



Changeling Press

*bad angels*  
**Falling**

Belinda McBride

Bad Angels: Falling  
*by Belinda McBride*

**Changeling Press LLC**

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## Bad Angels 1: Falling

### **Belinda McBride**

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## **Bad Angels 1: Falling**

Belinda McBride

Just what exactly happens when an angel goes bad?

Stripped of his voice, his memories, and his divinity, Rion Hunter falls to Earth in a fiery blaze. After crashing into a muddy sheep pasture in Scotland, the disgraced angel finds himself face-to-face with an unlikely rescuer: a Sidhe-born farmer named Rex.

Rex finds himself rapidly falling for the beautiful angel, which can be risky when the object of your affection just might be psychotic. And if that isn't enough, the men find that they've come to the attention of a ravenous succubus, who has developed an appetite for Scottish farmers.

Falling isn't so bad ... it's the landing that hurts.

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## Chapter One

Falling from Grace.

How does one describe the sensation? How does an angel process the horror of being cast out, thrown from the gates of Paradise to plummet through the heavens? How can a fragile body survive the horrific, bone-shattering cold, the agony of fire, burning and reaving the flesh from bone?

Kokabiel, the Star of God, was now a fallen star, blazing across the heavens, his soundless screams ripping through the fabric of the universe. Through the void of time and space, his cries were echoed by the screams of others who were as unfortunate as he.

He did not know the nature of his crime, only that he'd been cruelly betrayed, abandoned, by those he loved and trusted. He had been powerful in his celestial realm but was now helpless here in the frigid thin air of the blue planet below.

Hurtling and tumbling, his magnificent wings were unable to make purchase in the insubstantial atmosphere. He blazed with a glorious white light as he streaked through the sky. Again he screamed in agony of the body, anguish of the soul, and deathly fear of his fate. Then he slammed into the Earth in an explosion of fire and steam and soil, his skin and flesh seared away, every bone in his body ground to powder.

\* \* \* \*

Kokabiel lay deep under the surface of the Earth where he remained for hours and days and years until one morning he emerged, whole in body, but damaged and tainted in mind and soul. He burrowed his way through the mud and ice of the Earth's crust, emerging from the rich black soil in an unwitting parody of birth.

Naked and filthy, he sprawled on the new spring grass, chest heaving, eyes bewildered by the colors and shapes that he saw, confused by the sounds that filtered past the mud in his ears. Strange animals surrounded Kokabiel, ignoring him as they grazed in the field. Creatures wheeled through the sky overhead, borne on feathered wings, much like his...

He twisted, eyes wide in horror. They were gone. Burned away. Only charred stumps remained where his wings belonged. Panic gripped his heart and he lurched to unsteady feet, once again searching for the wings that he felt, yet were not to be seen. He opened his mouth to cry out, but only a coarse sound emerged from his throat, bursting past his mud-coated tongue.

Kokabiel turned to flee in panic, but clumsy legs betrayed him, spilling him to the muddy ground where he lay panting, the crippling fear too much to fight.

"They're still there, lad. They'll grow back soon enough, now that you're back in the light."

Kokabiel rolled over and located the voice. He scrambled on his backside, trying to distance himself from the threat. The creature looked familiar: two legs, two arms, a good-natured face under a mop of dirt brown curls that glistened



with silver. He couldn't understand the words the man spoke, but the meaning registered in his brain.

"Ah ... it's all right. You laddies are always pretty shaken once you wake up. Don't know if it's the fall..." Humorous, smiling eyes gazed up at the heavens, and then down to the soil. "...or if it's the landing. Either way, you angels got it rough. Took you longer than most. You must have fallen further." He grinned, exposing a roguish smile. "I'm Reux. That means headache." He chuckled at his own words. "Needless to say, I don't use it often. You can call me Rex. That means king. Better name, if you ask me. Now what do I call you?"

He moved a little closer, and Kokabiel eyed the creature nervously, for this was no human nor was it angel. He looked like a man, but through eyes blurred with fatigue, Kokabiel saw something else entirely. Something man-like and charming. Something magical. Surely this was no demon?

Rex moved closer, squatting down on his haunches, resting his arms on his knees, long, slender hands hanging loose. His legs were clad in worn fabric breeches. A woven cloth shirt hung loose to mid-thigh. Scuffed leather boots rose to his knees. The creature's eyes were no color Kokabiel had ever seen; brown mixed with green and gold, harmonizing with his richly colored curls and warm brown skin. The forest green of his eyes echoed the rich green of his shirt.

At his neck hung an ornate amulet, dangling from a worn leather cord. Magic resonated from the object.

"You're a pretty one, aren't you? That's going to be a problem right quick. I'll have to keep you hidden from the lassies till you're on your feet. Can you tell me your name?"

Rex's voice was mesmerizing, lyrical. Kokabiel felt his heart begin to settle; his fear began to recede. His panic rose once more with the realization that knowledge was flooding into his brain. Colors had names, words had meaning.

Kokabiel moved his lips experimentally, and a harsh sound came out. Before his voice was music, pure and crystalline. Now it was hoarse and husky. He'd lost his wings and now his voice. Tears stung his eyes.

"Koka..." He broke off, unable to bear the sound.

"Kokabiel?"

He nodded.

The creature ... Rex ... rose and paced. Through tear-blurred eyes, Kokabiel thought he saw something ... but he blinked and it vanished. No, Rex was no angel, nor was he human.

"*The* Kokabiel? The Star of God?"

"Yes."

"Shit. What in hell's going on up there?" He ran a hand through his curls, frowning up at the sky. Seeing Kokabiel's look of confusion, he shook his head sadly. "You aren't the first, lad. Not by far."

Kokabiel reached up and clasped the hand Rex offered. The other man pulled him effortlessly to his feet. He wobbled unsteadily, unaccustomed to the weight of a corporeal body. He stepped and winced, a sharp pain jabbing into his naked foot. His muddy skin pebbled with the cold. Kokabiel glanced

down. His flaccid penis rested in a nest of dark curls. That was new. Before, his body had been hairless and smooth. He reached up and tangled hair filled his fist. It was no longer brilliant and star-colored, but a rich, vibrant hue ... like blood. It was very nearly the color of blood. His hair fell almost to his hips rather than floating in waves around his shoulders. Gaps in the filth on his skin showed it to be creamy white rather than alabaster.

Kokabiel touched the skin of his face, under the drying mud. It felt as it should, smooth and hairless. The features felt the same. He wondered what color his eyes were. He suddenly realized that he didn't know what he looked like. Beyond his name, he had no memory.

"So you are God's Star. Obviously, we can't be calling you that."

Rex strode to a lump on the ground. It was a pack of some sort. He reached in and tossed Kokabiel a blanket, which he accepted with gratitude, wrapping it around his trembling body. A sharp pain ripped through his belly, followed by an unusual noise. Rex grinned as he turned away.

"A bit hungry, eh? Well, I've got mutton stew that'll be near ready."

Hungry? That was the pain in his belly? He trudged behind the man, realizing that he stood much taller than Rex, by nearly a handspan. The other man had broad shoulders, tapering to narrow hips. Kokabiel had nothing to compare the man to, but saw him as a thing of beauty and exceeding grace.

Grace. He had fallen from Grace.

"I'm thinking of names of stars. We don't want anything too heavenly, if you know what I mean."

"What are those?"

Rex looked at what had caught Kokabiel's attention.

"Those are sheep. We use their wool to make clothing and blankets, like the one you've got. We use their flesh as well."

Flesh? He swallowed down his horror.

"I've got it. Orion the Hunter, that's a constellation. But we won't call you Orion. You'll be Rion Hunter. What do you think of that?"

Kokabiel didn't know what to think, so he did not speak. That seemed the wisest course of action. It was the course of action that he would adhere to for many years to come. Speak little, listen carefully.

He continued to trudge behind his rescuer, tasting pain, discomfort, and misery for the first time in his very long existence.

Underneath all that, Kokabiel, now Rion Hunter, felt the awakening of a spark. That spark was the birth of something new ... curiosity.

He looked around at his new home on Earth, and the newborn hunger in his mind very nearly equaled the hunger in his belly.

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## Chapter Two

"You're a quick study, lad."

Rex watched as Hunter carefully cut the vegetables for the day's stew. He'd had one or two mishaps with the well-honed knives, and had learned quickly to respect the tools. The chunks of potato were rough and uneven, but that would matter little in the eating. What mattered more to Rex was that Hunter's cuts closed and healed at a stunning rate. Nevertheless, he still didn't trust the man with an axe.

Unfortunately, knowing what his new protégé was, Rex really didn't trust him at all. He simply couldn't allow himself that luxury.

He seemed to accept his new status here in the home of men. Hunter listened carefully and learned quickly. Food had been a novelty; he'd cautiously tested Rex's meager fare. He found vegetables and grains to be appealing, and within a few days, he'd come to accept meat. His mind rebelled, but Hunter adapted.

Adaptation appeared to be his single greatest strength. During quiet moments, Rex noticed grief. Sometimes the angel would begin to sing, and then stop abruptly as his husky, whispery voice emerged. He'd probably damaged his voice during the fall. A darker part of Rex wondered if they'd taken Hunter's voice before expelling him from his world. Nevertheless, that husky voice had a strange beauty all its own.

"What is this for?"

He'd taken a bunch of dried herbs from the rafters. Rex observed as Hunter examined them, finally pinching a leaf and smelling.

"Do you like it?"

Hunter wrinkled his nose and sniffed once again.

"Aye. It smells ... fresh." Hunter was unconsciously mimicking his mentor's Scots accent.

"It's lavender. It's used for medicine and sometimes cooking. And for the fragrance. Some lassies use it for perfume. Or for purifying the air. And sleep. It helps with sleep."

He took a sprig from Hunter and crumbled it over the stone floor. "There, as we walk the fragrance will release."

Hunter carefully replaced the bundle and brought down another, going through a similar routine of smelling and testing. He liked the mint but didn't care for the yarrow.

"Some you can eat, some you shouldn't?"

"Aye." Rex turned away from his mortar and pestle, showing Hunter how the plants were sorted. Since the angel showed a distinct affinity for plants, he might as well teach.

"Rex, sometimes people come here to see you, but you hide me away. Why?"

"Here, Hunter, crush a few leaves of this into the stew." Rex pulled a stool over by the fire and propped his bum against it. "They come to me because they are ill, and sometimes their illness causes them discomfort."

"Physical?"

"Yes, but sometimes they are embarrassed."

"Why?"

Rex thought back through the years, the unmarried women who wanted to avoid pregnancy, the men with ailments brought on by excessive drink, or by sexual impropriety. Silly accidents and outright tragedies.

"Sometimes their ailments are very personal in nature. Sometimes they ail due to their own behavior."

Rex fingered his chin as he watched Hunter move about the cooking area of the small cottage. The angel was tall, and while initially clumsy, had quickly adapted to his body of flesh. Hunter now moved with a fluid grace and economy of movement.

He'd been here nearly a month, and his language skills were phenomenal. Hunter quickly absorbed all there was to learn. It was probably time to introduce him to the locals at the village.

Still, there was the issue of his appearance. Once the dirt and mud had been washed away, the angel had been revealed as heartstoppingly beautiful. His auburn hair glowed like flame in the sunshine; his milky skin took on a golden hue in the sun. Hunter's face was near perfection, with eyes the color of cobalt and cheekbones that were high and chiseled.

That first day as he stepped from the bath, Rex's heart had constricted in his chest. His cock had hardened just at the sight of the angel, and Rex rarely felt attraction to men. Attraction to one of the Fallen was not only unwise, it was quite possibly dangerous. But still his body stirred, and when he thought of the pull of the moontide, his heart sunk in his

chest. How would he deal with this attraction at the peak of his sexual need?

They sat before the fire for hours, not speaking, as Rex carefully combed and braided the length of fine hair. Even among his people, few could boast such beautiful hair. He never let his own grow, as it curled into a wild, tangled mess. He envied Hunter that crown of silk and found that tending it had become one of his favorite tasks.

Initially, Hunter had been curiously blank, but now personality was beginning to show, and slowly, Rex's fears about his development began to stir. Fallen angels were notoriously unstable. Hunter was always watching, listening, soaking in the environment in which he'd landed. Thus far, he'd shown no indication of impatience or anger, merely curiosity. He displayed no affection, though some compassion for others had begun to glimmer in his eyes as Rex explained about the people who visited.

"Rex, are there others like me?"

He hesitated before answering. "A few. Yes, there have been a few."

Hunter sat at the table, carefully slicing another root with a sharp knife. "I thought so. You knew to come and find me, as well as how to tend my needs."

As Rex watched, every slice grew more precise and confident. "How did you know where I was?"

"I often watch the sky. That night, many stars fell, but your light didn't burn out. Instead, the sky grew bright with your fire. You were not difficult to locate."

"How long was I underground?"



"Just a few hours, I suppose."

Hunter paused in his task, looking up at Rex. "I'd have supposed it to be longer. It felt much longer."

"Time can be a funny thing, Hunter." In the angel's altered reality, he might very well have been buried for years.

Hunter returned to his work, shifting his back uncomfortably. His wings were recovering well. First, the bones had knit; now feathers were beginning to emerge. They shimmered white and gold and promised to be stunningly beautiful. It was rather sad that nobody would see them. He'd have to learn to keep them hidden for all the rest of his days.

Rex rose and moved behind Hunter, nudging the loose shirt up off his shoulders. Obliging, Hunter pulled the garment over his head. He shifted the thick rope of his braid to the side.

"They look better today." Rex gently ran his hands over the bony framework, noticing that Hunter's skin pebbled with goose bumps. "Do they hurt?"

"Aye, a bit. Mostly they itch." Tentatively, he stretched the wings out, shocking Rex with the breadth of the span. Folded, they were quite compact. Wings like this would easily carry a man his size.

"Humans are not like me."

It wasn't a question, but Rex answered anyway. "No, Hunter, humans are not like you."

"What will they think of my wings?"

Rex sighed and turned away. "They won't. We'll have to keep them hidden."

Pulling his shirt back over his head, Hunter turned on the wooden bench, facing Rex. "I know that you aren't as you appear. Will you hide me the way you hide yourself?"

Rex went still, his heart beating fast. "What do you mean, Hunter?"

He stood for a long moment, hazel eyes meeting blue, and the depth of knowledge that he saw in the other man frightened him. Nor did Hunter hesitate to meet his gaze. There was power there in the angel's eyes.

"When I look in your direction, but not directly at you, I see ... something. When it's just the two of us, you relax a bit. When the humans come, I can no longer see it."

Rex resisted the urge to press a hand over his pounding heart. His magic had been breached! Perhaps he'd grown lazy around Hunter, or perhaps the angel was simply more powerful at seeing through illusion. He took a deep breath, willing his racing heart to slow.

"No, Hunter, I'm not as you see me. Not much different, but it's still not wise to show myself completely."

"Are you a demon?"

That brought a slight smile to his face. "No, Hunter, I'm no demon. Demon-kind are of the fire. You are of the air. My kind are of this earth."

Hunter sat quietly, expectantly. Rex smiled and shook his head. It was time to give the angel a bit of his trust. "I'll have to take off my clothing." He started to pull his shirt away, and then paused. "Be sure you don't get too happy..." He trailed off, knowing that Hunter wouldn't get the joke. As far as he

could tell, the angel had no sexual awareness at all. Very little sense of humor, either.

Quickly, he slipped from his shirt, bending to unfasten the leather ties from his boots. Once those were off, he slipped from his trousers and stood naked in front of his charge. Rex knew what Hunter saw then, a slender man of medium height, nearing his middle years. His graying hair was glossy, his body well-muscled.

"What are those marks on your skin?"

Rex glanced down at the tattoos. "Magic. These are what keep me hidden." He dipped a finger into a cup of water and traced a pattern onto the skin of his chest. Gracefully, he painted invisible marks on his body. "This negates the charm."

Hunter nodded, watching with interest.

Once he'd reversed the charm, Rex felt the frisson of magic crawl across the skin of his body. Again, he felt life flowing as it should. He closed his eyes, savoring the bliss of freedom, though it would be short-lived. Sighing, he looked over at Hunter, whose eyes had grown wide in shock. Rex reached up and ran a hand through the curls that were now glossy and dark, spilling down past his shoulders. He pushed his hair back to display delicately pointed ears. With barely a thought, Rex spread his own wings; they weren't feathered like Hunter's, but velvety and marked like those of a great butterfly.

With a grin, he turned sideways, displaying his pride and joy.

"You have a tail!"

He burst out in laughter, partly at the shock in Hunter's voice, partly at the sheer joy of revealing himself again. He might not glow with the otherworldly light that the angel was unable to suppress, but Rex was of a blessed race and he knew that it showed. He laughed again as Hunter rose, circling him slowly, gently fingering his wings. He shivered at the touch of the angel's hands upon the sensitive skin of his tail. He breathed deeply, willing his cock to remain still.

"This feels good?"

Rex allowed his sinuous tail to slip free of Hunter's grasp. "Aye, it does, but not in the ordinary way." Without thought, the tail wound safely around Rex's thigh.

Slowly, Hunter circled back around to the front, closely examining Rex's face. "Your appearance ... it's the same, but different. You're young, but old. Your eyes glow brightly, and the color of your skin ... it hasn't changed, and yet it has."

Rex grinned and reached for his trousers.

"I tone down my coloring to blend better with the humans. I also give the illusion of age so they don't name me a witch and burn me at the stake." He slid onto the high stool. "I can recover from most injuries, but I doubt I'd survive burning."

"Are you of the Fair Race? A Sidhe?"

"Not very fair, am I?"

"There are other meanings of that word." Hunter moved away, sitting on the table well away from the food he'd been cutting. "It's said that your kind are guardians. You tend the earth itself. You're the color of the forest."

That was true enough. To the casual glance, Rex's hair was deep brown, but in the light, color could be seen shimmering

in its depth; greens and golds and other forest hues. The patterns on his wings were of iridescent green and gold, etched out in burgundy and ocher. His very skin was a light, golden-brown hue.

