



Valley of Shadows

By

Desiree Acuna

And

Juliette Barrymore

© Copyright by Desiree Acuna & Juliette Barrymore

Cover Art by Jenny Dixon

ISBN 1-58608-349-9

New Concepts Publishing

Lake Park, GA 31636

www.newconceptspublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

Chapter One

There was a dream-like quality to the proceedings. Princess Tyra just wasn't certain if she felt more like she was walking through a waking nightmare or a dream as she paced with slow dignity down the isle of the temple, keeping her gaze steadily on the priest and dignitaries who awaited her on the dais at the front of the great hall.

"Such poise!"

"Such beauty!"

"She's so young!"

She heard the whispers as she passed those high ranking enough to have been invited to witness her coronation just as she was vaguely aware of the sea of faces on either side of her. But she betrayed none of her qualms by so much as the flicker of an eyelash, not to anyone unfamiliar enough with her to note the minute signs of inner turmoil at any rate.

Unconsciously, she lifted a hand to curl her fingers around the amulet her grandmother, the sorceress Queen Zoreena, had given her the night before as if the charm would ward off the sense of impending doom that seemed to weigh more heavily upon her shoulders the closer she came to the dais. The comfort was more a matter of sentiment, though, than any certainty that the amulet held true power that could aid her in any way against the dangers she feared.

Wrought by her great grandmother, a powerful sorceress herself, it had been handed down through the women of her family for generations on their coronation day. The amulet had been her mother's and before that her grandmother, Queen Zoreena's.

It comforted Tyra because she could feel her mother's presence in wearing the token.

It *had* power. Queen Zoreena had assured her of that, insisted that it contained the most powerful of spells. As her grandmother's apprentice much of her life, Tyra could feel that power. The spell was not the sort of magic that would ward off the dark forces that Princess Tyra imagined she could feel circling above her like a flock of vultures, however. And it could certainly not lighten the heavy mantle of rule Tyra was about to don.

The spell the amulet contained had been created by Queen Zoreena for her mother when she had been much the same age that Tyra was now. Women of wealth and power such as themselves could only count on one thing, and that was that everyone around them fawned upon them for the wealth and power they could bestow. No one truly saw them as a woman, beautiful, plain, or anywhere in between, regardless of how they might have been seen without the mantle of power. Queen Zoreena had pointed out the advantages inherent in that, and yet, despite the position she had been born to, she was still a woman. She still yearned to love and be loved and she had been determined to bestow that gift upon her daughter and granddaughter.

The amulet contained a love potion. When a man had been chosen for her, Tyra

had the means to insure herself of his love and absolute devotion.

She had mixed feelings about it, but she had not wanted to voice them to her grandmother. It was all very well and good to know that she could bespell the man she would be forced to choose as consort, and the spell, she didn't doubt, would *make* him love her and insure his loyalty, but she would never know if he could have loved her without the spell.

It wasn't that she wasn't grateful for the gift. She was, not the least because it was something that had belonged to the mother she could not even remember, for both of her parents had been set upon by assassins and slain when she was little more than a toddling babe.

The fact that it had been her mother's comforted her, not the spell it contained, but the knowledge that her mother had worn this same amulet near her heart. Wearing it, she felt almost as if she could feel her mother's loving, protective embrace.

And she wondered if her father had truly loved her mother, or if he was merely enthralled by the spell contained within the amulet.

And she wondered if the doubt had tormented her mother, for it was widely known that her mother had adored the man she'd chosen as consort.

It would torment her, she thought, though she had not wanted to say so to her grandmother. But wasn't it as bad, she thought, to wonder whether the man one loved was devoted because he was ensorcelled as to doubt whether he was more enamored with the wealth and power of position than with oneself?

She didn't have to use the potion. She would be queen. She could look about herself for a man of rank who appealed to her as a woman, allow him to woo her. She was no fool. Her grandmother had not simply trained her as a sorceress. She had been grooming her to ascend the throne her entire life, teaching her to watch for telltale signs of treachery and subterfuge and plain out lies. It would take a very clever, very smooth rogue to dupe her.

Unfortunately, she thought wryly, like her grandmother, she had a penchant for rakes and rogues. There was just something about the element of danger one sensed in dealing with that sort of man that excited her.

Truthfully, it was more than a 'sense' of danger as she knew from hard experience. Her grandmother had had many lovers in her time and she had seen no harm in Tyra taking lovers, as well, in fact had recommended it as the only way to mature as a woman and gain a better understanding of men and their ways—an understanding she would need when she became queen herself. Her only caveat had been that Tyra use discretion and good sense in bestowing her favors. She had not been able to use either in her first affair because she had thought that she was madly in love.

Her gaze flickered to her grandmother on the thought and she scanned the older woman for any signs of weakness. She saw none and she wondered yet again why it was that her grandmother had decided to abdicate so that she could be crowned queen. Her heart squeezed uncomfortably in her chest. She should not be taking the throne now. She had not expected to do so before her grandmother's death and the fear wouldn't leave her that her grandmother knew that death stood at her shoulder even now.

She could not do this, she thought a little wildly, without her grandmother to guide her!

She understood her grandmother's reasoning, or at least the tale her grandmother had woven for her. There was unrest within the realm of Bandar. There always had been, at least in Tyra's lifetime, certainly in her mother's or she would be alive today. There was a very real danger that the realm would descend into chaos when Queen Zoreena died because she, her grandmother's successor, was so young. It seemed reasonable to see her granddaughter crowned while she was still alive and able to guide her granddaughter, to ensure that Tyra had a firm grip on the reigns of power.

And yet she was not ready for that much responsibility!

And she was afraid her grandmother was dying and unwilling to tell her.

What would she do if her grandmother left her and she was surrounded only by those she could never truly trust?

How long would *she* live? Would she fall beneath the blade of an assassin before she was even five and twenty as her mother had?

It seemed very likely. She was scarcely twenty now and already there had been several attempts upon her life. Being crowned might give her a small measure more of protection, but it would also make her more of a target. Not for one moment did she believe that the attempts would stop because her coronation was a *fait accompli*, regardless of what her grandmother believed.

And she knew that was a part of her grandmother's reasoning, even though Queen Zoreena had not said as much. No one but Tyra knew how deeply her grandmother mourned the death of her daughter or her irrational conviction that she would be alive today if she had ascended the throne instead of being the impediment between the assassin and the throne.

Because Zoreena was almost certain that the man behind the machinations was her nephew, Tyra's uncle, brother to her father, Avoran.

It seemed significant that both of his elder brothers had died at the hands of assassins.

If *she* died without issue, the throne would go to Avoran, and Queen Zoreena was determined to thwart his aspirations. Not only was he suspected of dabbling in the black arts, as a ruler, he was certain to thrust the realm into civil war.

He had no redeeming qualities that Tyra had been able to discern. As far back as she could remember, she had hated and feared her uncle, Lord Avoran. It was something she sensed in him, never saw, for he was clever enough to give the outward appearance of doting uncle. Given to debauchery and licentious, his tendency toward self-indulgence might merely have been contemptuous if not for the fact that his greed extended far beyond pleasures of the flesh. Or, more accurately she supposed, his avarice was an extension of his self-centeredness. He was not content to merely while away his days in satisfying his cravings. He wanted *more* power and *more* wealth to support his habits.

As she reached the dais at last and began to ascend the steps, she allowed her gaze to flicker briefly to her uncle, seated at the left hand of her grandmother. An involuntary shiver skated down her spine at the unguarded look in his eyes.

There was a gleam of pleasurable anticipation in them, but Tyra did not make the mistake of thinking that he was pleased to witness her coronation, joyful that his niece was about to take the throne. That look, she was absolutely certain at that moment, was a look of triumph.

Tyra's stomach executed a little freefall that sent a wave of dizziness through her. She flicked a panicked glance at her grandmother, wondering if the Queen realized they had played into Avoran's hands. Queen Zoreena had been certain that commanding Avoran's presence at the coronation would ensure her safety, that his hands would be tied. Instead, it seemed they had only given him the opportunity to *appear* innocent before the hall of lords called as witnesses. Whatever he was plotting, it might be suspected he had had a hand in it, but no one was going to openly accuse him when he was standing within 'harms way' when she was killed.

She saw something in her grandmother's eyes, but she had difficulty interpreting the look. A warning? Reassurance?

She felt somewhat comforted, but not greatly reassured. As powerful a sorceress as Queen Zoreena had once been, *she* knew, if no one else yet suspected it, that her grandmother's powers were fading with age. Many of the spells she had once conjured with ease she had forgotten, and those she still recalled without the need to pour over her book of spells were tainted because she had to struggle to recall the incantations.

With sudden insight, she realized why her grandmother had begun to groom her as successor to both the throne and her sorcery when she was scarcely out of swaddling cloths, and far too young to be apprenticed in the arts. She had always believed it was because her grandmother had needed to fill the void in her heart from the death of her only child. She had known that, in many ways, Queen Zoreena had clung to her as a lifeline, the only connection she still had to the daughter she'd lost.

She knew now, though, with absolute certainty, that it went beyond that and why her grandmother had insisted on stepping down and crowning her ... now. Her grandmother had often told her she was a talented apprentice, but although she thought she was quite good, she suspected it was more hopefulness than an accurate assessment of her powers on her grandmother's part.

Queen Zoreena was more concerned about her failing powers than her failing health. She no longer felt competent to hold the throne for her granddaughter.

She was looking to Tyra to protect *her* and the realm.

The sudden realization that her grandmother might not be able to protect her banished the doubts that had been fluttering about in the back of Tyra's mind. Abruptly, she no longer doubted that the dream like quality of the situation was pure waking nightmare.

She was in danger. The expression on Avoran's face was eloquent of that assessment.

And she was on her own.

She felt faint as she moved to stand at her grandmother's right hand and Queen Zoreena rose from her seat to face the assemblage and renounce her throne, naming her granddaughter, Princess Tyra as her successor.

Coldness wafted over Tyra as a murmur of voices rose within the crowd, muted and garbled by distance and the sounds of movement as they rose from their seats almost as one and knelt before their queen. Sweat beaded her skin despite the coldness that had washed over her as she gazed out over the bowed heads and wondered where among them the assassin waited.

Guards lined the walls and surrounded the dais. The doors of the temple had been

closed and bolted and guards stood outside them, and yet she felt as naked and vulnerable as if there were no guards at all because she was suddenly as certain her murderer stood within a few feet of her as she was that the attack, when it came, would be swift and unstoppable.

As Queen Zoreena began to speak, Tyra flicked another glance at Avoran. She saw now that his eyes had taken on a glazed, faraway look, almost as if he was bored. Almost idly, he stroked a ring on his finger. When she glanced from the movement of his hands to his face again, she saw that his lips were moving ever so slightly. She knew instantly that the ring was no ordinary ring, and that he was not merely muttering absently under his breath as Zoreena sometimes did, and that he was not bored. He was no longer with them. He had projected his spirit elsewhere.

Fear closed tightly, suffocatingly around her heart.

* * * *

The chants had reached a crescendo as Avoran alit in the shadowy, cavernous temple beneath his mansion. As he materialized, his high priest turned to look at him.

"The portal is opening, my lord."

Excitement surged through Avoran, and impatience. At last he would rid himself of the final impediment that stood between him and the throne!

Tyra.

Thrice he had sent assassins against her, and thrice they had failed him ... because of that witch, Zoreena, he knew! Somehow, despite the fact that he knew, positively, that her powers were failing, she had managed to thwart him. This time, though, this time, she would fail. She was not strong enough to repel *this* assassin!

Fear stabbed at him because this assassin was almost more powerful than even he could control and he rubbed his talisman, reassured when he felt the strength of its protection spell.

"Come!" he commanded, lifting his hands and adding his own powerful incantation to that of his priests.

Almost instantly, the portal opened wide. Flames shot forth, rose higher and higher until they licked at the vaulted ceiling of the sanctuary. The heat and brilliance was nigh unbearable, but he kept his gaze focused upon the center of flame, watching with a mixture of fear and anticipation as the flame began to take form. His heart was hammering so loudly in his ears when the daemon stepped forth it dulled the deep, rumbling bellow of the creature he'd summoned, though he noticed his priests had retreated, trembling now in terror, their hands covering their ears.

* * * *

Killian was marshalling his troops for battle when he felt the pull. At first, he dismissed it as nothing more than his anticipation that he had managed, at last, to provoke his overlord into a battle. As he rode his demon steed through the ranks of those he had gathered to fight their overlord and his minions, though, the burning pull became more and more pronounced. He knew, abruptly, and with certainty that some interfering gods damned human was playing with the ancient spells!

Fury rose in him. He struggled against the pull, tried to elude it. It was like a lasso around him, though, a fiery loop that he could not break, that seemed to grow stronger the longer he fought it. His fury peaked as he felt himself drawn to the other

world despite his efforts to fight the pull. It flooded like acid through his veins, brought him to a killing rage that was far more virulent for the fact that there was no possibility of triumph in crushing the one who had summoned him. His frustration only mounted as he cast his gaze back at the army that he had worked so long and so hard to amass to destroy his overlord ... and then he felt the agony of being pulled through the gateway that had opened to the overworld.

His rage and frustration hit a height when he discovered the gods damned bastard had woven a protection spell around himself—a powerful one. He tested its bounds and acknowledged that he could not break it—not without cunning and he was too furious to think beyond the battle he had been drawn from.

So be it, he thought furiously! He would carry out the task he had been drawn from his own concerns to perform, since he had no choice, with as much dispatch as possible and demand to be released. The bastard who had summoned him would rue his audacity, however! For, as soon as he had taken care of his overlord, he would be back to exact his revenge for the fool's meddling—and woe unto him if his gods damned interference cost *him* his battle! He would not die swiftly!

His lips curled in distaste when he saw the pale, quaking, puny humans who had dared to summon him.

"I am Killian. Who summons me? And what is your command?" he growled, seething that he could not get his hands on the wormy little bastards.

* * * *

"I, Lord Avoran, have summoned thee from the plane of fire! Do as I bid thee! Kill her!" Avoran responded. "Kill the princess, Tyra!"

At once the daemon's face contorted with rage. With a bellow that threatened to rupture his eardrums, the beast surged forth. The stone walls shook as the daemon clove through them as if they were no more substantial than water, disappearing in what almost appeared to be a cloud of black smoke, or fine particles of black dust.

For several heartbeats, Avoran could only stare at the spot where the daemon had disappeared, frozen with shock at the power he had unleashed. A surge of gleeful anticipation shattered the shell that held him, however ... that and the realization that he had abandoned his body in the coronation temple when he had astral projected to join his priests, leaving it more vulnerable than he liked.

With a sound that was part impatience, part fear, he launched himself into flight to return to his body before the daemon could reach the city. He had no difficulty following the path of the daemon. Beyond the walls of his modest castle, he saw a path of destruction that clearly delineated the daemon's progress. Trees had been felled through the thick forest that lay between his estate and the city walls. As he lifted his gaze, he saw the rocking branches of trees far below and in front him as three more great oaks were snapped like twigs and thrown aside.

Dismay spurred him to rush faster. He reached the walls of the city as the daemon reached them, stared in fascination as the beast shattered the wall, creating a huge hole and breaching the barrier within moments.

* * * *

Dimly, even through the stout walls of the cathedral, Tyra heard the frantic blowing of horns that called the men to arms. She glanced at Avoran even as Zoreena

fell silent, even as everyone within the temple tensed, their heads coming up in alert.

Lord Avoran blinked as she stared at him, slowly, as someone awakening from a deep sleep. The faraway look, she saw, had vanished from his eyes, and he turned to stare at the doors of the temple in anticipation.

With a sense of impending doom, Tyra followed the path of his gaze. Even as her eyes fastened upon the door, she heard the clatter of weaponry, the brief shrieks and screams as the elite guard of the palace engaged their enemy. Almost instantaneously, something slammed into the stout doors of the chapel. They heaved inward, as if sucking in a sharp breath at the blow. Deafeningly, the blow came again. Dust from splintering stones rained down from the wall that surrounded the doors, holding them in place.

Abruptly, the doors shattered, flew inward, great splinters like spears peppering the men nearest the door and felling them.

Tyra's eyes widened as she stared at the beast that burst through the opening.

Long black hair fluttered around the curling white horns that sprouted from the beast's head. The daemon was massive, taller than any mortal man, as red as fire and bulging with muscle, but Tyra had no more than a brief impression of the thing that waded through the elite palace guards as if they were no more than children. He tore the heads from two with no more seeming effort than if he'd shredded paper, hurling the heads like weapons at guards rushing to confront him. He tore the arm from another, using it as if it was a club and felling a half dozen more.

Blood, splintered bone, and shredded flesh flew in every direction. The hall was a roar of deafening sounds and complete chaos as men and women alike screamed and ran in every direction, some in a valorous, but foolhardy, effort to stop the thing bearing down upon her, others fleeing, or trying to flee.

The beast looked neither right nor left, however. Its glowing eyes were trained upon her and never wavered as he batted people from his path as if they were no more than insects.

It seemed she'd scarcely drawn a breath when the thing was upon her. She had had no time for thought, no time to consider fleeing, or where she might flee, or even if there was any place of safety. Time itself seemed to halt, almost as if it was holding its breath.

It was only as she realized that the amulet was biting into the palm of her hand that it occurred to Tyra that no man could withstand such a terrible being, nothing short of magic could stop it. That thought had no more than congealed in her brain, though, when she realized she had no time for an incantation even if she could have thought of one that would save her.

It was instinct not conscious thought that prompted Tyra to snatch the amulet from her neck and hurl it at the beast as he came at her. The vial shattered as it struck one curling horn, the contents enveloping him in a sparkling cloud of magic dust.

He halted as abruptly as if she'd skewered him in the chest with a pike. Tyra felt her breath freeze in her chest as she met his golden eyed gaze, as she watched the death in his eyes turn slowly to utter confusion as he stared at back at her.

And in that moment, as the blood craze left him, Tyra realized with a sense of stunned amazement that there was nothing beast-like about the being that stood before her. He had a man's countenance, rugged, angular, beautifully male. He was far more

fair, in an otherworldly way, than any mortal man could aspire to.

He shook his head like a bull challenged by the unwary trespass of a human within his territory. The fire in his golden eyes dulled for perhaps a split second, then flamed high again so rapidly that Tyra doubted she would have seen it if she had not been caught in the spell of his gaze, transfixed by it. This was not the blood craze that had lit his eyes before, however. She'd earned enough appreciative male glances to recognize the hunger she saw in his eyes as his gaze traveled down her length and up again to rivet once more on her face and her body responded with a will of its own, warming.

He surged toward her. Seizing her arms, he hauled her tightly against his chest, speared his fingers through her hair at the back of her head and used the tether of her long hair to drag her head back so that she was forced to look up at him. Tyra stared up at him wide eyed, holding her breath, partly because she was unable to breathe for the hammering of her heart in her chest and partly in an instinctive urge to protect herself from the potion that clung to the beast.

He heaved a shuddering breath. Dipping his head toward her abruptly, he opened his hard mouth over hers, breaching her surprise slackened lips with his tongue and raking it across hers possessively. A sweet, heady taste flowed into her mouth as he stroked her tongue with his, breathed into her mouth, assaulting her senses and sending them spiraling away and bringing her entire being to focus on that one point of heated contact. Fire roiled through her, settling low in her belly. Lava poured through her veins, awakening every sense, every nerve ending, broadening her focus to encompass the hard bulging muscles surrounding her--the banded steel of his arms, the rock hard wall of his chest ... the iron hard erection burrowing against her lower belly as he slid the arm banded around her waist downward, filling his palm with her buttocks and holding her captive as he curled his hips into hers.

Her strength ebbed as the heat curled through her, leaving her weak all over and shaking. A euphoric high enveloped her mind in a smoldering haze, so disorienting her that moments passed before she realized her head was not merely swimming from the fire coursing through her but because the daemon had swept her off her feet, literally, carrying her to the floor and pressing his body against hers as he pressed her against the hard stone dais. His hand was beneath her skirts, cupping her sex by the time that fully registered in her mind, however, and the feel of his hand cupped intimately against her, the grinding pump of his hips against her thigh, set off a fresh wave of heat and mindless need.

"Foul beast! Let her go! You will *kill* her! *Kill her, Killian!* How dare you befoul Princess Tyra, you vile beast!"

Reluctantly, the beast, Killian, lifted his head at that, breaking the kiss. His head swiveled in her uncle's direction, and he focused on him for several moments before his body began to tense.

Near to swooning at the sensations rushing through her, Tyra sucked in a breath of much needed air and opened her eyes with an effort to look at Avoran herself. He was nearly as red as the daemon by now in his rage. Spittle flew from his lips as he raged. "I command thee! I command thee! I will not grant thee leave to return to your plane, Killian! I will destroy you!"

Dazed as she was by the torrid kiss, it still came as no great shock to Tyra to learn

that Avoran had summoned the beast, merely as something of a surprise that he'd so far forgotten himself in his rage as to announce it to any in the temple who still lived. She was diverted from that, however, by the discovery that Killian wasn't actually hunching her as she'd thought when she felt his lower body grinding so erotically against her woman's mound that it had drawn moist, heated need into her woman's place. It was the guards stabbing pikes into his back that was driving him into her.

Apparently, the daemon realized that at about the same moment. He heaved upward, snatching her to her feet with one hand even as he swept an arm outward in a blow that sent all three of the guardsmen attacking him flying backwards.

Her head reeled as Killian swept her up, tossed her over his shoulder, and whirled around toward the door through which he'd entered. Fighting the disorientation and the jolts as the beast leapt from the dais and bounded toward the door, Tyra pressed her palms against his back and pushed herself upward, searching for her grandmother. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw her grandmother had collapsed on the throne, but she saw as the daemon sprinted from the temple that guardsman had rushed to surround the old woman.

Her grandmother was alive else there would have been no need for the palace guards to rush to protect her.

She believed that, felt relief flow through her with that certainty.

But it was not a profound relief, for in that same instant she knew there was no one to protect her from the daemon Killian.

Chapter Two

That realization was hardly an epiphany and yet it produced the jarring, electrifying sensation of being one. It pierced the shroud of shock that had enveloped Tyra the moment she'd first heard the alarms sounding and knew attack was imminent. It swept away the miasma of desire that had closed over her the moment she felt the heat of Killian's mouth on hers. It was a struggle even so to tear her mind from the focus of her discomfort and the fear that erupted at that realization and redirect it to assessing her situation.

She had little time to do so, she feared. The daemon moved as if he had the hounds of hell nipping at his feet, though she wasted no time on contemplating any possibility that fear had anything to do with it. Certainly, he had no fear of the soldiers or any reason to feel an iota of anxiety. Aside from being an immortal and far stronger than a round dozen mortal men put together, he had powers at his command beyond the physical. Moreover, he'd slain every soldier who had had the misfortune to stand in his path and of those who remained standing and capable of battle none would attempt to attack him now that he had her slung over one shoulder for fear of injuring her.

He had not brought her as a shield, though that thought flickered through her mind on the heels of the last. Why then had he taken her? And where was he taking her? And what did he intend to do to her whenever they reached the destination he had in mind?

Avoran's raging had cleared the little doubt that remained in her mind that he was behind the attempts on her life, however clever he had thought he was in the thinly veiled threats of retribution if Killian did not do as he had been commanded. Having failed before, clearly he had not wanted to risk failure again and had turned to the powers of darkness to aid him in his quest. Somehow, he had opened the gateway to the daemon's world and enchanted him, drawn him forth to do his bidding. Avoran had admitted as much when he had sworn to keep him from returning to his own plane if Killian did not kill her as he had been summoned to do.

And Killian had defied him.

She frowned, thinking that over, and realized that Killian had merely stared at the mortal dancing in fury and screaming at him as if he wasn't entirely certain whether or not he wished to smash him like a pesky mosquito.

Because he was caught up in a spell that had countered the one that had brought him to this world to begin with, she realized abruptly.

Her love potion.

That realization was both startling and unnerving.

It explained why the daemon had stared at her as if he meant to devour her and then had thrown her down to ravage her instead of taken her apart limb by limb.

How much faith could she place in the strength of the potion though?

Very little, she decided. She was amazed that it had had any effect on the beast at

all for, unlike mortals, daemons were not prone to be ruled by any of the softer emotions.

That thought brought her to the understanding she had been trying to avoid.

The love potion had prevented the daemon from fulfilling his purpose ... for now, but even if it continued to hold him, which she certainly could not count upon, she could *also* not count on the effect upon him being adoration. He would not know or understand or even be able to feel love ... not as she knew and understood it. She was certain of that.

Clearly, if the way he had pounced upon her was any indication at all, and she thought it was, the daemon, Killian, grasped love only as desire.

A wave of weakness and faintness washed over her at that thought. Whatever destination he had in mind, his purpose, unless the potion wore off beforehand, was to ravish her. Instantly, visions filled her mind of the beast shredding her clothes and pounding into her and terror followed upon the heels of the vision.

Cold, hard reason followed upon the heels of that, however. Fighting him, resisting him in any way would be to risk breaking the spell that was all that was keeping her alive at the moment.

If she lost her head, she would very likely lose it in truth.

* * * *

Killian was running almost entirely upon instinct. He could scarcely think for the waves of desperate need pounding in his groin and temples. As accustomed as he was to desire in its purest, most basic form, this need was like nothing he had ever experienced. It pumped through his veins like a corrosive acid, randomly burning thoughts into ash before they had completely formed and leaving great gaps in his ability to reason.

He had his woman, though, he thought with fierce satisfaction. They had tried to take her, but she was *his* and he would not allow it.

The hunger felt as if it was eating a hole in his belly as he rushed through the streets of the city with her, searching for a place where, in peace, he could pursue his need to touch and kiss and lick her and drive his cock into her channel until his body exploded, and then begin again until he was too sated to move.

The mortals were everywhere he turned, though, screaming, running before him until he had to thrust them out of his way or step on them to pass, throwing things at him. Rage filled him at those who dared that because he knew his precious was as mortal as they, as vulnerable as they. If he had felt that he could spare the time, he would have chased after them and ripped them apart for risking injury to his woman.

He studied them broodingly for many moments, tempted to turn aside from the need burning him, but in the end he merely fixed them with a look that promised retribution in time and moved on, searching.

He was near mad with the lust boiling in his veins by the time he saw the walls of the city. Out, he realized. He had to go further, beyond the reach of the crazed mortals dashing around him.

Then he could be alone with his precious.

Then he would not need to concern himself that someone would try to snatch her from him or someone would injure her in their attacks upon him. He could indulge his need to taste her, touch her. He could bare her body to his gaze and admire his prize to his heart's content.

Shifting her on his shoulder, he ran full tilt at the gates that blocked his path, slamming against the barrier with his other shoulder and then dropping back to thrust the splinters out of his way to make certain none marred his treasure as he passed. She was fragile, his flower, he reminded himself. She was mortal.

Dimly, a thread of uneasiness moved through him at that thought, the realization that he should have no interest in mortals at all, but he dismissed it after a moment. This one was different. His Tyra was special, so beautiful to him that he could hardly contain his impatience to make her well and truly his. With a hunger that was maddening, he felt the need to plow into her with his flesh, join his flesh with hers, feel the heated moisture of her body closing around him.

When he was beyond the gates, he began his search again, but the dwellings he passed stank of mortals and fear, distractions he had no tolerance for. The forest was better and he was tempted to find a bed of moss to lay her upon and drink his fill of her, but the mortals were still too close. Those he'd left alive, he discovered, were pursuing him now, and he needed little reasoning ability to determine why. They wanted his woman, meant to take his treasure from him.

He stopped for a time, watching them in the distance, tempted to set his woman aside and deal with them.

Would it take longer, he wondered, to find a place beyond their reach? Or to dispose of the troublesome hounds?

He decided upon the former. He would be soiled with their blood and flesh if he stopped to fight. The mortal women had shrieked and fainted at the sight of him as he was now, and he had very little of either blood or flesh on him from that first battle. Tyra had done neither ... She had not screamed at any rate. He was not at all certain she had not fainted. He had not heard so much as a peep from her since he had thrown her over his shoulder and made off with her, but he knew she lived. He could feel the pounding of her pulse, hear her panting breaths.

It made him imagine her in the throes of passion as he took her, set his blood to boiling higher once more and burned away the ability to reason beyond the sole thought that had driven him so far ... alone.

He began to race onward once more, this time taking care to make his way among the trees rather than battering them aside when they loomed in his path, for he was dimly aware that the mortals need only follow the path of destruction that lay in his wake to find him. If he left them no trail to follow so easily, he might shake them. They did not have his acute senses. They could not smell him as he could smell them, could not smell his fear as he smelled theirs for he felt none even if they had had that ability. They could not see in darkness as he could see.

