

The book cover features a composite image. The top half shows a woman with blonde hair lying between two muscular, shirtless men. The woman is wearing a white strapless top and has her eyes closed. The men are looking towards the camera. The background is a mix of green and blue. The bottom half of the cover shows a dark, stormy sky with a castle or fortress in the center, surrounded by jagged, icy or rocky formations. The title 'THE COLLISION' is written in large, stylized, green and white letters with a 3D effect. The author's name 'Crystal Kauffman' is at the top in white. The publisher's name 'Loose Id' is at the bottom right.

Crystal Kauffman

THE COLLISION

Loose Id

*Guardian's Realm:
The Collision*

Crystal Kauffman



Guardian's Realm: The Collision

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ISBN 978-1-60737-427-5

Available in PDF, HTML, Microsoft Reader, and Mobi

Editor: Jana J. Hanson

Cover Artist: Christine M. Griffin

Printed in the United States of America

Loose Id.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

870 Market St, Suite 1201

San Francisco CA 94102-2907

www.loose-id.com

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About this Title

Genre: Vampire Paranormal Ménage

Series: Guardian's Realm; **Previous Title:** *The Combat*

Balin Renforth has served the Guardians loyally for six hundred years, protecting innocents from vampire scum like Fitch Galloway. But he cannot deny the nagging familiarity Fitch inspires, any more than he can deny the irresistible curiosity stirred by the other man.

Fitch Galloway recognizes Balin immediately, though he never knew of the man's ties to the magical Ancient Fae which gave him the powers he used to transport them to the outer limits. The Guardian has clearly grown a stick up his ass, yet Fitch cannot deny that saving him more than six hundred years ago was the best thing he ever did, and Balin has become an honorable man he cannot help but feel proud of. But that's not the only feeling the handsome Guardian stirs in Fitch...

Or in Gladiolas. If it weren't for her painful addiction, freed Palace slave Gladiolas would think she'd died and gone to heaven. Finding herself in a remote castle prison with two drop-dead sexy men is like a dream come true. They're both so fiercely protective it feels like she is no longer slave, but master. Now if only she can get them to stop fighting, and start loving...

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, male/male sexual practices, ménage (m/f/m, m/m/f) violence.*

Guardian's Realm

The Order of the Guardians

A secretive, worldwide sect of immortal warriors created by Merlin. The Guardians are responsible for protecting humans from vampires and maintaining the Sacred Laws written by King Arthur. They are peacekeepers first, warriors second. The Guardians are human-born volunteers who are transformed by a magical elixir during a ritual performed by the elders of their kind. Each Guardian possesses the ability to shift into a unique creature and into stone. Additionally, they can bring forth powerful wings while in human form.

Vampire Task Force (VTF)

The VTF is a small watchdog department reporting to the Secret Service. This human-only division is responsible for monitoring vampire activity and, when necessary, performing swift and quiet problem solving.

Vampire Secret Service (VSS)

A top-secret, government-sanctioned agency of both vampire and human agents, the VSS reports directly to the president of the United States. In addition to hunting the world's most wanted vampires, this clandestine organization undertakes assignments too dangerous for other organizations. We could tell you more, but then we'd have to kill you.

Chapter One

Gladiolas paused at the mirror to straighten her gown before stepping into the slaves' private room. Although the revealing toga was little more than a translucent swath of cloth, she'd found she could arrange the ripples of the draping neckline to effectively cover her nipples.

She'd been a slave for years, and while accustomed to her own nudity, she didn't like the cool temperature of the slaves' common room prickling her bare breasts.

A sumptuous banquet was spread out on a long table in the lavish private room. Gladiolas plucked a grape from a fruit chandelier and popped it into her mouth. "She's here, you know," she said of the mysterious woman their leader, Spike, had been stalking for days. "He just brought her in."

The three other girls in the room stopped their chattering and regarded her coolly.

"What did she look like?" Daphne ventured.

"Pretty. Long mahogany hair." Gladiolas smiled secretively as she remembered Gabrielle's soft grip on her arm. She'd tried to grant Gladiolas her freedom, not realizing this *was* home.

"I don't understand what's so special about her," Raven snapped. She resumed her perusal of the lavish banquet, plucking a frosted cupcake from a sinful mountain of pastry. She squeezed it onto a plate loaded with food. "Any one of us would make him a better queen. She doesn't even want to be here!"

"Spike gifted me to her," Gladiolas told them.

“Congratulations.” Marigold flipped her hand dismissively. “So you're the new queen's plaything. Big deal.”

“We know you like the females better, Gladiolas,” Daphne teased. “I prefer cock any day.” All three erupted in wicked laughter.

Curious to find out more about her new mistress, Gladiolas turned and left the room, leaving the other girls to whisper nastily.

They'd always been jealous, not understanding the extra attention she received wasn't exactly a blessing. Gladiolas worked harder, and was used harder, than any of the other slaves.

Thundering music wrapped around her like a squeezing hand as Gladiolas wandered into the Palace playground. Its dim, seductive lighting didn't reach far in the cavernous room, but Gladiolas knew Spike would take Gabrielle to the far end near the dungeons where her sister, Linna, was being kept.

She wondered how Gabrielle would react to seeing her own sister strung up in the “splayer,” a huge, medieval rack where slaves were strung spread-eagle for the easy use of any who cared to indulge. Gladiolas found it strange that Spike had strung up one of his own vampires, but nobody else seemed concerned.

A sudden, heavy stench made Gladiolas freeze. Fear prickled on her skin. It wasn't just the richly metallic scent of blood—carried with it was the dark odor of death.

Her throat tightened. She quickly turned and headed to the bar. Carl slid a shot glass of Tourin across the glossy marble surface. Gladiolas gulped it down.

She dragged the back of her hand across her mouth. “What's going on?”

She knew already; the vampires had fed on something, or *someone*. Several still clambered in the tile pit, naked, covered with bloodstains the kaleidoscopic blue spotlights turned black.

“Daniel.” Carl tipped his head toward the pit. “He was a traitor.”

Her stomach swooped, but the Tourin's magical effect quickly took hold. A relaxing wave, like a sprinkling of magic fairy dust, rippled over her.

No human was ever killed without good reason, and Gladiolas knew Spike believed traitors to be the worst kind of vermin. His Palace, a literal citadel of indulgence, was the only one like it in the world, and highly illegal.

Hidden in a converted San Francisco high-rise in the heart of the financial district, the Palace served visiting vampires from around the world. Some of them paid as much as a million dollars for a monthlong stay, lured by the forbidden pleasures found within these lightproof walls.

Although it wasn't discussed, many of the slaves understood the acts committed here would bring about the arrest, and possibly execution, of the vampire guests if discovered. All the slaves knew it was illegal for a vampire to have sex with a human while in demon form, yet many, most in fact, did it at the Palace.

She knew there were secret sects, one of them a group of real gargoyles called the Guardians, who policed vampire kind. Gladiolas had heard whispers about them among the slaves, but none of the vampires would speak openly of them.

She'd been offered fifty thousand dollars for a year of servitude at the Palace. But by the time the offer had been presented, Gladiolas was already visiting vampire raves on a nightly basis, captivated by their magical Tourin, a liquid drug one hundred times more potent than ecstasy. During their contracted time, the slaves were not allowed to leave the Palace, but none of them wanted to. Most renewed their contracts.

Gladiolas had lost count of the years she'd been here.

Death was something she'd quickly come to accept. She tried to think positively, remind herself she'd given Daniel a rock-his-world blowjob before he'd died.

She wondered if it had something to do with Gabrielle. The Palace had been in upheaval for the last week, and Spike had lost two lieutenants in the hunt for his new queen—not that Gladiolas minded.

Evan hadn't much interest in girls—he preferred the male slaves—and Saramina had been a wicked bitch. But it was Geroelf, one of Spike's generals who had also gone missing that night, who Gladiolas would miss the least.

He always took her roughly from behind, making her kneel on a couch while he stood behind her and thrust into her with little or no preparation. He never healed her with his tongue afterward, instead letting someone else take care of his leavings.

He'd been one of her more brutal initiations in the first month she'd lived here. Spike had offered her to him as a reward for some deed, and she'd gone happily along, not knowing what she was in for.

At the time, still brand-new to the Palace, she hadn't understood exactly what the vampires did with their tongues after they finished fucking her; she only knew that it was quite pleasing and any pain vanished immediately.

Geroelf had been so rough with her that first night, she'd collapsed on the couch afterward, trembling with fear. But that night had come with a blessing too. She'd first met Cvetelina, a five-hundred-year-old vampire from Romania, who'd watched Geroelf's brutal fucking with distaste.

Gladiolas had felt a soft hand on her shoulder and had turned over to find the pretty vampire staring down at her with a gentle smile.

“Come, love. I'll make it better.” She picked Gladiolas up as though she weighed nothing, and carried her to a soft ottoman in a private alcove.

Gladiolas had thought it was her blood the vampire female wanted, but the woman's skilled tongue had brought instant relief, so she hadn't much cared. She'd been drawn into a fog of pleasure that ended with one of the most intense orgasms she'd ever known.

When she'd opened her eyes, Cvetelina was smiling down at her.

“Better?”

She'd nodded, and Cvetelina had kissed her. It was a soft, gentle kiss, and the first Gladiolas had ever received from a woman.

“You come find me whenever you need me, darling.”

Later, Gladiolas learned about the vampire's healing tongues and went to Cvetelina every time Geroelf used her. Whenever Cvetelina was at the Palace, Gladiolas spent each night in her suite, just lying in the tender vampire's arms.

She trailed through the Palace in search of Spike while wondering if Gabrielle would be as kind and if she would still be allowed to see Cvetelina.

A beefy hand clamped around her wrist as solidly as an iron shackle, snapping Gladiolas back to the here and now.

Boragnis was transformed into his demonic form: a giant of a beast with bloodred skin, brown teeth, yellow snake eyes, and ramlike horns curling out of his skull. He yanked her close, and the enormous head of his cock jabbed her in the stomach.

“You come to Kepevia with me,” he growled happily. “I pay ninety thousand rubles for you.”