He could feel the damp patterns drying on his skin, and knew that within moments, the illusion would once again take hold. Rex gave a roguish smile, feeling loss even as he shifted to his more mundane appearance.

"Can you fly?"

"My wings aren't as powerful as yours. But yes, I can fly."

"Do all members of your race have a tail?"

"Nae. No. There are many of us; the Fae and Fairy, Brownies and Pixies and Boogles. Some do, some don't." He gently folded his now invisible wings to his body and pulled the shirt over his head. Bending down, he stomped into his boots and tied them up. When he straightened, Hunter stood just feet away, watching.

"You're very wondrous. Truly magical."

Rex chuckled at the irony of the angel marveling at his mundane appearance. "To answer your earlier question, I'll be doing a few things to hide those wings of yours. You'll have to learn to keep them close to your body, no matter what. Then I'll design a charm to hide them and the other things that set you apart."

Hunter glanced down at his body, and then looked back at Rex in question.

"You glow, angel-man. Even without the wings, no person would believe you were of this Earth."

Rex turned to the table and began loading the cut food into the stewpot. "We'll need to get this over the fire, and then you can help me with a liniment. Old Billie Turner is on his way up the hill yonder. He'll be needing an ointment for sore joints."

"I can stay this time?"

"Aye, Hunter, I don't see any harm in it."

Hunter joined him, and together they quietly worked, while Rex hummed a jaunty tune under his breath.

\* \* \* \*

Rex groaned, his eyes coming open in the velvet darkness. He'd awakened to the feel of a soft, wet mouth on his cock, and soft, strong hands running up the skin of his belly.

*Hunter!*

That initial thought combined hope with horror. The angel was far too innocent to have such knowledge and experience. But still, the idea of Hunter sucking him off was enough to twist his insides with sheer, mindless lust.

His back arched, and the shadowy figure above him sat up and smiled, though he wasn't certain how he could see it in the inky blackness of his bed nook.

The curtains were tightly closed against the frigid cold, letting in no light at all. Another wave of sensation rolled over his body, and again he groaned. A gentle hand came down to his lips. *Hush. Don't wake him.*

Obediently, Rex swallowed down the gasps and moans that she so easily brought. In spite of the darkness, he could see her in precise, vivid detail. Inky black hair cascaded down

past her shoulders in waves. Her eyes were as dark as a moonless night, and her lips as red as the roses that grew in Stella Cameron's garden. She was full of breast and narrow of waist. The dark wings that rose over her back were the only part of her that he couldn't clearly see. He wanted to reach out and stroke the sleek feathers, but she moved back, avoiding his touch.

Rex was locked into place by her touch, unable to move, to stroke her skin or kiss her lips. But for now, he was content to allow her to explore his body, to take his needy cock between those pouting lips and swallow him down. As soon as his needs became thought, then thought became reality. His balls drew up tight, his ass clenched, and a moist finger was there, stroking past the tight ring of muscle, finding its way to that sweet spot. When he cried out in pleasure, her mouth was there to take the noise, swallowing it up.

Somewhere in his mind, Rex knew this was a dream, a vivid, wonderful dream.

She was the polar opposite of the angel that slept on a pallet near his fire. She was wanton and carnal, dark and so very knowledgeable.

*Is this what you want?* Her voice was a sweet whisper in his mind.

Once again, his cock was engulfed in wet heat. She went down until there was no part of him untouched. Her throat convulsed around his shaft, and her nose rested against the skin of his belly. He wanted to buck ... to thrust to completion, but she held him frozen in place.

*Or do you prefer this?*

Golden light spilled from her, and suddenly, Hunter took her place, his hair blazing like fire. Knowledge that did not exist in the angel resided there in those blue eyes. Those eyes looked like Hunter's but they were not his. He knelt there over Rex's body, grasping Rex's hard cock, slowly lowering himself onto that shaft. Rex shuddered with the sensation, his breath coming in great, painful gasps. Hunter rose, his eyes dropping closed as he slowly fucked Rex. He reached down and clasped Rex's hands, their fingers interlaced with simple intimacy.

The figure shifted, and she was again a dark beauty. His cock was now deep within the wet clasp of her pussy. Their hands remained linked, and she braced herself on his strength.

She rode him, thrusting down with sweet deliberation, her hips swaying in a slow, hypnotic dance. He shook with his need; heat and desire coursed through his veins. He wanted to roll her to her back, to plow into her body with all the passion that he'd been stifling for so many years. He wanted to spill his seed, to watch her swell with his children.

Her hands clasped, digging into his skin, applying just the right amount of pain to make Rex cry out. His body clenched in spasms as he released his hot, life-giving seed into her body.

He smelled blood and sweat and the earthy fragrance of semen. In the darkness, he saw life coming forth in a brilliant blaze of light. Behind the shadows of her body, he saw an image of Hunter, tall and strong and confident, his face a



study in joy as he fucked her with his eyes locked on Rex's face.

She didn't seem to know the angel was there. It was a vision within a dream.

The anomaly jarred Rex. He broke from the vision, and he woke from the dream, blinking his teary eyes against the darkness. A dream visitation. The shade of Kokabiel. Was it a portent of things to come, or simply his heated imagination and frustrated sexuality? Perhaps even a glimpse into Hunter's past?

Rex closed his eyes, fighting to conjure up her face, her image, but she was elusive. Like a dream, the vision faded almost as quickly as it came, leaving him sticky with sweat and spilled semen, and with fuzzy impressions and feelings akin to fear. Dread.

He did manage to conjure up her image, dark and indistinct. She leaned forward, kissing him gently on the lips, and she tasted of ice and fire and the depths of despair.

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### Chapter Three

"Rex."

Hunter lay flat on his back, looking down at his body in fear. "Rex!"

"Whaaa..."

"I think something's wrong."

Across the room, Rex rolled off his pallet in the bed niche, dark hair tousled, and his face heavy with sleep. The air was chill; morning's light had just begun to creep into the room. He hated to wake Rex so early, but fear made his heart race in his chest. Hunter lay perfectly still, afraid lest he disturb the beastie that had taken up residence on his belly.

"What's the matter, Hunter?"

Concern showed on his face, and immediately, Hunter felt relief. He wasn't alone. He sucked in a deep breath and let it out. Fear was a new and rather unwelcome sensation.

"Something's wrong with my man part." He pulled the blanket away to reveal the swollen, distended organ. It throbbed with a sensation that he was unable to put a name to. Veins bulged under the skin, throbbing with every beat of his heart. It had grown to several times its normal size, and now rested on his lower belly; the taut head nearly flush with his navel.

"That's it?"

Rex was looking at him in amazement; laughter had taken the place of concern in his eyes. "It's not paining you now, is it?"

Hunter shook his head. "But..."

"But that's just your morning wood, Hunter. Leave it alone and it'll get back to normal."

But it wasn't getting back to normal, and he'd lain abed for nearly an hour, tormented by the pulsing member.

"Your body wants to fuck. It's hard like that so you can enter a lassie's quim."

"Breeding, you mean?" Feeling slightly reassured, Hunter rose on his elbows, looking down at the length of his body. There seemed to be no change.

"Your cock's hungry for a female. That's all."

"Will this happen every morning?" Hunter could hear the dismay in his own voice. And oddly, Rex's presence seemed to aggravate the condition. A droplet of clear fluid had emerged from the slit.

"Aye, most mornings. Other times as well. And if you don't have a lassie to tend you, you can take care of it yourself."

Though he turned away, Hunter saw a devilish light gleaming in his eyes ... he recognized it as humor. He didn't quite know how to combat Rex's sense of the ridiculous, so he set his irritation aside for the moment. "How?"

The other man had retrieved his shirt from the foot of his bed and pulled it over his head, leaving his long legs bare.

"Just touch yourself, Hunter."

Touch? Tentatively, he reached down and ran a finger lightly over the rigid shaft of his cock. It felt even tighter.

"That makes it worse."

"It's supposed to. No ... don't do that ... take a good grasp..." Rex returned to his side and knelt, his long shirt hanging to the floor. "That's it. Hold it ... and stroke."

Hunter felt a strangled groan bubble to his lips. The pressure, the friction was glorious! He stroked again, and warmth radiated from his body. Unconsciously, his free hand drifted over to clasp Rex's thigh. His eyes fell closed for a long, breathless moment. When he opened them again, Rex was staring into his face, an indescribable expression on his own.

"Here..." Rex laid his hand over Hunter's, guiding him into a steady rhythm. "Relax, Hunter. It's not going to hurt you."

Obedying his instructions, Hunter lay back, liking the feel of Rex's hand over his, the taut muscle of the other man's thigh in his grasp.

"Take your other hand, and use it to tug on your sac..."

Hunter rolled his head to the side, eyes half open, drinking in every sensation that tingled through his body. He'd given control over to Rex. Though the other man was not touching his skin, he guided Hunter's touch in a wicked dance. An unbearable tension began to grow in his back, up his ass and into his belly. Hunter bucked against the sensation, feeling a culmination of some sort seizing his body. He moaned. The faster his hands stroked his flesh, the more intense the sensation grew.

"That's it, now try this..."

Rex's hand guided his own up over the head of his shaft; he'd grown wet and slick. When his cockhead bumped into his own palm, he nearly howled with pleasure.

"Let go! Stop fighting it!" Rex grasped the root of Hunter's shaft, pumping with a quick, light hand.

Hunter moaned in bewildered ecstasy. Spasms that centered in his pelvis radiated out from his body, wracking him with pleasure. He felt the hot spurt of fluid leaving his cock, felt ropes of it spatter on his skin.

And still, it went on and on, drawing hoarse cries from his throat. Ruthlessly, Rex forced him to stroke his cock, wringing every drop, every spasm from his exhausted body. His heart slammed in his chest, and his lungs pumped desperately for air.

Under their joined hands, he could feel his flesh growing soft and flaccid. Rex's hand opened, fingers spread wide over Hunter's tender stones.

Though he didn't open his eyes, he knew that Rex was affected by what had happened. He felt the quick caress of breath on his face and knew that if he looked up, Rex's face would be hovering near his own, lips close to his ... The other man took a deep, shuddering breath and then let loose his grip over Hunter's fist. Hunter looked to see Rex's pale face moving back from his. He moved backwards, rising stiffly. He'd gone white, yet flags of color were on his cheeks.

"Was that normal?" Hunter watched Rex's back as the other man donned his pants, and then sat down on the bench to pull on his boots.

"Aye, Hunter. That was a normal, healthy reaction for your first time." He stood and reached for the heavy tunic he wore when he tended animals in the morning. Spring had crossed into summer and the days were much warmer now. "I think

we'll need to look into introducing you to a lassie soon. I'm sure Betsy Brown will be willing to take you in hand." He shot a grin in Hunter's direction and waggled a brow. "You get yourself cleaned up and start the fire. I soaked the oats for porridge last night."

He left the cottage whistling a careless, happy melody. Hunter sat up in the bedding, looking down at the shining, milky fluid on his skin. His cock was normal once again, soft and small. The knowledge came quickly; this was the seed of his body, and was to be shared with a female. But somehow, he knew this wasn't always the case.

Rex might have acted casual about what just happened, but Hunter knew otherwise. Something very intimate had taken place between the two men, and Rex was running from it. He regretted what he'd shared with Hunter.

Something stung his eyes in counterpoint to the ache in his chest.

Hunter felt two hitherto unknown sensations. The first was humiliation, and the second was anger.

Somehow, that latter sensation was the easier to grasp.

\* \* \* \*

Rex made it to the small whitewashed barn before coming to a halt. In truth, walking was a slightly uncomfortable proposition considering the sizable erection he was burdened with. He paused by the pump at the ancient stone water trough and turned to look back up at his cottage.

What had he done?

There was no doubt in his mind that Hunter was innocent of carnal matters. No matter what he might have done to get himself expelled from Heaven, he had no knowledge of sex, and it hadn't been Rex's role to enlighten him that way. That should have come in time, and Hunter should have made the decision regarding his first sexual encounter.

But Rex had taken that choice away from the angel. The moment he'd wakened to Hunter's hushed, frightened voice, his heart had twisted in fear. It had been many decades, but Rex still remembered the story of Anahita, the Fallen that his uncle Dyffyd had taken charge of.

She'd been fragile, that had been clear from the start, but when she'd broken, it had been sudden and tragic. Unlike some of the other Fallen, she'd struck at herself rather than others, falling into madness. But Hunter hadn't been breaking. He'd been maturing. His sexual arousal was normal, and once he'd gotten past the humor of the situation, Rex had been struck nearly dumb by the male beauty of Hunter's naked form. His cock had been thick and proud, aroused to the point that it had taken little effort to push him into spending.

Rex had been sadly vulnerable to the temptation before him. His only redemption was that he merely assisted the angel. He didn't follow his own carnal inclinations. His mouth had watered with the need to taste, to kiss, to embrace the other man's rigid shaft. His hands had itched to roam his body. The urge to cover him, to make love, had been very nearly irresistible.

What would it feel like to be tangled in that silken hair? To be clasped by those powerful hands as their cocks thrust and dueled?

Rex shivered at the image in his mind. He'd managed to pass through five moon cycles since the angel had arrived, and each time had grown more difficult to bear. Alone on his croft, the full moon was uncomfortable, but not torturous. Sometimes he sought out women in the nearby villages, visiting them under the light of the full moon. He never spent in their bodies, lest he leave them with a halfling child.

Hunter's presence was making the full moon a very difficult time for Rex.

He needed to expose Hunter to other people, to women who would welcome him into their bodies. He'd been terribly irresponsible to not expose the angel to the humans who would be his peers for the remainder of his existence.

The fact that they lived an hour's walk from the nearest village was irrelevant. Rex should not have exposed him to a form of sex that was little understood or tolerated by the majority of humans. Though sodomy was no longer a death sentence, it still wouldn't go easy if they indulged and were caught by humans.

With a frustrated sigh, he primed the pump. Once the frigid water began to flow, he splashed his face and head. By all rights, Rex should simply plunge himself into the trough and douse the lingering arousal. Instead, he mentally reviewed his finances and his needs. Was it too soon to plan a visit to Edinburgh?



Again he looked at his cottage. When his clan had been forced to scatter, he'd resented that the seers had dispatched him to the south, to settle on an abandoned croft in the middle of nowhere. Rex craved the forests of his people, the wild mountain tops and howling winds of the North Sea.

But as years had passed into decades, he'd grown accustomed to life on the remote farm. Over the years he'd been forced to vacate it in "death" and re-settle as his own relative on occasion. But unlike so many other crofters, he owned his land, and Rex's uncanny skills kept him well fed, even as the crops of his neighbors withered and failed. In recent years, the villagers that sought out his healing skills had begun to look at him oddly, knowing that his appearance belied his age. It was once again time for a change. But this time, Rex didn't want to wander for years, letting time dim the memory of his neighbors. He didn't wish to leave at all.

His cottage had been an ugly heap of stone and rotten thatch when he'd first arrived. Over the years, he'd rebuilt and expanded the ancient structure, plastering and whitewashing the walls, putting stone floors over the dirt and thick rugs over the chilly slate.

A stand of forest grew on his property, and water was abundant. There was game and fish, and the soil was enriched by Rex's mere presence. But some of his herbs didn't flourish in the cold, damp weather of lowland Scotland. He sometimes traveled to the city for those items.

Rex had other reasons to travel to the city as well. He grew lonely on occasion, not only for companionship, but for

touch, for the presence of his own kind. In the older sections of the city, there were places he could go...

Places he could take Hunter for some much needed experience among Rex's kind. There were women there, ladies who were skilled in the arts of lovemaking. Men, as well, but Hunter needed the exposure to women in order to discover his own preference.

And if they encountered some of the elders, perhaps one would be willing to take responsibility for Hunter. Rex simply didn't have the skills to mentor one of the Fallen, his indiscretion proved that. Once he found a place for the angel, Rex could travel for a time, and then return to his beloved farm as a young man, a nephew or cousin, and begin his life once again.

A faint wisp of smoke rose from the chimney of the house. Very soon there would be hot water for tea, as well as porridge and oatcakes.

Rex would miss Hunter's cooking when he was gone.

He shook the water from his hair in a spray of rainbow-covered droplets, and turned to the barn, ready to begin the day.

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## Chapter Four

"You'd best take that look from your face, unless you want one of these men to take it off for you."

Rex grinned at Hunter, whose face had twisted against the pervasive smell of Edinburgh's Old City. Summer had added enough warmth to lift the fetid smells of sewage and rot to life. Earlier they'd ventured into the newer part of town. Elegant houses and gardens had been planted where a small loch once shimmered.

For now, they'd keep to the old byways and alleys off the Royal Mile up in the old part of the city.

"The odor is offensive."

"Aye, but you don't need to advertise it to one and all." Rex reached out and pulled Hunter away from the center of the road, barely in time to save him from being trampled by a carriage. Together they walked steadily uphill toward the castle.

"Is that where we're going?" Hunter tripped on a cobblestone, and quickly caught his balance. His gaze was fixed in the direction of the imposing Edinburgh Castle.

"Nay, we'll be traveling elsewhere today." To prove his point, Rex turned down a narrow passageway. From there, he turned again and wound through alleys till the space between buildings was barely shoulder width.

"There's much to this city that few know about, or would dream of." He paused at a stairway, allowing Hunter the time to absorb his surroundings. The noise of the busy streets had

faded, and rather than sewage and rot, he smelled moist earth and life. Once Hunter's eyes had returned to him, Rex began to descend a stairway.

"I didn't see that until you stepped down!"

Rex grinned at his amazement. He had the feeling that Hunter would never grow bored with magic. His smile faded a bit as he thought about the awesome power that Hunter held, if he only knew how to access it.

They continued to descend until a door blocked their passage. Rather than knock, Rex gestured, sketching runes in the air. The amulet that hung around his neck began to glow with a gentle white light. He paused, counted, and repeated the complex pattern in reverse.

The door vanished.

"Follow me. We'll go through the defensive wards next." He reached behind and caught Hunter's hand, settling it on his shoulder. Hunter squeezed and then readjusted his grip. Rex did his best to ignore the sensation of the angel's touch.