And the sun had already dropped low in the sky. Soon, darkness would fall and they would not be able to follow him all.

Those thoughts connected in his chaotic mind—darkness and follow. He lifted his head, peering far into the distance, his sight unhindered by the thick trees when he willed it so. The Valley of Shadows lay ahead of them.

And the mortals, he knew, feared the Valley of Shadows. It was unlikely they would pursue him there.

He moved on again, faster. He had a destination now. All he had to do was climb

the ridge that rimmed the valley and then he would find a place so that he and his woman could be alone, left in peace to pursue their desire for one another.

* * * *

Weariness swallowed Tyra's terror in little bites until none was left save the distant consciousness of danger, but even that was quelled as misery reared its head. Unable to drag in a decent breath of air except from time to time, her head pounding from hanging upside down, her ribs feeling crushed from the hard shoulder that bore into her more deeply still with each jolting stride, Tyra passed in and out of consciousness, aware of only snatches of her surroundings.

The dread that she had felt when she had first realized his intent—or at least thought she had figured it out—passed with everything else until all that she could think of was stopping. Her misery grew to such a pinnacle that she had to fight the urge to weep when she had not even felt the urge to cry from fear.

She fought it. She clung to the only weapon she thought she might have in her grasp, and that was the potion. However tenuous its hold on him, for now it meant she could live a little longer. It was not so much a ray of hope as a thread of desperation, but she clung to it. If she lived, she had a chance to escape.

If she died, she wouldn't have to worry about anything anymore, but she didn't *want* to die! She had scarcely had the chance to live!

She especially didn't want to die at the hands of this creature, torn limb from limb, *knowing* death would claim her long, painful moments before it did.

Despite her resolve to endure in silence, she had reached the point where she felt like she couldn't stand anymore when she noticed the terrain around them had changed. The sun had set and darkness was rapidly claiming the land, cloaking all around them, but she could sense the difference in his gait even if she hadn't been able to make out the rocky ground beneath her.

She searched her mind, trying to think where they might be that the ground would rise and become so stony. There was only one place that came to mind, but she could not believe he would have headed there.

Until it dawned on her that it was likely the only place her people *might* not pursue him.

And he was no man to be frightened of the things that terrified mortals.

Fear clutched at her, not just because she feared her people would not try to come after her, but because of all the horrible tales she'd heard about the Valley of Shadows and its denizens. Short of the plane from whence this creature had emerged, there was no place in the known world more terrifying.

The light had gone from the sky and the moon crested the horizon by the time the daemon halted, sniffing the air. Tyra opened her eyes, trying to pierce the darkness surrounding them to see if there were any of the denizens of the Valley around them. She saw nothing, but that meant little when she could barely see an arm's length in any direction.

The beast shifted, allowing her to slide to her feet. Tyra's legs promptly crumpled beneath her and she gasped fearfully as she felt herself falling. He caught her, lowering her until she was sitting on a stone perhaps a foot high. "Wait here," he murmured gruffly.

“You’re leaving me?” Tyra gasped in a frightened voice, more afraid at the moment of the inhabitants of the valley than the daemon.

He patted her head in an awkwardly affectionate manner, like someone might pat the head of a child for reassurance when they were unaccustomed to dealing with children. “I would die before I would allow harm to come to you,” he said in that same gruff, rumbling sort of growl.

It sent shivers through her, like the plucked chord of a stringed instrument, but she wasn’t certain if it was his voice or the words he’d spoken to her.

She heard a rustle of sound, saw the darkness shift as he moved away from her and then shivered again when she realized he had been swallowed up by the darkness. Wrapping her arms around herself, she contemplated the situation, wondering if she dared try to escape now that she was free of him.

The problem, she realized almost immediately, was an insurmountable one. For all she knew, he’d done no more than move beyond the range of her sight and hearing ... no great distance at all. Beyond that, she had no idea which way to go and no desire to rush blindly, deeply into the Valley of Shadows. She wanted to escape this place as much as she wanted to escape the daemon. More to the point, she was so weak she felt as if she could not even stand. It seemed doubtful that she could *run* anywhere at all and she would need wings on her feet to outdistance the daemon.

That train of thought had no more than finished its run when she heard such terrible sounds that it sent another jolt of weakness through her but also a current of terror that shot her to her feet before she had time to consider whether she could manage it or not. The great roar of the beast was followed by a roar from the daemon himself. Dull, meaty thuds and more growls, screams, meaty thuds ... and then silence.

Tyra’s ears pricked. She held her breath, waiting. A shriek erupted from her throat and she bounded straight upward from the ground beneath her feet as something brushed her arm.

Something warm and sticky.

“It is I, my princess,” Killian growled. “It is safe now.”

Tyra shuddered as the hand closed around her arm, trying not to think what that warm stickiness was. But she smelled it as he bent and lifted her into his arms—wild beast—a doggy sort of smell that, when combined with the sounds she’d heard, she knew to be the smell of a great bear ... and the blood.

Killian nuzzled her neck as he strode inside what she realized now must be a cave for it was darker almost at once than it had been before. She shivered again as it dawned on her that he’d left her just outside and gone in to evict the inhabitant. A wave of disorientation swept over her, the only warning she had that he was lowering her before she felt warm fur beneath her back.

Warm, smelly fur—still warm from the beast that had been wearing it only a few moments before.

That thought had barely crystallized in her mind, though, when she felt his mouth on the upper slope of her breasts and then her throat. The dizziness focused on that point of orientation, his hard mouth, the darkness around her making it impossible to divert her mind in any other direction as it moved over her with a hunger that spawned an echo inside of her regardless of how she might have wished otherwise. The intoxicating scent

of his flesh filtered through her senses in a heady wave a moment before his mouth converged on hers, his lips clinging to hers briefly before he swept past the barrier of her lips with his tongue and delved inside the sensitive cavern of her mouth.

She made a half hearted sound of protest in her throat and then lost all thoughts of protest as he settled his body fully against hers and began a frantic assault upon her body that left no part of her untouched or unaffected. Air brushed her bare skin as he thrust her gown upwards to caress her thighs, delving beneath her bodice with his other hand in almost the same moment and lifting her breast to his waiting mouth. She released a difficult breath, feeling as if the air had been punched from her lungs as she felt the moist, heated tug of his mouth on the taut peak of her breast.

Thoughts swarmed through her mind, but vanished before his assault on her senses. She should not want this. She should not feel any of the things she was feeling. He'd been summoned to kill her. He would if the spell was broken—without remorse, without hesitation.

She sucked in a quick breath of surprise as he grasped her underclothing and shredded it, feeling a mixture of fear and, insanely, a frisson of added excitement as she felt the faint roughness of his palms skimming over her bare belly. He rose on his knees above her abruptly, ripped her pantalettes from her and caught her legs, shoving her knees up to her chest and burrowing his face against her sex. The heat of his mouth on her nether lips, the flick of his hot tongue along her cleft, was so exquisite it made goosebumps erupt all over her body, tore a gasping cry from her.

Yield, she thought a little wildly? Or try to resist?

It seemed wrong to so thoroughly enjoy her ravishment, but she felt as if *she* had been enthralled. Every touch of his hands, his mouth, every stroke of his tongue, built a fire higher and higher inside of her until she was writhing beneath him, uttering choked cries of delight each time he found another place to touch her.

She found herself teetering on the brink of something momentous as he lathed her clit with his tongue, suckled it greedily until she thought she'd lose her mind and then stroked downward, ramming his tongue into her channel in hard thrusts. Lightening sizzled along her nerve endings, making her body seize and release rhythmically with ecstasy that was nearly painful, forcing a hoarse cry from her chest.

She caught his hair as he continued to lathe and suckle at her, forcing her body to seize over and over until she began to feel as if she would die if he didn't stop. He caught her wrists, prying them from his hair and manacled them to the floor. She whimpered, bucked against him, fought to free herself.

"Killian!" she cried out finally in desperation. "Please!"

He stopped when she called his name, lifted his head. She sensed that he was looking at her and fear pierced the mellow euphoria that blanketed her in the wake of the explosion of sensation she had just felt, fear that she'd somehow broken the spell that bound him to her.

He surged over her after only a moment, however, and she felt the hard rounded knob of his cock head probing her, thrusting. As wet as she was from his caresses, her flesh yielded reluctantly to his enormous erection. She felt as if she would split in two as he fought his way inside of her in short, stabbing sorties. Panting, she struggled to adjust to his girth, tried to force her muscles to relax.

He was wild by then to claim her fully, though, mindless in his pursuit, digging his fingers tightly into her hips as he pounded at her to gain entry into her body. The very desperation of his plunging assault, his hoarse, ragged breaths, the shudders running through his massive frame, sent a fresh wave of heat coursing through her, brought a gush of moisture to her passage that he needed to breach her completely. She gasped as he impaled her fully upon his shaft, feeling a rush of fire through her channel and all the way through her body at his hoarse, triumphant growl of satisfaction.

"Mine," he growled as he lowered himself heavily against her body, nipping sharply at her neck with his teeth as he pumped his hips and plowed into her at a jarring, frenetic pace. "My woman. Your flesh is good ... sweet ... hot ... my beautiful princess."

Tyra groaned, clutching him tightly, feeling the rise again of that momentous 'something' that had caught her up and flung her into heaven before. Her heart pounded with anticipation as she felt it winding tighter and tighter inside of her with each rake of his cock back and forth along her passage. Abruptly it caught her. Her body convulsed even harder than before, so hard it tore a series of keening cries from her, sent her spiraling perilously close to unconsciousness.

He uttered a hoarse groan as her body spasmed around his flesh, shuddered, thrust faster still for several moments and finally collapsed heavily on top of her, nearly pushing her completely over the edge into darkness.

"Killian," she managed to say faintly when he had ceased to huff for breath and breathed more easily. "You're crushing me ... sweeting."

Groaning, he heaved himself off of her.

Tyra dragged in a deep, grateful breath of air.

It left her in grunt as he dropped a heavy arm across her belly, forcing the air she'd just taken in from her lungs. Curling his fingers into her waist, he dragged her on top of his body. Tyra stiffened, but she was too weak in the aftermath to consider putting up any sort of a struggle. She lay where he arranged her, draped limply across his massive chest, struggling with the urge to simply drift away.

He petted her, stroking his massive palms over her body, tangling his fingers in her hair and yanking strands loose. Tyra ignored it as long as she could stand it and finally gathered her hair and moved it beyond his reach.

Beyond the discomfort of laying on his hard body, lifting and falling with each deep breath he dragged into his lungs, Tyra found she felt strangely detached for a woman who'd just been mauled by a daemon.

She frowned at that thought, realizing that was not precisely the way she felt at all. More accurately, she felt strangely *satisfied* for a woman who'd just been ravished by a the spawn of the underworld lying beneath her.

He rolled onto his side after a time, dumping her onto the fur. "Hungry, my precious?"

Tyra stared blindly up at the spot in the darkness where the voice had emerged, wondering if she was or if it would be wise to say no if she wasn't. It occurred to her, though, that she was hungry. She'd been too nervous to eat much that morning while she was preparing for the coronation and had expected to eat at the feast that was to be held afterward. Instead, she'd been captured by the beast and hauled away to the Valley of

Shadows. “Yes,” she said finally, questioningly.

He had not brought anything with him beyond her, and she was fairly certain, despite her state when she’d arrived, that this cave was not a place that he’d ventured into before.

He patted her head. “We have meat,” he announced, quite happily Tyra thought, her stomach churning as she abruptly recalled his battle with the owner of the cave.

She heard his movement and thought he’d sat up, or gotten up. She was still wondering which when she heard movement near the mouth, she thought, of the cave. By the time she turned to look, though, and saw by the brighter darkness that it was indeed the entrance to the cave, she saw no sign of him.

She sat up, feeling blindly at her clothes and adjusted her breasts in the bodice of what remained of her beautiful coronation gown. It was in shreds, she discovered to her dismay, and at that it was in far better shape that her underclothes, which were missing entirely. She was still thankful that she had as much as she did to cover herself.

And irritated that Killian had destroyed the rest of her clothes. If she *did* manage to escape, she would be half naked.

She struggled to dismiss that. Getting angry with Killian would do her no good at all and might harm her situation. Besides, she was obliged to admit that it was her own fault. She still didn’t know what had prompted her to hit him with the love potion, but as scenarios went having her clothes torn off of her and being ravished wasn’t half bad compared to the alternative.

Those thoughts gave her pause.

She didn’t *feel* ravished. She didn’t feel any of the things she knew she should’ve felt ... beyond gratitude that she was still alive to consider how she felt about things.

She realized after a few moment’s thought that she didn’t feel raped because Killian had not behaved as a rapist. He had behaved like a lover. He had not merely taken what he wanted in the most brutal way possible. He had been impatient, but he had not hurt her. He had given her pleasure.

A lot of pleasure.

It dawned on her abruptly and with shock that she’d climaxed ... twice. After three lovers and years of faking orgasm, she had actually experienced it herself ... with a daemon!

She was inclined to dismiss that, but she knew that was what it was. She was no stranger to men or to coupling. She’d come close to that extraordinary ‘something’ several times, close enough that between those experiences and the way her lovers had behaved, she knew that had to be what she’d felt if for no other reason than the fact that she had felt satisfaction, not horror, in the aftermath.

She was not happy with that conclusion. It could not be anything so simple as the possibility that Killian was a better lover. In point of fact, he had been very rough. There had been more than an edge of wildness about the way he’d been with her. He had not acted with the smooth, practiced moves of her previous, very experienced, lovers.

So how had he managed what none of the others had?

Three possibilities came to mind.

Either she had been so excited because he *was* a daemon, which said something about her penchant for ‘bad’ that seemed to her to go a little beyond the norm. Or she

had been swept up to such heights because, in spite of his roughness, he was the first man who had made love to her only because he adored her—even if it was the love potion that had inspired it.

Or she had managed to catch herself in the same web that had caught him.

She frowned at that thought, wishing she could dismiss it entirely. She had a dim memory, though, that when he had kissed her that first time she had felt things she shouldn't have and probably *wouldn't* have if not for the 'magical' haze that seemed to envelope her. She did not *feel* that she loved him. He still scared the pure hell out of her, but how could she have enjoyed it at all, and why would she be making excuses for him if she was completely unaffected?

She decided she wouldn't have, which had to mean that she had managed to get just enough of the spell herself to put some dangerous thoughts in her mind.

She concluded after a few moments, though, that she need not be overly concerned about that. It could not have been much or she would not still be contemplating escape. She *could* function rationally in spite of the effect of the spell upon her.

She just hoped that Killian was much more deeply under the enchantment than she was. Otherwise, she was in serious trouble.

Chapter Three

Tyra was diverted from her thoughts by the rustle of brush. It sent a stab of anxiety through her heart, but she realized almost immediately that it was Killian returning.

She realized something else, as well. He moved through the darkness as if he was completely unaffected by it ... which meant he was. That realization sent an uncomfortable jolt through her, but she calmed herself with the reflection that she at least had not tried to do anything that might have gotten her in trouble. It didn't make her feel particularly good to know that she hadn't simply because she'd been in no condition to try, not because she'd had the good sense to know it was useless, but at least she hadn't played her hand.

An explosion of fire distracted her, made her jump nearly out of her skin. Blinded by the abrupt transition from total blackness to light, Tyra slammed her eyes closed, but the impression was burned into her mind anyway.

Killian had *blown* fire onto the rushes and branches he'd collected.

She opened her eyes a fraction and peered at him, hoping she'd been mistaken, but he was holding no fire producing tools in his hands and he was completely naked. He had no pocket to tuck such things away in.

It dawned on her abruptly as he stood and she sorted through her erratic memories since he had first appeared that he had not had clothes at all ... at any point. He had charged into the temple in a blur of horrific, killing motion. Beyond the massive size of him, the taut, bulging muscles of his arms and legs and chest, beyond the long, flying mass of black hair and the curling horns, she had no impressions at all. And she had certainly not been in any condition after he'd taken her to consider the matter.

As he straightened and moved away from the fire, it dawned upon her that he moved with the easy grace of someone completely comfortable with himself.

She didn't know why she should be so surprised that he had no more concern about his nakedness than a savage beast. He *was* a savage beast, more intelligent, she supposed, than the beasts in the fields and forest, but still a beast.

Albeit a fascinating, beautiful beast in the form of man.

His muscular back and taut buttocks, she saw in the firelight, were as beautifully formed as his chest, belly, arms, and thighs. She recalled, dimly, that she had beheld his face as a thing of otherworldly beauty, not quite human if for no other reason than that fact, the perfection of each feature that came together to form a breathtaking whole. The same could be said of his body. As handsome and well formed as she had thought the men were that she had taken as lovers before, they paled by comparison.

Mesmerized by the play of muscles on his body as he moved, she watched as he crouched beside something cloaked in shadows at a little distance from the fire. The sickening sound of snapping bone and tearing flesh distracted her. She saw when he rose he was holding a bloody, unrecognizable blob of raw flesh. Averting her gaze from the

mess, she found herself staring at the wide, dead eyes and gaping maw of a great brown bear. Sucking in a sharp gasp, she scooted backwards, slamming her spine and the back of her head into the rough stone wall little more than a foot behind her. The pain effectively distracted her. Wincing, she squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed at her scalp, wondering if the tingling warmth was just pain or if she'd drawn blood.

She sensed Killian's nearness before she opened her eyes. When she did, she discovered he'd crossed to crouch in front of her.

"You have hurt yourself," he said in that deep, gruff voice of his that seemed to reach inside of her each time he spoke, almost as if his voice itself carried some sort of magic.

And maybe it did, she thought distractedly as he pulled her hands away and examined her scalp with his fingers. Maybe it wasn't the love potion at all? He was a daemon. She knew very little about their powers except that they were creatures of magic themselves and had powers mortals could only harness if they were greatly skilled at sorcery.

His nearness made her feel hot and dizzy and the touch of his fingers even more hot and dizzy. When he drew away, though, she stared at his hands in horror. They were coated with blood.

Following her gaze, he looked down at his hands. "It is not yours," he said when he looked up again, his lips twitching as if he was fighting the urge to smile.

Tyra stared at him, torn between the imbecilic urge to smile back at him and her revulsion over the blood. "The beast?" she said a little hoarsely.

He nodded, then frowned as he scanned her and then himself. "The blood and matter disgust you," he stated. "Come. It will take the meat a while to cook to suit you. There is water in the back of the cave."

She did find it revolting. Relieved that he didn't seem to take that in bad part, she rose eagerly to follow him. He stared down at the hide she'd been sitting on and picked it up when she rose and moved off of it. Catching the head of the bear and the hide ripped from its arms, he tore the head off and pitched it toward the mouth of the cave.

Tyra's stomach clenched at the display of the strength he was capable of as much as his nonchalant disposal of the beast's head. She turned away quickly as he turned back to her, certain the expression on her face would not please him.

The back of the cave was as black as pitch, she saw. "I ... uh ... I can't see," she said uneasily.

"Take this," he responded, shoving the hide of the bear at her.

Curling her lips, she took it, stumbling slightly when he let go since she hadn't anticipated the weight of the thing. He sent her a curious glance but moved away when he saw her heft it more firmly in her hands. Crouching by the fire, he picked up one of the burning branches from the pile, glanced around and then moved to a patch of moss.

Tyra stared at him in horrified fascination as he pulled up a swatch of the moss and calmly wound it around the burning end of the stick. He sent her a pleased smile when he'd finished fashioning his makeshift torch. Tyra curled her lips into as close an approximation of pleasure as she could manage.

Rising, he lifted the torch high and struck off toward the rear of the cave. Hefting the heavy hide, Tyra struggled to follow him. After glancing back at her a few times, he

turned to her, took the hide and tossed it over the crook of the arm holding the torch and then held out his hand to her.

She didn't want to touch it. He was coated with a disgusting mixture of drying blood and guts from the bear, and probably her men-at-arms, as well, but she hesitated only briefly before she placed her hand in his. Surprisingly, she felt a comforting sort of warmth curl in her belly as his hand closed around hers.

She stared at their joined hands as he tugged her into motion again, fascinated by the size and strength of it, feeling none of the uneasiness she was sure she should have felt at the way his hand dwarfed hers, at the overwhelming power that radiated off of him as surely as the heat wafted outward from the fire he'd built. Her gaze flickered upward from their joined hands after a moment, along his long, muscular arm to his shoulder. She saw when her gaze at last reached his face that he'd turned to look at her.

Heat smoldered in his eyes, the same heat she'd seen in them before, and an answering wave rolled over her, making her belly tighten and shimmy in anticipation. With an effort, she dragged her gaze from his and looked around as he guided her through a short, narrow passage. It opened into a cavern larger than the one they'd left. The sound of gushing water, which she'd barely been conscious of before, was pronounced as they passed through the narrow, natural corridor and into the larger cavern. The walls, she saw, glowed with an eerie green, lifting the darkness infinitesimally beyond the range of the flaming torch. Deep shadows abounded, but she could just make out the rippling gleam of water at the far end.

"I need to relieve myself," she said abruptly, vaguely embarrassed at the need to tell him, but drawn by the running water to assuage the need she'd been able to ignore up until that moment.

He nodded, gesturing toward a deeper shadow to one side. "Go there. It will be safer than finding a place beyond the caves."

Tyra glanced at him sharply at that, wondering if that was indeed his reason for directing her to a place close by or if it was merely that he didn't trust her to go off on her own. She saw nothing in his eyes to support that suspicion, though, and took the torch he held out to her to help her find her way.

The 'place' was little more than a dent in the cave wall, perhaps three feet deep, but it gave her some privacy, for which she was grateful. After a very little thought, she decided to remove her gown while she was at it. It was torn and hopelessly soiled but it was all she had to cover herself. She could wash it, she decided, when she bathed herself and then find a place to leave it to dry.

Killian, she discovered when she returned, was submerged in the small pool at the bottom of the small waterfall, scrubbing his hands over himself. He looked up when she carefully wedged the end of the torch in a crevice to hold it. The light in his eyes surged as he studied her and Tyra felt another answering upwelling in her blood, her heart picking up its pace. Struggling to ignore the way her body responded so quickly and easily to the desire she sensed in him, she moved with care to the edge of the pool and dipped a toe in to judge the temperature of the water.

Ice could not have been colder. A sharp gasp escaped her and she snatched her foot out of the water, staring at him wide eyed. "Its c-c-cold!" she exclaimed in disbelief.

His dark, arched brows lifted almost to his hairline. He looked at the water

curiously, lifted his head to study her again, and finally sucked in a deep breath that expanded his chest to nearly twice its normal size. Blowing it out in a narrow jet through his pursed lips, he directed a stream of fire toward the water. The force of it split the surface of the water, churned it as if it was boiling. Tyra was almost afraid to even test the water when he looked up at her expectantly. More cautiously than before, she dipped her toes in. Relief flooded her when she discovered it wasn't boiling as she'd feared. It was no longer cold either, but it was slightly warmer than merely tepid.

Climbing in, she discovered that it was not at all deep, only a little deeper than her own tub, though it was vastly larger in circumference. Focusing on cleaning her gown until she'd removed as much of the stains as she could, she looked around as she rung as much water as she could from it and saw that Killian had taken a stab at cleaning the bear skin. Dripping pinkish water, it was spread over a large rock at the edge of the natural pool. Wading across the basin, she spread her gown on the rock next to it, certain that it would pick up more dirt, but not particularly concerned about it. At least it would not reek of blood and bear.

She heard splashing behind her and wondered if Killian had gotten up to abandon the bath. Before she could turn to look to see what he was doing, a large hand slipped around her and splayed over her belly. Heat far warmer than the water suffused her back as he drew her backwards to rest against his chest and belly. His open mouth settled on the crook between her neck and shoulder, his teeth digging into her flesh just sharply enough to collect her attention for a split second before his splayed hand slipped down her belly and one thick finger parted her nether lips. She sucked in a sharp breath as that knowing finger found her woman's bud and teased it, kindling fire low in her belly and inducing moisture to flood her channel. Her nipples puckered, stood erect as blood surged into them, engorging them until she could feel every rapid pulse of her heart stinging them, bringing them to acute awareness of the faintest of sensations.

He turned her to face him after a moment. Catching her waist, he lifted her straight up, dragging her body along his in delicious friction until he could fasten his mouth over the tip of one breast. Fire and pleasure that skated the edge of pain shot through her as he caught her nipple between his teeth and plucked at it.

Her arms, which she'd braced instinctively on his shoulders, went limp. Her legs, which she had instinctively wrapped around his broad body became as insubstantial and would have given way if she hadn't locked her ankles together to help to support her weight. She tightened her grip as he released his hold on her with one hand and shifted it beneath her buttocks. His fingers delved her cleft. As he released one nipple and moved to its twin, he found the mouth of her sex and shoved his finger inside of her. Her body reacted to the intrusion by clenching tightly around his digit.

He made a rumbling sound of satisfaction deep in his chest. Pulling his finger from her, he guided his cock upward to take its place, lightening his grip on her just enough that she slipped downward to engage his rigid shaft. The muscles of her sex clenched hungrily around the tip of his shaft as if trying to drag him inside of her. A shudder went through him as he felt it. Seizing her hips in both hands, he bore down on her as he thrust upward, using her own weight to help him claim her passage.

Tyra tightened her arms around his neck, dizzy with the welter of impressions pounding through her; the heat and hardness of his body, the slickness of the water

coating both his skin and hers and creating delicious friction as their skin glided and clung by turns, the thickness of his shaft and exquisite fullness inside of her, the currents of pleasure stirred to life with each stroke of his cock along her channel. She groaned as the ripples wafting through her grew stronger with each pass, shivering as her body grew hotter, as the need grew more and more intense.

He echoed her throaty groan, held her tighter, began to drive into her faster, to bear down on her hips more frantically with each stroke so that he was driving so deeply inside of her she could scarcely catch her breath ... couldn't. She could only pant as the need inside of her intensified, forced her heart to pound harder and harder with excitement.

He stiffened abruptly, uttered a choked growl and burrowed so deeply inside of her Tyra felt her body shatter with ecstasy. She let out a sharp cry as the explosion of rapture seemed to pitch her spirit beyond her body, certainly pitched her beyond any awareness of her physical self. Nothing but an awareness of pleasure filled her darkening mind for long, long moments.

She was still gasping for breath when Killian's mouth settled over hers with gusty hunger, his breath filling her lungs where she'd failed to fill them herself. A headiness flowed through her as she drew his essence inside of her. Sated as she was on bliss, the drunken stupor that had engulfed her grew more pronounced and the darkness that teased the fringes of her mind settled more firmly over her. She wasn't even aware that he had moved until she felt the caress of water against her buttocks and then around her hips and waist as he sank to his knees.

He seemed loathe to disengage his body from hers, settling on his knees with her still impaled firmly on his shaft, though she could feel a lessening of the tightness inside of her as his cock became as flaccid as the entirety of her body seemed to be. He heaved in a ragged breath as he released her mouth and lifted his head.

"The others would not dwell long beyond the gateway if they knew the pleasure of a mortal woman's body," he said, his voice gravelly.

Surprise flickered through Tyra at the note of amusement in his voice. With an effort, she lifted her eyelids to stare at him, certain she must have mistaken the teasing note in his voice. The gleam in his eyes was unmistakable, though. It sent an odd sense of lightness through her and she found herself smiling up at him in response.

A faint frown drew his brows together after a moment. He lifted a hand and traced her features with his index finger. The puzzlement in his eyes dredged up a flicker of uneasiness in Tyra in spite of the lethargy her expenditure had produced.

She knew he was confused about the feelings churning inside of him and searched her mind for something to distract him from probing too deeply at the 'strangeness' of his infatuation. Giving him what she hoped was a sultry smile, she caught his hand and guided his index finger into her mouth, sucking on it. The effect on him was almost instantaneous. His cock hardened inside of her.

The effect on her was almost as profound and swift. The spent ashes of her desire smoldered, produced a wafting of heat through her.

It flickered through her mind to wonder if there was any possibility of exhausting him with his desires before he drained her completely of the will even to breathe. Wryly, she thought it unlikely unless she could somehow cease to respond, cease to explode with

ecstasy each time he plowed into her body.

It was worth a try, she decided, recalling that her lovers had slept the sleep of the dead after a night of lovemaking. If Killian was at least that much like his mortal counterparts, she might have a chance to slip away come dawn.

The choice did not seem to be hers anyway. The moment his cock hardened, he began to move again, or rather to move her. Grasping her hips, he bounced her up and down on his engorged member until they were both caught up once more in the upward spiraling of rapture and exploded with it. Tyra's legs could barely support her by the time they climbed out of the pool. The muscles along her inner thighs trembled with weakness with every step she took and she had to focus just to walk.