She'd heard the girls whispering, but so far, Spike hadn't come out and said he'd sold her. She didn't think he honestly would. His promise to the Russian demon had to be some scheme, especially considering he'd just gifted her to Gabrielle.

Gladiolas backed away from the cloud of noxious breath. While she doubted Spike would sell one of his most popular slaves, if not *the* most popular, she understood she had to entertain the beast as long as he was here.

He laughed and yanked her close again. “Pretty Gladiolas. We fuck now.” He effortlessly tossed her onto a pile of pillows. Gladiolas pushed onto her elbows to find him towering over her, his colossal cock all but blocking her view of his face.

She turned onto her hands and knees to scurry away, but he grabbed an ankle and dragged her back.

Gladiolas smothered a scream as he flipped her onto her back. She knew from experience her cries would only bring a bloodthirsty audience.

With both her ankles trapped in his huge fists, Boragnis dropped to his knees and hauled her legs wide apart. The swaths of her gown rode up her waist, exposing her sex. She also knew from experience that Boragnis had a monstrous sexual appetite.

He lifted her off the pillows and guided her body into position to receive his monstrous shaft.

Gladiolas steeled herself for penetration. She'd learned not to fight but to relax her body and close her eyes, and it would be over soon.

* * * * *

The Guardians flew down the elevator shaft, and Molin jammed his crowbar between the doors at the second-lowest floor. It was as far down as they could go with the cab sitting at the bottom.

Once parted, the doors slid open on their own. The assault team rushed into the cavernous room. Balin stood center point, his weapon of preference the crossbow. Molin and Wendell flanked left and right, full attack mode. The rest of the Guardian assault team would enter through different points, surprising the vampires from all sides.

“Destroy all challengers. Spare only those who surrender without resistance.”

The bloodsuckers lounging nearby on expensive furniture stared numbly, as though they couldn't believe their impenetrable fortress was under attack.

A moment of calm lingered, and then the first scream sliced through the erotic music throbbing within the macabre playhouse.

An enormous purple demon turned from the male slave who was sucking his cock and locked eyes with Balin. The creature shoved his slave away, let out an unearthly growl, and charged.

Balin loosed a quill from his bow. The arrow hit the vampire's shoulder and sank deep. The beast ripped it out and flung it aside without breaking stride. He charged on like a steam engine, his blazing eyes focused on Balin with deadly intent.

The next instant, the beast stumbled and looked down at his chest. Blue flames licked outward from the small hole where the tiny glass reservoir of holy water had shattered upon impact. The demon stopped and let loose a bloodcurdling shriek. Flames engulfed him, and he exploded in a dazzling spray of blue sparks.

Balin threw his arm up to shield his eyes from the explosion. He charged on, careful to avoid sighting humans. If they weren't in demon form, it was hard to tell the vampires from the slaves. Thankfully, the slaves were dressed in seductive clothing: the women in sheer strips of gossamer cloth and the men in skimpy latex that appeared sprayed on. Many of the slaves were bound to the circular support columns identifying the now-luxurious room as a former garage.

Balin rounded a cement column and halted in his tracks, horror-struck. The biggest fucking demon he'd ever seen was about to kill a young slave girl.

The monster held her by the ankles and was lifting her into the air as though she weighed nothing. His beastly cock jutted forward, as long and thick as a salami log capped with a gnarled fist.

The demon would tear her apart. Thankfully it hesitated, looking around as the screaming increased.

Chaos surrounded Balin; he knew only that the Guardians had spread into the room and stunned the vampires with their swift surprise attack, but he'd lost all other sights and sounds.

The girl in the beast's grip was a tiny, flaxen-haired beauty, almost pixielike. He couldn't let her be so cruelly sacrificed, not when the Guardians were seconds away from destroying this wicked den of iniquity.

Power surged through him before he consciously realized he'd summoned it. He flew across the area separating them, using only the ancient power passed to him from his ancestors.

Too late, he realized he should have used his wings.

Balin was unpracticed in the ancient magic and was able to call it forth only in frantic situations like this when his adrenaline raged.

He collided with the beast, surprising it into dropping the girl. Balin tumbled once before regaining his balance. He jumped to his feet, lifted his crossbow, and aimed.

The demon flung out his enormous arm and backhanded Balin across the jaw. Lights swirled in his twisting vision. He bit down on his tongue and tasted the coppery tang of his own blood. His crossbow flew out of his hand.

He collapsed on top of the slave girl and breathed in a wisp of flowers.

She squeaked out a scream and struggled beneath him, crushed by his much larger frame. The demon straddled them both, that inhuman phallus swinging like a baseball bat.

"Mine!"

Even as he fought unconsciousness, Balin knew he had one chance to save himself and the girl.

But would the ancient spell even work, or was it truly just a legend?

The demon bent, reaching with a beefy hand.

"No!" A human shout came from somewhere far away, and Balin had the sensation of soaring just as he drew the magic forth.

* * * * *

Fitch felt a moment's confusion as he flew into bright light, only because his thoughts were aimed at the scorching pain in his ankle as Boragnis's claw swiped him bone deep.

Then, almost calmly, he understood what had happened. *Magic.*

As quickly as it started, it was over.

They crashed down on a cold stone floor. The Guardian landed in a heap, and the girl tumbled away.

Fitch hit his shoulder hard and heard a crunch, but it was nothing compared to the pain in his ankle. He struggled into a sitting position and gripped his calf, afraid to look at the damage.

"Son of a bitch!"

He drew his pant leg up. The half-severed limb knit slowly before his eyes. His stomach rolled. Despite his healing abilities, it still hurt like hell.

He gritted his teeth as the pain faded in waves. Finally, the red curtain of agony faded from his vision. He glanced around, looking for new dangers. They appeared to have transported to a dark castle somewhere.

"No fucking way."

Compared to the chaos in the Palace, the silence here echoed startlingly. Frigid cold bit at his hands and face.

This was a dead place.

He glanced at the blond Guardian sprawled a few feet away, then to the slave girl. Wriggling the sweetest ass he'd ever seen, she pushed to her hands and knees and looked around, apparently as confused as he was.

One of them was an ancient fae.

Holy shit. He'd thought they had all died out.

Fitch glanced between them. The girl? She was a golden nymph with impossible beauty, and she wasn't crying or screaming like most humans would be after being transported by magic.

Then again, she'd been a slave girl to an illegal vampire Palace. She'd seen and heard things that would even make him cringe. *Experienced* things that would make him cringe.

But why would an ancient fae be a vampire plaything? Unless she was some sort of bizarre sexual deviant, she would possess the power to escape the vampires.

No, it had to be the man. He also possessed an unusual, ethereal beauty. And more than likely, a fae would serve the Guardians.

Like most Guardian warriors, he wore protective leather pants. *Très tacky*. A clingy black T-shirt showed every ridge and hollow in his muscled chest beneath a tight-fitting jacket Fitch knew had specially tailored slits to allow his wings to expand.

"Where are we?" the girl asked.

Fitch caught his breath. Her voice was like silver bells, and the innocence in her gaze made him ripple with chills.

Daylight, Fitch thought. She reminds me of daylight, with that golden hair as brilliant as a ray of sunshine and eyes the color of the sky on a summer's day.

"I don't know." He pulled his pant leg back over his boot as the pain faded to a dull throb. "You'll have to ask him. He brought us here."

She glanced at the man on the floor. A silken fall of hair tumbled over her shoulder. She crawled to him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"He's hurt."

Fitch took a punch to the gut. Her tenderness was a foreign thing, so strange that he almost couldn't fathom it, and the wave of jealousy he felt watching her bestow it on the other was bewildering.

For eight hundred years, he'd been alone, daring to risk love only once, to disastrous results. Even simple friendships were too much anymore. Mortals died so quickly.

Fitch pushed to his feet, gritting his teeth against a shock of pain. It flared and drifted away. He tested weight on the ankle, then limped to a blackened hearth.

He summoned a burst of energy and threw a ball of fire into the decaying logs. The fire roared to life. Still the act felt embarrassingly weak compared to the power the fae Guardian had used to bring them here.

He glanced back at the girl. She wore nothing but a draping, diaphanous cloth designed to look like a Roman toga. As she bent over the unconscious man, her delectable little ass pointed at him. Fitch saw the dark golden hair between her legs and a tantalizing glimpse of pink nether flesh. The gown teased the eye, more sensual than if she were naked—which she practically was against cold like this.

Even her feet were bare. She must be freezing.

“Come to the fire. You'll catch your death.”

“What about him?” she asked without turning around.

“He'll be fine.”

“Boragnis hit him hard.”

He hit me hard too, but you don't see me whining about it, Fitch wanted to say. Instead, he grumbled under his breath and crossed the stone floor to the Guardian.

He knelt beside them. Had he not been crouched, the look she gave him with those watery blue eyes would have brought him to his knees. She possessed rare beauty he'd not seen matched in over eight hundred years.

Fitch took her gently by the jaw. She blinked but didn't resist. Wasn't it said the fae were a special breed who rejoiced in their sexuality and gave everything to their lovers?

No, she's 100 percent human, he realized by sensing her. Simply trained to be compliant by her vampire captors.

But a special human. It almost seemed electrical current ran into his fingers where he touched her.

He pulled his hand away. He didn't have time to be distracted by a beautiful human nymph. He'd been within reaching distance of the vampire demon he'd hunted through centuries, only to lose him in a blink of magic.

He slapped the Guardian. "Hey. Wake up."

The girl clutched his wrist, igniting those strange quivery sensations all over again. "Gentle," she scolded, but she smiled, and her eyes absolutely *twinkled*. "I could have done that."

The Guardian's brow wrinkled, and he turned his head. A low moan rumbled deep in his chest. The sound rolled over Fitch, making him prickle from the top of his scalp to the soles of his feet with a strange tightening of his balls in between.

He sat back on his heels. *Just what I need. Cast into obscurity with a blond Adonis and a golden slave girl.*

The Guardian's eyes snapped open and blinked several times. They were as green as emeralds, which confirmed any doubts Fitch still had.

The man was an ancient fae.

They locked gazes, and Fitch would swear there was an audible click.

Chapter Two

Balin pushed upright and scrambled backward. He clawed through the confusion leading up to this moment.

How did I get here? Where is here?

