



Knossos West

A GIFT OF
DAYBREAK

STELLA & AUDRA PRICE

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A Gift of Daybreak

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

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A GIFT OF DAYBREAK

Stella and Audra Price

Dedication

To our new readers and fans. Thanks for taking this journey with us and for enjoying what we write. We know you will love Andrew and Fajer.

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Chapter One

Andy managed to keep the sneer off his face until he left the room the wedding had taken place in. What a sham it'd been and only because the little viper had gotten herself pregnant. A rush job for the sake of propriety. Not that Reece had any sense of propriety and surely the little viper whore didn't have any, either. Why his cousin had to live dangerously, let alone why he had to make Andy go to Vegas for the damn thing, Andy would never know. The place was so hot. Andy might be a snake, but he liked cooler more temperate temperatures. Of course, he could have made his excuses and turned down the invite, but he'd accepted for some reason unknown to him.

Truth was, Andy was growing bored. Maybe it was that his cousins were now mated and had children or maybe he was just getting to that age. He needed something new in his life. Certainly not a mate or child but something different, perhaps he needed a new yacht. He considered the idea as he walked the halls to his room. Knowing Remy and Reece's penchant for practical jokes and their drive to make him the butt of every one, he'd requested to be put as far away from them as possible. He was an easy target for them, seeing himself as above such childish pranks.

He'd been glad of the decision to move after seeing the colour of Reece's hair for the wedding. Dye in his hair gel apparently did wonders. Normally a dark blonde, it'd been coloured into a stunning purple, a colour that didn't go with his seething face. He did match rather well with Remy who'd been dressed up as Elvis for the occasion. For a moment, Andy had almost felt sorry for their mates, but the girls didn't seem to mind.

Maybe, I shouldn't go back down at all, he thought to himself as he fetched his key card from his wallet. It had been a mistake to go into Vegas in the first place. It was full of crime and sleaze. All one had to do was watch the TV to discover that.

He'd just pack his bags and leave, his cousins wouldn't miss him. He'd already shown face, and the boys would no doubt figure that he'd gotten lucky. That was only if they don't think too carefully about it, and Andy had never accused his cousins of thinking.

He slipped the card into the lock, opening the door and ready to pack his case. Stopping short, he caught a whiff of scent from his room. There was a female inside. Groaning

inwardly at Reece and Remy, he opened the door carefully, scared of what he'd find. He wouldn't touch a woman from Las Vegas with Reece's cock, let alone a ten foot pole.

A stately woman dressed in a green safari dress with her hair done up in a multicoloured turban and wearing large, tortoiseshell glasses that spanned above and below her eyes sat in the centre of the room. She was the colour of light coffee, with large berry-coloured lips, and her hands, adorned only with a large diamond ring, sat in her lap.

This was no hooker.

She uncrossed her legs and sat up a little more. "And a good morning to you, Mr. Derrell," she said in a soft voice, thick with a Mexican accent.

"If your here for turning down service, I'll pass. Leave the mint on the pillow," he quipped lightly, leaning against the wall. This woman, whoever she was, was Ophidian, a weresnake, just like him, and she was very unwelcome.

"Your attempts at levity are dry and rather uncalled for," she said and took off her glasses. She blinked large, almond-shaped, green eyes at him. "And such flip from a snake who grew up in the system... I would have thought Archon Rizdon would have taught you better."

He felt his eyes narrow. "True she did, but she also taught me manners. One does not simply encroach into another's territory without permission. I'm staying in this room for however long that may be. Bad form to break into another's room."

"You speak about territory when you're actually in mine." She stood and went to the window. "I came here for a quiet chat and you feel the need to challenge an Archon?" She shook her head.

"Archon?" he blinked, mentally chastising himself. "Of course, I meant no disrespect. I would be a fool to offer any such challenge, and I assure you I'm not a fool." He stepped away keeping more of a distance. If this was indeed her territory then she could be only one woman. Olivia. A viper in every respect and a most dangerous woman. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? The happy couple is downstairs, if you wish to offer them your congratulations."

"And I already have. My mate is conveying my felicitations. I am here to speak to you."

"Excellent." The word sounded forced even to him.

She turned to look at him. "Don't sound so enthused. I swear that's what's wrong with the eastern nests. I come here offering a great gift, and you feign happiness. Truth is you

shouldn't be happy, because you don't know what I come offering, but again, a modicum of interest would let me know I'm not wasting my time, and I do hate to do that." She scowled. "So let's start over, shall we? I do wish this to be pleasant."

She appeared to be ranting to herself. It was a woman thing, he supposed.

"Let's," he smiled, still keeping his distance. "Archon Olivia, it's such a surprise to see you here. I believe you're here to give me an offer?" He played along keeping his voice interested. Indeed, he'd be lying if he'd said he wasn't even a little curious to know what had brought this deadly woman to his room.

She smiled at him and cocked her head. "What if I were to tell you I'm here to give you choice of the females in the King snake nest?"

"Females?" he frowned.

"You know, when I heard about this wedding you're here for, I had mixed feelings. On the one side, it was nice to see a venomous female without a nest finding a home and a man to love her. On the other, she was a rogue. And don't get me started on the Grecian snake who married Remy Crane. I had high hopes for him. My point is that good, wholesome nest females are being overlooked by good male families for these...undesirables," Olivia said in a disgusted tone, shaking her head. "So I decided to come and offer you the keys to the kingdom, a female from my nest. It's no secret that I cloister my females, but they need strong men from decent families. You are a strong male from a decent family."

Tact. Andy was well known for his tact, seeming to have gathered all of his cousins' at some point of the other, but how to tell this venomous woman he had no interest in mating anything from her nest was beyond him. "I agree with you, Olivia. I don't agree with Carmen and Chrissy, either, but my cousins seem happy enough. I'm not one to stand in the way of love. Nor am I looking for it, at the moment. I'm still too young to mate or settle down. It's a very generous offer though. Maybe in a few years, I can take you up on it." *Or like when hell freezes over.*

Olivia was not to be swayed. "I disagree. You're of prime age for a mating, to bring strong sons and daughters to the race. But that's neither here nor there. You say you're not interested in settling down, even when you don't know what it is I'm offering? How are you to know what's out there if you don't see for yourself? Let me be clear, Andrew," she said using his full first name. "I'm opening my compound to you alone to see what is there that

might interest you. Should you not find something during the allotted time, then we will say no more about it."

"May I be blunt?"

She nodded. "Please say what you will, Andrew. We are all friends here."

"Of course, I'm not a mating type of man, Olivia, not right now. There's a lot I still want to do...unhindered as it is. I don't want a mate, and I doubt very much that there's anything you could have that would change my mind on that fact. I'm not even planning on staying here for very long. In fact, I'm here to pack to head home. The desert climate just doesn't suit me or my snake. I'm sorry."

Olivia walked over to him and handed him a picture of four women. One was short, curvy in the right places with long black hair, caramel skin and sultry brown eyes. To her left, a perky blond with high breasts and sultry smile. Next to her was a tall, pale female with a shock of curly brown hair and ice-blue eyes that seemed to laugh at him. And the fourth was a girl of average height, nondescript brown hair and unusual grey green eyes. She was sucking on a lollipop and had her hand in a pair of cut-off shorts.

He looked down at the beautiful women. They certainly were tempting. "Nice pictures. Do your females know you're pimping them out?"

She gave him a droll stare. "Insolence."

Maybe a little visit couldn't hurt...much. "Apologies. How long would I stay for?" He frowned not knowing why he was asking. The chances of walking in the viper compound and coming back out again were slim. "And what assurances of yours do I have for my safety. Surely your males won't be too pleased by this offer?"

She smiled, clearly happy by the questions. "A smart snake, too. The males in my compound are all family of the females, but that is moot because no snake goes against my word in my territory, Andrew. There are protocols to adhere to. I should like you stay a month at most, a week at least. Meet the girls, do as you will, decide, or don't, but all I ask is that you consider."

He sighed, giving in. It wasn't like he was doing anything here. "I want your guarantee of my safety—even from the women." As said, he was no fool. He wasn't so sure he could survive bite and had no intention of finding out. Viper women were volatile.

"All assurances, Andrew, though I don't think you have to worry. There is a reason why I keep my females so close to home. They will be quite accommodating." She looked at

her watch. "Marco should be waiting for me downstairs. The girls' names are on the back of the picture to acquaint you with them. I shall expect you before sundown, and there will be a limousine waiting for you here once you are ready to come."

"Fair enough. I'll see you soon then." He smiled at her then looked once again at the photos.

She nodded and walked past him, quietly closing the door. He turned over the photo and read the names: Annalissa, Bitsy, Fajer and Meredith. Beautiful names for beautiful women.

"Just a pity they're vipers," he sighed to himself, finding his phone. He'd have to contact his Archon to tell her of Olivia's offer, if nothing else to get her advice on matters.

* * * *

Fajer walked onto the back deck of Xiolicia, her home since she was five years old, and frowned. This place had never felt warm or comforting, never felt like she belonged. A desert paradise, it boasted the warm and sultry colours of the sand and clays that formed the habitat, along with large, well-irrigated lawns. It was beautiful and peaceful and damn boring.

Xiolicia was a sprawling estate far from the prying eyes of civilisation. Fajer had come to live there with her father when he'd mated with her stepmother, Olivia, the ruling archon of the south-western territory, and had known only the grounds and the people therein since. She hated it. Hated being so cloistered away from the world, but what Olivia wanted, Olivia got. As Archon, her stepmother had kept her close for what she called Fajer's own good. She supposed that was correct since she was the only non-venomous snake in a nest of vipers, mambas and king snakes. Being out in the territory alone might end badly.

So aside from schooling in an uber-posh, private school in California, she'd spent all her time on the grounds of the compound, much to her dislike. School was like a tease to her. It paraded before her eyes a life she could never have and never hope for and proved to her she would never belong anywhere. Oh, she had friends there, like she had here, but she always felt like an outsider. There, because of her nature, and here for the same reason. Her crèche mates might like her, but they treated her with kid gloves. At school, she had friends, but no one she had gotten too close to. The fear was always there.

So if this place didn't feel right, and she didn't belong here, why was she freaking out now about the possibility of leaving forever? Because she wasn't really ready for what was out there, and what was waiting for her. She wasn't ready for this man her stepmother had invited to the compound, wasn't ready to seduce and be seduced.

"Fay? I think this is best for you," Olivia had said when she'd returned from Las Vegas. "He's rich and worthy of you. And he's a boa, so he isn't a threat to you," she'd said with a slight distaste.

"I don't even know him, Mima," Fajer had replied still using the name Olivia had allowed Fajer to call her since they'd met. "How am I supposed to do any of what you're telling me? And who says he will choose me? I mean you did give him choice of the girls here. What if he wants Annalissa or Meredith? Or Bitsy? They are far more beautiful than me, and a sight more interesting I daresay."

"Fay, you sell yourself short. Andy Derrell is a playboy, a lover of beauty and the exotic. He is not a masochist like his crèche mate. Reece might have married a viper, but Andy isn't completely sold on the idea of a mate he'll have to worry about in the long run. No, he might have choices, as you say, but he will choose you. You're the most logical choice."

And maybe she was, though Olivia has posed him with an option. Who was to say that, after the end of the month, he would choose any of them? And seeing as he didn't know there was a non-venomous, he might just be coming for a sex holiday. Throw in the fact that she had no idea what he looked like, and her stomach was in knots. Olivia has assured her he was attractive and worthy of her, but she couldn't take it on that. What if she found him repugnant, and he wanted her? Could she do it?

She heard the French doors open and turned to see her cousin, Ryan, walking out with two glasses of wine in his hands and a smile on his face.

"Here, for the nerves."

Fajer took the alcohol and smiled, grateful that she was close to someone in the family who could read her mood. "Thanks Ryan."

"You know this is a good thing, cousin. You don't belong here. Never did. And I understand his nest is progressive. You wouldn't have to deal with all the BS you do here."

She looked at her cousin, a stunning specimen of maleness and shook her head. "And what if I'm not attracted to him? Did anyone ever think of that? You know I want my own

choices and a life, but not at the expense of being mated to a snake I don't know and am not attracted to."

"And how do you know you won't be attracted to him? There are far too many variables in this for you to dwell on the negative. Look, the guy is going to be here a month. If nothing else, then you get some recreation out of it and, at least, see what it's like to be with someone who you don't need to have a healthy fear of." He winked and took a sip of his wine. "Now, shouldn't you be getting ready for your presenting? I heard he's going to be here before twilight."

Fajer frowned. "Presenting? Oh hell no. I'm not even going to dinner."

Ryan's eyes glittered in the late afternoon sunshine. "Oh no? Olivia's not going to be happy about that."

"Well, I won't be paraded about like cattle. If he wants to meet me, he can damn well find me. I'm not going like a lamb to the slaughter."

Ryan shrugged and finished his wine. "Suit yourself. Though, you do realise that your stepmother is going to turn into a step-monster as soon as she realises you won't be in attendance, right?"

Fajer shrugged and turned around to look across the desert landscape, sparkling in the bright light of the sun. The cactuses and Joshua trees that littered the long vision of the desert beyond stood sentinel to her turbulent mind. She didn't care how Olivia would feel. This was about her, and she wouldn't just roll over and let it happen. If Andy Derrell wasn't the knight in shining armour her stepmother claimed he would be, regardless of his decision about Fajer, she wouldn't be leaving with him at the end of the month.

Chapter Two

Olivia had sent a car for him, even providing a helpful, thug-like bodyguard to make sure he got into it. He kept his bag with him, swinging it off his shoulder as he got into the back of the silver limo. No way was he getting parted from his stuff. He'd taken off his tie and loosened a few buttons, but that was the only change he'd had time to make to his wedding attire before his new friend here had knocked on the door and all but frog-marched him down to the car lot. Andy had left most of his things, including his laptop, back at his room. He could only hope that Remy and Reece would check his room before leaving. Olivia's man climbed in after him, shutting the door. Andy thought he heard the doors lock as they pulled away and started the drive to Olivia's nest.

Nests like hers weren't high up on his list of places to visit. He'd visited a few of the other, more relaxed, nests and found that even they were too restrictive of their members. When their parents had died, he and his cousins hadn't been in his Archon Elise's territory. He'd never forget the few hellish days they'd spent at Ramona's nest before Elise could drive up and get them. Ramona was a spiteful bitter woman who'd enjoyed parading her 'happy' family in front of three, newly orphaned boys. They had pitied them, trying to replace the boys' parents, cooing about how they understood but they had to move on. For the most part, Reece had been too young and confused. Remy had been the quietest he'd ever seen him. Andy had taken it all in though, as the oldest it was his burden to carry.

He'd always been grateful that Elise had taken them in after the accident. Though he doubted it had ever entered his Archon's mind not to, Elise just wasn't the type of woman to turn anyone away. It had crossed his mind a few times that she was going to leave them there. They'd barely known Elise then, but still she came through, taking them home and offering them comfort and a loving home, not a replacement mother. That was the reason she was the best Archon around, not because she demanded respect like Olivia, but because she'd earned it. She earned his respect with everything she did, especially with the patience she had for his younger more troublesome cousins and maybe for her blind eye to some of the more questionable things he did.

Running his hand through his hair, Andy growled under his breath. Vipers. Why did it have to be vipers? And in the desert, no less. He had better things to do with his time off than getting himself strong-armed into shotgun mating in a viper den. Shit, he'd rather go back to work than play Manson family with Olivia and her nest. His clients tended towards the scary, but at least, they all needed something from him. He snorted a wry laugh. Oh, Olivia wanted something from him all right.

He should have, at least, told Remy and Reece where he was going. He rummaged in his bag 'til he found his phone then unlocked it. There wasn't much charge left, but it was enough to make the call. His 'friend' opposite him glared as the light shone in the darkness.

He thumbed through the phone book 'til he found Elise's private number and dialled then held the phone to his ear.

Elise answered minutes later with a slight chuckle. "Andrew love, tell me they didn't torture you, too. Remy called a while ago and told me Chrissy is pissed about the Elvis get up. Reece swore he wouldn't do that. How was the wedding? Are they all behaving?"

"I wouldn't know, but I doubt it very much. I told Chrissy what to expect. It's her own fault for believing Reece. I thought that she'd have figured out his lies by now." When his cousin's mouth was open it meant some kind of lie was coming out.

"Now Andy..." Elise chided then sighed. "Never mind. So why don't I hear them about? Did you sneak off finally? I know they can grate on the nerves, but they are family, and they love you. Tell me, did Carmen look lovely in her dress?"

"She looked stunning, if out of place next to Elvis. The little viper scrubs up well." Remembering his company, he cleared his throat. "As for my location, I've sort of been kidnapped – not in a work capacity," he rushed into reassure her.

"Kidnapped? Andrew what are you talking about, darling?" she asked as if she was only partially paying attention.

"Kidnapped. Snake-napped. Taken against my will... Stolen..."

Elise gave a gasp. "What? Andrew explain yourself this instant! What the hell is going on?"

"Olivia gave me an offer I couldn't refuse. Literally." He glared at the other snake.

"Olivia? What the..." Elise trailed off with an explicit curse Andrew frowned at hearing. "What did the Viper queen want? She has no right trying to command any under my protection! Who the hell does that bitch think she is?"

"Some kind of matchmaker by the sound of it."

"Son of a..." She trailed off again. "Okay, what exactly did she offer you? You know you have the right to refuse."

"She wants me to mate one of her girls. Flashed me a picture and promised me a whole lot of fun. I'm only male, you know. Refusing wasn't really an option..." He frowned at his words, wondering if he could have tried a little harder to say no. "Besides I ain't Reece. The thought of a viper bite doesn't get me all hot and bothered."

"I know. Be careful, Andrew. If you get hurt... Well, wars have started for less. I won't have your life endangered for a piece of tail. How long will you be gone?"

"A week, hopefully less, with a bit of luck she'll get bored and send me packing. Don't worry Elise, she wouldn't risk one of those hellish meetings you guys all have by killing me."

"Let's hope not. I want an update in three days, Andrew. I don't trust her."

"Nor do I. You know you can't trust anything venomous. My phone's running out of charge. I'll try and get charger there, else wise I'll contact you from there. They're bound to have land lines, right?"

