



**Arkan's Bride**

Davida McLea

(c) 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-596-1

# **Arkan's Bride**

Davida McLea

Published 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-596-1

Published by Liquid Silver Books, imprint of Atlantic Bridge Publishing, 10509 Sedgegrass Dr, Indianapolis, Indiana 46235. Copyright © 2009, Davida McLea. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books  
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:  
[raven@LSbooks.com](mailto:raven@LSbooks.com)

Editor  
Vikky Bertling

Cover Artist  
Christine M. Griffin

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

## **Blurb**

Donna Kidwell has always known she is different. Left on the steps of her adopted parents' home, she yearned to find her birth parents and finally know where she belongs. When the Kidwells are killed in a fiery crash and Donna discovers the truth of her birth, she turns her back on her mysterious past and prepares to make a life with her fiancé Ethan.

Arkan of the Fae has waited for his promised bride for 21 years. She not only holds his heart, she holds the salvation of the Fae and all of Culatheed in her hands. When he finds her engaged to another man, he finds room in his heart for both Donna and Ethan.

Ethan has loved Donna for as long as he can remember. When another Arkan shows up to claim her as his own, Ethan refuses to step aside, becoming entangled in a love affair he never imagined.

The three forge a bond that can't be torn apart as they return to Culatheed to save the Fae from destruction at the hands of the Gwylla.

Molten Silver Kinks: Ménage, anal sex

## Prologue

The babe was three days old and had yet to cry her first tear. Her clear violet eyes peered out from under dark eyelashes, piercing her mother's heart with a wisdom that was far too ancient to reside in the body of such a small child. When her mother's fat tear plopped on the baby's forehead, she wrinkled her nose in displeasure, but did not whimper.

"She knows it is useless to cry," Aine said. "You should know this, too, Roane. Tears will get you nowhere."

Roane cuddled the baby closer to her heart and moved nearer to the fire. The old seer was right, of course. Roane had cried an ocean of tears since the death of her husband, and none of them had brought him back, or saved her infant from danger. But still, she could not stop the tears.

"Roane has suffered greatly these last months." Mara, Roane's best friend, dropped to the stone bench beside Roane and pulled her dark head down to her shoulder. "She has lost her mate before her child was even born. The skies are darkening over Culatheed, Aine. We all feel it. Someone as sensitive as Roane, someone who has suffered so great a loss, should be permitted the luxury of tears."

The old sorceress shrugged. "Weakness will only cause her more grief. We have all suffered, and will suffer more." She picked up her staff and tapped it three times on the ground. "Bring the babe to me. It is time for the naming."

"How can we have a naming ceremony without her father?" Roane's last word became a sob. "Aeryn is gone, and my child will have no name."

"I will stand in Aeryn's stead." Mara's husband stood tall, overshadowing the tiny Aine. He held his own son easily in his hands. "I will be her guardian if you would permit me the honor, Roane."

Roane was silent for a moment before nodding sadly. "Thank you, Daoine." Daoine gave her an encouraging smile and handed his own son, Arkan, to Mara. Roane placed the girl-child in Daoine's hands and took her place on the right side of Daoine, facing Aine.

Aine's face settled into harsh lines as she placed her gnarled hands on the infant's head. Her eyes rolled back up in her skull and her body trembled violently. A blue-green glow flared from around her small frame. "This child will be the Fae Regent on the twenty-first anniversary of her birth." Daoine nodded with a smile while Roane gasped. "She will rule Culatheed, with her mate, Arkan, at her side." A small flicker of hope flared inside Roane. Her daughter would be joined to the son of her oldest and dearest friend. Even without her father, the babe would have a full family with Roane, Daoine, Mara and her mate, Arkan, to show her great love.

Roane's hope was short lived. The oracle's voice deepened and went gravel-harsh. "Donella will be her name, and she will be in grave danger. As long as the regent Gwyllion rules Culatheed, Donella will never be safe. Her blood will be on the hands of the Gwylla race." With the final pronouncement, Aine released her hold on Donella and fell like a stone to the floor.

Roane looked at Daoine, still holding her precious daughter. His entire focus was on

the babe, his forehead wrinkled in concentration. The entire future of Culatheed rested with Donella. "The babe must be hidden. It is not safe for her to roam Culatheed," Daoine said. Roane fell to her knees, sobbing harder than ever. "There is a place in the grove where we can take her." Daoine's voice rose over the sound of Roane's cries. Mara was trying to comfort her, but it was no use. "My mother lives there still, away from all of Culatheed. She will raise Donella until she is of age. We cannot allow Gwyllion to find her. It would be the death of all the Fae."

Had there ever been a Fae suffer more, Roane thought. Stripped of her husband, now a killing curse was on her daughter. Suddenly, she had a flash of insight as bright as that from any sorcerer. She would not live to see Donella reach womanhood. The revelation was not painful. She would be with Aeryn soon, and her daughter would be well taken care of. The only regret is that Donella would never remember her mother. "You're right," she said. "But give her to me. I would hold her one last time."

Daoine placed Donella in Roane's thin arms and helped her to her feet. "Come quickly. We must hurry. Gwyllion undoubtedly knows that the Fae Regent has been named. As long as we remain here, the babe is not safe."

\*

The three adults made their way down Aine's mountain under cover of night, hoping to make it to safety before morning. Roane's tears had ceased. Her silence and the hollowness of her eyes scared Daoine more than all of her crying. Her feet shuffled down the side of the mountain. The effort to pick up her legs to take proper steps was too much for her. She stumbled once, but Daoine caught Roane by the arm and pulled her upright. "Are you well, Roane?"

Roane moaned and shook her head. "So tired," she gasped. She went down on her knees and swayed as her eyes rolled back. Her arms went slack and Donella fell from her hands. Daoine dove and caught the infant before she hit the ground, but he was not fast enough to save Roane. She tumbled down the side of the mountain, her body twisting and cracking as it hit the jagged rocks. She landed against the trunk of a tree with a sickening crunch. Donella stirred in Daoine's arms and her anguished cry floated on the wind.

Mara crawled down the side of the mountain, desperate to reach her friend's body. Just as she reached her hands out to Roane, a Gwylla dove at the body from behind the tree. He picked up Roane's body, threw it over his shoulder and jumped away from Mara. "The babe is next," he sneered before bolting down the side of the mountain with Roane.

Daoine looked at the precious bundle in his arms and knew that she would never be safe in their world. She would have to be hidden, secreted away where Gwyllion and her minions couldn't touch her. The future of Culatheed and the Fae rested on the shoulders of the tiny babe.

## Chapter One

Donna Kidwell gently fingered the thick yellowed parchment and tried to make sense of the words:

*My dear Mr. and Mrs. Kidwell, I have watched you for many months and know of your longing for a child. You are good people and I know Donella will be safe with you. Please care for her and love her as if she were your own, for she is a true Queen and all of my hope lies with her. I hope to return for her soon.—Daoine*

Donna sat cross-legged on the rich brown leather sofa that had belonged to her mother and re-read the adoption papers. Robert Burgess, her parents' lawyer and longtime friend, sat across from her in the chair that would always be her father's, worry creasing his forehead. Goosebumps pimply her flesh in spite of the flames roaring in the fireplace.

"Now you know," Burgess said, his voice as mournful as his old gray eyes. "Now you know why Jeanne never wanted you to see the papers."

Donna's adoption was never a secret. Even if her mother and father never told her, Donna would have figured it out. While both of her parents were tall and robust with strong features and open, good-natured faces, Donna had always been small for her age, with thin limbs, thick black hair and upturned violet eyes. As much as she loved her parents, she knew from a young age that she didn't belong. When she started searching for her birth mother at fourteen, Jeanne was hysterical.

"Why?" she cried out. "Haven't we been good parents? Why can't we be enough?" But Donna could never explain how lonely and out of place she felt when she looked in the mirror. Finally, when Donna reached her eighteenth birthday she walked into Robert Burgess' office and begged him for her adoption papers. He refused and immediately called her mother. After hours of pleading and crying, Jeanne had finally agreed that Donna could see the file, but not until after Jeanne's death. So Donna sat clutching a tissue, surrounded by memories of the only parents she ever knew. Her eyes were red-rimmed and raw, torn between grief and disbelief.

Donna gasped and bit back the sobs that threatened to break through. "No, I had a right to know. I had a right to see this." It would have been easier to take if Jeanne was sitting next to her, supporting her, drying her tears. But even as she pictured the scene, Donna knew that she would have been comforting Jeanne, not the other way around. Jeanne was always hysterical at any mention of Donna's adoption, and now Donna knew why.

The legal papers spelled it all out, and Donna finally understood why her mother was so insistent that they remain secret. There were news clippings detailing the foundling left on the doorstep of one of Abbottsville's most prominent families. That explained why Steve had left a profitable family business behind and moved his wife and new daughter to southern Louisiana. They were running from Daoine, running from the woman who was so desperate that she left Donna in a basket just days after her birth. Jeanne, who had been so desperate for a child, would never give up her daughter.

Legal papers made up the majority of the file. The state tried to claim Donna, but the Kidwell's went to court to fight for custody of the child left in their care. A tear snaked its

way down Donna's paper-white face and plopped on the note, smearing her name. "Donella," she whispered. Her name had been Donella. The odd name reverberated inside her. It felt right and familiar.

She shuffled through the rest of the papers, cataloging the Kidwell's many, many attempts to find her birth mother, but none of them had turned up the slightest trace of Daoine.

Her parents were dead and the mysterious woman who gave birth to her was long gone.

Except for her fiancé, Ethan, Donna was alone.

She closed the file and bit her lip. It was all in the past. All Donna had now was her future with Ethan. She knew the hole in her heart would never close, but she couldn't dwell on the mother who thought so little of her that she would leave her to strangers. "It doesn't matter now." Donna's voice was barely above a whisper. "It's over."

Burgess leaned over and patted her knee. "That's my girl." He gave her a small smile. "Jeanne would be so proud. She only wanted to spare you the pain and hurt. But you've handled this beautifully."

Donna wiped her tears away and gave him a weak smile. "Well, obviously I'm a survivor. Besides, Jeanne and Steve Kidwell were my parents. This woman, this Daoine, means nothing." But even as she said it, she felt the grief for the woman she never knew squeeze her chest until she found it difficult to draw a full breath.

Donna walked the older man to the door and accepted his departing hug gratefully. "If there is anything you need, anything at all, don't hesitate to ask." Donna nodded, but didn't trust her voice enough to speak.

She closed the door after the lawyer left and willed herself not to cry. *Crying won't do you any good.* And she was tired of crying. She had cried since her parents' accident, cried through the funeral, cried over her adoption papers. All the tears in the world can't change what is, she thought. With a sigh, she pushed her body away from the door and stumbled into the living room, still expecting to see her father sitting in his easy chair. Instead, all that waited for her was the file Burgess left. On impulse, she scooped up the papers, walked to the fireplace and threw them into the flames. She would honor Jeanne's wishes and forget about her past.

Donna watched in satisfaction as the fire consumed the papers, but the note from Daoine did not burn. On impulse, she reached in and snatched the letter from the flames. It was hot to the touch, but was not blackened from the heat. She folded the note and pressed it to her lips as fresh tears stung her eyes. She felt like she was betraying Jeanne to keep the note, but it was all Donna had of the woman who had given her up. A new chapter in her life was starting, one where she could build her own family with Ethan, but she had to hold onto who she was, even if she didn't quite know how.

\* \* \* \*

Arkan stood in the corner of Donella's bedroom, just far enough to keep him from reaching out and touching her cheek as she slept. He had waited long for this day, the day when his bride celebrated the 21st anniversary of her birth, the day he could finally claim what had been promised to him, but he had not envisioned the fiery crash that claimed the life of Jeanne and Steven Kidwell.

Donella tossed in her sleep and Arkan saw that she still clutched the letter his father

left when he brought the future Regent to the Kidwells. Tears continued to stream down her pale cheeks, even in sleep. In his mind's eye, he wiped them from her face and watched as she stirred. He pulled back, knowing that even though he had not physically touched her, she could sense his presence. His fingertips tingled as though he had laid them against her soft skin. It was the first time he felt her flesh, had touched even briefly the woman who was bound to him from the moment of her birth.

Arkan knew it was reckless, but that one magical touch ignited a fire inside his heart that would consume him if he ignored it. He stepped back further into the shadows and strengthened the cloaking glamour around him so that even if Donella were to awaken, she would see nothing but the shadows cast by the moonlight. He separated his soul from his body and sent his spirit to her.

Arkan lowered himself to her bed and lowered his mouth to Donella. She opened her lips as he felt his soul kiss her gently. He dipped his tongue into her warm mouth, eager for just a small taste of her. His cock hardened when Donella opened her mouth wider, inviting him deeper. He ached to walk across the room and cover her with his body, but he contented himself with loving her with nothing more than his will. Carefully, he pushed up the thin t-shirt that she wore to bed. Her breasts were small and round, lovely to see. Her pink nipple was sweet on his tongue and he sighed with the pleasure of it. "Oh, Donella," he whispered. "I've dreamed of this for so long."

Donella arched her back as Arkan softly swirled his tongue over her nipple. Her eyelids fluttered, but she did not wake. He watched her face for any sign of awareness, but she was lost in a world of dreams, maybe dreaming of the three days she spent in Culatheed before being ripped from her home and left to live among the humans. His thumbs caught the edge of her panties and pulled them just far enough for his hand fit between her thighs. She was beautiful, his Donella, every bit the princess. Even her pussy was beautiful. His mouth watered at the thought of tasting her, but it was too risky. Yet he couldn't come so far without taking something of Donella with him.

Arkan bit his lip to stifle his own moan when a gasp escaped Donella's lips as he eased his finger inside her pussy. Even asleep, she was wet and ready for him. It would be wonderful to sink his cock deep inside her, to feel her hips buck against him as he fucked her. All in good time. He would content himself with feeling her clit beneath his fingers. He rubbed the hard nub lightly, enraptured as her face turned red and her breathing grew shallow. He gently worked two fingers inside her and continued working her clit with his thumb. His own excitement built as her legs began to tremble. A small cry shattered the silence as the shock of orgasm raced through her. Arkan slumped against the wall, his own breath coming in deep gulps.

Donella's eyes sprang open. She looked down and saw her shirt pushed up and her panties pushed down. She pulled her shirt down to cover herself and sat up quickly, her eyes scanning the room for intruders. Arkan knew that she could not see him, but he felt a twinge of panic when her eyes lingered on the corner where he sat. He sighed with relief when she slowly lowered her head back to the pillow and closed her eyes. He was reckless and had almost ruined it all. He would have to approach her soon. The circumstances were less than ideal. Her whole world had been shattered when the humans who raised her died, but Arkan could not allow her time to heal. Tears of grief and sympathy welled in Arkan's eyes. He knew what it was to lose a loved one. Donella wasn't the only orphan, but she would be the one to bring peace to Culatheed. But first



would come vengeance, and it would come on the morrow, when Donella learned her true destiny.

## Chapter Two

"You have no business being here." Jackie hustled from around the counter and took Donna's hands. "Honey, you just buried your parents. Take some time off." Her soft brown eyes filled with tears. "We can handle things for a few days."

Donna felt tears of her own well in her eyes, but she waved off Jackie's concern. "And what should I do while I'm off?" she asked. "Stay at the house alone and cry some more? It's better that I stay busy. Besides, Mom and Dad worked hard to build this business. They wouldn't want it neglected." The Wagon Wheel had been Steven Kidwell's pride. It was the kind of restaurant that you only found in small towns, a place where kids could stop by after school for ice cream and where old men could stop in for coffee before dawn. She walked behind the counter and grabbed her apron. "I'll take my regular section."

Jackie reached and took Donna's arm. "Honey, you don't have to wait tables anymore. The Wheel belongs to you now. I know your mamma and daddy wanted you to have this place." Jackie's kind, round face blurred as Donna's eyes filled with tears.

"I want to," Donna choked out from behind a sob. "I have to do this." Anything to feel normal. She would eventually take over the day to day management of the diner, but for a few days she knew that Jackie and Otis, the long-time cook, could keep things going until she found her feet, until she got used to the idea of being alone. She tied the apron around her waist and gave Jackie a shaky smile. "I'll be fine."

And she would have been if not for the solicitous queries, the sad looks and the sympathetic pats from customers who had been frequenting the Wagon Wheel since before Donna could see over the counter. Everywhere she turned, there was someone expressing sympathy and offering help. It was when Seamus McManus, the crotchety old bachelor, slipped her an extra five for a tip that Donna finally lost control of her fragile emotions. The five dollar bill burned in her hand as she tore out the door and into the alley that ran next to the diner.

She collapsed against the cold brick, the rough stone cutting into her cheek as she pressed her face against the wall. Everything was all wrong. Even the spring air had turned unseasonably cold, as if the entire earth were mourning the passing of her parents. But even as Donna cried, she knew that her tears were not only for Steven and Jeanne, but for the mysterious Daoine who left her in a basket 21 years ago and for the death of the fantasy that she would find her birth mother and have a beautiful reunion. Her thoughts so consumed her that she didn't hear the man walk up behind her until her spoke.

"Darling," he whispered. Sympathy filled his voice. "Do not be so grieved. My heart is aching with yours."

Donna turned to the strange voice and stifled a gasp. He wasn't a large man, around three inches taller than her own 5'3", but he had such presence that he seemed to block the sun. His hair was as deeply black as her own, with glints of blue as the light reflected off the strands. His face was finely drawn, with delicately arched eyebrows and a thin, narrow nose above plump, shell-pink lips, but what surprised her the most were the tears wetting his pale cheeks. Her scrutiny didn't seem to bother him. He didn't move to wipe

away his tears. His sorrowful expression never changed. "Who are you?"

"I am Arkan." His voice was deep, resonant, his exotic accent falling on her ears like a well-loved melody. His golden eyes never left her face. There was hunger in his gaze and an odd familiarity. The sounds of the street reached Donna's ears, but she was suddenly aware of just how isolated she was in the alley with a stranger. In spite of his small size, he gave the impression of strength. She knew he could overpower her if he wished. "I mean you no harm." As soon as the words left his lips, Donna knew he spoke the truth. There was something comforting about Arkan.

"You're not from Pineville." It wasn't a question.

"No." A small smile curved his beautiful lips. "I'm from Culatheed."

Immediately a flash of green fields and impossibly blue sky blotted out the alley. A wave of dizziness and nausea overcame Donna and she reached out a hand to steady herself. Arkan slipped his arm around her waist and eased her gently to the pavement. "Easy, Donella."

At the sound of the name, Donna jerked her head around to stare. "What did you just call me?"

"Donella." He pushed a thick black curl out of her eyes. "That is your name."

Pain ripped through her, settling in her gut. "How do you know about that?" His arm had stayed around her as they both sat with their backs against the wall. She wanted to shove him away, but his warmth was soothing and she found herself lulled into acquiescence. She fit against him like he was a lover she had known her entire life. As soon as the thought formed in her mind, she knew. She sat up and began to push against him. "It was you," she croaked. Even in the broad light of the day, she could remember the shock of orgasm ripping through her belly as she awoke to an empty room, her shirt shoved over her breasts and her panties pulled down over her thighs. "You were in my room last night!" She stood and backed away from him, but he followed her step for step with his hands reaching out to capture hers. "You raped me!"

"No Donella," he whispered. "It wasn't like that, not at all. I would never hurt you." He took her hands in his and she instinctively trusted him, knew him as well as she knew herself.

She couldn't say how she knew him, and that unnerved her as much as Arkan knowing her birth name. She tried to pull her hands away from him, but he held her wrists tightly with a strength that surprised her. She struggled to break free. "Let me go!"

In an instant she felt large hands on her waist pulling her from Arkan's grasp.

Ethan, all six feet four inches of him, towered over Arkan. His olive skin was dusky plum with anger at finding Donna locked in a struggle. He pulled his fist back, but Donna grabbed his arm. "No!" It didn't make sense, but she couldn't stand by while Ethan punched the mysterious Arkan. *He's too small for Ethan to fight. Ethan could kill him.* But Arkan was strong for his size. Donna had no doubt that he could hold his own in a fight with any man. Ethan turned his puzzled gaze to Donna. "Fighting won't solve anything."

"But he had his hands on you. You were fighting. You could have been hurt." His fist relaxed, but his eyes never left Arkan. "We should at least call the police."

"No," Arkan said. For the first time, Donna thought she saw a trace of fear in his extraordinary eyes. "I meant no harm."

"It was all just a misunderstanding." The lie came from nowhere. She wrapped her

arms around Ethan's waist and curved her body against his. Jealousy burned in Arkan's stare and Donna felt oddly guilty. But she wasn't doing anything to feel guilty about. Ethan was her fiancé. So why did she feel the sudden urge to close the gap between Arkan and herself and melt against him?