A vampire stared back at him. *Vile creature.* The beautiful slave girl knelt beside him, also staring at him with a mask of pure innocence.

Darkness surrounded them, broken only by an orange hot spot glowing to his right. Balin blinked his eyes. A fire. The instant he recognized the blurry light, he also felt the frigid cold.

“Oh good.” The girl's beauty multiplied a hundred times when she broke into a smile. “I was worried.”

Balin reached for her. “Come here, sweetheart. It's okay. I'll protect you.”

The vampire snorted back a laugh.

Balin still held up his hand. “Come on, darling. You're safe now. You don't ever have to serve the vampires again. We're here to rescue you.”

“Some rescue,” the vampire snapped. He shoved to his feet and stalked to the fire. He held out his hands.

As though the undead thing can feel the cold.

“And who's 'we'?” he asked, turning back with a scowl. “In case you haven't noticed, none of your Guardian friends came with us.”

Balin clambered to his feet.

The slave girl rushed to help him. She caught him around the middle and pressed herself close. She wasn't much in the way of support, but her contact brought a reassuring sensation to his heart.

Instinctively, Balin circled her with his arms. She felt tiny and frail but smiled up at him as though nothing at all were wrong. He would have reveled in her touch had he not been so worried about their surroundings and the wretched company.

Alone and without his weapons, to him, even a single vampire presented a formidable challenge. And with an innocent to protect, the odds were against him.

“What is this place?” he demanded, tucking the slave girl tightly against him.

The vampire shrugged but didn't face him. “Haven't a clue.”

The girl swiveled her head to look up at him. Her silky hair tickled his arm. “He says you brought us here.”

“That's absurd, I...”

A moment of painful silence ticked by as Balin considered the possibility. He struggled back to his last solid memory. They'd stormed the Palace. Found the enormous room filled with vampires and slaves. Swarmed in, on full attack. The red demon, seconds from ravaging this sweet girl to death.

He shuddered at the horrific memory and squeezed her tighter against him.

Balin only meant to stun the demon with a white-hot ball of power, the only skill he'd learned from his grandfather's diary. Instead, he'd transported them thousands of miles.

“Remembering, are you?” the vampire snapped.

He swallowed. Was it possible?

The girl tugged him forward. “It's cold. Come to the fire.”

Looking warily at the vampire, he drew her back.

The beast tossed a look over his shoulder, his dark gaze flicking from Balin to the girl. He offered a spot by the hearth with a flip of his hand, but Balin refused.

The vampire's brow creased as though offended. "You have nothing to fear from me, Guardian."

"Me?" Balin squared his shoulders. "Fear from you? Listen to me, bloodsucker. We came to deliver much overdue justice on your sinful coven. There's nothing stopping me from handing down your sentence and delivering it right here."

The vampire faced him. He gestured with his hands. *Bring it on.*

"This girl is a witness to your crimes, and many others back at the Palace will also testify, I'll wager."

"He wasn't at the Palace," the girl said in a small voice. "I've never seen him before."

"You don't have to lie for him. He can't hurt you anymore."

"It's true." She pulled away from Balin, and reluctantly he let her slip through his fingers. "I'm cold. Please."

The void between them rushed in, chilling and dark. She moved to the hearth, crossing her arms at her chest to ward off the cold.

The vampire removed his leather bomber jacket and draped it over her shoulders. She drew it tight around herself and rewarded him with a million-dollar smile.

Balin stalked over. He glared, and the vamp sidestepped away. Balin then tossed the leather coat off her and replaced it with his own.

The vampire smirked at him and picked up his jacket. "So, you gonna tell us where we are?"

Balin turned his back to the fire so he could survey the room while keeping the vampire in his peripheral vision.

They stood in what appeared to be an ancient hall. The ceiling was high in here, the open space sucking up the heat from their meager fire. Two massive doors that were probably the manor's main entry stood in the shadows far at the other end. Some splintered wood, which might long ago have been

furniture, was piled off to the left, and a stone stairway led up the side of the wall to the second floor.

A crumbling decorative suit of armor stood near the hearth. In its metal hands were a lance blade and sword. Past it, another set of doors closed off the great hall under the second level.

It looked eerily like something he remembered from his childhood, but that place had been high in the snowy mountains of Transylvania, a country that didn't even exist today.

As if to taunt his worries, the wind howled ferociously, rattling the high shuttered windows on either side of the hearth's stone chimney. Earlier today, San Francisco had been clear and sunny.

"I do not know."

"Great. Wouldn't you agree we better figure it out?"

His rage flared. "There is no 'we'; there is only she and I. You do not fit into the equation, bloodsucker."

The vampire advanced. His brown eyes flared with a glint of red. "I didn't ask to come along on this little picnic, *Guardian*." He spat the identifier as though it tasted bad. "In case you don't remember, I was trying to save your ass when you wriggled your nose and zapped us here."

"Boys. Boys!" The girl jumped between them, one hand placed in the middle of each chest. A jolt of powerful energy shot through Balin, rattling the thin foundation he'd managed to reclaim.

He blinked away the shock and found himself glaring off with the vampire, the girl's tiny frame pinned between them.

"Oh my." She giggled. "This is nice."

They both rocked backward at the same instant.

She blew an exasperated sigh and pulled Balin's coat back around her shoulders, then pushed her arms through the sleeves. "Well, that was fun. But it didn't help matters."

"You saving *my* ass?" Balin shot back, incredulous.

"While you were spitting up your teeth, I was stopping Boragnis from slicing off your head."

"You mean while *I* was saving her, *you* were interfering."

"Stop!" the girl shouted. "We have more important things to do than fight between ourselves."

"You will never convince me you didn't want that creature to kill me."

"What he says is true." The girl's voice turned to a whisper, but it was enough to stop Balin cold. He focused his attention back on her.

Her gaze dropped to the floor, and the smile that had lit up this dreary place faded away.

"Boragnis considered me his property. He'd made arrangements to...to buy me from Spike."

She looked up at Balin. Tears swam in her eyes. A metal band tightened around his chest.

"He was reaching for your throat with his claws extended, when..." She turned and glanced at the vampire, and Balin felt something lurch inside. "He saved us."

He glanced up at the vampire. The bloodsucker watched him back with silent contempt.

For the first time, almost grudgingly, Balin noticed the difference between this vampire and other creatures of the night he'd encountered.

The man's eyes had glowed red with fury only moments ago, but now they were back to a normal chocolate brown. His skin was fair, but not deathly pale like so many vampires. The beast drew in a tight breath and let it out slowly, visibly curbing his anger. He wore modern clothes, and his hair was stylishly cut, though a little long around the collar.

"Why would you do this?" Balin asked, not completely believing it.

"I have been hunting the Bulgarian vampire for nearly two hundred years."

"You take me for a fool."

The vampire snorted. "That you believe your Guardian Mouseketeers are the only authority policing vampire kind not only proves your ignorance, it proves your arrogance as well."

"The Guardians are an ancient sect that have been in existence almost as long as vampires. We would know if there were others."

"You think we don't watch over our own?" The vampire turned his gaze back to the fire. "Not all vampires are criminals."

"You try to convince me of honorable intentions because more than likely, outside those doors, we'll encounter an angry mob who wants your head on a stake."

"Stop it," the girl interrupted, frowning. "He saved your life. Whether you like it or not, you owe him. At least you can be civil."

Her disapproval cut like a knife.

Digging the blade deeper, she went on. "Let me tell you something about vampires. There are good ones among them. I don't know this man, but he hasn't done anything to hurt me. Or you either."

The creature glared silently as the wind rattled the very bones of the castle.

"Why don't we take a small step by learning each other's names?" she said in a calmer voice. "I am Gladiolas. I have been at the Palace for...since two thousand six. What year is it now?"

Something inside Balin broke. "Sweetheart, you never have to go back there."

She smiled, as though she also believed he was a fool. "I have no place else to go. Besides, it isn't so bad. There are those who are unkind, but look at

the world we live in. At least with the vampires, I never get sick and I never grow old.”

“That beast was poised to kill you.”

She shook her head. “No. He wouldn't have killed me. My greatest fear was that he would take me from the Palace.”

Balin drew her to him. She curled against his chest and wrapped her arms round him. Her soft body pressed intimately against him, igniting a selfish flood of desire that sent the blood rushing to his cock.

Four hundred years without female companionship, and he finally discovered someone who ignited his desires, only to drag her through a magical portal to an uncertain future with an evil traveling companion. Worse, this angelic beauty, with whom he'd felt an instant link, wanted to go back to her vampire captors.

“I know you were trying to help me as well, and I appreciate what you did.” She eased away and bestowed a magical smile. “Shall I call you Hero, or will you tell us your name?”

He glanced up at the vampire. The man quickly looked away, a tic working in his jaw.

“I am Balin Renforth. Ninth Lieutenant in the Order of the Guardians of San Francisco.”

“Guardians. I've heard whispers about them. Is it true you can transform into stone?”

“I have many powers,” he said, flicking a warning glance at the vampire.

“Don't forget to tell her about your ties to ancient Ireland.”

So the bloodsucker knew. Balin guessed it was obvious to anyone familiar with their world. “Perhaps another time,” he returned in a low growl.

Gladiolas turned to the vampire. “Your turn.”

“Fitch Galloway. Vampire Secret Service.”

Balin barked a laugh. “Right.”

“My office is in the White House. Where's yours?”

“You expect me to believe you're sanctioned by the president of the United States?”

“I don't expect anything, except you're gonna zap us back to San Francisco.”

“I don't feel so well,” Gladiolas said, wandering a step closer to the fire. She placed a hand to her cheek.

“If I could 'zap' us anywhere, do you think I'd be standing here with you?”

“Maybe you're afraid to admit you interrupted a major takedown of one of the ten most wanted vampires in history. I was poised to nab him when you stuck your neck in the way.”

“You would have let him kill her?”

“He was pleasantly distracted. He never saw me coming. You and your friends blew the whole thing!”

“Oh.” Gladiolas sank to her knees.

“Gladiolas!” In a single step, Balin caught her and hefted her into his arms. Her body arched with seizure, every muscle tight. Then she fell limp as a rag doll.

“What's wrong with her?” he asked, even as he knew.