"Yes, by all accounts, Xiolicia is very state of the art. Just be careful."

"I'm all about careful." The car started to slow, and his tension spiked. "I've left most of my things at the hotel. Any chance you could get Remy or Chrissy to swing by my room and pick it up?"

"Of course, Andrew. I'll call Remy right now. Be safe, okay? And remember, those bitches bite."

"Like I could forget."

"Indeed. Love you." She hung up, and the car slowed to a stop. The door opened and his companion smirked at him then got out without giving him another glance, leaving the door open to the heat beyond.

"Well," Andy said to himself, his gut rolling. "Guess that's my cue." He grabbed his bag, got out of the limo then stretched in the boiling sun. On the bright side, at least, the heat called to his snake, though he could have done with a bit more humidity.

A large man stood at the front door with a self-satisfied smirk on his face as he leaned on the door jam, his legs crossed at the ankle. The perky blonde from the photo stood there as well, smiling at him, the top button of her cut off shorts undone.

"Guess I'm expected." He looked them both over, keeping his distance, the heavy weight of his bag grounding him. "What happened to Olivia?" He managed not to sneer at the viper's name—just barely. He worked with creatures worse than her, and he knew how to play the game and keep his cool, but something about this just rubbed him the wrong way. It wasn't just about her coming to him, but the fact that she could just pass around her females like a fanged pimp. Elise would never dream of such a thing.

The male pushed off the door and shrugged. "Late day siesta with Marco. Be happy their rooms are soundproof. You must be Andrew. I'm Ryan," he said and offered his hand. "This is Bitsy. Welcome to the compound." He smiled, and the girl looked Andy over like he was a steak.

"Call me Andy." He cautiously took Ryan's hand, shaking it. There was little doubt that both of the snakes were venomous, not to mention that it was well-known that Olivia's nest were firmly military. It was a safe bet that Ryan had some sort of service background. "Bitsy." He smiled, turning to her. Her leering made him distinctly uncomfortable. He already knew he wouldn't be spending much time with her. She wasn't his type.

"Andy, then," Ryan said. "Well, you're here in time for dinner, which is good. You'll get to meet everyone. Come on. We'll get you all set up. You want a beer?" He turned and walked into the large house.

Bitsy smiled at Andy, winked and sauntered off to the left, her ass swaying seductively.

Ryan shook his head. "Bitsy, if you ain't selling it, you shouldn't be putting it out there like that." He turned to Andrew. "Sorry about her. She thinks she's the cat's ass."

"I'm sure she does just fine." Andy felt the tension ease out of his shoulders as she walked out of sight. "A beer's never sounded so great. I guess getting snake-napped does that to a person."

"Yeah, that's a good way of putting it. Come on. Drop your bag there. The housekeeper will bring it up to your room. Kitchen is through here..." They walked through the house and ended up in a large kitchen. Ryan went to the fridge, picked up two bottles of imported beer and motioned for Andy to follow out and into the next room which was a solarium, complete with a few trees and a several tranquillity waterfalls. Ryan sat on a rattan couch and motioned for Andy to take the seat across from him, handing him the bottle.

"Cheers," Andy said taking the bottle and screwing it open. He tipped it to his lips, drinking down the crisp cold beer. "So, you sign up to be the welcoming committee?"

"Kinda. I had to see what was coming, you know? So which one of them got you out here?"

"Which one? I take it you're not meaning Olivia. I'm not sure really..." He shook his head. It was a question he'd asked himself. "I'm not looking for a mate, or anything permanent. I'm only here because Olivia got testy." Yet that wasn't quite true. He knew full well he could negotiate himself out of just about anything, so why had he decided to go along with her snake-napping plans?

"Really? She showed you that picture, didn't she? And I know it wasn't dear Bitsy or you would have been salivating with her blatant sexual come on," Ryan said and took a swig from the bottle.

"No. There was no picture of your Archon, thank the lord. Though I don't think I needed that mental image at all." His thought made him shudder. "I'm not the type of guy to go for blatant sexual come-ons. That's just not my thing."

Ryan laughed. "I meant the picture of the girls here. Merry, Bitsy, Annalissa and Fajer, the fabulous four."

"Oh...that one. Yeah, I saw it. They were all very..." He struggled for a word.

"Very?" Ryan smirked and arched a brow

"Interesting." And there was one in particular who was interesting. The last one, Fajer, the one who'd caught his eye. The one who wouldn't get out of his head.

"That's one way of putting it. I assume she wants you to get to know them each in turn?"

"I guess, though the less time I spend with Bitsy the better. Is that really her name?"

"Her real name is Bernice. What would you rather be called?" Ryan shook his head. "She's a sweet girl once you make it clear you're not interested in her 'round the world. Smart, too. She's one of those girls who looks stupid but is calculating as hell. Like my little sister, Anya." He whistled. "Lucky she wasn't on the menu. Girl might eat you alive. So Bits is out?"

"Pretty sure of it. I don't want to be eaten alive."

"Yeah." He chuckled. "And the others? Well, I'm sure you'll meet most of them tonight at dinner," he said and took another sip.

"That's the point of it. So what are the girls like? Any bunny boilers? Not that I'm looking for a mate. It's the last thing from my mind. But then, if I've got to stay here for a week. I may as well enjoy myself."

"They all have their pros and cons. Annalissa is a stunning creature, if a bit timid. Merry, well...she's interesting because of her quirks. And Fajer...well, that I'll leave you to find out. She's a firecracker."

"And beautiful, too," Andy said thoughtfully, mostly to himself

"That she is, though she's not going to be easy to deal with." Ryan took another swig, finishing his beer. "And she won't be at dinner."

"No?" Andy looked up at him "Why not?"

"Because she, and I quote 'will not be paraded like cattle'. So she's defying her stepmother's decree."

"Glad to see someone is." He grinned, the urge to meet her doubling. "Olivia's her stepmother?"

Ryan nodded. "Yep. Marco was married to Loretta before Olivia, which was just hella drama—but listen to me rambling on about the soap opera we have here in the west. I think it's about time for dinner, or will be soon. It's almost seven, and you will learn, everything here happens quite promptly."

"I'm sure," Andy quipped, rolling his eyes as Ryan led him into a huge dining hall.

Over the next hour, he learned that prompt was the understatement of the century. Everyone sat down at the same time, and the girls all introduced themselves—all but Ryan's sister, who was elsewhere, and the elusive, protesting Fajer. Olivia had introduced him then set them loose on him with relish.

Bitsy preened throughout the whole dinner, managing to steal the open seat next to him. She spent the whole dinner trying to touch him, grinding herself into him at every opportunity. Still Ryan was right. There did seem to be more to her than her blatant sexual advances. Andy had to wonder if she was putting him off on purpose. Ryan was right enough about her being cleverer than she made out.

Annalissa, true to Ryan's word, hardly said a word to him, tending towards the terminally shy, though, with her being the youngest, it didn't surprise him. It was so easy for the baby of a strong-minded family to fall between the cracks if no one's looking out for them. They'd always taken care not to overburden Reece, though Andy strongly suspected

that had done the smartass more harm than good. He'd tried to talk to her, but after a few minutes of forcing conversation out of her, he gave up. The wounded look on her face told him to leave her alone, and he could do nothing but obey. She was a sad case, but not one he was willing to take on. She probably knew it, too.

Merry was an anomaly. A woman interested in the genome project, she looked like a fashion plate while sitting there. Perfect makeup, perfect lines on her clothes and when she opened her mouth, Andy had thought she would sound like the rest of the disaffected, country-club wenches he knew. Instead, she belted out jargon that had little to do with a life of leisure. Curious.

Dinner was good, not as good as the meals at Knossos, but it went down well, especially since he hadn't eaten since breakfast. Once everyone had finished eating, and they'd ran out of polite conversation, Ryan brought him another beer and motioned for them to leave. By now, Andy was beginning to get the feel for the place. Although it was a nest of vipers, Olivia was the only real vicious one so far that he'd met.

"So? Bitsy touch anything? I saw her determination to cop a feel."

"She came close to a few things but stopped shy. I doubt she really wants to go there. Looks like Fajer isn't the only one protesting."

"Don't get me wrong. Bitsy would end up in your room tonight if she didn't know she would have to leave here with you if you took a shine to her. She likes it here, always has, but then she's a king snake, and they love the dry arid desert."

"I wouldn't force anyone to leave with me. Every time I tried to talk to her, Annalissa looked like I'd ran over her puppy then reversed over it."

"She's...well, she's a sad soul recently. She lost her brother on an op in South America about three weeks ago. She's normally not so sad." Ryan sighed. "I guess it was Aunt Liv's way of trying to cheer her up."

"Didn't work. Jesus Christ." Andy ran his hands through his hair. "As if our kind don't have enough problems, we don't need to be off dying on missions."

"Believe me, it was news to us. The mission was simple recon, checking on some interests we had down south. It was the guerrillas." Ryan shrugged. "So that's two for two..."

"Two for two?" Andy asked not understanding.

"Anna and Bitsy...out of the four," Ryan said, dismissing their present line of conversation.

"Yeah, well almost. Merry's nice, but she only has two interests, and I can't imagine them being further from mine."

"Yeah, Merry has her own set of issues, but she's wonderful in the sack." He winked. "So that just leaves Fajer, eh? Funny how that happened."

"Funny?" Andy asked, Ryan's tone instantly putting him on guard despite his fifth beer. "And why would that be?"

Ryan shrugged. "She's the best choice for you. It's just interesting that you came to the conclusion on your own."

"I haven't come to any conclusions. I don't want a mate."

"Yeah, you say that, yet we're sitting here and you're extremely curious about Fajer, aren't you?"

"A little, I have to admit, but..." Andy sighed, struggling for words. "I don't know. I shouldn't be here. I could have refused Olivia." He should have but he hadn't. For some reason he just couldn't. "What's she like?"

"Fajer? Fantastic. She's smart, sexy, driven—you should see for yourself." Ryan smiled. "And I happen to know where she is."

"If she's so great, why don't you mate her?"

"Two reasons. One she's like my little sister, and two, I like my sex with the possibility of danger. No venom, no danger."

"No venom?"

Ryan took a sip of his beer and shook his head. "Nope. None. Which is interesting, isn't it?" His eyes glittered with slight drunkenness and mirth.

"So what is she then? I thought everyone here had venom. It's kind of your thing, isn't it?"

"Fajer is special. Remember that soap opera that was Fajer's parents? Momma was a reti, and as it goes, so is Fajer."

"Interesting." Andy finished his beer, his snake screaming for more information on the girl. "So where is she? You said you knew where she was."

Ryan smirked. "Top of the stairs, to the left. Last door. And you can thank me in the morning." He stood. "Your room should be close by, as well. I'm sure you'll find it." Ryan sniggered and walked from the room, leaving Andy alone.

He set down his empty beer and stood with a little more effort than it should have taken. Great. Five beers and he was staggering around, just what he needed. His cousins would brand him a lightweight. He wasn't exactly a drinking man, but with his snake's metabolism, he should have been able to take a little more than five. He walked to the stairs taking his time to walk in a straight line. It wouldn't do to get picked off before meeting Fajer. He followed Ryan's directions, but he didn't need them. All he had to do was follow the scent that had been bothering him since he'd arrived earlier. It was the sweet scent of lilies mixed with something more exotic he couldn't place. It had his snake coiling in delight one moment then striking in urgency the next.

Somewhere, at the back of his mind, he knew chasing after her like this was a bad idea. It wasn't the way he liked to go about things. He was always a careful man. A measure twice cut once type of man. This wasn't careful or well-measured, but his snake didn't care, and as he knocked on her door enveloped in her scent, neither did he.

The door opened to the vision of perfection, misty with half-mast eyes and glistening pouty lips. "Anya I..." She opened her eyes completely then frowned. "You're not Anya."

"And this isn't my room." He smiled at the beauty in front of him. "You were missed at dinner."

Realisation dawned on her, and she blushed slightly then sobered. "I was?"

"Your housemates leave much to be desired in the way of conversation, I'm afraid, though Ryan did do his part to rescue me. I'm Andy." He held his hand out to her.

She took it and smiled. "So I suppose you want to come in, then?"

"If I'm welcome." His head spun a little as he held her hand. "It might be a better idea for me to head to my room though...if you know where it is?"

Fajer nodded. "Of course." She walked out a little bit and pointed three doors down to the right. "Over there."

"Thank you." He leant against the wall unwilling to leave the shelter of her scent. "So, do you think there's any chance you'll be out and about tomorrow?"

"Never can tell." She grinned. "Why? Would you like me to be?" She cocked her head. "If we are going to talk, you should just come in." She moved from the door and deeper into the room then stretched, doing a half backbend near the bed.

He suppressed a groan as his cock stiffened. Leashing his snake and instincts tightly, he stepped into her room. "I would. Like you to be out and about, that is. The others are off-putting, and you smell so enchanting." Had he said that last part or just thought it? Andy frowned sitting on the edge of her bed.

Fajer turned to him and smirked "Oh yeah? And how's that?" She stretched forward and placed her palms flat on the floor before her.

He watched her for several seconds then blinked. "You can't ask me to form a sentence then do that?"

"Huh?" she frowned and looked over at him.

"The bending." He pointed. "It's distracting."

"Really? Oh, I'm sorry. I'm getting ready for my evening run."

"Nothing to apologise about. I'm rather enjoying it. Just don't expect anything sensible out of me."

"Noted." She smiled and did a few more stretches. "So tell me about what you said, my scent?"

"Your scent?" He winced, so he *had* said it out aloud. "It's very alluring. Sweet and sexy. Something a man could roll around in enjoying 'til the end of time."

She blushed and smiled. "That was unexpected. I'll have to remember that." She looked over at the clock and sighed. "So? Do I make the first cut? 'Cause, I do have a schedule to keep."

"There's no cut. Merry's obsessed with her work, Annalissa looks at me like I'm a serial killer, and quite frankly, Bitsy scares me. There's no cut, love. Just you." He stood. "But I'd hate to mess with your schedule." He lifted her hand, turning it to lay a soft kiss on the inside of her palm. "Enjoy your run."

"Just me, huh? Prove it, then, Andy. That kiss on my palm is not the action of a guy interested in a girl," she said and turned completely to him, daring him to act.

He smiled wickedly. This was what he'd been waiting for—just an inch of permission. He felt his eyes shift, knowing they'd turned to the silver-grey of his snake as he gave into his urges. He reached for her, pulling her against him as he kissed her passionately.

Fajer stiffened in surprise but quickly melted against him, whimpering into his mouth. The kiss was epic, and she rubbed against him and moaned as his hands skimmed down her torso and moulded to her ass in her running pants.

He lifted her easily, sitting her on her nightstand and wrapping her legs around him.

She's wiggled against him, pressing her body close to his and ghosted her fingers down his arms, her end of the kissing becoming more aggressive.

He matched her aggressiveness, slipping a hand up under her shirt and stroking the silky, hot flesh beneath.

She groaned and broke the kiss, her eyes a sexy shade of silver and violet, the mirror of a reticulated python.

"Beautiful," he said, breathlessly kissing the upturned corner of her mouth.

She nipped his lip and cocked her head. "Oh yeah? Well, I can't say you're all talk now, can I?" She frowned as he pulled away.

"At least not until you've heard me talk when Ryan hasn't been pouring beer down my throat all night." He smiled at her.

"I hope you won't consider this a bad idea once you're sober, Andy," she said softly and stood from her perch and sighed.

"Same to you, but I doubt that very much. I guess I should go."

"Umm...maybe you should." She bit her bottom lip. "Though, I'm sure you can persuade me to forget my run."

He gritted his teeth as he shook his head. "I know I'll regret saying this in five or so minutes, but I better not. I doubt I'd do you the justice you deserve right now."

"Well that's honest. Enjoy your evening, Andy."

"I'm an honest guy. How about we do something tomorrow? I'm not sure what there is around here to do. Maybe lunch? "

Fajer nodded. "If you can tear yourself away, or you can find me."

"I'll find you. Don't worry about that. So I'll find you, and we'll have lunch." He opened her door, looking back at her.

"Sleep well, Andrew. You could be sleeping with me." She winked.

"And I'm an idiot for not..." He grinned. "I told you I'd regret being gentlemanly. I'll see you then." He left the room, locating his own and finding his bed.

Chapter Three

The next evening Fajer sat on her balcony and took a sip of the crisp Riesling she had liberated from the downstairs cellar and sighed. Fajer had had a good talking to from her stepmother about not making dinner the first night. Fajer had mentioned that she and Andy indeed had met, and that had placated the Archon, but only on the assurance that Fajer would be accessible the rest of his stay. Where the hell was Anya when she needed her? No doubt out with some strapping, sexy snake and getting a wild ride. Anya always had the best stories when she came home from prowling, and always had the best and rather lurid pictures in her camera phone of the men she always called conquests.

Fajer wished she could be as free with her body and attentions as Anya was, but she just wasn't built that way. Maybe that was why she was having so many problems with this situation. Andy Derrell was a fine specimen of virile snake, but she couldn't just hop into bed with a man she didn't even know, regardless of what her snake thought. True, she had all but thrown herself at him, but she was blaming that solely on her snake. If she didn't, she would have to acknowledge the fact that the first impression of the man was just as appealing as the snake that shared him. It might be true, but she was never one to just go with her baser needs. But she knew if she got to know him too well before they were lovers, he would end up as Ryan was to her—a dear, wonderful friend she could count on.

So she was stuck. When to take it further, if she was going to? Who was she kidding? He was a great choice for her, rich, sexy, interesting and *sans* venom. Olivia had chosen well, but...

She couldn't bring herself to hope he could care about her, as well. But after that kiss...

She shuddered and licked her lips as her body flooded with the feelings he'd evoked when he'd taken that liberty, met her dare face to face, an action so small to so many. Andy Derrell could kiss the piety off an angel. Surely, he made her resolve falter.

At the memory, her snake coiled in pleasure. She liked him, and she wanted him. Well, so did Fajer. She shook her head and took another sip of her wine then swirled the wine in her glass, watching the pale liquid glitter in the property lights surrounding the house.