"I knew Donella's mother," Arkan explained. "I came yesterday, on her 21st birthday to explain things to her. I wasn't aware that the family who raised her had met an untimely end." A fresh wave of grief washed over Donna. An untimely end. An odd turn of phrase, Donna thought, but an appropriate one. Her family was gone and all she could cling to was Ethan and now the strange Arkan who claimed to know her mother.

"You knew Jeanne?" His square jaw jutted out stubbornly. "How? I've never seen you here."

"I did not know Jeanne Kidwell," Arkan explained, "But Donella's true mother, Roane."

"But my mother's name was Daoine!" Donna thought she saw a flash of grief on Arkan's face, but as soon as it appeared, it was gone.

"There is much to explain to you, much you have to learn," he said. "But now is not the time. I had thought to tell you today, but you are still much grieved over your loss. It can wait for another time, but I fear it can't wait forever." And with that, Donna and Ethan found themselves alone in the alley.

\* \* \* \*

"What do you mean, you burned it all?" Ethan paced in front of the fireplace, casting glances at the flames as if the ashes could regurgitate the burnt file. "How could you do something like that? After you've waited so long to see it?" Loyal Ethan. He had been by Donna's side since the first day of kindergarten. He stood with her when she was teased for being small and funny-looking. He supported her when she tried to search for her birth mother and he was her rock through the funerals of her parents. Donna watched him struggle to understand the impulsive destruction of the documents that she waited so long to see.

Donna searched for words to explain what she felt, but none were adequate to explain the overwhelming sense of loneliness and despair she felt when she realized that she was truly alone, that her birth mother was lost to her forever. "I can't explain it, Ethan. I was upset. This is the only thing I saved." She handed him the note that was left with her on her parents' doorstep. Ethan's eyes scanned the letter, comprehension dawning on his handsome face. Tension weighted his wide shoulders as he raised sad eyes to Donna.

"This letter says your name is Donella." A lump closed off Donna's throat, making it impossible for her to speak. "That's what that man called you. Who is he?"

Donna walked from the hearth, sank into the sofa and drew her knees up to her chest. "I don't know. He said his name was Arkan. He knew my birth mother, but he didn't say how." As relieved as Donna had been to see Ethan show up in the alley, she was beginning to realize what an opportunity to learn about her past she missed. After the way Ethan threatened Arkan, Donna was sure she would never see the strange man again.

"He said your mother's name was Roane." Ethan held the letter out to her. "This letter says Daoine. So who is Daoine?"

"You know as much as I do," she sighed.

Ethan sat next to Donna and pulled her into his arms. She snuggled against him, reassured by his warmth and the hardness of his chest under her cheek. He was solid, dependable. Not at all strange or prone to disappearing in a snap like the odd Arkan. She knew that Arkan had touched her the night before, even though he hadn't been visible in her room. Her body hummed in memory of the gentle touch between her legs, the reverent kisses on her lips. The whole experience was surreal and dream-like, and even though she had done nothing wrong, she still felt as though she betrayed Ethan. She turned her face up to be kissed, willing Ethan to push Arkan from her mind. Ethan smiled and traced the outline of her lips with his thumb before he claimed her mouth. She savored the taste and feel of Ethan's tongue as he plundered her mouth, but she could still feel Arkan's hand massaging her clit. She squirmed to squelch the heat spreading through her belly and felt an invisible hand cup her pussy through her blue jeans. Ethan swallowed the gasp that escaped her lips. Donna knew it wasn't the memory of Arkan's touch that she felt. He was there, in the room with her, watching her, touching her as Ethan's hand made its way under her shirt and pinched her nipple through her bra.

She pulled away from Ethan, ripped her shirt over her head and reached behind her back to unfasten the lacy garment. Ethan's eyes darkened when it fell away from her breasts. Her nipples puckered sharply under his gaze. A ripple of pleasure washed over her when Ethan lowered her to the couch and closed his mouth over her nipple. A second mouth closed over her other nipple and Donna experienced a forbidden thrill that sent a shock of desire down to her crotch. Ethan unbuttoned her jeans and shoved them down over her hips. When she felt a gentle caress between her legs, she didn't know if it was Ethan or Arkan, but she was past caring. She twined her fingers through Ethan's thick hair, but in her mind, it was Arkan she was touching. With a guilty start she opened her eyes and pulled Ethan's face to hers and kissed him deeply, drinking in the taste and familiar feel of him. But even as she swirled her tongue with Ethan's, she heard Arkan's voice whisper in her ear. "Don't fight this, Donella," he said. "You belong to me, and I will have you—and Ethan, too if I must." She swallowed a groan deep in her throat as Arkan thrust two fingers deep inside her pussy.

She spread her legs wide and rode his fingers while Ethan squeezed her breasts and sucked on her tongue. She was surrounded by sensation, drowning in pleasure. Ethan flipped over on his back and spread her legs on either side of his hips. He smiled up at her as he eased her down over his cock. Donna's breath caught in her throat as she stretched to accommodate his width. Her breasts brushed his chest as she leaned forward and supported herself with her hands on either side of his head. His fingers bit into the soft flesh of her ass as she rode him, his moans and grunts goading her and increasing her own desire. Tension gathered in her legs and she knew she was spiraling towards orgasm, but she bit her lip, determined to make it last. She slowed her pace and tightened her pussy around Ethan's shaft, but just when she had regained control, she felt a finger gently massaging her anus before breeching her tight opening. The sensation was so unexpected that it stole her breath and left her temporarily paralyzed. "Keep going, Donella, or he's going to know." Arkan's voice seemed to fill the room, but Donna knew the words were for her ears only. "Ride him, dearling. I want to watch you come."

Donna grabbed Ethan's shoulders as his hands guided her hips down to meet his upward thrusts. "Donna," he moaned. "I'm going to come." Arkan's fingers fucked Donna's ass with the same rhythm as Ethan's cock. She felt stretched wide and full

enough to explode.

“Come then,” she whispered to him. Ethan raised his hips in a violent thrust as his cock spasmed. Donna's pussy clenched around him and she fell across his chest, her breath coming in gasps as orgasmic shocks radiated from her clit out through the rest of her body. Ethan wrapped his arms around her and kissed her gently and she felt Arkan wrap his arms around her from behind.

“That was lovely, darling,” he whispered. “And it was just the beginning.”

### Chapter Three

*Donna walked barefoot through the thick, cool grass, enjoying the feel of the warm sunshine on her face. The sky was a brilliant, cloudless blue and the land around her was dotted with gently rolling emerald hills with jagged outcroppings of rocks. Trees stretched so high that the tops seemed to disappear into the sky and bird song floated on the air like feathers caught by the wind. Arkan was beside her, his fingers laced through hers as he pointed out landmarks. "That is the house where you were born." It was a small house, with a thatched roof, like something out of a child's picture book. Donna felt an urge to walk through the door, to explore the home, but Arkan led her farther down the path. "There is no time, not yet." He gestured to a cave set in the highest hill. "That is where Aine lives. She is the prophetess. She gave you your name. She has named every birthling in Culatheed for many ages." They walked on, past other small houses and splashed their way through creeks and springs. Everywhere they went, people smiled and nodded or called greetings to Arkan. There seemed to be no sadness or sorrow.*

*"This place is beautiful, Arkan, but I don't understand why you brought me here."*

*"Do you like it here, dearling?" He turned to face her and cupped her chin in his hand. "Do you not find this place wondrous?"*

*"I've never seen anyplace quite like it. It's like some idealized version of Ireland, or maybe Scotland-like someplace you only see in the movies."*

*For the first time, a slight smile crossed Arkan's beautiful face. "It is real, I assure you. This is your true home. But it will not always look like this." He bent and plucked a violently pink flower and pressed the blossom into Donna's hand. Smiling, she brought the flower to her nose and inhaled deeply. Bile rose in her throat as the smell of death and decay assaulted her. She looked around her and the paradise was gone. The trees were black and barren. The stream beds were dry and cracked and the grass had died and left bare ground in its place. The flower in her hand was shriveled and brown. Even Arkan's bright golden eyes had dimmed. A profound sense of dread and grief washed over her. "What happened?"*

*A shadow passed over Arkan's face. "Gwyllion."*

\* \* \* \*

Donna padded into the kitchen before dawn, disturbed by her dreams. The chill of the barren landscape penetrated her, even as she pulled her robe tight around her body. She glanced out the window, almost expecting to see the rotting landscape from her dreams instead of the well-manicured lawn that had been Steven Kidwell's pride. She went through her morning routine, making coffee, adding extra cream, but the entire time, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched. Arkan, of course. She wasn't even surprised when she turned to find him sitting at the kitchen table. Donna knew the dream hadn't been a dream at all. It had the feel and smell and taste of reality. Arkan brought her to that strange place and showed her a vision of both Heaven and Hell. She sat across from him and took a long drink of her coffee and waited for him to speak. When he remained silent, she asked. "Who or what is Gwyllion?"

“Gwyllion is the Regent of Culatheed. She has been Regent for the twenty-one years of the Gwylla's reign. It is now time for the Reign of the Fae, but Gwyllion has grown too fond of her power. The Gwylla have grown used to preferential treatment. She will not give up her throne unless the new Regent challenges her, and even then, there will be a fight. Aine has foreseen it.”

Arkan had shown Donna Aine's cave in the vision. Aine the prophetess, but there was no such thing as a prophetess. A thousand questions bounced around Donna's mind. She took a pull of her coffee, wishing passionately that it were something stronger. She didn't even know what question to ask first, so she asked the most logical. “What does any of this have to do with me?”

“Have you not guessed?” He reached across the table and took her hand in his. A tingle shot up her arm and set off a tiny flame in her heart. Faint color appeared on his pale cheeks and he smiled at her. “You are the next Regent of the Fae. You must come back to Culatheed and take your rightful place on the throne. It is the only way to save the treaty and restore Culatheed.”

Donna pulled her hand free and jumped up so fast that her chair flew backwards and fell with a crash. “You're insane.” Her heart pounded so hard that she could feel it in her toes. His words had the ring of truth. She raked her hands through her hair. “I'm not going anywhere. I belong here.”

“Donella, please,” Arkan pleaded. “You must listen.”

“My name is not Donella!” she screeched. “Donna! My name is Donna!”

“What in the hell are you doing here?” Ethan emerged from the bedroom. “How did you even get in?” He turned to Donna. “Did you let him in?” Donna shook her head. Ethan advanced on Arkan, his hands curled into fists. Arkan sighed heavily and flicked his hand as if he were shooing a fly at Ethan. Bewilderment and fear clouded Ethan's blue eyes as he suddenly stopped his advance, frozen in place.

“I did not want to do that,” Arkan sighed, “But as you both undoubtedly know, Ethan is quite large and extraordinarily strong. I would rather like to conduct our business with all of my facial features intact.” He stood in directly in front of Ethan and placed his hand on Ethan's chin and pulled his face down so that Arkan could look into his eyes. “I mean no harm. I just need to talk to Donella, and to you, too. We could use someone with your size and strength. If I let you go, do you promise me that you will keep your fists down? I have no wish to immobilize you permanently.” A shudder went through Donna. Even with Arkan's low, gentle voice, she knew he meant what he said. In spite of his relatively small size, he could harm Ethan with little effort.

Arkan studied Ethan's face for a moment, then nodded slightly. Ethan stumbled forward into Arkan's arms. Arkan's face turned red under the strain of holding Ethan's large frame off the floor. “Chair,” he croaked. Donna rushed to ease a chair under Ethan and helped Arkan lower Ethan into it. “I'm afraid I hit him a little too hard.” He patted Ethan's face gently. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” Ethan breathed. “I'm just a little woozy.” He gulped air in deep, shuddering breaths. “What the hell are you? What did you do to me?”

“I am Arkan of the Fae. I merely prevented you from doing me harm.”

“What do you want with Donna?”

“To take her back to Culatheed. She is the Regent of the Fae. It has been foretold. If I fail to bring her, Culatheed will be forever lost to the Gwylla.”



“Fae, Culatheed, Gwyllion? You've lost me.” Ethan shook his head slightly, as if trying to clear it. “Donna, tell me I'm dreaming.”

“I wish I could.” She dropped to the floor next to his chair and laid her head in his lap. The familiar feel of his lap against her cheek was soothing. “I would give anything for him to be a figment of my imagination, but he's real, and Culatheed is real.” Ethan's hand tangled in her dark hair as he caressed her scalp. “Arkan showed it to me in a dream. It's dying. He says I'm the only one that can save it.”

“Where and what is Culatheed? And who are the Fae?”

“It is my homeland, and Donella's as well. All of the Fae live in Culatheed. The Fae is our race. We are older than humans.” Arkan gave Ethan a small smile. “We normally take great pains to hide ourselves from you, but this situation is hardly normal.” The smile faded from his face and his eyes again took on the air of grief that Donna was coming to recognize. “I wish we had time to get to know each other. I wish I had time to explain it all to you now, but I really need for Donella to come with me.” He spoke quickly, the words tumbling from his lips. “Please.”

Arkan stood and offered his hand to Donna. She looked from the outstretched hand to Ethan, knowing that to go would be to leave Ethan behind, maybe forever. But to refuse Arkan was unthinkable. She loved Ethan, but every cell in her body yearned for the strange Arkan. She saw understanding in Ethan's eyes and knew that whatever her choice, he would love her still. She lifted her hand and instead of taking Arkan's laid it softly on Ethan's handsome face. “Come with me,” she whispered.

\*

Ethan closed his eyes and basked in the feel of Donna's hand on his cheek. For as long as he could remember, he loved her. Loved her in a way that left no room for reason or rationality. Maybe that was why he nodded in agreement before his mind could even process her request. He had never been able to deny her, and he didn't like the way Arkan looked at her, as if he already owned her. Arkan may have some weird, mystic connection to Donna, but she had been his since the first day of kindergarten, and he'd be damned if he let her go without a fight.

“I'll go,” he whispered, “if you really want me to.” Donna's eyes filled with tears and a sense of triumph surged through him when he saw the naked jealousy in Arkan's eyes.

“More than anything,” Donna said. “I can't imagine life without you.” Donna leaned in and kissed him sweetly. Ethan could feel Arkan's eyes upon him, so he lifted his hand and tangled it in Donna's wispy black hair, drawing her closer. *She's mine. You won't have her as long as I'm here.*

“Fine,” Arkan said. His voice was low, but Ethan could hear the tension. “You may accompany Donella if she wishes, but we must leave now.”

“Now? But the diner, my home—my friends. What about all of them?” Donna's voice shook with uncertainty.

“You may return to this world if you must—after we save Culatheed, but for now, we have no time to gather your things or say good-bye.” Arkan's words were clipped, but suddenly softened. “I'm sorry, Donella, but it has to be this way.”

Donna reached out and grabbed Ethan's hand. He squeezed it stroked his thumb over her knuckles. She took a look around the roomy kitchen where Ethan remembered as many meals and good times as his own home. “Okay, then,” she said. “I will go.”

\* \* \* \*

The sun was just breaking over the horizon as Arkan led the way to the port that would take the three to Culatheed. Behind him, he could hear Donella's teeth chatter in the early morning chill. He wished there was time enough to allow her to change into suitable clothes, something that would keep her warm and comfortable, but the trip had taken longer than he anticipated. Mara would be worried. His mother had lost a husband to the Gwylla. Arkan did not think she would survive losing a son. Hopefully when they arrived in Culatheed, Donella would understand why he had been so short with her.

"I'm still not sure I understand why it has to be Donna who 'rescues' your home," Ethan grumbled. "Why her? Why can't someone else be Regent?"

"There was a war, many, many generations ago. Both the Gwylla and the Fae were almost wiped out. There was no winner. If either side were to survive, there had to be a treaty of shared power. For twenty-one years a Fae rules. The next twenty-one years a Gwylla assumes the throne. The Fae Regents are chosen by our prophetess. The Regent comes from one of nine sacred families."

"And I was chosen?" Donna asked.

"Three days after your birth, during your naming ceremony, when I was chosen as your mate."

Donella shivered and wrapped her arms tightly around her waist, whether from the chill in the air or from his words he did not know.

"We do not have long to go, dearling." The endearment fell naturally from his tongue, but he wished he had not said it. Ethan's face clouded and his grip on Donella's fingers tightened. Ethan was a large man, almost as large as a Gwylla. If not for his handsome face and gentleness with Donella—and lack of foul odor—Arkan would have mistaken him for one of Gwyllion's minions.

"How much farther and how do we get there?" Ethan asked. "I'm guessing that we don't just hop on a plane."

Arkan felt his lips twitch, but he bit back the urge to smile. "No. There is a door between the worlds that my father built when he left Donella." He turned. "There are three great oaks that mark the gateway. Do you know the place?"

Wonder lit Donna's face. "By the river. The Three Sisters."

"The Three Sisters?"

"It was her favorite place for picnics when we were kids." Ethan explained. "It was where I proposed."

"You sensed you were close to home there." He skipped over Ethan's mention of their impending marriage. It wouldn't matter once they arrive in Culatheed. Once Donella was where she belonged, with her own kind, she would understand the bond that they shared. She would know that she was destined to be his bride.

## Chapter Four

The smell of decay and death assaulted Arkan as soon as his feet touched the land in Culatheed. The ground beneath him felt spongy and soft, as if even the soil was dying. It had been three days since Donella's twenty-first birthday, three days that the Gwylla held Culatheed in their grip. The sky was swollen and bruised and a chill drizzle floated in the air. The leaves had fallen from the trees and the naked, black branches stood out in sharp relief against the clouds. It was worse than he had feared. They didn't have much time.

"We must hurry," he said as he grabbed Donella's hand. She was shivering and already blue with the cold. Donella's jeans and thin white t-shirt provided little protection from the weather. "I'm sorry, Donella, that I can't offer you hospitality and warm clothing, but we must reach Aine before Gwyllion knows we are here." She nodded and squeezed his hand. Her teeth chattered, but she didn't complain.

"How would Gwyllion know you're here?" Ethan asked. "Is there some kind of crystal ball?"

"No, nothing so crude. Every time someone enters or leaves Culatheed the energy flows and patterns change. My family has the gift of sorcery, so we displace more energy, and of course Donella is the chosen Regent, so the energy flows from and through her as well. We must make it to Aine and complete the joining ceremony before Gwyllion tries to stop it."

\*

The cold seemed to have seeped into Donna's bones, turning her arms and legs brittle. She felt as if she would shatter if someone touched her. Her t-shirt clung to her and her blue jeans were heavy with rain, making the trek up the mountain difficult. From the ground, Aine's cave did not look far, but like the end of a rainbow, the more she climbed, the farther away the opening seemed. "Is it just me," she gasped to Arkan, "Or is that damn cave moving?"

He did not laugh, but she could hear humor in his voice. "It is ancient magic, Donella. It does appear to move. Only those that truly have need of Aine will find the cave. Those who have no need of her will only find the opening farther and farther away. It is what keeps Aine safe." He lowered his voice so that Ethan could not hear his words. "It is taking longer to reach the cave because we have a human with us. Aine does not trust humans. I am trying to cloak him so she can't sense his presence, but it is slowing the journey."

"What will happen when she sees him?" Donna was already questioning the wisdom of bringing Ethan. As reassuring as his presence was to her, he was ill-suited for Culatheed, as ill-suited as she had been for the human world. He had to duck under hanging tree branches. The hidden paths that Arkan had taken through the forest were almost too narrow for Ethan's wide shoulders. Even as she and Arkan climbed the mountain with little trouble, Ethan lagged behind, his face red with exertion and frustration.

"She will not harm him," Arkan said, but Donna heard a note of uncertainty in his voice. "She will be so happy that I have brought the Regent that she will indulge us this one small thing." Small thing. Donna grinned as she glanced back at Ethan, still valiantly

struggling up the hill. He was no “small thing.” He looked up and caught her gaze and his face brightened. He flashed her his familiar grin and she was suddenly very glad that he had come.

\*

Ethan cursed under his breath as Arkan and Donna scrambled up the hill. It was a hell of a struggle to win a woman that he had always thought was his. The terrain was rocky and steep and the constant mist made the stones slick beneath his hands. Arkan had obviously made the trip up the side of Aine's hill many times because he flew up the side with little effort. Donna followed close behind him. At first, Ethan was surprised at how easily Donna made the trek, but he realized as she followed Arkan that his small, light body had been made for this terrain. Ethan's size and strength, which had always been an asset, were slowing him down as his large hands could barely grasp the ledges that Arkan and Donna used to climb.

“Do you need help?” Arkan called down to him.

“No,” Ethan yelled back. He could use a hand, but he would be damned if he asked for help from Arkan. Hell, the man barely came up to his shoulder. But there was strength in that small body, Ethan acknowledged. “I'm fine.”

Irritation passed over Arkan's face when he watched Ethan continue to struggle. He paused once to catch his breath and scan the mountainside for the next hand hold.

“It's to your right, about six inches up. It's a small one. Be careful,” Arkan said. Ethan's eyes fell on the stone protrusion and felt foolish for not seeing it before.