Together they moved cautiously through a long passageway. Slowly, the lights dimmed until Rex was barely able to see. The glow of the necklace was the only light visible. He reached up and gave Hunter's hand a comforting squeeze. Though he'd been through the magic many times, it was still intimidating.

Once they approached the end of the corridor, magic brushed against his skin, swirling and prodding in inquiry. Without warning, the charms on both men fell, and they were both revealed in their true forms. In the golden light cast by Hunter, Rex could clearly see several figures in the shadows.

"It is I, Reux, son of Barron and Mareigh." He swallowed, feeling a bit uneasy. "I bring with me the Fallen named Kokabiel, now known as Rion Hunter."

The silence stretched for long moments. Next to him, Hunter stood still as a statue. Odd, he'd never wondered what the angel would do in times of danger. Would he fight? Stand by in bewilderment? The balanced tension in his stance led Rex to believe that he was a fighter.

"Reux Barronson."

He grinned. This was a voice he knew well.

"Enter and be welcome."

The walls of the corridor shifted, and the fragrance of flowers drifted on the air. The entire world shifted into something completely different.

It was good to be home.

\* \* \* \*

Though he couldn't remember clearly, Hunter knew he'd walked among beings of great power in his previous life. But he didn't remember ever meeting one who awed him quite as completely as this woman. It might be that she was female, and he'd met few women in his short life on Earth. It could be her bearing and stateliness, or even her sheer beauty. This woman radiated a power that he was unable to define. To his horror, blood rushed to his nether region, even as it rose to his face.

As she moved toward them, Rex dropped to both his knees, and after a brief moment, Hunter followed suit, feeling quite comfortable abasing himself to the woman. When he

looked up, her visage appeared youthful as a child, yet aged as a crone. Silver-white hair cascaded from a knot at the top of her head, the color shifting from frozen blonde to winter gray. He blinked, and the illusion ceased, leaving a lovely woman of middle years standing above him.

Goodness. Kindness. That's what he felt tugging at his consciousness. She had no sense of ambition or greed.

"Reux, I have missed you." She trailed a hand through his hair, following the curve of one of his curls. "I wish your mother could see you now." She smiled sadly, and Hunter felt the pull of her grief.

After greeting Rex, she knelt to look directly into Hunter's eyes. Hers were cool gray, deep and endless as the coldest loch. They were guarded by feathery black lashes.

He felt a tug in the back of his mind, something shifted, sparks kissed his vision, and without meaning to Hunter felt himself slide into her mind. With a hitch in his breath, he realized that this newly awakened ability was familiar.

"I'm sorry." He quickly withdrew, and she smiled at his embarrassment.

"No offense was taken. I invited you. That ability was dormant until now?" He nodded, afraid to look directly into her eyes. His impressions of her were correct; she was a being of great power and unsurpassed humility. But she was far from harmless. "You are indeed Kokabiel then, God's Star." She slid her hand over his cheek in a gentle embrace. "Do you know why you are called that name?"

He shook his head slowly.

"You shine the light of knowledge. That is the key to your fall, Hunter. You shine light in the dark places that we all possess. Even the highest of the angels must have secrets, I suppose."

"Hunter, this is Brita. She's the Guardian of this place, and the sister of my mother."

Not knowing what else to do, he bowed deeply, feeling the slide of her hand on his cheek as it slipped away. He had no adequate words of greeting, and could only demonstrate his feeling by prostrating himself before her.

"Please, Hunter. I am not deserving." Gently, she took his hand and pulled him upright, but now, he saw only a lovely woman standing before him. She'd shielded her glamour.

No longer dazzled by the Guardian, Hunter looked around and blinked. The dank cavern was now a spacious and light-filled chamber. Outside of the glass windows, fields of green stretched endlessly. Birds sang sweetly and the sound of children's laughter carried on the fragrant breeze. It reminded him of home, though it was so vastly different. The walls that surrounded him were stone and wood rather than gilt and marble. Outside, plants and trees grew riotously, rather than in ordered plantings.

"This is a place out of time, which is why it seems familiar to you. Here, no person hungers or is forgotten. But for you, it is only a temporary haven, I'm sorry to say."

She began to walk down the corridor, and the two men fell into stride next to her. Glancing at Rex, he saw that his friend looked relaxed, but still carried the tension that he'd shown over the past months. While he didn't want to admit it,

Hunter knew that Rex's unhappiness was rooted in his own presence. A feeling that he recognized as guilt had begun to take hold in his soul, steadily eroding his growing joy in discovering this world.

His fledgling emotions had received ruthless treatment since that morning by the fireside. He'd offended Rex somehow, but didn't have the experience to understand what was wrong. Hunter knew only that need churned in his gut; the need for Rex's smile and foolish jokes. He yearned for the touch that had been offered so briefly.

Hunter had learned much of sexual matters in the ensuing months; he'd seen the act among animals both large and small, and once he'd gained control of his wings, Rex had painted charms upon his skin that hid his more angelic features from the human eye. This allowed him to meet the humans that lived nearby.

In the villages they visited, Hunter had spied couples in the act, though it was vastly different than the brief, often violent, copulations of horses and farm cats. The courtships among the humans heated his blood, and brought him to a cockstand. To his chagrin, arousal visited him often and at unexpected times. Sometimes he went hard when he woke in the morning or lay down with his thoughts at night. More than once, he'd gone erect upon spying a curvy woman. The worst embarrassment came when he glanced up and saw Rex framed in the doorway or whistling over the mortar and pestle. It was then that Hunter would turn away in shame, because he knew that his open face did not hide his emotions, and he didn't want to offend Rex.



The need swelled his cock, but more importantly, it caused his heart to ache. He craved not only Rex's touch, but his presence, his approval. He craved the return of Rex's happiness. And Hunter didn't know what to do to make his friend happy. Of all the changes and adjustments he'd had to make, grappling with emotion had been the most challenging.

Hunter wondered what sort of creature he'd been before his fall.

He finally set his unhappy thoughts aside and looked around. They'd left the spacious chamber and were now outside, walking along a vine-shrouded walkway. Grapes dangled in heavy bunches from the greenery, and golden light dappled the flowing skirts of Brita's light green gown. They came to an exit in the arbor; it led to a wildly beautiful courtyard.

"Hunter, with your leave, I'd like to speak to my nephew privately. We have been long apart and we have much to discuss." She smiled as she spoke. "I'm certain you must hunger and thirst, so I won't keep him long."

Hunter nodded and wandered off, admiring the profuse plant life, watching small birds hover in the air, flitting from flower to flower. When he turned to ask a question, they were both gone.

\* \* \* \*

"You've taken your time bringing him to us."

"It seemed best."

They walked out in the open where their voices would be lost to the air. Rex breathed deeply, smelling the perfume of

warm earth and growing things. After living so long in a climate of fog and cold, the Other Place was always a welcome luxury.

When she found an appropriate spot, Brita gestured for him to sit. For a moment, she smiled at the antics of two youngsters trying their wings for the first time. "I still remember your first time to fly."

"I soared so beautifully, and then landed in the lake." He smiled at the memory. "It was so long ago."

"It was only yesterday." And to Brita, it might very well seem that way. As Guardian of the Homeland, she had stewardship over time and space. When he returned to Edinburgh, she could deliver him to the point he entered, or years into the future.

"Aunt, I have no experience with the Fallen. I'm afraid that I've erred in my handling of Kokabiel."

"In what way?"

He didn't answer immediately, thinking of all the mistakes he'd made, both great and small. Even now, his mind skipped over the real truth. He drew a deep breath and looked directly into her knowing eyes.

"I find myself infatuated with him. Sexually."

She smiled and looked up to the sky, watching a bird soaring in the air. "It would be difficult not to be drawn to such beauty. I have a question for you, Reux. Do you love him?"

"Love?" He shook his head, laughing off the very idea. "There's so little to him to fall in love with. Right now, Hunter is nothing but a bundle of questions and confusion. I should

have had him here sooner. I should have taken him to the village, exposed him to others."

"There is much to love about your angel, Reux. He merely needs time to learn. His basic personality is intact. He has forgotten all that he was. Now he's taking the time to learn who he will be." She watched a bird flutter through the sky. "He cares for you deeply. In fact, I would say you are the most important aspect to his existence."

"But that is wrong! He's had no opportunity to meet other people, to see the world and learn what's out there."

"And that is why you brought him here."

He looked away, shame touching his face. "He needs more than I can give, Aunt. How can he learn to exist among humans by living with me on a croft in the middle of nowhere?"

"Perhaps then you should take him out into the world."

Reux went still. Leave his home? The croft? His woods? It had been his way of life for decades ... longer.

"I was sent here. To Scotland."

"By the seers. Why do you suppose they sent you exactly where you now live?"

"I was to watch the sky."

"Indeed."

That had been the reason they had set him there and abandoned him. To intercept the Fallen. Kokabiel. To keep the angel isolated until he'd either adapted or gone mad. Angels were immortal; few humans could stand in battle against their cold, emotionless determination. And when an angel went bad ... well, there was Hell to pay. Literally.

"I'm to kill him if he doesn't adapt."

"There is no choice, Reux."

But Hunter was adapting, he was learning and coping with his new existence.

"I don't think that will come to pass." But Hunter hadn't had enough time, not yet.

"Aunt, he needs to be around others. He needs..." Reux broke off, clearing his throat. "He needs to experience women ... men. He needs to do this without me there as a distraction. If you allow him to stay, perhaps find someone else..." Catching the look on her face, shame wound through Rex's soul. "Aunt, I can't keep him with me any longer. Maybe later, when he's had time here..."

He could take Hunter out into the world for a few years, get him on his feet, and then perhaps Rex could return to his croft. He'd come back young and with a new name. Perhaps he'd be an artist or a craftsman.

He'd be back to his own life, to his croft and his animals and his daily isolation. He'd be back to watching the sky for falling stars.

Rex glanced over at Brita. She'd slipped into hag mode, where her thoughts were deep and far-seeing. Catching his glance, she slid back into the present.

"You are confused. You don't know if you wish to keep him or give him away. You don't understand your feelings for the angel, and that is dangerous, Reux. He could kill you or he could love you. You were right to finally bring him to me. And you did wait too long." She looked out into the distance,

seeing something that Rex was blind to. "Go join him for your meal. Did you have any plans in the city?"

"I need to purchase supplies. Some herbs for medicines."

"Do what you must and then return to me. I'll have made my decision by then."

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## Chapter Five

He was only acting in the best interest of the angel. So why did he feel like shit?

Rex watched as the merchant rolled his purchases into an oilcloth packet. He handed over the coin and nodded, slipping the medicines down into his travel pouch.

Hunter would be treated well while Rex was gone. He would have endless opportunities to learn and grow, to know others. To make love and to fall in love. In the Other Place, there were libraries and instruments for making music. He had space to fly, to practice swordplay or learn a trade. Hunter would never grow bored. Even on the remote croft, he was always learning, always questioning. Surrounded by the many clans of the Sidhe, he would flourish. He'd be safe from the dangers that stalked him here in the Terran existence. If he truly fell, Hunter would be among the Sidhe rather than humans, and they would know what to do.

Rex stood in the tiny, dark herbalist shop, gazing absently at the wares displayed in baskets, hanging from the walls. Hunter enjoyed the fragrance of lavender, and his supply was low. The angel kept strewing it on the floor. He reached up and released a bunch from a hook hanging from the low rafters.

Stupid sentimentality. Especially since Hunter wouldn't be going home with him. He hung it back on the hook. And then he retrieved it and handed another coin to the merchant.

Outside, the sun had slipped away, and a hazy drizzle dampened the uneven streets. Rather than heading back for the alley, Rex walked uphill, back to the Royal Mile. He ignored the crowds and the wagons that choked the narrow road and continued until he came to a pub on a quiet corner. The building was crude and rough, but he knew it well. The owner was a good sort and knew when to leave his customers in peace. Rex suspected that he was something other than human himself, but didn't bother to ask.

Rex settled at a table, a mug of good ale in hand.

Every moment he spent here was a moment away from Hunter. Away from the stricken look he'd see in the angel's eyes when Rex told him that he was leaving. As he brought the tankard to his lips, the pungent fragrance of lavender overcame the fragrance of the ale. The perfume of the plant had settled on the skin of his hands.

"You look to be a million miles away."

He started slightly, looking in surprise at the stranger who stood at the other side of the round wooden table. The man gestured to the empty chair. Rex shrugged and nodded.

"You won't be minding a bit of company, then?"

The man had an open, friendly face; his deep blue eyes sparkled under a fringe of unruly black hair. He had the complexion of the Irish, fine fair skin and blue-black hair. His smile came easy.

"I saw you come out of the herbalist. You a healer, then?"

"No. I sometimes make liniments and such for the old folks in my area. I was just picking up some ingredients."

The other man sipped his ale, giving Rex a thorough going over. "I saw you with a pretty young thing earlier, thought maybe he was your son. But now I don't think so. His hair was ginger, yours is brown."

Suspicion began to creep over Rex. He stared at the other man, trying to see ... to really see. Was he using glamour to hide?

"I'm Patrick. Patrick Keenen. Late of Dublin ... now of wherever the wind blows me." His rosy lips curled in a smile, a dimple playing at one side.

Rex nodded, declining to offer a hand. "Rex Clark."

"Nice to make your acquaintance then. So anyhow, I'm guessing that young man was your helper. And since you've parted ways, I was hoping maybe you needed an extra hand and a strong back."

He did look a bit down on his luck. His clothing was clean but worn and threadbare. And he looked strong, with broad shoulders and powerful hands. For a moment, Rex considered the offer; he could use help at the croft, but the burden of secrecy was too much.

"My nephew is simply enjoying the sights, he wanted to go down and look at the gardens in the new part of the city." Over the edge of the tankard, he caught a fleeting glimpse of frustration in the other man's eyes. Or was it despair? These were desperate times in the human world. "I'm sure there are folks looking for day laborers. It's nearly planting season."

"Aye." Patrick's frustration melted away. "Aye, you're right. Do you have any suggestions?"



"No, I'm sorry. But I saw several good-sized farms on the way into the city. You could try some of those."

Patrick nodded and downed his drink. He tossed off a carefree grin. "I'll take your advice then. Will you be heading away soon? Perhaps I can travel with you? I've little to my name, but I'd like to keep what I've got."

"We're staying with friends tonight, but if you'll meet me here, we'll be leaving at first light. You're welcome to keep us company."

"And I thank you." Patrick rose, and for some reason, Rex was surprised at Patrick's height. He stood perhaps taller than Hunter. He scooped a pack off the floor, and shouldered it with ease. He pulled a cap onto his head and started for the door.

"Till the morrow then, Mister Clark."

"Tomorrow." He smiled as the man left. He'd have to think of a lie to tell him about Hunter's absence. But in truth, it would be good to have company on the road.

\* \* \* \*

"He's not coming back?"

Hunter sat up straighter, trying to force the sick feeling from the pit of his stomach. "But he didn't say that he was leaving without me." He rose from the wooden bench, pushing his way past a fall of wisteria blossoms. He stared around, trying to locate the entrance that would return him to the door into that dark Edinburgh alley. That building was no longer to be seen.

"Kokabiel. He didn't know that he wouldn't be coming back right away." Brita looked unusually grave. "He has every intention of returning, but the time here and the time there flow differently."

"I don't understand."

"I think it best that you stay with us for awhile. Reux agrees. You need to learn how to be with others, to learn how to interact with people you don't know."

He returned to the bench and sat heavily. "Who made this decision?"

"I did. But it was Reux's wish. It was a difficult decision for him to make."

"But you said that he didn't know..."

"He asked me to keep you here for a time. But he intended to come back and explain to you why."

"You did this to spare him. Because he's your nephew." He leaned forward, covering his face with his hands. "How long?"

"I don't know. I'll know when it's time."

A cool hand settled on his shoulder, but he didn't look up.

"Kokabiel..."

"Hunter. Rion Hunter. I don't want that name."

"Hunter. This is Carly. We have a cottage for you. I know you're upset, but I do think it's best." He glanced up and froze.

He'd seen women before but never like this one. Brita was beautiful, but this one exuded something that was alluring and fascinating.

Sex.

Her large dark eyes were upswept at the corners, her plump lips curled in a friendly smile. Masses of lush blonde hair cascaded around her shoulders and down her back. Her body was vividly displayed in the simple gown that she wore.

He looked away quickly lest he shame himself. He didn't want to be pulled from his distress at being left behind. He wanted to cling to that fear. He needed the images of Rex to hold him to the ground, to keep his brain from panic.

"Rion, I'll take you home now."

Her voice was low-pitched and alluring. Without realizing what he did, Hunter allowed her to clasp his hand and lead him away, down the shaded path. Briefly he glanced back at where Brita still sat shadowed under a spill of lavender blossoms. She looked old and wizened, yet still full of grace and beauty.

He turned back and looked forward. The sky was vivid blue, broken by cottony white clouds. "Does it ever rain, or is it always like this?"

Carly glanced up at him, a slight smile dancing over her lips. "It wouldn't be so green if the rain never fell." She continued to lead him onward. "It's true of the trees and flowers, but it's true of life as well."

The house she led him to was small, but neat and comfortable. The outside was plastered; a rounded thatched roof crowned the cottage. Flowers grew riotously, climbing up the walls on elaborately crafted trellises. The fragrance of roses and lavender filled the air.

"Brita said you like to read. We've brought books for you. At the main house, there is a library. You can find books on many subjects, and in many languages."

She opened the front door, and he followed her inside, tearing his eyes from the hourglass shape of her body. The floors of the house were wooden, and large shuttered windows opened to allow the sun and breeze to move through the room. The furniture was simple yet comfortable in appearance. There was a fireplace, and a bookshelf.

"Your bed is back here, near the kitchen." She gestured to a curtained cubby set into the wall. It was similar to Rex's bed at home.

*Home ...* He needed to cling to that image. He pictured the small croft, sheep on the hill and Rex's garden behind the cottage. Rex...

"There is extra clothing for you. There are food supplies, but we all eat together in the main hall. You're welcome to join us."