The night air was cool, as it always was in the desert, but it wasn't late enough for all the heat to be sucked from the landscape. She loved this time of day, when it was not wretchedly hot but not biting cold. Comfortable. She laid her head back against her Adirondack chair and sighed, her mind awash with issues and concerns and hopes for the future. A future with Andy Derrell, but only if things worked out.

Knuckles wrapped lightly on the door. "Fay?" Anya's musical voice called her name from the other side. "You're not brooding are you?"

Fajer smiled to herself. "I wouldn't call it brooding. Where the hell have you been, and who have you been doing?"

"You're going to have to open up to find out. I got my phone fully loaded, too. You should see the size of him. I think I've found the one or the one right now, at least." She giggled to herself. "Okay, maybe I found Mr. Last Night and All Day. Come on and let me in before big brother finds me."

Fajer laughed and got up, going to the door, and opened it, smirking. "I'm glad someone had a raucous day."

"Oh yeah?" Anya grinned stumbling through the door and hugging her. "And you didn't?"

"Not anywhere close. So who was he?"

"Mmm..." She brightened, flowing over to the balcony and perching on the edge. "His name was Rob—a Jaguar or a Leopard or something feline." She gave a dreamy, satisfied smile. "Unparalleled stamina."

"Better than Evan? You mooned over Evan for weeks."

"Evan?" She frowned, trying to place the name. "Ah, yeah, him. Oh, he was amazing. He was a snake though." She wrinkled her nose. "There's always something to be said for an illicit, hard fuck with a cat. It's knowing Olivia would explode if she found out. And Captain strait-laced would just about break his stiff-necked goody routine if he even suspected."

"Now Anya, Ryan means well. He's trying to look out for you. He does love you very much." She sighed and offered Anya a glass of wine.

"I know he does, and I love my big brother, too." She took her glass looking into it. "I just hate what that needy shrew's made him into. Thank God, she's our mother's sister, or she'd have studded him out to one of her viperous slut children."

Fajer nearly spit her wine across the balcony. "You're talking about my stepsisters, you know."

"Yeah, no offence. You're more of a sister to me than to them. Besides I'm a little loose, I guess, and viperous, so it's a little pot-kettle thing. But still, they ever touched my brother, and I'd kill them. You know that scheming bitch only keeps my brother and I around because we're going to birth little lacky vipers she can push around and control. No doubt she's pairing him off on someone already," Anya mused. "I'd rather be rogue than under her pushy controlling fingers, let alone birth her children. Maybe I should invite Rob here for the weekend? See if we can kill her off with shock?"

"Or kill your kitty with a surprise attack of venom. No, I think it's best if you don't even bother. So? Did you happen to see our houseguest when you sauntered up the stairs?"

"Guest?" Anya shook her head. "We have a guest? Do they know this place is practically the Hotel California?"

"Did you forget about Mr. Derrell?" Fajer asked and frowned. She couldn't forget about him. Why should Anya be allowed the luxury?

"Mr. Derrell?" Anya looked lost. "Umm... Is this something Aunt Liv told me about? That I don't listen to her should be obvious by now. Is this why dinner was so important? I skipped it to piss off the witch...plus there was the kitty." She sat up straighter, sipping her wine. "So who is Mr. Derrell? And why has he got you in such a tizzy?"

"So wait. You skipped out on dinner last night...and I did... Olivia invited a snake from back east to the compound for a while. To audition mates."

"Mates?" Anya's eyes widened. "Wow...that's something."

"Yeah. I would say so. It's her way of getting rid of me, even though she's given him choice of four of us. She thinks he's going to choose me."

"That's great." She grinned. "You can finally get out of this hell hole. What's he like? Hot?"

Fajer tried to give a noncommittal shrug. "I'm not sure. I hid from him, didn't do dinner, yet he happened to find me, here of all places. I was getting ready for my evening run. And yes, he's very attractive, but I'm not getting my hopes up."

"Any man with a lick of intelligence can see you're the best Olivia has to offer. All it'll take is one conversation, and he'll be drooling at your heels—or anywhere else you want him to."

"Yet, after that kiss last night, he spent his day avoiding me," Fajer mumbled and took another sip of her wine.

"A kiss?" Anya leered. "Ooh, you didn't say that. Spill. Was it good? Warm? Wet? Did he get any under the top action?"

Fajer chuckled and shook her head. "It was just a kiss." A toe curling, mind-blowing kiss. "And I don't think it meant anything to him. I was just the last he'd laid lips on that night. I don't know. All I do know is he's got a great voice and a firm yet gentle kiss."

"Hmm...and has he kissed any of the others since? You can tell a lot by a kiss, you know. At least, it wasn't sloppy and ham-handed like that brute Peter."

"Peter didn't have finesse, but he was thoughtful. I don't know if Andrew's kissed anyone since, but he's been quite involved with the girls, that's for damn sure. He doesn't seem like the kinda guy who would flaunt his sex in public."

"All the more reason for him to want you. You can't avoid him and get the results you want. You need to be in his face, otherwise he'll think you're not interested, and men don't like to risk their egos."

"True, but I'm not going to chase after him. Last I saw after dinner tonight, Meredith took him for a walk." She groaned. "Which is why I'm here with you."

"Well, that's no fun at all. You want me to feel him out for you?"

Fajer frowned. "No, that won't be necessary. If he wants me, he will find me."

Chapter Four

Olivia had run the household ragged for the next day, with plans and such so Fajer was still on the outs of being as available as Olivia wanted. While the softball game did present some opportunities, she just wasn't a public fighter, though the talk with Anya had opened her eyes. Since Andrew had other plans than seeking her out last night, Fajer knew she would have to step things up if she was going to keep his interest and satisfy her stepmother and not get another reprimand. The last thing she needed was for him to pick one of the other girls, especially after she'd let him kiss her, dared him to, actually. So Olivia said to be available. There wasn't a shot in hell she wouldn't be. Andrew was the most interesting thing that had happened at the compound in ages, and she would be damned if he was going to choose someone over her.

The heat of the day was thankfully broken up by cloud cover and gave everyone at Xiolicia a reason to spend time outside. Sunshine peeked out of the clouds from time to time, warming the cooler air, reminding the inhabitants that days like this were a gift.

Ryan had declared that it was a perfect day for a barbecue and that the entire house needed the relaxed kind of meal. Fajer was all for it, looking forward to a lazy day drinking and eating with everyone, especially their guest. Andy had become an easy fixture within the compound, winning the respect and hearts of everyone from Ryan right down to her father. All the girls were enamoured of him and flirted, good-naturedly, but didn't press him for anything physical, at least not in public. Times like last evening, when he was nowhere to be found, well, they were a different matter.

Fajer was on her knees filling an oversized cooler with ice and beer, alternating so that nothing was left out to skunk in the mild heat of the day.

Ryan walked over to Fajer and placed another twelve pack of beer at her feet. "Good idea, right?" he asked and cracked open a Dos Equis.

"Hell of a good idea. What's on the menu?"

"The usual. Ribs, some porterhouses, burgers, some chicken, and Archon asked for sea bass, too...and the usual veggies and such. You know how Anya loves her Portobello burgers." He grinned and took a swig of his beer.

"Indeed. I know my father is glad that Olivia put in the giant grill over the winter holidays. We need it to handle the amount of food everyone eats. So aside from the grill, what else?"

"Anya is in the kitchen right now with Meredith making macaroni salad, cucumber salad and a Caesar salad."

"Alone? And just where is the houseguest? Or is he still with Bitsy?" she asked with a little pout.

"Fay, hon, you need to fight for him if you want him."

Fajer knew that, and agreed with it, but she wasn't above playing hard to get.

As if he'd heard them, Andy appeared, a glass of wine casually in hand. He saw them both and headed over to them. "Ryan, I don't suppose you'd have a charger for this phone lying around?" He pulled out his phone. "It's dead, and I didn't grab mine."

Ryan took the phone out of his hands and looked at it. "Yeah, I think so. Marco has pretty much every electronic accessory known to man in his man cave." He grinned. "You got a hot date you need to call?"

"Nothing like that. I'm on holiday, but I have some clients who just don't take no for an answer. I'm miles away from my laptop, and if they can't get a hold of me, they're going to start getting twitchy." He smiled. "Trust me when I say the last thing anyone needs is one of them showing up."

"I'll take your word for it. I'll get this hooked up." He winked and walked off with beer and phone in his hand. Fajer smiled up at Andy and popped open a Corona. "So what kinda people do you work with that get 'twitchy'?" she asked and stood to her full height slowly, moving sensually as she did.

"The kind that make your Archon and everyone in this nest look like puppy dogs." He flashed her a serious look. "So I missed you for lunch. I seem to be doing that a lot."

"No sweat. I'm sure you have been busy." She smiled and took a sip of her beer. "Are you enjoying your stay so far? Getting treated well?"

"Better than I expected. I haven't been bitten or beaten up yet. Plus the food's not so bad. It's kind of like home, but we don't have the iron fist. You're stepmother's quite something."

"She's something all right." Fajer giggled, shook out her head and rubbed her left hand on her daisy dukes. "My dad and Ryan are our big grill chefs, so if you can think of it, it's going to be made."

"Sounds interesting. Back home BBQ's never end well, at least not for whoever gets left to tidy. Normally, Elise makes whoever started throwing burgers do it. So for the most part it's my cousins who get stuck with clean up. How about here? I can't imagine dinner time ever ending in a general, all-round ruckus."

"No, things here are pretty subdued. Kinda has to be when everyone has venom and a volatile nature. Didn't you notice all the lavender in pots around the place? Liv likes to keep the compound serene."

"And it certainly is. I guess messing around with venom isn't too safe. Surely, they have some sort of immunity to it though?"

She shook her head. "Nope. It's one of the things Merry is working on now. Immunity to your own species, yes, but we have mambas, vipers, king snakes, cobras and corals here. Lot of venom to go around." She shuddered.

"Not so appealing." He shared her look. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?" she asked, confused.

"Live with them." He looked away. "Sorry if it's too personal, but you're a stronger person than me. I couldn't live my life here."

"No, it's okay. I don't have much choice, I'm afraid. Dad is a king snake, and since mum passed on..." She shrugged.

"There's always a choice. It's hard making it though. I know that."

"No, no, there isn't. Like you said, Olivia rules here. She felt I was safest here close to her and my father."

"Safe?" He looked around. "That's a joke, but yeah, I'd hate to be the one going against her wishes. So what is it you do when you're not showing up for dinner and going to late night runs?"

"Now? Not much. After school, well, after high school, I came back here, took some courses on sociology through distance learning." She shrugged. "I wanted to work with orphans—our orphans, the ones who have no family—placing them in the right nests, so they would have a good chance at being loved and cared for. Seeing as the nests themselves

don't actually keep tabs unless the family was already a member and active, it was kinda fruitless. So I'm at that crossroads, I guess." She took another sip.

"That's a nice thing to want. You should meet my Archon. She'd be really interested in what you just told me. I know a lot of the other Archons look down on her for the work she does with rogues and orphans, but it's worthwhile, and it brings a peace to our nest that you'd be hard pushed to find at any of the others. Though we don't have nice lavender pots everywhere." He smiled wryly.

Fajer smiled. "See that's something. I like hearing that at least one nest in the country does something for the lost and lonely. The lavender, well..." She gave him a grin.

"I'm sure she believes it works. Seriously though, when I get out of here and back home, it's going to linger."

"Of course. It's what lavender does. It lingers." Fajer moved over to the Adirondack chair close to the lawn and sat. Her father walked out, and saw them, smiled and started the grill. Ryan came out behind him with a huge tray of meats.

"Andy? It's all set up in your room man. Should be about a half hour 'til you can use it."

"Great, thanks. Looks good." He motioned to the meat.

"Hope your hungry, Andrew," Marco said and laid some burgers and sea bass on the grill. Bitsy and Merry walked out with Anya and Olivia carrying bowls of salads. Bitsy placed hers on the long table then sauntered over to Andrew, wrapping her arm around him. "Hey, killer? Wanna go for a stroll? I got something I wanna show you."

Andy smiled brightly down at her, the smile not reaching his eyes. "Something good, I hope?"

Bitsy smirked then gave a triumphant look to Fajer. "Oh, I guarantee it. Come on." She took his hand. "Though I can't guarantee we'll be back for eats." She turned back to Fajer and stuck out her tongue, to which Fajer arched a brow.

"Oh come on, Bits," Anya drawled, a highball glass full of wine in one hand and a half drunk bottle in the other. "Leave off it. Stop scaring the poor man—though it would be fun to see what good things you've got to show him, 'cause baby I've seen it all and it ain't all that good."

Fajer shook her head.

Bitsy turned to Anya. "Wanna play too, Anya? You know it could be fun."

"If I wanted to, I would have by now. He's not my type, and you ain't his. Seriously sweetie, back before eats? When has a man ever been longer than ten minutes with you? You'd be back before my brother's flipped the first burger. Guess that's what happens when you're an easy lay."

Fajer was used to Anya's venom towards Bitsy, but never because of her, and she knew that Anya was defending Fajer's claim on the sexy snake from back east. Bitsy was not to be swayed. "Anya, I'm every guy's type."

Anya laughed, roaring as wine sloshed out of her glass. "Oh honey, that was good. Say it again. I guess, though, you are, in a way. You're cheap, and you open your legs faster than a whore with a hundred note stuck up her ass. Men love spunking up sluts, but they wouldn't take one home to meet mommy. You're like free porn to them. They don't exactly mark you down on their fav list, do they? You're just something to do. Andy here has class. You don't."

Olivia took this moment to weigh in. "Enough!" she shouted and narrowed her eyes at them both. "Little vipers! Listen to you both. I don't know when the last time..."

Fajer stopped listening as she got up from her seat and caught Andrew's eye, motioning for him to follow her.

"Very close call," Andy said as he caught up with her, looking relieved.

"Anya has a way of bringing the ruckus. I'm glad she did, though." She walked to the right lawn and climbed the steps into a roughly hewn gazebo.

"As am I," he chuckled. "She does have a way with words."

"Anya spews venom better with her words than her fangs, that's for damn sure. So..." She turned to face him. "Since we missed lunch, why don't we try again?"

"Perfect idea. What would you like?"

She smiled and moved closer. "Well, you know how I like an evening run? After, I sometimes take a spin in the pool then relax in the hot tub. If you're so inclined, I would love some company."

"I think that could easily be arranged." He smiled at her.

She bit her bottom lip. "Well that's all I can ask then, isn't it. We should get back, or we might go hungry. They're all vultures when daddy cooks." She winked. "And you might need your strength." She leaned in and nuzzled his nose with her own.

He lifted his head, capturing her lips in a chaste kiss. "You think it's safe yet?"

She licked his mouth with her tongue sweetly. "Haven't you figured it out yet that it's rarely safe here? Come on, hottie."

Chapter Five

The water was cool on her overheated body and enveloped her in its lulling caress as she moved through it after her dive. She broke the surface and took a breath, her pores and person feeling refreshed. Her run had been satisfying but turbulent, as her mind was awash with thoughts of her would-be suitor. Andy had sought her out, asked Ryan about her and spoken with her father about her too, but he'd also been ensconced with Anya several times, and Anya wasn't talking about what had happened.

She supposed she should feel good knowing she was jealous as hell that he was indeed taking her aunt's advice and seeing what was out there by way of the female members of Xiolicia, but he was hers damn it! He was here to fall for her and take her from here—no one else, only her. Her thoughts did scare her a bit. She didn't like how attached she was already to the sexy snake that invaded her thoughts night and day. Her snake on the other hand wasn't as understanding. No, Andy was already hers, she responded to him, and she had already claimed him in her own head. Fajer felt her snake seethe when he was with another female, and she was seething now. She had offered an invitation to meet her here after her run, and he was late. Where was he? Who was he with?

She swam to the caved grotto, an enclosed portion of the pool that was about four feet deep and contained a hot tub further back, then entered the hidden expanse, sighing at the slightly humid air that greeted her. No one was around, hell no one was even up at this time of night, so she took the chance and peeled off her bathing suit, thrilled as the air kissed her nipples. She needed to relax, to ponder, and she always did it best naked.

She waded through the water as it licked and kissed at her nipples while she moved, and the feeling thrilled her. She loved the fluidity of the water, the way it comforted her, made her feel secure. Much like she wanted the man she mated with to make her feel. Could Andy do this forever? It was worth a ponder.

She made it to the small wall that partitioned the hot tub from the pool proper, levered herself out of the water and laid down across the ledge, one leg up, the other lazily hanging in the pool. She rested her hands on her flat stomach and closed her eyes, breathing slowly, centring herself.

The air felt good on her body, a teasing caress as she remembered Andy's kiss, his accosting of her in the hall where he kissed and nibbled at her naked shoulder, earlier in the night. When he would give her those heart stopping smiles when he didn't think anyone was looking. She remembered his eyes, how they held her as she moved, how they'd conveyed how interested both he and his snake were.

She wished she could meet his snake. Hers was just as intrigued with his and needed to see if they meshed. Well, that wouldn't happen if Andy didn't commit to wooing her. Which he hadn't done yet. Oh sure, he liked her, teased her, but damn it, where was he now?

She sighed and opened her eyes. Mooning over him was not how she wanted to spend the quiet hours of the night, not when he could be here with her. How she really wanted to spend the quiet hours involved a large bed, silk sheets and Andy beneath her as she rode him, but it looked like that wasn't going to happen, not when he was standing her up.

She really liked the idea, imagining herself riding him with his hands on her hips, guiding her, telling her to cup her breasts and thumb her nipples. She mimicked her fantasy, her breasts tingly as she stroked them, her legs opening slowly, the air kissing her bare pussy, touching her like a new lover.

The sound of a male clearing his throat brought her back to herself.

"I... didn't mean to interrupt." Andy's eyes locked heatedly on her. "Glad I did though. Can I offer my assistance?"

Fajer sat up, closing her legs, covering her breasts and turning to him with a frown. "Someone should put a bell on you!"

"They could, but then I'd miss such enticing sights." He grinned, slipping off his short-sleeved button-up shirt and offering it to her.

She shook her head and took a step back into the hot tub, slipping into the water then turned on the bubbles. The action quickly camouflaged her nakedness, even though she wanted him to look, was hot for him to look. "You're late."