“Don't feel bad,” Arkan said. “This is not for you.” Ethan felt exposed, as if Arkan could read his mind. “You're doing wonderfully for a human,” Arkan encouraged.

“For a human,” Ethan mocked. But Ethan was gasping for breath by the time he caught up with Arkan and Donna.

“I would imagine that it takes quite a bit more effort to haul such a large frame.” Arkan smiled and Ethan was reminded of the way Donna's eyes would light when she smiled the same way. Arkan reminded Ethan of Donna in so many ways. In spite of himself, Ethan felt drawn to the strange man the same way he had always felt drawn to Donna. With a jolt he realized if he met Arkan under different circumstances, he would have liked him immensely.

The three of them continued up the mountain, finally landing at the mouth of a dark cave. “We are here, Donella,” Arkan said. He took her hand and pulled her to his side. “Aine will be pleased to see you.” He looked at Ethan. His face was somber and for a moment, a faint shot of worry passed through Ethan. “Would you be our third?”

“I don't know what you mean.”

“It is tradition in Culatheed for a joined couple to have a third, another male that promises to take care of the female if something happens to her mate. It is usually the male's father or brother, but my father is long dead and I have never had a sibling. Would you please join as our third and promise to take care of Donella if I do not make it out of the war alive?”

“I'm still not sure I know what you mean,” Ethan said. “You talk about joining. It sounds like a wedding, and that's impossible. I'm engaged to Donna. She's wearing the ring that I bought!”

“Joining is very close to your idea of a wedding, but it can't be undone. It is a sacred bond that tied two Fae together in every way. We will no longer be separate beings, but

two halves of a hole.”

Rage and jealousy shot through Ethan. He shoved Arkan against the rock and wrapped his hand around his neck. In the background, he could hear Donna's cries, but they meant little to him in the face of his anger. “No,” he said. “She belongs to me.”

Sympathy flooded Arkan's eyes, and the sight of it made Ethan even angrier. “I know this is hard for you. I can see that you love Donella, and that she loves you, but this was foretold before Donella ever met you. Without the joining, she can't be Regent. Culatheed will die. Ask Donella what she wants. If you love her, you'll abide by her wishes.”

The wind went out of Ethan's lungs as he loosened his hold on Arkan. He turned to face Donna and found her cheeks wet with tears. “I have to do this, Ethan. I feel it in my blood. This is what I was born for. I can't let this place die.” Ethan felt as though a knife had been plunged through his heart. “But I need you. Please stay with us. Be our third.” She held out her small hand and Ethan clasped his fingers around it,

“Absolutely.” A vise tightened around Ethan's heart. Relegated to a back up guardian when he had planned to be Donna's husband since before he could tie his shoes. At least he would be close, and if he were close, he had a chance to keep her heart. He turned to Arkan. “I will protect her with my life.” *And will die before I step aside and let you have her*, he thought.

“Thank you,” Arkan said. “I know you speak the truth.”

They turned, three abreast, and stepped through the arched opening of the cave. Before Ethan's eyes could adjust to the darkness a strong voice called out. “Arkan of the Fae, you are late. Now bring your bride and step forward to be joined.”

## Chapter Five

She was a tiny slip of a woman, barely up to Donella's shoulder. Her skin lay in wrinkles so deep it was impossible to tell if she smiled or frowned. Silver hair flowed straight back from a sharp widow's peak. She was stooped and bent, leaning most of her weight on a crudely carved stick. The only parts of her that did not speak of age and frailty were her eyes, eyes that were extraordinarily blue and clear. She turned those eyes on Donella and slowly took in everything, from the dark hair curling around her face, over the wet t-shirt that clung to her body and all the way down to the canvas sneakers that were as soaked as her shirt.

The scrutiny unnerved Donella. She wanted to drop her eyes, but knew that she was being measured, tested. She knew that to look away would be taken as a sign of weakness.

"So he finally brought you back," Aine said. "Took him long enough." She hobbled around Donella, looking her up and down. "Those human clothes are ridiculous, of course. They just won't do, not at all."

"There was no time to find her suitable garments, Aine," Arkan apologized. "We wanted to make sure we were here before Gwyllion could sense any changes."

"Yes," she muttered to herself. "Must be joined immediately, before Gwyllion knows." She returned to stand in front of Donella. "And what of the human?" Disgust dripped from her voice. "Why is he here? His kind does not belong."

Out of the corner of her eye, Donella saw Ethan slink deeper into the shadows along the edge of the cave. Her brave, handsome Ethan looked, for once in his life, out of his element.

"He was her promised one in the human world," Arkan said.

"Bah!" Aine waved a hand. "What are promises in the human world? They do not keep their promises. Joined and separated at a whim. No honor or reason to the joinings. And she is bound to you. There is no place here for him. He must go."

"He has always protected her." Impatience crept into Arkan's voice. "And he is strong. He will be helpful if we must fight the Gwylla. He is larger than even Gwyllion's son, and he has agreed to be our third."

Donella could see the shock take its toll on the old woman. She swayed slightly, but held tightly to her staff. "Never! A human has never taken part in the joining ceremony. It is sacred."

"We have never been in such peril as we are now," Arkan snapped. "And who would you have me ask, Aine? My father? One of my many brothers? I have no one, save my mother. Donella has no one. All we have is each other and Ethan. He will be our third or I will return to the human world with Donella and leave Culatheed to the Gwylla." Donella's respect for Arkan rose tremendously as she watched him stand up to the formidable little woman.

"You wouldn't dare," Aine said. Arkan stood with his hands on his hips, his feet planted wide apart. He did not budge or take his eyes from Aine. After a long moment, Aine nodded. "He will be the third. But the clothes will go." Donella had a feeling that Aine didn't like to lose.

A small grin quirked the corner of Arkan's mouth. "Fine," he said. "Do with her what you will."

A small knot of fear settled in Donella's belly as Aine took her hands and pulled her closer to the fire. "You must be cold, Donella." The gentleness in Aine's voice surprised her. She sat Donella on a stone next to the fire and cupped her face in her hands. "Yes," she whispered. "You are Roane's wee babe, grown and quite beautiful. How should I dress you?" She tapped her finger against her lips as her eyes grew unfocused. "Something in violet, to go with your eyes." Aiken closed her eyes and tapped her staff three times at Donella's feet. A heat so intense that Donella closed her eyes against the sudden sharp pain spread through her, but as quickly as it appeared the pain was gone. When she opened her eyes, she found that her wet clothing had disappeared. Donella was wrapped in silver-violet dress that shimmered and glowed in the firelight. The garment fit snugly from her shoulders down to her hips, where it flared dramatically, seeming to move even as she stood still. The sleeves were loose and flowing and fell down just past her fingertips. When she moved, glints of pink and pale blue appeared in the thread.

"It's beautiful," Donella whispered as she ran her hands over dress. It felt like water under her hands.

"And now for the hair," Aine said. She tapped her staff again, and again the same heat filled Donella. She raised her hand to her neck and felt the hair swept up into a twist. Donella was surprised to see tears fill the old woman's eyes as she looked at her. "You look just like Roane. It should have been her here, preparing you for your joining, but I am all that is available to you," she said sadly.

"I am glad you are here." On impulse, Donella took the frail old body in her arms. She bit her lip to keep from crying herself. She had lost so much, Roane and Jeanne and Steven and every vestige of her old life except for Ethan.

Aine pulled away and squeezed Donella's hands. "I know that things have not been easy for you, but this is a temporary difficulty. When you are joined, you will take your seat as the Regent. You will be where you belong, with the man who was made for you. You will see." Aine smiled broadly. "Now send me your third that I may dress him suitably."

\* \* \* \*

Ethan tugged at the tight pants Aine had dressed him in. Or dressed after a fashion, he thought. She just tapped that stick of hers and he felt like his skin was on fire. When he looked down, he was wearing clothes that he prayed no one he knew would ever see. She had dressed him in dark purple and lilac, "To complement Donella. You are her third." He hated that word—third. He was a third, a third wheel, when she had always been his. If the color and the reason behind it weren't bad enough, the clothes fit him like a second skin. The shirt fit tightly across the chest, where it was split down to his waist. Aine had nodded approvingly and ran her wrinkled hand over his muscles. "You are strong, just as Arkan said." She left the sleeves off, to show his arms. She seemed to like to show everything, because the pants that she had fitted to him looked painted on and showed his cock off to great advantage. When he looked at Donella in her dress, she was so beautiful that his cock couldn't help but respond. He felt vulnerable and exposed, unable to hide his erection in loose pants or behind a billowy shirt.

She and Arkan stood in front of the fire while he stood two steps behind Arkan. Aine

stood in front of them. Arkan reached out and took Donella's left hand in his right and Aine's right hand in his left. "You must take Aine's hand, dearling." His voice was so full of love that Ethan felt his gut tighten. He balled his fists at his side, determined not to interrupt and claim Donna as his own, no matter how much it hurt. Donna took Aine's hand and a glow enveloped the three of them. Aine and Arkan did not react, but Donna's eyes widened and she looked at Ethan and raised her eyebrows.

"Donella of Aeryn and Roane, Arkan of Daoine and Mara," Aine's voice reverberated off the walls of the cage. "You have been chosen, each for the other in the time before time, your souls were created as one and separated into a male body and a female body. You are each a half of a unique soul, yearning for each other. Do you accept the other half of your soul?"

"I, Arkan of Daoine and Mara, accept that Donella of Aeryn and Roane is the keeper of my incomplete soul." Arkan spoke forcefully and without hesitation. He and Aine turned expectant eyes to Donella.

"I, Donella of Aeryn and Roane," she began. "Accept that Arkan of Doaine and Mara." She paused, trying to remember the words. Her forehead furrowed as she concentrated. "Is the keeper of my incomplete soul."

"Arkan, do you accept responsibility for caring for Donella as you care for yourself? Do you agree to think first of her happiness, to the detriment of your own?"

"I do so agree."

"Donella, do you accept responsibility for caring for Arkan as you care for yourself? Do you agree to think first of his happiness to the detriment of your own?"

"I do so agree."

Aine dropped Arkan's and Donella's hands, but the glow that enveloped them did not dim. It had grown so bright that Ethan fought to keep himself from closing his eyes. Aine clapped her hands twice and two golden cuffs appeared in her palms. She took Arkan's right hand and clapped the cuff on his wrist. "Let this remind you of your bondage to Donella. So it will remain until your death." She did the same for Donna, but she was no longer his Donna. With the ceremony, Donna was forever Donella. She gazed solemnly at the gold cuff. It looked thick and heavy against her tiny arm. Nausea rose up inside Ethan. The ceremony had a sense of finality and rightness, so much that he wondered at the wisdom of stepping back and allowing it to happen. If Donella was really bound to Arkan, could she ever be his again?

Arkan reached for both of Donella's hands as Aine motioned for Ethan. "Arkan of Daoine and Mara and Donella of Aeryn and Roane have been joined together for eternity. Let he who will honor this bond past death step forward." Ethan stood motionless, unsure of the next step. Arkan turned pity-filled eyes toward him and nodded. Ethan understood that this was his role as the third. He stepped within an arm's length of Arkan. Arkan reached out and took Ethan's hand and nodded for Donella to do the same. "Ethan of the Humans," Aine said, "Do you so agree to be the third in this union, to support the union in all things and to provide support and comfort should either joined one suffer an early death?" Either one? He had not thought of Donella dead. He had not thought that he might be left to support and comfort Arkan if something happened to Donella. She turned dismayed eyes to him when he hesitated.

"I do so agree," he said finally. He was rewarded when Donella gave him a brilliant smile. It eased the pain in his heart. He had lived his whole life, just to see that smile.



“Those who have been joined may seal their bond with a kiss.” Ethan swallowed his hurt when Arkan cupped Donna's face in his hands and lowered his lips to hers. His heart twisted in his chest when he saw her open her lips to receive his tongue. The kiss seemed to go on forever. Ethan did not realize he had been holding his breath until he let it out in a great gush when the kiss ended.

“The Third may seal his bond with a kiss.” Anticipation leaped through Ethan when Donella raised her shining face to his. He placed a chaste kiss on her lips and was surprised when she caressed his bottom lip with her tongue. She pulled back and gave him an impish grin. He knew that all was not lost. She was still his Donna.

Arkan reached out and cupped Ethan's face in his hand. A shock went through him when he realized that he was expected to kiss Arkan, too. Ethan closed his eyes and waited for Arkan's lips to touch his, but the kiss didn't come. Ethan opened his eyes and found Arkan waiting expectantly. He didn't even come up to Ethan's shoulder. Ethan would have to lower his head and claim his kiss. The blood roared in his ears as he lowered his lips to Arkan's. It was a dry, chaste kiss, but a thrill shot through Ethan. He could feel heat rising in his face when Arkan pulled back and smiled.

“The Third has been welcomed into the union,” Aine said. “Your souls are bound forever.” She smiled and kissed Donella on the cheek and did the same to Arkan. “And now the Union must be solemnized.”

“Solemnized?” Donella's brow wrinkled. “Isn't that what we just did?”

“No, dearling.” Arkan gathered her in his arms. “We must join our bodies together, as we did our souls. We can't leave Aine's cave until we have been joined soul and body.”

Horror filled Donella's eyes as she looked around. “Here? We have to do that here?” Ethan understood. It had been hard enough to watch Arkan kiss her. There was no way his heart could survive watching the two of them make love.

Arkan laughed. “Not here. There is a room.” Jealousy tightened its grip around Ethan's heart as Arkan took Donella by the hand and led her to a red beaded cloth hanging behind Aine's fire. “This is the joining chamber. It is private, Donella.” Arkan pulled the curtain aside to reveal an opening in the cave wall. Donella looked dubious, but Arkan encouraged her. “Go, you will be safe with me.”

Ethan felt bereft as he watched Donella disappear through the wall with a glance over her shoulder at him. Arkan followed her, but he too turned to give Ethan a sorrowful look as he made his way into the inner chamber. Ethan dropped to the floor next to the fire, buried his head in his hands and sighed.

## Chapter Six

The small, dome-shaped chamber was cool and dim, lit only by a single torch set into the curved wall. At its highest point, the top of the chamber barely cleared Arkan's head. In the center of the room was a large, oval cushion piled high with soft-looking blankets. Donella's heart raced as her eyes fell on the bed. Arkan reached out for her hand and gave her a reassuring smile. "Don't be scared, Donella. I would never hurt you."

"I know." And she did know. Arkan had been nothing but kind and gentle. She felt like she had known him her entire life. "This is just so ... weird. I don't know what to do."

"Well, there are a lot of things that are different in Culatheed," Arkan chuckled, "but this isn't one of them. I'm sure you will figure it out."

In spite of her discomfort, Donella laughed. "It's not that. It's just I never in a million years pictured anything like this. This is not the way my life was supposed to go."

Donella thought she saw a hint of sadness in Arkan's eyes. "This is not the way I pictured my joining either, Donella." He took her hand and led her to the bed. "Everyone in Culatheed knows from an early age to whom they are bound. I have always known that I was bound to you and that I would be the one to fetch you from the humans. But even knowing that you were waiting didn't assuage the loneliness I felt. Most Fae spend much time with their mates as they are children, so that when adulthood comes, the joining is as natural as breathing." Arkan stroked Donella's cheek with the backs of his fingers. "I told myself that you would be worth waiting for, that we would have a joining ceremony that would be the envy of all of Culatheed. We would be surrounded by friends. My father would be our third and my mother would be with you, to help you dress and to ease your nerves before the solemnization. The weather would be glorious and we would have so many blooms decorating Aine's cave that we would all be dizzy from the scent." He traced the line of her lower lip with his thumb. "But all we have is this. A hurried ceremony with no family, no friends. Just each other."

"We have Ethan." Even if she lived to be 100, Donella would never forget the stricken look on sweet Ethan's face as she entered the chamber with Arkan.

Arkan tucked a heavy lock of black hair behind her ear. "You love him very much, don't you?"

A lump rose in Donella's throat. "Yes," she said softly. "I do. He has been very good to me."

"He is a good man," Arkan agreed, "And he loves you a great deal, but you are easy to love, Donella." He dipped his head and kissed her. A surge like nothing she had ever felt rushed through her. Her scalp tingled and her toes curled against the hard stone floor. She felt like Arkan was pouring his soul into her, but still she pulled away.

Arkan released her, but cupped her chin in his hand and kissed her lightly. "I can tell you are torn. We could bring him here if you like."

A forbidden thrill shot through Donella. "You mean, here, in the bed?"

"It is unusual, to bring a third into the chamber." Arkan pressed Donella back onto the bed and lifted her skirt up to her waist. He dipped a finger between the lips of her pussy until it was wet and slick with her juices. He lifted it to his lips and licked it slowly

before smiling at her. "But we are unusual, are we not?" Donella nodded wordlessly. "You pledged yourself to him, and he pledged himself to you. He is still pledged to you. You still wear the ring that he gave you."

The diamond suddenly burned on Donella's finger. "I forgot to take it off." She moved to grab the ring, but Arkan placed his hand on hers to stop her.

"No, leave it on. It was given and received in love. We're special, the three of us." He stood and pulled his tunic over his head. His chest was lean, but well muscled, his broad shoulders tapering down to slim hips. A faint black trail on his abdomen disappeared beneath the tight pants that did little to hide his erection. "I will bring him to you, to us."

Donella could hear the blood rushing in her ears as she watched Arkan pull back the beaded curtain. His voice was too low to hear, but she could hear Aine's angry tones, followed by Ethan's deep rumble.

Ethan had to duck to enter the chamber, and even at the highest point in the room, he could not stand to his full height. Surprise flattened his face when he caught sight of Donella, her skirt shoved up to her waist, her legs spread apart. He looked from Donella to Arkan. "What's going on?"

"Donella loves you," Arkan said simply. "What Donella wants, I will do everything in my power to bring to her. We have both loved her for many years. She loves both of us. Why should we not both enjoy her? Why should we three not be bonded together?"

A small smile crept up the side of Ethan's face. "I like the way you think, Arkan." He took Donella by the hand and pulled her up to a sitting position before pulling her lavender gown over her head, leaving her naked and exposed before the two men. The frank admiration on Arkan's and Ethan's face left her momentarily breathless. Part of her thought she should put a stop to what was happening, but the pull of arousal was stronger. With a smile, she wrapped her arms around Ethan's neck and fell back against the bed. His lips found the curve of her throat and left a trail of fiery kisses down to her breast, capturing a nipple in his hot, wet mouth. Heat traveled from his mouth all the way down to her toes.

Donella opened her mouth to cry out, but the sound was captured inside Arkan's kiss. His tongue invaded her mouth, plundered and tasted in perfect complement to Ethan's mouth on her nipple, as if the two men shared one mind. Donella threaded the fingers of one hand through Ethan's thick hair and the other through the Arkan's dark mane. Arkan responded by deepening his kiss and snaking his hand down her side. He brushed her thighs apart and filled her pussy with two fingers and brushed her clit with his thumb. "So hot and wet." Arkan's breath was warm and moist against her ear. "So lovely." He offered his fingers, shiny and wet, to Ethan. Donella's belly tightened as Ethan's tongue lapped her juices from Arkan's hand.

"Delicious," Ethan said. "But I want to really taste you." His dropped kisses over her belly until he reached her pussy. Tension built in Donella's body when she felt the gentle puff of his breath against her dark curls. He gently parted her lips with his fingers and lapped slowly at her clit. Donella shivered with pleasure as his lips played and tugged until she was aching to cry out, but Arkan refused to leave her mouth long enough for her to make a sound. His hands cupped both her breasts, lifting and molding them, sending shocks from the tips of her nipples straight down to her pussy. She arched her back, forcing Ethan's tongue deeper inside her. He lifted his head and smiled at her. "You taste

so sweet," he whispered.

She felt Arkan stiffen at Ethan's words. "I want to taste her, Ethan." Ethan rose from between Donella's legs, but instead of taking his place, Arkan grabbed Ethan's face and kissed him roughly. "Lovely, yes," he murmured against Ethan's lips. "You both taste lovely and sweet."

Donella caught her breath when she heard Ethan's low moan. Arkan smiled when he heard her gasp. He nuzzled Ethan's neck and whispered, barely loud enough for her to hear, "She loves us both, Ethan. She loves watching me kiss you." He caught the waistband of Ethan's pants with his thumbs and tugged them over his hips. Ethan's cock sprang upward, deep purple and heavily veined. Donella heard Arkan's breath catch in his throat. His small hand encircled Ethan. A deep flush painted Ethan's skin as Arkan stroked all the way down to the base of his shaft. A low moan escaped his lips and his head fell backwards.