Gracefully, she moved around the room, pointing out lanterns and other necessities that he barely noticed. Hunter was fixated on the alluring beauty of the woman. When she caught him staring, he flushed. She smiled.

"I confess, Rion, that you are an extremely handsome being. I've never seen one of the Fallen before." She moved a bit closer and stroked a long feather on his wing.

"You don't have wings." His voice was huskier than usual.

"Not all of us do. The gifts of my clan are of a nature different than Reux's."

She drifted to the corner where a stringed instrument was propped. He hadn't noticed it before. "You feel extremely drawn to me. That is the nature of my gift."

"Seduction?"

"Of a sort." Her fingers drifted over the strings of the lute. "If you'd like to learn, I will teach you." She lifted the instrument and sat on a nearby stool. She plucked the strings, and the music was so poignant, so pure, that tears came to Hunter's eyes. He'd not forgotten the loss of his song.

She played, and it seemed to last forever yet it ended far too soon. His heart ached to accompany her, and yet he sat mesmerized, unable to turn away. As the last notes faded, Carly gently laid the instrument across his lap and guided his fingers to the fret board. The first tentative notes sang through the room. From there, he wandered, explored. Hunter lost himself in the music.

She rose and moved behind him, running her hands over the edges of his wings. "Have you flown?"

"Once or twice." He spoke absently, all of his attention on the instrument, the painful sting of the strings under his fingers. "They aren't strong yet, and Rex always worries..."

Rex. He'd forgotten about Rex. Hunter frowned and paused, looking back at Carly. "That's the nature of your gift. Forgetfulness."

"Sweet forgetfulness. Among other things." She pushed his hair aside and leaned down, her lips whispering along the skin of his neck. She stepped close, between his wings, pressing the length of her body to his. Hunter's breath caught. Her

fragrance flooded his nostrils, going straight to his head. "Let go, Rion."

It wasn't that hard to let go, to forget all his worries, his concerns. Her lips skated over his skin, her hands wandered his body. She moved to the side, bringing his face to hers. Her kiss was sweet and gentle. Awkwardly, he set the lute on the floor and pulled her to his lap. His cock was straining and rigid. If Hunter didn't know exactly what to do, his body certainly did!

"Let go, Rion." Her whisper was so soft, he barely heard it. As though compelled, his mind turned to Carly and her soft body, her alluring fragrance. Once again she leaned in for his kiss. This time her tongue skated over his lips. He allowed his to part, and to his surprise, she was in his mouth, tasting, teasing his tongue to follow hers. Encouraged, he pursued the kiss, following her lips and her mouth, occasionally drawing back to look at her face. "Your kiss is sweet, Rion."

"It's my first."

"I find that difficult to believe."

She smiled and cupped his cheek. She leaned in again, and he thought to catch her lips once more, but she averted her face slightly, pressing kisses on his jaw, nuzzling down his throat to the tender skin under his ear.

To his distinct pleasure, his blood heated, his cock grew harder with a sweet ache. When Carly slid off his lap, he thought to protest until she took his hand, drawing him to follow her. She led him to the sleeping niche, drawing the curtain open to reveal fresh white bedding that was fragrant

with lavender. She let go of his hand and slipped out of her clothing before Rion knew what was happening.

"Carly..."

"Shhh..." She laid her fingers over his lips. "This is for me too." She started to drop her hand, but he caught it, lifting her fingers to his lips once again. One by one, he kissed them, drawing them into the warmth of his mouth. Her soft intake of breath was a reward that made him feel oddly male and powerful.

Gently, she pulled them away and began to undress Hunter, pulling away the coarse tunic and breeches that he wore on the farm. Casually, she dropped them to the floor.

"We have clothing that will adapt better to your wings. There's no need to hide them while you're here." She then pressed him to sit at the edge of the bed, dropping to her knees between his parted thighs. "So pretty. Such a beautiful body, right down to your fingers and toes."

He smiled, taking a deep breath as she stroked the fronts of his thighs.

"Undo your hair for me."

He'd cut a great deal before it became apparent that the length was too much to easily tend, but it still hung to his waist in a thick curtain. He sat up a bit, letting it loose from the braid that Rex had woven it into.

Rex. He saw his friend's face, the roguish smile and dancing eyes, but all too quickly, the image faded. Between his legs, Carly was moving, her fingers dancing over his cock, making it hard and thick. He leaned back, supported by his hands, and watched as her blonde curls trailed over his skin.

She clasped his shaft in a surprisingly strong hand and stroked, just as Rex had taught him.

But then her head dipped, and wet warmth engulfed the head of his cock even as she fisted him hard. Her tongue dipped into the edge of his foreskin, gentle as a butterfly.

Hunter was unable to hold back the gasp, incapable of stopping the sudden thrust of his hips. Every dip of her head took more of his flesh; every stroke burned and seared him to greater awareness. His head rolled back as she fondled his balls, and when a wet, firm finger glided into his ass, Hunter's strength failed. He dropped onto his elbows, and finally, flat to his back.

She worked him to unbearable peaks and then dropped him abruptly to Earth, over and over again. He shook as though with fever; sweat bloomed over his skin. Long strands of fiery hair stuck to his chest and belly. He needed to finish, but wanted something else. His breath ripped from his chest in great, sobbing moans.

"You're close. I'm ready as well."

He wanted to cry as her hands left his body, leaving him cold and bereft. But she stood and gently urged him further back onto the bed.

He lay like one dead. The swelling of his cock rested heavy and wet on his belly. When Hunter opened his eyes, he saw Carly move above his body, pale in the dim light of the bed. Her breasts were perfect alabaster globes and her hair spilled over her body like molten gold.

She mounted him, straddling his hips. She clasped his cock in her hand and slowly, carefully lowered herself until her



warm, slick body swallowed him. His cock disappeared into her channel in agonizing inches. It was tight and blissful and so blessedly sweet. She rose a bit and then dropped, beginning a rhythm that Hunter knew was the most basic, most common instinct, whether a man was angel or human or other.

His hips rose to meet her, and she smiled her encouragement.

"I'm so close already, Rion. So ready."

She leaned forward, supporting herself with hands on his chest. Her hips pumped against his, and the friction began to overtake them both. Their bodies slapped together. Her passage was slick and wet; he felt her juices slipping down his balls, down to the crack of his ass. Hunter forced himself to watch, to see the female as she rode him to her culmination.

Carly's eyes were heavy-lidded, her chin dropped and she rode him with wild abandon, crying out deep in her chest. Her passage rippled and gripped his cock over and over again. Her sheer ecstasy was too much ... the friction on his cock, the pounding of their bodies, the image of her flushed face, her swaying breasts.

Every muscle in his body went tight. Hunter flexed and clasped her hips, holding her steady as he pounded upward into her body. The seed left his body in pulsing spasms, slipping from her passage back to his groin in a slick, delicious puddle.

Carly moaned again, his enthusiastic climax pulling her along to another orgasm. Even when he had no more seed to

spend, she kept him hard, milking him for every last second that he had to offer.

His body went limp, his heart pounding, his breath rasping from his lungs in panting bursts. Carly didn't move; she remained as she was, supported on rigid arms, moving slightly to allow his cock to slide from her body. He wanted to hold her body close to his.

"How was that?"

He clasped her arms, stroking along the fine, warm skin. She was slender, her bones and muscles so frail. He continued up her arms, sliding until he reached her breast, testing the weight, the texture of the skin. Abruptly, he leaned up, taking one pebbled nipple into his mouth, giving an experimental suck.

"Rion..." She inhaled sharply, holding his head to her breast. He feasted there, enjoying the way she held him close to her body. One hand drifted up, fondling her other breast.

"You have much to learn yet, Rion, but you are a quick study."

Gently, she disengaged him from her breast and slid from his body. She disappeared for a few minutes, and Rion dropped back on the bed, glowing with warmth and satisfaction. This far surpassed the relief he'd obtained with his own hands. It very nearly matched that first time...

"Tonight, Rion, after dinner, we'll spend a long evening together. This was only the start."

She was dressed in her simple gown, her hair tumbling around her shoulders, her lips and face flushed. He tried to

remember if he'd kissed her hard enough to make her lips swell.

Carly knelt on the soft mattress, leaning down to kiss him once again. When she moved back from his mouth, Hunter swore that he saw her, the room, then the entire house through a golden haze of happiness and pleasure.

He listened to her walk to the front door and quietly leave the house, and for long moments afterward, that glowing contentment stayed with him.

But then he sat up and looked at the cottage with its comfortable furnishings. Hunter rose and found water to wash the artifacts of sex from his body. He dressed in a pristine white tunic that fit perfectly. The doeskin trousers molded to his body, and soft boots caressed his feet.

A glass hung on the wall by the water closet. In it, he saw himself reflected.

It was the first time that Rion Hunter ever looked upon himself.

He stared and saw only a stranger, a tall man with broad shoulders and long legs, hair hanging in a deep, vivid spill against the white linen of his clothing. Great feathered wings towered behind his body.

He should know that man, and yet he was a stranger.

The pain in his chest was sharp and grievous. Not knowing what else to do, he found the abandoned lute and picked it up. He played until the sun began to sink in the west and the birds settled for the night. He played until his fingers were sore and bleeding. He played until Carly fetched him for

dinner, and took away the pain in his heart that Rex had left behind.

Hours later, after Carly had left his bed, he got up and played until the sun rose over the horizon.

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## Chapter Six

Rex felt that itch on his skin that told him that someone was watching. He ambled along the Royal Mile, stepping to the side of the street as soldiers tramped through, or as heavy wagons carried goods to various businesses in the busy city.

He ducked into alleys barely wide enough to accommodate a full-sized man, so he made himself slightly less than full sized. Rex dodged into shadows and emerged in the sunlight far distant from where he'd initially entered. He was sorely tempted to take the guise of a teen or a child, but that level of charm could pose a hazard all its own, here in the bowels of the city.

As the sun dipped from the sky, hunger gnawed at his belly. Reaching into his pack, he found one of the apples that Hunter had given him before he left.

Hunter. No doubt the angel was anxious about his daylong absence. Now he was tired and reluctant to begin the long journey home. He'd have to spend a night as a guest of his aunt.

He bit the apple, smiling at the tart-sweet flesh. Much as he loved life in the Terran world, he missed the food from home. There were other things he missed as well. Loneliness had long been his companion. Secrecy was a fact of his existence. When he visited home, even for a day or two, his soul was strengthened and rejuvenated. Even his magic grew stronger.

Hunter had alleviated that loneliness. In the months that he'd been with Rex, he'd grown and blossomed, and the prospect of losing his company brought a vague ache to Rex's throat and heaviness to his chest. He feared for his protégé. He feared that Hunter would be unable to cope with the demands of the world. He feared that like Anahita, Kokabiel would ultimately crumble.

Unlike Anahita, he didn't think Hunter would quietly slip away into a hell of his own making. Hunter could be dangerous. Rion Hunter could truly fall into the grips of darkness. Other than Rex, the angel had formed no deep connections, nor did he seem inclined to do so. Those without compassion were truly hazardous. Rex cursed himself for keeping the man so isolated.

His senses told him that he was alone again, unwatched, so Rex casually slipped into a side street that took him back to the heart of the Mile. Gnawing on the apple, he moved casually, but watched carefully. Patrick Keenen had taken him by surprise, and the next time Rex made such an error, it could be fatal.

He tossed the apple core into the fetid gutter and broke into a whistle, finally dodging into an alley to begin the dizzying journey that led him to the hidden doorway. It was hidden in a different spot every time, so Rex was forced to stretch himself magically, to look past illusions and charms to find the door.

This time, he passed unchallenged, finally entering a chamber that slowly lightened and brightened, revealing the Other Place. Home.

Humans that still believed in his people said they lived in the fairy mounds, deep under the earth. That was incorrect, but the mistake was understandable. To reach the Other Place, one had to surrender to the earth's embrace. The doors and gateways to Home were in old places, so magical that they were hidden in plain sight. But the journey was always down, deep into places hidden deep under the ground.

Brita wasn't here to meet him this time, so Rex hurried along, worried about his coming confrontation with Hunter. He'd find his aunt; now that she'd had time to consider the situation, her counsel would be of value.

He emerged from the barrow into the passageway of the palace, the fragrance of the land tickling his nose, the very air soaked into his pores. He grinned, knowing the guise of the aging farmer had fallen away, revealing him as *Sidhe*, one of the Blessed.

Emerging into the courtyard, Rex found her waiting, exactly as he'd left her. Brita's golden gown had been exchanged for leaf green, and she was in her matron guise, that of middle years. Oddly, it was this guise that made him most nervous. As matron, she reminded him of his mother. He wondered what sort of lecture she had in store for him.

"Aunt." He dropped to one knee and then rose, waiting for her to speak.

"Reux. We have much to discuss."

That didn't sound good. Rex rose to both feet and looked down at her with a bit of puzzlement. The wisteria had been in full bloom when he'd left earlier that day. Now it was fresh green, the buds giving only a hint of the glory to come. He

glanced at the sky; heavy gray clouds hung overhead, the sun breaking through in hopeful beams.

He swallowed hard; a very bad feeling had settled in his gut. "What did you do, Guardian?"

A flicker of something showed on her face, and then was vanquished. Guilt?

"Aunt. Did you bring me back earlier or later?" Of course, he knew the answer. "How long has it been? One year? Ten? Twenty?" He went back to his knees as a wave of fear and guilt washed over him. "For mercy, Brita! How long?"

"Just under one year. I felt that was enough."

He bowed his head and covered his face, trying his best not to release the anger at her betrayal. Relief that it wasn't longer. "I didn't get to talk to him first. To warn him."

"That would have been more cruel, Reux. The decision was taken from you. Your suffering was minimal."

"And his?"

She looked away abruptly and then rose, walking to the edge of the flagstones. From here, they could see out over the valley. Earlier in his day, flowers had filled the fields with riotous colors and fragrance. Now, only the fruit trees were in bloom.

"He suffered. Yes, he certainly did suffer. But he proved himself in a way that he couldn't have accomplished otherwise."

Brita turned back to him, reaching out to clasp his hand. "He wasn't ... still isn't happy, but Hunter has acclimated himself well. He's proven that he can be a contributing



member of society, even if circumstances are not to his liking."

Rex blinked quickly, clearing the tears from his eyes. He couldn't clear his heart so easily. "Did he ... does he have friends? Lovers?"

"He gets along well with everyone. He's close to Tam and Halsey, and spends a good deal of time with them. Once he discovered music..." She trailed off for a moment. "And at the start, he and Carly were close."

"Lovers, you mean."

She nodded. "Only for a short time. My admiration began to grow for him during their relationship. He could have given himself over to her forgetfulness. Instead, he refused to stay nights with her, though he craved the peace she gave him. He eventually put an end to their relationship."

Carly was of a clan of Sidhe that was similar to the nymphs of Greek mythos. Her particular gift and curse was that of forgetfulness and seduction. In her arms, a married man would forego wife and children. She was as addictive as opium. Carly's personal tragedy was that no person ever loved Carly, they became addicted to her. Even Rex had spent countless hours of bliss in her enchanted arms, only to find himself in a confused stupor when she moved on to her next lover.

Rex was impressed at the fortitude of the angel. "And since that time?"

"He accepts what is offered, whether it is friendship or more. He is kind to all, but attached to few. If he grieves for you still, he does it in silence."

They began to walk together, down another flagstone path. This one led to the palace, where Brita kept her rooms.

"You believe he is not truly fallen?"

"He is stable and benevolent. I don't know why he was forced from his home, but over the years, there have been many like him. The two of you need to talk, to decide what your future holds. He's ready to leave now."

She paused at a doorway that led into the kitchens. "He stays in the small cottage that you favor. He has been keeping to himself these past days. If you choose, the two of you can stay for a time. I'll return you to the appropriate time when you choose to leave."

"Thank you."

"Don't. I'm afraid that I hurt him deeply. Though it was for a valid purpose, I still feel guilt. I simply chose the shortest path to the answer. I could have caused more damage than if I'd allowed the situation to unfold naturally." As he watched, she cycled quickly through her incarnations, finally settling on the Maiden. Her hair glistened like snow in the sunshine, her face held the beauty of the spring.

"I'm afraid that I made the choice. It seemed the kindest to you, if not to him. I'm very sorry, Reux. I hope you can forgive me."

He could never resist Brita in this form. Rex took her soft hand and bowed deeply over it. "I hope the same, Guardian."

She was mighty, but not infallible.

\* \* \* \*

The cottage was the same, yet different.

The comfortable furnishings were all intact, but bunches of fresh flowers in rough bundles decorated the room. Herbs dried from the ceiling rafters, just as they did in the cottage at the croft. That brought a smile to Rex's face.

From outside in the back garden, soft strains of music carried. His old lute was in its place in the corner. Rex picked it up and tested the strings. They were in perfect tune. Clearly, Hunter had found a new way to fill his time. He gave a tentative pluck to the bass string and closed his eyes in pleasure. The sound was still as mellow and rich as ever.

Carrying the instrument, he made his way to the back door of the cottage and stood listening to the mellow music of the guitar floating on the air. No doubt he'd borrowed the instrument from Halsey, whose life outside was as a maker of stringed instruments. Like all of the Sidhe, Halsey and his wife Tam had to take occasional breaks to disappear and come back as someone else.

Hunter's finger's faltered on the strings, and then he returned to repeat the passage until he'd mastered it. He then went back to the beginning of the song and started again. It was a rustic folksong, and on occasion, his husky voice lifted in a hauntingly beautiful accompaniment to the angelic sound of his guitar.

As the music faded to a close, Rex brought the lute up and deftly fingered the strings, weaving a complicated melody. From the corner of his eye, he could see Hunter look up in surprise, and go very still.

*Fine knacks for ladies, cheap choice brave and new,  
Good pennyworth, but money cannot move...*

He allowed the old Dowland madrigal to roll off the lute, enjoying the sound of his voice as it vanished into the spring air. Rex knew he wasn't the most accomplished of musicians, yet found great pleasure in the playing.

"Why did you never play the lute before?"

Rex gave a slight flourish to the end of the song, and then set the instrument down. He looked at Hunter, whose eyes were unusually bright. The angel still wore every feeling on his face, plain to read.