Andy nodded and slipped his shirt back on, buttoning it, hiding the sexy expanse of chest she salivated to touch. He ignored her statement. "I don't sleep so well normally, but this is my favourite time of day. Out on the sea, it's when the water feels the calmest. It's peaceful. I guess by nature, we're nocturnal." He walked to the side of the pool.

She eyed him standing there, noticing that his attention was concentrated on her. He looked so yummy and relaxed in his loose fitting jeans, T-shirt and flip-flops, like he was

completely at ease. Meanwhile, her body screamed for him to touch her, but she wasn't giving in. She decided talking was the best course of action.

"Do you sail a lot? I know you mentioned it the other night at dinner, but you didn't elaborate."

Andy smiled, his joy apparent on his face. "Any chance I can. It's my escape from the world."

"I saw the ocean once," she mused. "Least, I think it was the ocean. I was in the bell tower at the school I went to. A bunch of the kids said on a clear day you could see to the ocean. It was beautiful, I think, blue and glistening."

"It is, and so much more. It changes so quickly, so unforgiving." He spoke reverently. "You'd love it. I don't know much about you, but I know that."

She smiled. She loved his voice, his refined way of speaking. "You're probably right, though seeing the ocean or experiencing it in the high desert is kinda impossible. But anyway, you came out here. What were you expecting to find?" She smiled at him and let her eyes roam his chest, a fine silhouette for her gaze courtesy of the lights behind him that shone through his thin shirt.

"To find? I'm not sure, really. I sure as hell wasn't expecting to find someone such as yourself in this nest of vipers."

She moved closer and put her arms on her legs and rested her chin on her wrist. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, that I didn't expect to find any female of worth here. Someone who calls to both me and my snake. Truth is, I only came here because Olivia strong-armed me into the whole thing. I never wanted a mate or anything even close to one...until now." He swallowed hard. "Sorry, I come from a nest where our Archon doesn't rule us with a iron fist. Olivia promised me one of her girls if one caught my eye, but this shouldn't be like choosing a bottle of wine from a supermarket. Mating should be mutual. It should happen gradually." He cleared his throat. "What I'm trying to say is that I like you, Fay, and with your permission, I'd like to court you...take you out sometime, maybe show you the ocean?"

She blinked at him several times. He liked her. She called to his snake. "Court me? Why the hell have you been hanging out with the other girls then?" She frowned as realisation dawned on her. "Oh my God. I'm a last resort, aren't I?"

"A last resort? No...hell no. I wouldn't offer to...anyone else. I spoke with the girls the first night, until I kissed you, then it was all over for me. No one here could compare to you. I hate doing anything unprepared. I wanted to know more about you before I spoke to you. I guess I should really have been asking you about you instead of asking everyone else."

She sighed. "So you're telling me that you have been spending so much time with two woman who have publicly declared they wanted to lick your skin off because you wanted to know about *me*?" She smirked. "And nothing happened with the other girls?"

"Well, when you put it like that, it sounds like a horrible idea." He grinned. "I spoke to your cousins, Ryan and Anya, as well, plus your father. And yeah, nothing happened with the other girls—though I did spend as little time with them as possible, but now it's not like they can say they didn't get a fair run."

He did work the angles, she had to give him that. "So then why don't you join me in here? I mean, each of our liaisons have been at night at this point, and you've already seen me naked..."

"I guess it would only be fair to see me in the same state of undress." He popped the buttons of his shirt, shrugging out of it.

Andy was a feast for the eyes. The soft lights of the grotto played shadows in the hills and valleys of his muscular chest and trim waist, and she moved back towards the far wall of the large hot tub and sat on the high seat her nipples winking out of the water.

He kicked off his shoes and undid his pants, stripping teasingly slow.

Fajer raised an eyebrow, pairing it with a smirk as she watched. "You look like you know what you're doing there. Sure you haven't told me about your secret life as a Chippendales dancer?"

"You haven't asked about my secret life as a Chippendales dancer." He grinned.

Fajer smiled and shook her head. "Should I? Are you hiding legions of screaming fans somewhere?"

"Nope." He shook his head, dropping his pants. "None that I know of at least."

"That's a relief."

While Andy wasn't as perfectly built as her cousin, Ryan, he was everything she found attractive in the male body. Tall, broad shoulders, flat and lickable stomach, tapered waist. Her eyes went wide as he slipped his pants down his hips, revealing his strong thighs, everything else was hidden by the deeper wells of shadows that teased her. She couldn't get

a good look at him, not from where she was sitting. But oh, his thighs were perfection. A swimmer's body, powerful, lithe and from what she could see, completely hairless.

Giving in to her urgings and deciding to be bold, she pushed off from her seat and stood, her breasts now exposed to the air once more, the water running rivers down them and between. She moved closer, the water thick about her waist and thighs as she tried to sway them. She hoped she didn't look stupid. Seduction was far from her thing.

When she made it to the wall closest to Andy, he stepped out of his pants, and stood there in front of her, gloriously naked, close enough to touch, to run her hands down his hips, into the darkness that was the shadow that concentrated between his thighs, teasing her. She itched to touch him, to see what was waiting for her, what she swore she would have before the night's end.

She looked up at him, smiling. "You just going to stand there or join me?" she asked and moved back a few steps. "'Cause, you standing there is just a big old tease," she added coyly and licked her lips, her eyes never leaving the shadowy area where his cock was hiding.

"A tease?" His eyes glinted with amusement. "I guess I am."

"Shouldn't we be getting to know each other, Andy?" she asked in a singsong voice and pouted. "Your reluctance would say otherwise."

"Oh, there's no reluctance on my end, Fay. I'm sure you can see that." He stepped into the light, his erection standing proud and tall along his taught belly. "No reluctance at all."

Fajer's mouth went dry as she blinked at him. Whoa. She might have gotten herself in over her head. Trying to recover from her initial shock, she looked up at him and cocked her head. "Is that for me?"

"It is." He palmed himself, stroking gently. "If you want."

At his words, her body clenched in low places, heating her blood deliciously, and her snake took severe notice. She moved forward and licked her lips, rising from the water again and placed her hand over his and took his other to tug him towards the water.

"This is what you're here for, isn't it?" She leaned in and kissed him, her lips just touching his, as if to give him the green light.

He took her mouth, kissing her possessively as he moved into the water beside her. His cool hands slipped around her waist pulling her against his hard lean body.

Fajer melted against him as she gave up any thought that he was simply playing the field. No man kissed like this unless they were committed, and she had to believe that. Her hands skimmed his sides then his back, and she all but purred with joy at the feel of him. Hard lines and angles in all the right places, the ridges of his abdomen tickling her own tummy as she sunk further into the swirling water.

He growled into her mouth, her scant touches driving him wild. Suddenly, lifting her in the deep water, he wrapped her legs around him.

She giggled and smiled down at him. "Umm... I do love your arms Andrew." She nuzzled his throat. "Tell me," she whispered in his ear, "on this boat of yours, will you make love to me by starlight on the open sea?"

"And daylight," he kissed the side of her mouth. "And twilight and moonlight and candle light." He punctuated his words with kisses trailing down her throat. "And in any other type of light you can wish for."

Fajer gasped with each kiss and wrapped herself tighter around him. His thick cock nestled between their bodies, hugged and caressed by her soft, wet flesh. He throbbed for her. She'd never thought a man would be that crazy for her.

"The night you kissed me," she moaned and shivered, "I wanted you then."

"And I you. I had to drag myself away from you. I thought about you all that night and every night after."

"Yet, you visited me only once." She chuckled. "Granted, it was interesting. I wouldn't have thrown you out of my bed, Andy."

"I know that now." He kissed her again, this time bending slightly to suck a beading nipple into his scorching-hot mouth.

"I want you Andy...to know you, to have you...please..." she whimpered and arched under his careful attentions.

"Yes." He thrust into her, filling her completely, his mouth kissing up to cover hers.

Fajer saw stars at the invasion, his body fitting hers so snugly. She moaned into his mouth, gripping his ass with her hands as he flexed while he moved in her. He felt amazing, with the warm water swirling around them, his body advancing and retreating so perfectly. He made slow love to her, and she couldn't want anything more. Snakes were known for their wild sexual appetites, but Andy was showing her what could be for a lifetime with him. She could feel the propensity for violence, for the crazy wild sex that Anya talked about, but

that would have to be for later. Now, now was about cementing something they had yet to talk about.

He cupped her face with his hand, cradling her to him as he loved her.

Fajer kept her eyes on him the whole time, a smile peeking out from the gasps. He moved them to the low seat and turned to sit, allowing her the dominant position, as befitted a female of their race. She rode him with purpose, gasping as she felt that tight little ball of feeling start to grow. "Andrew," she moaned and shivered.

"Fajer," he cried out, grasping her tightly.

She shattered, her body moving on its own, gripping him lovingly, as she panted her joy for him.

He found his own release, spilling into her, his whole body gripping her.

Calm settled over Fajer as she felt her lover's breathing begin to slow. She looked him in the eyes and grinned then kissed him and leaned in, rubbing her face against his shoulder, licking the newly blossomed sweat from the crook of his neck. "Umm... I needed that."

"As did I."

She giggled and sighed. "And here I thought I was going to get ravaged by you."

"I thought we could save that for later, sometime when we have a more private setting."

"So you want there to be a next time?" She wiggled on his lap then righted herself, her arms around his neck, the water bubbling around them both.

"More than anything." He kissed her, lightly brushing their lips together.

"Talk to me, Andrew. You haven't said anything about *you* really, I mean aside from what you tell everyone in public."

"What would you like to know? I'm an open book to you. Just tell me."

"What is it you really do? I mean, you've alluded to stuff not being aboveboard and all."

"Not aboveboard? I guess that one way of putting it. I'm a financial advisor. I help people move their money around. I guess the old term is laundering. I clean money."

She moved to face him. "Figured you would be a gangster." She giggled. "Daddy would love it."

"I doubt it. My books are clean, and I'm very selective about my clients. For the most part, I actually do what it says on my office sign. But there are other things. Most

supernaturals don't trust humans with their money or maybe they want their dealings to look more human. I doubt it's as exciting as being a gangster, more numbers."

"Either way, it's sticking it to Johnny Law, which is why daddy would approve. But that's neither here nor there. I like that you've got a pseudo bad streak."

"You do, do you?" He grinned at her in wonder. "My Archon disapproves, and my cousins don't know. They're not exactly the secretive type."

"Well, I can keep a secret. And we all try to do what we love, right? So I don't have one problem with it. So what do they think you do?"

"I'm not sure Reece has considered it. He thinks all I do is sail about in my yacht, tipping my hat to people I pass. We never needed money so I guess he sees me as a snake of extreme leisure. Remy thinks I'm a banker of sorts. He pretty much spaces out whenever math is mentioned. He's the artist of the family, though not actual art. He's a musician of sorts. I have to admit I space out whenever he talks about it though," he admitted.

"So, you're the financier, he's the musician and what exactly does Reece, is that his name, do?"

"Reece is the youngest. He's pretty much an ass professionally. He got a little viper knocked up though and just married her. That's why I was in town for Olivia to snare."

Fajer laughed. "So your nest doesn't discriminate? That's nice. They all sound lovely — hell to have some family sounds lovely."

"You should meet them and our Archon. I already told you she'd love you. We don't discriminate. If anything I feel sorry for Elise for getting stuck with Reece. She needs that edge to keep him in line. We take in all sorts. I've never known Elise to turn anyone away."

"Wow, that sounds amazing. So different than here," she sighed, wistfully.

"It's another world. We're a family." He paused. "You should come with me and meet everyone."

Fajer slipped around and sat in his lap, facing him, his cock once again nestled between her thighs. She realised that it felt right but didn't say anything. "The only way I'm going to leave here is if I'm going to be mated, Andrew, and as much as I like you, I don't know if we could be forever. There are too many factors to keep us apart."

"Whether we mate or not, I can't leave you here. You deserve so much more, to see so much more. Olivia will let you go if you're with me. We don't have to be mated for that, and we'll need more than this week to decide if we're for forever or not. Come with me, spend

some time with me in my own environment, and if we decide we're not for each other then Elise would have you in a heartbeat, helping her kids."

Fajer smiled, her eyes tearing up. Andrew had a good heart. He was giving her a choice, and the means to make that choice. She grinned. "You're serious? Really? Well, we would have to make it believable," She nuzzled him. "You think you can get around to marking me? I know how it goes. One time won't matter in the scheme of it and will make it look more believable. But this is all on one condition."

"Condition away." He smiled, nuzzling her back.

"You spend the rest of the nights here in my bed." She nipped his bottom lip and sucked sweetly.

"I can think of no better place for me," he growled, his hands slipping back over her.

Fajer gasped and arched purring. "Then mark me, Andrew. My snake is itching to get to know yours."

Andrew kissed her, a soft and sexy gesture, and she melted into his embrace. Her legs slid along his thighs, and she groaned, feeling his cock hard and ready once again nestled between her legs, teasing her clit as she moved, the swirling water moving his cock softly against her.

"Tease..." she gasped and shifted her body closer to him and kissed him again, her fingers stroking his neck.

Andy grinned and kissed down her neck. "Nope. You're the one in the position of power Fajer..."

"So I am." She reared up and sunk down on him once more and closed her eyes in bliss. Nothing felt as good as Andrew completing her. She moved slowly, gaining both momentum and sensation, and looked at him as his head shot up. She stroked him with her inner muscles, squeezing softly.

"Damn, Fajer," Andrew breathed and leaned his head back. She bit her bottom lip, laced her fingers behind his neck and pulled him to sit up properly, which slipped him deeper into her. She moaned, and stared at him, her hands still around his neck. She rode him faster, watching as his eyes flickered from human to snake, and felt his body tense.

He kissed her then, a crushing and violent act, their tongues dancing and fighting. Her little moans spurred him on. His hands went to her hips, guiding them both towards climax.

She broke the kiss, nipped his bottom lip and shuddered as her orgasm tore through her, and that's when she threw her head back and he struck.

The action sent another mind numbing orgasm through her and her spine bowed as she cried out. The feeling of Andrew marking her, making her his, if just for a little while, was glorious. Andrew followed her over the brink seconds later, cementing his claim. She panted and slowly came back down to earth, to the sweet lull of the bubbling water, to the arms that were now holding her body as the mouth of her lover kissed and licked the bite.

She didn't mark him, but it wasn't necessary. She knew what she felt, and while she wasn't ready to claim him publicly, she knew she was already his.

Andrew nuzzled her and chuckled. "Never thought I would do that," he mumbled into her shoulder as he kept up his ministrations to her flesh.

"Umm...I'm glad you did. Not only does it make everything easier, that was one hell of a rush."

He looked up at her, and she noticed his eyes hadn't changed back yet. "And it always will, Fajer. I promise. Now about that bed you were talking about..."

Fajer laughed. "Yeah a pruned snake isn't my idea of sexy."

"Me, either."

He pulled her off his lap, and she frowned momentarily, disliking being parted from him. She climbed out of the hot tub with shaky legs and then stretched and heard him groan from behind her. "What? Did I break you?" she asked as she looked over her shoulder.

"You might if you keep doing all the stretching. Any more of that, and we won't make it to the bed."

"And we can't have that. So I'll abstain, at least until we get back to my room."

"So generous." He climbed out himself and went to her, wrapping his arm around her waist and kissing the sensitive flesh of his mark. "Though once we're there, don't let me stop you."

She turned and grinned. "You think you could?"

Chapter Six

Fajer looked out from her balcony for what she knew was going to be the last time. It was all set. She was leaving with Andrew, going east, and her stepmother and father couldn't be happier. True, the real nature of their arrangement wasn't known to anyone except Ryan and Anya, but it was probably better that way. Andrew was giving her a choice and time to get to know him, and for that, she was grateful.

It was true their snakes had already decided they belonged together, but the human parts weren't sure yet. If they lived the majority of their lives as snakes there would be no problem, but they didn't, and no amount of sexual attraction would guarantee a successful and lasting mating.

So Andrew was going to woo her, or so he said, and win her over. And if he didn't, well then she had a place at the New York nest until she decided what to do and found someone who could be forever.

She was excited for two reasons. One, she was going to see part of the world that wasn't the long expanse of the backyard of Xiolicia, and two, she was being courted by a sexy snake of worth who finally couldn't keep his hands off her. Once Andrew had made it known that Fajer was his choice, with a toe-tingling and mind-numbing kiss, it was like the green light was given. The past day and a half, he'd been finding ways to get her alone, even if it was just for a stolen kiss in the hallway, and their nights had been sweet and stunning. He made sweet love to her, always slow and perfect. While it was something she enjoyed, she wanted the naughty snake she knew lurked just underneath the surface. He had promised once they were back at Knossos West, his nest, there would be no stopping him.

She felt his arms wrap around her from behind, and she sighed, leaning into his embrace. "Umm...I don't think I'll ever get used to these arms wrapped around me, which is a good thing." Fajer nuzzled his cheek and nipped at the stubbly skin. "Someone needs a shave. So what's the plan? Flight back? Then what?"

"Then I'll show you home. It's your trip so we can do anything you want, but there are a few things I'd like to show you. My hunting ground for one. It's much more humid than here, with big trees to climb, and the Knossos grounds are always filled with game. Then

there's the boat. We could maybe take an evening trip out in it, and I'll show you the sea at night. Just the two of us."

"Just the sea?" She grinned and turned in his embrace, her slowly fading mating mark glistening in the midday sunshine. "You going to show me what it's like to scream your name out on that sea?"

"There is that, too." He leaned down, capturing her mouth in his. "Sound travels fast in the ocean."

Fajer smiled and cocked her head. "I can't wait. This is a real adventure for me, Andrew. I wanted to thank you. Well, I'll thank you properly once we get the chance." She winked and saw Anya walk in over his shoulder. "How long do we have 'til we leave? I recall Ryan saying he wanted a pow-wow with you before we leave."

Andrew turned to see what she was looking at and took the hint. "Ah, well, I'll go and see him and leave you two alone." He kissed her cheek.

"He's down in the gym like a good little pet." Anya waved in the general direction of the gym. "He'd enjoy the company. He gets a little creepy down there himself with his posters. I'm surprised it's not swimming in hand lotion and discarded tissues."

Fajer frowned. "So graphic. And much more information than I ever needed to know about Ryan."