Donella propped herself up on her elbows and watched as Arkan worked Ethan's cock with his hands. Arkan caught her eye and gave her a wink before dropping to his knees. "Look at Donella, Ethan," Arkan whispered hoarsely. "See how her eyes shine?" Ethan's dark eyes found Donella. Confusion warred with desire, but she smiled and nodded encouragingly. "This is turning her on. She loves it." Arkan's pink tongue darted out and he licked the pre-cum that was oozing from the tip of Ethan's cock. "Mmm," he murmured. "Wonderful." Arkan opened his lips and slid them down over Ethan's shaft until they brushed his dark curls. Ethan's fingers twisted in Arkan's hair as he worked in and out of Arkan's mouth. Donella couldn't tear her eyes away as the muscles of Ethan's abdomen flexed and rolled. His entire body tensed and stilled as he came in Arkan's mouth with a strangled cry.

Ethan moaned with what sounded like regret as Arkan slid his mouth back up to the head of Ethan's cock and let it slip from his lips. Arkan gave it one last, long lick and turned to kiss Donella. She could taste the salt from Ethan on Arkan's lips. His hands were warm and soft against her skin as he cradled her face and plundered her mouth with his tongue. He nudged her thighs wider apart with his knee and settled the head of his cock against her pussy. With one quick stroke, he buried himself inside her. Her body clenched around him. Donella felt whole, as if they would be joined forever. Arkan pulled his lips away from hers and smiled down at the surprise in her eyes. "We are joined forever, Donella. It will always be thus." He buried his head against her breasts as he took her with long, slow strokes. Ethan stretched out his length beside her. She turned her lips to him and he took her mouth with wonder and reverence while he stroked Arkan's hair. Never in Donella's wildest dreams had she imagined herself as the center of such devoted attention, but it seemed right somehow. It seemed right to be with the man that fate had chosen for her and the man that she had chosen for herself. Even more wondrous was that both men were drawn to each other.

Arkan's thrusts increased in force and speed and his breathing grew increasingly labored. Excitement built in Donella's belly and her thighs tightened as she wrapped her legs around Arkan's slim hips. Orgasm ripped through her and she cried out, but the sound was lost in Ethan's kiss. Arkan came as Donella came down through the haze, her body still quaking. He placed a tender kiss over her heart. "Ah, Donella," he murmured. "It was even better than I had ever imagined." He lifted his head and kissed Ethan softly. He took Donella's hand in his and wrapped his other arm around Ethan's chest and the

three of them curled together on the bed as their sweat mingled and their breathing returned to normal.

## Chapter Seven

The time in the chamber was too brief, Arkan thought as he looked at Donella and Ethan. In happier times, the joined couple would spend days in the chamber emerging only for food. But these were not happy times. The three had emerged from the chamber after several hours and started on their journey back down the mountain. Aine had been scandalized at such a short mating, almost as scandalized as she was when Arkan brought Ethan into the chamber. Ethan had seemed scandalized himself, hesitant to take the pleasure and affection Arkan offered. His eyes were guarded, but his body responded when Arkan touched him. Arkan could only hope that his heart would follow his body.

Arkan stood at the base of Aine's hill and surveyed the landscape. The sky had lightened since he arrived with Donella and Ethan in tow. It could not have escaped Gwyllion's notice that there had been a power shift. He would have to get to his mother and have her moved as soon as possible. The Gwylla knew that he had been bound to the next Regent and would likely attack his mother to find Donella. His hand closed over Donella's. She gave him a reassuring squeeze, as if she could see the worry in his mind. The bond between them was strengthening. Soon, she would feel his emotions as if they were his own. "You should meet my mother," he said.

"You are worried about her," Donella said. Concern clouded her violet eyes.

"Things are already changing. You have brought light and life to Culatheed, just by breathing. Gwyllion won't be happy." Unbidden, the memory of his father's death flashed before him. Gwyllion had sent her thugs after him. They had made great sport of him, then left his mangled corpse on Arkan's doorstep. The message had been clear. He was not to go to Donella. He was not to bring her to Culatheed. She was never to claim her throne. Instead of scaring him, the sight of his father's poor, bruised body had strengthened his resolve. If Donella could reclaim Culatheed so that no one else's father died a horrible death, Arkan knew he would risk his own life. It had never before crossed his mind that he would bring harm to his mother, but he knew the Gwylla would think nothing of torturing a woman. "We must get to my mother and get her to safety." Culatheed was riddled with Fae ports, spots that could transport the Fae from one part of Culatheed to another quickly. The Gwylla couldn't use the ports, their molecular structure was too dense, but they knew the ports existed. They would undoubtedly be watching them all, all but one.

Arkan's family was the last of the great sorcerers and his father had gone to considerable effort to construct a hidden port without attracting the attention of the Gwylla. It connected the cellar of Arkan's family home to the grove just past Aine's mountain. Arkan and his mother were the only beings in Culatheed who knew of its existence. If he, Donella and Ethan could get to the grove unseen, then getting his mother back to Aine's cave would be easy. Aine had provided the three of them with clothes that blended into the wooded land and hid their faces from view, but nothing could hide Ethan. Traveling with someone as large as Ethan was problematic and he wasn't sure that Ethan could use the port. Arkan was faced with a choice. The three of them could travel uncloaked and hope that no one took notice of them, or he could cloak Ethan and hope that the use of sorcery did not attract the attention of Gwyllion. Just because she had no

great magic herself didn't mean that she couldn't sense its use. The sun was just painting the sky pink. Most Fae wouldn't be awake before full dawn.

"This way," he motioned Donella and Ethan through a stand of trees whose tops stretched beyond sight. They would take their chances walking to the grove.

"I've never seen anything like this place before." Wonder filled Ethan's voice as he craned his neck to take in the full height of the tree.

"After we have restored Culatheed, I will take you both and show you all that Culatheed has to offer." He turned and took Ethan's hand. "Maybe you would like to stay." Ethan's face took on a crimson flush. Ethan was Arkan's greatest surprise. He had gone into the human world to fetch Donella. He expected her to have human attachments, but he did not expect Ethan. He did not expect her to be bound to another, especially not a human like Ethan. Not someone with Ethan's heart, honor and sense of duty. He did not expect to find another to love. Still, Arkan could see the jealousy and fear in Ethan's eyes. It would not be easy to convince him to share Donella or to love him.

Confusion and uncertainty colored Ethan's handsome face. He shrugged. "Maybe."

\* \* \* \*

Culatheed was more beautiful than anything Donella had ever imagined. The sun had begun to steal across the land and she could see that the grass and the trees were beginning to take on the vibrant green hue that they had been lacking when they first arrived. Arkan had told her that she would bring life back to the land, but she had not known what he meant. Death and desolation had greeted her when she first set foot on the land. She would have wagered that nothing could chase the smell of decay away, but mere hours after she had taken her place as Regent, she could see the changes adding up. The Gwylla would certainly notice and would be ready to defend their own power.

The Gwylla, she thought. It had only been a day since Arkan had appeared at her kitchen table and spun a fantastic tale about the Fae and the Gwylla. It had all sounded like something out of a child's fairy story, but Donella could feel the truth of his words now. She could see the Gwylla in her mind's eye. She knew that she would recognize Gwyllion if she passed her on the path. Culatheed was seeping into her bones, or maybe it had always been there, living in her blood, waiting for her return to the land of her birth. Every step she took on the Culatheed ground forced her old life and memories to fade. It was as if she had spent her entire life preparing to take her position as leader of the Fae. Everything had changed, even her name. She knew that she would never answer to Donna again.

She watched in amusement as Ethan and Arkan walked a step before her. Arkan had reached out and taken Ethan's hand. The larger man's shoulders had stiffened at the touch, but he hadn't pulled away. There was a bond between the two of them that was as strong as the bond between Arkan and Donella herself. Arkan seemed to have accepted the bond and his feelings for Ethan as easily as he had claimed Donella for his own, but Ethan seemed to be struggling with his emotions. She wished she could sit and talk with him alone, to hold him in her arms and explain that she loved him as she always had. Her love for Arkan in no way diminished the love she felt for Ethan, but there was no time.

Donella had felt the bond between the three of them when they had lain together in Aine's cave. As the sweat had dried on their bodies, she had felt thin silver cords binding them, knitting their bodies together until she could not tell where her body ended and

another's began. Arkan had opened a sleepy eye and winked at her. She knew that he felt the magic between them. It was part of being Fae, but Ethan was fully human. She didn't know if he could feel the magic the three of them had worked, but she knew that he could never leave their trio, even if he could never understand why.

The three of them made their way down the path, with Arkan walking so quickly that he had to tug Ethan's hand to make him keep up. He was worried about his mother. His fear was palpable, invading Donella's mind until it became her own, until she could feel her own heart rise up inside her chest. He turned and gave her a small smile over his shoulder and she knew that he had felt her thoughts. "We are almost to the port. Mother will be so pleased to see both of you. I only wish that we had time for the traditional joining feast. She will be beside herself. She had so looked forward to a huge celebration when you returned."

"Later, when we are safe, she can have as large a celebration as Culatheed has ever seen."

"She would like that," he smiled. "We have had very little to celebrate since you have been gone."

\* \* \* \*

The hair on the back of Ethan's neck crawled as Arkan led him into a tiny clearing in the middle of the great stand of trees. The trunks were as round and large as the redwoods he had seen on vacation in California, and at the center was a round clearing, no more than five feet across. There was a circle of grass that was a richer green than any they had passed. It shimmered in the early morning sun, but if Arkan had not pointed it out, Ethan would not have noticed.

Arkan's grip on Ethan's hand grew damp and tight before he suddenly dropped Ethan's hand and fell to his knees just outside the circle. A wave of grief passed over his face as he pressed his cheek into the grass. Panic rose up in Ethan's throat, robbing him of breath. He felt the same urge to comfort Arkan as he would comfort Donella. He knelt next to him and slid his arm around Arkan's slim waist. He had not known that Arkan was weeping until he felt the sobs vibrating against his chest.

Donella dropped to her knees on and placed her hand on Arkan's back and whispered something against Arkan's ear. Her hand brushed against Ethan's arm and their eyes met over Arkan's head. Hers were filled with concern and tears. Ethan could not hear the words she whispered to Arkan, but he felt Arkan relax against him. After a moment, Arkan sat up and wiped tears from his face. "I am sorry." He exhaled and ran his hand through his hair. "This was my father's last act of magic before he died. He knew the Gywlla would come for him. He wanted to make sure that we would have safe means of travel from our home to Aine's cave. This is a special port that will take us to the cellar of my home. We must convince my mother to come with us and stay at Aine's."

Ethan stared into the center of the circle. The air seemed to vibrate with contained energy. There was a different feel, a heaviness to the atmosphere that was missing from the port near Donella's home with the Kidwells. A small frisson of concern moved through Ethan. He wasn't sure how the new port worked, and he wasn't at all sure that it would be a comfortable experience.

"Exactly how does this port work?" Ethan asked. "I don't know how to do any kind of magic. I never even believed it existed until last night."



“Most ports can be used by the Fae and by certain other beings, like half-Faes and humans. It was why you were able to port from your world to Culatheed, but this port is different. It was meant to be used only by my family. My father put certain safeguards on it to be sure that it remained hidden and that only a true Fae could use it. I'm not sure that you can port. A human's body is denser than a Fae's, and you are much larger as well. The only way to know for sure is for you to try and port with Donella and me. Maybe the two of us together will have enough power to bring you through the port with us,” Arkan said.

“But I don't know any magic, either,” Donella said. She turned to Ethan, her violet eyes dark and worried in her paper-pale face. “I want to help you, but what if I do something wrong and only half of you goes, while half of you gets left behind because of me?”

Ethan saw Arkan's jaw work as if he were fighting to contain a smile. “It doesn't work that way,” he explained. “You don't have to know any magic. Just the magic you have in your blood is enough. If our magic together can't get Ethan through the port, he will just be left behind.” He turned to Ethan and took his hand. “I'm not at all sure that this will work, so I want to put a cloaking spell on you. If you don't make the trip, you must wait here in the grove. If the cloaking takes, no one will know you are here. We will gather my mother and return as soon as possible. We will come back for you. It is important that you don't wander off. The Gwylla could capture you and use you against Donella. Do you understand?”

Ethan felt like a child being scolded by his father, but he could see the sincere concern in Arkan's eyes, concern that Ethan would wander through Culatheed and be lost forever. He couldn't be offended by such concern. “I understand. I will stay here like a good boy if I am left behind.”

“Good.” Arkan stood and pulled Ethan after him. “Now close your eyes so I can cloak you.”

“Why do I have to close my eyes?”

“Just do it,” Arkan snapped. “We don't have much time,” he said more gently.

Ethan closed his eyes and felt Arkan's cool hands on his cheeks. He felt a flush spread across his face. He swallowed as his heart jumped in his throat. Arkan mumbled words that Ethan could not understand and a searing heat spread from Arkan's hands down over his body. Ethan fought the urge to flinch. He was reminded of the heat of Aine's magic. Was all power in Culatheed spread by such intense heat? Would Donella have such power at her fingertips one day?

“You can open your eyes now,” Arkan said.

Ethan opened his eyes and looked down at his body. He was still visible, but he looked washed out and insubstantial. He touched his chest and was relieved to find he was still solid. “Only the truly gifted Fae will see you now, and there are precious few of us left,” Arkan said. “Now come stand in the middle of the circle with us.” Donella and Arkan took Ethan's hands and the three of them walked into the center of the small grove. Arkan began to whisper under his breath, words in a language that Ethan knew was as old as time, words that he would never understand. Donella nodded in time to Arkan's word and a sudden sharp stab of jealousy pierced him as he realized she understood every syllable. He wondered if he would ever be able to truly share every part of her life again, as he did before Arkan's sudden arrival.

Arkan's words came faster and louder. The air vibrated with the force of Arkan's voice and the trees swayed in a sudden gust of wind. And as quickly as the wind appeared, it was gone, and Donella and Arkan with it. He had been left behind, with nothing to do but wait.

## Chapter Eight

Traveling by port felt like being scattered to the wind. Donella thought her body was dissolving, but Arkan's hand felt solid in hers. Darkness enveloped her and there was an unnatural silence that made Donella especially uneasy. It was a little like death, Donella thought, cold and dark and silent. The only thing that stood between Donella and hysteria was the warmth of Arkan's hand in hers. Her other hand felt strangely empty, and she knew that they had left Ethan behind at the circle. She tamped down the faint thread of worry that threatened to pull her back to the grove. Ethan would be fine. He had Arkan's magic and his own strength to protect him.

Slowly, light began to creep in around the edges of her vision. She could hear the blood rushing in her head. A small, windowless room began to come into focus. It was only slightly larger than a closet, with a bed against one wall and a number of jars and boxes along the opposite wall.

She felt the ground rush up to meet her feet and had Arkan not steadied her, Donella would have fallen over. The room would have been completely dark if not for a single candle that was set into the wall. The wick was pure white and there was no wax dripping onto the sconce that held it. "It's an everlasting candle." Arkan's soft voice made her jump. "It was my father's. It will burn forever, unless one of my family extinguishes it."

"Where are we? You said we would be at your home. Is this where you live?"

"This is the room off our cellar. My father dug it out of the earth after he brought you to the humans. It was meant to be a hiding place in case of Gwylla attack. There is food in the jars. Mother keeps them stocked every week, in case we ever had need of this place."

Donella dropped heavily on the bed. Fatigue suddenly overwhelmed her. She would have given anything to curl up on the bed and sleep for a week, but they had to get Arkan's mother and return to the circle. "What happened to Ethan? I felt his hand slip away from mine."

"He is at the circle. His body is too solid to go through the port. Our bodies are made of air. Humans are made of the earth. Do not worry for him, Donella. He is a smart and brave man. He will be fine." He reached down and took her hand and pressed a kiss against her palm. A shiver slid down her spine when his soft lips brushed the sensitive skin. She felt disloyal to Ethan, knowing that if time had not been so precious, she would have pulled Arkan against her and fallen back onto the bed. "Come," he said. "It's time for you to meet my mother."

\* \* \* \*

Arkan climbed the stairs much slower than he would have if Donella hadn't been clinging to his hand. He wanted to bound up the stairs and throw himself into his mother's arms like he was still a small boy. Hardly the action of the strapping son come to save the world from total destruction, but he couldn't be anything other than what he was, and what he was, in that moment, was scared. He was scared for his mother. He was scared for the future of Culatheed. He was scared for the safety of Donella and for Ethan who

never would have been in the situation if not for Arkan. "Never be afraid of fear," his father had told him. There was no danger in that, Arkan thought wryly. "Fear is what keeps you honest. Fear is what keeps you from being foolhardy. Absence of fear leads to rashness. Embrace your fear, but don't give in to it."

He reached for the doorknob, but stopped just as he was about to push the door open. Through the heavy wood, he could hear his mother's soft voice raised in anger. "I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't seen my son in days." Her voice caught on the last word. "There isn't anyone here. You've taken my husband from me. Now my son is gone, too. Can't you leave me alone in my old age? You've taken all I have. What more do you want from me?" Pain closed a fist around Arkan's heart. It took everything that he had not to open the door and go to her.

"Gwyllion is not as stupid as you Fae seem to think." The voice was deep and slow. A Gwylla. Arkan's blood turned to ice in his veins. He had known that they would come for his mother, but he didn't think they would turn up this soon. "Gwyllion said that she felt his magic. She said that he was here." Arkan heard a thump followed by the sickening crash of wood splintering.

"There is no need to be destructive," his mother snapped. "Search the house or take me prisoner, whatever you think is best, but if you think I will let you destroy my home, you have taken leave of what little sense you possess."

"You can't talk to me that way! I am a personal guard of Gwyllion!"

"Then perhaps I can go to Aine and explain to her that our noble Regent," her voice raised in a sneer, "has a thug in her employ. Given that Gwyllion has held her regency past the date of her mandate, I'm sure that Aine would love to hear of any abuse of power."

"This is not Aine's concern." But his voice lacked his earlier bravado. "Gwyllion rules because the Fae have not produced their Regent. When the new Regent returns, Gwyllion will gladly step down."

"That day may come sooner than you think. Now if you've concluded your business here..." Mara's voice carried the tone of dismissal.

"Gwyllion will hear of your lack of cooperation," he grumbled, but Arkan heard little heat in his words, just a surliness that he had not been able to frighten Mara.

The front door slammed so hard that the entire house shook. Arkan counted to three, to give the Gwylla time to leave the property. On three, the door flew open and he was face to face with his very angry mother.

\*

"Of all the stupid things you have ever done, this one just about tops all of them, Arkan." Mara was a taller woman than Donella had expected. She was almost as tall as Arkan, with a great shock of platinum blond hair and ebony black eyes. Her features were strong and sharp with a cleft chin. She was as different from Arkan as she would have been from Ethan. Donella immediately knew that this was not a woman to be crossed. Arkan grunted in pain as Mara threw her arms around his waist and squeezed. "Be glad it's not your neck," she said. She pulled away and laid her hand on his cheek and her face softened. The difference it made in her appearance was startling. She was almost unrecognizable as the woman that had opened the door. "My brave, fool-hardy son. What were you thinking, using the portal?"

"How did you know I was here?"

"I felt it, of course," she laughed. "I always feel when you're near. I knew the instant you returned to Culatheed." A flash of pain painted her features. "I knew the instant you joined with your love. I assume that is who is cowering behind you." Donella startled and felt her face flame. She had thought she was well hidden in the shadows. "Yes, I see you, dear. And you are quite lovely. I would have recognized you immediately. You look like your mother. She was my dearest friend, you know." She turned from Arkan and extended both hands to Donella. They were large and firm in hers. "We have missed you in Culatheed, Donella. When your mother died, a little of the light and beauty that graced our land died with her. I know you will bring the same joy and laughter." That was a tall order for anyone, Donella thought, much less someone who had never heard of Culatheed until a few days prior.

"I don't know about that." She dropped her head and allowed the curtain of her dark hair to shadow her face.

Arkan's mother tucked a stray strand behind her ear. "I know this is overwhelming to you. But this is your destiny. When things are settled and you are presented to Gwyllion as Regent, you will grow into your role. You will see. Aine never mistakes these things. Aine would not have named you Regent if it you were not up to the task."

"Mother," Arkan interrupted. "We must hurry. We have to get back to the portal so we can hide you at Aine's."

Laughter bubbled up from her berry lips, but the merriment didn't reach her eyes. "Hide at Aine's? But why?" Her face took on more of the same hard edges that Donella had seen when she had first opened the door. "This is my home, Arkan. I have no desire to leave it."

"The Gwylla have already been here, Mother." Arkan pointed to a table that had been reduced to rubble. "That thug destroyed the table just because he was irritated. Do you want him to turn his strength on you? Do you want to meet the same end as father?" Arkan's held his shoulders stiffly and Donella knew that he was barely holding his frustration in check.

"They wouldn't dare attack me. I am a woman and even the Gwylla won't attack a woman."

"They wanted to kill Donella when she was born. A female child, Mother. Do you really think they would spare you on account of your sex?" His lowered his voice pulled her head to his shoulder. "I've lost father. I can't lose you, too. And we have to get back to the circle. We have to return for Ethan."