The meat, they discovered upon their return to the outer chamber of the cave, was charred on all sides ... and still raw in the middle. Killian tore off chunks, waved them in the air to cool them and handed her small pieces to eat. She was starving, she realized with her first bite, because it tasted better than any of the succulent dishes the cooks at the palace produced and it had no seasoning at all.

Killian ate enough to feed three men, but then he was roughly the size of two and he had expended a great deal of energy. He finished before her and rose, returning to the chamber with the pool.

Tyra glanced longingly toward the mouth of the cave when he'd gone, wondering if her grandmother had recovered sufficiently from her shock to conjure a seeing spell or if she was too weakened and ill to help her at all. She wasn't certain it would help even if Zoreena could. The men-at-arms had grabbed weapons and arms, she realized, and charged after them as soon as they'd gathered their wits.

She had not consciously noted that because of her own distress, but, unconsciously, she had. Unless Zoreena could also find the strength to astral project, therefore, or round up someone to chase after them, being able to 'see' where she was at this moment would not help her any time soon.

If she could escape at daybreak, though, she thought hopefully, she might well meet up with her men.

Uneasiness immediately assailed her at thought. Attempting and failing might mean her death. She knew the love spell had to be tenuous at best. It would not take a great deal to pierce it and allow the daemon clearer thought.

And either way, she realized with dismay, he was bound to come after her. Her only chance of truly escaping him would be if she had enough time to make it back to the palace. There, even if Zoreena was in no condition to cast a spell herself, she would have access to her grandmother's book of spells. She was confident that, with that, she could place a protection spell over the castle that would be powerful enough to prevent Killian from entering.

Without it ...

She was still struggling to recall some spell she'd learned that might help her when Killian returned carrying the skin of the bear. Snapping it as the laundresses did the bed linens, he shook the residual water droplets from it and then held it in front of the fire for a few moments to dry it.

The fur was still damp when he'd spread it on the cave floor and dragged her onto it, but she was still slightly damp herself and it at least smelled somewhat better. It gave

her a modicum of cushioning between herself and the hard, cold stone of the cave floor and she was glad for it also because Killian was insatiable. He plowed into her until she finally erupted with pleasure again and passed from consciousness and then roused her later and coupled with her again.

Light filtering into the cave roused her after what seemed an endless night and far too little rest. She was loath to surface even enough to crack an eyelid, however.

Tomorrow, she thought groggily, burrowing against the warmth of Killian's belly.

The not terribly pleasant odor of burning meat woke her again sometime later. Wrinkling her nose, Tyra stretched and finally opened her eyes when she discovered she was alone on the fur.

Killian, she saw when she finally managed to focus her eyes, was sprawled negligently on the side of the fire opposite her, one knee drawn up, the other leg stretched in front of him. His expression was what she could only think of as brooding. She didn't particularly care for that look.

He blinked after a moment, slowly, as if emerging from deep thought, his gaze focusing on her face. Desire flickered to life in his eyes, and yet there was something else there, as well, she sensed and it made her even more uneasy.

"I find my hunger for you ... disturbingly insatiable," he muttered slowly, almost thoughtfully.

Tyra managed an uneasy smile despite the anxiety that instantly churned in her belly. "It is because you love me ... as I love you," she managed to say around the emotional knot that had formed in her throat and made her mouth dry.

One of his black brows lifted upward in an expression that was more sardonic than mildly questioning. "Why?"

Tyra blinked at him, her mind scrambling for what he was asking, which she thought with dread she knew. "Why what?" she asked cautiously.

He frowned, flicking an assessing gaze over her. "Why do love me?"

Tyra felt her eyes round before she went back to blinking in an effort to jog her mind to produce an acceptable answer. "Because ... because ... just because I do. I mean—there is no rhyme or reason for love. It simply happens."

He tilted his head curiously. "Does it? At what point while I was slaughtering your men did you say to yourself—I love this being with all my heart!"

Tyra smiled at him weakly, suppressing the urge to leap to her feet and race from the cave only with the reflection that it was doubtful she could manage it. "It was ... when you kissed me!" she said on sudden inspiration. "It was like nothing I'd ever felt before!"

"Because it was me? Or because you had not kissed a daemon before?"

Tyra stared at him in dismay. "You did not ... *feel* it?" she asked weakly.

His gaze flickered over her. When his eyes met hers once more, she saw they were churning with desire. "I felt ... something I had not felt before. Not for any of my own kind ... which I find baffles me."

Tyra swallowed with an effort. "Because love is something that simply happens when you meet the one you were destined to be with," she quoted her grandmother, having had no true experience with it herself. She had felt it when she had believed that she was in love with her first lover, but she had realized after a time that she was merely

in love with the person she had *believed* he was, not the person he actually was—which meant that it wasn't truly love. Desire, perhaps, but affection based upon misconception was not true feelings.

He lifted a hand, summoning her with the gesture. She resisted the urge to glance toward the mouth of the cave and judge the distance, trying to assure herself he meant her no harm or he would simply have attacked her. Shakily, she pushed herself to her feet and went to him, standing over him uneasily. He caught her hips, guiding her to step between his splayed legs and then caught her wrist, exerting enough pressure that she had, perforce, to drop to her knees before him. "Show me the love you feel for me," he murmured in a deep, rumbling voice latent with desire.

"Show?" Tyra echoed doubtfully.

His eyes narrowed. "This 'love' you mortals speak of so easily ... it is desire for the one you hold in affection, is it not?"

Tyra moistened her fear dried lips, realizing abruptly that she *did* desire him. Insane as even she thought it was, in spite of the anxiety churning in her belly, there was also a sense of breathless anticipation. She had felt both, she realized as she met his gaze, almost from the moment she first set eyes on him, a self-destructive mixture of fear and desire that were woven so insidiously together she was not certain from one moment to the next which made her heart pound more furiously, which made her feel faint at the thought of touching him or being touched by him.

Even if she had not, she saw that he was testing her. She could not be sure that he had completely surmounted the spell. It seemed indisputable that he'd begun to question its effect upon him, however.

Her mouth was so dry by now she had to suck moisture from her salivary glands and swallow convulsively twice to gather enough moisture to dampen her mouth and throat. She did not think a show of hesitancy would be taken well, though, and lifted her hand to rest it lightly on one of his hard shoulders instead of pointing out that love was not an emotion easily displayed. If he did not understand it, though, then he would not know the difference between the touch that spoke of love and the one that was only desire. She thought it was possible that she might even have fooled him with pretended desire she did not feel, but it was as well that she did feel it, however misplaced she knew it to be.

Affection, she prompted herself, dragging her gaze from his in an effort to focus her mind to how she might convince him, weave the fraying threads of the spell more tightly about him. His flesh was hot to her hand, she realized as she curled her fingers to feel the texture of his skin. It dawned upon her that he radiated heat, near as much as the fire behind her back, though his skin was not hot enough to burn her. His coloring, his gift of fire, the heat of his flesh could mean only one thing, she decided. Avoran had summoned Killian from the plane of fire to serve him. She had little knowledge of the beings of that plane, and yet they were no more inclined to wander the earthly plane than any of the others.

Immortal, they might well be, but the earthly plane did not please them, must discomfort them to a great degree, else they would come and go more freely ... plague mortals far more than they did. They were powerful beings, as Killian had amply demonstrated already, and there must be plenty that were powerful enough to breach the

gateways at will.

A mortal, unless he had a good deal of power, could not open the gateways, and he certainly could not command them. The ring Avoran wore must be far more than she'd realized at first. It must be the talisman that protected him while it allowed him to control the daemon.

Killian's flesh tensed beneath her light touch as she stroked her hand over his upper chest and her gaze flickered back to his. His expression had grown taut. The fire in his eyes blazed hotter.

He might not understand his hunger for her, but she saw that he had a good deal of difficulty controlling it.

That was weapon enough, she thought. So long as she fed the desire, he could think no more clearly than she could when she was in the throes of passion ... hopefully not nearly as well.

Wryly, she supposed it was a double edged sword.

The things he had done to her the night before had left her no room at all for thought.

Shifting closer to him, she settled her other hand on his opposite shoulder and swept her palms lightly up his neck to stroke his face as she leaned toward him and brushed her lips feather light along his hard mouth. It brought a flood of warmth to her belly to chase away the chill of nervousness. The touch summoned images of that hard mouth on her body the night before, wringing sharp cries of ecstasy from her, and she felt her nipples pucker with a cascade of warmth through her breasts and belly.

She was a little surprised, a little uneasy, and very disappointed when he did not immediately seize the initiative, drag her against his chest, and kiss her into mindless oblivion. The disappointment waned, though, as she explored the texture of his skin with her lips and glided her hands upward to explore his ears and his surprisingly soft, silky hair.

Daemon or not, he felt like a man ... except better than any she had felt before, stronger, harder, infinitely pleasing to the touch, intoxicating to taste. Her mouth watered with want as she filled her nostrils with his scent and tasted him on her lips and tongue. Without consciously deciding, guided solely by desire, she ceased to brush light, closed mouth kisses along his face and began to nibble instead with her lips, running the tip of her tongue along his flesh and sucking at it.

The comment he'd made before flickered through her mind as she familiarized herself with the feel and texture and tone of his skin and hard flesh, absorbed his taste and scent with a heady sense of pleasure. The shock that had enveloped her as he had plowed through walls, doors, her grandmother's protection spell, and armed, experienced men-at-arms had separated her from the terror she might have felt otherwise, cushioned her enough in any event that it had allowed her sufficient detachment to feel absolute awe at his speed and power and efficiency as a killing machine. As for the violence of his assault—if their roles had been reversed and her men had had the upper hand, they would have been just as savage, perhaps more so. She had seen what they were capable of when the blood lust was upon them and it was no pretty sight.

She was certainly not less inclined to view him favorably because he was capable of single handedly, and without any weapons beyond his own hands, breeching any

defense thrown in front of him. No woman could help but feel awe at such a mighty, invincible warrior, she thought, especially when he had shown he was equally capable of protecting, and even a good deal of gentleness. For all his brute strength and single-minded pursuit of his goal, when the spell had tamed those urges, he had shown great care for her frailty beside a creature such as himself. She was bruised, true, from the roughness of his passion, but not injured as she might well have easily been if he had simply not taken her weakness into consideration.

Regret touched her as she guided her hands lower and filled her palms with the hard ridges of muscle along his shoulders and upper arms and upper chest, regret that circumstances couldn't have been different. If he had come to her as a warrior petitioning for her hand instead of being sent as an assassin she would not have needed a love potion to open her heart to him. She would have melted at the sight of so magnificent a male. He would have been the stuff of any woman's dreams then—handsome and powerful enough to take her breath away and fill her with pride to have him at her side, joy to have one so splendid to father her children.

He moved restlessly beneath her light touch, his breath growing more and more labored. The growing excitement she felt in him fed her own. The realization that she could evoke so much desire in such a powerful man as to make him shake with need sent a dizzying rush of elation through her, spurred her to push until she could find the limit of his self-control. She settled lower as she followed the path her hands had blazed with her lips.

His eyes were glazed when she had thoroughly familiarized herself with his upper body and looked up at him again. She held his gaze for a long moment and then looked down. His cock, she saw, feeling her mouth go dry, was a masterful shaft of flesh, so engorged the skin was stretched tightly along its massive length, the veins bulging and pulsing with the flow of blood. The urge to taste him, to pleasure him there as he had pleased her the night before, was so strong she felt dizzy with the impulse. She yielded to the sudden, almost overwhelming need, grasping it with one hand and leaning down to cover the round head with her mouth.

The taste of him in her mouth was an unexpected delight surpassed only by the thrill of his massive size. As she struggled to open her mouth wide enough to engulf more of his turgid flesh, her mind filled with images of his cock thrusting into her body the night before. A deep ache blossomed in her belly. A flood of heat and moisture answered, the muscles along the walls of her sex quivering and working as if beckoning him to fill her again.

She wanted to feel him there and at the same time, she felt a hunger growing to feel his pleasure fill her mouth, to taste the essence of his passion. Her throat closed with thirst at that thought. Her nether throat clenched with an equally demanding thirst. She fed more hungrily upon his flesh, stroking him with her hands and mouth, sucking on him to take the taste of his flesh inside of her to fulfill her need to savor him.

His hands settled on her shoulders, gripped them tightly, lightened their hold, and tightened again, kneading her flesh. The faint tremors she'd felt wafting through him became more pronounced, became hard shudders as his breath sawed in and out of his chest like a bellows, the hot puffs of air he expelled scouring her skin and lifting goose bumps of acute sensation.

He speared his fingers through her hair, gripping her skull as the quakes rattled him harder, the nearly inaudible grunts he'd been making drawn out into short, gasping groans. The sounds he couldn't contain, seemed scarcely aware of, intensified the fire leaping inside of her. She began to move over him faster, suck harder, more hungrily, focused single-mindedly on the desire, the *need* to bring him to his peak with her mouth and hands.

He gave up the effort to contain the tortured groans of pleasure her mouth and hands dragged from him, either that or he lost all awareness of the sounds wrenched from him. His hands moved over her restlessly, as if he was of divided mind whether to tear her away from his flesh or to urge her to devour him. His hands tightened on her abruptly, forcing her to still. He released a long, tortured sound of agony, shaking all over. Unable to move, Tyra closed her mouth tightly over the head of his cock and sucked hard. A hard shudder went through him, dragging from him a choked cry of anguish. His cock jerked in her mouth so hard she nearly lost her grip on it. Feeling his grip on her slacken, she drove her mouth down over his flesh and swallowed as she felt his seed erupt from his cock.

A wave of mindless hunger and powerful exultation ripped through her. Uttering a moan of excitement she stroked and pulled at him until she had milked him of every drop of his seed and still she hungered for more, continued to suckle at him frantically until he caught her shoulders with hands that shook and dragged her up. One arm tightened around her as he speared the fingers of his other hand through her hair, catching the base of her skull tightly and holding her as he opened his mouth over hers. Bearing down on her mercilessly, he thrust his tongue into her mouth in an assault just shy of savagery. She met his conquest with the fierce hunger of unappeased longing. Their tongues raked along each other, dueled for dominance.

He dragged her across his lap, spearing her with his flesh, turgid with need once more. An arm tightened around her shoulders. His other arm tightened around her hips as he bore down on her, forcing her body over his shaft. She groaned her delight and hunger into his mouth as she felt his cock sliding home through the slick wetness that bathed her channel. He huffed a pained breath of satisfaction into her mouth as claimed her fully, deeply. Holding her impaled upon his shaft, he dragged his feet beneath him, shifted onto his knees and, in that fashion, seized control, holding her tightly as he thrust upward into her body with the pumping of his hips.

And then it was her that moaned, shook, felt her control wrenched from her grasp as he drove her toward completion with merciless intent. He dragged his mouth from hers, fastened it upon her neck and sucked hard as her body began to quiver on the verge of release. The stinging suction of his mouth along the tender flesh of her neck sent her over the edge. She cried out as she came, hoarsely, her mind and spirit seeming to fly away from her body with the force of the explosion of rapture inside of her. His arms tightened brusingly around her as the shockwave of her release seemed to travel through him. A long, low, almost animal groan seemed torn from his throat as he came with her.

Chapter Four

Lord Avoran was still in a state of near mindless fear and fury when he finally arrived at the edge of the Valley of Shadows. Fear was riding him that he had given himself away and that there might be living witnesses to it, and that his plans seemed to have gone completely awry and he had lost control of the beast. The beast had not done what he had been summoned to do and yet had managed to so decimate and scatter the army of Bandar that it had taken far more time than he had wanted to devote to it to gather the remainder up to follow.

His terror of the valley pierced even the emotional turmoil that was raging inside of him, however. Halting abruptly on the rim of the valley, he fought his horse until he had managed to calm the frightened beast. He turned then to survey the army at his back, wondering if he could send them forth and remain safely on the Bandar side of the border.

It did not take his powers to assure him that he would have to summon a more powerful spell than he was currently capable of to overcome their terror of the valley. "We will camp here!" he announced. "He will not get far into the valley before the shadow people drive him back directly into our arms!"

The men did not look a great deal happier with that news than they had at the prospect of going into the valley to confront the daemon, but they settled quickly enough to setting up an encampment.

Relieved that they at least did not mean to abandon the chase altogether, Lord Avoran directed them to set up his own pavilion first and retired to it straight away to summon his powers to astral project. It had occurred to him that it might not be at all necessary to pursue the matter further. The little bitch had managed to cast some enchantment over the beast. He knew she had, but she was not nearly as powerful as he was! No doubt his own spell had overcome hers and the beast had already done what he had been summoned to do!

It did not take him long to discover where the beast had gone to ground with his prize. It was a bit of a jolt to discover why he had been so frantic to find some place to enjoy his prize in peace, but Avoran discovered he was both amused and aroused at the sheer ferocity of the beast's rape of the princess. Clearly, the spell Tyra had woven to bind the beast to her had backfired and his 'devotion' had manifested itself in a way she had not anticipated. He, himself, had not anticipated this sort of end for her, but he was mightily titillated over the prospect.

He had spent many idle moments toying with the fantasy of having her himself. He would have, despite her protests, and regardless of the prudes who disapproved of taking those tied by blood into one's bed, if she had not been so well guarded that he could think of no way that he might snatch her without risk to himself.

Even his own appetites were not so bestial—well, not quite. She would have enjoyed his bed far better, he was certain, although his appetites tended to be a bit rough according to the screamers who frequented it. He lingered to watch, expecting any

moment for the beast to finish her off. To his vast disappointment, however, he was snatched back before he could witness it by the entrance of someone into his pavilion. He was not pleased when he discovered that it was the royal captain of the guard who had come to insist that they push forward at once to rescue Tyra.

He smiled thinly at the man, actually rather regretful that he would have to dispose of him once he had seized the throne for he was an able captain. The man was far too loyal to Zoreena and Tyra, however, and could be trusted to turn upon him if he ever got so much as a whiff of the things he had done.

“I have been worried sick about my little niece myself. You will no doubt be as pleased as I was to discover that Princess Tyra managed to weave a protection spell about herself. Of course, it is not strong. She has not attained Queen Zoreena’s powers, but she is safe for the moment and I am still convinced that this is our best strategy for insuring her safe return. The shadow people will not tolerate the breach of their territory. They will drive the beast back—and the longer he lingers in our world, the weaker he will become and the more likely that we can wrest Tyra from him without harm coming to her.”

The Captain looked as if he wasn’t certain whether to believe that or not. “It does not seem right only to wait,” he said slowly.

Lord Avoran shrugged. “It chafes me to wait far more than it does you, I assure you! She is my kin and nigh the last of it!”

* * * *

By their third day in the cavern the uneasiness had settled in Tyra that she was sinking far faster under the spell Killian was weaving around her than he was. He exhausted her with his hunger for her body, and yet she was not so weary in mind or body that her thoughts did not turn to the possibility of escape. In her more lucid moments, she worried the problem with her mind, but she realized she had lost the perspective to judge whether her reluctance to try was built upon a solid foundation of reason or her unwillingness to deprive herself of the passion he ignited within her.

Her men had either lost their trail or their fierce determination to rescue her had wavered in the face of entering the Valley of Shadows. They did not come thundering down upon the cave and wage battle.

Killian, however, became more and more withdrawn and restless, not that he’d been especially open to begin with, but the way he studied her undermined the little confidence she had had that the spell was strong enough to continue to hold him for long.

She knew when and if it broke, her life was forfeit, and yet at the same time she found it difficult to accept that Killian the assassin could displace Killian the lover in the blink of an eye. She toyed with the idea of trying to convince him to return with her to the castle, but she doubted she had that much hold upon him and feared even trying would rip away another thread of the spell, perhaps the entire fabric of it.

It was near dusk on the third day when Killian rose abruptly and decisively and stalked toward the cave entrance. “I must find food.”

He’d muttered more to himself than to her. Tyra felt a surge of adrenaline rush through her. Fear seized her, the certainty that he had given her what was quite possibly her only chance at freedom and an equal surety that she would never manage it. She had not realized until she found herself facing the possibility that she was more afraid of

trying to escape Killian and the possible consequences than staying with him.

She began to argue in her mind immediately. If she had been more confident that she could succeed, she would not have thought twice, she assured herself, but could she? Or would she only manage to bring about the disaster she'd been so worried about sooner?

* * * *

It was Killian's thoughts that finally drove him from the cave. The certainty was growing stronger that he was caught in some powerful spell that made what had once seem reasonable now seem unreasonable and vice versa. The fact that he desired the Princess Tyra beyond reason had not greatly disturbed him—in the beginning—but he had begun to suspect that that in itself was proof of some extraordinarily powerful enchantment.

She was beautiful. There was no denying that. And she was also desirable and he had never been one to quibble over his hungers.

How had his desire for her so radically altered his determination to defeat his overlord, however?

For it had. He had been mulling that over for days now—when he could assuage his hunger for Tyra long enough to turn his mind in another direction. He had pondered all the time that he had spent plotting against his master, and all the time and effort he had put forth to gather an army capable of defeating the overlord he despised with every breath he took. He had been on the very verge of meeting his enemy in battle when he had been summoned, and yet now he found that he was far more interested in dallying with Tyra than returning to finish what he had once longed for with a fierceness that matched his passion for the princess.

What could it be that would bring about such a change if not an enchantment?

He thought it was, but he had not been able to throw it off even recognizing it for what it was. He had thought, at first, that he could appease it and the hunger would go away. Instead, it seemed to him that the more time he spent indulging it, the stronger the grip of the enchantment.

And yet, the sorcerer who had summoned him was powerful. He had opened a gateway and pulled him forth.

To kill Tyra ... the spineless worm! He could not kill so frail a woman himself? He was so incompetent that he needed a powerful daemon like himself to do the deed?

Evidently, he thought, feeling a churning rage against the bastard for summoning him to begin with and then charging him with destroying a life far more precious than his own!

He shook that thought with an effort, trying to focus his mind on what had convinced him that Tyra was so beautiful, so desirable that he could not bear to harm her, that he adored her—beyond the obvious that she was so appealing to his senses.

She did not adore him, he thought angrily. He saw fear in her eyes when she thought he would not notice. An adoring woman, he was sure, would not look at her man in such a way at any time.

She had surely bespelled him and not in the ordinary way. There was magic involved, strong magic, and he abruptly remembered the vial she had thrown at him when he had reached her, thinking that he would end her life quickly and be on his way.

He was caught between the two, he realized abruptly—the sorcerer and the sorceress, and he was growing weaker the longer he remained on their plane. And his army would not defeat his overlord without him to lead it.

He could not kill her to free himself. Even summoning the thought of doing so was enough to make him feel sick to his stomach.

What then? Remain as the pawn of the pair? Stay until he grew so weak that they could destroy him?

There was another option, he realized abruptly, a gateway north of the Valley of Shadows. If he made his way there, he could break the spell that both had cast over him. The magic of the portal would be enough and once he had passed through into his own plane his own strength would return.

And he would have vengeance on the meddling sorcerer who had pulled him from his own, far more important business, to worry with the piddling squabbles of mere mortals!

* * * *

Tyra was quaking even before she finally managed to gather the nerve to creep to the entrance of the cave and peer around for any sign of Killian. She felt so weak with relief when she did not see him that she felt downright faint. She hesitated, struggling with her fears a few moments more and finally thought to scan the ground for some idea of the direction Killian had taken.

Crouching, she narrowed her eyes against the failing light and finally found his tracks leading deeper into the valley. Better and better, she thought! Straightening at once, she moved a little further from the cave and surveyed the landscape for any sign of him and, when she saw none, for some idea of how far she might be from the border of her own land.

She could scarcely believe her luck when she realized how close she was! Killian could not have carried her more than a couple of miles beyond the border of Bandar!

That realization was enough to galvanize her with hopefulness she had not been able to summon before. Dismissing her anxiety, she set out toward the border as fast she could, trying to convince herself that she would meet her loyal soldiers any moment, that they would be camped at the top of the valley at the border, or mayhap even searching for her in the valley. They would whisk her back to the palace and she would go at once to her workroom and begin to cast a protection spell.

In a very short space of time, she had developed a stitch in her side from rushing. Despite the discomfort, though, her fear of being recaptured had diminished every step that she came closer to her goal and her confidence had risen.

There was no more warning than a mighty blast of air and a faint crackling noise before Killian landed solidly in front of her, blocking her path. Tyra sucked in a sharp breath that bordered on a scream, clamping a hand over her wildly galloping heart and stared wide eyed at the daemon, trying to kick start her brain into functioning.

Desperation led to inspiration. Dropping her hand from her heart, she surged forward, flinging herself upon Killian's chest dramatically. "Killian! Beloved! You were gone so long I became afraid. Thank the gods I have found you!"

He seemed frozen for a long moment. Finally, he lifted his arms around her. "You would have found me sooner, beloved, if you had gone the same direction that I

had rather than the opposite,” he said in a rumbling voice that still managed to sound sardonic.

“I was panicked when I heard a noise and realized it was not you returning!” she said quickly. “I simply ran! I had no notion where to find you!”

“And you did not think to call out to me?”

She shook her head, doggedly pursuing the tale that had popped into her head even though it was becoming very clear that he was not going to fall for it. “I fear the shadow people,” she reminded him. “I might well have heard one!”

He pushed her away enough to lift her into his arms. She coiled her arms around his shoulders, burrowing her face against his neck when he had hoisted her against his chest, trying to calm her racing heart, struggling with the sense of fear and despair that welled inside her.

“I am weakening in this plane, it is true, and yet I still have the ‘seeing’, my precious. I fear you do not adore me as I do you, for I saw you as you searched the ground outside the cave. You knew very well which direction I had taken before you chose this one.”

“I didn’t! I swear I didn’t! It was too dark for my eyes to see, though you are right! I did try! You believe me don’t you, beloved?”

“Nay. I do not. You are a clever minx, though.”

Tyra gulped convulsively, trying to decide whether her ‘innocence’ would prompt her to anger or hurt. “What do you mean to do?” she asked breathlessly.

“Adore you, of course, my precious.”

She did not know why, but that was not the least reassuring. She discovered her instincts had not been wrong when they reached the cave again. Her certainty that he meant to punish her had ripped away her wit and left only instinct and her instinct prompted her to foolhardiness. The moment he set her on her feet, she made a desperate attempt to dash past him and flee.

She thought at first that it was Killian’s hands that had closed around her wrists. The cold bite of metal and the tingling burn of magic were unmistakable, though. She realized despairingly that he had conjured manacles from the stone. Despite her attempts to elude them, they were like live things. They coiled around her as easily as if she had not even tried to resist, pulling her back to the wall behind her and binding her against it.

Killian studied her through eyes narrowed with both anger and desire. “This will keep you safe, beloved, until I can return.”

Tyra had turned her face from him, refusing to look at him, but at that she whirled her head to blink at him in disbelief. “You are not going to leave me chained like this!” she gasped.

He paused at the mouth of the cave and turned to look at her speculatively. “It will be easier to find you when I return.” He hesitated. “I believe we will play another game when I do. Think warm thoughts of me, beloved.”

She glared at his back as he turned and left. Warm thoughts! She would think of him back upon his own plane!

She could not sustain her anger, unfortunately. Her mind almost immediately began to worry the comment about the games he meant to play and she was torn between fear and—insanely!—the very warmth he had suggested.

He had not truly seemed angry with her, she reminded herself, even though he had clearly not been fooled at all. He would not actually harm her, she assured herself. He was still bound by the love spell, as fearful as she had been that her attempt to escape would break it.

The thought reminded her of what he had said about weakening in her world. She tried to see that in a positive light since it occurred to her that that might well be why the charm she had not thought that powerful seemed to still have him in its snare. She discovered, though, that even while it did comfort her on that level, she felt uneasiness that she could not connect to her own situation—dismay for him.

She did not think that he had realized what he had said, what he had given away and, in any case, she could not imagine such a powerful being seeking any sort of empathy. He would not expect it and would not seek it for that reason. He would also be too proud to admit it—except that he had. She thought that must be because it was true and something that had been preying upon his mind for him to allow it to slip.

If it was true, then it could only be good news for her. The weaker he became the more powerful the spell would bind him and the more he would be under her spell, but she did not particularly want that. It dismayed her a great deal to think that he might weaken enough that he could be destroyed.

She did not want that. She only wanted him to go back to his own world.

He returned while she was still wavering between fear of what he might do in retaliation for her defiance, struggling with heated fantasies, and worrying about his fate. Dusk had given way to complete darkness in that time, however, and fear filled her for a moment that it was not Killian.

“Killian?” she whispered in a quavering voice when she heard a heavy, meaty thud.