"I suppose that in the Terran world, I get so involved in the day to day battle to survive, that I forget about the fine things. And sadly, those are the things that allow us to enjoy life."

He sat on a wooden bench facing Hunter. The crushed gravel path separated the two. Hunter looked away, back down at the guitar he had cradled on his lap.

"You've learned to play very well. I'm very impressed."

Hunter's fingers wandered idly over the fretboard of the guitar.

"I owe you an apology. I am very sorry that I didn't come back."

"Brita says that you didn't know." His hands paused, and finally he looked up, a world of pain in those cobalt eyes.

"That is true. But somehow it doesn't make me feel better. I doubt that it makes you feel better either." He sighed and rested his head on his hands, watching as a beetle made its way awkwardly from the gravel to the grass. "In truth, I had something like this in mind, but I intended to talk with you first."

"Why? Why was it so important that we be separated?"

"Because I was falling in love with you. Because, in a sense, you were a child and needed to grow up. I couldn't take advantage of you that way, Hunter. I couldn't."

There. He'd said it. It might be a monumental mistake, but at this point, he couldn't go any further astray with the angel than he'd already gone. Rex put all his focus into following the path of the beetle. When the rain came later in the day, it would simply wash back down onto the gravel path, but it persevered, going back to whatever hole it called home.

"I often imagined your return. Sometimes, I believed that I'd fall upon you and beat you. I wanted blood. Other times, we'd fall into one another's arms and embrace without saying a word. But then I'd remember that you probably hadn't missed me at all."

Rex took a chance and looked up, and saw the light of anger in Hunter's eyes. He'd never seen Hunter angry before.

"Do you understand? You've been away from me a day, Rex. I've been without you a year."

"I understand." His throat was tight. Clearly, while his infatuation with Hunter was fresh, the angel had used the time to move on.

"My aunt ... Brita says that your time here is at an end. We've got to make plans for your life in the Terran realm."

"Do I have a say in my future?"

"Of course." Shame filled Rex as he realized all the actions they'd taken without ever asking Hunter what he wanted. But a year ago, it was doubtful that he could have made a clear, informed decision. Now he could.

"When you leave, what do you plan? Are you going home? To the croft?"

"For a time. I've been there long enough that the villagers are beginning to suspect that things are strange. It's probably time to leave again. I'll come back here and Brita will send me forward a decade."

"I wish to go with you."

Rex looked at him in surprise. Hunter sat upright, his face composed, though his eyes were overly bright. His bright hair gleamed in one thick braid that fell forward over his shoulder. He kept his wings folded, but still, they rose above his head in a great arch. It was another nonverbal sign of his anger.

"I've been without you for a year. In that time, I've come to realize that in spite of my anger and my resentment, I care for you deeply. Love, if you wish. At the start, I thought I'd die for missing you, Rex. And yet I survived and moved on. I learned much, and I made friends. I've learned to love a woman's body and to sing with my hands instead of my voice." He rose and crossed the path, kneeling in front of Rex. "I will do anything to not part with you again, Rex, but if you choose otherwise, I will survive and make the best life that I can."

"God, Hunter!" Rex's voice was choked with tears, and he fell to his knees as well, facing the other man. "You are a much, much better person than I am."

Hunter caught him by the forearms, holding Rex steady for a moment. He broke loose and reached up, grasping the angel's head, pulling him close. Slowly, uncertainly, Hunter relaxed forward until his head rested on Rex's shoulder. Rex

felt him reach around, holding him, his arms pulling them close. Hunter remained there, quiet and seemingly passive, yet when Rex moved, he followed, not allowing the embrace to end.

Rex fisted his thick braid, looping it over his hand, and then cradled the angel's head to his shoulder. "I won't leave you again, Hunter. Not until you want me to go."

Finally, Hunter sucked in a breath that sounded like a sob. He pulled closer in to Rex till they touched along every inch of their bodies. Another sob escaped, and then another. Oddly, Rex felt reassured at the angel's show of emotion. That meant that he had feelings that ran deep. He stroked Hunter's silky hair, murmuring soft reassurances in his ear.

"Hunter." He tugged on the thick braid until Hunter's head came up, and Rex could clearly see his tear-reddened eyes. "It will all be well."

"I know." Hunter swallowed back another quiet sob.

Without thinking, Rex leaned in and softly kissed his lips. The angel went completely still in his arms. With a slight smile, Rex repeated the gesture, this time lingering, taking a moment to kiss the tears from Hunter's cheeks.

"My knees are getting wet from kneeling here in the grass." Hunter eased his hold on Rex, and tentatively his hands began to wander, up to where Rex's wings folded neatly against his back. He stroked and Rex sighed at the pleasure of the touch. Hunter's hand dropped lower, embracing the muscular base of Rex's tail. "You can't hide it while we're here?"

"No need to hide it. And you're right. The magic of the Other Place negates the magic that I use to disguise myself. The charms on your skin will have faded by now. I'll have to reapply them before we leave."

Rex allowed himself the luxury of pleasure, just for now ... this moment. He turned his head and rested it on Hunter's broad shoulder, shivering at the sensation of hands on his body, his skin. It had been such a long time since he'd been touched! He slowly pulled his tail through Hunter's hands, snaking it around to wrap low on the angel's waist, pulling their hips close together.

He was hard, so hard, and pushing against Hunter's erection felt decadent and wonderful. They rocked together, pressing and releasing in a delicious embrace.

"Men can make love together." It wasn't a question, but rather a statement, whispered in Hunter's husky voice.

"Yes, Hunter, men can make love." Was that permission for this beautiful being in his arms to move forward? To continue with his exploration? Rex felt firm, silken lips pressing the skin of his forehead, his eyelids, and finally settling on his mouth. Hunter nipped and pulled at his lower lip, dragging his tongue over to soothe the sting. On a sigh, Rex kissed him back, allowing Hunter to embrace and explore.

And could he ever kiss! Hunter cradled his jaw, moving his head to fit better to Rex's mouth. As his arousal grew, his kisses grew sharp and hard, his tongue probed and tasted. Using his greater height as leverage, Hunter pressed Rex backward, until his back met the wooden bench. He buried



one hand into Rex's curls and pursued the kiss until they were both breathless and flushed with need.

Hunter came to his feet and helped Rex up, pushing him to his back on the bench. All Rex could see was the sky, blue and brilliant, studded by heavy gray clouds. And then that was obscured by Hunter's exquisite face as they once again kissed deeply. All that they were, all that they needed, was in that kiss.

Hunter lowered his body over Rex, exploring, pulling at the collar of his shirt, unfastening the buttons as he worked his way lower. Rex's chest heaved with his breathing. He shuddered as Hunter caught his nipple between sharp teeth, pulling and then laving with his tongue. His tail wandered freely, stroking down Hunter's muscular back, down his tight buttocks, and then under, the tip trailing over his groin. He played the length of Hunter's cock, teasing his testes, and then stroking his length again and again.

When Hunter bit too hard, Rex grinned and smacked him sharply on the ass.

"Pants off..."

Hunter was struggling with the waistband of Rex's trousers, leaving them momentarily to fumble at his own. Once they were both open and exposed, Hunter lowered himself, groaning in bliss as their cocks pressed and rubbed from balls to tip. They began to grind, to gasp at the feel of their cocks sliding past each other, catching at the tips in a moment of agonizing pleasure. Changing their rhythm, the two pressed tightly at the root, rolling upward and then back down.

"I'm going to spend if you keep doing this!" Rex knew his laugh was shaky. He wrapped his arms around Hunter's body, one at the shoulder, the other at the hips. His tail continued to wander, alternating smooth, velvety strokes with sharp slaps.

In answer, Hunter began a steady, pumping stroke, their bodies capturing their hard, weeping cocks in a vise-like grip. "I want you to spend, Rex. Here where I can watch your face." He took Rex's mouth in another brutally sweet kiss, forcing them to move faster, harder. "I've been waiting for this, Rex ... waiting for you for so long!"

This was the sort of sex that schoolboys had in the darkness of their sleeping halls, or what monks did when the vows of chastity became too heavy to bear. Their bellies slapped, their balls grew tight and hard, and Hunter planted a hand on either side of Rex's head, rising up to watch him as their release grew closer.

"Yes ... oh mercy, Hunter!" His cock was on fire, his skin burned and tingled, and all the muscles in his body went tight. "You too..."

"You first!" Hunter's voice had become a low-pitched growl. A part of Rex's mind couldn't accept that the quiet, passive angel that he knew had become so dominant and aggressive.

He loved it.

Rex went higher up that path, his breathing grew ragged and he grunted. All the muscles in his groin and back locked in a long, crippling spasm that traveled from his ass to his balls, and finally to his cock. His seed spit out in streams,

slick on his belly, spattering on Hunter's skin. He groaned again as wave after wave of orgasm rocked him, and he ground up into the other man in a last, desperate effort to bring him to the brink.

As though he'd given himself permission, Hunter rose to his climax, his eyes dropping closed, and finally, he dropped full length over Rex, his face buried in the Sidhe's dark curls. Rex held him tightly as shudders wracked his body, and the heat of the angel's release spread like velvet over his belly.

Slowly, so slowly he came to a halt, occasional shudders running through his muscles. Another sob escaped, and Rex could feel the hot slide of tears onto his skin. He held tightly onto the angel, stroking his satiny feathers and silken limbs, murmuring silly words that might have been comfort, but they might have been love as well.

They lay there long after Hunter had become too heavy for Rex to bear. They lay as the sun set, and a brisk chill wandered into the cottage. They would lie for as long as Hunter needed Rex's arms around him, holding him close.

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## Chapter Seven

"Tonight was my night in the kitchens."

They'd retreated to the bed niche, shed all of their clothing and were now simply being comfortable. The high emotions had ebbed, though they hadn't completely retreated. Deep in his chest, a hard knot rested, just waiting to rise up and choke him. Hunter forced it back and wrapped himself tighter to Rex.

A year ago, this man had represented Hunter's entire life; his comfort, his security, and his safety. Now, even knowing that he could survive on his own, Hunter again felt that the Sidhe was his lifeline. But there was strength in knowing that it wasn't need, but love that held Rex so deeply in his heart.

Having shed the burden of his hidden desire, Rex behaved like the youth that he now appeared. Whether his hair was shining brown or streaked with silver, the eyes were the same, as was the smile. He laughed in delight at the rain that broke from the clouds, chasing them into the cottage. His eyes sparkled at their first, fumbling attempt at a duet on the lute and guitar.

If a shadow sometimes appeared in his eyes, Hunter waited for it to pass. Rex was mercurial in his moods, and the guilt settled briefly, passing quickly, but Hunter knew it was still there.

Rex didn't like guilt, and that made Hunter feel a bit safer.

"I'm sure they knew you wouldn't make it tonight. But if you'd like..."

"I'd rather stay here."

They sat face to face in the niche; Rex leaned against the wall at the foot of the bed, while Hunter leaned at the head of the bed. Their legs were intertwined, and Rex's tail occasionally stroked his leg, reminding Hunter of all the exploration they had yet to experience.

"I don't know about you, Hunter, but all I've had to eat since this morning..." He broke off, aware of the break in their time. "You gave me two apples before I left. I still have one." He reached out of the niche and caught his traveling bag, drawing out a vivid red apple. It was fresh as though it had been newly picked. Rex reached into the bag and pulled out a parcel, handing it to Hunter.

It was a sheaf of pungent dried lavender. He inhaled deeply, and then reached up, suspending the bundle from the wall. "That will keep the bed fresh."

"Aye."

Rex's smile still took his breath away. In the past year, Hunter had looked upon some of the most beautiful faces in existence. Rex's smile was lopsided; his hair grew in unmanageable curls and twists. His features were less symmetrical than those of many of the magical beings he'd met. His skin was brown from the sun, and his slender hands were hard with work.

And yet he was magic.

No one seemed to know what Rex's true gifts were, though all agreed that the grass was always a bit greener where he'd sat, and the fruit that he harvested was always sweeter. Carly's gift had been sex and pleasure, but Rex's...

"You're fertility."

"Pardon?" He lifted a brow at Hunter's exclamation.

"Your croft flourishes while the harvests all around die in the ground. Animals have no fear of you. I would imagine if you were careless, you'd have scores of children following you about."

"Fertility is usually associated with the female."

"It takes both. While Carly inspires blind lust, you inspire growth and reproduction. That's why you need to be close to the earth ... close to the forests and wild places."

As he watched, the smile faded from Rex's face. He looked up and met Hunter's eyes, and there, Hunter could see the green of the forest, the gold of wheat ready to be harvested. He saw the rushing water as it melted from the mountaintops and hurried to the ocean. He saw the first blush of new life, the green shoots coming up from fertile black soil.

"Aye. There are few like me in this world or the next."

He glanced down at the apple in his hands, thick black lashes shading his eyes. "By rights, now that I've returned home, this apple should be dried to dust." He leaned over and set it on the floor, and as Hunter watched, the fruit began to dull, to wither and finally disintegrate. Rex then held his hands to the front, opening them with the palms up.

His palms bore calluses from hard work; black dirt was permanently engrained in his skin. But they were beautiful hands, capable of pulling music out of a temperamental lute. They were gentle hands that soothed the wounded and sick.

"Those women who come to you for potions to get with child?"

"The potions are harmless fakes. Unless she is completely barren, I can prompt fertility in women. Men as well." He smiled and rested his hands on his bare thighs.

Hunter gazed at those hands, and then his eyes traveled up the length of Rex's legs to the thatch of black curls that cradled his cock and balls. His eyes continued to wander over his flat belly and lightly muscled abdomen and chest. Restlessly, Rex shifted, drawing up one leg, offering a view that Hunter returned to. Quickly, he looked up at the face of the Sidhe, catching Rex watching quizzically.

"You've been with women."

Hunter nodded.

"Men?"

"No. There were none that I desired."

"So I'm it for you then. Among men, anyway."

"Aye." He reached up and pulled at his braid, running his fingers down its length.

"Your hair's grown. We'll have to shorten it a bit before we return." Rex's foot stroked his calf gently. The sensation was almost hypnotic. Hunter blinked. When had the lights grown so dim? The candles they'd lit were nearly guttered. He glanced out and saw that the rain had stopped.

"If you hunger, I have bread and fruit, as well as cheese and cold meat."

"I hunger."

Rex's steady gaze never left Hunter's face. Abruptly, he shifted to leave the bed.

"Hunter."

A hand on his arm gave him pause.

"You're it for me as well."

"Among men."

"No, Hunter. Among anyone." He let go of Hunter's arm and settled back where the shadows were growing. "I don't deny the affection for women in myself. It's what nature created me for. But love ... you are the only one in my heart."

Hunter remained there, one leg outside the bed, the other folded under his body. His arm tingled where Rex had touched him. His cock grew heavy against the seam of his thigh and groin.

"There is only you in my heart, Rex. I care for others, but it's different."

"Friendship."

"Yes. Friendship."

Rex's gaze was heavy on his skin; it was almost something he could touch. His breath came faster, and his shaft began to lengthen. "Hunter."

"Yes." He didn't look at Rex.

"I'm going to fuck you."

"Yes." His answer was so soft, he barely heard it himself. Rex didn't move, but Hunter felt a soft stroke against his skin, running down his hip, snaking around his rapidly hardening cock. There was a tuft of soft fur at the end of Rex's tail, rather like the downy fur of his wings. He watched in fascination as the tail gently probed his cock, caressing his balls, and working its way down to his anus. He arched uncontrollably as the tip of the tail probed his tight hole.

"Do you want me to take you there?"



Hunter licked his lips and swallowed, nodding his head. "I want to take you as well."

"So we both want to run the show in bed." Rex's tail pulled away, and then wrapped around Hunter's wrist, pulling him down into the bed. "I suppose we can live with that."

"I suppose we don't have a choice, if we wish to remain together." Hunter twisted to face Rex. The Sidhe's cock was as erect and hard as his own. Hunter's shaft was alabaster pale in comparison to Rex's. His brown skin darkened to a ruddy color at the head, where it emerged from the foreskin. Hunter reached out and touched, rolling the silky skin back to reveal distended veins.

With a good deal of curiosity, he grasped Rex's weighty cock and pumped it loosely, smiling as the other man went still. He shifted again and leaned down, remembering how he liked it. He ran long, slow licks up the shaft, circling the head, and returning to the base. He nosed in and pushed at Rex's heavy balls, pulling the loose skin with his lips, rolling the orbs while his tongue glided over the skin.

Rex's hand settled gently on his head, not guiding, but in a caress.

Something soft tickled his cheek, it was the tip of a tail, stroking gently. He shivered, his skin going rough at the tickling sensation. Rex sighed and rested his head back, eyes closed, his hips rocking gently with Hunter's movement.

"Not too much, love." He sighed, and then twisted and pushed Hunter onto his back. "If you're going to fuck me, you need to be good and wet." He bent to Hunter's cock and took it in, licking him wet from root to tip. Hunter writhed.

"Oil ... I have oil..." He pointed to the ledge above the head of the bed, and Rex grabbed a small blue glass bottle.

"This?"

"Yes ... yes..." Whatever he meant to say was lost in Rex's kiss. He broke it off and straddled Hunter's thighs, oiling up both their cocks. With a wicked smile, he upended the bottle over the tip of his tail. When his tail was slick, he gave Hunter an experimental slap on the hip, laughing at the sound.

"It might sting a bit now, but later, you'll love it."

He leaned forward, clearly intending to control this round of lovemaking. He slicked his hands up and down Hunter's abdomen, rubbing the leftover oil on his skin, and then he leaned forward.

The glide of their slick, oiled cocks caused them both to groan in arousal.

"Face to face?"

Hunter nodded, unable to catch his breath.

"And you want to fuck me? How do you want me? On my back?" He rose on his knees, hovering over Hunter's aching cock. "On top?"

"On your back."

Hunter rolled them, pinning Rex against the mattress, enjoying the other man's look of surprise. He didn't really remember his life before, but knew he had some surprising skills. It appeared that wresting was one of them.