Anya smirked. "Hey, Mr. Straight-laced needs to get his rocks off somehow. I doubt Olivia lets him do it anyway. It won't be in his program, the fucking robot."

Andy raised an eyebrow. "That's not really the impression I got, but yeah, I'll see you guys soon." He walked out.

Fajer laughed. "I don't even wanna know. So? I'm going to be leaving." She gave a mildly hysterical tittering laugh. "God, this is scary."

"You'll do just fine." Anya grinned, rubbing her cousin's arm reassuringly. "Andy's a great guy, and he'll look out for you, or else he'll have me to answer to."

"I hope so..." Fajer absently stroked the mating mark on her shoulder. It tingled, sending jolts of pleasure down through her body, hitting all the right parts. "I'm going to miss you, Anya. You promise you will come and visit me?"

"Sure, maybe even sooner than you think. What with you gone, there's no reason at all for me to stay in this shit hole under skanky Viv's thumb."

Fajer frowned. "Wait. Honey, what are you saying? You know I would love to have you with me, but what is Ryan going to say. Does he know? Where are you going to go?"

"My brother doesn't care much beyond Olivia's next order." Anya sighed. "I'm getting as far away from here as possible. You know that cat I've been seeing?"

"Yeah, the one who put Evan to shame. What about him?"

"Well, he asked me to move in with him. His pride isn't all that far from where you're going."

"Really? Just be careful Anya, okay? I don't want anything to happen to you. So what else? Should we go and bother the guys? I mean Andrew didn't mention when we were leaving." Fajer sighed. "You know as much as I hate this place, I'm going to miss it."

"I won't, that's for sure. They'll have to kill me before they brings me back here." Anya linked arms with her.

"So dramatic, Anya. Come on. We can spy." She winked as they left the bedroom and made their way down to the ground floor gym.

* * * *

Andy entered the gym, finding Ryan alone and, thankfully, doing none of the things his sister described. The gym was large and modern with everything one could ever imagine a gym needing, including a sauna room and hot tub to the far back. Ryan was lifting weights mechanically. "Hey, you wanted to see me."

"Well, you're leaving. I wanted to say goodbye." Ryan smiled and put down the fifty-pound barbell and stood, stretching.

"Not leaving right now, but yeah, we're on our way. I left Anya saying goodbye to Fay. I have to admit I'll miss you. You're not bad for a venomous thug."

Ryan smirked. "We sound like a bunch of old women, you know that? *So* not manly. But hey, I have been called worse. So it's for real with you and Fajer?" he asked and went to the fridge to his left, opening it and grabbing a Gatorade. He closed it and smiled at the poster gracing the door – a pinup with eyes just begging for it.

"I think so. You want me to leave you two alone?"

Ryan laughed. "Who me and Evelyn? Nah...she's a very hot fantasy though. I'd give my fangs for one hot night with the woman. Too bad she isn't ophidian. Fajer is like my sister, Andy. I want her happy. She deserves that."

"She'll be happy. I promise you that." Andy nodded to the poster, grinning. "What happened to no venom no fun?"

"Evelyn Rose is above the venom standard. She's in a class all her own. You don't bite a woman like that. You devour her." He grinned. "That's the kinda mate I want."

"Well, maybe if you save up your brownie points, Santa will get her for you for Easter."

Ryan looked shocked. "There's not a price in the world that could get any of us that woman. Trust me." He gave another longing look at her then turned completely around to face Andrew. "So? I assume we will be invited to the wedding? Provided there is one?"

"Of course, if there is one you're all invited—you and Anya that is."

Ryan smirked. "Nice save. Seriously though, you think you two could work out?"

"I hope so. I really like her, my snake loves her and I think she feels the same way about me. We'll just have to see where it takes us. And you? Miss Rose here aside, anyone in your future?"

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Ryan scoffed. "I'm not getting pushed into a mating, not now anyway. I'm not anywhere near ready for it, not mature enough, you could say."

"Good luck with that in Olivia's nest."

"Truth is I have been hanging out for two reasons. Fajer and Anya. Now that Fajer is taken care of, I think I can persuade Anya to go to college. She's got a trust fund just for that." He shrugged. "If I can work that out, I'm going to go back to my place in New Mexico, pretend I'm human for a while."

"I'm sure you play human very well. I've got a question though. Why didn't Olivia offer Anya with the others? Not that I'd have considered a venomous mate in the first place. It always would have been Fay."

Ryan smiled. "Because Anya is the last of my mother's line who can carry on our breed. And Olivia doesn't think she's at mating age yet. She's only nineteen. And newsflash, it was always supposed to be Fajer for you. But she couldn't very well just ship her off. My aunt isn't the craftiest one out there, but she does understand the way of relationships."

"Nineteen?" Andy grinned, shaking his head, "Wow, she sure doesn't look it...or act it."

"No, no, she doesn't. Olivia wants full control over Anya's offspring, so she'll mate Anya to one of her trusted males when she's in her early twenties. It sucks, but she'll be cared for and probably be the head of her own nest by the time she's twenty-four."

"That is a truly scary thought. No offence, but I don't think your sister's the type to just sit by and let that happen. Olivia might have to change her plans on that one."

"I've been saying that for years. Unfortunately, it's a test of wills, and one will win. The other, well, I don't wanna think about it. Sucks. I love my sister, but mating and breeding is probably what's best for her in the long run."

"Oh my God, you're such an ass." Anya shook her head from the doorway. "Such a fucking ass. Breeding is all I'm good for, is it? Oh, I bet that's all the crap that bitch has been filling your head with. So who gets the job, then? Who gets to screw kiddies out of me? You going to hold me down for Auntie Liv and her cadre of willing vipers?" She spat out angrily, her eyes filling with tears.

Ryan frowned. "Obviously you walked in on the last leg of that conversation, little sis. Calm down. You know I swore I wouldn't let her mate you 'til you were ready and had a chance to do your own thing. So stop getting all dramatic, okay?"

"How does that make it any better?" she asked, horrified. "I'm not like you. I'm not a fucking robot. Look at you, you're just as bad as she is."

"I am not, Anya. Sweet Jesus, you're horrible," he sighed. "An, all I wanted for you was to go to school, enjoy your life and find a mate you care for. You insist on freaking out all the time. I always knew you were a drama queen but darlin'..."

"I don't freak out enough, considering Aunt Liv and your freaky little plans. She'd never let that happen. You don't get to live happily ever after with that harpy around. Why do you think mom and dad left? Think they wanted this for us? You being her little golden soldier and me a fucking broodmare?"

"Sweet Christ, Anya, you aren't listening! I have no plans with Aunt Liv," he growled, exasperated. Fajer went to Andy and gripped his hand. Ryan stalked closer to his little sister. "Mom and dad didn't leave Anya..." He sighed. "They are dead."

"Because they left. They're dead because they left. And why would I listen to you? You're not speaking any sense."

"Anya, I am. Christ. Think about what you're saying! Mom and dad left, and they are dead. So what? You going to leave, too? So you can die? You think you'll do any better out there on your own? Christ! Please, don't be cross with me, Anya."

"I was already leaving. I don't want to sit around and wait to get paired off with some idiot. Olivia will see it as a childish huff and won't realise I'm not coming back 'til I'm long gone. I've met someone. Thankfully, he's not a snake, but he has a place out of the way where I can crash 'til I get somewhere to live sorted out."

"An, hon, don't do that. Lemme work it out, okay? It's not safe out there."

"No way." She shook her head. "It's now or never. If Olivia realises what I'm going to do, she'll put me on house arrest, and I'll never see daylight again. I'm a big girl. I can look after myself—you could come with me though?"

"If you want. I do have my place in New Mexico," he offered with a glimmer of hope.

Fajer smiled and whispered to Andy. "Frightening, eh? That wasn't even close to a huge blowout."

"Yeah, I think we need more lavender about the place." He squeezed her hand.

"No." Anya shook her head. "She'll find us there. She'll find us anywhere within ophidian control. That's why we have to go to a pride. She has no control there."

"We will go, hon, but we have to go to my place first and get stuff. Like mom's pictures and Dad's paintings. If we go, I'm not leaving that behind, okay?" He pulled her close to him and kissed her head.

"Okay." She hugged him, nodding jerkily. Andy couldn't help but notice how small she looked against her brother. "But promise me we'll stick together. No changing your mind. No thinking that I just need sometime to cool down then dragging me all the way back here. I'm not coming back."

"I won't bring you back. I promise." He looked at Fajer. "Fay, if you hear from Olivia, I'm going with Anya to see schools. You know, it's a good thing she's not here today. I'll have to send Marco some Cubans."

Fajer nodded. "Hell, your secret is safe with us. I promise."

Ryan smiled at them, and Fajer angled out of the room with Andy so the siblings could be alone. The last chapter of her life here had just come to a close, and there would be no reason to come back if things didn't work out.

She wasn't sure how Ryan and Anya would end up, or where, but so long as they stuck together, like she was determined to do with Andy, everything would work out for the better.

Chapter Seven

The plane ride was typical. They had flown first class from Vegas to the Newark airport in New Jersey and were now in a town car on their way back to Knossos West. Andrew said that normally he would have had family come and get him, as they didn't really flaunt their wealth by taking limos or other rented cars, but this was a special occasion, and he didn't want to throw family in the mix just yet.

The compound was located on the outskirts of an upstate New York city called Shadow Heights, a town filled with supernaturals. Andrew had told her when she asked that supers outnumbered humans there two to one. It was as good a place as any to hide in the open, and the compound had been there well before the city had become what it was today. They were urbanites, and it scared her, being the backcountry bumpkin.

The drive was pleasant, and they snuggled close in the wide backseat, Andy telling her of all the roadside attractions as they drove by. He mentioned shopping centres, hiking trails, skiing centres, something Fajer was eager to try, and other smaller towns along the way. If New York was going to be her home, and she was hoping it was, then she was going to enjoy it.

"So you really get snow here?" she asked as he pointed out the exit for yet another ski centre.

He nodded. "Yep. A lot, actually. Reece and Carmen go snowboarding a lot, as do Remy and Chrissy. Vermont is only a four-hour drive from the compound, too. So if you're serious about learning, we can make it happen." He grinned. "I'll tell you, hot tubbing in the winter... There's nothing in the world like it."

"I can't wait to see snow. I mean real snow. On occasion, we got some at Xiolicia, but it never stayed. Can't wait to see the whole landscape covered in all that pretty white stuff."

Andrew smiled at her and sighed. "I haven't really been a fan of the winter, but things change." He turned and kissed her sweetly and Fajer took the motion as a green light. She climbed into his lap and cuddled close, her hand going under his shirt, to rest peacefully on his abdomen. It was a familiar gesture, but she didn't care. Andrew called to her, and she was powerless to do anything but be close to him.

"How long 'til we get there?" she asked and snuggled even closer.

"Another hour. Shadow Heights is deep in the Catskills. We should get there around dinner time."

"And they're expecting us?"

Andrew nodded. "They are. Elise knows what to expect, meaning you."

"And everyone else?"

"No clue. I figured I wanted to give my cousins and Phil, that's our resident cook, a heart attack."

"Naughty snake."

"I could be." He smirked.

Fajer looked up at him with a wry smile on her face and shifted to straddle him, the skirt she was wearing sliding up her legs, her eyes changing to her snake gaze. He groaned, his eyes following suit and kissed her hard, his hands going to her ass and pulling her flush with his growing arousal. She moaned and gasped, whimpering as he broke the kiss and started trailing nips and kisses down her throat.

Fajer wasted no time opening his pants and slipping her hand in to cup him. His cock was hot, hard for her, and begging for attention. She stroked it in time with his kisses, squeezed as she was learning he liked, and he gripped her even tighter. "Aren't you worried about the driver seeing us?" she asked in a whisper.

"Nope. Guy's paid to drive, not give pointers."

Fajer giggled and lifted up on her knees as he lifted his hips to slide his jeans down to the floor. He meant to have her right there. Fajer had never had sex anywhere someone else could watch. He had said she would see the wild side of him once they got back to New York, and he was well on his way to proving that bold statement.

His kisses trailed to his fading mark on her shoulder, and his tongue snaked out and licked lovingly. She shivered and threw back her head, the sensations skittering down her spine and chest, pooling low in her belly. Yes, this man knew how to hit all the right buttons.

His hand slipped under her now flared skirt, fingertips blazing a trail of fire and lust up her inner thigh. They stopped just short of their mark as he lifted his head. "Panties or no?" he asked with a hit of wickedness in his eyes.

"Check." She nipped his lip as his fingers closed the gap. He groaned, finding her devoid of any material barrier between her welcoming heat and his questing fingers.

"Naughty girl," he said and kissed her hard, his fingers finding purchase as they stroked her soft wetness. She wiggled then moved her own hand from his groin to allow him better access, her hands better suited to unbuttoning her shirt.

She looked over her shoulder, peeking at the driver, who seemed totally oblivious to their activities. Either he was or he was damn good at keeping it nonchalant.

Emboldened, she sank into the experience with her lover, her nimble fingers catching the last button on her cotton, short-sleeved shirt. He hissed, seeing her breasts held behind a wispy scrap of white lace, her nipples pushing against the material, straining towards him.

Andrew smiled and bent his head again, this time catching a nipple with his teeth and worrying it sweetly. Fajer gasped and shuddered, her body almost to the point of begging. With his hand between her thighs, his mouth around her nipple and the knowledge that they were racing down a highway towards her lover's home in a car where anyone who got a good look inside would see what they were doing, Fajer lost it.

She cried out, her body revelling in the orgasm Andrew was busily rolling through her. She vaguely heard his words of encouragement, his dirty talk, and his endearments. The haze had barely lifted when she felt the sweet invasion of his cock slipping slowly inside her still-spasming sheath. It was still a very snug fit, her body ready for him but always surprised at his girth. She purred, her eyes now on his, her smile matching his own.

"Sweet Christ, that was good."

"Umm...it's going to get better..." he mumbled and kissed her hard, moving their bodies slowly, his tight hands around her waist. As she got his rhythm, he moved his hands to the smooth globes of her ass, where he controlled their strokes. He was amazing, strong, holding her and moving her with purpose. Fajer's arms were around his neck as she rode him, her eyes closed to revel in the sensation.

"Fajer...fuck, you feel so good," he mumbled and licked down her throat, his mouth gravitating back to her fading mating mark. She knew what was coming and moaned, waiting for his strike.

Andrew nibbled, his mouth teasing her. She moaned. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. "Please, Andrew, please."

He chuckled, a low, manly chuckle and looked up at her. "Don't beg, baby. I need to as much as you need me to."

He struck then, the bite a melding of both man and snake, reinforcing ownership of her. Fajer came then, her body and snake accepting Andrew and his snake. She leaned into his shoulder and bit his shoulder, as well, clamping down and enforcing her own claim on them both.

Andrew growled, his body following hers over into oblivion. It was minutes later when she finally unlatched from his shoulder, to see where her teeth had bit through his shirt, the blood colouring the tattered edges. Her mark started to heal then, making a sloping swirl down the front of his chest. This was her first time biting him, and damn did it feel good. He panted at her shoulder and nuzzled the sensitive bite he had given her.

"Shit, I didn't think," he said and sighed.

"Like I could hold back. Nothing is set in stone yet, Andrew, but that was one wild ride." She giggled.

Andrew cuddled to her to him and kissed the side of her neck. "That, love, was nothing. That was merely a taste."

"Oh? How so?"

"Simple. Wasn't enough room in here." He gave her a lascivious look and wiggled his eyebrows.

Fajer laughed and kissed him then slowly climbed off his lap and started fixing her clothing. "I needed that. I'm not so nervous now."

"Nothing to be nervous about, love. They are going to adore you, almost as much as I do."

Fajer wasn't so sure, but kept her opinion to herself. She looked out the window once again and saw a large green mileage sign. *Shadow Heights, 20*. She sighed and shook her hair out, that little nugget of nervousness starting to take root once more.

Chapter Eight

Andrew held tightly onto Fajer's hand in what he hoped was a reassuring way. Whether he was reassuring himself or her he wasn't quite sure. He knew she had nothing to be nervous about, everyone would love her just like he did, if not quite in the same way. She was beautiful and shy but still managed to be outrageous at the same time. Not once did she balk at anything they'd done, but instead, she revelled in it, enjoying it, and there was much more to come. He'd bitten her twice now, not hard enough to initiate a mating bond, but he knew it wouldn't be long before they took that plunge. He just had to make the commitment and show her that there was so much more to life than the way she'd been living. Seeing her locked up with Olivia had truly sickened him. He'd vowed to show her how to live properly.

In fact, they both could do with some lessons in living. Whether or not she chose him, she deserved to live free.

It was his cousins' reactions to him wanting a mate that gave him pause. He'd always scorned the idea of mating and, indeed, marriage as a whole, and for him to show up like this was more unexpected than Reece finding a viper. He now understood his cousin's commitment to Carmen because, if he felt even half of what Andy was beginning to feel for Fajer, it would take a hell of a lot more than getting bit to put him off. He had to admit to a certain perverse pleasure he'd get when they saw him. It wasn't often he got to shock them both.

It was so good to be home at last. The air was so much fresher and crisper. He was often amazed at just how good it felt to return home after being away, even if he hadn't been gone for very long. He watched Fajer wonder at every small detail from plant to landmarks, taking great pleasure in telling her everything he knew about the sights. He couldn't wait to show her Knossos and share his hunting ground with her. Once they'd spent themselves in the regrettably small confines of the limo, the trip went by quickly and smoothly and soon enough they were pulling through the compound gates.

He squeezed her hand again, brushing a stray hair from her face with the other. "Nearly there." He smiled. "You ready?"

"As I will ever be. So let's get this right. There's Remy with Chrissy, and they have Sapphire, and Reece and Carmen, the viper, and they have twins, right?" She chewed her bottom lip in a cute fit of nervousness.

"They will have soon. She's not far off her due date. She'll be miserable and moody, but then, I think she's normally like that. I know I would be if I had to put up with Reece on a regular basis." He grinned, amazed at how adorable she looked.

She smiled. "Is he really that bad? Honestly?"