She jumped in fright when he touched her, and yet even as she did, his heated scent enveloped her and she knew it was him. Instead of answering her, he caught her ankles. Her weight should have instantly pulled painfully against the manacles holding her to the wall and for a moment she was too confused to grasp what was happening.

A tingle all over her like stinging insects and then the whisper of cool evening air spoke of magic, though. He had removed her gown, leaving her completely bare and totally vulnerable. He had not used his powers on her before and a flicker of panic washed through her when she realized that he was binding her up.

For his pleasure? Her body responded with a wash of anticipation.

Or to punish her for her defiance? Cold followed the heat.

The muscles of her legs and buttocks began to feel the strain as he bent her knees and pushed her legs up tightly on either side of her and then spread her legs so wide it pulled at the tendons along her inner thighs. She felt the moist petals of flesh of her sex part with the strain, as well, and tried instinctively to close her legs together.

Her heart began to palpitate a little frantically with a mixture of fear and excitement when she discovered she was unable to move.

She heard the ragged pant of his breath, felt it a moment before she felt his touch—the hot, rough texture of his tongue as he dragged it along her cleft. She would’ve bucked if she had been able to. Every muscle in her body clenched, strained, and found no release of tension.

The fear began to give way entirely to excitement, however, as she felt him settle to licking and sucking at her sex with a hunger that was almost as unnerving as it was exciting to her senses. Within a very few minutes she was too drunk with the pleasure coiling through her in heated waves to think about the possibility that it might only be a prelude to the true punishment he had in mind.

She didn't try to hold back for more than a handful of moments to savor the pleasure a little longer when she felt her body soaring toward release. The token resistance gave way and her body erupted in rapture that shook her and made her gasp.

She discovered then what the trap was that he had set for her, the punishment that he had promised.

Pleasure, more than she could bear.

He paused for a handful of seconds for her to catch her breath and began again. She groaned, still too drunk and disoriented to grasp what he was doing. She was excruciatingly sensitive so soon after she'd come, though, and she struggled to elude his touch ... for all the good it did. She still couldn't move—not at all. He licked and pulled at her clit until her body responded, taking her up to another peak. The spasms were hard and lasted longer the second time.

And he gave her less time to recover, barely paused when she shattered in climax. A groan of dread worked its way from her chest when she realized he was driving her to yet another release, but no amount of effort could close her mind to it. Her body responded more sluggishly, but it did respond. She blacked out when she hit her third climax, briefly sparing her senses from the overload, but it did not last nearly long enough. She came to the discovery that he had transferred his attention to her sex itself. A modicum of relief filled her even as she felt the heated glide of his tongue inside of her, but it was short in duration. His tongue thickened and lengthened until it flickered through her mind that it wasn't his tongue at all, but his cock. The rough texture of it gave the lie to that very quickly. He found the spot that was her pleasure center and lapped at it until she had come again ... and fainted again.

She whimpered when he returned his attention to her clit, but her body seemed to seize all over. She was struggling so hard for breath that she could not even force a plea for mercy out and she was so fevered and intoxicated when she had come again that she lacked the wit. It seemed she had become a mindless bundle of nerve endings completely at his command.

As often as she managed to convince herself that she could not possibly come even one more time, he proved her wrong. When her body responded sluggishly, he would merely transfer his attention to scouring her channel with his tongue or begin to tug frantically at her breasts until her body answered his demand and heated toward another explosion.

She had reached a point where she barely had a grasp on consciousness when she felt her body shift. Her mind instantly interpreted it as the end of her torment and she roused hopefully. She discovered to her dismay, though, that he had only repositioned her to take his own pleasure after hours of wringing pleasure from her body.

She groaned as he grasped her hips and drove her down onto his shaft, and yet the hope lingered that he would assuage his own needs and allow her to rest. It lingered until he had plowed into her and spilled his seed three times and she had come three more

times. When he turned her again, she did not even feel a flicker of hope that he was done with her.

It was just as well, for he was not. He parted her buttocks and she felt him pressing something into both holes. As sluggish as her mind was, it went wild at the double penetration, for both were thick enough to be his cock and she knew he only had one. She did not have the time or the mental faculties to grasp it. As soon as he had firmly seated himself, he began to drive into her as he had before.

Thankfully, when she had reached her third climax, she also reached oblivion.

* * * *

Killian felt a mixture of fury and deep anxiety when he discovered he could not rouse Tyra again. After studying her for several moments, the madness that had seized him began to dissipate and he released the magical bonds and carried her to the bear hide.

She sprawled limply when he had settled her.

His anxiety deepened as it slowly dawned on him that she was mortal, not one of his own kind, that he had allowed himself to get so wrapped up in thoroughly assuaging his desire for her that he had lost sight of her frailty.

Dropping to his knees, he examined her for her life force and felt alarm wash through him at her weakness.

It had been no part of his design to harm her, and yet he realized he had fucked her so frenziedly that he had dangerously weakened her.

He had meant to punish her, though, for the spell she had cast upon him, for the need she had planted in him that he could not shake even knowing she had betrayed his love for her and tried to escape him. Even knowing that she had enslaved him when he did not have the comfort of knowing that she was equally enslaved.

He swallowed a little convulsively and summoned his magic to him to ease her suffering, to give her back some of the strength he had drained from her.

It eased some of his worry when he saw her life force brighten, knew that she was only resting and not wavering between the worlds.

She would hate him for certain now, he thought in sudden panic. He had used her mercilessly.

Rising abruptly, he strode to the entrance of the cave, staring out over the valley, though his thoughts were too chaotic to register much that his eyes beheld.

He had thought to break the spell she had woven around him. He had thought he could ease himself on her and reach a surfeit that would drive her from him mind.

He had not thought that he might only succeed in making her despise him! At least, before she had only felt indifference and fear. That was not nearly as bad as her hate!

He had not even succeeded in driving the want for her from him! He was sated, and yet even now he was anxious for his hunger to rise again—more hungry for her than he had been before!

What kind of spell had the minx woven over him, he thought with a mixture of true fear and fury?

A dangerous one, he realized in the next moment as it finally penetrated his abstraction that he could sense mortals near at hand—many mortals. Her army had come after them, he realized, while he dallied with her!

He turned and stared through the darkness at her, trying to summon the will to leave her. He was weakening in her world. He could not linger much longer before he was weakened to the point that there was a very real danger that her men could destroy him. He had to reach the gateway!

He had managed no more than a handful of steps beyond the cave, though, when she drew him back. Uttering a frustrated growl, he stalked to her sleeping form and gathered her into his arms.

It would have helped, he thought with a mixture of self-derisive amusement and anger, if he had fed his body's hunger for sustenance instead of focusing entirely upon expending it on fucking her.

Fool that he was, he had weakened himself further!

Dismissing it, he held her limp form carefully and set out at a brisk trot toward his goal—the gateway just north of the Valley of Shadows.

Chapter Five

Avoran was not pleased when he returned to check the beast's progress a few days later and discovered that Tyra was still very much alive—enough that she had managed to elude the stupid daemon and make a break for freedom. To his relief since he could not do a damned thing beyond watch, the beast seemed to tumble to her ruse and cut her off before she could reach her men.

The promise of retribution tempted him so mightily that he decided to linger and watch, certain that, at last, Killian would cease to toy with Tyra and end it. The show was far more arousing than he had anticipated! He had never thought to try such things himself. The binding, he thought, must add a great deal of spice—to himself—besides eliminating the difficulty of holding the female down when one wanted to do things the female did not especially like.

Not that he had not tried tying them down and also manacles, but they tended to limit him more than he liked. The magical bindings would be far better since he could then not only prevent the female from jerking at a particularly delicate moment but also position her in whatever way he liked.

It was a pity really, that he had not thought to try this sort of thing with Tyra himself since it seemed obvious that she was not going to survive this as she had the beast's previous attempts to 'woo' her.

She was nigh half dead before the beast finally settled to fucking her.

Fucked to death, he thought with a mixture of amusement and fierce arousal!

He had just decided that it was safe to assume she would not survive the night when the fool decided to revive her!

Fury flared for several moments, but it occurred to him the beast most likely simply was not completely appeased yet. He would rouse her again and begin the salacious torture over again and perhaps another round after that until he could no longer hold her spirit within her frail body.

Delicious! Absolutely delightful! He would never have thought of such a twisted method of murder!

He was convinced that Killian was only waiting impatiently for her to revive enough to begin again when the beast began to pace, but then something fouled his plans. He abruptly became alert, sniffing the air like the beast he was and then dashed inside to scoop Tyra up and dashed off with her.

Avoran hesitated, wondering whether to follow or return to his body. Since it dawned upon him quite suddenly that he had lingered far longer than he should have, he curbed the urge to follow and returned to his pavilion.

The weakness that assailed him when he re-entered his body alarmed him, but not nearly as much as the discovery a few moments later that the gods damned captain had taken it upon himself to lead his men into the valley.

"Lord Avoran!" Max, his private Captain at arms called urgently from outside his

pavilion even as he reconnected with his body.

"What is it that cannot wait until a decent hour!" he demanded testily, sitting up on his pallet.

"Captain Duron refused to wait longer! I did not want to disturb you, but you said that I should if there was a problem with the men."

"He is gone and you have waited until now to tell me!" Avoran snarled furiously.

"He took a small band, not the entire army, to see if he could flush the beast and retrieve the princess. I did not know what he had planned until they were gone."

"*That* is what drove the beast off before he had finished," Avoran muttered, settling back on his pallet. "Well, he will have no luck. He flushed the beast alright! He has taken Tyra and headed deeper into the valley. The only luck the fool is likely to have is an encounter with the shadow people. Let me know if they return."

"You mean when, my lord?"

"No, I mean if," Avoran said drily.

* * * *

Tyra realized they were moving long before she managed to rouse herself enough to open her eyes to see if she could tell what was going on. She was almost sorry when she had. The forest around them was inky black—except for the glowing yellow eyes that winked at them from the darkness.

She tensed in Killian's arms. "Killian ... the shadow people," she murmured on a breath of sound. Even that much took great effort, for she was still so weak she did not think she would have been able to hold her head up if Killian had not supported it.

She felt his movements as he glanced down at her, but he gave no other indication that he had heard her beyond moving a little faster and she was not certain about that since she had not really been conscious of much besides movement.

It took an effort of will, but she struggled until she managed to drape her arms around his shoulders and moved her head closer to his. "Killian?"

"Do not worry yourself, beloved," he murmured.

Relieved, she allowed the tension to ease from her and her mind to drift. She was so tired and achy! She could not imagine why until images began to filter into her mind of the hours of torturous pleasure she had endured. A shudder raked its way through her.

Almost as if he read her mind, though, mayhap, it was preying upon his, he spoke again. "I have sorely used you, my precious. I was angry that you would leave me."

The heaviness of regret laced his voice.

Sorely, she mused. She was certainly sore, she decided ruefully. But sorely used? That was a more difficult question to answer. She did not especially *feel* abused.

It disconcerted her. Truthfully, she had not even sensed that he was angry when he had been ... doing all those things to her, although he had certainly seemed angry when he had caught her trying to slip away. Beyond pleasuring her to the point where she thought she might die of it, she could not say he had harmed her, intentionally or unintentionally. There had been no pain involved in that punishment.

Mayhap a little discomfort.

She was not altogether certain she would protest, though, if he took the notion to punish her like that again, although she did dimly recall that she had begged him to stop a time or two.

Or mayhap she had only *thought* she had begged him to?

Mayhap she actually *had* voiced those thoughts rambling in her mind and that was why he was so pensive? Seemed ... regretful? Worried.

It was a bit of a shock to think that he might feel regret even if he had hurt her. True, he was caught in the web of her potion and thought himself mad for her, madly in love, but he was a daemon. From what she had always believed about them, they could not really discern a great deal of difference between pleasure and pain. It was much the same to them.

She might have pursued that line of thought except that the shadow folk had other plans. She had thought that they were following, or merely watching. She supposed she had been convinced that even the shadow people would not attack a daemon, given the choice. She discovered when they reached a vast meadow near the heart of the valley that that was not the case.

They had been drawing a net around them.

As the moon rose to shine down upon them, the shadows moved, began to utter war cries that made her blood run cold. Killian stopped abruptly with the realization that they were surrounded and that he could not do battle with her in his arms.

Bending, he settled her among the grasses and flung a protection spell over her. Despite that, sheer terror gripped Tyra as she saw the shadows move toward them. She realized she had not actually believed the tales of the shadow people. She saw now why they were called that.

They were dark elves. Their ebony skin gleamed almost bluish in the moon's bright beams. Their long, inky hair streamed around them as they danced forward to engage the daemon and then almost seemed to vanish into thin air when he confronted them. But each time they attacked, she heard Killian grunt with the impact of their weapons, saw blood begin to flow and her heart contracted painfully in her chest.

Almost to a man, the shadow people seemed tall and slender, and yet one stood out among them. He was nigh as tall and broad and muscular as Killian and he proved he was nigh as strong when he engaged him in hand-to-hand combat.

Nigh as strong as Killian was now, she thought fearfully, recalling what he had said about weakening the longer he remained in her world.

She was not certain if the fact that the battle waged on for many minutes was yet another sign of his weakened state or if the shadow people were simply that much stronger than her own men, but she suspected it was a combination of the two. Dark elves were not mortals even if they were not daemons, and like the daemon, they had their own magic.

They bled him. Horror settled in her slowly as she realized that that was their aim, to weaken him by degrees. She bit her lip against the urge to scream that at him, knowing that he knew it as well as she did, unwilling to distract him.

Despite their ferocity and their nimbleness, he littered the field with them. Abruptly, they broke off the fight, apparently having discovered that he would not be as easily dispatched as they had believed. The leader raced toward her and, to her stunned amazement and horror, penetrated the protection spell Killian had woven around her as if it did not exist at all, snatching her from the ground, tossing her onto his shoulder and racing away with her.

She struggled to push herself upright and shoved her hair from her eyes, watching in abject horror as Killian wavered where he stood and went down on his knees. She tried to call out to him, but the hard shoulder in her mid-section made it impossible even to draw breath to try.

She was too caught up in her anxiety about Killian for many moments to spare the time to worry about herself. Even when it finally dawned on her that her lover had been vanquished and she faced an uncertain future, though, she was torn between her fear for herself and her anguish that Killian might have been killed.

* * * *

Killian was too stunned to find himself defeated by no more than a handful of elves to think beyond that shock for some time. Fury began to burn in him when he had settled on his back on the ground and try to pull strength back into himself to close the wounds from which his essence flowed, further weakening him.

The need to avenge his honor at so humiliating a defeat gave him the strength to get up after a few moments, but it occurred to him rather forcefully that they would never have succeeded if he had not already been weakened.

He had not been gone from his own world long enough to be so weakened, he thought angrily.

Except that he had expended himself on the woman to the point that he had ignored even the need to take in sustenance!

Fool!

He searched his surroundings for his enemy and discovered, like shadows, they had disappeared just as they had come.

Except the ones he had slaughtered, he thought in satisfaction, staring around at them through narrowed eyes.

Revenge could wait, he decided. He was needed in his own world to lead his army against his overlord.

The dark elves would rue the day they had decided to attack *him*, however!

Turning north once more, he began to jog toward his goal, the temple where the gateway lay.

* * * *

“No! No! No! No!” Avoran screamed, leaping up and down in his fury! “Fool! Where are you going?”

Not unnaturally, Killian ignored him since Avoran had made no attempt to manifest himself as more than a wraith to watch what transpired.

After a few moments, Avoran settled to thinking. The gods damned interfering shadow people! Not only had they not destroyed the gods damned daemon, they had not killed the damned princess!

Gods! Was everyone that damned incompetent? Or was it merely bad luck on his part and very good luck on Tyra's?

Anxiety flickered to life after a few moments, dampening his fury and he frowned as he studied the rapidly disappearing form of the daemon, wondering where the fuck the stupid beast thought he was going! *Why* was he going anywhere at all? *How* could he go?

Even if Tyra's spell had somehow negated his own, Killian should still be firmly

enchanted, damn it! Why was he headed *that* way so purposefully?

He turned to look back in the direction that the shadow people had disappeared, but he was more anxious the longer he pondered Killian's behavior. Deciding to find out what the beast was up to before he went to see what could be done about Tyra, he studied the beast's direction and took flight, soaring over the valley in a northerly direction, searching for what it might be that was drawing the beast.

He felt it before he saw it and sheer terror washed over him in a cold wave. A vision instantly rose in his mind of the way Killian had looked at him when he had summoned the daemon. There had never been any doubt in his mind, unfortunately, that the daemon would have ripped him to shreds in that moment if not for his protective talisman.

A portal to the underworld! Killian could break the spells—his and Tyra's if he could make it back through the gateway to his own world and regain his strength! And this was no conjured passage but an opening through which the daemons could pass without interference from either world!

* * * *

Tyra was too distraught over Killian to assimilate much of what was happening around her until the dark elf who called himself Raizar pulled the horse the two of them were riding to a halt and she saw the ancient city that lay before them. Shadowy from the darkness that shrouded it, she could still discern that it must once have been a very great city, not just because the ruins sprawled for seeming miles along the valley floor, but also because of the beauty that remained.

The forest was making great inroads in reclaiming it. Trees and shrubs and vines had proven themselves stronger than stone and pushed up through it, cracking the stone, shattering it in places, tumbling the city slowly to the ground and crawling over it. And yet, here and there buildings still stood almost untouched by the nature waging war upon it. Fluted columns still supported porticos and cornices, and elaborate friezes still ornamented the many buildings, though it was too dark and she was too distant to make out the figures carved in the stones.

The men who'd accompanied them through the forest, dismounted and released their horses to roam as they pleased while they faded like shadows into the shadows and vanished. Tyra shivered.

The arm Raizar had settled along her waist to support her tightened fractionally. "We are nearly home," he murmured.

Tyra felt her throat close. Not her home and she had begun to wonder if she would ever see it again.

Strange, but she had not spent a great deal of time thinking of that when she had been with Killian. It struck her as odd abruptly that she had not. She had certainly feared for her life—just as she did now—but she had not considered it in that context and she wondered why she had not before and why she did now.

Raizar urged the horse onward and they threaded their way between the great crumbling buildings along what had once been thoroughfares paved with stone.

It flickered through her mind to wonder what civilization had built the city and what had become of them.

The valley, she knew, had not always been known as the Valley of Shadows. She

had no idea what it had been called before, though, for that was long before her time and no one spoke of the Valley of Shadows.

She knew only that the folk of the outer realms had made war with the ‘others’, those beings who were not as they were, who had magic, or who were simply not ‘natural’ and they had finally withdrawn into the Valley of Shadows and beyond that into the realms that became known as the Shadow Lands.

The only thing that she did know was that very few who did not belong there had ever wandered into the Shadow Lands and emerged again.

She had known that Killian did not belong with them, that he was from the realm of the fire daemons, she realized. She had thought him invincible, believed that where ever he meant to take her, it was not here but beyond the Shadow Lands.

That was in part why it had not occurred to her before that she might never see her home again ... and why it did now. Raizar belonged here.

She was so engrossed in her thoughts that she hardly noticed when he pulled the horse to a halt at last until he slipped from its back and reached up to help her down. Instead of setting her own feet, however, he simply pulled her into his arms and carried her up the broad stones stairs that she saw led up to a great mansion that might once have been a palace.

The heels of his boots echoed eerily back to them as he strode briskly along the broad foyer beyond the double doors that formed the entrance. He had covered perhaps a quarter of the distance when he paused and opened a door, pushing it wide to carry her inside.

There was no smell of dust or decay, she realized with surprise when he settled her on a yielding surface that she realized was a couch and left her. Sitting up, she peered warily through the darkness, following him only by the sounds he made. She heard the strike of stones and a tiny flame flickered to life. It multiplied, becoming a branch of candles. He moved about the great room lighting others until the room was slowly unveiled, the shadows chased away by the golden, flickering light.

She studied him warily, noticing for the first time that he was dressed in black. It was no wonder he blended with the shadows of the night!

He moved toward her when he had lit the room to his satisfaction and settled on the end of the couch opposite her, studying her with frank interest.

No! More than mere interest. The look of a man examining his prize!

“You have not given me your name,” he said thoughtfully, lifting her hand ... she thought to salute it. Instead, he examined it as he had her face and her clothing. When he settled her hand on her thigh, he lifted a lock of her hair. “Princess Tyra.”

Tyra felt her eyes widen. “You don’t ... know me,” she said doubtfully.

He chuckled. “Not by sight, no. But even here we hear things and this hair—well, there are few so fortunate as to have hair such a lovely shade of red. You have the bearing and manner of a great lady. As tattered as your gown is, it was clearly an extraordinarily expensive gown. How came you to fall prey to the beast?”

Tyra swallowed a little convulsively. “He was summoned ... by someone.”

He grunted, more a sound of thoughtfulness than conclusion. “And now you have fallen prey ... to me.”

Tyra blinked at him. “But ... you know who I am!”

“A beautiful woman ... mine by conquest,” he said, his hard lipped mouth curling upward at one corner.

Tyra felt her jaw sag, felt her lips part in stunned surprise. “You do not mean to return me to my people?”

“That would not be much of a reward to me for risking my life.”

“What sort of reward are you looking for?” Tyra asked, an edge to her voice now. He chuckled. “The company of a beautiful woman.”

Tyra felt her face heat, but she tamped the urge to ask him what sort of ‘company’ he had in mind. She was very much afraid that she *knew* what he had in mind.

“Have you dined?”

The abrupt shift threw her. She blinked at him. “Not ... uh ... recently,” she answered, unable to keep a hopeful note from her voice.

“Then you will be gracious and join me, yes?”

She glanced around in confusion. “Yes, thank you,” she responded a little doubtfully.

He stood, taking her hand and helping her to her feet. “Then I will give you into the capable hands of my housekeeper and she will see to it that someone attends your needs. I think you will be comfortable for a chance to dress for dinner?”

It was bizarre that it threw her so off kilter to find herself in a civilized setting when she had spent no more than a week in a completely uncivilized one, if that much. Thoroughly confused, she allowed him to lead her to the doors they had so lately entered. An elfin woman holding a lantern met them in the corridor. Bowing, she led Tyra to a broad staircase she hadn’t noticed upon her arrival—since the entire mansion had been cloaked in darkness—and upstairs to a chamber that had clearly been designed with a lady in mind.

It was as richly appointed as the salon downstairs and Tyra’s confusion deepened. The elfin folk, by and large, were forest dwellers. She did not know about the dark elves, but that was clearly not the case ... and yet she still had the sense that Raizar was a law unto himself. The city they had passed through had seemed abandoned. She could not imagine that the others who had vanished had disappeared into the dwellings.

Was it not real then, but magic?

She frowned at the thought, but dismissed it when she discovered a maid had appeared from a small room that connected with the bed chamber. She bowed. “Your bath is ready, my lady.”

My lady—not your highness. They knew of her coming, had prepared for her, and yet not who she was? Or was it intentional? Not a slight, per se, but an indication that here she was no more than a lady.

The mantle of her birth had always sat heavily upon her shoulders and yet she discovered now that it had been ripped away that she was not happy about it. She was of no mind to argue with the possibility of a real bath, though, and clean clothes.

She had not realized how much her distress and shock had shielded her from her body’s complaints until she settled in the hot bath. She gritted her teeth at the effort it took even to lower herself into the bath. Her muscles screamed in protest and she could not prevent a groan of discomfort.

Almost at once, though, the heat of the water began to soak the soreness from her

muscles. She leaned back against the sloped rim of the tub, closing her eyes, savoring the heat that leached the pain from her muscles.

She was half-asleep when someone took the sponge from her limp hand and began to bathe her with infinite gentleness, too content to care if someone else was of a mind to do it for her. A hand delved into the water, cupped her calf and lifted her leg and the sponge was brushed back and forth along her entire leg and foot with a mesmerizing slowness that soothed and massaged even while it cleaned. They settled that leg once more and lifted the other, bathing that as they had the first and then moved to her arms.

She felt her attendant settled behind her, a slight tug as they leaned over her and pulled at the hair she'd draped over the back of the tub. Two large hands, minus the sponge settled on her breasts, cupping them as they had her calves and Tyra's eyes abruptly flew open. She looked up at the dark face above hers in absolutely bafflement for several moments before she realized it was Raizar.

A jolt of shock went through her.

"Lovely," he murmured, coasting his hands downward from her breasts over her belly and down between her thighs before she could command her chaotic thoughts into any sort of order.

"What are you doing here?" she gasped, struggling to sit up and discovering she was tethered by her hair, which he was leaning against.

"Bathing you," he murmured huskily.

"What happened to the maid?" Tyra gasped.

"I sent her away. She would not have enjoyed this nearly as much as I."

Tyra looked away, struggling to evict the turmoil from her mind and consider her situation. It did not help matters that he had slipped a finger into her cleft and begun to strum her clit. Try as she might to simply ignore the intimate play, her clit had other feeling on the matter. She felt her nipples hardening into tight little buds, felt warmth creeping insidiously through her.

He did not care who she was, she realized with a jolt of surprise, any more than Killian had. She was a captive prize—at his mercy, his to do with as he pleased.

It was impossible to simply relax and try to accept or enjoy for all that. Her mind was in too much turmoil and the response of her body to his touch evoked strong memories of Killian's touch that in turn provoked a guilt response.

The realization that her resistance was because of Killian came as more of an unpleasant jolt even than the discovery that her birth and position meant nothing to him.

Why would she feel any sort of loyalty to Killian? He was no chosen lover! She had been his captive as much as she was Raizar's!

It defied logic! She had been certain that she was not caught in her own spell, but was she right? Had the effects merely been subtle enough that she had not realized she was?

Apparently tiring of merely playing, Raizar drew her from her bath after a few minutes. Wrapping her snugly in a bath sheet that covered her from neck to feet and trapped her arms, he lifted her and carried her to the wide bed in the bed chamber. He settled her there in the center, pulling the sheet away from her in much the manner of someone unwrapping a gift.

More than a little unnerved by his possessiveness, unable to think of anything she

could do beyond protest verbally, which seemed unlikely to have any beneficial effect, Tyra watched his face uneasily. The darkness of his skin, she realized with a touch of surprise, and mayhap her shock and distress, as well, had blinded her to him as an individual. Her mind had registered 'dark elf' and shut down.

She saw as she studied his face that he was well favored and far younger than she had realized before. She supposed the fact that he was clearly the leader of the band of warriors had contributed to her assumption that he was not young, that he must be a man of years of training and experience.

She realized that he could not be many years older than she was.

And then it dawned on her that he was an elf. He could be her age plus one hundred years and he would still appear young. Still, he was a young elf ... a handsome one, his harsh, craggy features pleasing to her eyes.

It could not be so difficult, she told herself, to yield to him what he was demanding. At least he behaved in a lover-like manner and not as a conqueror and rapist.

Of course, she had not fought him and that might have made a great deal of difference, but somehow she did not think so. Men who abused women, to her thinking, generally fell in one or two categories—those who had little or no self-control and those who lacked confidence in themselves as men and felt a need to prove they were everything a man should be—on someone weaker than they were.

Raizar, she felt certain, did not fall in either category. His golden eyes were tumultuous with desire. She felt his eagerness in his touch, for his hands shook ever so faintly, and yet there was no clumsiness in his touch, no sense that anger lay just beneath the surface waiting to slip his control. He merely desired her. He was not bent on exerting his physical dominance ... which he could have no doubt of.

She forced herself to relax as he rolled toward her and sought her lips, to yield to him. She discovered it was far easier than she had expected. His hard mouth felt good on hers and his taste and scent pleased her senses. The need in his kiss summoned an unanticipated rush of desire in response.

Her reaction to him disturbed her more than no reaction would have. She had not expected to despite the fact that she had acknowledged that she found him physically appealing.

She did not know what to think of it or herself. She had always welcomed passion when she had taken lovers before and it had never met her expectations. She had found intimacy pleasant, or tedious, but never intoxicating to the point of mindlessness. Yet she had with Killian and she felt herself rising quickly toward that state of being entirely ruled by her senses with Raizar.

Had Killian unlocked the key? Had he taught her passion so that it was now hers, to be summoned by any lover who appealed to her and had some claim to finesse?

But she could not really call what Killian had done finesse, as guilty as it made her feel to think that way. It had been raw, animal desire that he had shown her and evoked from her in response.

She found she preferred to think that he had unlocked her passion to believing that no one would ever again make her feel as he had. It made her ache for his touch even while Raizar caressed her and awoke her body, brought the sadness of regret with it.

He was gone, she told herself fiercely, and she was far better off that he was.

Sooner or later he would have broken the spell and very likely have slain her as he had been summoned to do.