Fitch appeared at his side. He smoothed a lock of hair away from her brow. But rather than feel jealous or protective, Balin was grateful the vampire was capable of tenderness.

“The Tourin. She's been on it for years. She's in for a terrible withdrawal. We have to get her back to the city.” He glanced up. Balin saw genuine concern in his eyes. “Guardian, if you know how to open that portal again, I suggest you do it quickly.”

* * * * *

Fitch stepped back as the Guardian knelt by the fire and cradled the girl in his lap.

"I don't, or I would. You have to believe me."

Fitch believed the man wouldn't spend a minute longer in his company than he had to. He also believed, from the way Balin looked at her, the man would do anything to save her.

Hell, he'd gone up against Boragnis.

Gladiolas whimpered and squirmed in his lap. He stroked her temple gently. "Shhh, sweeting."

The tenderness reached into Fitch and squeezed what was left of his heart into a bloody pulp. He faced the hearth and let his gaze blur on the licking flames.

"I learned of the magic from my grandfather, when I was a little boy."

Fitch looked up. The other man's voice was low with regret, and he experienced a pang of pity.

But this, I already knew.

Fitch turned his eyes back to the fire and shoved away long-ago memories like unfriendly acquaintances he hoped never to see again.

"He taught me how to throw energy balls, that was all. Mostly I remember he warned me against abusing the power. When he died, I received his books. All I know now, I learned from his writings."

Gladiolas mewled and snuggled deeper into the man's shielding embrace.

"I will not be able to...zap us anywhere for at least seven days. My strength has been depleted." He glanced up at Fitch warily. "I do not feel weakened, but the power feels far away."

Fitch scowled. That last part was meant to convince him he'd better not try anything, and he couldn't deny the spark of anger that lit in his bloodstream.

In the Guardian's arms, Gladiolas gasped and jerked, rolling her hips erotically.

"Why don't you just fuck her?" Fitch said a degree too harshly. He leaned an elbow on the stone mantel jutting over the hearth. "It's what she needs."

"We don't *do* that," the Guardian spat back. He narrowed his eyes. "That's what a vampire would do."

"Yeah, right. Don't play the righteous act with me. You're a man. You've got a dick. You know it'll make her feel better. Why don't you take that moral stick out of your ass and do the right thing?"

"Please," Gladiolas whimpered.

"Hell, I'll do it. She's one fine piece of ass."

"You touch her, and I will stake you myself, bloodsucker."

Gladiolas snaked a hand around his neck and lifted her lips to Balin's. He jerked with surprise. For a moment, he held back, reluctant to return the touch, then must have decided there was no harm in a simple kiss.

Their lips touched, hesitantly at first, on both accounts. A Guardian, afraid to indulge, and a slave, afraid to demand.

Then her kiss became desperate, and his turned hungry. They shared a literal feasting of mouths, dragging a moan from deep within the Guardian's chest.

Heat rushed through Fitch, made his skin burn, but he could not drag his gaze away.

The Guardian was obviously turned on, yet too noble to take what the girl offered. Too decent to give what she needed. Albeit she was almost unconscious, she had spent nearly four years in the Palace. She was far from innocent. Hell, she could probably teach them both some tricks.

There was no harm in giving her what she needed, and enjoying it. He did not respect the Guardian for his resistance. If anything, he thought him a fool.

In fact, the Guardian was merciless. The Tourin's powerful grip would make her wish she'd never been born. The addictive drink was a powerful concoction of vampire plasma and opiates meant to make her biddable and sexually ravenous. It was cruel not to ease her pain. Even with sex, her withdrawal would be agonizing.

She kissed Balin wildly, growing more and more feverish.

Fitch's blood began to boil. The guy was a jerk, but the two of them looked fucking hot kissing like that.

"Please, Balin. Please." She pressed closer. The arm between their bodies slid lower, and she eased her hand between his legs.

Balin jerked. "Gladiolas, no."

"Mmm, why?" she pleaded, but in the next instant, she went limp, and her eyes fell closed.

Balin let out a ragged sigh. "There. You see? The physical contact does not have to be sexual. She needs only a gentle touch."

Fitch's body thrummed with nervous energy. It must be the Guardian's ability to transform into stone that made him so virtuous. He had the willpower of a granite statue.

That powerful kiss, combined with the little sex kitten's desperate need to be fucked, had been one of the most erotic sights Fitch ever witnessed.

He swallowed a hot lump from his throat and let his gaze blur on the flames again.

Gladiolas was beautiful like an angel, but a strange awareness caused Fitch's guts to swoop. He would never say it out loud, but he'd itched to reach out and touch the Guardian's glossy blond hair. Fitch wished Balin would fuck her, if only to see the man's glorious body humping away on her.

The Guardian was a masterpiece of male perfection. A vampire didn't live eight hundred years without learning awareness for male beauty, and the courage to admit it—at least to himself.

What did the Guardian fuck like? What did he look like straining in the throes of orgasm?

Shit. Get me the fuck out of here.

“What happened?”

Gladiolas opened her eyes. She stared up at Balin with pure adoration. She then slid her weary gaze to Fitch.

“You were sick, but now you're better,” Balin told her.

“Did we have sex?”

“No, sweetheart.” He stroked a strand of hair from her cheek with his thumb, and Fitch was hit with that odd pang of jealousy again.

“Why not?”

“Because the noble Guardian won't go against his noble code,” Fitch supplied.

“Oh.”

Gladiolas looked confused, as though she were coming out of a bad drunk. She groaned as Balin helped her to her feet.

Fitch took in her swollen lips and sultry eyes. He wished it were him she'd fallen against, he who had devoured her mouth. That kiss had been something.

But he would have taken her on the bare stone floor, more concerned with his own pleasure than easing her pain.

He glanced at the Guardian. Balin's frustration was evident in the bulging column of flesh straining behind his ridiculous leather pants.

So, his morals aren't the only thing made of steel.

“Noble Boy says we're here for seven days, at least. We need to figure out where 'here' is, and how we're going to survive for a week. You're going to need clothes, you're both going to need food, and I'm going to need...”

“Blood?”

"Shelter," Fitch snapped. He glared at the self-righteous son of a bitch. "Don't worry, Guardian. I know I can't feed from you."

The other man returned a stony glare. "You got that right, vampire."

* * * * *

Gladiolas eased closer to Fitch. She placed her hand on his cheek. Some of the fury in his eyes melted away.

He was a stunningly handsome man but with an intense sorrow in his eyes like she'd never seen. With immortality, she guessed they had both witnessed some terrible things.

"If you need to, you can feed from me."

"Not a chance in hell," Balin growled.

Gladiolas glanced over her shoulder. She knew if she weren't here with them, these two would have torn each other apart by now.

"In case you haven't noticed, that's where we are. I've never seen anything so gloomy."

Fitch grasped her hand. "You're a doll." He brought it down from his cheek and kissed her knuckles, then pushed her hand away. "We'll see."

Gladiolas sensed the message loud and clear. *You shouldn't touch me.*

Sweet vampire, there's nothing you could do to me that hasn't been done already.

Everyone always looked at her like she was a fragile little waif, but Gladiolas was tougher than that. She'd been fed upon daily, more times than she could ever remember. It would take no effort from her at all, and it could very well save his life.

"You don't understand," she whispered to both. "I'll need his blood in return."

Behind her, Balin caught his breath.

"It isn't Tourin, but it's better than nothing."

Fitch's gaze flicked over her shoulder. "She's right. We've done tests at the agency. Her cell structure has been altered. If she's been on the Tourin more than two years, she'll never be normal again."

A chill raced through her at the finality in his words, but Gladiolas told herself she already knew this. Even after her first day at the Palace, she'd known she was permanently changed.

Fitch nodded. There was now sympathy in those severe eyes. "When you need it, you shall have it."

An unearthly roar rattled the very foundation of the castle. Both men instinctively stepped closer. Gladiolas reached for them and found herself locked in a protective embrace of strong arms.

"What the fuck was that?" Fitch said.

"I'm scared."

Another roar thundered, frighteningly close, immediately on the other side of the wall. It sounded like the T. rex dinosaurs from the *Jurassic Park* movies.

This unearthly wail was followed by growling, snarling, and very undoglike barking. Whatever it was, there were several of them, and they were fighting right outside the castle.

The three of them stood frozen in horror, listening as the cacophony increased in tempo and ferocity, then drifted away as the creatures galloped off, still locked in their battle.

"I don't like the sound of that," Fitch said.

"Nor do I," Balin agreed.

"I'm scared," Gladiolas said again and suddenly felt dumb for it. Maybe she *was* a fragile little waif.

"Where the fuck did you take us, Guardian?" Fitch grimaced. "What? What's that look?"

"I can't be sure."

"Why don't you tell us anyway?"

Both men moved apart, leaving Gladiolas feeling cold. Only when they were gone did she realize the exquisite allure of their bodies pressed close. Frustration welled like a tight knot deep in her belly.

I need them, she thought. I need them both.

"We should explore our surroundings. I will know for sure if I can look around."

"Fine. Look around."

"We should stay together," Gladiolas said quickly. "Please, don't leave me alone."

"No one will leave you alone," Balin assured her.

He moved to the suit of armor standing near the hearth and removed the lance from its right hand.

Distrust jumped to life in Fitch's eyes.

"Vampire." Balin tossed it to him.

Fitch caught it by the staff. He nodded. "Guardian."

Balin took the wide-ended sword for himself. He tested the blade's sharpness with the pad of his thumb.

"If my hunch is correct, the answer will be found there." Balin pointed with the sword. "In the great hall."

Gladiolas watched him with a mixture of reverence and desire. He was a capable leader and an unbelievably handsome man. Although Fitch was as gorgeous as a magazine cover model, Balin was muscled perfection, with the physique of a title-winning bodybuilder.

If she had a choice of anyone to be stuck here with, it would be these two. In the back of her mind, she kept a fearful understanding at arm's length. *I am the only one of us who isn't immortal.*

Leaving the fire's warm embrace, they walked slowly toward the double doors under the second level. The cold stone floor leached her body's warmth through her feet and made her toes numb.

The doors were medieval, able to be locked by heavy slab of wood fastened with fat black rivets that slid through an iron cradle. It was presently unlocked, but the doors stood closed. Balin took one circular handle, and Fitch took the other.