"Worse, but don't worry. He'll be on his best behaviour." Reece always was around him ever since he'd accidentally broken his collarbone and a few of his ribs in a play fight that had gone bad. Reece always had to push things too far, and Andy had been young at the time. He'd felt awful afterwards, more so because Elise had made him play nurse to the surly fuck. Reece had since forgiven him, but there was no question of a doubt as to who would take who in a fight since then. Reece skirted the boundaries but never overstepped his mark.

"Okay." She gave an audible sigh as they rolled up the driveway, and she saw the compound. It was larger than Xiolicia but not by much. It was only after seeing the tall blonde dressed in a sage-green broomstick skirt and white and green cardigan, standing on the front stairs, that she squeezed his hand hard. "Umm?"

"That's Elise," he supplied. "Looks like she's been waiting for us."

The car came to a stop, and Elise walked down the steps towards it, a bright smile on her face.

He kissed the top of Fajer's head, "Ready?"

She nodded and watched as he stepped out then slipped out behind him. Elise had him in her arms, hugging him.

"Welcome home, sweetheart. Flight okay?"

"Smooth enough. We did our fair share of sleeping." He hugged her tightly, kissing her on the cheek as he let go. "Elise, it'd be my pleasure to introduce you to Fajer." He turned taking Fajer's hand and pulling her gently up beside him.

Elise looked towards her, and her smile brightened by about twenty watts. She stepped closer and hugged Fajer, holding her close. "Oh, Andrew, you have picked well for yourself. You are divine, Fajer. Welcome to the family."

Fajer hugged her back and laughed. "Thank you, Archon. It's wonderful to be accepted into your nest."

Elise pulled back and frowned. "Oh, honey, we don't stand on ceremony here. Call me Elise, okay? And you're welcome here, always." She turned to Andrew. "Your cousins are going to be floored."

"You think?" Andy flashed her a grin.

"I know. Come on, everyone is in the kitchen, I think. Dinner is almost ready. Come on." She turned to the driver. "Devin? Please take the bags to Andrew's rooms." She turned to walk back inside. Fajer took Andrew's hand as they walked into the large house.

"So is the guest house set up?" he asked, hoping Elise had remembered to air it out for him. As much as he loved his nest, privacy did become an issue when they all lived together. Andy had been living in the guesthouse since he'd been old enough to live on his own.

"Of course, new linens and a fresh coat of paint." She winked, falling back into one of their jokes from when he'd first moved out.

"Perfect, you're the best, Lise."

"I try." They walked into the kitchen, and Fajer blanched at the several people standing in there. "Easy, love," Elise said to her then turned to the room. "Andy's home, and he's got a surprise."

"Everyone, this is Fajer." He put his arm around her, smiling at his friends and family. "I met her at Xiolicia."

Remy turned from tipping a beer to his mouth and talking with Reece, saw Andrew and Fajer, and spit his beer all over Reece. "Holy shit. You gotta be kidding me! A viper? Seriously? Super hot, though. Way to go, cuz."

"She is super hot, but not a viper," he chuckled at them. "Fay, that's Remy, and Reece is wiping beer off his face."

Reece grumbled and took the second towel a short, heavily pregnant woman was handing him. "Figures you couldn't handle a viper. I'll third the hot though. You don't deserve that." He winked and leered at Fajer. "Welcome, hottie."

"Behave. I'll leave her to decide whether I deserve her or not. Hopefully she'll decide differently from you."

Remy grinned. "Got you there, Reece." He walked over to Fajer, took her hand and kissed it. "Good to have you here, little sister."

"Not too friendly," Andrew growled, his snake hating Remy touching his unclaimed mate. He pulled her against him, taking a deep calming breath. Andy was good at keeping

his cool, but seeing someone else, even his mated cousin, touching her was going to drive him into a rage.

Fajer smiled and nodded. "Thank you, all of you." She turned to Andy then back to Reece. "And trust me, we deserve each other."

"Lord." A slim, dark-haired snake rolled her eyes. "Males and their posturing, though I have to admit I'd thought Andy would be immune to it. Nice to see he's just as lowly as the rest of us. I'm Chrissy, Remy's mate."

Fajer smiled at the woman and hugged her when she reached for her. "You should see it when they have fangs and pump venom."

"I can't imagine. It's bad enough here when Carmen goes off on Reece." She winced nodding to the pregnant snake.

"He deserves it all and more," Carmen growled, gesturing to her belly. "Look at what he's done to me." She glared threateningly at Reece.

Fajer laughed. "Indeed. For that affront, you should bite him. Though I understand congrats are in order, the wedding and all. At least, he made an honest woman out of you."

"Honest? It would take more than a huge ring to do that." She beamed, flashing her ring. "Though he's still in the bad books for the Elvis fiasco." She swiped at his head just missing it.

"Elvis?" Fajer shook her head and smiled at Carmen's two-karat, sparkly diamond ring. "Beautiful."

An older man walked in through the backdoor with a large tray of food that had everyone turning towards him. He saw Andrew and smiled. "Oh good, you're back. Made your favourite." He looked at Fajer then at Andrew again and shook his head. "Hope you guys are hungry."

"I guess we are. Fay this is Phil. He's the best chef around. If you want to get on anyone's good side it's his. Thankfully, he likes a good scotch so he's easy to bribe."

Fajer smiled at the older man and inhaled. "Is that ribs? With dry rub?" she asked hopefully.

Phil nodded. "I like her already." He winked at her and walked past everyone towards the long table in the next room. "Grab your drinks and the wine. Everything is ready to go."

Remy and Reece both escorted their mates to the dining room, and Elise walked past them both, leaving Fajer and Andy in the kitchen alone.

“Well, that was the nest. Not that scary, huh?”

“No, and their mates are...well, beautiful. Full of life, sexy, and non-threatening – well, to me anyway.”

“They’re okay, but you’d have to be a little threatening to keep my cousins under the thumb.”

“As long as I’m not having to dodge venom for looking at someone the wrong way. Andrew this house is so beautiful.”

“And there’s no venom dodging. After dinner, I’ll take you a walk around the place, give you the tour, if you’d like?”

She nodded. “And that guest house?”

“There, too. Our bags should be there so you can freshen up.”

“Then let’s get to dinner. Those ribs are calling my name.”

Chapter Nine

Dinner was interesting, delicious and a lot of fun. The table was laden with not only the barbeque, but several sides, fresh-baked rolls and a large bowl of salad. Phillip mentioned that they had their own garden, and Fajer was astounded. Back home they couldn't get much more than grass to grow and only in controlled situations. And the vegetables were delicious, so much better than anything she had had at Xiolicia.

Everyone was interested in learning about her and how Andy had managed to snag her. She and Andy kept tight-lipped, giving away few hints about their relationship, though Fajer knew a blind man could see they were already devoted to each other. What a curious state of events. She hadn't expected to fall so hard for him so quickly. But she was there, sitting next to her lover, his hand on her thigh through dinner, and now, his arm possessively around her waist.

She'd always thought the affection would grow, like it had with most of the set-up matings she had witnessed living at Xiolicia. She was quickly coming to terms with the fact that it wasn't the way one claimed a life mate. She never really understood why Olivia chose to pick and choose her members' mates, but she knew now it wasn't the road to a successful and loving mating. Though...Olivia had chosen Andrew for her, so maybe it did work. Her stepmother and her father were devoted to each other, and she knew her father loved Olivia very deeply, as much as her real mother. How someone could love that completely twice was beyond her. If things didn't work out with Andrew, she doubted she would ever feel this at ease with anyone else. He cared for her, in ways no one else had. It counted for a lot to her, and she wanted to keep him. Luckily, that was in the cards.

After they had eaten and helped clean up, Andrew had excused the two of them and was now taking her on a tour of the main house. The first floor was standard with living rooms, kitchen, family room, and two bathrooms. Down a hallway, a large indoor pool. The foyer, well, she still loved its pristine white walls, tile mosaic and curving stairs. When she had walked in not three hours before, the beauty and the opulence of the entryway had floored her. She felt welcomed when she'd walked in, and that was a great feeling.

They were now on the second floor, walking towards the left side of the house from the stairs. There were several bedrooms, and at the end of the hallway, a large, vaulted-ceiling great room, where several children were laying amongst pillows in both human and snake form on the sunken floor, watching a programme on the television. They were quiet and looked happy.

"So this is your crèche? It's, well, it's wonderful. That you can put both forms together and not worry." She smiled wistfully as she looked around the room again, noting the bright colours and the toys then large windows that would surely let in a lot of late afternoon sunshine for the children to bask in. It was the kind of crèche she wanted her children to grow up in.

"I guess you don't get that much at Xiolicia. Not every type of snake can shift from a few months onward. Reece and Carmen's kids, for one, won't change 'til puberty. Elise likes to encourage it whenever she can. The more the kids change, the easier it becomes—like speaking another language, kids pick it up easier."

"True. King snakes and corals both can change right out the chute so to speak, and they're volatile when they're babies. So Olivia keeps it so they don't shift 'til they're about ten. Me, I never got to shift with everyone. It was too dangerous."

"No wonder. King snakes are cannibalistic, if not quite venomous. Come on." He flashed her a smile then moved over to sit next to a little girl with fine, dark hair and bright green eyes. She looked no older than a year old and was rolling herself over with resolute determination to a big pile of toys under the watchful eye of the crèche's nurse. "This is Sapphire." He lifted the girl onto his knee, snatching up a teddy from the pile.

"Remy and Chrissy's little one? She looks like Chrissy." She smiled and went to her knees. "Hi, sweetheart. Aren't you the prettiest thing?"

"She'd be butt ugly if she looked like her pop, and thankfully she hasn't discovered tattoos yet." He bounced her on his knees as she giggled clapping her hands.

"Nothing is going to make this little rocker baby ugly," she cooed and clapped her hands with Sapphire. "Remy and Chrissy must be so proud." She looked back at the half dozen children and three snakes there. "Are they all Phil's? Or are some of them orphans?" she asked quietly.

"Phil wishes," he chuckled. "No, his two are the lazy runts glued to the TV." He dipped his voice low. "He lost his wife a few years ago, and they moved in here. The three rascals in

snake form are Marie's," he nodded to the crèche nurse. "And Craig and Tanya are being babysat while their parents are off living highlife somewhere—"

"Skiing in Austria," a boy, presumably Craig, supplied helpfully.

"Thanks, kiddo," Andy grinned at him. "Austria. The other two have been adopted at some point. There are a few others, but they must be out running rings around their Auntie Myra. You didn't meet her. She's the artist in the house, like paintings and such. She's rarely at nest functions, but she can't keep herself from the kids."

"Wow, so this is a real birthing nest. It's nice. I'm sure the holidays here are insane."

"You have no idea." He grinned. "It's good that way. Elise doesn't have any of her own children, but she loves, indulges and spoils them. You should have seen her with Reece and Remy."

"And you?" She grinned and nuzzled Sapphire as the child grabbed at her face and planted a wet kiss on her cheek.

"I guess she indulged me, too, but I was the oldest."

"Isn't Elise mated?" she asked as she pulled away from the child.

"She used to be, but whether they truly mated or not, I'm not privy. John Merrick was the coolest, toughest man I'd ever met. A really great guy. He used to keep in touch with a few nests in South America and in and around Europe. He wanted to unify things and make it easier for the rogues and orphans and the snakes like us to travel. He didn't see why growing up safe was granted to some but denied to others. He had a lot of ideals, and he had Elise. She glowed around him. She never recovered fully from his death."

Fajer felt her heart pang at hearing that Elise's mate had died, and she hadn't even had a child to remember him by. Her own mother was gone, but her father had her, and that had helped. "That's horrible. A real bittersweet story. I feel for her." She sighed and cocked her head at Sapphire who was yawning. "I think this one needs her bed."

"And her diaper changed, but I'll let sweet Marie do that." He kissed the little one before passing her off to the nurse. "Yeah, Elise and Merrick are a real tragedy," he told her once they were out the crèche door. "But she's doing what she can to carry on his work."

"I see that. I mean I couldn't believe it that Carmen was a rogue, and Elise didn't bat an eye at it. Olivia would have had her courting the nest for at least a year before she even let her into the compound."

They walked across the hall and back to the entrance to the stairs. She looked down and gasped, seeing the mosaic from this height revealed a special scene. It was two large snakes entwined and taking up the entire bottom-floor foyer. "Holy shit."

"You like?"

"It's, well, it's stunning and such a hidden beauty." She grinned and turned to him pulling him closer.

"It's kind of like our secret. When others are down there, they have no idea what's on the floor under them." He leaned down, brushing his lips against hers.

"I love it. Adds to the charm of the place for me. So what's to the right? And upstairs? Can you tell I'm eager to see your room?"

"Nope, you're very hard to read," he answered, solemn faced. "We're outside if you wanna go do that next?"

Fajer rubbed against him and grinned. "Hell yeah. Perfect end to a perfect night, I think."

"Come on then." He took her hand, intertwining his long fingers with hers, and they started down the stairs.

Fajer got dizzy as he whisked her out of the house and around to the left side of the grounds, where a smaller version of the main house was perched at the edge of the forested grounds.

"This is my place," he said, leading her up the staircase.

The house loomed above her. Three floors like the main house, the front of the house was a mass of windows. They entered and Andrew flipped on the lights. Fajer smiled anew at what she saw. The decor was masculine in monochrome, large couches with overstuffed cushions, a large fireplace in the centre of the room with a plasma TV above it. All the furniture was plush. He'd carpeted the living room, which was sunken in and looked lush and soft, as well.

She beamed. "Wow."

"I hope you like it. We can change it if you don't."

She turned to him and smiled, realising he wouldn't think twice about changing things to make her comfortable. The truth was, she liked it. It looked homey and loved. "Hell no. I love this. It's inviting. Feels like home."

"Great, I hoped you'd like it—only don't tell Reece or Remy about the plasma or they'll come over here to watch porn or something."

"Secret is safe with me. So how many rooms has this place got? Anything cool? It looks huge from the outside. What do you need three floors for?"

"Come and see. Two guest rooms and the top floor's a master bedroom."

"The entire top floor? You're kidding!"

"Well, it does have a sunken Jacuzzi."

Fajer grinned and grabbed his hand then pulled him towards the stairs. "The rest of the place can wait. I really wanna see that bed."

"It's big enough." He stopped, pulling her towards him and into a kiss. "You were stunning today."

"Really? You know, at first, everything was overwhelming, but everyone here... I feel good here, with you, Andrew. Thank you."

"Don't mention it. I did nothing." He bent down, swinging her up into his arms. "Allow me." He carried her up the stairs as if she weighed nothing.

She giggled. "Isn't this what you're supposed to do on our wedding night?" she said then blushed.

"I'll do it then, too," he chuckled, nuzzling her.

"You proposing?" she asked and laid her head on his shoulder as he reached the top level and turned on the lights. The overhead recessed lighting and sconces blazed to life. The bed in front of them was swathed in black cotton, large and heaped with pillows in silver and blue. The walls were steel grey, and all the furniture was glass and metal. It was modern, sexy, and Fajer approved of it greatly. "Wow. Talk about sex den."

"Not that it would know. I don't have sex here. I just like my comforts." He set her down gently, his hands warm and firm on her waist.

"No?" she pouted. "You don't have sex here? That's kinda disappointing. How about in the Jacuzzi tub? Do you have sex there?" she asked with mirth.

"Mmm...don't get me wrong. I plan to." His grip tightened on her. "A lot."

She giggled and kissed him passionately. "I hope so. You promised to show me how wild you could be, Andy."

"Did I?" He smiled innocently, brushing his lips against her

He set her down, and she cocked her head then gripped the bottom of her shirt and pulled it up over her head then unbuttoned her skirt, letting it fall to the floor. She had put on her panties and now stood in front of him in her lacy bra and sexy silk underwear. "What's this do for you?"

"Wow..." He swallowed a few times, stunned.

Fajer wasn't really used to being a sex object, but her body and her snake were screaming for him, and she knew she'd have to up her ante if he was going to take the green light.

"Just wow... It's not often I'm speechless." He darted in, kissing her, his hand moving to the small of her back as he deepened the kiss. His other hand took hers and pressed it to his erection. "Feel what you do to me?"

She shuddered and nuzzled him, looking at him with her snake gaze. "Umm...I love that I can do this to you. You should feel what you do to me."

"Yeah?" He pulled back, his eyes darkening with lust as he dropped to his knees. "Sit back on the bed."

She did, slipping back and licking her lips. He kissed her knee, slowly nuzzling her legs apart, then kissed up her inner thighs. Licking a small trail along her thigh, he blew gently on the wetness.

Fajer shivered and looked down at him, her eyes flickering. "Andy?" she asked quietly and fisted the black comforter in her hands.

"Mmm?" He looked at her, moving up and kissing her through the damp satin.

"You don't have to do this," she said and bit her bottom lip. No one had ever done what he was insinuating. It wasn't safe for her before this.

"No, but I want to," he rumbled huskily, his eyes meeting hers. "You smell so tempting." He flicked his tongue out, running it over her.

Fajer gasped, the feeling like a little lightning bolt straight to her core. She still had her panties on, too.

He laid a kiss on her core before slipping off her panties and hooking her legs over his shoulders. "So beautiful," he whispered reverently before kissing her again, his tongue flicking over her clit.

Fajer arched and cried out. Nothing felt this good. Nothing. Andrew's mouth expertly played her sensitive flesh, and all she could do was writhe beneath him.

He worked her, licking a slow line over her and swirling his tongue playfully over her clit before dipping back down and thrusting into her.

She panted. "Andy...so good, please..." She didn't know what she needed, but her body was quickly skittering towards the edge.

He moaned into her, coming up to suckle hard on her clit and slipping a finger into her heat.

Fajer shattered, arching completely off the bed, wrenching the comforter from its perfect placement. She called his name, letting it die in her throat as a moan.

He stayed where he was, lapping at her gently.

"Christ," Fajer said as she sat up, looking down at her lover who looked rather at home between her thighs. "That was...shit, that was epic."

"Very." He smiled up at her, his eyes snake-like with lust. "I plan on doing that again."

"God, any time, though, I think I should return the favour."

"Later, definitely later." He crawled up next to her.

Lying there in her bra and nothing else, she frowned. "So what now, then? You're far too dressed for anything else."

"Well, that's true..." He sat up, popping his shirt buttons and kicking off his pants.