"Who is Ethan? Is he the heavy presence that I felt with you when you returned?"

"He is our third," Arkan said simply. Donella waited for Arkan to explain that Ethan was more than a third, but Arkan remained silent.

"I know no one named Ethan and I know all the Fae in Culatheed."

"He is not Fae, but human."

"You brought a human in to Culatheed?" Anger showed in every line of her body. She seemed to grow six inches as she towered over Arkan, but he did not back down or cower. "There has never been a human in Culatheed. Are you trying to destroy us all? What if he goes back and tells everyone about us?"

"He was pledged to Donella before she knew of Culatheed. He has loved her all of her life and she loves him as well. I would not leave him behind with his heart broken and I will not ask Donella to live without him."

“Love!” She barked. “What do humans know of love? They think it is something to be fallen into. Donella would have forgotten about him in time. It is much more sensible for an elder to match the infants. Look at you and Donella. Only three days and you both look at each other as though you have loved forever. Was Aine wrong?”

“No,” Arkan said softly. “She was not wrong, but Ethan is a good man, and he will protect Donella with his life. All of this is for Donella, Mother. Ethan is large, as large as Gwyllion herself. We can use his strength. But he wasn't able to use the port and he has been left behind. This land and its ways are strange to him. We must return before he gets into trouble.” He took her by the arms and brought her a step closer. “If Gwyllion has sensed the use of the port, then she has probably discovered the circle at the base of Aine's mountain. I will not have him alone the first time he encounters a Gwylla.” He released Mara, crossed his arms in front of his chest and planted his feet wide. “We will return to Ethan, without you if we must, but I will not leave him to fend for himself.” Donella felt a fresh surge of love for Arkan. She could feel his love for his mother, but he was willing to leave her behind for Ethan. For the first time, she began to believe that the three of them could live and love together. Arkan had proven his devotion to Ethan, but could Ethan ever really accept Arkan?

\* \* \* \*

Ethan leaned up against the tree and waited for Arkan and Donella to return. The porting had gone so fast that he was sure that if he blinked he would have missed their departure. One minute he was standing in the circle with his hands clasped by Arkan and Donella and the next he was standing alone.

He picked the largest tree and curled up between the roots. It was large enough that the roots extended almost to the top of his head. Never in all his life had he seen trees as large as those in Culatheed. For that matter, he had never seen anything like Culatheed, or anyone like Arkan.

Ethan wasn't sure exactly how it had happened, but his heart leaped when he thought of the strange pale man with the golden eyes. Never in his life had he ever been attracted to a man, but he knew that he was as bound to Arkan as Donella was. That bond galled him. How could he be bound to someone that seemed intent on taking away the love of his life?

But that wasn't quite being fair to Arkan, Ethan admitted. Arkan had asked Ethan if he wanted to stay in Culatheed, proof that he didn't intend to keep Ethan from Donella. But the question was a mere formality. Ethan could no more leave Donella and Arkan than he could cut out his own heart, and Arkan knew it. It was in the way he looked at Ethan, as if he could look into his soul and see what was written there.

He watched the circle from his spot in the grove, willing Arkan and Donella to appear. He prayed that Arkan's mother was safe. From what he heard from Arkan of the Gwylla, he did not want to see what would be left if they got their hands on someone frail enough to have given birth to Arkan. But, to be fair, Arkan wasn't always delicate. In the few days Ethan had known him, he seemed to go from the delicate waif he saw in the alley to a strong, heavily muscled fighter, especially if Donella was threatened. At first, Ethan thought it was a trick of the light, or maybe a product of his own overloaded mind, but now he realized it was a part of Arkan's magic, to subtly change his physical body when he had need.

Ethan rested his head against the trunk of the tree. He knew it wasn't wise to sleep when he was alone in a strange land, but he was so tired after the drama of the last days that his eyelids felt weighted down. He couldn't stop himself from closing his eyes, just for a minute, when the blackness crowded the edges of his vision.

He settled down between the tree roots and began to drift off, but he was soon awakened by a pair of deep, gruff voices.

"Gwyllion said it would be here, but I don't see anything." Twigs snapped as feet shuffled through the grove floor. The Gwylla. Ethan's heart raced as he flattened himself against the ground.

"What are we looking for, anyway?"

"Gwyllion said it would be a circle marked off on the ground. Arkan and his new bride will use it to port between here and his home. Gwyllion has been looking for it since Daoine died, she felt the rip in Culatheed's fabric, but no one has been able to find it."

"What will we do when we find it?" The voice was slow, and Ethan couldn't shake the feeling that neither Gwylla was particularly bright.

"Wait, Gwyllion said. She said that we would catch them coming back through the port. Then we can do whatever we want with them, just as long as they are all dead when we finish. The Fae will never be able to produce their Regent."

Fear and rage swirled together inside Ethan. Arkan and Donella could be coming through the port with Arkan's mother at any time. They would walk right into the hands of the waiting beasts and there was nothing that Ethan could do to warn them.

There was nothing he could do but try to stop the Gwylla from getting their hands on Donella and Arkan. He slowly raised his head over the roots of the tree and looked at the Gwylla for the first time. They were larger than Arkan by almost a foot, but they were not any taller than Ethan himself. They weren't as tall as Ethan had expected, but they were twice as broad as he was. Their bodies were stuffed into too-small dirty gray shirts and roughly sewn breeches. They were big, but their massive arms looked soft and doughy under the shirt. Their heads were as large as pumpkins and their coarse hair was as gray as their shirts. Small eyes were set back deep in their skulls. Even from behind the tree roots, he could smell their unwashed bodies.

Against one of the Gwylla, Ethan knew he would have no trouble, but against two, it would take all of his strength and speed. He would have to hope that the Gwylla were slow and soft enough that he could at least outlast them.

Ethan felt around blindly until his fingers closed on a smooth rock. He hefted it in his hand, popped up from his hidden position and hurled the rock at the smaller of the two Gwylla. He had hoped to knock him out, but it only appeared to stun him momentarily.

"What the?" He turned around and his eyes widened when he saw Ethan leaping over the tree roots. "Who in Gwyllion's name are you?"

"It's a human you idiot! A human has breached Culatheed!" The larger Gwylla was so stunned that his feet seemed nailed to the ground as Ethan hurled himself at the smaller of the pair. The Gwylla landed with a resounding thud as Ethan tackled him around his knees. Ethan felt the bones crack under his hand as he buried his fist into the surprised face. The Gwylla roared in pain and anger. He pushed against Ethan's chest with such force that Ethan went sailing through the air.

Ethan immediately sprang to his feet to find both Gwylla approaching him. "How

did you get here?" The larger one asked. He seemed to be the smarter Gwylla, the one that Gwyllion had left in charge. "Humans can't enter Culatheed on their own." When Ethan didn't answer, a knowing leer crossed the Gwylla's face. "You came back with the Fae bitch, didn't you? Well, you can watch me and Magorc take turns with her before we kill her."

Magorc made a sound that was part laughter and part grunt. "I like the way you think, Zylysic."

Zylysic advanced on Ethan and when they were almost at arm's length, he lunged at the large Gwylla and wrapped his hands around his throat. He could barely get his hands around Zylysic's neck, who grunted when Ethan brought his knee against his groin. Zylysic fell to his back and Ethan pressed against his airway, hoping the Gwylla would pass out from lack of air. Ethan straddled Zylysic as he thrashed and whined pitifully while Ethan increased the pressure on his throat.

Magorc smashed his fist into the back of Ethan's head. Ethan's head snapped forward and his vision momentarily dimmed. Even after the beating he took at Ethan's hands, Magorc was still able to fight. The beasts were stronger than he thought. Dizziness almost overwhelmed him, but he kept his hold on the Gwylla's neck. He couldn't let go. Even if he couldn't defeat the Gwylla, he could distract them long enough so that Donella and Arkan could make it through the port and get to safety.

Fire tore through Ethan's body as Magorc sank his teeth into Ethan's skin. The pain traveled down his arm and through his body as the venom in the Gwylla's bite flowed through him. The searing heat was overwhelming and nausea rose up in the back of his throat. Still he kept up his pressure on the thrashing creature underneath him and slowly Zylysic's struggles began to lose strength. Ethan just needed to hold on for a few more minutes, just to even the odds when Arkan returned. The edges of Ethan's vision began to darken as the poison traveled through him.

Through the haze of darkness and pain, Ethan thought he heard Arkan's voice, but he knew he must be hallucinating as he slipped into unconsciousness. He only hoped that he had done enough damage to the two Gwylla so that Arkan and Donella would have a chance against them when they made it back to the grove.

\*

"Ethan, no!" Arkan shouted as he fell through the port. He had never traveled through the port with three people. It was a tight fit, but he hadn't wanted to take the time to travel separately. Before he took Mara and Donella's hands, a sense of foreboding so strong that it almost brought him to his knees coursed through him. Once his feet hit the ground in the middle of the grove, he knew that his intuition was right. His heart stopped when he saw brave Ethan fighting off two Gwylla. One was on the ground under Ethan. The large Gwylla's face was a sickly grayish blue and Arkan knew that the he was only seconds away from death. But it was the smaller Gwylla on Ethan's back that caused Arkan concern. He had wrapped his arms around Ethan's neck and his teeth were clamped onto Ethan's shoulder. Blood was pouring from the wound, along with thick, green venom dripping from the Gwylla's mouth. Ethan's face was pale with pain and Arkan knew that he wouldn't be able to hang on much longer. The Gwylla's venom was enough to cause a nasty infected sore in a Fae, but in humans, it could be much worse.

He could hear Donella's anguished wails and his own mother's startled cry, but Ethan was his only concern. He flew at the Gwylla on Ethan's back and putting in every bit of



his magic and his love for Ethan and Donella into his hands, he grasped the Gwylla's head and watched as the jolt hit his small brain.

The Gwylla looked stunned for a moment before comprehension dawned in his eyes. But the fight with Ethan had drained him and Arkan had the advantage of surprise. Before the Gwylla could fight back, he released Ethan and slumped backwards, dead before he hit the ground.

Ethan keeled over. One look at his pale, drawn face told Arkan that he was near death. He took Ethan's handsome face in his hands. Brave, dear, foolish Ethan, trying to fight off the Gwylla on his own. Arkan hadn't realized just how much he had grown to love Ethan until he felt the life slipping from his body. Arkan took a deep breath, willing himself to stay calm for Donella's sake. He couldn't save Ethan and sooth a hysterical Donella. "We must move him to Aine's cave," he said as he cursed his own foolishness. He had no skills as a healer. He had the talent, it came along with his magic, but he had never bothered to use it, believing brute magical strength would always keep him from needing to heal. He wasn't even sure if the Fae healing magic would work on a human. But he knew that if anyone could help Ethan, it was Aine. The trip up the mountain with Ethan would be difficult and there was no guarantee that he would live through the journey, but it was his only chance. Arkan knew he had to try.

## Chapter Nine

Donella looked at Ethan's pale, lifeless form and thought he must surely be dead. The three of them had carried him up the side of the mountain, fighting to lift Ethan's large body over rocks and under low tree limbs. Donella's own arms burned with the effort, but at every spasm of pain, she bit her lip and redoubled her efforts, marveling at the way Arkan never faltered under the burden. Mara seemed to struggle as much as Donella, but her small hands gripped Ethan's heavily muscled legs firmly and she carried him without complaint. He was heavy, even with the three of them carrying him. He was jostled and turned and more than once he was almost dropped down the mountain side, but he never stirred. Aine met them at the mouth of the cave. "What has happened?" she snapped.

"He tried to fight off two Gwylla," Arkan said simply. "He has suffered a bite, but the venom has affected him differently." He lowered his voice and leaned in, making sure his words were for Aine's ears only. "I'm not sure he will survive."

"You should not have brought him here. He should not be involved in sacred Fae ceremonies. This is Culatheed's way of righting your wrongs." Aine's voice wasn't above a whisper, but it floated to Donella's ears. She whimpered and swayed, tears filling her eyes.

"If the fault is mine, then I will take my own life, but Ethan has done nothing to deserve this. You will save him," Arkan said, "Or we will leave Culatheed to Gwyllion."

They brought Ethan into the main room of the cave, where Arkan and Donella and Ethan had been joined together a few hours before. His olive skin had gone pasty and green and his chest barely rose and fell with each breath. Donella knelt beside him and clasped his hand. He gripped her fingers slightly. She took it as a good sign. "This is my fault," she whispered. "If not for me, he wouldn't be here."

"Ethan is an adult, Donella." Arkan knelt across from her and clasped Ethan's other hand. "He had a choice, and he chose to come with us. The fault is with the Gwylla."

"There is no time to lay blame at all, not if you want me to save him." Aine pulled Arkan away from Ethan. "If you want to be helpful, go stoke the fire. He is cold and we will need to warm him." She turned to Arkan's mother. "Mara, I will need your help. We must bleed him and I do not want Arkan and Donella to help me. They are bound to him and this will not be pleasant." Mara's face turned pale, but her features took on the mask of strength that was becoming familiar to Donella.

"Of course," Mara said. "Anything you need."

The fire flared and quickly filled the cave. Donella closed her eyes against its brightness, but the warmth did nothing to chase away the chill that had seeped into her bones. Arkan wiped sweat from his brow. "What do you need of me now, Aine?"

"Take Donella and go into the inner chamber. I don't want you to be here."

"I'll not leave him." Arkan's face settled into a mask of strength very like his mother's.

"Then there is nothing I can do for him but wait for him to pass into the next life." Anger showed in every line of her body. "His death will be on your head."

Donella, cried out, but she didn't recognize the voice as her own. She threw herself across Ethan's body and sobbed. "Please, please, don't die," she whispered in his ear. "I

love you so much. I've loved you from the first time I saw you, remember?" Tears leaked down her cheeks and wet Ethan's skin. "You were on the playground on the first day of school? Remember? You pushed me on the swings. I loved you then, and I love you now. I can't live without you, Ethan. Please don't leave me. I need you."

"I will not let him die, Donella." Arkan put his arms around her waist and pulled her away from Ethan. "Come, we will go into the chamber and let Aine work her healing magic. He will be fine." He didn't sound convinced. "How could he not survive? He is well loved, and those who love and are loved, always have more to live for." He pressed his lips to her forehead.

It sounded like false hope to Donella, but false hope was better than no hope to her, so she clung to it. She nodded and took Arkan's hand and followed him into the chamber where the three of them had lain together.

\*

Ethan was flat on his back on the hard dirt floor, but he couldn't find the strength to move. Donella was draped across his chest, whispering words of love and devotion. Her tears flowed onto his lips. He could taste their salt and they seemed to give him an extra measure of strength. He closed his eyes for a minute, gathering the strength to speak, but his lips couldn't form the words. And then she was gone. He felt the loss of her warmth acutely. He began to tremble violently.

"Move him closer to the fire. He is like ice. We must warm him." Aine's voice was clipped and efficient. Aine, he thought, they had brought him to Aine. Things were starting to grow clear in his muddled mind. He remembered the Gwylla attack, remembered the pain of the bite and his fear that he would die before Arkan and Donella returned. He survived, but he wasn't sure for how much longer.

Four hands slipped under his back and dragged him along the floor. He couldn't open his eyes to see the flames, but he felt their comforting heat. The warmth lapped at his fingers and spread to the rest of his body. Slowly, his trembling stopped. "He is as heavy as a Gwylla." The voice was unfamiliar, but it was lyrical, like a spoken song. "I had no idea that humans were so big."

"They can grow to be even larger than this one," Aine said. "But don't let their size fool you. They are delicate creatures, prone to death and disease. Their life spans are ridiculously short. Look what a simple Gwylla bite did to him"

"Donella loves him." The lovely voice again. There was something of Arkan in the voice, a familiar cadence and inflection to the words. Mara, Ethan thought with no small satisfaction. Mara was safe, as was Donella and Arkan. If he died, at least his fight with the Gwylla meant something.

"Your son loves him as well," Aine said. "He does not show it outwardly as Donella does, but Arkan shares her fear for Ethan."

"My son has seen too much loss in his short life. We must save this Ethan, whatever the cost." Mara's voice was firm.

"We must bleed him. It is the only way to get the Gwylla venom out of him. He must be drained to the point of death to rid his body of as much of the poison as possible. The little blood we leave him will regenerate. He will always have some venom, but he will be able to live with it."

Fear coursed through Ethan. He wasn't sure that he wanted to be drained of almost all of his blood, but if it meant living and being able to stay with Donella, he would go

through whatever Aine had in store for him.

"I don't know how to drain," Mara said. "Tell me what to do."

"Take your place at his head and hold it as still as possible. This could cause him a great deal of pain, but his head must stay immobilized."

Ethan felt small, soft hands against his temples. "I am ready."

Aine's rough hand grabbed his arm. He felt a nick on his right wrist. The pain started as no more than a spark—not so bad—but it soon turned into a roaring inferno, the flames licking along every nerve of his body. He thought he must have rolled into the fire on accident. He had never known pain like this. The Gwylla bite paled in comparison. "Hold his head still Mara!" Aine's angry voice penetrated through the pain.

"I am trying, Aine, but he is strong. I am doing the best I can!"

The pain seemed to go on forever and even in his delirium, Ethan tried his best to remain still, but he could not help but thrash as the agony claimed him. "It's not enough," Aine said. "The pain should have subsided by now. I will have to supplement his blood."

"Take my blood," Mara said. "He is already bound to Arkan and his bride. The blood should come from his family."

"Are you sure, Mara? Your blood is royal. You are one of the nine lines from which a Regent may come. Do you really want to give that away?"

"He has almost given his life to protect my son and his bride. If anyone deserves royal blood, it is this human." Ethan wanted to reach out and take her hand. It was like being in Hell, feeling the pain, hearing the words spoken over him, but being unable to speak or move or acknowledge Mara's precious gift.

"This may sting a bit," Aine said. Ethan heard Mara groan, but an instant later, the soft skin of her wrist was pressed against his lips. At first he was repulsed. He couldn't do it. He wouldn't drink Mara's blood, but Aine's hand jerked on his chin, forcing his mouth open. He tasted the sweetness of Mara's blood sprinkled on his tongue. Mara pressed her wrist to his mouth and though he tried to just lap at the stream, he latched on and drank hungrily. She cried out, but still he could not stop himself. Warmth flowed through him and the pain began to recede.

"That is enough, Ethan," Aine said. The wrist was pulled away from his lips. He wanted to cry out in frustration. "Open your eyes for me." *I can't*, he wanted to say, but he found his eyes opened on their own. He was staring into Arkan's eyes, but they were set in a feminine face that was paper white and filled with concern.

"It is wonderful to see you, Ethan. Perhaps it is time we met." A small smile played at the corners of her lips. "I am Mara."

"You saved me." Ethan's voice came out in a croak. "Thank you."

Mara waved away his thanks. "And you saved my son. If the Gwylla had been waiting on us when we came through the port, we would have had no chance against them." Her hands were cool and soft as she brushed the hair back away from his forehead.

"They were going to kill Arkan and Donella," Ethan said. "I couldn't let the Gwylla hurt them, even if it meant that they would kill me instead."

"They almost did," Aine said. "That was a foolish thing you did. Brave, but foolish."

"Wouldn't you have done the same thing?" Ethan thought he saw a flicker of respect in the old woman's eyes.

"What's done is done and there is no point quarreling over it now." Mara snapped at

Aine. She pressed her lips to Ethan's forehead. "My son and his bride love you a great deal. I am starting to understand why."

\* \* \* \*

Arkan could hear the faint rumble of Ethan's deep voice. A wave of relief washed over him. "He is awake," he told Donella. "I told you that Aine's healing magic was strong."

"I want to go see him," Donella said as she darted past Arkan. He grabbed her by the arm.

"Not yet," he said softly. "I don't know what treatments Aine had to give him. Sometimes they can cause confusion. It is best that we wait until Aine calls for us."

"But—"

"He is awake and talking. Listen—" He cocked his head closer to the door to try and make out Ethan's words. "Is it not enough to know that he is alive?" He cradled Donella's damp face in his hands. "I know that you are impatient. I so long to see him and reassure myself that he is healthy that I ache, but trust me. It is best that we wait. If we interfere, we could make Aine angry, and that could disrupt the magic."

Donella pulled away from him and flounced down on the bed. "I don't know how you can be so calm," she pouted. "He almost died saving us, Arkan. We put him in that situation. One of us should have stayed behind."

He took a deep sigh and let her anger roll off. He knew that she was scared and upset and more than a little tired. He spoke slowly and gently, as he would to an exhausted child. "Who would you have stay behind with him? It couldn't be me. I had to open the port."

"I could have stayed with him. I could have fought. Maybe he wouldn't have been in such bad shape had he not tried to take on two Gwylla alone."

"Maybe," Arkan conceded. "Or maybe the Gwylla would have been able to take you captive. You could be dead or in Gwyllion's hands now."