Even so, it brought a wave of deeper sorrow to think he might have been slain himself. She could not believe that, would not believe it. It was far more comforting to think he had managed to overcome the enchantment in his pain and anger and returned to his own world.

Banishing him resolutely from her mind, she sought succor in Raizar, wanting him to teach her body to respond to him as Killian had taught it. She could not allow herself to be bound to him in any way!

Despite her resolution, she found herself battling Killian's intrusion throughout and yet Raizar also commanded her senses, eventually gained dominance with his practiced touch and kisses. In truth, there was no great similarity in the way the two touched and aroused her. Raizar's mouth did not feel the same, nor his hands. His taste and scent were different.

He did not enter her until he had aroused her to fever pitch and she had begun to bump against him and pull at him in demand. The thickness of his cock stretched her deliciously, conquering her passage only by dint of his determination.

She felt his control waver once he had burrowed deeply inside of her. He paused, gasping for breath, and then began to stroke her passage with swift, gliding thrusts that sent waves of pleasurable anticipation through her. The tingles grew harder and closer together until she was panting, reaching desperately for the prize that had been offered.

Either because he sensed how near she was to reaching her goal or because he was rushing toward his own, he increased his pace, began to pound into her in shorter swifter strokes that drove her upward until bliss ruptured inside of her. She sucked in a sharp, keening breath as the force of it rocked her, tightening her hold on him frantically.

He uttered a growl of triumph and followed her, shaking with the force of his own climax, shuddering with the after quakes as she did until sanity reclaimed them and the world shifted into focus again.

Bending his head, he sucked at her lips lingeringly and then her throat. "That was a ... pleasing appetizer," he murmured, his voice tinged with amusement.

Tyra opened her eyes to look at him doubtfully and he chuckled. Bending, he kissed the tip of her nose and bounded off the bed. When he returned, he was carrying a tray of food which he settled on the bed between them. He proceeded to feed himself and her then, dividing his attentions between feeding on the food, appeasing her need for food, and arousing her need for more pleasure at the same time.

She was grateful for it—for both. Killian hardly crossed her mind more than a handful of times and hope began to grow in her that she could, eventually, close her mind to him forever.

Chapter Six

Avoran was so frozen by indecision with the discovery that his plans were falling apart around him and his slave, Killian, rushing toward his freedom that he could not think, could do nothing but pace his tent in terror.

"We must act!" the captain of his elite personal guard growled, clearly impatient with Avoran's indecisiveness.

Avoran whirled on him furiously. "*I know* that, gods damn it! Can you not see that I am thinking!"

His captain pursed his lips. "And every moment that you spend thinking we are drawing nearer to complete disaster!" he said pointedly.

Avoran stopped pacing long enough to narrow his eyes at the man. Briefly, he considered felling him where he stood, but he needed him, he realized.

Later, he promised himself!

"The shadow people have seized Tyra," he muttered under his breath. "They have never been known to release anyone once they have captured them, but can I truly count on that? As long as she lives she will be a threat to me. Of course, she might even now be dead, but that fucking bitch has never been known to do anything the least bit convenient to anyone else.

"No, I do not think I can count on that!" He stopped muttering to himself and fixed his captain with a hard look. "Has her men returned?"

"Nay. The man he left in charge is convinced they were slain by the shadow people."

Avoran frowned. "I do not think we can count on that either. It seemed to me that they scurried back into their holes after their encounter with the daemon. Their leader made off with the princess. I do not think they would act alone."

He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "The daemon slew a goodly number and they were not nearly as strong in numbers as our army. Yes! Form up the men to push forward! We will march to the valley and confront the shadow people. It will be a great triumph for me when I am crowned. Mind you! Make certain once you have routed them that you hunt the princess down and see to it that she is dead! I cannot afford to have her breathing!"

The captain looked surprised. "You will not be marching with the army?" he said, disapproval in his voice.

"Nay! You fool! I must think of a way to deal with that renegade daemon I have brought here! Leave my guard and take the others!"

The captain frowned. "If he is making his way toward the portal as you say, why would he be a problem? He was angry at being summoned at all. Why would he not simply dismiss this as an annoyance and go about his own concerns?"

"Because he is a gods damned daemon!" Avoran roared at him. "I cannot count on that! He may want to avenge himself on me for having the audacity to summon him

to start with! And if my summoning spell has weakened enough for him to throw it off, then my protection spell is *also* weakened!” He waved his hand at the man impatiently. “Go away! Take care of the business I have set for you! Mind you, I will have your balls if you dare to come back without her lifeless body!”

* * * *

Contrary to what Killian had believed, hoped, distance did nothing to sever the binding that Tyra had placed around him. A dozen times he thrust her from his mind and pushed onward and a dozen times he paused and looked back.

Angry with himself and with her, he doggedly pursued his goal until he had begun to feel the pull of the portal. It was strange and unsettling that the moment he did, he also felt the pull toward Tyra more strongly.

He stopped finally and settled to rest and consider the situation.

His army awaited him—victory over his overlord awaited him. Nourishment for his weakening awaited him if he pushed onward.

A sense of hollowness was growing, however, that it seemed none of those things could fill—only Tyra.

He had abandoned her to the dark elves.

They would not harm her. That great hulking bastard that had challenged him had had his eye on her from the start, he thought with sudden possessive anger. That was why they had followed him! To take his prize!

She was *his*!

Straightening abruptly, he turned back, moving far more quickly than he had before.

* * * *

Despair had claimed Tyra long before exhaustion did, but she welcomed the sleep as a respite. Raizar had succeeded grandly in thoroughly arousing her and appeasing her many times over. He was charming. He was extremely intelligent. He was handsome.

He was not Killian, however, and it was borne in upon Tyra that the time she had spent in Killian’s company had had a far more profound effect upon her than merely putting her in touch with her body and teaching her passion. Whether it was with the aid of her potion or not, he had claimed a piece of her heart and it clung to him tenaciously despite every attempt to ignore it, to will it away, and to reason it away.

Fool that she was, she was not the least relieved that he had left her and moved on. She felt abandoned and hurt. She did not even feel concerned that he seemed to have broken the spell, and she certainly should have when she knew her uncle had summoned him to be the instrument of her death!

She felt like groaning in protest when Raizar woke her with his caresses as he had tucked her into a deep, exhausted sleep the night before. Weariness was only part of it. She was convinced he could not coax her heart into his hands and that was all that really mattered to her at that point.

She was not going to be able to turn to him to oust Killian completely from her mind and soul. She might well be his captive forever, but he could not take what had already been given.

To her relief, he seemed appeased enough, for the moment, and allowed her privacy to bathe and dress. When the maid who had abandoned her to Raizar the night

before helped her to dress, she directed her to join Raizar in the grand salon.

She discovered when she reached it that he had had a small table set up for two and a meal was waiting for the two of them to break their fast.

Heartened by the delicious smells wafting to her from the table, at least, Tyra was able to join him with more enthusiasm than she might have felt otherwise. After searching her mind for a few moments for a topic of polite conversation, she decided to give in to her curiosity about the city.

"I do not think that I have ever heard of this place," she said slowly. "What city is this?"

He looked surprised but pleased. "It is the ancient city of Byzantium. It was once the heart of the 'civilized' world."

Tyra widened her eyes at him. "Truly?" she gasped in awe and then frowned. "I had thought it was merely a legend."

He chuckled, but there was as much derision in the sound as amusement. "I am not surprised. The victors write history, my dear. The four kingdoms—also, no doubt legend by now, arose from the ashes of Byzantium once they had slain the Elfin king and queen and destroyed the achievements of four hundred years of peace. In their time, the four kingdoms also fell to the greed of man and became ... pretty much what they are today except that the Shadowlands were carved from them somewhat later—when man decided that he did not want to share this world at all with the 'others'," he said bitterly.

Tyra eyed him uneasily, regretting her curiosity since it seemed to have dredged up animosity toward her own people. She did not know why, but she had not expected it. "You ... ah ... were not there?" she asked hesitantly.

He sent her a startled look and burst out laughing. "You are ignorant of the elfin folk, my dear, to even ask. Nay, I was not. Our life spans are long, but not nearly that long."

Resentment flickered to life. "The ignorance is hardly my fault when the elfin folk keep to themselves. I have nothing but rumors and fables to rely upon for information."

He studied her meditatively. "It is not your fault because you had no hand in it, but I think you are well aware that the elfin folk—indeed all of the denizens of the Shadowlands 'keep to themselves'—and guard their lands well—to prevent the 'naturals' from taking everything. They are like locusts upon the land."

Tyra felt a blush of both embarrassment and anger. "You are as guilty of prejudice as the 'naturals' you obviously despise if you are determined to paint everyone with the same brush without giving them the benefit of doubt!"

He shrugged. "True, but there is safety in assuming any natural is an enemy of any whom they deem 'unnatural'." He grinned abruptly. "I am very willing to be opened minded where you are concerned."

Before Tyra could think of a scathing remark to counter that, a commotion outside the mansion drew their attention. Tyra was instantly alarmed since she could see from the sudden tension in Raizar that this was not commonplace or expected. He stood abruptly as a servant showed a group of dark elves clad in long, flowing robes into the salon. Tyra surged to her feet, as well, but retreated to the far side of the room. Standing her ground might have been more 'queenly', but she was a queen without moral or

physical support and she rather thought wisdom suggested distance until she had a better idea of what had brought the stern faced elfin men.

“The humans have breached the treaty and launched a full scale invasion of the valley,” the one who appeared to be the eldest announced without preamble.

Tyra could not see Raizar’s expression from where she stood, but she saw him stiffen. “This has been verified, Merl?” he demanded sharply.

The man he had addressed compressed his lips. “At dawning a scout rode in with the news!”

Raizar cursed long and with a proficiency that stunned Tyra. He threw a glance at her that she found hard to interpret but that made her more uneasy than she was already.

“We routed a band of them before we returned last eve.”

Merl’s expression was grim. “And lost many good men in the taking of yon human wench.”

“The daemon transgressed,” Raizar growled. “Are you questioning my decision?”

Merl seemed to ruminate over it for a long moment. “No, Captain Raizar. We do not question your judgment in that. It may have been wiser to dispense with the wench, however. The army hails from Bandar and if I am not mistaken, she does also.”

Raizar shrugged. “She hails from the valley now,” he ground out. “The decision of whether to take prisoners, or not, is also mine.”

“Granted, but your decision is now tested. The army is dedicated to retrieving her, we do not doubt. We have called our forces to arms.”

Raizar nodded, flicking another glance at Tyra. “We will rout them or they will not be seen beyond our borders again,” he said grimly.

The council members, for Tyra had decided that was what they must be, bowed their heads respectfully and left.

Raizar turned to study her speculatively. It unnerved Tyra, but she saw that this was her best opportunity to return to her home. “Take me. I will turn them back! There is no reason for any to die—either among your people or mine! They are only doing what their duty compels them to do—to protect me.”

His lips tightened. “I do not need your protection, your highness,” he said sardonically. “Your men may, but I do not.

“Then allow me to protect them!” Tyra cried. “Release me to them and we will turn and leave you in peace!”

“They chose their path when they crossed the border,” Raizar growled, a muscle working in his lean jaw.

“Did you not avenge the trespass enough upon me last eve!” Tyra cried desperately when she saw he had no intention of turning from his duty.

He surged toward her at that, moving so swiftly she was unable to command her feet to carry her out of harm’s way. She flinched when he grasped her upper arms. “Did that feel like revenge to you?” he ground out. “Was I not tender enough? Did I give you no pleasure?”

Tyra gulped. “You were not hurtful! You did give me pleasure! I just ... do not understand why you keep me and risk war when you have assuaged your needs!”

She could tell nothing about his stony expression or read the thoughts that flitted

in his eyes.

“Mayhap I am not done ‘assuaging’ my needs!” he growled finally. “I will let you know, *princess*, when I am done!”

He released her abruptly and left her, bellowing to his servants as he reached the corridor to guard his prisoner well and see to it that she did not escape. He did not look back and the uncomfortable suspicion rose in Tyra that she had misunderstood his motives.

She dismissed that as the serving woman and the housekeeper appeared and asked her to return to her room. It was not a request, Tyra knew, but a politely worded threat. She debated briefly whether to go quietly or not, but although she felt far more evenly matched when it came to defending herself against two women, these were not mere women. They were elfin women and, from what she had heard, the women were nearly as fierce as warriors as their men folk. They were far stronger than ‘naturals’ from all accounts and she did not feel up to discovering if that was true or not.

She led the way without argument, reflecting that she had a far better chance of escaping if she gave the appearance of compliance. It was a bedchamber that they were leading her to, after all, not a prison cell.

Now was certainly not the time to make a bid for freedom in any case with the elfin army called to arms. Once they marched away, she felt certain they would take most of the warriors. No doubt they would also leave defenders, but they would want to take a large force to meet hers even if they were elfin.

She also felt far better about attempting escape when there was more distance between herself and Raizar.

And it could not be argued that she was in need of a little time to rest. She had had little enough in the time since Killian had first taken her!

* * * *

It took an effort to curb his rage when Killian spied the first band of dark elves. The desire to attack them immediately and wreak vengeance for their attack upon him was nigh overwhelming but something at the back of his mind stayed him. Instead, he summoned a cloaking and followed them.

He realized after a very little time that this was no random scout party patrolling. The band moved swiftly and with intent.

It took no great leap of intelligence to figure out why. The army of Bandar had undoubtedly advanced into the valley.

He discovered when he reached an ancient, crumbling city that this was undoubtedly the case, for there were bands of elfin warriors converging there from every direction.

He had to fight another round with his temper when he discovered the bastard who had attacked him and taken his woman was clearly their commander. It was not the realization that he had not the strength to plow through the entire army and reach the bastard that stopped him from instantly attacking, however. It was the certainty that that was not the way to get his woman back and also that it would endanger his frail darling.

He wanted her back—unharmd. He could not ensure that if he fought the army of dark elves assembling in the heart of the city.

And there was no reason, he realized, to risk harm coming to her. The army was

marching to meet her men.

He was too impatient to merely wait, however. After studying the elves for a time, he began to look about him at the ruins and climbed to a better vantage point to watch them and to see if he could determine where they were holding his woman. It transpired to be an excellent decision. Once he had climbed high enough to clear his head of their foul scent, he detected just a faint, tantalizing taste of hers. His body reacted almost before his brain had analyzed the scent, leaving no doubt in his mind that he had found her.

Narrowing his eyes, focusing completely on tracing that lovely perfume, he scanned the city until he at last found the direction and began to move slowly but steadily closer. The elfin army began to move, as well, marching from the city, but he was scarcely conscious of them once he had the scent of his woman in his nostrils and his blood began to pound out a demand for her. It led him unerringly through the city until he came at last to a mansion that had seen repairs and was whole whereas those around it still leaned brokenly, threaded with vines and leaves and growing things.

He had to curb the urge to rush inside at once, but his mind was still warning him to caution and he discovered after a few moments that it was not his imagination that he could still smell elves.

The thieving bastard had left guards around his mansion to watch his prize!

There were only four. He might be weakened but he could manage four without difficulty!

Were there more inside, though? They were bound to make a fuss when he slew them and alert any that might be inside, he decided.

He decided to slip inside stealthily and make certain there was no chance that Tyra might come to harm while he was occupied with slaying the guards. Leaping to the roof of the mansion, he paced the circumference until he found the place where her scent was strongest and then climbed down the wall and peered through the windows.

Tyra was pacing the room, he discovered, distress clear in her expression and in the tension radiating from her. Anger surged through him. He saw no sign that she had been harmed, but she was distressed! That was enough!

Curbing the urge to simply smash the window and leap inside, he grasped the thing and wrenched it open, discovering as he did that they had been locked—for they shattered. Tyra whirled at the sound, her eyes wide, her face paling with fright.

“Killian!” she gasped when he discarded the cloaking that had hidden him from the eyes of the elves and bounded inside.

She surprised him, rushing to him and throwing her arms around him as if he was her savior, her rescuer. Disconcerted, he stared down at her bright hair for a moment and finally grasped a handful of it and yanked her head back to see her face.

He saw welcome there that made his chest tighten. Desire rushed over him, however, ousting all thought from his mind. Need claimed him, the need to lay claim to his woman. He drew her closer, covered her mouth and drank her essence greedily, exploring the soft cavern of her mouth with his tongue.

She clutched at him, kissing him back with a fervor that set his pulse to pounding harder, that banished all thought from his mind. The scalding need to claim her completely moved through him like flash fire and he pulled at her clothing, determined to

rid her of it with all possible haste and drive his cock into her sheathe.

She began to struggle. It took his fevered mind many moments to assimilate that and when he did, rage surged through him, the certainty that her appearance of gladness had been false.

“Killian!” she gasped. “We need to get out of here, dearling! We can do this later!”

He drew away enough to stare down at her without comprehension.

She clasped his face between her palms. “I missed you, too! But we have to leave! Now! While they are gone!”

That finally penetrated his mind. “I will slay them!” he growled. “They took you from me! I will have my revenge before I leave!”

She made a sound of impatience. “You slew half of them before! Please, Killian! Take me away from here! I do not want you to be hurt more! You said yourself that you were weakening!”

He glared at her. “I am no weakling that a handful of elves could harm me!”

“Please?”

He swallowed a little convulsive at the pleading in her expression and in her voice, but it dawned on him that he had used stealth to protect her. He had not wanted *her* in the midst of another battle.

Nodding abruptly, he drew her up and tossed her across one shoulder, cloaking the two of them. She gasped when he leapt onto the windowsill and went out. “The cloak will be pointless, beloved, if you are going to squeak like a little mouse!”

She stiffened in his grip, but she made no other sound as he climbed back onto the roof and then leapt to nearest wall still standing and ran along the top of it. He was too intent on his task to spare much attention to his burden, but it began to weigh upon him as he drew nearer to the edge of the city that she had not made a sound since he had take her from her prison.

Dropping to the ground, he raced into the forest that encroached the city and lowered her to her feet to examine her. She wobbled, would have fallen if he had not caught her. “You are alright, beloved?” he asked, disconcerted by the weakness she displayed.

“No! My head aches from being upside down and my belly hurts from your hard shoulder,” she said testily.

He drew away from her to study her face. “You are injured?” he demanded.

She blew out her breath in a huff. “No. And I did *not* squeak like a mouse!”

Amusement flickered through Killian. He pulled her back to finish what he had begun before, satisfying his hunger for her mouth before he wrenched the bodice of her gown out of his way and began to pull greedily at her breasts. She curled her arms around his head, holding tightly but he discovered he did not mind that. It made the flamed inside him leap higher to feel her holding him, to hear her faint gasps of pleasure and soon even that was not enough.

Carrying her to the ground, he flung her skirts out of his way, caught her knees and pressed them against her body, and pressed his cock into her. “Your sheathe is so tight and hot, beloved,” he growled, struggling to claim the entirety of it. “I have missed this ... being inside of you.”

She groaned, arching to meet him and he felt that same, incomprehensible tightening in his chest even before her body yielded completely to his assault and he sank to the hilt inside of her. The fever was already upon him. He could not have stopped once he had claimed her passage if he had wanted to and he did not want to. Gritting his teeth against the exquisite pleasure pounding through him, he drove in and out of her with the desperation he could not control. When she gasped keenly and began to jerk and shudder against him, his body answered the call of hers and yielded his seed into her keeping.

Panting for breath in the aftermath, he toyed with the notion of beginning again immediately, but discovered that he was sated enough that alertness of his surroundings had begun to filter into his mind.

"You must return to your own plane," Tyra said softly, huskily, reaching up to touch his cheek.

His focus shifted to her. Suspicion flickered through him, but he knew that she was right, whatever her motives for wanting him gone.

He rose, lifting her from the ground and into his arms.

"I could walk, you know," she said, curling her arms around his shoulders as if she had no real desire for him to put her down.

"You would slow me," he said gruffly.

The look that entered her eyes made his belly clench uncomfortably, but he shook it off and began to retrace his steps of before.

"Where are you taking me?" Tyra asked when he stopped finally near noon and lifted his head to scan the sky.

He glanced at her. "There is a portal to my world to the north of the valley. I will go there." He paused, frowning. "You are right. The longer I linger, the weaker I become."

* * * *

"I must close the gateway!" Avoran said decisively. "I must reach it before the beast and close it! And then I will destroy him!" Moving to his book of spells, he began to pour over it in search of a spell strong enough to destroy a daemon. There were plenty to summon daemon's of every sort, and many to banish them, but they would not do! He had made an enemy. He did not care to have enemies of any kind rattling about and presenting danger. He certainly did not care to have a daemon as his enemy!

He was so near frantic with the need to hurry that it seemed to take him forever before he finally found what he was looking for. He was not happy to discover that he must go to the portal to close it! He would have far preferred to conjure the spell from where he was.

That presented another problem. The daemon was far closer to the gateway than he was. He could astral project, of course, but he did not care to go alone. He needed some way to transport his elite guard with him.

Grinding his teeth with impatience, he began to search for another spell that might aid him in that and finally found one that held promise. Composing himself took an effort, but it would not do to try to weave a spell with his mind divided, he reminded himself. He needed absolute focus to perform the ritual as it should be done.

When he had decided that he was calm enough, he began to chant the incantation.

It soothed him. He felt the power begin to flow into him and that soothed his jangling nerves far better than his attempts to merely convince himself to relax.

His newly appointed captain-at-arms flung his tent flap aside and rushed in as he was completing the spell. “Wyverns!”

Avoran’s lips tightened momentarily, but he ignored the man and completed the spell before he turned on him in fury. “*Never!* Never interrupt me when I am casting, gods damn it! Fool! You might have ruined everything!”

The man flushed, his expression hardening. “I merely came to warn you that we are about to be attacked by an entire *flock* of wyvern!”

“I summoned them!” Avoran growled. “They are entirely within my power and they will take us up and carry us to where we must go!”

The man looked far from convinced or pleased with the information. He bowed and departed, however.

Seething, Avoran glared at the tent flap for several moments and finally dismissed it. He could deal with the fool later ... if he was still around! Gathering up his spell book, he clutched it tightly, protectively to his chest and stalked from the pavilion to watch as the wyverns he had summoned settled in the encampment.

“Do not provoke them with those pikes, fools! They are bespelled! But they will attack if you attack them! Mount up! We must reach the temple north of the valley before the daemon does!”

Chapter Seven

“Will you slay me, my lover, once you have passed through the portal?” Tyra asked, knowing she did not truly want the answer but entirely unable to prevent herself from asking.

Killian’s expression twisted but it was hard to say what emotion caused it. “Nay. I will not,” he said after a pause so long that Tyra thought he would not answer at all. “The spell that you cast upon me broke the enchantment your uncle had cast.”

Tyra felt her heart flutter uncomfortably. “You know ...?” she asked faintly.

“Aye. I know.”

It was not rational that she felt more sorrow to realize her own spell would be broken once he passed through than fear that he would turn on her, but she realized that she trusted his word. He was not so deeply under the spell that he could not make that decision if he was aware of it.

Nodding unhappily, she turned to stare at the temple they were approaching, realizing that she could not lie to herself anymore. She had been caught up in that enchantment as surely as he had been. She loved him. It would break her heart when he returned, but it was still far better to know that he was well and where he belonged than the alternative, she told herself.

She had not even managed to draw comfort from that thought, however, when she heard a screeching cry from above them that drew her gaze. Her heart seemed to stand still in her chest as she stared at the dragons above them.

“Wyverns!” Killian said grimly. Tightening his hold on her, he launched himself into a loping run, racing faster up the side of the mountain.

The jarring run made it nigh impossible for Tyra to see what was happening above them, to determine what the threat was, but she saw that the beasts were heading toward the temple just as they were. As they began to descend, she finally saw what had caused Killian to race toward the temple.

There were men mounted on the wyverns!

Her mind went perfectly blank for a handful of seconds before it hit her. Avoran!

“Hurry!” she cried. “Put me down! Leave me! He means to head you off and destroy you!”

Instead of slowing his pace, Killian began to run faster.

Avoran discovered him the moment he burst through the forest that climbed the mountainside and into the open. He began to scream curses at them.

Killian reached the steps of the temple even as the wyvern began to settle on the ground. Perhaps half of the soldiers leapt from the backs of the wyvern immediately and charged toward them.

Killian set Tyra on her feet abruptly and pushed her behind him.

“Wait fools!” Avoran bellowed.

The soldiers charging toward them skidded to a halt at the command and turned to

look at Avoran as if he had lost his mind.

Avoran ignored them, trying to calm himself enough to think. As he watched the beast, he saw the daemon flick a glance behind him at the portal.

“Your stay among us has weakened you, daemon!” he said finally. “Go home! Even I can feel the pull of the magical flux from the gateway. I have no quarrel with you. You may even take the woman, if you like,” he said, forcing a smile.

Killian’s eyes narrowed. “I cannot take her. She is mortal. She will die there.”

“Ah ... we have a dilemma. Her spell upon you will be broken once you pass through, though. You will see. You will not care.”

Killian glanced at Tyra and then beyond her. Turning, Tyra drew in a sharp gasp. The portal yawned before her, gleaming like some great mirror and yet she discovered that she could see his plane from where she stood. It was indeed a world of fire, red rock, red sky. A molten river flowed between two armies of fearsome looking daemons. Even as she watched the daemons on the other side launched themselves at one another in a horrific battle.

When Tyra dragged her gaze from the scene, staring at Killian.

She knew at once that one of those armies was his, realized immediately that that was why he had been so enraged when he had been pulled away from his world. “Go Killian,” she whispered, swallowing a little convulsively. “I do not need you to fight my battles.”

He flicked a glance at her and turned to look at Avoran again.

Abruptly, he seemed to come to a decision. Whirling away from her, he launched himself toward the portal and as he did, it seemed to close around him as if it had only opened for him.

Tyra felt as if the air had been crushed from her lungs.

“This is just too rich!” Avoran exclaimed, laughing. “You were caught in your own spell?”

Tyra jerked at the reminder of her own danger and whirled to look at her uncle. “My army is marching even now!” she said without a good deal of conviction. “Grandmother knows what you have done! You will not get away with this!”

It seemed she struck a chord of doubt in him. He stopped gloating and frowned at her. “She is old and weak! She could not stop me before! How do you think she will stop me now?”

Tyra frowned. “Stop you before?”

His humor returned. “When I ... removed the other obstacles in my path,” he murmured chidingly.

Despite the fact that she had always suspected that he had had a hand in the death of her parents, she was shocked at his brazen admission. “You killed my parents!”

He snorted. “I killed my brothers! You do not think I hesitated a moment to kill your mother, as well?”

“Or that you will hesitate to kill me.”

He studied her. “It occurs to me that there is no real rush for that. I have always ... admired your beauty. No one need ever know what has become of you.”

Revulsion rushed through Tyra. She thought for several moments that she would be physically ill at the suggestion. “Do not think for one moment that I will allow you to

touch me, you vile, disgusting man! You are my uncle! How could you even think like that?"

He shrugged. "I will not hold an accident of your birth against you," he said, laughing. "I would have given much to get my hands on your mother, but you will do nearly as well." He paused. "I will not need your compliance, my dear. I believe I will enjoy it more, in point of fact, if you scream. And I have a place where you may scream all you like."

He transferred his attention to his men. "Take her! Bind her well. I would not like her to fling herself off of the wyvern before I have had a chance to entertain myself with her!"

Tyra screamed when the men began to advance on her, looking wildly around for some possible avenue of escape. Even as she turned to try to fling herself through the portal, however, Killian stepped through.

Blood and fleshy matter splattered him from head to foot and his face was a mask of such rage that it halted her in her tracks. Fortunately, it gave the men behind her pause, as well.

Avoran's smile of triumph fell.

"Short battle!" Killian growled. Uttering a howl of rage that almost literally made Tyra's hair stand on end, he charged straight toward her. She squeezed her eyes shut, tensed all over for the pain she expected.

The men behind her screamed. Whirling, she discovered that Killian had bounded over her. Blood and torn flesh splattered her as Killian seized the nearest man and used his body to bludgeon the others. The wyvern began to scream, as well, to dance and buck. Flinging the men from their backs, they took flight.

Avoran managed to collect himself. Even as he struck the ground, he summoned a spell. A ball of fire formed in his hand. He flung it toward Killian and formed another. Killian shredded the soldiers trying to battle him and flung both their weapons and the parts of their bodies he'd ripped off at the sorcerer.

Caught in the line of fire, Tyra screamed and threw herself toward the stone stairs as a fireball whizzed toward her. It struck her before she could hit the ground and oblivion claimed her.