“Stand aside, Gladiolas.”

She scurried behind Balin. He nodded once. Both men hauled open the doors.

A cloud of dank air wafted out. When nothing horrible rushed to attack, Balin reached back and took her hand. The three eased forward and peered inside.

Tiny pops and snaps filled the cavernous room as candles lit magically on a long table. Mounds of blackened, rotting mold transformed into platters of freshly prepared food: cooked ham, a roasted turkey, a strange-looking eel with a plum in its mouth.

Silver bowls on clawed feet were filled with an assortment of colorful delicacies. Two crystal decanters stood full with wine: one white, one red—at least she hoped it was red wine. Platters held mountains of fresh fruit, and in the center, a tiered table chandelier displayed a tempting assortment of cakes and pastries. It looked suspiciously like the offerings in the slave's common room at the Palace.

“What is it?” she breathed out.

“I was afraid to believe...”

“It's not real,” Fitch said. “It can't be. It's just a legend.”

“It is no legend.”

“What?” she insisted more urgently.

“Château Arnonne.”

“Good job, Guardian,” Fitch grumbled. “You've banished us.”

Chapter Three

"Stay with her," Balin commanded. Without looking back, he sensed the vampire step close and put a protective arm around Gladiolas.

He moved to the end of the table where the body sat in a high-backed chair, the head of the household in his magical prison.

The corpse, still sitting princely with both hands on the table, was dry like jerked beef and decayed nearly to bone. The entire end of the tablecloth was stained, the drained blood long ago having turned brown.

The enchanted blade he'd used to cut his wrists had been placed neatly beside his right hand. It still gleamed magically, illuminated by the thousand-year-old spell that rendered it capable of killing a vampire.

"That's what's-his-name, isn't it?" Fitch asked.

"Count Zlatko," Balin confirmed.

"Count who?" Gladiolas asked in a frightened voice.

"An ancient vampire, banished for his crimes," he supplied. "It is the old way, because in the Dark Ages, death was thought too merciful."

"Well, he apparently took the coward's way out," Fitch said drily. "I read about this, but I never believed it was true."

"Nor did I."

"So that must mean we're in Romania."

"Yes."

Balin turned back in time to see Gladiolas stagger against Fitch.

"Oh God." She whirled around and threw her arms around his neck.

The vampire looked at him and opened his hands as if to show he had no control over it.

"Can we go home? I want to go back to the Palace!"

Balin's heart sank. The girl actually wanted the vampires. Had they permanently mutated her with their evil poison? If what Fitch said was true, she might never want to be free.

"The good news is we have food," Fitch said.

She jerked away from him. "I'm not eating that! It's probably poisoned! This is evil magic. We're going to die here!"

Balin walked back to them. "The food is not poisoned. This place was created to sustain him."

Gladiolas whirled around and threw her arms around his neck exactly as she'd just done to the vampire. Balin felt an instant lift.

He circled her with his arms. "See? The hearth is burning, and the room has become warmer. The magic here that was meant to imprison Count Zlatko in loneliness will provide us with salvation. Every time you enter this room, fresh food will appear. We are safe here."

She turned her head back and forth. He felt the wetness of her tears soaking his shirt. "No. I'm scared. It was all moldy and wormy, like in a horror movie."

"It was only moldy because the last time he entered here, he never left."

She squeezed tighter. "I want to go h-h-home."

It saddened him that she thought of the Palace as home. Gently, he pried her away. "Gladiolas, when was the last time you slept?"

She sniffled. "I don't know."

"We should rest. We will all feel better after a good night's sleep."

"What about those monsters?"

"Yeah, Guardian. What about those monsters?"

The vampire was turning into a pest.

"The castle is enchanted. The same magic that prevents us from walking to freedom prevents them from getting inside."

Too late he realized it was the wrong thing to say. Gladiolas's terror only increased. "You mean we're *trapped* in here?"

"Only until I can summon the magic to return us home."

"Really?" Fitch lifted a single brow. "Then you want to explain that?" The vampire inclined his head.

An enormous heap of dung sat in the corner of the room. A human skull protruded from the top.

Uh-oh.

"What?" Gladiolas asked.

He stroked a hand over her silken hair, preventing her from looking. He scowled at Fitch and mouthed a curse. *Fucking vampire.* "Nothing. Come, let us go upstairs. If my hunch is correct, we'll find a comfortable bedchamber where we can rest safely. Perhaps even a hot bath."

He carefully guided her to keep her from seeing the monster pile of poop. The candles extinguished, and the doors whisked shut behind them.

With Gladiolas tucked safely under his arm and the sword held aloft in the other, he followed the vampire up the stone staircase.

Balin searched through foggy memories of the legend. He suspected the beasts outside were hellhounds assigned to guard Count Zlatko. But how had they gotten in? Perhaps when the count died, the spell surrounding this place had faded.

He hoped that since they were here and the castle's magic clearly sensed their presence, the enchantment was again strong.

Though the legends about this place had varied over time, Balin suspected the castle had only one bedchamber. As they climbed the stairs, he tried to

think of a way to politely insist the vamp find private lodgings. There was no way he was sharing accommodations with a bloodsucker.

He held Gladiolas close with a hand looped around her waist, more afraid of the seizures than the beasts they'd heard outside. He sensed her fatigue in the way she sagged against him and dragged her feet.

At the top of the stairs, they came to a single door. *So much for telling the demon to get lost.*

Holding the lance in front of him, Fitch pushed it open.

A lavish chamber opened before them. The floors were lined with plush red carpet runners edged with gold. Candles lit as if by a magic hand, and the stone hearth directly in front of them roared to life. A deep copper tub sat beside the stone hearth.

The count's dresser and armoire stood kitty-corner against the walls on the left side. In front of them two Queen Anne wing chairs sat side by side with a marble-topped parlor table between. A matching, low-slung cocktail table separated them from a sofa upholstered in the same red jacquard satin.

But Balin only glimpsed the furniture. His gaze froze on the enormous canopied bed literally commanding the room.

A bloodred comforter of velvet covered the enormous mattress, and matching velvet pillows were piled against at the polished mahogany headboard. It looked like a sacrificial dais for virgins.

Bloody gods of Olympus.

"Housekeeping's done a good job," Fitch commented. "I wonder if they'll send up a rollaway."

Gladiolas choked over a laugh, but it faded quickly.

"You see," Balin said, trying to sound light. "There's a tub."

Gladiolas padded over to it. Her footfalls on the plush carpet runner sounded like she walked through sand. "How do we fill it?"

Balin stepped beside her. He concentrated hard, but no water appeared.

Gladiolas leaned over, bracing her hand on the edge. Water appeared at the bottom and began to rise.

She yelped and jumped back. The water stopped.

Fitch came over and peered inside too.

"I think it's safe," Balin said. He placed his hand on the edge as she had done and the water resumed filling. When he let go to reach in, it continued.

"It's warm."

Gladiolas peered at him with frightened eyes. He smiled. "Go ahead."

Timidly, she reached into the water. "Mmmm." Her low sigh vibrated into his center. "I *would* like a bath."

"I'll stay close," Balin assured her.

He heard glass tinkling and turned around. Fitch had found a stocked courtesy beside the chairs and poured himself a goblet of something that glittered like faceted amber. He settled into one of the Queen Anne chairs and lifted the glass in salute.

"This is one hell of a prison." He sipped. "Mmm. That's good. Three-hundred-year-old brandy."

"What's that?" Gladiolas looked at the rigid chair set off in the opposite corner. The unpadded seat was composed of a square box with a high back and low-slung arms.

Balin hadn't seen anything like it in centuries. Although it was nothing but the most rudimentary necessity, an odd pang of melancholy struck deep. "That is a garderobe."

"A what?"

"The toilet."

"There's plumbing here?"

Fitch laughed.

"Uh, no," Balin murmured.

With her wide eyes glued to it, she walked over and peered into the hole in the seat. When she realized what she was looking at, she jerked back. "Oh no. This is *not* going to work."

"Young people today," Fitch chided. "They don't know how good they have it."

She glanced at him, then shuffled back with tightly pursed lips. "I know this wasn't anybody's fault," she said softly.

Fitch snorted into his glass.

"I'll try to keep a positive attitude."

Her sweetness wrapped around Balin's heart. She was already permanently fixed there. "The vampire and I will provide you with whatever privacy you need."

Gladiolas sighed and managed a smile. "I appreciate that. We don't know how long we'll be here. We should all be mindful of each other's needs."

She flipped her hair over her head and wound it into a knot. She then removed the gold belt at her waist and slipped out of her gossamer gown. It slid down her body like water and pooled at her feet.

For a moment, Balin could only stare in awe at the exquisite creature bared before him.

Her peaches-and-cream skin was flawless, peppered with tiny golden hairs that grew thicker on her arms and legs. They glinted, shining like gold fibers in the soft candlelight.

Her breasts were pert, not large, but firm and high. The rosy tips were a rare color of dusky pink no words could aptly describe. With a heavier curve to the bottom, her nipples pointed slightly upward. A narrow waist and flat belly flared into womanly hips that gave way to a luscious, round derriere.

The swath of fabric she wore was nearly transparent, but he hadn't realized how much it had hidden.

Obviously accustomed to going naked, she didn't notice his stunned expression. She stepped into the water and turned toward him, and Balin's gaze was drawn to the golden triangle of cropped hair at the apex of her thighs.

He was staring. He swallowed and turned away, trailing his eyes across the floor. Fleeting, he glanced at Fitch. The man eyed him wearing a wry half smile.

"How long's it been, Guardian?"

Gladiolas's pleased moan wrenched his attention back. She settled into the water with a gentle splash and smiled innocently.

"Feels good." She lifted a wet arm. "Hold my hand."

He knew he should or risk her having another seizure. On numb feet, he moved back and knelt beside the tub.

Her eyes turned limpid in the rising steam. "I'm glad you're here." Her gaze then slid to Fitch. "You too. I feel safe with both of you."

"I will give my life to protect you," Balin said, surprised by the soft arousal in his own voice.

"I know. I can tell that about you already."