Donella buried her face in her hands and shuddered. "I never thought of that," she said. "This is all so new to me, Arkan. I don't know what to do or what to think. I'm scared, Arkan."

His heart contracted with sympathy. He knew she spoke the truth because he could feel her emotions as well as he could feel his own. It was painful to bear her fear and guilt over Ethan along with his own, but that was the price of being bonded to his bride. He took her in his arms and pulled her head against his shoulder. "I know that this is all bewildering to you, but you have to trust me." He pressed his lips against her hair. "I would never lead you or Ethan into danger that I would not face myself."

"That's hardly reassuring," she said.

"I wish I could promise you that there would be no danger, but there will be more fighting, Donella. This is all up to you. If you will it so, we can go back to the human world and leave Culatheed to the Gwylla."

He could feel the shock ripple through her body. She pulled away and pierced him with a look. "But what about your mother? What about the other Fae?" Her face turned red as anger rose within her. "How could you even suggest that we leave Culatheed? That we allow this beautiful place to turn into a rotting, decaying heap?" Her voice rose and became tinged with hysteria. He bit his lip to hide a smile, but it crept up the side of his

face anyway. "How could you smile at a time like this? It isn't funny."

"No, you are right, Donella. This is not funny." He laid a hand alongside her burning cheek. "I knew what your reaction would be. You have left all that was human in you behind. You are fully Fae, as I am. You could no more leave Culatheed than you could cut out your heart, but I had to know. This will be dangerous. If your heart were not truly here, you would be in more danger than you can imagine."

He took her hand and pulled her toward the bed. He saw her eyes light, but he only chuckled. "It would be wonderful to take you to bed, my love, but we both must rest now. You have not slept since we arrived, and we will both need our wits about us if we are to survive."

Disappointment clouded her violet eyes, and she nodded glumly. "You're right, but I don't know how I will ever be able to sleep. There are so many things going through my head right now."

He stretched out on the bed and pulled her in beside him. "Close your eyes," he said. He touched his fingertips to her closed eyelids and whispered a spell that his mother would perform when he was young. Before the last syllable fell from his lips, her breathing grew deep and regular and he knew she was asleep. He sighed as he snuggled up against her, wishing sleep would come as easily to him.

\* \* \* \*

When Donella finally woke from her deep sleep, she found the others sitting around the fire, talking in hushed tones. Lying alone in the chamber, she overheard what it had taken to heal Ethan, an infusion of Mara's blood. It was the only thing strong enough to fight the Gwylla venom. It had made bile rise in the back of Donella's throat, to think of how close she had come to losing Ethan. She left her chamber and joined the others, fighting the urge to launch herself at Ethan, to touch him, reassure herself that he was well and healthy, but he was pacing the cave, as agitated as Donella had ever seen him. In spite of almost dying at the hands of the Gwylla, Ethan was more than ready to return to the fight.

"But I'm fine," Ethan said as he paced the small cave. "I feel as good as new."

"But you almost died, Ethan." Donella stood toe to toe with Ethan, blocking his path. "You can't go out there. Not again. The Gwylla obviously aren't as stupid as you seem to think. They will realize that you reacted badly to the bite. What if it happens again? What if we can't get you back here in time?"

"That's a chance I will take, Donella." His square jaw set and he crossed his arms in front of his chest. Donella fought the urge to slap him. "If it keeps you safe, I will fight."

"He is right, Donella." Arkan's calm voice interrupted Donella's heat. "He is strong, and Mara's blood flows through his veins. The Fae blood will offer him a measure of protection against whatever the Gwylla might throw at him. He will never be as strong as a Fae at resisting the venom, but he is in a much better position to defend himself now." Arkan crossed his arms and stood next to Ethan.

"Someone must go fight the Gwylla, Donella." Aine's voice was calm and steady. "You have to let them do what they must."

"But why can't I go with them?" Donella asked. She turned on Aine, ready to go to battle if she must. She was not a delicate flower to be protected. She was the Regent, and it was up to her to protect her land.

“Because the Gwylla want nothing more than to capture you. No Fae has yet seen you, Donella,” Aine explained. “If Gwyllion were to capture you, she could kill you and say that you never returned. Since the Fae have no other Regent to offer in your place, we would be forced to endure Gwyllion's rule. It would give her the time she needs to establish a permanent Gwylla kingdom. You can't want that to happen.”

“Of course not, but it only makes sense that three of us are stronger than two.”

“Four,” said Mara. “I will not allow my son to go without me. I have lost my husband. I will not lose my son as well, not while I have breath in my body.”

“Absolutely not,” Arkan said. Donella's eyes widened in shock as he seemed to suddenly tower over his mother. It was something she had seen both mother and son do—subtly change form when angry or threatened. “You will not go and neither will Donella.”

“But—” Donella interrupted.

“Donella, I am sorry. I would love to have you with me, but this is too dangerous.” She dropped her head and felt tears well in her eyes. She bit her lip until it stung, trying to hold them back. Arkan took her chin and tilted her face up. His eyes were full of concern and love. “I can't risk your life. If something happens to me, you have to go on and rule Culatheed. You will be the one to bring Culatheed back.”

“If you die, I will die, too,” Donella choked. “I can't live without you and Ethan.”

“An admirable sentiment,” Aine interrupted dryly, “But Arkan is right. You have to stay here. In addition to putting you in danger, you would be endangering Ethan and Arkan because they would both be so focused on your safety that they would neglect their own. Inviting yourself where you are not wanted is selfish and immature.” She crossed her arms in front of her and planted her feet wide. “It is settled. We will all rest and wait for nightfall. Arkan and Ethan will breach Gwyllion's base and will bring her back here. Once she steps foot inside this cave, we will perform the ceremony to officially transfer her title to Donella.”

Tears coursed down Donella's face as she watched Ethan and Arkan huddle together in front of the fire. Their heads were bent towards each other and they whispered urgently, making plans that did not include her. They were willing to put themselves in harm's way to spare her life. If they died fighting Gwyllion, their blood would be on her hands. She refused to let that happen. She would not have the deaths of the two people she most loved on her head.

## Chapter Ten

Donella eased out from under Ethan's heavy arm. He moaned in his sleep and rolled over. He snuggled across the bed, only stopping when he found Arkan's warmth. She watched with a small smile as they nestled together. In his waking hours, Ethan still regarded Arkan with jealousy and suspicion, even as Arkan treated Ethan with love and respect. Donella's relationship with Arkan still grated on Ethan. She hoped that he would come to know that her love for Arkan didn't endanger her love for him. She placed a brief kiss on Arkan's forehead and caressed Ethan's cheek. Donella knew that when she returned, they would be very angry with her, but the anger wouldn't last forever, then they could live and love in peace.

Donella tip toed from the chamber and into the main room of the cave. She grabbed Aine's sturdy walking shoes from next to the fire and slipped them on her feet.

"I knew that I had not misjudged you." Mara's soft voice startled her. Donella looked up, expecting anger, but was caught off-guard by Mara's smile. "But I can't let you go alone."

"Please do not wake Arkan," Donella's heart raced. She had been so careful not to awaken anyone. "He will be so angry with me."

"I have no plans to tell Arkan anything." Mara's smile lit up her whole face. "I plan to go with you. You are planning to find Gwyllion, are you not?" Donella nodded. "You will need someone who knows the land. You do not know Culatheed. I can help you find your way, and I am not without certain skills that may prove helpful when fighting, if it comes to that."

Relief flooded through Donella. "I would be most happy for your company."

"Did you have a plan?"

Donella shook her head and gave her a sheepish grin. "No. I just wanted to find Gwyllion." The smile slipped from her face. "I can't let them die because of me."

"We will discuss the plan on the way down the mountain. It is near dark and Arkan and Aine will be waking up soon. We must go before they find us."

\* \* \* \*

The trees loomed over Donella, with silver shadows falling on the forest floor as the moonlight streamed through the branches. The landscape that seemed merely barren during the day seemed sinister, with dangers lurking in every dark shape. Every rustling branch, every snapping twig was a Gwylla, come to kill her and Mara. She tried not to jump at each noise. She did not want Mara to see how very afraid she was.

"There is no shame in fear, Donella." Mara's soft voice whispered.

"Do you read minds as well as Arkan then?" Donella asked.

"No," she smiled. "Not nearly as well, but I don't have to read minds to know that you are frightened. It is in your face and your eyes. But don't be ashamed of your fear. It is not holding you back. You are forging ahead in spite of it, and that is more admirable than not being afraid at all."

"I don't even know which way to go, or what we'll do when we get there." What



seemed like a good idea in Aine's cave now felt foolish. She was in a strange land with no weapons and no plan to defeat a formidable enemy. "I'm so stupid to think that I could do this."

"All Fae rulers must undergo a test of their wiles and their bravery," Mara said. "Your trial is just more difficult than most. But know this—it will make you a better Regent." Mara's voice faded. Her forehead was etched with concern. She cocked her ear, listening. "Do you hear that?" she whispered.

Donella didn't have time to answer before a large pair of hands wrapped around her throat. The pressure was so sudden that she couldn't even cry out. Mara launched herself at the Gwylla holding Donella, but her small size was no match for his girth. "Unhand her!" Mara cried as she worked furiously to pry his fingers away from Donella.

"Why are you in the forest at night?" the Gwylla demanded. "Gwyllion has commanded all Fae to remain inside their homes while the moon shines."

"We are searching the woods for spores," Mara said. "We use them in healing and they can only be found by the light of the moon."

The Gwylla loosened his grip and Donella took a deep, grateful breath. Her admiration for Mara rose as she spun a tale of being healers who depended on herbs and plants to survive.

"Surely you can take pity on two small women." Mara gave him a sweet, innocent smile. "After all," her voice dropped seductively, "We are all alone. Isn't there something we can do to make you look the other way?"

The Gwylla leered and reached for Mara. She placed her hands on either side of his face and lifted her mouth and whispered something against his lips. Just before his lips touched her, he froze as if he had been struck, then keeled over at Mara's feet.

"W-w-what did you just do?" Donella whispered through trembling lips. She could still feel the heavy fingers on her skin.

"Stunned him," Mara said. "I wasn't sure it would work on such a large Gwylla, and it probably won't keep him immobilized for long. We have to hurry if we want to reach Gwyllion's lair before they notice they have lost a guard."

\* \* \* \*

Ethan knew Donella was gone, even before he opened his eyes. The body pressed into his side was too firm, with none of the softness of her curves. Ethan opened his eyes a slit and found Arkan curved against him. In sleep, his face lost its sharp edges. His pale cheeks took on a flush and his lips were ripe and deep red, like Donella's. He could still feel Arkan's lips as they caressed his during the joining ceremony. His reaction has been a shock, as much of a shock as his desire to kiss him now. He wanted to kiss those red lips, lose himself in them, have Arkan awaken and wrap his arms around him and...

Ethan gave himself a mental shake. He grabbed Arkan's shoulder and gave him a sharp shove. "Donella's gone."

Arkan jumped up from the bed, clear-eyed and alert. "What do you mean, she's gone?"

"I mean she's not here."

"Maybe she is by the fire."

Ethan shook his head. "Donella is gone, Arkan. I'm sure she's searching for Gwyllion."

Anger and disbelief swept through Arkan's eyes.

"She would not." His voice was just above a whisper.

Ethan bit back a laugh. Donella would—if for no other reason than she had been forbidden to go. "I'm afraid she would. She doesn't like to be told what to do."

"No," Arkan said sharply. "No, no, no," he repeated, turning to slam his fist into the wall in time to his protests. "No, no, no," he shouted before releasing his rage in a primal howl. He fell to his knees and buried his head in his hands, his knuckles swollen and bloody. Ethan fought the urge to comfort him, sensing that Arkan wouldn't welcome pity or sympathy. He watched as Arkan's chest rose and fell as he visibly calmed. "She is safe, at least for now. I can sense this." He stood and wiped the tears from his face. The wound of his hands closed, leaving his hand slightly red, but no longer swollen and torn. "She is safe, but we must go to her. She can't possibly defend herself against the Gwylla. She is not yet knowledgeable about the ways of Culatheed. She doesn't even know what weapons she has at her fingertips. We must go to her." He sighed deeply, and Ethan got the feeling that Arkan was already exhausted, before they even started. He cursed Donella—a first for him—for disregarding Arkan's advice. For the first time, he felt truly close to Arkan as the two of them set off to find Donella.

\* \* \* \*

Even standing at the base of Gwyllion's fortress, Donella could sense Arkan as though he stood at her shoulder. His anger had been terrible when he had awakened to find Donella and Mara gone. The rage had been so strong that Donella was momentarily robbed of breath. She collapsed against a tree and doubled over, gasping. Mara had slipped a steadying arm around her waist. "Take a deep breath. It will pass."

Donella wagged her head and swallowed against the bitterness that rose up in the back of her throat. "I can't do this."

"You must do this," Mara insisted. "Look, we are at Gwyllion's front door. If you go back now, you leave Culatheed to her and Arkan will forever think of you as weak."

Pressure built up inside Donella's head, pushing against her skull until she thought it would burst. "But he is so angry. I can feel it rising up inside me." She dropped to her knees and moaned as a knife-like pain shot through her. She could see Arkan pacing in front of the fire, cursing her. A mixture of rage and fear painted his beautiful face. Bile rose up in the back of Donella's throat and she wretched and gagged, trying to swallow the nausea. Her heart twisted with regret. She had known that he would be unhappy, but she had never envisioned Arkan's face distorted by such negative emotions, not her calm, beautiful husband. "How can I see him?" she whispered. "Why can I feel his anger as if it were my own?"

"When two Fae belong to each other, they have an emotional link. It is present from the day of their birth. The Fae children spend much time with each other as they mature. They learn to manage the link while experiencing softer emotions like love, happiness and desire. You have always been linked to Arkan, but you have not been aware as you would have been had you been allowed to remain in Culatheed. Did you never experience sharp shifts in mood as a child?"

Memories came into crystal clear focus. Her parents had been so concerned over her quicksilver moods that they had brought her to a doctor. He had prescribed medication to calm her, but the pills made her feel empty and disconnected. In a fit of anger, she had

flushed them down the toilet and her parents had never pushed the issue again. "I thought I was just moody."

"You were feeling Arkan's emotions, but he is nearer to you now, so you feel them more strongly. You will learn to control the connection, to let in as much or as little as you can bear." She placed her hands on either side of Donella's head. "Turn your gaze inside yourself," she commanded. "You must search inside yourself to find your own emotions. Concentrate on those, find the courage that brought you this far. Breathe in and feel it expand until it pushes all traces of Arkan's anger out of you."

Donella's body shook with the effort of breathing through the pain, but she persisted, seeing herself standing tall, ruling over Culatheed with Arkan and Ethan by her side. She saw herself facing Gwyllion and returning to her men whole and victorious. She could still feel Arkan's displeasure, but it was a small voice in the back of her mind, barely perceptible over her own thoughts. Her breathing began to return to normal and the sweat dried on her brow. "Good," Mara said as she brushed Donella's dark hair back from her eyes. "Now, think of Arkan, let him see inside you. Let him see that you are well and it will do much to calm his fear."

"I don't know how to do that," Donella said, frustrated anew at something else she did not know. She would never learn all there was to know about Culatheed or about herself and her abilities.

"Hold his face in your mind. Concentrate on opening your mind. He will sense you, and you will know when he does." She took Donella's hands in her own. "The connection between two Fae who are bonded is very special. It's not something that can be easily understood until you have experienced it. Trust me. This will work."

Donella hesitantly closed her eyes and willed herself to reach out to Arkan. In her mind, she could see her hand extend to him. All of her love and the courage that was coursing through her veins was in her touch as she clasped his hand. It was the thought of him and of living their life together that gave her the courage to go deep into the heart of Gwyllion's lair. As soon as the Arkan in her mind accepted her hand, she felt an instant flash of connection and a powerful surge of joy washed through her. The angry lines of his face smoothed, even though there was still apprehension. She felt his love and concern and even some residual anger, but the rage had faded.

"See?" Mara's voice intruded. "It's worked. He knows you are safe, and he knows that you are doing what you must."

"So he will not be angry with me?"

"Oh, he will be very angry," Mara laughed, "There is no help for that. But he will not be so aggrieved when he finds you."

"What do you mean, when he finds me?"

"Oh, Donella, youngling. He will not sit idly in Aine's cave while you go off to fight the Gwylla. If he is not already on his way down the mountain, then I don't know my son. It is all the more reason for us to hurry. You must be the one to defeat Gwyllion. Arkan has the gift of magic and bravery, but his understanding of prophecy is weak. It has been foretold that the Fae Regent must defeat the Gwylla. A victory will usher in a new time of peace for the Fae and Culatheed, but we must hurry. If the men arrive first, it will be difficult to reach her before her guards find us." Mara's voice trailed off and she reached out to grab Donella's arm to still her. Apprehension flooded her delicate face.

It was just a flash of insight, a tremor of premonition, but it wasn't enough. The first

Gwylla grabbed Mara by the hair and snapped her head back. Donella had been so wrapped up in listening to Mara that she had not heard the snap of twigs as they were trod upon. "Mara!" Donella took a step toward the older woman.

"No, Donella," Mara cried. "Run!" Mara cried out again as the Gwylla yanked tighter on her hair and began to drag her to Gwyllion's lair.

"I will not leave you." She launched herself at the monster that held Mara. The Gwylla knocked her backwards with a careless flick of his heavily muscled arm. The breath left her lungs as she landed on the forest floor with a thud. She lay still, hoping the Gwylla would mistake her for dead.

"You idiot!" A second Gwylla joined the first. He was older, with coarse grizzled hair sprouting from his sloping forehead. He was not as powerfully built as the Gwylla who held Mara, but he walked quickly and with a purpose that the younger beast did not possess. "You are not to harm them." Donella kept her eyes closed and allowed her body to become limp. The Gwylla bent and scooped her off the ground as if she weighed no more than a baby. "She is unconscious. You should hope that she has suffered no permanent harm. Gwyllion has special plans for these two. They are of no use to her dead."

"She flew at me!" Through half-closed eyes, Donella saw his bottom lip jut out, making him look even more simple-minded. "I was supposed to let her hurt me?"

"If you are so afraid of such a small, weak thing, then perhaps Gwyllion can find other jobs more suited to your abilities," the older Gwylla sneered.

"I'm not afraid. I'm just ready to teach these Fae who is in charge in Culatheed. I am tired of being treated like I'm an animal. What better way to show that we rule than to do away with their Regent?" Donella's head lolled back over the arm that held her, even as fear threatened to overtake her reason.

"It is for Gwyllion to decide what is to become of these two." Donella bit her lip to withhold a groan when the Gwylla threw her over his shoulder and began to carry her to Gwyllion. They were close to the lair and Donella knew that she had only minutes to think of a plan.

\* \* \* \*

Ethan followed Arkan through the heavy underbrush of the Culatheed forest. The trees were so thick that the moonlight did not reach the forest floor, but Arkan did not seem to need light. In spite of Arkan's shorter legs, Ethan had to struggle to keep pace. He fell to his knees when his foot caught on a massive tree root hidden in the brush.

"Hurry, Ethan," Arkan called over his shoulder, but he did not slow his pace.

"Wait," Ethan said "I can't see you if you get too far ahead. I don't know where I am going."

Arkan turned and jogged back to Ethan. He took Ethan's hand and pulled him to his feet. "I forget you don't know the way, but we must hurry. It is longer through the forest, but I can't use the ports and risk leaving you alone." He turned and pulled Ethan behind him.

"Where are we going?" Ethan asked. When they left the cave, Arkan had said little, not to explain where they were going or why his face drained of all blood as they made their way down the hill.

"To Gwyllion's lair. Mara and Donella are there." Arkan dropped Ethan's hand and

picked up his pace, almost leaving Ethan behind again. "The Gwylla have them, but they have not been harmed." His unspoken threat caused a shiver to race up Ethan's spine.

He didn't ask how Arkan knew that the two women were still alive. He was already growing used to the strange bond that Donella and Arkan shared. Donella and Arkan had been bound together before they were born, like a whole that was torn into two halves, Aine had explained. It only made sense that they would have a strong mental and emotional connection, but he didn't like it. It made him feel like an outsider, even though Arkan had done everything to include him, even inviting Ethan into the mating chamber. Arkan's easy acceptance of Ethan surprised him. But it wasn't just acceptance, it was love. Arkan's eyes shone with love when he looked at Ethan. At times the adoration in Arkan's eyes made Ethan uncomfortable. Arkan was his rival, but he knew he could never win if he continued to try and fight Arkan for Donella. The bond between them was too strong. If he had been in Arkan's position, he would never accept another man. The truth made him feel guilty and small for the times he pushed Arkan away.