* * * *

Huffing for breath, Killian paused when he discovered he could not find another target for his rage. Satisfaction flickered through him briefly when he had scanned the area and discovered that he had slain them all. It died when he did not see Tyra and panic took its place. A desperate search with his gaze finally settled on her, crumpled on the steps of the temple. For a few moments, he could only stare at her, fighting a horrible sense of dread, dizziness. Shaking his head to throw it off, he strode toward her and dropped his knees.

She was so limp when he carefully turned her over that anguish flooded him, the urge to howl. As he battled his churning emotions, however, he realized he could still detect her pulsing heart, her breath.

Relief flooded him. With great care, he gathered her into his arms, cradling her against his chest so that he could give her some of his essence. The coolness left her skin. Her heart began to beat more strongly.

She was bloodied. For a few moments, he stared at the mess in horror, until he realized that most, if not all, was from him. Rising with her in his arms, he looked around and finally moved away from the temple when he caught the scent and sounds of water. Following them, he came upon a small stream just beyond the line of trees.

He settled her on a carpet of moss and stepped into the frigid water, bathing the gore of his battles off and then tore her gown away and used that to bathe the blood from her. She gasped when the cool cloth touched her.

Killian paused, waiting for her eyes to open.

For several moments, she merely stared at him as if she did not know him and he felt his belly tighten.

She struggled to sit up abruptly and glanced around fearfully.

Her gaze was sober when she turned to him again. "You came back."

He swallowed with an effort. "I would not have left you at all if I had thought I could defeat Avoran," he said with remorse.

She stunned him by scrambling to her feet and throwing herself at him. He caught her against his chest gratefully and curled his arms around her. "You came back for me," she whispered shakily.

"Yes, beloved." Emboldened by her behavior, he held her close. "I am not a creature of your world, my precious, but I am your man. I have defeated my overlord. I would pledge myself to guard you from your enemies ... ally myself to you in case of need, if you will have me."

She pulled away to look at him, but he could tell nothing from her expression.

"You need only call me and I will come."

She swallowed audibly and lifted a hand to his cheek. "Would that include the possibility of ... calling you to my bed?"

Desire flooded him instantly. "Aye, beloved. It would."

She ducked her face, tracing a finger along his chest. "I don't suppose that I could convince you to be my consort?"

Disbelief flickered through him, hope, and then he felt it die. "You are to be queen. You must produce an heir," he reminded her.

She looked at him. "I would" She paused. "It would give me the greatest pleasure to welcome your seed into my body and bear your child, Killian. Can ... can you not give me your child?"

He stared at her, hardly daring to believe that she meant it. "You would welcome my seed?" He frowned. "You do not need to do this thing, beloved. My heart is yours."

She smiled at him. "My heart is yours, as well, beloved. I said that it would please me. It would."

"I must think on this," he muttered uncomfortably. "I will take you home for now."

Disconcerted, Tyra pulled away and sent him a hurt look, but she was too distressed to consider arguing with him about it.

It seemed to her that he was in a very great rush to return her. She had no idea how long it might have taken them to cross the valley if he had not decided to linger long enough to sample her. Even accounting for the days they had spent together, though, it seemed to her that she found herself deposited at the gates of the city before she had had

time to accustom herself to the idea that he really did mean to abandon her ... again.

The citizens rejoiced at her return. The remnants of her army had returned only a few days before and admitted defeat at the hands of the shadow people and the entire realm was in mourning for her when she arrived. She found it difficult to rejoice with them, although she was so happy to see her grandmother she flung herself at the old woman and wept until she was exhausted.

* * * *

Killian was divided, heart and mind, when he returned to his own world as he had never been before. He hurt as he never had before and the pain drove him as surely as the emptiness.

Contrary to what he had implied, he had abandoned his army to return immediately to Tyra to protect her and he discovered his army in retreat when he turned his attention to his own concerns once more. Enraged, he rallied them and turned them upon his overlord once more. For days they waged a fierce battle to gain the ground they had lost and finally beat back the overlord's defenders. Two more days of dedication and the army of his overlord broke and ran.

Satisfaction filled him, and yet he could not allow his overlord to flee with his army. Malikai would only return and try to pry him from his new holdings.

Digging his heels into his daemon steed, he charged after his retreating quarry and finally chased him to ground near the well of lost souls.

Uttering a roar of a challenge, he leapt from his own steed and slammed into his overlord, tumbling him from his seat and onto the ground and slashing at him with his fire sword.

Malikai was not ready to yield his existence, however, even if he had been ready to yield his holdings. He rolled away, lumbered to his feet and charged Killian, swinging his own fire sword with such blinding speed that it almost appeared a solid mass of fire.

Killian gave ground until he felt the wall of the well of souls pressing into his calves. Having lured his quarry to his goal, he feigned, beating Malikai back with a fury that spoke of desperation.

He felt it. He would not have felt it, he knew, if the fear was not with him that his passing would leave Tyra open to her enemies and that infuriated him, but he had already accepted that he was lost as far as she was concerned. He used his fury to his advantage, pressing for a time and then, when Malikai fell back to catch his breath, he feigned a similar need, leaving himself open.

Malikai, as he had hoped, took the bait, charging him full force in an effort to cast him down the well, but he was ready for him. At the last possible moment, he sprang straight up. Flipping in the air and landing behind his overlord, he gave the daemon a shove when he managed to stop himself just shy of the well, pitching him over the rim and into the abyss.

He stood for a time, staring down into the darkness, panting for breath. "Now I am done, my princess! And I have an army of daemons at your command, beloved, if anyone should ever dare to threaten you again!"

* * * *

"Your melancholia since your return worries me," Zoreena said gently. "It worries your subjects."

Tyra had stiffened when she had heard her grandmother's approach, striving to push the very melancholy her grandmother mentioned from her features. "I am well, Grandmother ... only a little tired still."

Zoreena's lips tightened. "That tale may work for the others, but I had thought that you trusted me enough to tell me what it is that plagues you."

Tyra moved away from the window she had been staring out and settled on a chair near her grandmother. Everyone had thought it best to proceed as soon as possible with the coronation that had been interrupted and she had assumed the mantle of power within two days of her return ... quietly, without the pomp and ceremony of the first. It had been easier in some ways, harder in others.

It was almost inevitable that it would bring back memories she would have preferred had not been resurrected.

"The entire realm is in mourning," Tyra said after a moment. "It would be unseemly for me to be gay when so many lost their lives ... though I am more relieved than I can say to see you so well when I had feared the worst."

"There is a chasm of difference between gaiety and the glum face that you wear. I will agree that somberness is appropriate and I believe your subjects feel heartened by your empathy for their suffering, but *you* are suffering. It is not merely empathy.

"This has nothing to do with that elfin warrior who was so distraught that you escaped him, I presume?" Zoreena asked tentatively.

Tyra sent her a startled look. "Raizar?" She frowned. "How would you know whether or not he was distraught?"

Zoreena gave her a sour look. "I am old, child, but I am still a sorceress to be reckoned with! Do you not think that I sought you the moment I was able to?"

Tyra could not prevent a blush. She squirmed uncomfortably. "You ... uh ... searched for me?"

Zoreena looked exasperated. "I know that you are in love with your beast. Why have you not summoned him if you are so miserable without him?"

Tyra reddened even more, a mixture of resentment and embarrassment flooding her at her grandmother's probing. "That was nothing more than the love potion," she said a little stiffly. "I had no time to think before I cast it at him—and I did not know that it would catch me within the spell, as well."

"You were caught in nothing of nothing, Tyra," Zoreena said gently. "Love itself is magic. Magic cannot conjure it. The love spell was only to open your heart and the heart of the man you chose to love."

Tyra stared at her grandmother blankly for several moments before a frown of confusion knit her brows. "I do not understand. The potion did not make me fall in love with him?"

"*He* made you fall in love with him ... though I must say, my dear, he is a beastly creature and I cannot fathom what you found in him to adore."

Tyra glared at her. "He is a noble creature!" She chewed her lip, thinking over her time with him and decided she had glossed over his rough edges a bit. "He was tender and gentle with me—a little rough, I suppose, but he *is* a daemon! For one such as he is, he was *extremely* gentle."

Zoreena looked away, but Tyra thought she caught a glimpse of smile. "Mmm.

Yes, I saw how gentle he was.”

“Grandmother! That was ... private!”

“You are queen, Tyra. Unfortunately, privacy does not go with the territory. In any case, I had every reason to believe that you were in danger. It was my duty to do what I could to protect you.” She shrugged. “I saw you were not really in any need of my protection, but I thought it best to ... monitor your situation until I was certain you were completely out of danger.”

Tyra frowned. “You are saying that the potion did not enthrall Killian?”

Zoreena smiled. “I think you know that. He came back for you. He protected you even after he had gone through the portal, and that would have broken any enchantment that had been woven by anyone in this plane.”

Tyra swallowed with difficulty against the unhappiness that clogged her throat. “He said ... he said he loved me. But when I asked him to be my consort”

“He said he could not give you an heir,” Zoreena finished.

“If you were watching,” Tyra said indignantly, “I do not know why you would bother to ask!”

Zoreena gave her a censorious look. “I was not watching then!”

“Then how would you know that?”

“I know a little about daemons,” Zoreena said dryly. “More than you, obviously.”

Tyra looked at her unhappily. “What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing, dear heart—if he were not a beast, he would have felt only joy to know you wanted to bear his child.”

“He is not a beast!” Tyra said crossly.

“Not to you, obviously ... but just the same. You cannot expect him to behave as a mortal man, dearest, for he is not. He has too much power himself to feel any draw for the power you offered in asking him to be your consort. And the child ... it would bind him to you more surely than his love—which he does not understand or particularly want to feel.” She frowned. “He felt ... safe in offering to come to you if you needed him. Mayhap he even felt that it would give him the opportunity to ... be your lover. They are not very different from men of this world in that respect, certainly. He would not see your asking for a child in the same way that a mortal man would, though. To us, it is the offer of immortality of a sort—the continuation of their lines and a great compliment that you feel they are worthy of that—although, truth to tell, men tend to be fools and rarely appreciate that aspect. Daemons are immortals themselves and ... not inclined to reproduce, particularly on mortal females.” She hesitated. “He would have to bestow a part of himself upon you to produce the babe. His essence is not entirely the same as the seed of a mortal man. Mayhap he even felt a sense of betrayal at the request. He cannot know that you do not know that taking his child into your womb Well, you would not become immortal, but you would not be entirely mortal anymore either. He may have thought it proof that you did not love him rather than proof that you did.”

Tyra felt like weeping. “But I cannot take him as my consort if he will not give me an heir!”

Zoreena smiled. “I think you should tell him that, dearest. Tell him that you have thought it over and you realize that it would be far better only to take him as your lover

and you will find a mortal man to give you an heir.”

Tyra gaped at her. “He would be furious!”

Zoreena shrugged. “I imagine so.” Rising, she patted Tyra’s cheek affectionately. “They are selfish creatures, daemons. He will not want to share your affections, Tyra, even with a child. He certainly will not want to share with a mortal man.”

Tyra thought over what her grandmother had said to her long and hard. She did not particularly care for the thought of trying to manipulate Killian into giving her what she wanted, but she was miserable without him. Could she settle for just having him as a lover if he did not fall for the ultimatum?

It did not take long to arrive at a conclusion about that. She wanted to be with him. If he only wanted to be her lover, she *would* settle for that ... and hope that he might change his mind later.

The problem was, she had no idea how she was to summon him. He had said she need only call for him, but had he truly meant it would take no more than that? Or had he meant that she would have to use her powers to open a gateway?

She shivered at the thought, remembering the daemons she had seen in the battle. What if she opened a gateway and it was not Killian who came through?

Shaking her head, she got up after a time and went to her bedchamber. When she had lain down on her bed, she closed her eyes and tried to summon him with her mind. She did not have to open her eyes to know it had not worked, but she did anyway, peering around her chamber hopefully.

Frustration flickered through her. “You did not tell me how I was to call you, Killian!”

She had scarcely spoken the complaint aloud when she saw a shimmering at the foot of her bed. She blinked, a little alarmed, but when she opened her eyes again, Killian stood at the foot of her bed where the strange glow had been moments before. She sat up abruptly, smiling in delight. “You came!”

He glanced around her bedchamber curiously and returned his gaze to her. His eyes were tumultuous when he met her gaze again. Leaning forward at the waist, he settled his hands on the mattress and began to crawl slowly toward her like a predatory cat. Tyra’s breath caught in her throat. Excitement abruptly began to surge through her as he reached her ankles and continued to crawl forward until they were almost nose to nose.

“You are in danger, beloved?” he asked in a rumbling growl.

Dismay flickered through her. “You did not say I could *only* call you if I was in danger,” she reminded him. “You said if I needed you.”

He tilted his head, narrowing his gaze on her lips. “You have need?”

She swallowed with an effort. “Yes.”

“I do not think it is as great as mine, my precious,” he murmured, covering her lips in a heated kiss that instantly resurrected every heated moment between them before and magnified it. She was on fire for him before her head ever hit the pillow behind her, kissing him back as hungrily as he kissed her, caressing him with hands impatient to feel all of him. He gnawed a path of stinging kisses to her breasts, teased them until she thought she would black out and then moved lower.

A mixture of anticipation and uneasiness went through her when he reached her belly and grasped her thighs, parting them and wedging his shoulders between them. She wanted his kisses there, and yet she wasn't at all sure she could endure the sensual torture of before.

It was just too delicious to deny him, she discovered. The feel of his mouth and tongue on her drove her upwards to her peak twice in such quick succession that she was nearly screaming with the convulsions rocking her, half dreading and half anticipating the next assault. He surprised her by shifting forward and spearing his cock into her opening instead of tormenting her further with his mouth, gaining entrance into her body in short sorties that delved deeper and deeper until she was panting at the fullness.

Without pause, he began to drive into her in long, deep thrusts the moment he had claimed her, carrying her to another peak and then another before his own great body began to shudder with release.

Weak and breathless in the aftermath, she lay with her eyes closed, savoring the jolts and sparks that still randomly sizzled through her. He nuzzled his face against her ear, lifting a rash of goosebumps. "Is that why you took so long to summon me?" he murmured. "Because you were not certain that I would come?"

Tyra felt her throat close at the question. "I was not certain that you would welcome a summoning ... only for this."

"Only?" he growled.

Tyra could not help but smile. "You did not offer to be my lover," she reminded him, "only my protector ... my ally." She turned to face him, lifting a hand to stroke his face. "I wanted more."

His expression closed.

"I explained to my grandmother why I was so unhappy and she told me that I had asked too much of you. I understand now."

He slid a narrow eyed look at her. "Do you?"

She sighed. "I suppose I do. I would ... welcome you as my lover, Killian ... and, if that is all that you would be comfortable with, then I will accept that."

He did not look particularly pleased. "You will?"

"Yes. I will," she said firmly.

That seemed to settle the matter in his mind. She did not know whether to be relieved or not, but she had little time to dwell on it. He was insatiable, drawing a response from her body over and over even when she thought she was so weary that she could not possibly come again. Eventually, exhaustion overcame all else, however, and she slept.

He woke her stroking his hands along her back thoughtfully. "You are queen now?"

Drunk with fatigue, she yawned. "Yes," she muttered.

"You will be expected to take a consort and produce an heir."

"Mmmhmm." She patted him and planted a kiss in the middle of his chest. "In time."

"How much time?"

The question aroused her to a little more alertness. "For what?"

"To take a consort and produce a brat!" he said testily.

“Oh.” She yawned again. “I donno. Coupla years. Sleep now. Talk later,” she muttered.

He was gone when she woke, but although she was a little disappointed, she felt wonderful—a little sore, but far more cheerful than she had felt since Killian had brought her home and left her. Zoreena noticed the change in her immediately and sent her a teasing look over the breakfast table, but Tyra ignored it.

When she had finished her meal, she called for her horse and left the palace with her guards to tour the city and examine the repairs that had been made since ‘the daemon’ attack at her coronation.

Pleased to see the city had been set to rights and commerce had resumed, she left the city and took the road that led to her uncle’s castle just beyond the city. After staring at the place for some time, she turned to her captain. “Have it raised and the temple where he performed his evil rituals,” she said coldly.

“The priests of the temple?”

“Drive them out. I will not have them in Bandar longer than it will take them to reach the border.”

When she returned, she sat in council for the first time and, with her grandmother beside her to advise her, began the tedious task of learning her role as ruler of Bandar.

Killian appeared in her bedchamber a week later, his expression brooding. Tyra was half asleep when he appeared, but sat up and looked at him in surprise. “Did I call you, beloved?” she asked.

“You did not!” he growled. “You have not summoned me in a week!”

She opened her eyes wider. “That long?”

“Yes! It has been that long, gods damn it! At this rate, I will be lucky if I am to fuck you a dozen times before you take a consort!”

She smiled at him. “Come to me, my lover and fuck me tonight!”

He did not seem particularly appeased, but he fell upon her hungrily and loved her until exhaustion overcame her.

He was gone the following morning as he had been before, but he appeared in her bedchamber that evening as she bathed. Sprawling in a chair, he studied her broodingly.

“You are angry about something?” Tyra asked easily. “Problems within your realm?”

“There are *no* problems within my realm!” he growled.

She sent him a look. “Well! You cannot be needy! Not when we fucked half the night last night!”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “You cannot say that I cannot be hungry only because you are not!”

Tyra’s lips twitched, but she managed to keep from smiling. Climbing from her bath, she dried herself and moved toward him. Dropping her towel as she neared him, she climbed onto his lap and draped her arms around his neck. “You are insatiable,” she murmured, rubbing the tip of her nose against his.

“I am a daemon,” he growled.

“Well, it seems to me that it would be better for you to come each night, lover, and then you can pop back over to your place until the next night. That way, you can get

‘fed’ each night and you will not get so hungry.”

He frowned. “I may grow too accustomed to sleeping in your bed.”

She chuckled. “I did not know you had ever *slept* in my bed.”

“Your consort will sleep in your bed.”

She sat back. “Maybe, but I have not chosen one.”

“You are thinking of one?”

She shrugged. “The lords on the council have suggested one or two.”

“And you are considering them?”

She shook her head at him. “I have my hands full with you at the moment.”

He studied her angrily a moment and then seemed to realize that she was sitting on his lap naked. Running his hands over her, he grasped his cock, aligned it with her body and dragged her down on it. She gasped, unprepared for the breach, but discovered her body had no trouble producing the moisture he needed. Within moments, she felt the rise of passion inside her that he commanded, felt her body tense to take the glorious leap into rapture. He rose from the chair with her still mounted and crawled into her bed with her, thrusting into her until he brought her to another peak and over it before he expended himself.

To her surprise, he curled up beside her afterwards, tucked her close, and dropped to sleep even before she did.

A month later, Tyra was struggling to stay awake through yet another boring discussion between the lords regarding sheep production when the doors abruptly burst open hard enough they slammed against the walls on either side. Killian, dressed in a swirling deep purple cape and black leather breeches, stalked to the center of the room, throwing everyone in it into a state a panic and jerking Tyra wide awake.

He pointed an imperious finger at her. “That is my woman, gods damn it!” he growled in a voice that dared anyone to deny it. “I will be her consort! I have bred my brat upon her and *he* will be her heir!”

Tyra sent her grandmother a grateful glance. “Beloved! It pains me to say this ... but my heir really should be a girl. We have always passed the monarchy from mother to daughter.”

Killian stared at her in disbelief. “A female? You did not say it must be a female!”

“Sweety! You did not ask!”

He narrowed his eyes at her for a long moment and then turned to the squawking lords again. “I have bred my brat on her and *she* will be the heir,” he said triumphantly.

The End

Read an excerpt from Desiree Acuna's *Demonic Desires*, also available from NCP.

Demonic Desires

By

Desiree Acuna

Prologue

"I heard they got ... screwed to death," Barbara said in a whisper that didn't disguise the underlying hum of excitement in her voice.

Darrell snickered. "Where'd you hear that? I heard they were decapitated—eyeballs ripped out, intestines hung around the place like garland."

"I can't imagine what you'd find exciting about that, Barb! Dead's still dead! This place me the creeps," Karen muttered. "Do you mind not talking about all those stories? You know its just urban myth, anyway."

"But there really were several killings in this old building, according to what I heard," Mack said.

"Keep your voice down!" Barbara hissed. "There might be a night watchman around."

"Oh come on! In this building? It's been deserted for years. I heard it was supposed be torn down years and years ago."

The four college students stopped when they reached the grand stair case leading up from the lobby, scanning the lobby with their flashlights.

"Wow!" Karen exclaimed in a keen whisper. "This place looks like it must have been really something at one time! How old did you say the building was, Mack?"

"A couple of hundred years ... at least."

"No way!"

"Yes, way! I looked it up. It was built in the early 1800's."

"You just looked at it wrong," Darrell said sneeringly. "There ain't no way this place's been standing here that long. It's even got an elevator. They didn't have elevator's that long ago."

Karen snickered. "When did you get to be an expert on elevators? And how do you know it's an elevator, anyway?"

Almost before the words were out of her mouth, they heard a tinkling chime and the doors they'd been studying slowly began to open. All four froze, staring at the slowly opening doors in horror. When they saw the cubicle was empty, the two guys relaxed, uttering nervous laughs. "Fuck! I nearly shit myself! Thought for sure it was the night watchman!"

"That's seriously fucking creepy," Karen said in a quavering voice. "How could the elevator be working? There's no power!"

"Must be some kind of backup generator system for the elevators," Darrel said, chuckling nervously.

"Why would they even have something like that? You said the building had been empty for years and years," Barb demanded.

"You know ... I thought this was a bad idea to start with. Now I think it's a really, really bad idea. Let's go," Karen put in, her voice still shaky.

"Oh come on, baby! I thought we were going to party in the old spook building?"

Mack said in a cajoling voice. He held up the suitcase of beer he'd lugged inside.

Darrell straightened abruptly and strode toward the open elevator.

"Quit messing around, Darrell!" Barb called after him.

"Yeah, man. What're you doing?" Mack seconded her. "I thought we were going to tour the place. I ain't gettin' on that old elevator. No way!"

"Don't be such a chicken shit!" Darrell snapped. "It came down, didn't it? We can go to the top and work our way down. Walking downstairs beats the shit out of climbing them!"

"What if it falls?" Barb put in.

"Or the doors close and we get stuck inside?" Karen pointed out. "Nobody knows we're here. We could be stuck in there for days!"

Mack set one foot on the bottom stair. "I'm taking the stairs."

"Suit yourselves!" Darrell snapped. "I'm taking the elevator. Meet you three chicken shits at the top!"

"Darrell don't!" Barb exclaimed as he stepped into the cubicle and punched a button. The doors started to close slowly.

Barb rushed toward the elevator, but the doors closed before she could reach them. She stared at the closed doors in disbelief for several moments and then lifted her fist and pounded on the doors. Mack and Karen rushed over, calling Darrell's name.

Barbara turned to look at them wide eyed. "I think it went up."

Mack pressed his ear to the panels and finally stepped back, looking up. "Man, that thing is moving! The light shows it's reached the twelfth floor."

Karen and Barbara stepped back and looked up. "It stopped," they said, almost in unison."

"Because there's only twelve floors," Mack said dryly.

"What do we do? Wait here and see if he comes back down?" Barbara asked worriedly.

Mack looked disgusted. "Walk up, I guess. You know he isn't just going to come back down when it was his idea to come here and explore the place to start with."

"I'd rather go get the cops and get them to look for him," Karen said uneasily.

"And get locked up for trespassing?" Mack demanded, aghast at the suggestion. "Don't be stupid. He just took the elevator. Come on. We'll find him."

"I don't want to wander around this place," Karen said, anger finally seeping into her voice. "I don't like it. Let's just go. He'll come back to the dorm when he gets tired of playing detective."

Barbara glared at her. "Hey! It's Darrell's car we came in. We can't just leave him! This is a god awful neighborhood and it's the middle of the night. He might get mugged!"

"We might get mugged!" Karen snapped. "It's an abandoned building. There's no telling how many derelicts are camping out here—maybe drug addicts."

Mack stalked to the stairs. "I'm going to look for Darrell. You two go wait in the car if you don't want to come."

"I'm coming," Barbara said decisively. "Karen can wait in the car if she doesn't want to come."

Karen stared at the pair with a mixture of anxiety and anger, glanced behind her

at the cavernous lobby and considered sitting in the car by herself for maybe hours, wondering where they were and when they'd come back. Knowing them, they'd probably find Darrell and decide to have their party after all, get stinking drunk, and she'd end up spending the night in the car by herself. She charged after them when they reached the first landing and disappeared from view, her heart in her throat.

None of them talked as they climbed the stairs, briskly at first and then more and more slowly. Finally, when they reached the landing at the fifth floor, Mack moved to the door. "I'm taking the fucking elevator. This is bullshit."

Karen argued with the two of them all the way to the elevator that it wasn't safe. The cables were liable to break and drop them all the way to the ground.

The elevator dinged before they reached it, the doors slowly opening as they had in the lobby. All three of them froze in their tracks for a split second. Mack was the first to recover, charging toward the elevator doors. "Darrell, you asshole!"

He stopped abruptly when he'd glanced inside.

"What is it?" Barbara demanded breathlessly.

"It's empty."

"Ok, now this is scaring the shit out of me!" Karen said in quavering voice. "It just stopped—like it knew we were on this floor."

Mack sent her a look. "God, Karen! You really get into this kind of bullshit, don't you? There aren't any spooks or bogeymen in the building. It's just stuff people make up! The elevator probably just stops at every floor."

"It didn't before," Barbara pointed out.

"So you think it's the elevator from hell?" Mack demanded with a disbelieving laugh, stepping inside and bouncing experimentally as if testing the cables. "I'm not walking all the way to the top. You ladies coming?"

"I'm not getting on that thing!" Karen said emphatically. "You aren't, are you, Barb?"

Barbara sent her an apologetic look. "I really don't feel like walking up."

"We can go down—stay in the car while Mack finds Darrell," Karen suggested hopefully.

Barbara opened her mouth as if she would say more, but before a sound came out, a horrible, inhuman scream came from the vicinity of the stairwell, followed by a heavy thumping—as if a body was plunging down the stairs.

Screaming, Karen ran toward the elevator just as Barbara leapt inside. Dashing inside behind her, Karen and Barbara grabbed each other, screaming again. "What was that?"

"Take us down, Mack! I want to get out of here!" Karen demanded, hysteria threading her voice as the doors closed and the elevator began to move.

"Shit!" Mack exclaimed, punching a little frantically at the buttons. "It's going up!"

The three turned and looked at each other in horror for several moments.

"It's probably just that it was already going up," Mack muttered after a moment.

"What do think that was that we heard?"

"Probably that asshole Darrell trying to scare the shit out of us," Mack retorted.

"It worked!" Karen said hotly. "You think that's really what it was? It sounded

... It sounded like a body falling.”

Barbara uttered a choked cry, tears of fear welling in her eyes. “I swear to god if that was just Darrell’s idea of a joke I’m never going to speak to him again!”

Unnerved, the three stood watching the light move from one level to another. A jolt went through all of them when, instead of the elevator stopping and the doors opening when the light for the twelfth floor lit up, the elevator continued to move upward. They all exchanged a horrified look.

Mack uttered a snort. “Must be the penthouse.”

Barbara and Karen both let out a sharp gasp when the elevator jolted to a stop, staring wide eyed at the doors as they began to open at last, uncertain what they expected to see.

The corridor, as far as they could see, looked like the others they’d seen on the way up. After exchanging a nervous look, the three moved to the doors and cautiously peered out, more than half expecting Darrell to leap from the shadows and scream at them like a banshee. Seeing no sign of him, they stepped out and flicked their flashlights around. There was only one door besides the door to the stairwell, and it was standing open.

Mack started toward it. “Darrell, you total, fucking asshole! You nearly scared Barb and Karen to death with that stupid shit!”

Barbara and Karen were right on his heels as he stepped inside the room and flicked his flashlight around the interior.

A man was sitting in a chair near one window, Karen discovered, sucking her breath in in a sharp gasp. “Darrell! Damn it! You scared the hell out of us!”

The beam of the flashlights didn’t quite reach that far, but she knew it had to be Darrell.

Until he lifted his head and looked directly at her and she saw his eyes glowing red.

“I have been waiting for you,” he said in a deep, growling voice.

Chapter One

Kally switched the engine off and sat staring at the building for several minutes, her mind filled with a thousand questions she'd never thought she would find answers to.

And still might not, she reminded herself.

Dragging her gaze from the building after a few minutes, she scanned the streets, the sidewalks, the vacant 'eyes' of crumbling buildings that had once held windows but no longer did. The place looked like a war zone, not like anyplace USA but like cities she'd seen in the news that had been bombed. Some of the lots up and down the street had been cleared to the dirt, but there were shells of buildings still standing—barely—slowly crumbling in upon themselves. Ragged notices in varying shades of yellow were plastered on doors and in some cases the walls beside an opening that no longer had a door or on plywood covering missing windows.