She tucked her legs and swiveled around in the large tub. Loose tendrils of wet hair stuck to her neck. She reached for the cloth and a purple bar of flower-scented soap on the stool near the end of the tub. She lathered the cloth and washed her face.

After rinsing, she glanced over her shoulder. "Wash my back?" She offered the rag.

He hesitated a moment but decided there was no harm. Continued physical contact would stay the withdrawals, and later, he might need her to return the favor.

A ripple of excitement zinged through his veins. They were trapped together here, for how long, nobody knew. Avoiding familiarity would be impossible. He could not deny the small pleasure knowing no matter what

happened, they would come out of this with intimate knowledge of one another. A curious thrill followed as he realized *all three of us*.

Balin started a circular massage around her back, earning another pleased sigh.

"Mmmm, that's nice." She closed her eyes and tilted her head left and then right, as if gently working tension out of her neck.

He was aware Fitch poured another drink, hearing the *glug-glug-glug* of brandy and the crystalline *clink* of the decanter set down on the marble surface of the parlor table. The sound carried across the room shrilly, making him more aware of the other man than he wanted to be.

Gladiolas swiveled through the water until she faced him again, eyes still closed, and leaned her head back against the edge of the tub. Those delectable breasts floated just under the water's surface, her tight nipples pointing toward the ceiling. The water sloshed lazily in the tub. Exposing them, submerging them. Exposing. Submerging.

"How long have you been a Guardian?"

He cleared his throat and wrenched his eyes away. Fortunately hers were still closed, and she hadn't seen him gawking. "Eight hundred and seventy-five years."

"Mmmm. Long time."

He lathered the washcloth again and soaped her shoulders. When he trailed it down her arm, she lifted it and allowed him to wash her all the way to her fingertips. He then repeated the act on the other arm.

"Is there a Mrs. Guardian?"

He chuckled. "No."

"How about you? Is there a Mrs. Vampire?"

"No. No Mrs. Vampire." Fitch's voice was heavy with arousal. So he wasn't impervious to her innocent charms either, Balin thought smugly.

She turned her head to the side but still kept her eyes closed. "Long time to be alone."

Balin trailed the cloth between her breasts. *By the gods, yes it was.* Yet while he realized this, he also understood he'd never before felt the longing he did at this moment.

Her lips parted on a sigh. He stared at them as their kiss invaded his memory like a lightning strike.

He'd been hesitant and afraid, but now he wished he could do it again, properly. He would nip and suck her lips, and wouldn't balk when she slipped her tongue into his mouth. He would revel in the touch instead of regretting it.

He realized he was circling her breast with the cloth. He nearly stopped, but his last thoughts echoed. *Don't regret.*

His hand slid to the other side. The plump mound quivered as his fingers teased it.

The vampire had asked him how long it had been. Balin couldn't even remember. They both probably thought him a fool for his resistance. He was acting like a stodgy old cad. Well hell, in eight hundred years, he'd seen enough to make him one.

He moved his hand down, bringing gentle splashing sounds from the bath. Slowly and languidly, he washed her stomach and hips.

She shifted in the tub, and his hand fell between her legs. The washcloth drifted away, leaving nothing between them.

"Mmmm." Her pleased moan touched his every nerve ending like a sensual caress. "Nice to be treated like the master for once."

He teased through the golden curls with his fingertips. Gladiolas caught his hand and pressed it against her mound. A low sigh seeped past her lips.

Balin slid deeper with his fingers, roaming past her outer folds to the tender flesh they guarded. He looked up and found her watching him, her wide blue eyes darkened to midnight sapphires.

Her lids drifted shut, and she sagged back against the copper edge. He continued, wanting to show her what it felt like to be cherished. Her days of surrendering herself for the pleasure of others were over. From now on, it would be all about her. He would see to that if it were his last act.

Gently, he eased the plump outer lips farther apart.

With his middle finger, he teased her clitoral nub in a gentle circle, then pushed his finger inside her to the first knuckle. Her tight muscles clamped around him. She lifted her hips, asking for more.

Maybe later he would give it, but now he wanted to show her gentle pleasure. He pressed the pad of his finger against the slick slide of flesh and rubbed, barely traveling inside.

“Oh, Balin,” she said softly.

He worked her this way until her brow creased and tiny mewls of pleasure slipped from her throat. The water splashed, and his moving arm betrayed the act.

It had to be obvious to the vampire what he was doing. Later, Fitch would surely have a few choice words on this, but at this moment, Balin didn't care. In delivering her pleasure, he received it himself.

Her body peaked with climax, then relaxed against the tub's edge. Balin gently eased his finger from her body. A long sigh escaped her.

He rose to retrieve a soft towel from a stack beside the stool, then lifted Gladiolas from the water. He dabbed her dry as he carried her to the bed.

Balin swiveled toward the vampire, who watched them in glowering silence.

“Pull the blankets down.”

Without a word, Fitch rose and crossed the room.

Whatever magic enchanted this place, it had advanced with time. The linens, blanket, and top comforter were high quality, and though unmarked by

any brand insignia or identifying tag, they seemed modern, as did the towel he dried Gladiolas with.

Fitch stepped back, and Balin eased her down onto the plush mattress. She rolled onto her side with a low moan. Balin pulled the blankets up around her. He turned to find Fitch returned to his chair and slugging back the bottom of his brandy.

He set the glass down. "Enjoy yourself?"

"Gladiolas is my only concern." Even as he said it, he knew the other man saw him as a hypocrite. Balin didn't care what the demon thought. In his heart, he knew his own honor, just as he knew the vampire didn't have any.

He crossed the room and sat in the matched chair.

"Humor me," Fitch said. "Why this place?"

He thought about it, not really sure himself. "When I saw the monster attacking her, I believe I wanted to go as far away as possible. Château Arnonne popped into my head as the most remote place I knew. But I never dreamed I could do it."

"Yeah, well, congratulations." Fitch slumped lower in the chair.

"Had you not interfered, you would not be here," Balin growled back. Then he softened his voice. "I understand you were trying to save us. For that, I am grateful."

Fitch responded with a shrug.

"Were you really hunting that creature?"

The other man nodded. "You may have seen on the news, about two years ago an entire village in the mountains of Bulgaria was killed by volcanic gases. The truth is they were slaughtered."

"By Boragnis?"

"And three others who have since been captured. My agency has had its eye on him for two hundred years."

"You are really an agent of the White House?"

Fitch nodded. "Vampire Secret Service."

"Then I trust you will be on your best behavior."

"Sure, no problem." Fitch threw his hands up. "I'm trapped in an enchanted castle in the fucking outer limits, maybe for the rest of my unnatural life, with a nubile sex kitten lying naked and wanting in an enormous bed. I'll be a perfect gentleman."

"I understand your frustration," Balin said, guarding his anger. "I desire her too. But she deserves our care. Not our greed."

"She's been fucked several times a day, every day, for more years than she can remember. Once or twice by us isn't going to hurt her."

"I think you are wrong." He clenched his jaw. Across the room, Gladiolas tossed as though having a bad dream. "She felt... There would be evidence. But she was..."

"Tight?" The vampire grinned. "Are you really that naive?"

"I am a protector of innocent lives. And if you are truly who you say you are, so are you. Regardless of how she was treated before, she will be protected while in our care. Nothing more."

"All right, all right. Don't pop a fuse, Guardian." Fitch stood and removed his jacket, then tossed it across the chair. He dragged his shirt over his head.

Balin tensed. "What are you doing?"

"Taking a bath." He untied the laces on his thickly soled motorcycle boots and kicked them off. "Then I'm going to bed. I haven't slept in three days."

His jeans slid off and were discarded with the rest of his clothes.

Again, Balin could only stare in numb silence.

Fitch's body was smooth white, cut with muscle, his features almost chiseled. He was a man who knew hard work. His skin revealed he'd been turned while still young, but the toll of immortality had put hard lines around his mouth and eyes.

He turned to walk to the tub, and Balin caught his breath. A jagged network of scars crisscrossed his back. They gleamed like satin in the firelight. He'd been whipped violently and left to heal, while he was still mortal. The scars would accompany him through eternity.

Glimpses of a long-ago memory flashed through Balin's mind like lightning strikes, bright yet fleeting, leaving only a ghostly shadow in his mind's eye. They felt so close but were nothing he could grasp.

The vampire stepped into the tub and faced him. His chest was firm and toned. A washboard stomach tapered into narrow hips. Dark hair trailed down his chest and thickened at his groin. His impressive cock stood tall and stiff, blush red at the tip, with heavy balls dangling beneath the matted bush of black hair.

"Like what you see?" the vampire taunted.

Balin glanced away, embarrassed. Fitch was a beautiful man, but he was a vampire. And a dickhead.

He settled into the water with a groan. "Damn, that's good." The water splashed. "Scrub my back, will you?"

"Fuck yourself."

Fitch laughed, clearly pleased with his acidic humor.

Gladiolas turned on the bed and let out a small cry.

Balin went to sit beside her. Her hair had come unwound and tangled around her head. He combed it away from her face while issuing soft assurances. After a moment, she relaxed.

Fatigue pulled at his senses, but Balin fought it. The vampire was too casual about their situation, and the straining erection between his legs proved he couldn't be trusted. Balin would have to keep a close eye on the beast.

He shifted, arranging himself more comfortably. He had his own significant erection, yet that alone didn't make him untrustworthy. It was the vampire's cavalier attitude toward Gladiolas that made Balin worry. Fitch

might not have been part of the Palace, but he clearly believed there was nothing wrong with using human women for pleasure.

The water splashed, calling Balin's attention. Fitch rose and stepped out. He took a towel and, standing close to the hearth, fluffed it over himself with a cottony rustle of fabric.

The fire gilded Fitch's skin, turning the hair on his body to copper filament. His back was to him, and Balin let himself indulge in the sight. After all, there was nothing wrong with looking.

Fitch draped the towel over the stool and crossed the room. Balin realized he was still staring, but the vampire no longer wore a cocky expression.

The vampire rounded the bed, ignoring the fact he was being watched. He pulled the blankets back and slipped into the bed on the opposite side of Gladiolas.

She flipped over and rolled against him. Fitch seemed as surprised by it as Balin. Still propped on one elbow, the other man caught her against his chest. His eyes flicked to Balin's.