The Fae were bound together through blood and joining in a way that was foreign to Ethan. It was that bond, Ethan knew, that allowed Arkan to accept Ethan, to see him not as a rival, but as a potential partner. Ethan even felt a bond himself with Mara because of the gift of her blood, but it wasn't as strong as the bond between Donella and Arkan. In odd moments, he felt flashes of fear that he knew wasn't his own. He couldn't see Mara, but he knew that wherever she was, she was afraid. He wanted to share the feeling with Arkan, to ask him what it meant, but Arkan was single-minded in his pursuit of the two women he most loved. Ethan would not burden him more.

He trudged along behind Arkan, watching as he pushed aside branches and leaped over rocks. He was as physically fit as any athlete, pushing himself not for glory, but for the safety of Donella and Mara. So single-minded was he in his quest that he missed the eyes that glared out from behind a tree, but Ethan saw the Gwylla in the split second before he threw himself at Arkan. "Arkan!" Ethan screamed, but the warning came a second too late. Arkan went sprawling under the weight of the beast.

The Gwylla pressed his thumbs deep into Arkan's throat. Ethan watched in horror as Arkan's face lost color and his body went limp.

"No!" he screamed as he ran at the Gwylla. With a strength that surprised him, he picked the Gwylla from Arkan's body and threw him against a tree. His body slid down the tree and landed with a thud against the hard ground. The Gwylla didn't move, and Ethan knew he was dead.

He heard Arkan's groan and turned his attention to him. Arkan rose up on his elbow, breathing deeply as if he would never get enough air. Ethan was relieved to see the color returning to his face. "Are you okay?"

Arkan nodded. "I will be fine. I have suffered worse than this. For all that I am not large, I am rather durable. I'm much more difficult to permanently harm than the Gwylla think."

"It didn't look like you were so 'durable' from here," Ethan mumbled. He felt silly for worrying about Arkan when apparently he had never been in any real danger. "I'll remember how tough you are next time we run into a Gwylla."

Arkan stood and placed a steadying hand on Ethan's arm. Ethan's skin sizzled at the contact. "I'm very glad you were here. The Gwylla may not have been able to kill me, but he could have impaired me so that I would not have been able to search for Donella and

Mara. I am glad you are with me, and that you have agreed to be bound to Donella and to me.” He lifted Ethan's hand and pressed a kiss to his palm. Ethan felt his cock rising when Arkan's tongue caressed the sensitive skin, but Arkan pulled back and gave him an impish wink. “Not now,” he said, glancing down at Ethan's erection. “But soon.”

\* \* \* \*

Arkan stood at the entrance to Gwyllion's lair and waited for Ethan to catch up. He knew that the pace he had set was taxing for Ethan, but Arkan could not rein himself in. They had lost valuable time fighting the Gwylla. He shuddered to think what could have happened if Ethan hadn't been with him. Mara and Donella had been captured, but without Ethan there to handle the Gwylla, Arkan would have been little help to them. He knew that both women were safe, and he felt no fear from Donella. On the contrary, he felt a surprising surge of anger emanating from her, but it did little to reassure him. Donella was so impetuous, and she knew little of the Gwylla and what they were capable of. He wanted to get to her before she got herself into more trouble than she could escape.

He heard Ethan's breathing before he heard his plodding footsteps. Arkan turned and watched as he emerged from the woods. His face was red and sweat plastered his hair to his forehead. Ethan had not complained, but Arkan knew that he was nearing exhaustion. Human endurance was nothing compared to the Fae. Mara's blood flowed in Ethan's veins, but it had yet to truly merge with Ethan's body. It would take time before Ethan could feel the full benefits and know what a gift Mara had given him. Arkan wished there was time enough to allow Ethan to rest, but he dared not prolong their entrance. He pulled an animal skin sack from his belt and held it out to Ethan. “Drink this. It is the juice of the mariflax plant. It will help you regain your strength.”

Ethan didn't bat an eye at the strange drink. Arkan was touched by Ethan's trust. He turned the container up and drank greedily. His color returned to normal and, within minutes, his breathing was regular and even. He lowered the skin and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “That's incredible,” he said. “If we bottled and sold that back home, we would be rich.”

Arkan smiled at his wonder. “Unfortunately, mariflax only grows in a small area in Culatheed, and it takes many cycles for the plant to produce juice. It is quite rare and very valuable.”

A flash of remorse darkened Ethan's eyes. “And I drank the whole thing.”

“There is more in the cellar of Mara's home, and even if there weren't, it is worth it to return your strength. I will depend on you when we get inside. Mara and Donella will be guarded well. With Mara's blood in your veins, you will be immune to the Gwylla venom, and with your size, you will match them in strength.” Arkan smiled. “They won't know what hit them.”

Ethan's face lit up. Arkan almost laughed. His face was so open and so readable; his joy at finally being useful was so palpable that Arkan had to restrain the urge to laugh. “How do we get in?” Ethan asked. “I want to do something besides be a burden.”

“This way,” Arkan motioned. “Follow me.” Arkan dropped to his knees and crawled under a low branch. He heard Ethan swear and knew that he had a hard time squeezing through the opening. Crawling through the tunnel of brush, Arkan hoped the opening into the lair was still there. The tiny opening had been carved into the stone of the Gwylla lair during the time of the first Gwylla Regent. It had enabled generations of Fae sorcerers to

spy on the Gwylla. It was through the secret entrance that Daoine had first learned of the plot to kill the infant Donella.

Many Gwylla Regents had searched the lair for a sign of weakness, but the opening had always been well-hidden, but things had changed since Gwyllion had come to power. As much as he loathed her, Arkan could not help feeling a grudging respect for the beast. She was smart, one of the smartest of her kind that Arkan had ever known. When he reached the stone wall, he pressed against the stone and was gratified to feel it shift beneath his touch. He pulled the stone away to reveal the small opening in the wall. He looked over his shoulder. He knew it would be a tight fit to get Ethan through. His magic would be the only way to get Ethan inside, but using magic so close to Gwyllion's home base would be like shining a beacon in the dark. Still he couldn't leave Ethan behind. Ethan would never agree to let Arkan go alone, not when Ethan had come so far.

"Come." He motioned for Ethan to pull up next to him.

"There is no way I'm going to fit through there." Ethan's face fell.

"I can get you through, but you have to trust me," Arkan said. "Can you do that?"

Ethan met his eyes evenly. He nodded slowly. "Yes."

Arkan could feel the courage it took for Ethan to agree to go along with whatever needed to be done. He took Ethan's hands. His own palms heated painfully as he transferred his magic to Ethan. Arkan saw Ethan wince in pain, but no complaint crossed his lips. "Now, we must hurry. The magic wears off quickly." He shoved Ethan in front of him. "Crawl through the opening, but be as quiet as you can. The tunnel opens into an unused room, but the magic I used will attract attention."

"But I can't fit!"

"Trust me!" Arkan tried to keep his impatience out of his voice. Every second that Ethan delayed the magic grew weaker. Arkan could not take a chance on performing the spell a second time. "Just go!"

Ethan stuck his head through the tunnel and paused before sliding through the opening. Arkan watched as his shoulder blades crossed over each other and his ribs collapsed, allowing him to slip inside easily. He hit the ground with a thud. Arkan slipped in beside him as Ethan's body returned to its normal shape. "This is just too weird," he said.

Arkan lifted his head and listened for the small voice that meant Donella was somewhere in the lair. "This way," he whispered as he darted down a side tunnel. He wasn't sure where it led, but Donella's voice called to him from the opening. "We have to hurry. They know we're here."

\* \* \* \*

"So have you come up with a plan yet?" Mara asked.

"Well, first, we have to get out of these chains," Donella said. "Then we go from there."

Mara glanced at the chains on her wrists. "How do you suggest we do that?"

Donella sighed deeply. This was becoming more complicated than she originally anticipated. "I have absolutely no idea." She twisted against the shackles that held her on the wall. The Gwylla had brought her and Mara to an inner chamber and left them in the small, damp room. "What's taking them so long?"

"Surely you're not in that big of a hurry to meet Gwyllion?"

“Anything would be better than this waiting,” Donella said, “but I wasn't talking about her. Arkan's here. I heard him when he entered.”

A small smile flitted across Mara's face. “It's a good sign that you can sense him.”

“I wish he hadn't come. There was no need to put himself in danger, and he made enough noise to wake the dead. I'm surprised you didn't hear him.”

“As long as you're in danger, he is in danger, whether he is physically with you or not. Don't you understand? You hold half of his heart. Arkan lost you were you just a baby. He would never survive losing you again.”

Donella was silent as she let the words sink in. A sense of dread weighed on her—she never imagined the responsibility that came from being completely loved. If Arkan met his death inside the lair, his blood would be on her hands.

“I get two for one, then.” An oily voice came from the doorway. Gwyllion. Donella knew it was her before she even lifted her eyes. “It is wonderful to meet you at last, Donella.” Gwyllion was impossibly enormous. Taller than the other Gwylla and as wide as two men. Her face bore the thick, rough features of the Gwylla guards, but her eyes shone with an intelligence that the others did not possess. She would be a formidable opponent. “I'm afraid I must apologize for my guard's manners.”

She feigned shock. “Locking up the Fae Regent.” Gwyllion crossed the dungeon in two strides and stood close enough to Donella that she could feel warm breath against her skin. A cold finger traced the curve of Donella's cheek. “They are quite overwhelmed with your beauty, you know, as I suspect Arkan and your human are as well.” She lifted Donella's chin and examined her face critically. “However, I am not so easily impressed.” With a snap of her fingers, the chains fell away from Donella and Mara. Gwyllion smiled at their shock. “Yes, I have a fair bit of magic skill, though not nearly as much as the Fae,” she admitted. “Still, it is helpful.”

“How did you come by such powers?” Mara shook with barely contained fury, but her voice was calm and even. “The Gwylla have their strength, the Fae have their magic. Neither breed should have both. It is one of the reasons that interbreeding has been outlawed, so that no class of citizens can rule above the other. Who sired you?”

Gwyllion waved her hand in dismissal. “Fear not,” she breezed, “I was sired by two full-blood Gwylla. I was given magic the same way that Donella's Ethan survived the venom. An infusion of Fae blood gave me enough magic to make this a fair fight.”

“No one said anything about fighting,” Donella said. She lifted her hands to show that she meant no harm. “The Gwylla and Fae have lived together in peace for generations. I come merely to complete that transfer of power.”

Gwyllion gave a shout of mirthless laughter. “You really are ignorant in the ways of Culatheed, aren't you? There has been no peace.” Derision filled her voice. “There has been a coexistence, but when have the Fae ever reached their hand out in friendship to the Gwylla? You and your kind have treated us as though we were scum, less than the dirt under your feet. But that has all changed, hasn't it? Now I hold all the power. The first being in Culatheed to combine the strength of the Gwylla with the clever magic of the Fae. And now I have their Regent. You have not come to fight?” She gave Donella a sly smile. “You have not asked where I got the Fae blood for my transfusion?”

“I really don't care where you got the Fae blood. All I care about is returning Culatheed to a state of balance. This is unnatural. Surely you can see what is happening out there. Trees are dying, everything is turning black. The land is dying. No one wants to



live that way—not even the Gwylla.”

“How dare you presume to know what the Gwylla want—you who have been in hiding for your twenty-one years.” Her voice shook with derision.

“I did not make the decision to hide. That decision was made for me. But I am here now, and I am ready to peaceably take my place as ruler.”

“Peaceably?” Gwyllion's eyes shone with gleeful malice. “Did they tell you of your mother's death?”

Donella swallowed the lump in her throat and willed herself to keep her voice steady. “I know she died shortly after my birth.”

“Did they take you to see her grave? Have you paid your respects to her?”

“Gwyllion, no!” Mara barked. “That is enough.”

“You want to spare her? How sweet.” She turned her attention back to Donella. “But she is a grown woman. She wants to rule this place. Surely she can handle the truth.” A hateful thrill filled her voice. “There is no grave because there was no body. I took her body and used her blood for my own. My, but her flesh tasted sweet. I have your mother's blood in my veins, just as you do. In fact, you might even say we are sisters of a sort. And now we will see who is most powerful. We will duel. The winner gets Culatheed.”

“But that's not fair, Gwyllion,” Mara said. “Donella has never used her power. She doesn't know how.”

“Well now, that's not my fault, is it? If she had been left in Culatheed, she would know. You should never have hidden her away.”

“You would have killed her!”

Gwyllion waved off the protest. “What's done is done. My most trusted advisors wait in the Regent's Room. We will duel there.”

“What about me?” Donella asked. “Who will be my support? If you have the advantage of your advisors, Fae should be present as well.”

“Oh, but they will,” Gwyllion said. “You have Mara, of course.” She nodded at Mara in acknowledgment. “And Arkan and Ethan are waiting as well.”

Ice replaced the blood in Donella's body. “You have them?”

“Of course, darling. They made ever so much noise as they were coming in. Apparently your strong Ethan needed help squeezing through the passage. Such a strong, handsome man—and now with Fae blood. After I dispatch you, I may make him my mate.”

“He would never be your mate,” Donella spat.

“Of course he would. I doubt he is stupid, and I can be very persuasive.” She snapped her fingers and two Gwylla immediately appeared. “Now, go with the guards. They will escort you into the Regent's Room. And do hold your head high. I want Arkan to see your face when I defeat you.”

## Chapter Eleven

Donella closed her eyes, momentarily dazzled by the bright light of the Regent's Room after the damp darkness of the corridors. Once her eyes adjusted, she could see Gwylla lining the back wall, their faces lit up in joyful anticipation of the battle to come. Mara was bound at the wrists and ankles and hung from the wall. A gag had been tied around her mouth to keep her from crying out. The Gwylla who guarded her peered out from a darkened, swollen eye and Donella knew that Mara had put up a hell of a fight. Arkan and Ethan sat in chairs set high up on raised dais, giving them a full view of the circle marked off on the floor for the duel. Donella sensed Arkan's fear and worry, both for her and for Mara. She tried to convey a sense of calm, but he saw past it to her own concern. He struggled against his bonds, desperate to reach her, but she gave her head a sharp shake. "I have to do this on my own," she thought. "It has to be me." He slumped against the chair when the words reached him. He nodded dejectedly.

Donella tore her eyes from Arkan and looked at Ethan. He dwarfed his chairs and the chains that bound him cut into his large arms. The Gwylla obviously didn't expect someone of his size. He was in danger because of her. Guilt washed over her as she saw the two men she loved more than she loved her own life, bound and facing likely death because of her, because of who and what she was. She would lay down her own life in front of Gwyllion without hesitation, but she knew that the Gwylla Regent had no intention of any Fae leaving the Regent's Room. They were all marked for death.

Gwyllion entered the room wearing a robe of the deepest violet. She stood tall and straight, her head held high. The contrast between her royal robe and Donella's ripped and stained clothes were striking. "Honored guests. I rejoice that you have consented to join me for a demonstration. As you all know, this is the twenty-first year of my reign as Regent. On the anniversary of the transfer of power, the Fae did not produce their Regent as they are commanded by our treaty. Out of the kindness of my heart, I consented to stay on until their Regent could be found. Now the tardy Regent has emerged from her safe, sheltered life with the humans, expecting to take her place as the head of Culatheed. Such a disregard for manners and for the well-being of Culatheed I have never seen. Not only has she shown Culatheed dishonor by failing to show for her coronation, she has never been trained in the ways of Culatheed. Her magic is all but useless. Her powers have grown weak from disuse." Her voice rose as she drove home her point. "We can't turn Culatheed over to a weak, untrained Regent. We could be overtaken by humans. She has even brought one of the foul, loathsome creatures into our world." She indicated Ethan, whose face was flaming with anger. "How can we be sure that this isn't a plot to overthrow our land? He could be a spy! Before I can, in good conscious, turn over the reins of power, she must be tested. She must defeat me, for the good of Culatheed and its citizens, the Fae Regent must prove herself worthy."

The crowd of Gwylla cheered until Gwyllion silenced them with a wave of her hand. She stepped to the center of the circle, her face a breath away from Donella's. "Donella of the Fae, you have been challenged to a duel by Gwyllion of the Gwylla. Do you accept this challenge?"

Donella stared into the unblinking yellow eyes and saw a flash of fear behind the

swagger. "Yes." Her voice rang out, strong and true over the jeers and boos of the crowd.

A small smile creased Gwyllion's face. "Very good," she said. "The rules are these: All forms of attack are allowed. Any magical attack and all physical attacks are within the bounds of the contest. There shall be no weapons save our own cunning and strength. The challenge is over when one of us has been pushed from the circle three times. Do you understand and accept these rules?"

"I do."

"Then let the challenge begin!" Her voice thundered, shaking the chamber and reverberating in Donella's chest. She swallowed her fear and tried to block out the cheers and cries surrounding her.

Before Donella had a chance to react, a sharp shooting pain ripped through her body. Gwyllion placed a single fingertip to Donella's chest and sent a shock of agony through her. She fought the need to shout and instinctively took a step back, breaking the contact, and the pain swiftly vanished.

Gwyllion charged at her, both hands outstretched, but Donella rolled to the side, sending Gwyllion crashing out of the circle. The boundary glowed red, magically awarding Donella the point. Donella's heart soared at her early triumph. "That's one," she said. Gwyllion stood up, her eyes flashing dangerously.

Again she charged at Donella, sparks flying from her fingertips, but Donella flattened herself against the ground. Her heart pounded. She had the early advantage, but avoiding Gwyllion's attacks would only work for so long. The Gwylla Regent was stronger. Donella would never win in a physical match. "Use your magic, Donella." The words echoed in her head. She turned and found Arkan watching her, concentration making his forehead wrinkle.

"But I don't know how," she thought. She could feel power flowing through her, but it felt wild, and unstable.

"You do." Arkan's voice echoed as if he were next to her, whispering in her ear. "You were born knowing. Trust yourself."

"Stand up and fight," Gwyllion laughed. "You can't just lie down and quit. Where's the fun in that?" Again she charged at Donella, the same red sparks flying from her fingertips.

Donella leaped to her feet and held both palms up. She felt energy course through her body and flow outward, until a blue shield surrounded her. Gwyllion ran headlong into the force field and cried out in pain as she skidded across the ground, coming to a stop just inside the circle. She gasped heavily, regaining her breath. "Very good," she laughed, "little Donella has some magic after all." But the laughter didn't reach her eyes. "What a very effective shield that was." She rose to her feet and held her hands out to the sides of her body. "I can't get around your shield. You just learned that. It is up to you to attack. I am defenseless before you," she feigned helplessness. "A strong attack could end this."

Donella looked at her hands. In the center of each palm was a blue-green ball, right enough to cause her to squint against the light. "It is your magic, it's in your hands. Use your power." Donella could hear Arkan's voice echoing in her head. She took a deep breath and flung her hands towards Gwyllion. To her shock, a ball of crackling energy soared through the air, but Gwyllion saw the attack coming. She dropped to her knees and lunged at Donella. She was able to drop below Donella's hands and grab her legs.

Donella's skin burned where Gwyllion touched, but the pain was nothing compared to the agony that coursed through her body when Gwyllion sank her teeth into her thigh.

\*

Donella's screams echoed off the walls. Gwyllion was pumping venom into Donella's body, weakening her as she shoved her from the circle. Donella's body crossed the line and Gwyllion released her hold and gave a cry of triumph. "We are even now, Fae." She wiped the dripping venom and Donella's blood from her mouth. "Stand up and return to the circle to continue the fight.

Panic rose up in Ethan as he watched Donella struggle to her feet, her face pale as moonlight. It hardly seemed a fair fight Gwyllion was larger and stronger than Donella, and she seemed to have enough magic to fight Donella. Donella had only the magic that she had never been trained to use and her instincts.

"We have to do something to help her," Ethan whispered to Arkan.

"I'm doing all I can to give her encouragement, but I can't interfere." Arkan whispered back. "She'll be fine." But his face was as pale as Donella's.

"Magic isn't enough," Ethan snapped. "You said that Gwyllion's magic was weak. It's her strength that will beat Donella."

"Gwyllion's magic is weak," Arkan said. "Donella's magic is the only thing that she can fight with. She can't match Gwyllion's physical power."

As they spoke, Donella stood and slowly walked into the center of the circle. Gwyllion's eyes glittered with hatred, but her breath was coming in shallow gasps. Fatigue was beginning to show in the set of her shoulders. Donella dropped to her knees and rolled her body into a ball. Blue sparks shot out from her body as she rolled to Gwyllion, knocking the Gwylla off her feet. She landed with one foot outside the circle. The circle flared, giving the point to Donella. She smiled at Arkan. Ethan felt a small niggling of hope at Arkan's answering smile. Donella paid for her brief moment of levity. Gwyllion reached across the circle line and grabbed her ankle. The shock showed on Donella's face, but Ethan saw from the set of her jaw that she was concentrating all of her will on remaining upright.

"Fall, damn it!" Gwyllion shouted. Donella laughed and pulled her leg from Gwyllion's grasp. Gwyllion crawled into the center of the circle, seemingly intent on finishing the challenge, but it was clear to Ethan that she was rapidly losing the strength to go on.