Condemned.

She didn't have to move close enough to read them. She knew what all of the notices were. Everything on the block had been condemned and for several blocks around.

She didn't see any sign of people, though, and that was the main thing.

After scanning the area carefully for at least ten minutes, she leaned across the seat and opened her glove box, pulling the .38 special out. When she'd checked the magazine to make sure it was full, she loaded a bullet into the breach, set the pistol down on the seat beside her, and removed the high powered flashlight she'd brought along ... just in case, and tested it to make sure it was working. She checked her digital recorder next.

"Testing, testing, blah, blah." She replayed it, listening until she heard her voice repeating the test, then stopped it and reversed to the beginning.

Dragging in a shaky breath, she scanned the area again, all the way around her car. It was broad daylight, not much after two. There wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Perfect visibility, and her heart was still hammering uncomfortably in her chest when she finally got out of the car.

She didn't make any attempt to hide the gun. In fact, although she didn't wave it around, she made it a point to scan her surroundings again with the pistol in her hand and clearly visible before she tucked it into her waistband.

If anyone was loitering in any of the old buildings, she wanted to be sure they knew that she was armed.

Slightly comforted by the weight of the gun, she used her auto-lock to lock the car and moved around it to stare at the building she'd traveled a thousand miles to see.

It was immediately evident that there was something that just didn't click about the old Empire Hotel. It looked old, the architecture in keeping with a luxury building built nearly two hundred years before, but that wasn't what made it stand out.

What made it stand out, what made it seem eerie, was that it was in nearly perfect

condition as far as she could see from where she stood.

It looked like the eye of a hurricane.

There were faded notices of condemnation on the entrance door and plastered on several of the windows, as well, fluttering in the breeze that was channeled along the street, but it was still completely intact—all the windows and the door.

After glancing up and down the street again, she finally moved toward the entrance, struggling to regulate her heart rate and breathing. There was a metal plaque to the right of the entrance and she paused to stare at it, even though there was no doubt in her mind that she'd found the building that had figured into local urban legend for at least a hundred years.

"Empire Hotel. Built 1800," she said into her recorder. "Founder Aziel Empire. Weird name. I wonder what the ethnic origins of that would be?"

Clicking the recorder off again, she shoved it into her jeans pocket and took one last glance around to make sure no one was creeping up on her and finally grasped the tarnished door handle and pulled.

The door opened on silent hinges, making her pulse quicken. Cool air brushed her face, as if the building was air conditioned. Wedging her foot and shoulder against the heavy door, she stared at the shadowy interior until her eyes adjusted. Light filtered in through dozens of windows that were as tall or, more likely, taller than she was, though, dust, no doubt stirred up by the opening door, drifting smoke light in the motes.

The Empire had been a luxury hotel in its day, and that was instantly obvious as her eyes adjusted to the interior gloom. Ornate columns sprinkled the cavernous room just beyond the door, crystal chandeliers, plush, ornate sofas and chairs, beautiful carved occasional tables, thick runners of carpet.

After a moment, she pulled the pistol from her waistband and tucked the flashlight in its place and then stepped further inside, examining every corner carefully with her gaze with each step. There was no furtive movements, no faint sounds indicating even so much as mice or pigeons that might've decided to call the place home.

The urge hit her to find something and prop the door open.

It had opened easily enough, just as she'd heard it would, and she still didn't like the idea of allowing it to close behind her, sealing her in. She stood indecisively in the open door for several moments more, and finally moved completely inside, allowing the door to close.

It didn't make a sound when it did, and that was almost more unnerving than it would've been if it had banged. Trying to ignore that strange circumstance, trying to convince herself it was evidence of upkeep, not anything bizarre or 'otherworldly', she lifted her head and studied the ornate ceiling supported by the forest of columns across the vast room. "Is anyone here? Hello?"

Her voice didn't echo.

A shiver skated down her spine as it suddenly occurred to her that it should have.

Swallowing with an effort, she yelled. "Hey! Hello? If there are any bogeymen, ghosts, or serial killers in here, come out! Come out! So I can blow a fucking hole in you a mile wide." She muttered the last barely above whisper and then listened intently for several moments. When she didn't hear anything she could even identify as the scurrying of mice, she moved deeper into the hotel lobby, still scanning her surroundings

keenly.

She pulled her recorder out again when she'd reached the front desk. "The door wasn't locked—just like I'd read. No locks. No matter how many times the doors have been locked, nailed shut, boarded up, whenever anyone has ever come to the place, they've always vanished. The door's always open ... to the next victim.

"Dusty—not a surprise, but I don't think the spiders like this place. No old cobwebs to make it look like a haunted building. Just dust and not a lot of that. No footprints in the dust.

"Either no one has been here for years or the resident ghost sprinkled dust over their tracks.

"Why would you come here, Karen? Peer pressure? You weren't an adventuresome soul. And why at night? This was so stupid! And you weren't stupid. I just don't get it."

After studying the lobby for a few more minutes, she glanced out the nearest window, checking the light even though she knew she hadn't been inside more than a few minutes.

She didn't want to be any where near the place at sundown.

Satisfied, she moved toward the wide staircase that wound up from the lobby, tilting her head to scan the stairwell above. The wide, fancy staircase continued up for what looked like three levels and then a more practical stair completed the climb to the top ... as far as she could see. The shadows were deeper in the stairwell.

She had mounted three stairs when a tinkling sound made her halt in her tracks and whirl in search of what had made it. The light above the elevator caught her gaze. She stared at it, trying to calm the uncomfortable thumping of her heart in her chest, raising the barrel of her pistol as the doors slowly began to open and the hair on the back of her neck prickled and stood on end in alarm.

The cubicle was empty as far as she could see.

She debated briefly, but there was no way she was going up the stairs without the certainty that she had the building to herself. Making no attempt to be quiet, she galloped back down the steps and rushed toward the elevator, weaving back and forth as she went to get a better view of the cubicle on either side of the door.

If there was anyone inside, she decided, they'd have to be flattened up against the anterior wall ... which meant she would be wide open to attack if she tried to peer inside, particularly if she guessed the wrong side.

"Come out!" she said, her voice harsh and commanding ... because she was scared shitless.

After straining to listen over the pounding of her heart for several moments, she tried moving to first one side and then the other to peer into the cubicle. She still didn't see anyone, and she thought they'd have to be awfully thin to completely avoid detection, but she still couldn't convince herself that no one was in the elevator.

It seemed doubtful the thing would've come down all by itself, however, regardless of the tales that had been told about the place.

She sucked her lower lip in, considering. Before she could lose her nerve, she leapt inside, whirling the minute she landed and aiming her pistol at either side of the front of the elevator. Slumping against the back wall in relief, she drew a shaky breath.

She hadn't even finished sucking it in when the doors began to close. She shoved off the wall to leap out, but the opening had narrowed too much to allow her to jump through and the doors nearly took her hand off when she tried waving it between them to stop the doors from closing.

"Damn it!" she swore, stamping her foot furiously.

Before she had time to decide what to do about being sealed into the elevator, it jerked into motion. Her eyes widened. Her heart slammed into her ribcage painfully as she swayed with the sudden jolt. She moved back to the far corner after a moment, trying to calm the chaos rattling her brain, trying to think.

Was it a trap? Had someone sent the elevator down to her?

How was the damned thing even working? There shouldn't be any electricity in the building. It had been condemned—repeatedly.

Her mind leapt from those thoughts to wondering just how old the elevator was and, more importantly, the cables. She could hear the thing creaking and groaning as it rose. Was it as old as the building? Had they even *had* elevators that far back? Or was it something added later to modernize?

Like maybe only a hundred years ago, she thought a little sickly, remembering abruptly that the building had been condemned and scheduled for destruction the first time, according to her research, before the turn of the century—before 1900.

The hotel had been closed down after a series of brutal murders no more than thirty years after it had first been built. Actually, the first murder had occurred in 1830. There hadn't been another murder until nearly ten years later, but a grisly string had followed the second and the hotel, already aging and declining in popularity had finally gone bankrupt and closed its doors permanently in 1848.

She pushed those thoughts from her mind. She couldn't do anything about the elevator. She needed to focus on the possibility that someone had sent it down to collect her and might be waiting for her when she arrived.

That thought cleared her panicked mind enough to make her surge toward the front of the elevator and begin punching buttons to try to get the thing to stop. She tried every button, including the emergency stop, but the elevator continued to climb. Realizing it was useless, more convinced than ever that someone was behind her ride to the top of the hotel, Kally moved back to the corner where she'd been before, scanning the cubicle.

There was an access door in the roof of the elevator, she saw, but the cubicle had been built during an age where soaring ceilings were a sign of wealth. Nothing short of a ladder would get her close enough to reach it. She sure as hell couldn't leap up to reach it even if there'd been something for her to grab a hold.

The hair on the back of her neck prickled as the thought flickered through her mind that, although it was not going to be an exit for her, she couldn't rule out the possibility of being attacked from above.

Checking her pistol to make sure she hadn't done anything stupid—like leaving the safety on, she braced herself in the corner, holding the gun close in to her body so that there was less chance it could be kicked or knocked from her hands. Dividing her attention between the doors, the level indicator, and the trap door in the ceiling of the elevator, she waited, forcing herself to take slow, deep, calming breaths. It worked to a

degree, slowing her pulse so that the possibility that she might hyperventilate became less likely.

Her heart tripped over itself when the indicator displayed the twelfth floor. She braced herself ... and the elevator continued to rise.

The roof?

The hotel only *had* twelve floors!

Before she could decide what to make of it, the cubicle stopped as jerkily as it had started. The alarm pinged and the doors began to slowly open. Flicking a glance at the ceiling, Kally aimed at the widening crack and placed her finger on the trigger.

The doors opened to a wide, shadowy corridor that was completely empty. After staring at the space for several thundering heartbeats, she jerked sideways to glance to one side of the elevator and then the other. When she saw nothing but more empty corridor, she hesitated, thinking, and finally moved one cautious step to her right, weaving jerkily to try to avoid an attack as she darted quick glances at more and more of the corridor. She made her way all the way to the front of the elevator in the same manner and finally peered quickly around the edge for a quick look in each direction.

Puzzlement filled her when she saw that, to all appearances, she was completely alone.

Maybe the elevator was just quirky?

That figured into her decision to step off. The ride up had been hair raising enough, expecting to hear the twang of snapping cables all the way up. The damned thing hadn't responded when she'd tried to get it to stop either. She wasn't about to take the chance of getting trapped in the son-of-a-bitch when no one knew where she was.

Almost the moment she stepped off, the doors closed.

Consternation filled her when she heard the whir of mechanics and realized the fucking elevator had left her at the very top of the damned hotel.

All she wanted to do, now, was get the hell out as quickly as she could.

She'd come with the intention of looking at what was believed to be the actual crime scene. Karen and two of her friends, Barbara Watkins and Mack McKinney had been found dumped in the alley behind the hotel but, according to the police, they weren't killed there. They'd been killed inside the hotel ... on the top floor.

Stiff with fear, Kally debated with herself for several moments. The urge to rush toward the door she thought must lead to the stairwell was nearly overwhelming, but she'd come this far. She wasn't going to be able to live with herself if she discovered she was just too big a coward to even look after all she'd gone through to get here.

The damned elevator had completely demoralized her.

Her hands were starting to cramp and sweat from gripping her pistol so hard. She dragged in a few drawn out breaths to try to calm her racing heart and dared a glance toward the window at one end of the corridor. She could see the sun had moved noticeably since the last time she'd checked. Prying the fingers of her left hand loose from her gun, she took a quick glance at her wristwatch.

Three thirty. Was that even possible? An hour and a half since she'd parked the car and come inside?

How long would it take her, she wondered, to make it down to the ground floor?

Noticing that her hand was shaking, she scrubbed her hand on her jeans to dry it

and switched her gun to that hand and dried the right hand on her jeans. A shiver skated through her as she slowly became aware of the fact that she was sweating and the air around her was cold.

It didn't just feel air conditioned. It was cold.

Shouldn't it be hotter on the top floor?

Was nothing about this entire building logical at all?

Shaking the wandering thoughts, she focused on door number one ... the door that should open into the crime scene. She glanced at the door to the stairwell again, wondering abruptly if she'd let her guard down too soon. What if whoever had sent the elevator down was waiting in the stairwell?

What if they were waiting in the room?

She couldn't just stand in the corridor, paralyzed with fear. She had to make up her mind and either head for the door and get the hell away from the place as fast she could, or study the scene she'd come to look at.

No way was she ever coming back to this place!

That clinched it. She had to look.

Flicking glances at the door to the stairwell, she moved slowly toward the other door. Stopping when she reached it to dry her damp hands again, she raised her right hand toward her shoulder, pointing the barrel of the pistol at the ceiling, and grabbed the doorknob with her left. Taking a couple of deep breaths, she turned the knob. When it opened, she gave the door a shove hard enough to slam it back against the wall and leapt to one side of the door. The door knob hit the wall with a satisfying crash—nothing meaty behind it.

Moving away from the wall after a few moments, she leveled her pistol and darted glances around what she could see of the room. It was surprisingly bright and she discovered a long row of curtain-less windows easily six or seven feet tall broke the wall directly across from the corridor. The afternoon sunlight flooded the room.

Heartened by that, she moved a little to one side to check the side of the wall opposite the door and finally moved to the threshold and glanced around. The room shouldn't have surprised her, but it did. Even by the lobby standard, the room was opulent. Like the lobby, tall fluted columns, topped with ornate Corinthian style capitals were set at approximately fifteen foot intervals down what was must have been the center of the wide open area. Half columns and capitals lined the walls at the same intervals—for balance, she supposed. It seemed unlikely that they were functional as the center support columns obviously were. The floor seemed to be made up of marble tiles roughly a foot square, but thick carpets with intricate designs woven into them broke the monotony of the cold white stone.

There was a huge fireplace with an ornate mantel, also with a strong Grecian influence, at one end of the vast room surrounded by a grouping of high backed, over stuffed chairs and a pair of couches that obviously made up a living area. A dark, glossy dining table with matching chairs for ten and an impossibly tall china cabinet made up the dining area just to the left of the door and beyond that, made only semi private by the gauzy, transparent curtains that surrounded it, was the bedroom.

The focal point, not surprisingly, was the bed. What was a surprise was that the bed was absolutely enormous and the headboard of it looked to be nearly ten feet tall.

Across from the foyer area where she stood, there was a half wall that separated the main living areas from the kitchen area.

Despite the fact that the furniture looked like antiques from a bygone era, the very openness of the penthouse apartment seemed ... very modern.

Realizing that she'd been more focused on taking in the opulence of her surroundings than actually looking for potential threat, Kally felt a jolt of fear go through her. After flicking a quick look at the corridor behind her and then around at the room again, she stood indecisively where she was.

There was no sign of violence that she could see from where she stood. Would the crime scene have been cleaned up? Or was she on the wrong floor?

She frowned, trying to recall what the report had said. It seemed to her that it had described an apartment like this—not just an ordinary hotel room, although she'd interpreted it at the time to mean a suite. Beyond that, everything she'd read had indicated the hotel only had twelve floors.

Maybe the indicator on the elevator was messed up?

That didn't seem that farfetched considering the age of the building. It sounded more reasonable than the possibility that they'd miscounted the number of floors in the building.

If there'd been pictures

But the pictures that had been taken had been damaged. She hadn't been able to tell much about them.

Except the fireplace. She abruptly remembered that she'd seen the corner of what had looked like a fireplace in one of the pictures. Even as she glanced toward the fireplace, shifted to start toward it, she saw ... something—the air glowed. She checked, blinked her eyes to try to focus them. The shimmering effect didn't vanish, though. It became more pronounced until she found herself staring at something that more nearly resembled a plasma ball than anything else—except that the thing was huge, at least six feet in circumference. Afraid to blink now, she stared hard at the glowing sphere of arcing electricity. Sucking in a sharp breath, she took a step back.

The cloudiness seemed to part. A solid form *appeared* in the center of it. Curled tightly in upon itself, the part that she could see nevertheless looked like a huge muscular back—man-like in shape except for a pair of long, pointed, purplish protrusions along it that contrasted sharply with the bright red, glistening flesh. The thing uncurled, came erect. She stared in horror at it, unable to wrap her mind around what her eyes were seeing. It was man-like only in the sense that it had a head, torso, two arms and two legs—and massive genitalia. The flesh looked like raw meat. White bony protrusions like a row of triangular teeth ran the length of its massive arms from wrist to shoulders.

The face was the stuff of nightmares. Except for the long hair on its head, it looked like a person who'd been peeled down to the bloody flesh.

It—he—it was *definitely* male—grinned at her, unfurling a pair of purplish bat-like wings. "I have been waiting for you," he said in a deep, guttural voice.

Kally sucked in a harsh breath, jerked her gun up and began firing at the nightmarish thing. The first two slugs made it stagger back several steps until it collided with the mantel behind it, but it didn't fall down. Despite her training, she lifted the gun barrel a hair higher and aimed for the grinning face as it straightened and lurched toward

her. Her third bullet caught it right between the eyes. It slammed against the mantel again, but this time, after wavering a split second, it dropped to its knees and then fell face forward, smacking into the floor hard enough she felt the quakes beneath her feet.

She couldn't move. She discovered she was huffing for breath as if she'd been running a mile. Even as it occurred to her to inch a little closer, however, to see if she'd actually killed the thing, she caught a glimpse of a similar phenomenon to what she'd already seen out of the corner of her eye.

It riveted her attention. She threw a quick glance behind her to make sure there was nothing back there and when she looked directly toward the 'plasma ball' again, she saw a creature very like the first one emerging from the energy field.

This one carried a sword.

As she stared at him in eye bulging horror, he sucked in a deep breath and lifted the sword above his head.

Realizing abruptly that his entire focus was riveted to the area where the first creature had fallen, Kally snapped her gaze toward it and discovered the thing was standing again.

There was no sign of the blackened bullet hole she'd put in the middle of his head, no sign of the holes she'd put in his chest either.

The second creature roared ... something. It sounded like speech, but if it was she was in no condition to understand. Screaming, Kally pointed at the first creature, which had surged toward her again, and fired off four more rounds in quick succession.

The second creature halted his charge and whipped a glance in her direction. When he did, Kally swiveled toward him, leveled her pistol at him and emptied her clip. He staggered backward as the bullets impacted with his chest, but she doubted the bullets would be any more effective on him than they had been on the other creature. Whirling, she fled the room and raced down the corridor toward the stairwell, trying to eject the spent clip and search her pocket for another.

It dawned on her as she slammed through the stairwell door that she hadn't thought to bring a spare. Galvanized by that, she flew down the stairs so fast she nearly tripped and rolled down them over and over. Adrenaline kept her going far longer than she would've been able to manage without it, but the chemical giving her strength began to wane long before she'd made it even halfway down the stairs. She managed several more flights before her knees buckled. Lurching over the last step in the stringer, she pitched across the landing and into the wall.

Heaving so hard for air at first she thought she was going to throw up, she threw a frantic glance upward, more than half expecting to see both creatures bearing down on her. It only made her feel marginally better when she saw no sign of either one, but she had no choice but to stay where she was until she'd brought her heart rate and breathing to more normal levels. As soon as she managed to get one complete lungful of air, though, she began moving again as fast she could manage.

She'd thought she was in excellent physical condition, and yet it was only by dint of sheer determination and terror that she managed to make it to the bottom floor. Her legs felt like stilts as she staggered to a run across the lobby and finally burst through the door and onto the sidewalk. Holding her cramping side, limping from a twisted knee and ankle, she dug her keys out of her pocket and clicked the unlock button for the car doors

as she hurried toward the safety it represented ... she hoped.

Collapsing inside, she locked the doors and dropped her head against the headrest, wondering if her heart was going to burst. Thankfully it didn't, but when the last of the adrenaline finally drained from her so, too, did every ounce of strength. It took all she could do even to lift the car keys toward the ignition and she had to pause to gather her strength to turn the key once she'd inserted it.

Still so weak she could barely hold the pedal down with her foot or guide the car, she drove off.

Chapter Two

The rage Aziel felt when Mestopolis managed to elude him was slow to leave. He'd been so close to finally dispatching the rogue bastard back to the underworld and earning his own way back into the good graces of his overlord after years of frustration! "Interfering, *mortal*—female!" he growled.

Perched atop the Empire, he studied her through narrowed eyes as she staggered out of the building and climbed into her car, absently rubbing his chest at the reminder of the pain she'd inflicted. Mestopolis had been so focused on the female he would have had her if she had not taken the notion to try to fill *his* hide full of holes, as well!

It had distracted him for no more than a few moments, but that was enough to allow Mestopolis to slip through his fingers ... again.

Failure was not an option. He would find himself relegated once more to the quagmire of torment and desolation, perhaps never again allowed to crawl from that stinking muck. As little as he relished the role of enforcer of laws, it was far better than the abyss, better to divide his time between the underworld and this one than to have none of either.

He brooded over that as he watched her vehicle disappear.

Her use of the weapon was nothing, of course, a puny effort at best to destroy either one of them.

And yet, once his rage settled to a low simmer, he realized that he was surprised. Mortals rarely surprised him.

They were generally all too predictable—which was why Mestopolis had managed to prey upon them so easily and effectively. Rogue bastard!

As little as he liked his current task, he was obliged to admit the fucking asshole had totally upset the balance and deserved whatever punishment the overlord considered fitting ... once Mestopolis was dispatched back to the underworld. He had no quarrel with his interest in fucking humans. They could be entertaining, if only briefly. Even his master had no quarrel with that, but Mestopolis could not be satisfied with only that. He had developed a very bad habit of slaughtering them when he was done with them, and *that* could not be allowed.

If he'd even contented himself with destroying those souls destined to join the denizens of the underworld eventually anyway—drug pushers and users who committed murder by their actions or those who murdered for the sheer pleasure of it and were beyond redemption—his master would've been willing to overlook his penchant for humans.

The slaughter of innocents was another matter altogether. There were laws. No one could ignore them with impunity—not even the overlord—which was how he'd found himself in such a distasteful position to start with, charged with hunting the rogues down and dispatching them back to the underworld to face the overlord's wrath.

He might have earned himself a place at the overlord's side in this time—a far

more comfortable existence than the one he had now—though to be sure it was far better than the one before—if not for Mestopolis.

He could not be certain, of course. The overlord was nothing if not unpredictable, but he had been pleased before he had hit this particular snag—Mestopolis. Thrice before he had been sent to collect a rogue and thrice he had dealt swiftly with them, earning favor.

The last time he had reported failure his overlord had suggested that he not return again until he had better to report unless he just relished the thought of returning to the bog of torment and desolation. Recalling that instance, Aziel rose from his perch to pace and consider his predicament.

The female flickered through his mind more than once, irritatingly distracting, but he had never tried to deny the fact that he had a taste for human flesh and, despite the circumstances, he had not failed to notice she looked to be particularly delectable. Her image flickered enticingly before his mind's eye with little effort at summoning—her full breasts, tiny waist and rounded hips that were particularly appealing—the piquant little heart shaped face, bowed lips, big blue eyes, and wheat colored hair,

There had been strength and purpose in her deliciously delicate little features, not just fear, when she had pumped lead into him, he recalled, feeling a stirring of lust.

She might well be a refreshing challenge when her kind rarely was.

Not that he could afford the distraction at the moment.

Perhaps when he had dispatched Mestopolis? He would be due a reward.

Did he actually want a taste of her badly enough, though, to risk that being his *only* reward?

Then again, perhaps it would seem modest enough his master would give him permission to explore her to his heart's content and *still* give him a position by his side? It was only a human female, after all, and they were pathetically short lived ... even in the best of circumstances.

And hers weren't, he realized abruptly, having been too consumed with his rage at first to think of it, and too consumed by his lust of her since. She had signed her own death warrant when she had seen both him and Mestopolis. Whether she was an innocent or not—and he was certain she was—especially if she was, it was forbidden for any human to have certain knowledge of their existence and the existence of the underworld.

She would have to die—whether at his hands or Mestopolis—which was a great pity when she was such a lovely creature, but so it was written.

It need not be a difficult death, however, he reminded himself. It was only important to see it done, not the manner of it.

He was on the point of dismissing her from his mind again when a sudden thought occurred to him.

Mestopolis, a night demon, had wanted her badly enough to manifest in the light of day.

Frowning, he moved to the low wall that surrounded the roof and perched on it again, tapping his chin thoughtfully with one claw tipped finger while he tried to decide if the thought actually had merit or if he was only attributing his own interest in the female to Mestopolis. It had been many human years since Mestopolis had last indulged his appetite for mortals, but that was as nothing to them and it had been far longer since

his last incursion before that—at least twice as long.

Mayhap he was only becoming more addicted? He had had four the last time, after all, before that only a pair. Logically, of course, the four should have satisfied him for a while, but then Mestopolis was not entirely rational or he would not have been so blatant in defying the overlord or the laws of the underworld.

There was little in *this* world that warranted the risks of displeasing an overlord when they could make one's existence so very unpleasant in their plain.

Mestopolis was a creature of the shadow world. What could he make of the fact that Mestopolis had ignored the dangers of being caught by manifesting in the light of day when he had not the shadows to aid him in eluding capture? A growing addiction? Or something about that particular female?

Would any female work as a lure? Or did he need that one?

Or was he merely trying to rationalize his own interest in the female?

He could not really afford to displease his overlord further. There would be hell to pay if he allowed himself to be distracted from his task by his interest in fucking the female. If, however, it transpired that Mestopolis had a particular interest in her, then he could indulge his own whimsy and, at the same time, use her as a lure to dispatch his prey.

It was worth investigating, he decided. If his master learned of it and sent for him to question him, he at least had a plausible excuse for using her.

How to go about it, though?

The simplest way, of course, would be to enthrall her. He could use her in whatever way he liked then, as long as he liked—or she lasted—without having to use a glamour spell to entice her or having to deal with her hysterics. He did not particularly like the screaming. He knew many did—he suspected that that was a good deal of Mestopolis' penchant for them—but he did not care for it all. It did not heighten his enjoyment to have such a racket in his ears when he taking his pleasure. Then, too, humans did not have the taste for pleasures of the flesh that demons did. They objected so strenuously to some of the most modest demands.

He spent a good deal of time conjuring images in his mind of what he could and would do with her once he had enthralled her and brought her to his lair, but he realized after a bit that enthrallment had definite limitations. She could not scream, true, and deafen him with her screeching, but she would lay there like a dead thing and that was not particularly appealing either. He might as well *have* a dead thing.

She was a lively little thing. What would be the point of capturing such as she and then taking her will away so that she could not challenge him with her liveliness? He might as well capture one of those insipid creatures that fainted or dropped dead at the sight of him.

That had more merit, he decided, tapping his chin in thought again, and far more promise of pleasure for him.

On the other hand, he had not found it particularly pleasurable to be shot. It had certainly intrigued him that she was such a feisty little thing, but the shooting part ... that had fucking hurt, and it was distracting besides.

It would have to be the glamour spell or enthrallment, he realized. There was just no dealing with mortals without a great deal of trouble. It was almost enough to put him

off of the project all together—the realization that it would be more work than he had at first considered—but he could not easily dismiss the pleasurable throb he felt in his cock whenever he thought of her. That was rare enough to warrant a little extra trouble, he decided. Not that it was all that uncommon to feel lust for a mortal woman. He freely admitted he had a taste for them, but that was in a general way. Ordinarily, he felt the heat and looked about for a likely candidate to assuage it on. She was the first he had looked upon and *then* coveted.

He considered that uneasily for a moment, wondering what it was about her that had had that effect upon him, but he could not seem to pinpoint it and finally decided to dismiss it as unimportant. It was enough that she did tempt him, she was his for the taking, and she might further be useful in accomplishing his task.

He hoped she was not going to turn out to be a complete disappointment—but then such was the existence of an immortal. So much *was* disappointing.

* * * *

Kally arrived at her apartment on autopilot. Ordinarily, that would have been a scary thought right by itself, but everything in her ‘normal’ world fell so far from what she’d seen at the Empire Hotel that very little distress registered—not even relief if it came to that. Even when she’d parked her car, locked it, and dashed inside, she didn’t feel a lot better or safer.

She wasn’t certain she would ever feel safe again.

She’d spent years of her life learning self-protection, learning how to keep from being a victim—primarily because of the brutal murder of her aunt—and now this!

Shivering, she made her way through the apartment to her bedroom and began discarding her clothing as she headed to the bathroom. Turning the water on as hot as she could stand it, she climbed in and stood under the pounding spray until the shaking finally stopped. She stayed until the blistering hot water cooled to barely warm and finally got out.