"Keep your hands to yourself, vampire."

Thankfully the sheet was bunched between them, preventing their bodies from touching.

Fitch flipped his palms open. "Hey, perfect gentleman, remember?" He wrinkled his nose. "You could use a bath yourself. You stink, Guardian."

He would have preferred to stay right here and fix his hands firmly around the vampire's neck, but reluctantly, Balin rose and crossed to the tub. He was exhausted, moving mechanically, as though someone else were controlling him.

Gladiolas's fast reaction to Fitch brought a sting that felt oddly like jealousy. Here he was, the one trying to protect her, and she gravitated toward the selfish demon like a bee to a flower.

He stripped, watching them carefully.

Fitch propped his head on his elbow and stared down at Gladiolas as she slept. She had rolled onto her back but still seemed fitful. The vampire simply watched her, not offering a caress or even a soothing whisper.

Balin wanted to tell him to rub her forehead or hold her hand, but refrained from encouraging any contact. He knew vampires; they had no self-control.

He stepped into the water. It was still hot and felt like heaven. There wasn't a trace of soap foam. The water had refreshed as soon as Fitch stepped out.

He needed this, Balin realized as the water's warm embrace brought instant relief. How many hours had it been since the Guardian team had all stood around the mansion's table, planning Gabrielle's dangerous infiltration of the Palace?

He wondered if she was okay. Had the Guardians succeeded in the raid? He hoped no one was hurt. Part of him felt like a failure for vanishing almost as it started.

He clenched his fists. He was no coward. The sight of that demon preparing to kill Gladiolas had caused something inside him to snap. He knew there were many slaves at the Palace who had been viciously abused, but the instant he saw her, he knew Gladiolas was special.

Special to me alone.

Something had clicked in his brain the instant he saw her. He would have saved any female in the demon's clutches, but Gladiolas was more.

He glanced at the bed. Fitch still leaned over her, staring down. Balin's breath caught. The vampire was watching the pulse at her throat as though stoned.

"How long can you last?"

Fitch looked at him. The vampire's gaze slid down his chest, lingered, then slowly returned. "Without sex? Six hours, maybe seven."

Balin frowned. Fitch's grin faded. "Four days. Five, tops. But you wouldn't want to know me after three."

Gladiolas jerked. A strangled cry tore from her throat. She rolled away from Fitch and kicked the blankets off.

Balin was about to launch out of the tub and rush to her side when Fitch touched her neck. "Easy, babe. It's all right."

The sight of them held him frozen. Lying behind her, Fitch's large body loomed over Gladiolas. Her creamy skin was a delicious contrast against his darker masculine flesh. She arched her back, thrusting out those pert breasts.

Balin suddenly felt very much like an enemy, forbidding them to do what each of their bodies demanded.

Was denying her really in Gladiolas's best interest? He reminded himself the tiny girl was too delicate for either of them. Sex might appease her pain, but he and Fitch were the wrong ones to do it. She needed a human male, with a human-sized penis. She'd been abused for too long already. She was still confused by the vampire's evil drug, not in her right mind.

He'd seen with his own eyes that immortality had enhanced Fitch just as it had him. The man had a proud cock with impressive girth. The Tourin's hold only made Gladiolas think she wanted it, but in truth, they would hurt her.

But there was no human male here.

"Why don't you just fuck her? It's what she needs."

Balin clenched his jaw, silencing the vampire's words. It isn't, he tried to convince himself.

Gladiolas lifted her arm and reached back, sliding it around Fitch's neck. She turned her head as though glancing over her shoulder, but her eyes remained closed.

She pulled him to her mouth. The vampire met her kiss eagerly. He shifted his body closer, slipping his hand around her middle. It drifted upward and

cupped her breast. They were both facing him, as though this were a show for Balin's benefit.

Look how much she likes it, the vampire seemed to be saying. His hand squeezed, her rigid pink nipple and the plump swells of flesh bulging between his fingers.

Balin watched in stunned silence. He couldn't bring himself to stop them. In the back of his mind, he realized Gladiolas's growing discomfort had eased.

"You need me," she whispered to Fitch.

"Yes."

She brought her hand away from his face and placed it on top of his at her breast. Balin watched her urge it downward. She lifted her thigh and pressed his hand between her legs.

"Vampire," Balin warned.

Gladiolas pushed up on her elbow and stared at him, sober determination in her eyes. "While we are here, we are three, Balin. Equal."

You touched me; so shall he.

The vampire needed no urging to fondle her.

Balin swallowed his shame but could not tear his gaze away. He watched her beautiful body arch and fall against the other man's hand, urging him into a loping rhythm. She lifted her leg higher, affording him an unobstructed, eye-level view of Fitch's fingers sliding back and forth over juicy pink flesh.

"Oh," she breathed out, closing her eyes. She settled down on the pillow, baring her neck. "Oh yes."

Her hips bucked against him, riding his hand. She'd kicked the sheet farther away, and Balin watched Fitch push his finger inside her pussy. Gladiolas issued a low moan in time with its passage into her body. "Yes. Now."

Fitch bared his teeth. Elongated fangs sank into her neck. Her body went stiff, and she cried out. Balin tensed but remained in the water. The vampire

drank of her for several seconds, making Balin's worry climb with each one that ticked by.

Finally Fitch eased back and licked her neck where two punctures marred her creamy skin. They healed before his eyes. Gladiolas relaxed over a long sigh and smiled up at him.

Fitch nicked his wrist with a fang. Blood trickled out. He held his arm out to her. Gladiolas took it in her hands and brought it to her mouth.

Balin swallowed and looked away, his understanding now perfectly clear. *He* was the unwelcome third wheel.

Gladiolas and Fitch shared a blood bond.

Chapter Four

Finally at peace since leaving the Palace, Gladiolas slid deep into the soft sheets' cottony caress. She fought to keep her sleepy eyes open, too entranced by Balin's virile physique to miss a single glimpse of his muscled nakedness. He was a god among men.

He towed dry by the fire, then stood staring into it for long moments, one arm resting on the hearth's high mantel. His thick cock dangled between his legs, drooping as though sad.

Quite unlike her randy bedmate, she thought happily, whose steel-like erection rested against her bare bottom.

The only thing that kept her from shifting her hips backward and mounting him was Balin's disapproval.

She clung to this last remaining sliver of self-control while knowing Balin would lose respect for her soon enough when it fled.

The fire dimmed, as though the magical room knew she was near sleep.

"Balin," she called. He didn't move for so long, she thought he was ignoring her.

Finally, he glanced over his shoulder.

She lifted her hand, beckoning. "Come to bed."

"He's afraid," Fitch said.

Gladiolas smiled. The vampire was challenging him, a gently manipulative ploy to get him to stop acting so pigheaded.

He turned. His beautiful cock no longer looked sad. It stood erect, reaching toward his belly button, throbbing with his heartbeat. Gladiolas came

instantly awake. The hearth and the candles burned brighter. God, she wanted to taste that magnificent column of flesh.

"I'll sleep in the chair," Balin mumbled.

"Don't be silly." She flipped the blankets back and stroked her hand over the empty space. "The bed is so soft and so warm. Big enough for all of us."

He glanced away and clenched his jaw.

"Please. I'm scared."

He looked back and considered it for a long moment before shuffling over. "You have nothing to be afraid of, sweetheart." He sat on the edge.

"You don't know that." She took his hand, trying to urge him in. He wouldn't be convinced. "While we're here, we have to stay together..."

She glanced over her shoulder. Fitch watched her with heavy-lidded eyes. His warm hand slid over her breast, igniting a storm of tingles that rolled south and exploded between her legs.

He would be easier to convince than Balin.

"Do everything together." She looked back at Balin. "It could be so good."

A flicker of shock passed through those brilliant green eyes, and she knew he grasped her meaning.

"No. This stops here. I am a Guardian, Gladiolas. My job is to protect you, even from yourself." He swiveled toward them, exposing his raging cock. It jutted up from his lap like a tree trunk. A diamond of precum glistened at the slit.

"Look at me. You and I aren't compatible, and neither is he. We could hurt you."

"No." Her heart went out to the noble protector. "You wouldn't hurt me."

"Not on purpose, no. *Never*. But the Tourin's hold will cause you to want to do things you truly shouldn't do. You will come to see your time at the Palace was cruelty. You could have irrevocable injuries you will never heal from."

"He doesn't understand," the vampire said quietly.

Balin glared at Fitch. "Understand what?" he growled.

She tugged harder on Balin's wrist. He rose and laid his large body stiffly at the very edge of the mattress. Gladiolas arranged the covers over him, greedily letting her hand slide over his muscled rib cage.

Pure heaven.

What was that group of muscles called? Oh yes, the obliques. The sexiest of all, besides what grew between his legs.

"Balin, even now I can feel the pain. As the days wear on, it will get worse. You must look beyond what you believe is right and trust that I know what I need."

He pinched his eyes shut and slid closer. Heaven above, this is nice, she thought as the warmth of their two bodies enveloped her.

"I won't bring you injury," he vowed.

"Do you remember when you said you thought Boragnis was going to kill me, and I told you he wasn't?"

His eyes flashed open.

"He wouldn't have killed me, Balin."

"But how...? What he intended wasn't possible."

"It is. What you saved me from...wouldn't have been the first time."

The noble Guardian's brows drew together. "I don't understand."

"Many of the Palace guests like to fuck their slaves in their demon form."

"It is illegal," Balin said in a horror-laden voice. "And physically impossible. A human cannot bear a demon."

She shook her head. "Don't get me wrong; I didn't like it. It hurt like I *was* dying."

He cupped her cheek, and even Fitch tightened his arm around her and pressed closer, breathing a sympathetic sigh into her hair.

"Their needs are sometimes brutal, but the vampires are not careless with their slaves. You know their saliva has healing properties."

"Y-yes." His emerald gaze flicked over her shoulder at Fitch.

"Their tongues can become serpentlike and travel as deep inside the body as necessary to heal whatever damage is inflicted."

He sucked in a breath. "No."

"It's true," Fitch said softly. "They finish the healing by swirling their tongue through her vagina, toning her inner walls after their use. It rejuvenates her, making her instantly ready for more. That's how she can tolerate penetration as many times in a day as they want her. They can even repair her hymen, if they want her to feel virginal the next time they fuck her."