Fajer's breath caught as he once again exposed his perfect body to her. Andrew was so sexy and, she realised, completely hers. Only one more bite that would seal that.

"What's got you so serious?" He brushed a stray strand of hair from her face

She shook her head. "Nothing, Seeing you lying there all perfect. God, Andrew, I'm trying to figure out how the hell I got so lucky to be here with you now."

"I'm pretty sure I'm the lucky one." He reached over, pulling her onto his legs to casually straddle him.

Fajer smiled and shook out her hair as she reached around and unhooked her bra, letting it slip off her breasts. She threw it to the side of the big bed. "Andrew..." She smiled and blushed. "I do really want to stay with you. This is the right place for me, right here, with you."

He lifted his hands, cupping her. "Anywhere that isn't Xiolicia would suit you best. I do love you here, though, with me." His thumbs rasped over her nipples.

Fajer shivered at his touch and licked her lips. "I don't wanna be anywhere else. Now, make love to me, Andrew. I need to feel close to you. So does my snake."

"Mine too." He lifted her, slipping her down his shaft.

They made love slowly, and that was okay with her. He was attentive, his eyes never leaving hers as she rode him. Her snake coiled. Her body burned, and she exploded for her lover.

His eyes shifted, glowing and snake-like as he flipped them over and drove her hard into the bed.

Fajer gasped and wrapped her legs around his waist, her gaze matching his, yet again. He kissed her as he took her faster and with more force than before. Fajer arched and purred for him, enjoying the force, the power. He was sexy, he was creative and she got wetter the harder he took her and the more naughty things he whispered in her ear.

"That's it. Give yourself. Give it all over, baby," he whispered, finally sitting back on his knees and bringing her with him.

"Andy..." she panted and wrapped her arms around his neck, bouncing hard on his cock. "So close..."

"God, girl, so good." He bit down on her neck, not hard enough to break the skin but hard enough.

Fajer cried out and came for him, the action of him biting her sending her over the edge. Her body hugged his seductively and cradled him. She kept moving, feeling her body ripple around his. "So...so good. Andrew..."

He bit harder, pulling her fully onto him.

Fajer moaned and followed suit, her own mouth latching to his shoulder.

"That's it love, again, one big one." He redoubled his efforts, his fingers digging into her.

She arched, her breasts jutting up at him as her body took over and shattered for him once more.

He bit down breaking her skin as he came, spilling into her. His essence flowed with his seed, pushing into her, waiting for acceptance.

She moaned and bit down on his shoulder, breaking his skin, too, and wrapping her arms around him holding him close. He'd done it. He'd marked her the third time, and she felt his essence and hers mixing.

He relaxed into her, breathing heavily as they became one. "I love you."

He'd said it. He'd really said it.

"I love you, too. Funny how that happened. I barely know you," she mused and licked her mark on his shoulder. "This feels right. You feel like home."

"So do you. We are home." He kissed her lightly.

She beamed at him. "So? Mated?" She giggled. "Our snakes haven't even met."

"Something we should soon remedy."

She snuggled into him as he lay back amongst the pillows. "Can we tomorrow? She won't keep any longer than that." She nibbled his chest.

"First thing, we can't wait to show you our hunting spot. There's a spot just up stream on top of the waterfall. It's a great sunspot."

"I can't wait," she sighed and closed her eyes, her body sated, her snake satisfied to have her mate. Tomorrow would be her turn to meet his. Neither of them could wait.

Chapter Ten

A week had passed since she'd arrived, and Fajer had already carved out a niche for herself within the routine of the day within the nest. She helped get the older children off to school in the morning then played in the sunroom with the younger children, along with Chrissy and Elise. Bright, sweet and full of wonder, Chrissy and Remy's daughter, Sapphire, was a joy. Fajer could only hope her children were as amazing.

Their plans to have their hunt had been cut short. Andrew's work had called at him, and with everything that needed to be done around Knossos, they hadn't found the time. Today though, today was the day they'd set aside.

The monthly hunt was today, but Andrew had promised to take her early in the day and show her his favourite spots, and she couldn't wait. She was getting close to her change and was really excited that she could finally effect it with someone else, rather than alone like she normally had back at her old home. For the first time in her life, she would be in her snake form with someone else, and that someone else was her mate. It didn't get any better than that.

She walked into the kitchen after sending Phillip's oldest, twin girls named Lucy and Lacy, off to the bus. Phillip smiled as she entered and motioned towards the island. She went to it, seeing breakfast waiting there—eggs, cut melon and other fruits, sausage, waffles and juice.

"Morning Fajer. Girls get off okay?"

She nodded. "Has Andrew been in yet? I left him snoring softly."

"Nope. Though I don't doubt he will be. He rarely misses waffles." He winked. "Load up. Chrissy and Carmen are outside sitting in the sunshine."

"Thanks, Phil. Everything smells amazing."

Phil beamed and motioned to the carafes on the side of him. "You know where the coffee is."

Fajer loaded her plate with eggs and waffles, grabbing a piece of sausage and some cut strawberries and apricots that she put on her waffles, then moved to the coffee, taking a big cup. She poured the steaming brew then carried it out the backdoor along with her plate. She

found Chrissy and Carmen sitting in the sunshine, Carmen with a plate of fruit and sausage and a steaming cup of tea. She was sitting in the direct sunlight, as was best for a pregnant snake, basking in the heat.

Chrissy sat to the side, lounging back with some fruit in her lap. They both smiled as Fajer approached, and Chrissy sat up and moved a chair out for their new nest member.

"Morning, ladies. Carmen? How are you feeling? You look radiant." She sat and took a sip of her black coffee and sighed.

Chrissy winced. "Lord, don't get her started. I just calmed her down."

"I did not need to be calmed down," the viper snapped. "I'm swollen, and they keep fighting each other, and my bladder control is bad at best. Plus to top it all off, my so-called husband doesn't think my body will shape back after having both of them naturally," she growled. "Those words really came out of his mouth. To me. Asshole."

Chrissy smiled at Fajer. "Reece is the worst kind of asshole, but I doubt those were his exact words. Unfortunately, we won't know for a few hours as he's still recovering from the bite."

"There wasn't that much venom in it." Carmen glared up in Reece's general direction. "He deserved more, and he's sleeping on the sofa when he recovers. Fat snake that he is."

Fajer laughed. "I think he deserved it then, Carmen. Chrissy? How was your pregnancy? Did you have any complications?" She forked some of her eggs into her mouth.

"I was a little early but nothing threatening. Remy just about pissed himself though, plus the poor soul had to run around after me getting me gallons of ice cream and pickles."

"That doesn't sound so bad. When are you due, Carmen?"

"Soon, thank God. I can't wait for this all to be over." She rubbed her swollen belly. "It's been too long. I just want to meet these little monsters and let them knock lumps out of each other on their own time."

Fajer nodded. "I know they're going to be the great kids, like Sapphire." She smiled wistfully and cut her sausage, popping a piece in her mouth.

"And they'll be just as spoiled. How about you? Ever thought of having some yourself?"

"I have, but it hasn't come up yet with Andrew." She idly stroked her mating mark which was hidden under her T-shirt. They had given everyone the good news two nights after they'd mated, and Elise had broken open a very good bottle of champagne to celebrate

the last of her bachelors taking the plunge. "The honeymoon isn't over yet, you know?" she blushed.

"Nope, but if he's anything like his cousins, I'd start planning." Chrissy grinned. "It's not like it took Rem or Reece very long."

Fajer giggled and blushed harder. "I wouldn't be upset if we were, but there are things I wanna do, like see the ocean with him."

"Ah, the famous boat. I haven't seen it yet." Chrissy smiled.

"I got the impression he keeps it very much his own thing. Andrew is very private, isn't he?"

"So far as we know. Heck, we didn't think he'd ever find a mate. He's all business."

She beamed. "I'm glad he took up Olivia on her offer. Andrew is amazing."

"So are you. You're the one who's made him less surly."

Fajer laughed. "I guess so. So where are the hubbies right now? You sure Reece won't have to be taken to the emergency room?" She dug into her waffle and listened to her new nest mates talk on about their husbands.

"I'm not that venomous, and there wasn't that much venom in the bite," Carmen said. "Just enough to teach him to mind his manners. I've bitten him with a full dose once before, and it didn't kill him. I'm sure by now he's shifted and is laying on Remy's balcony sunning his big fat snake. I hope Remy's mocking him."

Fajer shook her head. "We can only hope." She finished her coffee and stood up. "I need to go and find my mate. He promised me a hunt today."

"Good luck." Chrissy grinned at her.

Fajer took her plate into the kitchen, cleaned up then walked through the backdoor and across the lawn to the guesthouse. She opened the door to see Andrew in the living room with a tall, extremely sexy blond guy who leaned against the sidewall. He was sex on legs, and his cruel smirk at her as he noticed her said he knew it.

Andrew looked up as she came over then turned back to the stranger with a frown. "This conversation's over. I'm on vacation. I'll look over things when I get back."

"And now I can see why," the man leered, his cold eyes fucking her from the distance.

Fajer shivered and smiled. "Andrew? We still on for today?" she asked in a breathy whisper.

"If not, I'll gladly step in to pick up whatever slack he's dropping."

"Hunter, down," Andy growled at him, turning to her. "'Course we're still on."

She smiled at her mate and then looked at the hot blond Andrew had called Hunter. Oh lord, he looked at her like he was. His smirk broadened to a vicious smile, and she turned back to Andrew. Hunter was simultaneously creeping her out and turning her on. "If you have something to do, we can wait 'til later, but the sun is nice this morning." She blushed.

"So nice." Hunter grinned. "I never figured you for the domestic type, Derrell, but I can almost see why. Dom will be pissed he missed this." His smile widened, the thought giving him pleasure. "So, sweet thing, what's your pleasure for the day?" His eyes flickered snakelike as he said the word pleasure.

Fajer frowned. This hot man didn't smell like a snake, yet he'd just winked at her. "My mate is taking me for a hunt today, which is well overdue."

"A hunt? One wouldn't think your mate was so..." He paused, considering the word. "Savage."

Fajer shook her head. "I'm not, but my snake is. And it's been far too long since she sat out in the sun or had a proper feed." She wrapped her body around Andrew. "So?"

"We're going hunting, love. Hunter was just leaving."

"I was, was I?"

Fajer gave him a quick look then nuzzled Andrew. "I don't care if he stays here, but he can't come on the hunt. I won't share my first shift with you with anyone—least of all, a person of indeterminate shifter heritage."

She thought she saw Hunter's eyes flash red, but it must have been a trick of the light. "Indeterminate shifter heritage? Smart, but not too bright and a little rude." His eyes narrowed at her, his whole attention focusing and assessing. "Give me a week, and I could fix those manners of hers, Derrell. It'd be child's play."

Andy hissed, stepping between them, his hand on her arm pulling her back. "Even think about touching her, and I'll end our arrangement. Your businesses and personas wouldn't even look vaguely human, then what do you think would happen?"

Hunter winced, an expression that barely touched his face for a second.

"You're not all that invincible," Andy continued. "And you'd have to go back and explain to Dominic how you managed to piss me off."

Hunter's face flushed with anger. "I don't answer to him." He took a deep breath holding it then slowly letting it back out. "I can't say I like you as a domestic virtuous

defender, however, I do need you. It's a little late for the thinking part. I've already done things to her in my mind that she couldn't dream up," he smirked, "But I won't touch her...unless she comes to me that is." His eyes flashed in another cocky snake wink.

Fajer didn't like the sound of that. She shook her head. "Don't count on it. You're pretty, but something tells me I wouldn't like the way you swing."

"No, not at first." He gave her a tight-lipped smile.

"No, not ever. Snakes mate for life."

"As do I. A life can easily be taken." He turned to Andy. "So you'll do what we need?"

"First thing in the morning." Andy nodded. "And you'll leave my mate the hell alone."

Hunter growled, waving off in her direction. "Already out of my mind."

She squeezed Andy's hand. "So now that you guys are done with your pissing contest, can we go?"

"I'm not stopping you," Hunter sneered as his phone rang. "That'll be Dom. Gotta dash." He waved as he teleported out of the sunroom, leaving an unsettling feeling behind him. Cold, like despair.

Fajer rubbed the goose bumps from her arms. "You know what? I don't wanna know. Can we get to our date, please?" She turned towards Andy and rubbed against him.

"Yep, I'd love nothing more." He kissed her, his arms wrapping around her. "I'm sorry you had to met him."

"Ooh, it was...interesting to say the least. Let's keep work at the office from now on, okay? He leaves a bad taste in my mouth, but he is very pretty."

"He and his partner are oddities best left alone." He kissed her gently. "So where were we?"

"I was whining about going for our hunt." She tugged his hand and person towards the back door. "Where are we going exactly?"

"Ah." His face lit up as he led her over the manicured lawn towards the beginning of the wilderness at the back of guesthouse. "My favourite hunting ground, somewhere where we can relax."

"And sun. You promised a sunning, too." She grinned. "So? Do we get naked here?"

"You know, I'm never going to answer 'no' to that question."

"And I won't ever say 'no'." She winked and lifted her T-shirt over her head, throwing it over on a side bush then stepped out of her shorts. She'd known she was going to have a

hunt today, so she'd worn as little clothes as possible. She stretched and moaned. "Umm...this is going to feel so good."

He watched her, his gaze hotly raking over her. "You're perfect." He took off his shirt.

"You really think so? You know, I think I like not wearing knickers," she teased.

"I can't complain about it, either." He stepped into her, kissing her, his hands moving between her thighs. "Mmm...and so wet..."

Fajer shivered, and this time it was from desire. "Umm...start that and we won't get to any kind of hunting." She leaned into his hand. Regardless of her words, her body burned for his touch, burned to be pleased by him. Andrew's hands were skilled and worked her deftly but slowly, pleasing her but not heightening her need.

"We need to hunt. I can feel your snake." He kissed her sweetly on the lips.

"And I can feel yours, lurking. I really want that introduction." She lay down on the sun-warmed grass and grinned to him. "Show me?"

"Oh yeah." He gave her an excited grin before quickly shedding the rest of his clothes.

Fajer's snake came to attention, wanting to experience this as well. She wiggled her toes in the sunshine. "I can't wait."

He stretched out and began his shift, changing fluidly from his normal six-foot man shape into a bulky ten-foot boa. He was a pale grey with rusty-red markings, giving the appearance of darker grey circles moving down his back. That was until one got to his tail where the grey turned into the richest, deepest red she could imagine, banding his tail, a total contrast to the grey. He rolled over, completing his change and flicking out his tongue to taste the air between them and playfully show her his opaque white belly scales.

Fajer was completely in love, and so was her snake. The man was sexy, and his snake was magnificent. He was colourful, so much better looking than any of the other snakes she had seen at Xiolicia and bigger. His eyes watched her, the green and gold shining at her. So beautiful, she really was a lucky woman.

Andrew lifted his head, and she smiled, crooking her finger to beckon him. He began to move closer, and she flattened her foot on the ground, leaving her leg cocked. "Goddamn it, Andy baby, you are hot...and quite a big boy, but we knew that." She winked down to him and licked her lips. "I want to feel your scales on my skin."

He tasted her again then slowly made his way up her leg, coiling tenderly around her.

Fajer arched and moaned. He felt so good, his weight a welcome addition to her body. He coiled around her waist, his head sliding up her chest between her breasts.

"So sexy, baby, and all mine."

Yours, he agreed in her head, *my mate*. He brought himself fully onto her, his cool scales soaking in her heat and the heat from the sun.

His voice was clear, if a bit echoed. He father had told her that when speaking telepathically with another snake, it had to grow, like a bond, but that bond came quickly with mates. Fajer hoped that was so. She stroked his bulk, giggling as he scented the air around them, his tongue tickling her skin. "I feel like Eve in the garden, except I'm being tempted with a sexy snake instead of an apple. I can't wait to wake up to you all curled in our bed like this." She stroked his head again and gave a contented sigh at the thought. "So should I join you?"

Please, I'm dying to see you, he sent to her mind, their telepathic link getting stronger with every word they spoke to each other. She knew once she changed over to her snake form, there would be no fuzziness. Everything would be clear and perfect.

"Umm...well then you'll have to move back a little. She's a bit nervous."

He nodded once before slithering back off of her and giving her some space.

Fajer sighed then stretched, affecting her change. In moments, she went from her normal lithe five-foot-nine form to her snake self, a black, silver and orange reticulated python. She stretched out, gaining her full seven-foot length and lifted her head to him, her violet and silver eyes seeking him out. She scented him and tentatively moved closer, nervous of his reaction.

You're beautiful, he told her, his voice full of awe as he moved closer to her.

Really? she asked with a slight tremor in her voice. It meant a lot to her that he accepted her snake side. Only four others had seen her this way: her father, her aunt and her cousins Ryan and Anya. They were the only people she had ever felt safe with, the only people she had ever relaxed with. Now, she wouldn't have to be on guard for any kind of accident. Andrew wouldn't ever hurt her.

Very, so vibrant and colourful. May I? He asked permission before touching her.

She moved closer. *Of course. I want you to cuddle me.*

He wrapped around her, immediately holding her in his warming coils.

Fajer sighed and snuggled closer, her body wrapped with her mate. *Andrew, you're amazing. So beautiful and strong. I feel so safe with you.*

I won't let anyone hurt you. I promise. His tongue flashed out on her the side of her face, his version of a snake kiss. *Come on. I'll show you my place.* He tightened on her as a hug before letting go and moving towards the dark line of trees.

Fajer followed behind him for little while as she took in the sights and sounds of her new hunting grounds. It was so beautiful. The underbrush was perfect for their bulk, giving just enough shade and trapping the heat in small pockets. She felt the small lives of the forest dwellers that scampered away and the larger entities that kept their distance just out of striking distance. The trees looked perfect for climbing, something she had once or twice done on the prickly Joshua trees back home. It never felt good, like she knew it was supposed to. Now, she would have to try again. She looked to her mate who was just ahead of her and came up beside him. *You know, love, you are the sexiest snake I have ever seen.*

Good thing you mated me then, his voice came as a chuckle as they moved to a little stream then followed it upwards. *We're at the very edge of the perimeter. Nobody ever comes up this way.*

She took a look around with her snake senses and was in awe. It was so much nicer than she could ever have hoped it would be. Large trees with tons of shade, soft and spongy, loamy ground and long cool grass. This was the environment she'd longed for, and now she had it, along with a mate to share it with. *It's stunning, Andy. I'm...wow. It's like a dream.*

Far more lush than your old hunting grounds, and you haven't seen the best bit yet. He led her to a clearing where the water pooled, rushing down from a fall. *It's the largest waterfall here. There are a few deeper pools down stream, but I'm not much for swimming,* he told her as he slithered his way up a worn path to take her to the top of the fall. There was a large grass ledge overlooking most of the forest and grounds.