Rex opened his legs, allowing Hunter to cover him, to take him in a deep, exploring kiss. While the Sidhe explored his body with hands and tail, Hunter showered him with kisses and licks, nibbling at an earlobe, and gently biting his jaw. He

drew Rex's legs up, tilting his hips to the ceiling. Grasping his cock in one hand, he ran it over Rex's rigid shaft, down to where his balls had drawn tight.

Groping on the bedding, he found the oil and spilled it generously over Rex's balls, watching as it dribbled down his crack. With a gentle finger, he worked it into his tight hole, preparing him as thoroughly as possible.

Rex was panting, somewhere on the good side of pain.  
"You seem to know what you're doing, Hunter."

He didn't look up from his task, but nodded. Carly had been an excellent teacher.

"You know what to do?"

He finally looked up, his heart racing at the vision of Rex splayed out at his mercy, one arm behind his head, slowly pumping his oily cock with his free hand.

"Aye. I know."

Hunter began his slow assault into the tightest space he'd ever invaded. Rex's hips shook, so he held him steady with one hand, guiding his cock with the other. He paused to catch his breath and check the Sidhe, who nodded. Color was bright in Rex's cheeks, and sweat had broken out over his face and chest. He might have done this before, but it was clearly not something he did often. Hunter was pleased that he'd be the only man taking Rex. He was more than pleased. Sweat broke from his own body at the image of what they were about to do together.

It would be a wet, slippery ride.

Hunter pulled back and began again, adding a bit more oil. Every time he withdrew, he returned a bit deeper into Rex's body. He thrust a little harder and a little faster.

At last, panting in frustration, he was in. He lowered Rex's legs and lay forward, covering him for a kiss.

He could feel Rex's cock under his belly; it had gone a bit soft with the penetration, and was now growing hard again. Hunter withdrew and thrust gently, experimentally. Rex's eyes went big. "Oh ... there's the spot." He shivered and rocked his hips, urging Hunter to move.

They found their tempo, at first gentle and undemanding, and then as they grew more comfortable, harder and faster. He braced himself with hands on either side of Rex's head, feeling the other man's hands on his body, roaming down his back, digging into the crack of his ass.

Hunter felt something firm pressing into his ass, and began to slow, giving Rex a confused look. Both of the other man's hands were on his hips. "Just relax and bear down. It's not nearly so large as your cock."

Rex's tail pressed for entry, firm and slick, sliding past that firm band of muscle.

"I told you I was going to fuck you, Hunter." Rex gave a lopsided grin as his tail snaked into Hunter's hole, pushing and pulling, finally moving freely. It was strange and invasive, but Hunter trembled in reaction to the unexpected sensations.

He shuddered as the soft tip of Rex's tail passed over something exquisitely sensitive, something that forced his arousal up, melting through every bit of his body. Unable to control himself, he thrust harder into Rex's body, gripping

hard on the muscular appendage in his ass. He felt every inch as it invaded and retreated at the exact same rhythm that he moved into Rex.

He felt helpless and shattered. He arched his body over Rex's, letting go of all control as he fucked and was fucked in return.

Under his weight, Rex was as lost as he, blindly matching Hunter's tempo. Their bodies were too tightly meshed for him to reach down and grasp his cock. No matter, the pressure of Hunter's body kept him hard, their bodies matched, their breathing matched, and when Hunter felt the climax rip through his body, he knew that Rex was coming as well.

He arched up for a long, frozen moment, and then buried his face in the crook of Rex's neck, pumping his hips in short, jerky thrusts. He spasmed hard around the object in his ass. Just when he thought it could go no further, get any wilder, Rex's tail pulled out quickly and he brought it down over Hunter's buttocks in a series of sharp, stinging blows, bringing Hunter up on his arms, howling as his climax roared over him once again.

His balls were empty, but they clenched hard, and he slammed violently into Rex's body. He felt the hot silken release against his belly as Rex came apart in his arms with a guttural cry.

He collapsed to his side, motionless, shivering as sweat chilled on his skin. He felt Rex's tail go loose and slide to the bed between them. With great difficulty, Hunter opened his eyes, looking at the beautiful man at his side. Rex's eyes were wide open and overly-bright. He still broke with an

occasional shiver. When he caught Hunter looking, he smiled weakly and reached over, stroking his face.

"Is this what our future holds?" His finger moved back and forth on Hunter's cheek. It was so gentle, so caring for such a small gesture.

"It could be. It should be."

"Then I'd say we are very lucky men. Very lucky indeed."

His hand began to slip away, but Hunter caught it and held it tightly to his chest.

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## Chapter Eight

"I think it's time for you to tell me what's been going on."

Rex cracked one eye open, squinting against the light. He saw Hunter's silhouette above him. He stretched, enjoying the tickle of warm grass against his naked back. He was also pleasantly aware of a languid hard-on.

"Why can't angels be as lazy as the Sidhe? Can't you just relax and enjoy the sunshine?" Inwardly, he groaned. This was the day of reckoning.

"It's been weeks, Rex. And while this has been incredible..."

"Like a honeymoon, eh?"

Hunter cleared his throat, holding back his amusement. "These weeks have been wonderful, Rex, but I need to know why I'm different. Why you fear for me. Why you fear me."

At that, Rex sat up, blinking against the light. Blinking against the vision before him. Hunter had been flying; his wings were out and gleaming in the sun. Only the front of his hair was tied back, the rest flowed loose around his shoulders.

"God, you're hard on the eyes. Can you tone it down?" To his surprise and delight, the angel's radiance dropped a few levels. "Good job! How'd you learn that?"

Hunter stood, clearly waiting.

"Never mind, I'm just glad you're gaining control. You fly so much it makes me tired."

"You should fly more, and maybe you wouldn't be so tired."

"Ah, I get all the practice I need." He stood and stretched, twisting a crimp from his spine.

"I've yet to see you fly for any substantial distance."

"That sounds like a challenge, Hunter." He grinned, and then sobered. "A challenge for later. Sit down with me."

The angel settled gracefully to the plush carpet of grass, and Rex sat beside him, knees drawn up, ankles crossed. He watched a butterfly floating lazily from flower to flower, focusing on the insect as he gathered his thoughts.

"We don't really know what's going on in your world, or why angels fall. Because of the nature of time and space, two might fall together, one comes to Earth today, the other won't appear for decades, or even centuries. They always come in the most horrific way possible. I believe that most do not survive the fall." He glanced over at Hunter, whose eyes were unfocused, fixed off in the distance.

"The Fallen are always frightened and bewildered. The first we know of came thousands of years ago. The Sidhe did not exist then, nor did the elves or nereids or any of the other people of the Earth. Nor were there vampires or ghouls or any of the other dark people."

"Did our coming affect the people here?"

"We believe that your people are our ancestors. The early ones crossed out with humans, producing all the Blessed Ones, and all the Dark Ones. Thus, we've taken the vow to tend you when you fall. To protect you."

"And to protect Earth from us."



"Aye." He reached out and clasped Hunter's hand, giving it a brief squeeze. "The Fallen are volatile. We handle them carefully so that they don't turn dark. The old ones with long memory believe that there are two types of Fallen. There are those who fell through their own evil, those ones are truly fallen and are evil beings. And there are those who fell through betrayal or through the machinations of others." He went quiet, waiting for questions, but Hunter said nothing. "There was one, a female named Anahita. My mother's brother tended her. She did well for a very long time, yet there was a stain on her soul. Her madness descended slowly. She fought it; she fought the gathering darkness within, but eventually struck out in rage."

"What happens to an angel that goes dark?" He still didn't look over at Rex.

"We take their life, if we are able."

"How? We are immortal beings."

Rex plucked a blade of grass, and then a dandelion, spinning the bright yellow flower in a lazy circle. "No being is truly mortal, or immortal. We know how to end the life of an angel."

"And you won't tell me how?" He sounded ... angry. Hurt.

"No, Hunter. I won't tell you how."

"Do you believe that I'm dark? Evil?"

"You tell me, Hunter." He leaned back, resting on his hands. "Do you feel malevolent? Dark? Do you feel that you have a stain upon your soul?"

"No." The answer was spoken softly. "No, I am not perfect, but I hate no person."

"Then you have your answer."

Rex lay back, watching figures form in the clouds, only to dissolve and reform elsewhere. There was much to be learned watching clouds. There was much to be learned loving a fallen angel.

"What happened to Anahita? Did your uncle kill her?"

"No, Anahita took herself away before she truly fell. Legend says that she flew to the farthest northlands and buried herself under the ice. She is forever frozen, safe from this world, and the world is safe from her."

"That is sad. Perhaps she simply couldn't cope. Perhaps she remembered who she was." Hunter lay back in the grass next to Rex; their hands gently linked. "Perhaps she needed love or the handling of another."

Rex sighed. "I never met her, but my uncle was a hard man. Demanding and cold. He was not well loved by his sisters."

Hunter didn't ask, but Rex knew that the question hovered there between them. "My uncle was a soldier. I tend the forests and farmlands, he tended the battlefields. He eased the dying on to the next life, and rallied the living. The ghouls harvest the battlefields as well. He tangled with one who was eating the soul of a dying soldier. In that particular altercation, Uncle Dyffyd did not prevail. He fell at Waterloo."

Not so long ago, actually. Little more than a half-century.

"And your mother?"

Rex smiled sadly. "She was able to shift her form. Her favorite form was that of a bird. She flew away one morning and never returned."

"I'm sorry."

"We should all die doing what we love to do." He inched closer and rested his head on Hunter's shoulder. Odd that they could take comfort and give comfort so fluidly.

"The children of the dark ones ... are they always evil?"

"Demons. We call the truly fallen demons. And with some exceptions, I find their offspring frightening, sometimes loathsome. The vampires have created a fairly civilized culture, but every one that I've met fights daily to remain benevolent. There are other creatures of darkness, humans who kill for no apparent reason, or are morbidly cruel. There are creatures that change shape, and those who creep through the dreamworld. Some are malevolent, some are not. I don't know that my uncle was an evil man, but he was dark."

"Are you saying evil is a choice?"

"I believe that it is. Of course, nothing is black and white. I don't know what influenced Anahita, or what caused her fall, but she sacrificed herself to protect others."

"To me, it doesn't sound as though she had much choice."

"She did though. And she chose to protect others at the expense of her own life. She didn't have to do that. She could have embraced the demonic influence in her heart."

Rex rolled onto his side and propped a booted leg over Hunter's knees. His lazy hard-on wasn't so lazy anymore, and as always, Hunter's mere presence set him on fire.

"You challenged me."

"I did?"

Rex nipped Hunter's throat lightly, drawing the skin between his teeth, sucking lightly. He loved how the angel's color came up. His mark would remain on the angel's fair skin for hours. Reaching down without looking, he ran a hand over the bulge in the front of Hunter's breeches.

"You challenged me to a flight."

Hunter grabbed his wandering hand and held it tightly over his swollen cock.

"Perhaps later."

"Perhaps now."

Rex rolled away and sprung to his feet, immediately taking to the air. Hunter blinked in surprise as Rex hovered, his wings a golden blur.

"If you can catch me, you can fuck me." With a laugh, he was gone, streaking toward the forested hills.

At that moment, Hunter knew he was outclassed. He leapt into the air, stretching his powerful wings. His wings were meant for flying high above the Earth, catching and soaring on wind currents. He'd never seen anything like Rex hovering above him, suspended on the air.

Rex had already vanished into the trees.

Hunter climbed high, searching for his quarry, and once he caught sight of the golden flash of Rex's wings, he dove, the feathered tips of his own wings catching on leaves and branches. He twisted between trees, and finally rose high again where he could avoid the obstacles down below.

Rex moved like a creature born to the forest and sky, spinning and dipping around trees. One moment he was

skimming the ground, and the next he was flitting among the top branches of the tallest pine.

Hunter dove and attacked, only to find himself empty-handed and rapidly trying to catch himself as he hurtled to the ground. He landed hard, sprawling in the soft, loamy dirt of the forest floor.

Above him, Rex came to a soft landing on a thick branch, his tail wrapped around the trunk of the tree.

"Tired yet?" He stood in an arrogant posture; the leaves of the tree barely quivered with his movement. Hunter sat and considered the bruises that would rise, and then climbed to his feet, brushing dirt and leaves from his breeches. Without warning, he leaped into the air, straight for Rex's perch.

But Rex was no longer there, and the branch swayed dangerously under Hunter's weight. He scrambled up, hands clawing at the bark, trying to catch his balance. The Sidhe was in the tree opposite, hopping from limb to limb in a breathtaking display of skill. He glided between trees, his muscular tail acting as both balance and an extra hand.

Hunter jumped again; his broad wings were of no use in this foliage.

Rex chuckled and stepped into thin air, just inches from Hunter's clasp hands. The angel caught himself precariously, and braced using the branches above his head. He didn't know whether to laugh or shout in anger. Rex's wings blurred ... he moved to the side just slightly, and Hunter felt the flick of the Sidhe's tail snapping against his ass.

Rex shouted with laughter and was gone again.

Hunter looked in the branches of the great oaks and swaying maples, but Rex was gone. He lowered himself to a squat and considered his position. He was high above the forest floor with too little space to use his wings. The branches groaned ominously under his weight. He was certain that he could climb down if necessary. The thought didn't have any appeal.

"Rex, how do you hover? I don't understand how your wings can bear your weight."

A slight hum in the air announced Rex's arrival. He settled on a branch facing Hunter, his tail coiling around the swaying trunk. There was no possible way that the tender limb could bear him, and yet there he stood, his glistening mahogany curls glinting in the sun, laughter sparkling in his eyes. He looked impossibly young, and heartbreakingly beautiful.

"That branch is too slender to bear your weight..." And yet it did!

Rex stood balanced and secure, riding the branch as it swayed in the wind. To Hunter's amazement, the Sidhe let his tail unwind from the trunk of the tree as he delicately trod to the most narrow, slender part of the branch. He rose to the tips of his toes and stepped off the branch, hovering in mid-air, his wings beating slowly.

"Do you lower your weight?"

Rex grinned and nodded.

"Your size as well?" The Sidhe smiled gently and as Hunter watched in amazement, Rex grew smaller ... not much, but enough to make his point.

Without warning, the branch cracked, and Hunter scrambled to keep from falling. He dropped to the lower, thicker branches just a few feet down, and his heart pounded in alarm. Slowly, carefully, he lowered one foot to a branch just a few inches lower, while keeping his grip on the limbs above his head.

"Now there's an inviting sight."

The words were whispered from mere inches away. Hunter turned his head to find Rex hovering behind him. His wings kicked up a light breeze that ruffled the loose strands of hair around Hunter's face.

"I think I win." Rex's tail snaked around Hunter's waist, holding him tightly in place. "You can't move, can you?"

Hunter was unable to move up or down as long as the Sidhe maintained that grip on his waist. "You said..."

"I said if you could catch me, you could fuck me. But I caught you instead."

His voice was so close to Hunter's face now that he could feel the whisper of breath against his skin. Rex's hand came up and gently stroked the side of Hunter's face. "So soft ... soft like a babe."

"Or a woman."

"No, Hunter, you may be beautiful, but there is nothing female about you."

They stood like that, feeling the sway of the tree in the wind, hearing the soft sounds of the forest below. Hunter realized that the wild places where animals roamed and trees grew were truly Rex's home. The Sidhe was born to this ... not to a croft on a windy hill. He laid his cheek against the

rough bark of the tree and relaxed, listening with more than his ears.

"The wind in the trees sounds like running water."

"Aye." Rex leaned closer, allowing himself to relax against the angel in a melting embrace. "And the birds?"

"Their music is pure and sublime."

"What do you smell?"

Hunter closed his eyes and inhaled. "Green. Grasses and trees and flowers. Brown ... the trunk of this tree, the moisture of the soil. I smell the sweet kiss of violets on the forest floor." Rex's cheek was close to his; the other man's curls tickled his nose. "I smell you. I love that you smell of the earth and life and growing things."

Hunter felt Rex wrap his arms around his body, one hand on his belly, the other over his heart. He pressed closer, and his hips nestled between Hunter's thighs.

"Since you caught me, aren't you going to fuck me?" He pushed his ass back into Rex's groin.

Rex chuckled; the sound was velvety and full of sin, bringing goose bumps up on Hunter's smooth arms. "I was going to take you to the ground and make love to you in a pile of leaves. But here ... right here..." His hand dropped down and grasped the root of Hunter's cock. "I think this spot offers possibilities."

"But I can't move."

"Exactly."

Through the fabric of his breeches, Rex stroked Hunter's shaft, using smooth, long strokes that brought him to a full



cockstand in just a few heartbeats. Hunter shivered and clasped the tree harder.

"You are completely, utterly, at my mercy."

As his hands dipped into the waistband of Hunter's pants, unfastening the ties that held them together, the angel could think of no place better to be than at the mercy of Rex.

Every inch of his skin was soft and fine, but when his hand cupped Hunter's shaft, Rex knew without a doubt that this was the smoothest, silkiest spot on the angel's body. He leaned in, resting his head between Hunter's broad shoulders, letting his fingers guide the journey he was taking. Down the rigid shaft, to the delicate orbs, and back to the tender skin just behind. Rex ran his tongue slowly up Hunter's spine, moving the heavy braid over the front of his shoulder.

Both men were shirtless; Rex had left his behind at the cottage, and Hunter's had floated to the ground just moments ago. Hunter inhaled deeply and let his breath out on a long, shuddering sigh. Rex smiled and pressed a kiss on the back of his neck, nipping lightly. His free hand wandered over Hunter's flat belly, dipping into his navel. It then wandered up to circle and pinch his flat nipples. He couldn't see, but he could feel them tighten and pucker.

It seemed a good time to get rid of the pants, but because of his precarious perch on the tree, Hunter was unable to lift his feet to step free, and with one foot elevated, they wouldn't drop far. His legs were trapped.

Rex solved the problem by simply tearing them away, ripping them down the seams. He grinned as a tiny bead of moisture trickled from Hunter's cockhead and onto his own

fingers. He rubbed the slick moisture between his fingers and carried it up to his lips, savoring the salty taste of his lover.