Her mind seemed numb even after she’d thawed the deep freeze that gripped the rest of her. When she’d dressed again, she moved into her scantily furnished living room and curled up on the couch, staring at nothing, waiting for her mind to begin functioning again.

She was hardly aware of when it did. At first, the images that had been flashing randomly through her mind like the occasional sizzle of an electrical wire with a short, began to return at more regular intervals. After a while they ceased to be flashes like the images one captures with a strobe light and became more solid, lingering long enough in her mind for more than a glimpse.

She drew a shaky breath when a calmness approaching normal finally settled inside of her.

“Demons.” Even as she muttered the mythological name for them, she knew that was exactly what they were.

It was like the time when she’d been a little girl and smelled a skunk. She’d never smelled a skunk before, but nobody had to tell her what the smell was. She knew instantly, just from what she’d heard, that that was exactly what it was.

It wasn’t even as tenuous as connecting the worst odor she’d ever smelled in her life with a skunk.

They *looked* just like every picture, Halloween costume, and movie theater rendition of a demon that she'd ever seen.

That thought made her take a long mental step back and look the situation over with more skepticism. She'd never been a deeply religious person—actually, she was totally non-religious—or at least she'd thought she was. Maybe it was easier to believe in devils and demons than gods? After all, evil was all around.

She shook the thought off. It was some kind of 'programming' she decided. She'd been pelted with the images her entire life in one way or another. It wasn't that she believed in such things—or she hadn't before she'd seen them. It was a matter of identifying by prior programming—just as it had been in the case of the skunk.

So what might they be if they weren't actually what she'd thought they were? Aliens?

They sure as hell weren't human!

She still struggled with that thought, trying now to summon the images clearly when she'd tried before to banish them. Unfortunately for that effort, she was pretty sure, now, that the entire incident, from start to finish, hadn't taken more than a matter of minutes. Her brain simply wasn't capable of grasping and retaining much when so much had happened in those few minutes, particularly when she'd been scared half out of her wits.

Luckily, she had trained herself to react to a threat. If she'd had to think about it, that thing ... She didn't know what it might have done, but she strongly suspected her body would've been found in the alley like Karen's.

Shelving that possible connection for a few moments, she went back to trying to recall if she'd seen anything at all that would point to the possibility that it was some sort of hoax—men in costumes using special effects.

It popped into her mind instantly to wonder what the point of such a thing would've been, but she dismissed motivations. The important first step, she was sure, was to determine as closely as she could *what* they were. She could worry about the rest later. She wasn't functioning on full mental faculties anyway at the moment. She was still in the grips of shock even if much of it had worn off.

No matter how hard she focused, though, she couldn't think of anything that would indicate that it was nothing more than men in very convincing makeup.

She hadn't been part of any setup. She'd been using real bullets and she'd planted a nice little grouping in the thing's chest, and put one right between the eyes. Vests under their suits—if it was suits—could've prevented any serious injury to the body. The impact of the bullets would've packed a hell of a punch right by themselves and would account for the thing staggering back.

The bullet between the eyes was the real clincher, though. She'd seen it hit home. She knew her bullet had entered the thing's brain and she couldn't imagine any living creature—even an alien—surviving a bullet to the brain.

Unless they didn't carry their brains in their skulls?

Unlikely. What would be the point of having a head if the brains were in the toes?

She got up and picked her gun up, checking the breach to make sure it was empty before she sniffed the barrel. Gun powder. Of course, gun powder was used even for

blanks, from what she'd heard, but how would anyone have gotten to her gun?

No one in the city even knew her. She hadn't been in the city but a couple of weeks.

Gathering up her supplies, she settled on the floor beside the scarred coffee table that had come with the furnished apartment and focused for a little while on cleaning and oiling the gun and then reloaded her empty clip.

She'd divided ten rounds between the two creatures and it hadn't done anything more than annoy them.

As difficult as she was finding it to accept, as little as she wanted to accept, she realized she just couldn't dismiss the possibility—the likelihood—that what she'd seen was exactly what she'd thought she'd seen.

Demons.

Given the circumstances, it seemed unlikely her gun would do her a hell of a lot of good, but it *had* at least slowed them down and she felt safer having it close. Leaving it on the coffee table within easy reach, she retrieved her recorder and sat listening to the impressions she'd recorded while she was looking over the hotel. When she got to the end, she stopped it, gathered her thoughts, and finally turned it on.

"I don't think I'm going to be able to rule out the supernatural in the case of mom's baby sister's death. In point of fact, it actually explains a lot of the questions we had that were never answered by the police to our satisfaction. It also explains why the case was never solved."

* * * *

Kally didn't sleep well. She'd spent the rest of the day and late into the night pouring over the pitiful amount of 'evidence' she'd collected. Most of it consisted of what she could remember overhearing her mother and father say.

Her mother had reared her younger sister like a mother after their mother had died. It had just about destroyed her when her 'baby' was murdered, particularly when it was so brutal. She hadn't wanted to ask her mother to relive it all over again. The main reason she'd come was out of some vague hope that she could somehow help her mother finally put it to rest for good. She hadn't wanted to resurrect it by grilling her mother for what she had heard and what she knew.

That wasn't entirely her reason for not wanting to bring it up.

Her mother would've had pure hysterics if she'd had any inkling of what she meant to do. Her mother had been hyper fearful ever since she'd gotten word about Karen's murder that everyone she loved was a potential victim and would be snatched away from her by some serial killer who'd gone out of their way just to prey on her family.

She knew it wasn't logical. Her mother knew it wasn't. In point of fact, Karen's murder had made the odds almost astronomical that their family would ever see another murder, but she couldn't help the way she felt.

It had been her mother's idea to enroll her in karate classes shortly after Karen's death. She hadn't been interested herself. The only reason she hadn't whined and complained about having to go was because she didn't want to add to the stress her mother was under. The only reason she'd continued with them was because she'd seen it comforted her mother to think she was learning how to defend herself.

It wasn't an 'interest' she had. It never had been, but she'd felt it was a worthwhile sacrifice on her part if it made her mother happy, made her feel safer, and she'd begun to see it after a while as giving her the potential to protect her mother in case of need, not just herself.

She'd taken up shooting for the same reason, even though she hated guns.

As it turned out, it hadn't been a bad idea. Nature hadn't designed her to protect herself. She'd learned when she'd enrolled in self-defense classes in college, kick-boxing, that, statistically speaking, she was a borne victim. The highest percentage of murder victims in the country were women in her height and weight range. Murderers, it seemed, found it convenient to choose victims whose physical size made them easy to catch and subdue. A woman five foot to five four that weighed one hundred to one fifteen was easy for a grown man to snatch up, subdue quickly, and make off with.

Of course a good bit of self-defense had to do with not placing yourself into the position of becoming a victim by bad habits and poor choices.

Her visit to the Empire Hotel had to rank somewhere around the top of stupid moves calculated to make a person a victim.

She'd known that going in, but she hadn't seen any hope for it. She'd taken every precaution she could think of. She'd made sure to go in the middle of the day—night time was the most dangerous time to wander into unfamiliar territory—and she'd made sure she was armed and she'd carefully checked the area for loiterers before she'd gone in.

The fact that she hadn't told anyone she was going or taken anyone with her, though, lessened the effectiveness of the precautions she *had* taken.

As *if* anything short of an army would've helped considering what she'd encountered!

Demons.

She wasn't a lot closer the following morning to reaching acceptance. She didn't know if she deep down believed, or she deep down doubted, but her mind was still wrestling with what she'd seen versus what she believed and looking for other answers that were more acceptable.

She discovered an envelope had been slid under her front door as she started out. Frowning, she bent to pick it up and opened it.

It wasn't sealed. The flap hadn't even been neatly tucked in. Flipping it back, she pulled the single sheet of stationery from it and opened it.

Ms. Kally Greer,

If you are still interested in touring the old Empire Hotel, meet me at the hotel at 9:00 AM and I will be happy to show you around.

Aziel Empire

Kally stared at the bold scrawl for several moments, feeling her blood freeze in her veins.

She'd called and spoken to his personal secretary when she'd first arrived in the city. How significant was it that the invitation she'd given up on had arrived the day

after she'd decided to tour the place without an invitation?

Was there any significance at all? Or was it merely a coincidence?

She glanced at her watch. Dismayed to discover that it was already 8:30, she uttered a hiss of disgust.

It figured, damn it! He *would* pull something like this!

Not that she could actually be certain he'd timed it so that she didn't have time to decide. The note hadn't been delivered by the mail carrier. It could've been there since the day before. It might even have been there when she'd come back from the hotel. She doubted it. She thought she would've noticed, but she certainly couldn't be sure considering the condition she'd been in.

She did *not* want to go back to that place ... ever!

What if what she thought she'd seen actually *was* real? Some feeble old rich goat wasn't going to be any help at all ... unless she took off and left him to keep them occupied while she ran for it!

She was fairly certain that he was filthy stinking, rich, though. If he was, she doubted he would travel without an entourage that would probably include at least one massive body guard that looked like a comic book superhero on steroids—maybe two or three—probably his personal secretary and maybe a nurse.

Shaking her head, she locked the apartment and trotted to her car. She couldn't really afford to pass up the chance, she realized, no matter how reluctant she was to go back. She just hoped he'd wait around for a few minutes if she was late ... because she was definitely going to be late. There was no way she was going to be able to make it to the hotel from her apartment in much under an hour.

If she got there and he was already gone, she would just keep driving, she decided.

Chapter Three

There was a black stretch limo parked in front of the hotel when Kally arrived. As she pulled in and parked behind it, one of the rear doors opened.

The limo didn't actually surprise her that much, but she was a little surprised that the driver didn't run around to open the door.

She was stunned to stupidity by the man that got out. Debonair double zero spy man had nothing on this guy! Tall dark and classically handsome, from the fit of his well tailored and no doubt very expensive business suit, he was also built like a bodybuilder. If there had ever been a man borne that could make her wet just looking at him, he'd just climbed out of that limo. She wasn't certain how long she sat staring in slack jawed wonder, but she came around when the man approached her and tapped on her window. After staring at him blankly a few moments longer, she finally remembered she hadn't turned off the engine and did so—which was when she took her foot off the brake and discovered she hadn't put the car in park either.

Feeling her face redden, she shifted the gear into park and unlocked the door. He opened it before she could.

"Ms. Greer?"

She gazed raptly at him in mindless appreciation. He was even prettier up close!

He favored her with a warm smile that made her belly feel as if she'd just jumped off a cliff, holding out his hand. "I'm Aziel Empire."

Mesmerized by the deep timber of his voice, feeling a delightful shiver skate down her spine, Kally stared at his hand for a moment, lifting hers to place it in his like a sleepwalker. His hand dwarfed hers, sending another warm shiver through her. She stared at his well manicured nails as his fingers closed around hers, swallowing with an effort, and then clearing her throat when she still couldn't find her voice. "Kally," she finally managed.

Discovering that he was waiting for her to exit the car, she made an abortive attempt to rise—which was when she discovered she hadn't unfastened her seatbelt.

God! Kill me now! Don't let me die of mortification!

She had to pull her hand from his and wrestle with the damned seatbelt. He leaned in—to help, she supposed, but the scent of his cologne or aftershave to say nothing of his close proximity was such that she wasn't sure whether she was within an inch of swooning or coming.

Possibly both.

A wave of dizziness washed over her and at the same time her kegel's started clapping madly.

His cheek nearly brushed hers as he unfastened the belt and moved out again, giving her a close enough view of his face to see that his eyes were a curiously vibrant shade of green, surrounded by thick black curling lashes and that his face looked as flawless up close—really close—as it had from a distance.

She was suddenly desperately sorry she had dashed off without considering changing. When she'd dressed in old jeans and a t-shirt and tamed her hair into a French braid it was with the expectation of spending the day poring over old cold case files—assuming she had any luck convincing the police to allow it.

Resisting the urge to smooth her t-shirt self-consciously, or check her braid to see how much of her straight, fine hair was still confined as she got out of the car, she smiled vaguely in his general direction without meeting his gaze. “Thank you for meeting me, Mr. Empire,” she said uncomfortably.

“My pleasure—Aziel.”

She wasn't certain she was at all easy with the thought of calling him by his first name. Most everyone did these days, but it seemed a tad too familiar with a man like him. “I didn't really expect you to come yourself.”

“It's no trouble,” he assured her. Pausing beside the car, he tapped the window of the door he'd emerged from. “Take it around to the garage, Baleal.”

Kally glanced toward the front of the car, but she couldn't see anything for the darkened windows. She frowned at Aziel curiously when the car moved off and turned the corner.

“I just returned this morning or I would have met with you earlier,” he said, settling a large hand in the center of her back and urging her toward the door of the hotel.

“Earlier?” she repeated questioningly.

He smiled faintly. “In the week.”

“Oh.”

A shiver skated along her spine as they entered the hotel lobby. She would've put it down to her reluctance to go inside except she knew it wasn't fear that inspired it—not entirely, in any case.

When he'd walked her to the front desk, he excused himself and left her standing at the desk while he went behind it. He was gone only a few moments when the lights abruptly came to life, startling the hell of her. She was still looking around at the ceiling when he rejoined her.

“The power's on,” she said, surprised and beginning to feel a great deal more confusion.

She'd spent most of her drive over trying to decide what to tell Mr. Empire about her experience in the hotel the day before—a warning of *some* kind seemed essential—but the discovery that there actually *was* electricity in the hotel instantly resurrected all of her own doubts about her experiences.

“Yes—after a fashion. I keep it cut off most of the time, on most of the floors, but I live in the penthouse at the top.”

Kally sent him a startled glance. “You live ... here?”

He looked away, studying the enormous lobby lit up by the gleaming chandeliers overhead. “This was almost a marvel in the day it was built,” he said musingly, “one of the tallest buildings anywhere at the time my grandfather built it.”

Kally blinked as she digested that. “Your grandfather? But it was built in 1800.”

He sent her a narrow eyed look, seemed to consider, and finally smiled faintly.

“Great ... something.”

Kally glanced away. She really was having trouble focusing when she looked at

the man and wondered if every woman that looked at him had the same problem.

Very likely, she thought, and realized she was blushing again, feeling incredibly gauche and stupid. What was wrong with her anyway? He was certainly the most handsome man she'd ever set eyes on, but she'd never been prone to turning into a blithering idiot just because she found a man wildly attractive.

Then again, she couldn't recall having met one she found even nearly as wildly attractive, so maybe she was due ... or overdue?

"Of course," she managed finally. "I don't know what I was thinking. I guess it's pretty cumbersome to keep referring to him as great-great-great grandfather—or however many it goes back."

His smile widened to a rueful grin that was seriously dangerous. She found herself smiling back at him vacuously.

He moved closer. Settling his hand on her lower back again, he ushered her through the lobby, giving her the history of the hotel and its furnishings. She was more keenly attuned to his touch, his nearness, and the pleasing drone of his deep voice than she was to anything he said, but then she wasn't really interested in the history of the hotel—not the ancient history.

As keyed up as she was due to both her attraction to the man and the residual fear from the day before, she found that by the time they'd toured the entire first floor that she'd relaxed a good deal. Questions crowded her mind that she couldn't voice, couldn't think how to put into words.

He lived in the penthouse.

Where she'd been the day before.

"How long have you lived here?" she asked finally when they'd paused near the elevator.

Reaching toward the service button, he pressed it. He was frowning when he straightened, but he finally shrugged. "Years."

The clipped answer put her in her place. At the same time, it only gave rise to more questions.

If, in fact, she'd seen demons as she'd thought she had, how could he have lived here for years and not have seen them, as well?

Because there was no way she was going to believe that he'd had an experience anything like she'd had and *still* lived here.

So what could she *now* make of her 'experience'? Was her mind suspect? Had it been some sort of hallucination? Psychotic break at confronting the murder scene she'd heard so much about throughout her childhood?

"Sorry. Not my business. I was just ... curious. I mean ... it's a beautiful old building and obviously you feel a lot of pride in the family history tied up in it, but still ... the neighborhood ... and ... uh"

He smiled thinly, ushering her inside the cubicle when the doors of the elevator opened. "I like my solitude."

Kally glanced around uneasily at the elevator as the doors shut, sucking in a sharp gasp as it jerked into motion.

"It is old, but it is quiet safe, I assure you."

Well, then, as long as he was assuring her! Kally nodded instead of voicing the

doubts swarming her mind like crows. “You didn’t punch the button,” she pointed out.

“It is set to go directly to the penthouse.”

Kally nodded, discovering she *was* completely able to ignore his powerful attraction and focus inwardly as the cubicle rose. Part of it was the fear churning in her belly in spite of everything that should have convinced her that none of what she’d thought had happened the day before actually had. Suspicion arose, though, maybe because it was easier to believe anything *except* that she’d imagined the entire thing.

She wasn’t prone to either hysteria or vivid imaginings. She hadn’t taken any drugs or exhibited any signs that drugs had been slipped to her—though that as an explanation did eventually occur to her.

One thing that did was that if Empire was as wealthy as she suspected, he could certainly buy the best of anything—including the very best technology available. Maybe what she’d stumbled upon had been some sort sick joke/burglar/ security setup?

She didn’t know anything about the man. She’d managed to track him down as the owner, but hadn’t found out anything else about him and now she wondered again if the timing of his invitation wasn’t just a little too pat. Maybe he *had* been somewhere and had just returned, but even if he *had* it didn’t rule out her suspicions. All it really ruled out was that she was a particular target.

The man was as handsome as sin and every inch the polished gentleman, but that didn’t rule out the possibility that he was completely insane, or just arrogant enough in his wealth and power to think anything he wanted to do was alright as long as he could afford it. He hadn’t seemed to be going out of his way to debunk everything that had seemed completely unnatural the day before, and yet—surprise!—he had.

He had immediately shown her that there was power available, even in the lobby, and explained that he just usually kept it off. He’d explained the strange behavior of the elevator by saying it was programmed to go directly from the penthouse to the ground floor and back again—all completely reasonable explanations.

It hadn’t felt natural or reasonable the day before, and she hadn’t been scared mindless until *after* she’d had her ride up in the haunted elevator and met the goons at the top—unnerved, yes—but not scared stupid.

It occurred to her suddenly to wonder why neither of those creatures had come after her. She hadn’t been in any condition to really consider that aspect before. She’d just been relieved they hadn’t.

But maybe they hadn’t because they were ... holograms or something like that?

She shook that off. She didn’t believe, even caught off guard, that she would be that easily convinced by special effects. The movie people managed to pull off some really convincing special effects in the movies, but then that was on film, using computer graphics. She doubted it looked nearly as convincing in real time.

“I will, of course, show you the remainder of the hotel,” Aziel said, breaking into her thoughts, “but I thought it would be less of a workout to take the elevator to the top and walk down.”

Kally slid a curious glance at him because it hadn’t occurred to her before to wonder why he would take her to his penthouse—actually at all. She had expressed an interest in the hotel. Maybe her vacuous appreciation of his physical perfection had convinced him she was far more interested in exploring his bedroom?

Not that the idea didn't have a certain appeal, she reflected wryly. She would've liked to think she couldn't so easily be diverted from her self-appointed mission—and she couldn't—but she wasn't a fanatic by any means. She wouldn't really mind something a little lighter and more enjoyable to occupy her mind for a short while.

She didn't mind getting the opportunity to get a better look at his penthouse to appease her curiosity about the event, if it came to that. She smiled. "Good thinking," she agreed, particularly after the unaccustomed exercise she'd had the day before.

There wasn't much on her body that wasn't sore from it, but her legs were particularly abused. Walking down might not be as stressful as climbing, but she'd be using the same muscles today that she had when she'd run down the day before and that was bound to be hell.

Her belly tightened as the elevator jolted to a stop and the doors opened.

Aziel gestured with one hand for her to precede him. His other hand skimmed her shoulder and braid on the way to settle mid-back as it had before. She jumped, sending him a quick look, but she didn't comment on his familiarity. It didn't particularly offend her even though she would ordinarily have objected.

She didn't believe it wasn't accidental, though, any more than she believed it was a thoughtless habit. He'd touched her because he wanted to. She saw that in his eyes in the brief glance—desire.

It unsettled her, but it also sent a reciprocating flash of heat through her.

Contrary to her expectations, the penthouse was as empty of habitation as it had been the day before and for the first time she felt a little uneasy about her escort. Trying not to be too obvious, she outran the hand he had settled on her back and pretended keen interest in the penthouse as she surveyed it, walking around the foyer. When she glanced at him again, she saw that his eyes were narrowed, speculative. He didn't look particularly pleased, but the expression vanished almost before she could register it. "You don't have staff in residence?" she asked uncomfortably.

His dark brows rose. "Not in the penthouse," he responded after a brief hesitation that made her wonder if he had staff anywhere in the building. "Baleal has a suite on the floor below, as well as the housekeeper, who is also the cook."

"I didn't mean to be nosey," she said a little uncomfortably. "I was just surprised."

He smiled faintly. "I'm amazingly self-sufficient," he murmured, wandering toward the living area she'd been trying hard not to stare at.

She watched him for a moment and finally followed when he stopped at a window to stare out, clasping his hands behind him. "This looks ... a little more modern than the lobby."

"It is ... a bit." He turned to study her. "Shall I show you around?"

She didn't want to look around—didn't need to. What she wanted to know was how long the penthouse had been a part of the building. Since the beginning? Had it been added later? Or just remodeled more recently? Since the murders?

There wasn't any sign, needless to say, that it had ever been a crime scene.

Was there any hope, at all, that she'd been mistaken and the crime scene actually *was* on the twelfth and was still intact?

There also wasn't any sign of the events the day before—no heat scarring and she

distinctly remembered that the moment she had set foot in the penthouse she had *felt* the crackling of electrical energy, not just seen it.

She smiled a little mechanically in response to his question. "I wouldn't want to intrude since this is your private residence. I wouldn't mind looking at the rest of the hotel, though."

Particularly the twelfth floor.

"I thought you might join me for luncheon before we make that trek."

It was lunch time already? Kally blinked at him in surprise, automatically glancing at her wristwatch. She uttered a soft laugh of embarrassment. "It *is* lunch time. I am so sorry! I had no idea I'd taken up so much of your time!"

He smiled easily, displaying a pair of crescent shaped dimples, one in either cheek. "You aren't going to run off and leave me to eat alone after I worked so hard to get you up here at just the right time?"

Kally found she couldn't help but respond to the charm in both his smile and the flirtatious request. "You're sure it won't be any trouble?"

His smile broadened to a triumphant grin that made her a tad uneasy. "I am certain it would be a disappointment if you did not. If you like, you can sit on the terrace while I prepare something."

"I could help," she offered.

His smile became a little stiff. "It will take me no more than a few moments. The terrace is through the bed chamber."

Kally felt her belly execute a little flip flop, but she merely nodded and crossed from the living area to the foyer and followed the hallway to the 'bed chamber', listening a little absently to his tread as he headed into the kitchen. She couldn't decide if his reference to it as the 'bed chamber' was quaint or just strange.

She discovered the sheer drapes had been pulled back on the side facing the hallway and tied to one of the columns. Across the wide expanse of bed, she saw a pair of French doors. After glancing back at Aziel, she crossed the carpeted room and let herself out onto the terrace. A stiff breeze hit her the moment she opened the door, nearly snatching it from her grip. Unnerved by the near mishap, she stepped through and closed the door firmly behind her, surveying the awning covered patio. A glass topped dining set of wrought iron dominated the area beneath the awning. She glanced from the table and chair set to the chaise fully exposed to the sun and decided to sit at the table while she waited. The breeze was almost constant and comfortable enough in the shade but she doubted the same could be said for the remainder of the roof top patio.

In any case, she didn't particularly want to enjoy the view from too close to the edge. It made her belly tense just looking toward the horizon from where she was.

* * * *

Aziel's annoyance slowly dissipated as he watched her step outside. Expelling the last of his irritation in a huff of breath, he turned to stare at the clock, wondering how long mortals generally spent concocting their food. It had not occurred to him, unfortunately, when he had invited her to dine that he had no clue of such things or that the timing might be telling if he guessed wrong.

Briefly, he regretted his impulse to forgo magic and try to woo her in the mortal way so that he might experience something a little different. It hardly seemed worth the

effort and, besides, he was tired of wooing. He was ready to get down to the fucking.

Not that he had not enjoyed the chattering.

Actually, he amended, he had not particularly enjoyed that because he had had to keep his wits about him to refrain from saying something he ought not, something that might give him away, and he had been far more interested in touching her, smelling her.

He *had* enjoyed that, he decided, and the anticipation ... just as he had thought he would. Impatience slithered through him as he studied her through narrowed, possessive eyes, though. He wanted her naked, on his bed, spread before him like a succulent meal so that he could taste every inch of her. And, when he could contain his impatience no longer, speared upon his cock so that he could feel his flesh gliding through her hot, moist body ... hear her cries of ecstasy, her moans of unbearable bliss.

He massaged his throbbing member at the thoughts, wavering between the desire to stalk out to the patio and snatch her back inside to do all the things he had thought of ... so far ... and anything else that came to mind once he had her, and the equally compelling desire to relish his anticipation a little longer.

What difference did it make if she was willing or not, he thought irritably? He could *make* her willing with very little effort!

He was not at all certain that he could convince her without a spell within a time frame that he would find acceptable.

Was it really worth all this effort just to experience something that was only a little different?

She turned while he was staring at her and glanced directly at him. For a moment, his mind was so caught up in the images he had conjured of taking her that he did not even register that she was looking back at him. The moment he did realize it, however, it occurred to him that she must be waiting.

No doubt it had been long enough if she was wondering what was taking him so long. Relieved to have a cue, he conjured the meal he had decided would be elegant and impressive upon a silver tray and lifted it from the counter, striding from the kitchen with it. She got up and opened the door for him when she saw his approach—which was a relief since it had not occurred to him that it would have to be opened *their* way.

She smiled at him when he had set the tray down on the table top and for a moment ... just for a split second ... he completely forgot everything else as everything inside of him went taut with burning need. He tensed, struggling with the urge to pounce upon her instantly.

Her smile wavered and fell, snatching him back to his surroundings, reminding him, belatedly, to smile back. Frowning when she merely looked at him uneasily, he focused on removing the covers.

She stared at the tray with a strange look upon her face.

“Is something amiss?” he asked, uneasy for no reason he could quite figure out.

“You made this ... just now?”

There was a clue there that his timing might have been off just a little. He considered it and finally decided to hedge. “Warmed it.”

She chuckled. “That’s what I thought. No wonder you didn’t need help.”

Relieved that he had surmounted that hurdle without arousing suspicion, he moved around the table to help her with her chair. He realized just as he was about to seat

himself that he had neglected a beverage. Annoyance wafted through him. "Wine?"

She looked surprised. "Water, I think ... unless you have sweetened ice tea?"

Nodding, grinding his teeth since she had declined the wine, which he was certain would have relaxed her considerably—mayhap right into his bed—he went back inside, snapped his fingers once he'd reached the kitchen, and returned with two tall glasses of iced tea.

After watching her surreptitiously for a few moments, taking note of her behavior, he matched his to hers, settling his napkin in his lap, and focused on the food, a little surprised that it was actually very enjoyable. There was something to be said for mortals, after all ... beyond the pleasures of the flesh, he thought.

"You haven't asked me why I wanted a tour of the hotel," she said after a while.

Because he did not need to ask. He lifted his brows at her questioningly, though, thinking hard. "I assumed it was because you were interested in the hotel," he said finally.

She sent him a strange look. "So ... you don't really care why?"

He considered it. Actually, he did. Setting aside the fact that he wanted to fuck her unconscious, and the possibility, now, that she might serve him well as bait, he would have preferred that she had stayed away. He shrugged. "If you had not been interested you would not be here now. I think it would be more accurate to say that the reason does not matter."

He could tell by her expression that she did not quite know how to take that, but she seemed a little pleased. Faint color entered her cheeks. He had noticed that she did that whenever he caught her staring at him or he smiled at her, and he thought it must mean that she liked something he had done or said.

He was entirely certain that she was pleased with his glamour spell. He could see that in her eyes when she looked at him.

It dawned on him as he considered it that he found it very enjoyable. He had never seen that particular look in a mortal's eyes before—horror, yes, many times, and of course the glazed look that always came into their eyes once they were enthralled and when he was taking pleasure of their flesh. He had, in point of fact, he realized, noticed a look in her eyes several times approaching that same glazed look of the enthralled. He wondered if she would look at him that way when he was pounding her hot little cunt with his cock.

He would have to try to recall that interesting question when he took her and see, he decided.