She settled and gasped in her mind. She could see quite far. They were about fifteen feet from the forest floor and about canopy level with many of the elms and oaks that dotted the landscape. *This is magnificent. I can see why you love it so much. Thank you, love, for sharing it with me.*

I wouldn't share it with anyone else. You're my mate. I love you, Fajer.

Passion and contentment radiated through her brain at his words. She turned to him and slithered closer, coiling about him. *I love you, too, Andy. I don't think I could have mated with a better man.*

Me neither, he hissed and chuckled, *but then I'm biased.*

Of course, you are, baby. She sighed and rested her head on his. The need to actually hunt had diminished. Both she and her snake were in agreement that they needed this time with Andrew, to connect on their basest level. Everything was working out so well, this man cared for her and showed her every minute of every day why they were meant to be together. *I don't feel like hunting today. Just lying here with you in the sunshine, is that okay?*

Fine by me. I had a big breakfast, and my snake's content to finally be with you.

Mine, too. We are going to have beautiful children. She offered with a chuckle. *So now that we have this wonderful day on deck, what about the boat? Soon?*

Mmm...yes, I'd love to show you the ocean. We can laze out on the deck.

That sounds like heaven. The water and you. Thank you, baby, for bringing me here. Everything is so amazing. My mum would have loved it here.

He coiled around her tightly in a reassuring hug. They sat in the sunshine in silence for a while, soaking up the rays and enjoying nature. She heard all the smaller animals about, as if they knew that they weren't to be wary today. There was no threat around. Andrew's bulk moved every so often, to get closer to her then to give them more room to move. Soon enough, the sun started to go down, and she lazily lifted her head. *I think our day is over, love. How long have we been out here?*

Long enough to miss dinner. I'm sure Phil has left us something though.

She realised her human self was hungry, but her snake was content still. *Then let's get back. I need to snuggle with my mate.* She giggled and sent the image of her riding him on their big bed. *Should we change back?*

Not if we want to get out of the forest before full dark. I'm taking you the second you change back over.

Fajer giggled and started slithering down the embankment towards the forest floor with purpose. *Well, then I guess we better get back quickly. I don't want the trees here to wear battle scars from my nails. We need to do this once a week, though. I love the tranquillity. It's like the quiet of the desert and the lushness of a forest all in one. Perfection.*

Next time we'll head out at dawn, and we can spend all day here, in both forms.

Thoughts of what they would do here in their own perfect Eden coloured her musings. *Deal, baby. The thought of playing in this paradise with you makes me giddy.*

Great, I'm holding you to that now. Come on before it gets dark, and we get sidelined by one of the deer. As they both reached the ground level he held her tail with his. The action was possessive, comforting and conveyed everything he felt for her in both form.

Fajer giggled. *Yes, dear.*

Epilogue

Three weeks later

Fajer stood on the deck of *Serpent's Folly* and looked out towards the horizon. Andrew was at the wheel, steering them towards Cape Cod. He'd mentioned a sweet little lobster shack just down the way from the dock and wouldn't take no for an answer. Fajer had never tasted lobster, but he promised that it was the single most divine food on the face of the planet. She wasn't averse to trying new things, and since he had yet to steer her wrong...

She loved being out on the ocean with him. The boat was amazing, and she was loath to leave it even for lunch. She could just sail away with him on it, but she knew after awhile she would miss the nest she had come to adore. She was accepted there, loved even, and there was no fear, well not for her. Reece had a healthy fear of his mate, but she supposed that was the only way to deal with the reprobate.

Things at home were progressing well. Carmen was still scrappy, and once Chrissy had found out Fajer wanted to learn how to snowboard, they began planning a trip for December to Vermont. Fajer was happy to finally have a family she could do things with and not worry about accidentally taking a fang to the arm. There was so much to look forward to.

Especially with Andrew. As a mate, he was proving to be everything she had wanted. Most mornings she woke up to a voracious lover intent on pleasing her within an inch of her life, and since their first change, she'd woken up to her very sexy mate in snake form, lying next to her or slithering up her leg. He would wake her, snuggle to her and they would lay there as she stroked him serenely in the morning sunshine. It was so perfect. He took courting her seriously. Even though they had already mated, he wasn't ready yet to propose. Which was fine with her, she wasn't in any rush. He let her be herself, and for that she was grateful.

She had started thinking of what she was going to do with her days, and had yet to decide anything, but she had time now, and a very wealthy mate who didn't mind her being a lady of leisure. She needed something to be passionate about though, so she was still exploring her options.

She turned from the fast-approaching land to her mate who looked so sexy in the sunshine wearing his short-sleeved button up shirt in a stunning sage green and white linen pants. She smiled at him, and he motioned to her to join him. She went with a spring in her step, her arms going around his waist from behind.

"So, you going to let me drive one of these days?" she asked as he turned around and wrapped an arm around her waist, bringing her to the wheel. He then surrounded her from behind, cutting off the slight breeze that had been making the hem of her sundress sway. She looked at both their arms on the wheel, his a gorgeous tan that her skin was quickly becoming as well. Another day or two on the water and she would be the same healthy shade. She was looking forward to it. Her snake loved its new environment, appreciated that it was temperate and was becoming more of a part of her every day. It was happy, and it adored Andy and his snake so much. She'd never thought she would find something like that for herself.

"Drive away, love," he whispered into her ear through the sounds of the roaring wind.

She shivered, his words sliding through her like a caress. She steered, with his help of course, and whooped with laughter and excitement when he let her help him pull into port. He had been teaching her all the parts of the boat but had held back on letting her drive 'til now. It was fun, exhilarating, but pulling into port had proved a little scary. She told him as much.

"I couldn't have done better myself." He kissed her then hopped up onto the dock, offering her his hand. "Besides nothing could have gone wrong."

She grinned. "I love that you didn't tell me I suck. I'm not trying that alone any time soon. So? Why did we have to come in for lunch? We could have just spent some time in bed again, eating fruit off each other and drinking Asti."

"You should have given me that option before we turned in." He laughed. "But seriously, we're here for lobster."

"So you said when you started to steer us towards shore. They look like little monsters, baby."

"Which taste like heaven. It hasn't escaped me that they look like bugs, either, but you can't beat the taste. Plus you have to work to get to the meat."

"Working for my meal?" She pouted. "That hardly seems fun."

"Then let me work for you and feed you the meat. I promise you won't be disappointed."

That sounded like a fine idea. Andrew set up the gangplank, and they crossed from the boat to the dock. They strolled, his arm around her waist, his fingers stroking her side through the soft cotton of her sundress. They passed several small vendors, selling everything from fresh fish to beach knickknacks. She would look later, after their feast of sea dwelling little monsters and hopefully some strong beer. She snuggled to him as they walked, laying her head on his shoulder, her hair flowing around her and cushioning his shoulder as she rested there.

They made it to the restaurant a little while later, and Fajer looked over the building with a little apprehension. "Now, baby, don't get me wrong, I'm an adventurous girl, and I'm really looking forward to having you feed me lobster, but that building doesn't look like it would stand up if a stiff breeze hit it. You sure we're in the right place?"

"I am." He grinned down at her teasingly. "Besides there's not much of a breeze here today. You'll be perfectly safe."

She smirked and pinched him. "Don't be cheeky."

"I'll try my best," he answered solemnly, once again leading her towards the lobster shack.

Fajer caressed his side with her fingers then ducked under the overhang of the building and stepped into the room, her senses assaulted by three things. One, the thick scent of butter and what she could only imagine was the aforementioned lobster that had her mouth watering. Two, the dust motes that tickled her nose. And three, the scream that assailed her ears when both she and Anya caught sight of each other. The other woman rose from the table and ran to her. Fajer looked at Andrew and smiled.

"You did this?" she said.

Andrew smiled somewhat smugly, nodding his hello to Ryan. Fajer barely had time to notice as Anya launched herself at her, hugging her fiercely.

"You perfect man!" Fajer said and winked at her mate, then snuggled her cousin. "Anya! This is fantastic! Ryan!" She grinned at her older cousin who was just now walking forward. He clasped Andrew's hand and smiled.

"We missed you so much," Anya said with another hug before dragging her to the table. "Or I missed you at least. He," she jabbed a thumb in Ryan's direction, "just wanted to

shut me up, though he missed you a little. Apparently, my man-of-action big brother likes this boating stuff. He can work them, too. A man of many talents." She grinned. "If I wasn't so darned beautiful, I'd be jealous. So how are you? Spill," she demanded. "Is everyone treating you well? I don't have to go and threaten anyone in my usual caustic way?"

Fajer laughed and sat next to her cousin. "Everyone is fantastic to me." She turned her head a little to show off her mating mark. "Andy and I are fantastic. It's been a very freeing experience leaving Xiolicia. I love my new nest. Everyone is so nice, and it's a breeding nest, Anya! They even let the babies change early here. So many little children! You need to come visit!"

Anya's lip curled up when Fajer mentioned children, but she nodded happily. "I'd love to. It'll be great to see you in your new environment."

Fajer beamed as Andrew sat next to her, and Ryan next to his sister. "And Ryan, you have to come, too."

Ryan nodded. "Of course. Once we get back to New York, we're going to spend the rest of the month with you guys. Andy set it up with Elise. You look radiant, Fajer. Better than I have ever seen you."

Fajer blushed. "Mated life suits me."

"Much better than that prison did." Anya beamed, sipping her drink.

"I'm just grateful to have you with me," Andy said to Fajer.

She leaned in and kissed him. "So? What about these lobsters? And beers? You promised beers."

"And that you shall have, my love." He stood. "Ryan? Can I get you guys anything?"

"I'll come with you. Let them catch up." He stood and looked at Anya. "Beer?"

"Dark and foamy please." She grinned sweetly at her brother.

He chuckled and sauntered away with Andrew, leaving them alone. Fajer looked at Anya and grinned. "We got a few minutes. Tell me what's been going on?"

She shook her head. "Not much juicy gossip, I'm afraid. If Olivia's pissing a fit, I don't know about it. We've been moving around a lot, though, much to big brother's distaste. You know how he's a social butterfly and all. I'm keeping in touch with my dreamy lion man."

Fajer thought back and picked his name out of her memory. "So things with Rob are progressing even though you're playing gypsy with Ryan?" She smiled.

"Yeah." Her face lit up, not unlike the way Fajer's own did when she spoke of Andy. "He's very good to me. He's patient and strong willed — stronger than me, I think. I think he loves me." She blushed, a gesture Fajer hadn't thought Anya capable of.

"No shit? Well, that's good news. And hey, Ryan will be happy with whatever you choose. You need to tell him at some point. Now, how far is Rob's pride from New York? We can figure a way for him to see you, I think."

"Already taken care of. He's been following us around, and his pride isn't too far from here, either. I've met them already, they're," she wrinkled her nose, "stuffy but accepting. His sire's a pain in the ass, but then, what alpha isn't a bully? No one's as bad as Liv." She grinned. "I'll tell Ryan soon. I'm just waiting for my moment. I think, in a way, he'll be grateful to go back to Xiolicia."

"Maybe. Ryan is a soldier first and foremost. And maybe knowing you'll be close to me will be a good thing, too. I mean, if it comes down to it, I'm sure Elise would take you in as a nest member, so you can have a home base in case..."

"In case what?" Anya asked sharply, with a frown.

"I don't know." Fajer shrugged then smiled.

"Me, neither. No offence but I'd rather not join your breeding nest. I'm fine on my own and perfectly capable of handling anything that comes my way." She smiled happily. "We want different things, cousin, and it looks like we're going to get them."

"Agreed. Just promise me you won't be a stranger, okay?"

"Wild horses couldn't keep me away. Now, sexy lions are a different matter. I can't wait for you to meet him."

"Same here. He sounds great and good for you." She looked up to see her mate and her cousin walking back with two trays laden with lobsters, beers and little bubbling pots of butter. She licked her lips. "My God, that smells like heaven."

Andy grinned at her. "Having second thoughts about the monster thing?" he asked setting down his tray and settling in beside her.

She looked down and frowned. "I was, but it really looks like a monster sitting there all red and clawy."

"Ah well, allow me to help you." He broke off a claw, expertly freeing the meat from the shell. He dipped it in some butter and held it up to her lips. "Taste," he said with a cocky grin that said he knew she was going to love it.

Even though the action was extremely personal, and sexy, it didn't seem to bother either of them. She opened her mouth, and he placed the bit of meat on her tongue then she closed her lips around his fingers, ticking the pads with the tip of her tongue. Flavour burst in her mouth as he pulled his fingers out, the buttery-garlic taste sliding around her mouth. She chewed the meat slowly and moaned. "Good lord..."

"Good?" His grin widened.

"You have sold me, love. They are good little monsters."

"Delicious ones." He kissed her, his tongue catching a dribbling piece of butter.

Ryan laughed. "God, the two of you are so in love it's kinda disgusting." He smiled and handed Anya her lobster and drink.

Fajer turned and grinned at Ryan. "It is what you wanted for me, isn't it, cousin? 'Blissfully happy' I believe you called it? Well, I am."

Ryan nodded. "And I hoped as much."

"And it's still a little disgusting," Anya said with a wink in her direction. "It looks good on the two of you, you both glow."

They sat and ate in relative silence, Andrew alternately feeding Fajer and himself from both the lobsters in front of him. She didn't once get her hands dirty, but her mate was getting quite worked up, his eyes flickering to his snake gaze every time her tongue caressed his fingertips.

"Just so you know, I fully intend to teach you how to do your own lobster so you can feed me one day."

"Deal, baby, though I think we should do that back on the boat in bed. Less chance of getting clothes all messy." She winked, and Ryan almost spit out the beer he was drinking.

Anya whistled low, hammering on her own lobster unsuccessfully.

"Tempting." Andy grinned back at her. "We'll have to get some to go, then."

Fajer giggled. They would indeed. Fifteen minutes later, the four of them were sitting there, fat and happy, and on their second round of drinks.

"So have you heard much from Olivia?" Ryan asked Andy and looked on as Andy held Fajer close to him and sipped his beer.

"Not much. Elise sent word that Fajer and I had mated, and Marco sent a lovely 'dowry', this beautifully restored nineteen-sixty-seven, two-seater Jaguar, along with a mating gift of a week in Belize. Not too bad." He smirked.

"Not bad," Anya commented, bringing her feet up under her to get comfier.

"But other than that, Olivia sent her congratulations. You guys?"

Ryan nodded. "She called for an update on Anya. I told her we were looking at schools. Anything to keep her placated. We are away and happy. If I have to keep lying to her, I will. I did make a promise."

"Yes, you did, you social butterfly you." Anya beamed at him. "Plus, I'm actually looking at schools. I figure an education can't be all that bad a thing."

Ryan smiled.

Fajer sat listening to her family talk and sighed. Everything was working out so well for everyone. Andy was the best thing to happen to all of them. Soon enough, the sun started to go down, and they said their goodbyes outside of the restaurant shack. She hugged her cousins and promised they would meet up at the boat dock at Cornwall on the Hudson to make their way to Knossos West together. Andrew steered her back towards *Serpent's Folly* and held her close as they walked.

"We'll come back soon," he promised, kissing her ear.

"Umm...we'd better. This was a beautiful trip, Andrew. Thank you. And thank you for the surprise. I'm glad they will be meeting us to visit. You seriously are the most amazing man on the face of the planet."

"I try but I don't think I'm quite there yet." They walked down the gang plank and he helped her off onto the boat.

"No? Why not?" she asked as he handed her the wrap that was sitting on the hatch.

"Because my motives weren't at all altruistic." His hands, that had been resting securely on her waist, slid up to cup her breasts, kneading them.

She giggled. "No? A hidden agenda?"

"Indeed..." He kissed her ear again trailing his lips, kissing feather-light down her neck.

She arched into him and shivered. "Umm... Naughty mate. We staying here tonight or casting off?"

"Casting off. We do have to make it back to meet Ryan and Anya."

"Umm...well, it will have to be after." She hooked her leg around his hip and slid her hand from his waist to the front of his pants then cocked her head, feeling something not normally there.

"What is it?" he asked her, looking puzzled.

"Got me. It's *your* pocket," she said and slipped her hand inside.

"Take it out." He smiled faintly.

"Take what out exactly?" She skirted her fingers against his erection then pulled the tiny, double-sided shell from his pocket. She looked at him with a question in her eyes.

"Open it up."

She did as he asked. Her eyes widened with what she saw.

He grinned, taking her shaking hands in his as he got down on one knee. "Fajer, my mate, I love you more and more each day. You help me look forward to tomorrow. I want you to marry me so we can wake up every day wrapped in each other's scents." He held the ring up to her. "Say yes."

She blinked at the ring, sitting in their hands. Large, glittery and perfect, it was more than she ever deserved. "Andrew, you didn't need to do this. I'm yours, baby. I have been since you kissed me in my bedroom. I love you. And I can't say no to this ring." She grinned. "Chrissy is going to be jealous." She winked and looked down at him. "Yes, baby, always yes."

He stood, wrapping his arms around her. "I've been yours since I first caught your scent. I love you, always."

She kissed him hard and jumped up into his arms wrapping her legs around his waist. Her hand travelled down his stomach and grasped him through his pants and she moaned. "So put the ring on me, so I can take this out and we can celebrate."

Andrew held her close then slipped the ring on her finger with a sweet kiss on her lips. "Done. Now about that celebrating..."

About the Authors

Stella and Audra Price are sisters who have always shared their love of writing, even as children. Now in their twenties, they have created a complete world from the voices in their heads which they have deemed the Eververse. They both have similar interests in makeup, horror movies, dogs and a love of a good bottle of wine; they rarely disagree, unless it's over the last glass of that wine.

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