He slipped his own breeches down a bit, enough to release his cock. He wasn't ready just yet, but casually thrust his hips forward, letting his erection slide between the silky squeeze of genitals and thigh. He nudged past Hunter's stones, his cock stroking back and forth in a slow caress. When their ridged heads caught lightly, he shivered at the sensation.

Rex focused once again on the task at hand, one hand fondling, arousing Hunter but never giving him a steady rhythm, never allowing him to rise too high. He laughed gently when Hunter's hips bucked in frustration.

"You like this ... you like me holding in place..."

He gently rubbed Hunter's ass and then slapped sharply. The sound carried through the trees, startling birds into flight. He wrapped a hand into the angel's long braid and pulled his head back, running kisses down his jaw, and biting gently into the tender flesh of his neck. The sound that escaped from the angel was more than a sigh, yet less than a moan.

"Tell me to stop if you need to," he whispered, trailing the tip of his tongue into the shell of Hunter's ear.

"Don't ... don't stop ... please..."

Hunter's voice was raspy with need, husky with desire. His breath came in short, staccato bursts, arousing Rex even more. He thrust his hips a bit faster, his cockhead bumping Hunter's stones, causing both men to gasp.

"I need you. God in heaven, Hunter, I need you now!" Rex spit into his palm, wetting his already slick shaft. "I'll be careful ... Tell me to stop if it hurts..." He pressed Hunter

slightly forward, nudging his elevated foot to the right, opening him up a bit more. Slowly, gently, he pressed in, pausing every few moments to recapture his control. Hunter didn't help with that. He met Rex's every movement, pressing back to meet him, arching his back just a bit.

"Keep going, Rex. Please, please don't stop!" His hands shifted on the branches that he clung to, grasping them tighter. As Rex nudged and pushed and gently pressed his way into that tight passage, the soft sounds from Hunter's throat developed into gasps and moans. Rex pulled back, gliding out, and then he pumped in hard. The next thrust was harder, and the next harder still.

He steadied Hunter with one hand on his hip, his tail wrapped securely around his waist. With his free hand, he stroked the fine white feathers of Hunter's wings, resting his face in the center of his back, feeling the flex of the angel's muscles. He trailed fingers over his chest, and as his climax drew near, Rex reached down, clasping Hunter's cock. He pumped it in time to his thrusts; the stimulation forced Hunter into an answering movement. His hips thrust back to meet Rex's cock, and then forward into the tight clasp of the Sidhe's heated palm.

Hunter's deep, gravelly moan grew into a low keening cry, and even as his balls contracted, as the muscles in his pelvis twisted in climax, Rex felt the warm spill of seed over his hand, between his fingers and down his wrist. He cried out, slick hand flat to Hunter's taut belly as he spilled into the other man. The force of the orgasm snapped his head back,

his mouth opened in a wordless cry, and he collapsed forward, unable to move or think or even breathe.

He tasted the sweat on his lover's skin, felt the cool breeze stirring their hair. When his eyes fluttered open, Rex could see the white flag of Hunter's shirt tangled in a bush. A brilliant red fox examined it, nose twitching.

"I love you, Hunter." He pulled back stiffly, watching the angel's skin pebble as his flaccid cock slipped free. Carefully, he loosened his hold on Hunter. "You all right?"

"Fine." Hunter tried to straighten, but was still clinging to the tree. "I just feel a little stuck here."

"You aren't afraid of heights, are you?" Rex grinned at the idea of the high-flying angel being stuck in a tree.

"Not afraid of heights. Very afraid of falling."

Rex's heart constricted a bit. Did Hunter have to battle that fear every time he climbed into the sky? He'd never shown delight in flying, just a grim determination to do his best.

"Want to see another of my tricks?"

Hunter didn't answer, but he looked over his shoulder with a slight smile.

"Trust me?"

"I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"You'll love it." And with that, Rex wrapped his tail around Hunter's waist, dropped their weight to nil, and together, they floated to the ground, light as thistledown. Hunter's legs were still stiff but he laughed as they landed. Hunter slid to the ground in a heap. Rex rescued the tunic from the sharp teeth of the fearless little vixen and helped Hunter work the

garment around his wings. He quickly rescued his own trousers and tied them on. He bent down and picked up the tattered remains of Hunter's pants.

"Sorry about your breeches. I was in a bit of a hurry."

For a long moment, Hunter stared at him. His expression was so odd that Rex was unable to read it. And then he lit up. For a moment it seemed that he'd lost control of that angelic glow that radiated from him in unguarded moments.

But it wasn't that at all.

Hunter's smile was radiant, and his husky laugh was like music. He wrapped his arms around his belly and collapsed backward, face to the sky. Rex couldn't help laughing with him. Hunter reached out and pulled him down till they lay together, both looking up into the sky, laughing until they were both exhausted.

"What do you see when you look up into the clouds, Rex?" His laughter had faded, but a smile still played over his lips. His blue eyes glowed with happiness.

"I see all kinds of things in the clouds, Hunter. What do you see?"

Rex watched his face as he carefully examined the fluffy clouds that drifted lazily in the sky. His face looked more alive, more intent than Rex could recall seeing. He looked happy, and that look pulled at his heart.

"You. I see you in the clouds." Hunter turned from the sky to look deeply into Rex's eyes. "And now I understand what love is."

"And what is that, Hunter?" He cocked a brow, waiting for the angel to answer.

"I care more for your happiness than for my own."

He pressed a kiss gently to Rex's lips. "I love you, Rex."

Hunter looked back up to the sky, watching the clouds pass by.

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## Chapter Nine

Brita had timed their exit to the minute.

Rex and Hunter stepped into the dark Edinburgh alley just as dawn broke. They'd donned their old worn clothing and had made certain that their hair was the correct length. As they stepped from one world to the next, Rex's face became lined and merry, his hair streaked through with glints of silver.

Hunter's wings folded away, his otherworldly glow faded. Though they had discussed the need to not display their affection openly among the dour Scots, Hunter's fingers brushed Rex's hand. He squeezed the angel's hand gently and let his fingers loose.

"We're to meet Patrick Keenen at a tavern up the street a ways. He'll ask about the gardens in the new city, perhaps what you think of the architecture."

Hunter nodded; he'd seen enough of the new developments in the city to answer correctly. Together, they turned and walked slowly uphill to the Royal Mile, pausing to watch the sun rise in the east. The smells of the city assailed his nostrils, and the sounds of a new morning came to them through the muffling layer of fog. Together, they stepped onto the cobbled street, dodging wagons and early morning pedestrians. Smoke from morning fires mingled with the mist that swirled in the air.

"It still smells bad, but I prefer this older part of the city to the new city below."

Rex glanced around at the gray stone walls, the cobbles on the street they walked on. The new city was golden and bright and symmetrical. The old city was dingy and gray; the buildings rose in a haphazard fashion. Age and magic swirled around them in invisible waves. "I prefer this part of the city too."

They continued in silence until Rex tapped Hunter's arm. "Up here a ways..."

Hunter followed Rex's slender form as he took a dizzying series of turns, ending up in front of a decrepit-looking tavern. A figure parted from the shadows, a black-haired, blue-eyed man with a smile that was a bit too easy.

"Patrick, this is Hunter."

The man grinned a little wider, extending his hand to Hunter. Reluctantly, he clasped it, not knowing what to expect.

Nothing happened, and he glanced at Rex, who was busy adjusting his pack.

"Have you eaten this morning, Patrick?"

The Irishman shook his head and caught a loaf that Rex tossed to him, biting into it with relish. His black curls were tied back, falling over his shoulders in a tousled spill. By the looks of his wrinkled clothing and damp hair, he'd been living hard.

Without further conversation, the three men headed west down the Royal Mile, eventually leaving Edinburgh behind. Busy roads gave way to dirt tracks, and while the Irishman spoke little, he hummed tunelessly, sometimes breaking into



song. To Hunter's amazement, he often broke into dance, grinning and clapping his hands.

"Do ya sing, Mr. Hunter?"

"Hunter's fine. And no, I've no ear for music." Hunter's amusement fled and he caught Rex's eye, silently begging him to interfere.

"Patrick, there's a small estate this direction. We'll wait for you off by that burn. If you don't return, we'll know you found work."

Patrick's countenance fell for a heartbeat, and for the briefest moment Hunter felt uneasy. But the smile returned in a flash, and Patrick was on his way. He walked backward, facing them.

"If I'm back, I'll teach you some good Irish songs ... no man should be without music in his life."

Rex squeezed his arm briefly, and then nodded to a tree near the rushing water. The ground was fairly dry and they pulled out food, setting some aside for the Irishman.

"Was it wise to invite him along?"

Rex paused as he bit into an apple, chewing slowly as he looked into Hunter's face. "Does he worry you? I didn't sense any glamour or magic."

"No, I don't see anything untruthful, but he seems ... wrong."

"Are you sure it's not because he's a bonnie-lookin' fellow, and he's been noticing that same fact about you?"

Hunter flushed in embarrassment. "Truly, Rex, except for you, my taste runs to females."

"I know that, Hunter ... and wasn't it nice of Carly to give us such a nice fare-thee-well?" Both men grinned at the memory of the three of them tumbling in the sheets, nearly forgetting that they intended to return to Edinburgh. Oddly, now that he was away from the female, he could barely bring her face to mind. Her gift was forgetfulness, but in a way, it was also her curse. Hunter wondered if anyone had ever truly loved Carly.

"So you're worried about him then?"

Hunter took a moment to gather his thoughts. "He seems right, but there's something underneath. Something wrong."

"Some humans are like that." Rex drew his knees up, lacing his fingers over his knees. "He may have been touched by something dark, once upon a time."

Hunter stared at the Sidhe; the sun was coming out, and caught the silver in his hair. Now that he had time and practice behind him, he could see past the edges of Rex's magic. The wings took phantom shape and then vanished. He could see the true form of Rex's body and face as though they were layered under a mist.

But it took concentration and skill, and he didn't think the Irishman had any powers to see past illusion and glamour. If Patrick had powers of his own, he'd have sensed it. And if he hadn't, then surely Rex would have.

"Well, we'll be heading north tomorrow, and I've let him know we've no room for him on the croft. He'll be out of our hair soon enough." He leaned back against the tree, holding a blade of grass to his lips and sending out a delicate melody. It was sprightly, yet oddly soothing. Through heavy eyes,

Hunter watched a small gray rabbit approach. The tall grass seemed to sway to the melody of the grass flute, and a pair of songbirds landed in the tree, lending their song to Rex's.

Hunter had nearly dozed off when he heard the familiar voice singing a jaunty tune. It clashed with the melody that had surrounded them.

Patrick was returning, obviously still unemployed.

He sat and listened to the two men chatting while the Irishman ate his noonday meal, chattering about everything and nothing while Hunter stared, trying to shine the light of knowledge and truth on a surface that reflected nothing back.

\* \* \* \*

The evening was cold and quiet. Even Patrick wasn't inclined to sing or tell chatty stories. Once the sun fell past the horizon, the men hunkered around the small fire and warmed their hands, listening to the sounds of the night. It didn't rain, but the mist came in waves, cool and unsettling. One moment, Rex could clearly see the sky, the stars, but the next, the three men were enshrouded in a moist blanket of gray.

Normally he didn't spook over such things, but perhaps Hunter's nerves were contagious. The angel had rolled into his blankets, his back to the others. Rex could see that he was feigning sleep through the stiff set of his shoulders. Patrick sat staring off into the distance. His expression never changed whether the air was misty or clear.

Rex dug into his pack and pulled out a pipe, filling it with tobacco laced with other less common herbs. He rose and

stretched, slowly pacing a circle around their little camp, letting the smoke form a ring of protection. Patrick didn't seem to notice, so Rex paused at north, south, west and east, blowing an offering to the gods at each direction.

When the bowl of his pipe grew cool, he sat down cross-legged, tapping the ash out and putting it away. There were other spells of protection, but he didn't know whether he was keeping something out, or something in. Once Patrick was asleep, he'd lay another circle, a small circle just for Hunter. He'd never seen the angel spooked like this. Insecure, yes, but not afraid.

He settled on the ground, wrapping himself in a woolen blanket, noticing how the night birds had fallen silent. The very air grew still within the circle. A slight sensation of breathlessness told him that the wards were being tested, that something was afoot, whether it be good or evil.

Not all things that roamed the night meant harm. Not all things that walked in the light were benevolent. He lay awake for hours watching the tiny fire struggle against death, rising once to give it fuel and encouragement.

Hunter's face was peaceful in sleep. Patrick wore a frown; a slight pall of tension lay over his body. Either he sensed something, or he was the something that Rex was blocking. He wished to roll next to his lover, to share blankets and warmth and comfort. He wished the long, cold night would come to an end.

While he was wishing, Rex drifted off, carried away into dreams of darkness and melancholy.

\* \* \* \*

He was cold. So cold that the very sensation burned down to his bones like fire. He was hot, burning with sensations that a man should never feel. The fire was in his brain, the cold was in his heart.

Hunter opened his eyes, seeing nothing but the faint flicker of light. To his horror, he was held solidly immobile; his eyes were frozen, though he could see. Maybe it was his imagination, but there seemed to be a crust of ice over their surface. He couldn't blink it away.

Water had flooded his ear canals and was now solid, yet rather than deathly silence, he heard unearthly screams. His heart stuttered and lurched into a sluggish beat. He opened his mouth to scream, but the water had frozen deep into his throat.

How could ice be so hot? How could blind eyes see fire?

Flames licked and grew higher until the ice grew thin, and it cracked ... melted away from his ... not his eyes. Because now Hunter knew that this wasn't his nightmare. Someone else was navigating him through this horror.

He woke, panting, a scream on his lips, looking across the camp at Patrick, who lay still and asleep. However, Rex's eyes came wide open in panic. "C ... c ... cold..."

His lips were blue, his face deathly pale, and Hunter quickly wrapped him in his own blanket, then tossed extra wood onto the fire. Rex recovered quickly, for in truth, the cold was from the dream, not from reality. They huddled for a moment, grounding themselves in the comfort of touch.

"Did you dream of ice? Fire?"

Hunter nodded, wrapping his arms around Rex, pulling him tight to his chest.

"I set a ward. Something tested it ... couldn't get in."

"So it invaded us in a dream."

Rex nodded jerkily. "You think he's all right?"

Patrick appeared to sleep peacefully. Could he have been the source of their monstrous visitation?

"It's hours yet till dawn."

"I'll keep watch."

Truthfully, Hunter didn't think he could return to sleep. He didn't want to return to sleep if all that waited him was ice and fire and fury. Whatever, whoever had shared that dream was fearsome and terrifying. Nothing he knew, nothing he remembered could have prepared him for that outpouring. He was afraid, but more to the point, he pitied that being. So much agony, and there was nothing he could do to help.

Rex was no longer shivering, and he'd clearly dropped back to sleep in Hunter's arms. When the entity had struck out, Rex had seemed to take the brunt of the attack ... if that's what it was.

He lowered Rex back to the ground and the Sidhe curled up on his side, arms and legs held tightly to his body. Hunter leaned down and brushed a kiss against his cheek. He sat close to Rex, gazing out into the foggy night. The fire seemed small and insignificant against the weight of the darkness.

Memory had not been his friend this past year. It had taunted him, teasing him with images that dissolved like mist when he looked. Remembrance slid into his mind's eye, slipping away as quickly as it came.

*The turn of a head, the smile of ... someone. The tone of a bell or the sound of a voice. White marbled halls and the fragrance of roses drifting lightly on the air.*

*Hair the color of starlight, celestial blue eyes, the colors of the many moods of the sky. An enemy who wasn't ... a friend who was.*

Hunter gazed at the night sky, seeing but not really remembering.

*A woman with smiling eyes, her tongue trailing down his smooth, hairless body, looking up at him through a fringe of silver-white hair. Her lips moved, but he couldn't hear her speak. His heart swelled with joy at the long awaited consummation of their love...*

*A friend, arm draped lazily over his shoulder, laughing as he urged him along ... somewhere...*

*A scream, more screams ... a sword over her head, coming down in a blaze, leaving nothing in its wake but empty space. A sword ... suspended over his head ... hands wrenching his mouth open as the glowing hot metal was shoved into his throat...*

Hunter tried to scream ... to wake, but the dream had him and wouldn't let loose.

He was flat on his back in the damp dirt of a Scottish meadow. The thing of fire and ice roamed his body freely. Flames licked his skin. Warm heat nudged his cock, drawing it to painful sweet erection. Faster than he could comprehend, he was pulled to climax, his seed drawn into her ravenous mouth. Again, hard ... painful ... and release pulled all the strength from his body ... again and then again.

He heard a scream, thought it was his own as the hungry mouth began again ... torturing him with the sweetest agony. Another scream ... This one ripped from the bottom of his lungs, tearing over his scarred vocal cords.

An answering scream ... and another...

Hunter fought past the flames of lust and fear; he beat them down, struggling to wakefulness. For a moment, he thought the world had gone to hell and back. Rex lay thrashing and struggling. A red glow wrapped his body, stripping him of his glamour. His face was wan and pale, his eyes fevered and partially open.

Hunter looked to the other side of the fire, and saw Patrick also struggled in his sleep. The faintest red mist hovered over his form. That wasn't what held Hunter's eye...

He crouched, gathering Rex into his arms, only marginally aware of the sweat and the semen that soaked his clothing and coated their bodies.

Rex screamed and thrashed as his body arched into another impossible climax. His tail thrashed wildly, catching Hunter like a whip over his back, his legs, and even his wings. Hunter stood his ground, ignoring the pain.

Patrick was now awake and on his feet, his black hair spilling to his hips in glossy waves. His naked skin was no longer human white, but the color of moonlight, glowing in the coming dawn. Huge, black-feathered wings rose above his back. His cock was hard and rigid, yet streaks of semen glittered on his belly and thighs. As Hunter watched, the ebony sword he brandished began to glow with an unearthly



white light. He held it to the sky and the red mist fled, as though in fear.

It still clung to Rex, pulling the very life from his body.

"Save him..."

The smile was gone from Patrick's eyes. In its place was deadly intent, reflected in the flame of his sword. He was crossing the camp, but clearly, his intent was not to aid Rex.