"The magic doesn't come naturally to her," Arkan whispered. "Using it is causing her strength to fail her."

The Gwylla surrounding Ethan were muttering angrily, shouting at Gwyllion to stand. Sweat poured from her skin as she pulled herself up to her hands and knees. Her limbs trembled violently and Ethan felt an unexpected surge of sympathy. From the angry shouts around him, he knew if Gwyllion lost the battle, her own kind would turn on her until she was destroyed. Ethan saw a shadow of pity cross Donella's face. She held out a hand to Gwyllion. There was a triumphant gleam in her eye just before she placed her hand in Donella's.

"No!" Ethan shouted, but he was too late. Gwyllion had pulled Donella down to her level and threw her on her back. She lowered her head to Donella's neck and clamped her teeth on the tender flesh. Donella's anguished cry echoed inside Ethan's head until he thought it would explode with the force of it. Donella's legs thrashed against the pain, and

Ethan knew he had to help or die himself. He couldn't stand by and watch Donella die.

He flexed his arms, hoping the restraints would give way under his strength. The chains gave slightly, but he still found himself bound. "Help her! I know you can!"

Tears coursed down Arkan's cheeks. "I can't. This is a Fae duel. No Fae can intervene in a lawful duel."

"I'm not a Fae!" Ethan shouted. "I don't play by your rules. If you can't help her, then help me!" He flexed his arms against the chains. Arkan sighed and nodded, furrowing his brow in concentration. Ethan felt his arms tingle with the extra surge of strength. He took a deep breath and ripped his arms free of the chains. The Gwylla that guarded him snarled and bared his teeth, but Ethan was too fast for him. His hand shot out and he grabbed the guard's throat. He felt a satisfying snap as the Gwylla's neck cracked in his grip. Ethan dropped him and darted for the circle. He grabbed Gwyllion and pulled her off Donella, tamping down his alarm at her pale, lifeless form.

Gwyllion roared with rage, her mouth covered in thick yellow venom. "You dare!"

Ethan doubled his fist and knocked Gwyllion hard enough that she flew through the air, landing on the other side of the circle, his brute strength more than a match for the weakened Gwylla Regent. Red flames flared around the boundary of the circle, blocking Gwyllion's entry back into the sacred space. She grunted in frustration.

"That's three times out of the circle," Arkan's voice boomed over the 'boos' of the Gwylla. "You have been defeated, even the circle that you erected knows this is true."

Gwyllion's voice rose over the angry shouts of the Gwylla. "But this was not a fair fight, sorcerer! A human should never have been allowed into the circle. It was your magic that allowed him to breach the line.

"It was never your intention to have a fair fight, Gwyllion," Arkan said. "You thought you could defeat an untrained Fae by stealing Fae blood, but you underestimated her, and Ethan, too, and that has been your downfall. You are not the only one with Fae blood. Ethan shares the blood of Mara, freely given. You murdered and stole to gain your blood. It will never give you the power that Ethan has."

The assembled Gwylla looked from Arkan to Ethan to Donella. Donella had taken on a glow so bright that Ethan fought to shield his eyes. The assembled Gwylla began, one by one, to drop to a knee, showing deference to the newly installed Fae Regent. Gwyllion laughed, but it rang hollow. "You have played too many mind games, sorcerer. It has addled your own brain. She is not yet the Regent. There has been no ceremony, no transfer of the title."

"It is you who has suffered from a weak mind, Gwyllion. You have been defeated and Culatheed has stripped you of your power." The largest of the Gwylla rose from his knee and advanced on Gwyllion. "You have put your own desires and ambitions above those of the Gwylla and Culatheed. Your quest for power has brought shame to all Gwylla." He advanced on her, his eyes never leaving her face

"But I did this for all of us, all of the Gwylla," Gwyllion protested. "We are an ancient and noble race. We were never meant to be under the dominion of the Fae. We should rule ourselves."

"We are an ancient race," the Gwylla agreed, "and a proud one. It is only in the last generations that we have shamed ourselves with our discontent, and now you have hastened the end of our time."

"The end of our time?" Wild hysteria strained her voice. "This is not the end. It is

just the beginning.” She reached out and grabbed his hands. “If the human had not intervened, we would have won.”

“It is true that the Fae broke the sacred laws and brought a human into Culatheed, but were you acts not equally as wrong? Killing a Fae and taking her blood? Attempting to kill the Fae Regent in violation of the treaty that kept us safe and Culatheed peaceful?”

“She did not deserve to rule Culatheed! Look at her!” she spat. “She is weak.”

“It is you who do not deserve to rule. You came from the oldest of the Gwylla lines. You would have left the regency and lived out your life as the most honored of the Gwylla. Instead, you have brought disgrace upon yourself and all of us.” He pulled his hands away from hers. “You have tried to overthrow the true Regent of Culatheed. You know the punishment for such treachery, Gwyllion.”

Panic and surprise flattened Gwyllion’s face. “You can’t.” Her voice broke and her knees buckled under her. The Gwylla’s hand was around her throat before she hit the ground. His fingers tightened around her neck, cutting off the flow of air. Color drained from Gwyllion’s face as she clawed at the strong hand.

“The only sentence for uprising is death, Gwyllion,” he said. “You knew this and risked the punishment for your own selfish lust for power. You gambled and you lost.” With a quick twist, the Gwylla snapped Gwyllion’s neck. Her head rolled listlessly on her shoulder as he dropped her to the ground. He looked around at the Gwylla who still knelt in front of Donella. “Come,” he said gruffly. “We have no more business here.”

## Chapter Twelve

Donella, Mara, Arkan and Ethan walked alone from the Gwyllion's lair. The sun shone brightly, reaching golden fingers through the flowers that bloomed on the trees. Arkan smiled and took Donella's hand. "See?" he said. "Even the trees and the sun know that the true Regent has been restored."

"And I suppose that you think that your victory makes sneaking off and putting all of Culatheed in danger acceptable?" Aine blocked their path. Her arms were crossed over her chest and an expression of pure fury painted her wrinkled face. "You should not have ventured alone."

"She was not alone, Aine," Mara put her small frame between the older woman and Donella. "I was with her."

"You should have known better. She could have died at Gwyllion's hands and Culatheed would have been lost to the Fae forever."

"I knew what was at stake as well as you did. I also knew that as long as Gwyllion lived that Donella would never be safe, and you know this as well."

"Gwyllion had to be defeated, but you all took a grave risk letting Donella take on Gwyllion alone." But Donella watched as her face softened and her body relaxed. "I would never have forgiven myself if Donella had died."

"But I did not die," Donella said. "And now all is as it should be."

\* \* \* \*

The small, ragged group returned to Aine's cave tired, but exhilarated. "You should rest," Aine told Donella. "With Gwyllion dead, we must complete the transition of power or Culatheed will soon grow unstable. All of Culatheed will turn out for the ceremony. The Fae have missed you, Donella. You must greet them."

"Aine's right," Arkan said. "The next few days will be busy ones, for all of us." He took her hand and led her to the door of the mating chamber. Suddenly he stopped and looked over his shoulder to find Ethan still standing next to Aine, looking forlorn and lost. Arkan held out his hand to Ethan. "You need to rest as well, Ethan. Most Fae have never seen a human, and all will want to see the one that helped save their Regent."

Ethan hesitated for a moment before finally slipping his hand in Arkan's.

\* \* \* \*

Arkan still held Ethan's hand when Donella sank onto the bed and buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders slumped forward and her entire body trembled slightly. Ethan pulled his hand away and crossed the room in two strides to reach Donella. He slid to the floor and rested his hands on her knees. "Donella, are you okay?" he asked.

She shook her head but did not look at either man. Ethan gently pried her hands from her face. Arkan was shocked to see that her cheeks were wet with tears. After everything that had happened, he supposed she had the right to cry, but she had been so strong, so resolute in battle, that her tears surprised him. He crawled into the bed, stretched out beside Donella and pulled her into his arms. Her sobs were so powerful that they shook

Arkan with their force. He felt the bed dip as Ethan scooted in behind her and wrapped his arms around her. “Shh,” Arkan whispered into her hair, “Don’t cry.” But the soothing words had no effect, so he offered her the only thing he had to give, his silent acceptance of her tears. Together Arkan and Ethan held Donella while she wept.

In time, Donella’s sobs grew less frequent and her shaking stopped. She lay still in the circle formed by Arkan and Ethan’s arms. “I’m sorry,” she said in a voice made hoarse by her crying. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“Don’t apologize, dearling,” Arkan murmured as he pushed her hair away from her sweat-dampened brow. “If anyone had earned the right to their tears, it’s you.”

“Some Regent I’ll make,” she hiccupped. “Dissolving into tears at the first sign of trouble.”

“You’ll make a fine Regent,” Arkan said. “You were strong when you needed to be strong. But now you’re just tired, and overwhelmed by everything. You need to get some rest.”

Donella tilted her lips up to his. “I don’t want to rest,” she whispered against his lips.

Arkan struggled to pull his head away, knowing that he should refuse her for her own good. “There is plenty of time for that later, Donella, an entire lifetime. After you have had some sleep.”

Tears shimmered in her violet eyes. “Please, Arkan,” she said. “I need this.” She kissed him sweetly. “I need to feel both of you.” She dropped slow kisses along his bottom lip, trailing her mouth down her his chin and licking his neck. “I need to feel your heart beat, to hear your breathing.” She ran her hands under his tunic. Her hands felt cool against the heat of his skin. “Please,” she sighed. “Love me.” Arkan couldn’t refuse her. He slipped his hands under the tattered remains of her tunic and slid it from her shoulder. A large bruise glowed violently purple against the ivory of her skin. He winced, feeling the wound as if it were on his own body. Tenderly, he pressed his lips to her skin, feeling warmth flowing into him. When he lifted his lips, he found that the bruise had faded.

He pushed her tunic over her breasts and down her hips until it lay in a heap at the foot of the bed. He pulled back and let his eyes roam over her body. Small breasts, a tiny waist, slim hips that tapered into round, curvy thighs, but his eyes were focused on the small cuts and bruises that marked her otherwise flawless skin. His fingers trailed over each mark. He had come so close to losing her. Each mark reminded him of just how close.

Donella closed her hand over his fingers. “Not now,” she whispered. “They’re just flesh wounds. If you want to heal me, love me. Love will heal me.”

\*

It was hard, watching Donella reach out to Arkan for comfort, especially when he needed comfort himself. An invisible hand squeezed Ethan’s heart when Donella’s lips met Arkan’s. Ethan felt uncomfortable watching, wondering if he should slip out quietly, wondering where he fit in. Donella said she loved him still, and Arkan watched him with heat-filled eyes, but did they really want him or would he always been a third wheel?

Arkan looked up at Ethan’s sigh. Ethan’s breath caught in his throat at the understanding and love in Arkan’s eyes. Arkan reached over Donella’s body and took Ethan’s hand. It still bore the marks of the beating he gave the Gwylla. “It seems that you need healing, too.” He brought Ethan’s hand to his lips and ran his tongue over Ethan’s knuckles. Ethan closed his eyes and shivered. “Let me love you, Ethan,” Arkan



murmured. "Let us all love each other."

Ethan reached out, threading his fingers through Arkan's hair, loving the way it tangled and wrapped around his skin. His lips brushed Arkan's gently, feeling the softness, allowing himself to get used to the taste and feel. He could taste Donella's sweetness mixed with the Arkan's heat when he swept his tongue between Arkan's lips.

"Yes," Arkan whispered. "Kiss me, Ethan, the way you kiss her." Ethan's cock hardened at Arkan's encouragement. He turned his head and crushed Arkan's mouth with his own. He traced the edges of Arkan's teeth, the soft contours of his tongue, learning the texture and flavor.

He moaned and pulled away from Arkan's lips when gentle hands slid his pants over his hips, but Arkan pulled his head down and deepened the kiss.

Donella's soft hands pulled his cock free of the material and stroked him until he was rigid and throbbing. He moaned into Arkan's mouth as Donella slipped his cock into her warm, wet mouth. Arkan matched his moan and pulled Ethan's shirt over his head, tossing it on the floor next to Donella's tunic. Pleasure coursed through Ethan as Arkan showered kisses over his neck, down his chest, then lower, where he nudged Donella over. "Share," he rasped.

Donella released her hold on Ethan's cock, licking the underside as Arkan whirled his tongue around the head.

Donella crawled up the bed until her lips were pressed against Ethan's. Her hands held his face while she feasted on his mouth, sucking his tongue as if it were his cock. Ethan reached out and stroked her thigh, higher and higher, until the backs of his knuckles brushed against her pussy. She sighed and opened her legs wider. He stroked her, circling her clit with his thumb until she arched and shuddered, coating his fingers with her juices.

Ethan reached down and pulled Arkan's head from his cock and traced Arkan's lips, letting him taste Donella from his fingers. Arkan's eyes darkened to black. He rose up and whispered in Ethan's ear. "Fuck her," he moaned. "Fuck her while I watch." The harsh language surprised and inflamed Ethan. He almost came at the sound of Arkan's voice, suddenly rough and guttural.

Donella smiled. Her arms came around his chest and her legs closed around his hips, pulling him nearer. He slipped into her easily, her pussy clenching around his erection, squeezing, milking him. He thrust into her, glorying in her moans.

"That's it," Arkan moaned. "You're beautiful to watch together." Ethan felt Arkan's hands on his back. The hair on the nape of his neck stood on end as Arkan's lips trailed down his back until his tongue traced the crack of his ass. Ethan stiffened and stilled at the unfamiliar sensation. "You belong together," Arkan moaned. Ethan shuddered as Arkan spread his cheeks wide and teased the tight bud with the tip of his tongue. Shock and pleasure raced through him as Arkan pressed his tongue into him. Ethan pressed his cock further into Donella, hoping to ease his throbbing cock. "You belong together, and I belong with both of you," Arkan said as he rose up and settled the head of his cock on Ethan's ass. Ethan bit his bottom lip as Arkan eased his cock inside. He felt open, stretched impossibly wide, vulnerable.

Ethan felt Arkan's heart pounding against him as Arkan curled his chest against Ethan's back. Donella pulled him closer moaning as each of Arkan's thrusts pushed Ethan deeper. "We are one," Donella said. Ethan's body tensed as Arkan's thrusts became surer

and Donella cried out as her pussy convulsed around his cock. Arkan moaned in his ear as his body shook and he emptied himself into Ethan's body. "Come for us," Arkan said. Ethan gave one more mighty thrust and felt his own orgasm overtake him, his thighs trembling and his cock pouring into Donella as she pulled his lips to her own.

\* \* \* \*

Donella curled into Arkan's sleeping body, lulled by the rhythmic breathing. He slept as a baby, with no thoughts to trouble him. Donella envied him his clear mind. Ethan's chest was pressed flush against her back, his heart thudding against her body. He was still, but his muscles were tense.

"You're awake," she said. "You should sleep."

"You're one to talk," he whispered. "You have a busy day tomorrow. Everyone will want to see you and Arkan." His voice caught on the last word, and Donella knew that for all his bravado, he was still worried about her relationship with Arkan. Arkan had been wonderful, to both Donella and Ethan. She had watched as Ethan responded to Arkan's charm and gentleness, but in quiet times, she had watched as Ethan's eyes followed the smaller man with a mixture of longing and jealousy. He wanted to love Arkan, Donella was sure of it, but she didn't know if he could let go of his jealousy and let himself fall.

Donella turned in Ethan's arms and pressed her lips to his chin. "They will want to see you, too. You saved their Regent, and Arkan and I want you there." She spread her fingers over his chest. "He loves you."

Ethan shook his head. "He loves you. He tolerates me."

"You know that's not true," she admonished him. "And you care for him. I've seen it in your eyes." She smiled at his look of surprise. "Don't forget, I know you better than anyone in the world. You look at Arkan the same way you've always looked at me."

"He's been a surprise," Ethan admitted. "But I don't know if I can stand back and watch the two of you together, knowing that you love him more than you love me."

Donella pulled back to look into his face, to see if he was serious. She saw doubt and confusion in his eyes. "Who said I love him more than I love you?"

"You don't have to say it. You're bound together. I can see it. I'm not blind. You're bound by blood and magic. I can't compete with that and I don't know if I can handle being number two."

Donella shook her head and hoped she could find the right words to soothe him. "I am bound to Arkan, and I can never change that, but I'm bound to you, too." She laid a hand on his cheek, feeling its familiar contours beneath her fingertips. "We may not have a bond of blood, but we have something different. We have a bond of shared experiences. You've been there for every important event of my life. You've been there when the bullies teased me on the playground. You were there when the Kidwells died, you were even there for me when Gwyllion threatened to finish me off. You're my hero, Ethan, my protector, my guardian and the love that I *chose*. How could you ever think that you would be second place? The way I feel about Arkan is in my blood, the way I feel about you is in my heart. Accept it, Ethan," she teased. "You're stuck with me and with Arkan." She pressed her lips to his and poured her heart and soul into the kiss. She broke away and nuzzled his lips "Stay with us?"

"Forever," he whispered.

\*

Donella stood in front of the mirror and smoothed her hands over the gown of pure white that Mara insisted she wear. "It belonged to my mother. She was a Regent as well. She wore this dress during the public ceremony."

"But I've already been named Regent." Butterflies floated in Donella's stomach at the thought of facing the Fae who stood assemble outside of Arkan's home. "Why is this necessary?"

"It is not required, of course," Mara said. "The true crowning took place the night you defeated Gwyllion. But the Regent is always crowned in front of her people. It is tradition." A small smile played at the corner of her lips. "Surely you, Ethan, and Arkan don't want to repeat the event for an audience? Gwyllion is gone, but we could always find another Gwylla for you to defeat."

"Of course not," Donella laughed. The smile slowly slid from her face. "Do you think that they will accept Ethan, though? He is human, and there has never been a human in Culatheed before."

"They will accept him because you have. And he is part Fae now, after all. He has my blood and he was bound to you and to Arkan. It is highly unusual, but everything about your life has been unusual. Culatheed has never had a Regent quite like you. I think your reign will be quite an interesting one, for all of us."

\* \* \* \*

Ethan's breath caught in his throat at the sight of Donella emerging through the door. Even with the dark circles under her eyes, she was incomparably lovely in the shimmering gown. His blood still ran cold when he thought of how close he had come to losing her, first to Arkan, then to the Gwylla. As if Ethan had spoken his name aloud, Arkan turned his head to him and smiled. Arkan reached out and grabbed Ethan's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. After Donella's defeat of Gwyllion, Ethan wasn't sure what would become of him. Donella loved him, he was finally convinced of it, but he has still been unsure about Arkan. Even after his promise to Donella, he wasn't sure that Culatheed would ever be his home, but Arkan put all thoughts of leaving out of his mind. "You belong to Donella now. You were joined with us in Aine's cave. We all belong to each other. Culatheed is your home now." His soft lips closed over Ethan's, his tongue wetting the tender skin. "Please stay," he whispered.

So Ethan agreed to stay in the ancient world, where the customs were strange and his size marked him as an outsider. But that was only fair, he thought to himself. Donella had lived in his world for the first years of her life. It was his turn to live in hers.

The roar of the crowd and the tug of Arkan's hand pulled Ethan out of his thoughts. Arkan tugged Ethan behind him as he joined Donella in front of the Fae. Ethan could hear mumbles and whispering as he joined Arkan and Donella on the raised platform to take his place as Donella's mate. Donella smiled, took Arkan's face in her hands and kissed him deeply. She then turned and did the same for Ethan. The buzz of the crowd grew as her lips slid from his. The shock that rippled through the crowd was tangible, but as Ethan saw Arkan and Donella smiling at him, what the rest of the Fae thought of him faded from his mind. He had the love of Donella and Arkan and the trust of Aine and Mara. The rest would come in time.

Aine walked to the trio and winked at Ethan. She placed a crown of pink blooms on Donella's head and placed Donella's right hand in Arkan's and her left hand in Ethan's.

“This is Donella, Regent of the Fae and her mates, Arkan the Sorcerer and Ethan the Human. The Twenty-One Years have begun.”

**The End**

**About the Author:**

Visit <http://www.davidamclea.com/>

**Meet Lsb Authors At The House Of Sin**  
**Lsbooks.Net**

**We invite you to visit Liquid Silver Books**

LSbooks.com  
for other exciting erotic romances.

**2007: Terran Realm**

Urban fantasy world: TerranRealm.com

**Featured Series:**

**The Zodiac Series: 12 books, 24 stories and authors**  
Two hot stories for each sign, 12 signs

**The Coven of the Wolf by Rae Morgan**  
Benevolent lusty witches keep evil forces at bay

**Fallen: by Tiffany Aaron**  
Fallen angels in hot flight to redeem their wings

**The Max Series by JB Skully**  
Meet Max, her not-absent dead husband, sexy detective Witt, his mother...

And many, many more!