"It is as I feared, Kokabiel. The demons are drawn to your side."

"How do you know my name?" Hunter stepped back. Rex felt light in his arms, as though he was losing substance. He glanced at the Sidhe, and from the corner of his eye, saw his own wings rising bright and magnificent in the darkness.

"Who are you?"

"You do not know me?" The other angel faltered for a moment, a look of confusion in his eye. It was quickly gone.

"You know me well. I loved you and called you friend. But you are no longer that person. It is in the honor of God's Star that I slay you this day."

Hunter took another step back, thinking quickly, but finding no answers.

"Who are you to me?"

"I am Azrael. I am the Bringer of Death."

"And you have come for me." It wasn't a question. That black sword blazed in the death angel's hand, chasing the scattered remnants of the red phantom as though it was smoke. His intent was clear.

"The demon might have sought me out, but it meant to kill me, Azrael. Why do you foil the demon when it clearly shares your purpose?"

Again, confusion flickered in the dark angel's expression. Rex moaned slightly, and shifted in Hunter's arms.

"This Sidhe has done no wrong by the laws of our people. I will not allow him to die, nor will you break the laws of our people by taking his life."

Hunter was desperate for time, for inspiration. He remembered enough to know there was a rigid code of conduct among the angels, and he prayed that the Blessed Ones were off limits.

"Stop hiding behind your lover."

"Allow me to tend his health. I will face you then."

Azrael lowered his sword and stood his ground, allowing Hunter to lower Rex to the ground. His pulse was fast and erratic, his skin held a dangerous pallor. It wasn't good. Hunter knew he had to save himself in order to save Rex.

"Tell me, Azrael, what crime am I guilty of?"

"You know."

"I have no memory of any wrongdoing." He looked up from Rex's still form. "I have no memory of your face or name. I believe you speak false when you claim that we were friends."

Azrael flinched as though he'd been slapped. Hunter sorted through the fragments of his memory, and nowhere did he recall a black-winged angel.

"Did they cast you out as well? You are dark therefore you must be better suited to the evil things that you hunt here on Earth."

"I am Heaven's Angel of Justice."

"No, Azrael, you are a flunky. You are the bringer of death because no others will soil their hands. I remember little, but before I fell, I was as white and spotless as all the others. When I woke here, my hair was the color of flame."

"It is a sign of your corruption."

"I am not corrupt, Azrael. I am still the bringer of Knowledge and Truth. Look upon me."

It didn't really work that way, Hunter needed to touch in order to see, but Azrael's tortured eyes told him what he needed to know.

"What is my crime, Azrael?"

"Treason."

"What did I do? My life was one of beauty and music. They thrust a white-hot blade down my throat and killed my song. Mere speech gives me pain now. They stripped the memories from my brain. A woman ... someone I loved. She is no more because of me. What did I do, Azrael?"

He stood and faced the angel.

"Were we truly friends?" He searched the dark angel's face for something familiar. If they'd been friends, shouldn't he have known him? Shouldn't he ... feel?

"What attacked us just now? You and I broke away, but its main target was Rex. Why?"

The blade vanished from Azrael's hand, and his shoulders slumped forward.

"What was my crime, Azrael?" He moved closer, palms open and empty.

A terrible expression crossed the dark angel's face. Tears and anger chased each other through his eyes. "I don't know. I am commanded, and I obey."

"Were you truly my friend?"

"You don't remember. If you remembered, I would see it on your face. You never could lie, Kokabiel."

"My name is Rion Hunter." He moved closer and looked up into the other angel's face. "What did we mean to one another?"

Azrael caught a breath; it very nearly sounded like a sob.

"All shunned me but you, Kokabiel. When I was banished and became the Angel of Death, I was marked like this." He bowed his head, his ebony wings spread slightly. "They all turned their backs. I walked through the Celestial Halls and the others turned away, save you. You smiled and remained my friend."

"What did I do to be banished?"

"I do not know." He hung his head in shame. "I am commanded, and I obey."

Slowly, Hunter reached out and clasped his arm. "Look upon the truth, Azrael. Look with knowledge. See my heart." Distantly, he was aware of the glow that grew and enfolded them both. Azrael's eyes grew large with fear ... horror.

"They took your song. They took your memories..."

"Who was she?"

Azrael shook his head mutely.

"Could you see the faces of my betrayers?"

"No. They used magic to cloud your memory. I'm sorry, Kokabiel." He seemed to wilt, to somehow grow smaller, though he stood taller than Hunter.

"The Sidhe stirs. She drained off some of our vitality. He's immortal, so he'll recover."

"What was that?"

"Succubus."

Azrael looked around as though he was searching for something ... someone. "It will come again. It has called attention to you. Others will come now. The essence of immortals is a divine taste upon the lips of the Dark Ones. They will seek you both out and feed from you forever."

"Shit."

Hunter turned to see Rex balancing on wobbly legs. "She tasted you as well." He nodded to Azrael's belly where semen was drying on his alabaster skin.

"As I tasted her. Now I will hunt the demon as her kind will hunt you."

"Like I said ... shit. Not that being fucked to death is a bad way to go." He stepped, staggered and went to his knees. Hunter hurried to steady him as he rose again.

"That thing was a she?"

Azrael nodded.

"Well, evil or not, she's being tortured. That wasn't an act of malice so much as fury and pain."

"I felt it as well." Hunter looked at Patrick. Azrael.

"She is one of the Fallen. She is now demon. I will find her and destroy her."

He turned away, and before their eyes, the wings faded and before them stood Patrick Feehan, with his merry face and shining blue eyes. His smile had fled.

"We part ways here. I cannot kill you without knowing more, Kokabiel."

"I'm sure he appreciates that, Patrick. What exactly does that mean?"

Patrick turned, and in the gray morning light, Hunter could see the barest trace of glamour, some powerful magic that hid Azrael from sight. Not as good as Rex, but very nearly. How had he remained hidden so completely?

"It means that I will seek the truth. If Kokabiel is guilty of treason, I will return."

"And if he's innocent?"

Azrael had no answer for that. He looked from angel to Sidhe, and swallowed hard. "I don't know."

Hunter saw that Patrick was truly confused. He was a bringer of death, not justice, in spite of what he'd said earlier. He followed orders, but lacked the capacity to distinguish guilt or innocence. Hunter wondered how much innocent blood the black angel had spilled.

"In the meantime, Azrael, you are welcome at our hearth." Hunter stepped up, once again looking deep into those sapphire blue eyes. He looked for the truth. He looked for mercy. He looked for any sort of memory that might live there, but he saw nothing.

"You must not stay at your farm."

"What?" Rex's voice was a harsh whisper in the fog.

"She has tasted you. Whoever holds her leash has tasted you ... all of us. If you remain in one place, you will be found."

"No ... I can't..."

Hunter clasped his shoulder and squeezed hard. He felt Rex's grief run up his arm like an ache that settled around his heart. He moved closer and held the Sidhe tight to his chest, looking at Azrael through a mist of shared pain.

"I've been there nigh on two hundred years..."

"And you cannot afford to remain there another week. I am sorry." His Irish lilt was back, and it sat poorly on his grim words. "It is only a place, Blessed One."

"He's bound to the earth and forest there, Azrael. It's like ... tearing off a limb."

Azrael gathered his blanket and stuffed it into his pack. "When I hunt this demon and destroy her ... and her nest, you might be able to return."

He turned away, walking into the mist. When they could see him no longer, his voice suddenly carried to their ears.

"I am sorry, Kokabiel, to taunt you over the loss of your song. That was ... unkind."

Hunter didn't know what to say, so he said nothing. He gathered Rex into his arms and rose swiftly into the sky, heedless of anyone who might see them.

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## Chapter Ten

"It's all taken care of."

Hunter pulled back the curtain from the bed nook and carefully sat on the edge of the coarse mattress. Rex lay there, still pale, still not recovered from the attack. "I've arranged for Missus Cameron to take the cow and chickens. I hope it's all right ... I didn't charge her."

"That's fine. She's a widow and has little enough. The rest of the livestock?"

"I sold the flock to Mister Brown down near the village. He'll send a boy and a dog to gather them tomorrow." He hesitated. "I told them you are ill and go to live out your days with your brother."

Rex rolled over to face the wall, giving his back to Hunter. It stung. Hunter stood up and moved around the little cottage, gathering a few things. "I kept the horse and cart, but I doubt we should take more than we can carry easily. It'll be some time before you can walk a full day."

"I'll be fine soon enough." He still didn't move to face the room.

Hunter sighed and set down the bundle of clothing he held. He moved to the bed and carefully slid under the blankets, wrapping an arm around Rex's waist. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Rex. I don't know how to make this up to you."

That brought Rex around to look at him. "You blame yourself for this?"



"Azrael came for me. He said the demon came for me. Where else do I place the blame?"

"Oh, Hunter, no ... No. This isn't your fault. It was time for me to leave anyway. I've nearly overstayed and the neighbors are growing suspicious." He pulled Hunter closer, drawing his head down. "I'm tired, Hunter, and a little sad. I'm very frightened as well. For you more than for myself."

The Sidhe was in his true form; his tail was wrapped around Hunter's waist, gently stroking and soothing. He ran his hand down the angel's hair.

"Can we go back to the Other Place? Just until you recover?"

Rex shook his head. "Patrick was right, she's tasted us. If we go there, that could give the Dark Ones a way into our world. It's too dangerous. We just need to move."

They lay quietly. Hunter could hear the beat of his heart, feel the velvety surface of Rex's wings. Before they left, the Sidhe would lay wards on the house. The locals would slowly forget the little croft near the forest, and it would gradually fade from view until Rex returned as his own son or nephew. He'd already dug up several small caches of coin and gemstones that had been hidden over the years. They had money that would feed them for a long time to come.

"What do you remember about the succubus?" Rex's voice was low and strained. Had this been his burden these past days? Had the attack left him damaged in his soul?

"She was angry and frightened. I just remember her mouth on my cock, bringing me again and again. Not much

else. I broke away before you did. Do you remember something different?"

"Hatred. She hated me, but needed me as well. I ... I said yes to her, Hunter. She didn't take ... I gave. She was afraid of dying." He rolled onto Hunter's chest, resting his cheek on the rough fabric of his tunic. "I don't want to run from her. I want to find her ... help her."

"She's a demon, Rex. She means to hurt us."

"She's a succubus, Hunter. They haunt the dreams and feed on lust. But they don't do any real harm. They don't kill. They aren't necessarily evil or demonic."

"But Azrael said..."

"I heard what he said. But do you remember what we talked about a few days back? About evil being a choice?"

"Yes. I remember."

"I didn't sense evil, Hunter. Fear and fury and the need to survive. She needs help."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Hunter leaned back and looked down into Rex's face. "That we find her? Is that what you want?"

"I don't know, Hunter. I don't know what I want. But I do want you to remember that this world isn't black and white. This world isn't even shades of gray. It's a vibrant place with all the colors that you can imagine in all the combinations that the eye can understand. Just because someone does something bad, doesn't mean that they are evil. Your friend Azrael sees only black and white. I don't see that way, Kokabiel."

"Don't call me that." Hunter shifted away, moving to the edge of the bed. Rex's tail held him tightly, not allowing him to escape.

"Make love to me, Hunter."

He felt his skin flush ... Rex hadn't touched him since they'd returned to the croft. They slept in the same bed, but with caution and distance. "You're still too weak."

"I'm too weak to stand in a tree and fuck, but I'm strong enough for you to make love with me." The Sidhe's strong rough hand slipped under Hunter's tunic, stroking the soft skin of his chest and belly. With the urging of hands and lips and that comical tail, Hunter returned to Rex's side, sighing as his shirt slipped over his head and his pants dropped to the floor.

Rex was on his back, his wings spread out beneath his body. With a sense of surrender that was somewhere near to despair, Hunter rose over his slender body, covering it with his own. They kissed gently, lips clinging, breath mingling.

"Gentle this time, Rex."

"Gentle," he whispered in Hunter's ear. It was indeed gentle, skin brushing, lips caressing. Words of love were spoken and all feelings of guilt fled from Hunter's soul. He knelt between Rex's parted legs, kissing a soft line from belly to hip to that tender valley between thigh and groin. Before his eyes, Rex's shaft filled and grew hard and straight, moving up over his belly.

He nuzzled, nipped and licked, teasing the beautiful, rounded head of Rex's cock. One hand settled at the root of

his shaft, with the other he fondled, tracing the line that divided his balls, following it down till it met his anus.

He wet his finger and teased, circling the starburst entrance and then dipping in, only to retreat. Rex reclined, eyes heavy, content to let Hunter take the lead as they made love. He arched his back and groaned as the angel's finger stroked deep inside his ass, finding his sweet spot and holding for blissfully agonizing seconds.

Rex reached down and stroked Hunter's face, held his hair back and watched with open fascination as slick, clear pre-come dripped from the slit in his cockhead.

"Lovely as this is..." Rex groaned as Hunter laved the entire length of his shaft. "For God's sake Hunter ... Fuck me or I'm going now ... I swear!"

Hunter chuckled, loving the picture before him. Loving the sight of Rex lost to need and lust. He loved the warmth that spread through his chest, knowing that for now ... at this moment, he was the strong one, taking care of the Sidhe in every way possible.

He carefully brought up Rex's knees and raised his ass, pressing as gently as he possibly could. His hand was slick with Rex's juices; his cock was slick with his own. He slipped in easily, painlessly.

"Come down here. I want to see your face."

Hunter lowered his legs; Rex wrapped them around his hips, holding him close. They barely moved, simply enjoying the sensation of being joined, connected. Hunter pulled back and thrust, sinking a little deeper, and deeper still, until Rex groaned, and he knew he was balls deep.

The pressure on his cock was blissful. Under his belly, he felt Rex's shaft as a hard, hot pressure. He rocked, watching the Sidhe's beautiful face for any sign of pain or discomfort. Rex smiled and pulled him close for a kiss.

Odd that this gentle lovemaking would bring him so fast, so hard, but something about the energy, the control, the very restraint of the act brought Hunter crashing to that place much faster than he'd expected. He fought the climax, rising from Rex's hard, warm body, struggling for control.

"Nearly there?"

He nodded, looking down at the slender man under his body. He looked at the smooth muscle of his chest and belly, the dark hair that ran from navel to groin. He dipped, sucking gently on a rigid nipple, one hand sliding down to clasp Rex's shaft. He pumped his cock even as he thrust, determined that they'd go together. He felt the Sidhe clasp his hips, fingers digging deep into his skin. Hunter squeezed his eyes tightly shut, focusing on Rex, willing his arousal up and over, holding back with every fiber of control he possessed.

All the while, he was suspended just at that moment before climax, when the body is taut as a bowstring, every muscle quivering, every nerve flaring to brilliant life. Rex was climbing, his body struggling, his hips pumping hard on Hunter's cock.

"Ah ... now, Hunter ... oh ... damnation!"

And they were there ... together at the very moment.

Red smoke hazed his vision, every movement of his body focused on spending within the body of his lover. And at the very height of his climax, Hunter knew they weren't alone,

that another body was twined with theirs, insubstantial and hungry, drinking in the very energy of their sex.

But her touch was gentle this time, and as they lay tangled and spent, sweat and seed drying on their bodies, he felt a hand gently stroking his skin, his thighs. Rex's hands still dug into his hips, and his tail lay to the side. A phantom kiss brushed his lips, a perfumed tongue caressed his mouth. Hunter closed his eyes tightly and saw a face turn toward his, her eyes growing wide with alarm.

Hunter didn't know whether to laugh or cry, to know anger or fear. He dragged his head up and looked around the room, but the dim light told him they were alone.

He looked back down at Rex's flushed face. The Sidhe hadn't seemed to notice that anything was wrong. Instead, he reached up and brought Hunter down for another kiss, long and lingering, their tongues gently dueling. He pulled away, tears bright in his eyes.

"She was here, Rex."

"Was she? I didn't even sense her." He drew an arm back behind his head, a worried look on his face. "She fed off you?"

"Us. When we spent. It wasn't bad. Just ... unsettling." He dipped his head, claimed another kiss. He buried his head in Rex's shoulder, breathing deeply, savoring the fragrance of lavender and earth and so many other good things.

"Tomorrow, then. We'll go to Glasgow and catch a ship."

"Where will we go, Rex?" He tried to roll to the side, but strong arms held him in place.

"We'll take the first ship out. We can go to Italy and look at the paintings of the great masters ... or even to Egypt or Africa."

"America?"

Rex shook his head. "They're at war. When that passes, I'd like to see the vast forests and plains. It must be a wondrous place."

Finally he released Hunter from his embrace, and the angel slid to his side, pulling Rex in close to his body. He ran his fingers through the soft russet curls.

"We'll be fine, Hunter. That I promise."

Hunter felt Rex grow loose in his arms, relaxing into sleep. The room grew dark and yet Hunter continued to watch, seeking out the slightest trace of danger.

"And I'll keep you safe, Rex. That I promise."

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## **Belinda McBride**

*Belinda lives in the wilderness of the Siskiyou Mountains and at night, she runs naked with a pack of wolves...*

Uhh...

Belinda lives *near* the Siskiyou Mountains and shares her home with a pack of Siberian Huskies who like to pretend they are wolves. And she usually keeps her clothing on when she goes outside.

Being born into a multi-racial family gave Belinda a unique outlook on the world and a love for history and genealogy. Her great-grandfather was a noted Comanche leader who was one of the founders of the Native American church. Other relatives were bond servants from Scotland, Mongolians from Central Asia, and a foundling of African ancestry. And then there was her grandmother, who had two husbands ... at the same time...

Belinda loves to travel, collect rare gemstones, make soap and spend precious time with her daughters. Her degree is in History with a Cultural Anthropology minor. On weekends, you will often find Belinda ringside at a dog show, comb and spray bottle in hand.

She invites you to visit her website at [www.belindamcbride.com](http://www.belindamcbride.com), or email her directly at [belinda@belindamcbride.com](mailto:belinda@belindamcbride.com).



Bad Angels: Falling  
*by Belinda McBride*

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