"You talk about them like you aren't one of them," Balin growled.

"I'm not one of *them*," Fitch shot back.

Balin's panicked eyes slid back to hers. "You want to go back to this place?" he fairly cried.

"There is much pleasure to be found in the Palace. The healing sensation alone is incredible." She caressed his cheek, and he caught her hand. "You think it's wrong, but the truth is, the Palace was better than where I came from. Not only did my stepfather rape me, he beat me. Only back home, there was no one to heal me afterward."

Balin hauled her close and squeezed tight. She expected there might be jealousy, but Fitch's hand slid lightly over her back and practically pushed her into his arms. She suspected he had ulterior motives; by convincing Balin to have her, he could too.

Still, it felt wonderful.

I could spend eternity like this, she thought.

When she eased away, she kissed him lightly on the lips. He returned it hesitantly at first, then allowed himself to fall into it with abandon. His kiss was slow and deep, cherishing and apologetic.

"The Palace was my home," she whispered. "I loved living there. But I would rather be here, with the two of you."

"You will never be abused again. I will see to it."

Fitch gently combed her hair off her shoulder. "Yeah, despite the pleasure you found there, the Palace was a bad place, Gladiolas. My agency can help too."

Balin actually smiled at Fitch. Her heart warmed with gratitude. She settled onto the bed as fatigue pulled at her.

Their promises sounded like heaven. Until now, Gladiolas had been content as a slave. For the first time, her heart alighted with a new desire.

Even if it was only for a few days, she wanted these two for her own.

* * * * *

Unaccustomed to sharing a bed, Fitch awoke to Gladiolas's tossing. She gulped out a scream, clawing at the sheets. He shot up and glanced around.

The noble jerk was nowhere to be seen. The door to the chamber stood open.

"Damn it!"

She flung out an arm, smacking him across the chest. He grabbed her wrists and pinned her down.

"Gladiolas, take it easy."

"Ah!" Her eyes flashed open. "Hurts."

"I know, baby." He angled his body over her, keeping her from thrashing. She arched against him, sending flames of desire shooting straight to his cock. Damn it all, her hot, wriggling little body was driving him out of his mind. He'd hardly slept a wink, in a perpetual state of arousal with the two of them lying only inches away.

"Here, drink." In a panic, he nicked his wrist too deep. Fitch cursed against the sting.

She sucked at the wound. Burning pain crawled up his arm.

“Better?”

She heaved over deep breaths as his blood's healing power crept too slowly through her body. Her delectable breasts rose and fell, the rigid nipples tickling the underside of his arm where he held her down.

With painful clarity, he became aware of her every naked inch pressing against his every naked inch. The contact was like an electrical storm raging across his flesh.

“I need,” she said simply.

“I know you do, babe.”

“I feel empty. Fill me.”

He shook his head. Where was the damned warden when he needed him?

“I need you inside me.”

“Gladiolas.”

“Please, you know I can't last seven days without you. You have to convince Balin.”

God, how he'd love to. Unfortunately, the Guardian refused to remove the stick from his ass.

Gladiolas pushed up, pressing her soft breasts into him. “You know you want me.”

“Hell yes.”

“It could be seven days of pure bliss.”

That's for sure. Holy hell, when did it get so hot in here?

She lunged forward, kissing and licking. “You're gorgeous. How could I not want you? How could any woman not want you?”

Her flattery was trained. It was one of the first things slaves were taught. But in his case, if he did say so himself, it was apt.

Their young Guardian was a stud too. What a cruel twist of fate Gladiolas had not been banished with two ugly slobs.

Women threw themselves at him, but he almost always had to reject them. How could he possibly explain himself to them? *Yeah, baby, I've got a superhuman dick. Just ignore my glowing eyes. Oh, and I might stick my fangs in your neck when I come. And forget about having an orgasm, because I'll have drained you unconscious...*

The years had been lonely. A single lifetime was too long to spend alone. He'd endured ten.

But worse than the loneliness was the rejection. He would never risk that misery again.

Gladiolas pushed him to the breaking point. And all she wanted was sex. If she could live with that, so could he. He squeezed his eyes shut. She's not a slave anymore, and she knows what she wants, he convinced himself. I wouldn't be taking anything I'm not supposed to have.

"Gladiolas, if I fuck you, I won't heal you afterward. It would defeat the act. You need to be sexually exhausted, or the sickness will come back immediately."

"It'll be worth it to feel you."

He recognized the dazed glassiness in her eyes. She was in full withdrawal.

He shifted toward her, and she drew her legs up and apart. He was between them before he'd fully decided to.

She bucked beneath him. He thrust downward, pinning her to the soft mattress with his hips while he imprisoned her wrists above her head.

His own need flared like an inferno. He couldn't deny his vampire prowess. While he would never take a slave, his desire was as powerful as any of his evil counterparts'.

"Oh yes, baby," she cooed happily.

He bent his head and suckled her nipple, calming her frantic tension.

She arched her back, pushing her breast into his mouth. He then raked with his teeth, earning a pleased cry. Again, and this time he bit down on the verge of too hard.

She threw back her head and moaned. Her pussy wept sweet moisture against his belly.

He clamped onto the delicious little bud, nipped, then soothed the bite with a suckle. Nip, suckle. Nip, suckle, nip, suckle...nip, nip, nip.

Her cries turned to agonized grunts in time with each delicious bite.

"I could come just from this."

"Would you like to?"

"Don't you fucking dare." She locked her legs around his hips. "Put that sweet meat inside me before I scream!"

"But I haven't tasted the other yet." He slid his mouth over and circled her neglected nipple. Her areola had swelled to the size of a half-dollar. He sucked the entire thing into his mouth, maybe a smidgen too hard, and flicked over the tip with his tongue.

"Oh. Harder."

He did.

"Harder!"

"I'll give you *harder*."

He rose over her. His cock sought her wet core as though it had a mind of its own. Her outer folds parted like a flower opening to the sun. His straining tip found the slick nectar gushing out of her.

He stared into those cool blue eyes. She stared back, ready.

He plunged deep, filling her in one fierce surge. Her mouth widened with a silent gasp, and her eyes fell shut. Her muscles clamped around him, stretched, and pulled tight as he pushed to her body's maximum capacity.

The Guardian was right, he was too big for her, but Fitch was too far gone now. She squeezed at him like a hot, silk glove, impossibly wet, impossibly tight.

He eased out and thrust again. Her features relaxed in pure bliss. It was more than sexual pleasure for Gladiolas. He relieved a pain emanating from the deepest part of her.

She let her legs fall wide and pulled at his shoulders, urging him down against her. "Oh, thank you, Fitch," she whispered in his ear. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, cupcake." *Literally.*

He rode out on her creamy nectar and thrust again, pushing his way deeper into her tight little cunt.

"You have a beautiful cock," she purred. "Feels so good inside me."

"Feels good to be inside you." His entire body rose and fell with the power of his pistoning hips. Her tiny frame jerked under the force.

"You're going to come, aren't you?" Not a question but a plea.

"Try and stop me."

"It won't be as good if you don't."

"Don't want to disappoint."

She clawed at his back. Her woman's chamber had stretched and now allowed him full penetration. He knew he was pounding away too roughly on her, but his body had taken control away from his brain. Dimly, he wondered if she would regret the soreness. When was the last time she had been fucked without being healed afterward?

Her gasps turned to sweet little whines, which grew in pitch as she neared her pleasure. He pumped in and out, sliding across that mysterious muscle that she in turn pushed down against his deep-traveling cockhead.

He couldn't deny it was nice to ride a woman who not only knew he was a vampire but reveled in it.

"Ooh yes. Ooh yes. Come with me, baby."

"Ask," he gritted through clenched teeth, "and you shall receive."

And receive him she did. She lifted her hips and urged him to take all he needed. He let loose, with great, heavy spurts erupting deep inside her until his balls felt like shriveled raisins.

She lay beneath him, panting, for long moments. Her body clenched and unclenched, squeezing at his still-hard cock. Her honeyed skin glowed with a sheen of sweat.

Her eyes were clearer when she focused on him, and her heavy breaths blended into a laugh.

He dragged a lock of hair from her brow. "How do you feel?"

"Magnificent." Her smile was magical, lifting the darkness from his heart that had settled there too long ago. Gladiolas was truly special.

He eased out of her tired pussy. Her brow furrowed. "Ooh."

"Don't say I didn't warn you. In an hour when you can't walk, I don't want to hear any whining."

"You *are* a bad boy," she scolded gently. "That's my favorite kind."

"And you're a naughty girl." He pecked a kiss on her pink mouth. "That's *my* favorite kind."

He sat up and glanced at her bared nipples. If there were any bite marks, his saliva had healed them. Still, they were swollen and dark, dusky rose from his thorough sucking.

"Can you get dressed?"

She laughed. "Not much to get dressed in."

"Maybe we can fix one of these sheets into a better dress for you. We need to go in search of our roommate."

Her mirth faded.

"Vampires and Guardians can sense each other."

Her eyes went wide.

Fitch nodded. “He saw us.”

Chapter Five

Balin sat in the great hall with his head in his hands. He'd come down for a plate of food for Gladiolas, curious to see if their departure from the room last night had removed the moldy piles of ancient food for good.

As he'd suspected, the platters were clean and shiny when he first entered the great hall. The candles flared to life, and the food appeared, steaming hot.

Gladiolas would be happy to see that.

He'd only been gone ten minutes, for fuck's sake. The vampire had taken the first opportunity to mount her.

Balin had returned to find them going at it like randy teenagers. He stood in the doorway, thunderstruck, while at the same time, not surprised at all.

You can't trust a vampire.

Fitch's broad back rose and fell, his firm ass pumping away. Beneath him, Gladiolas's widespread thighs bucked under the vampire's ferocious pummeling.

For a long, tense moment, rage had turned the scene red. Then Gladiolas's happy banter—God, they actually talked to each other during—proved it was she who lured him.

Anger had turned to burning jealousy. They looked utterly beautiful together.

Then, in what he could only describe as the most shocking sensation of all, he became turned on.

Emotions raced through his mind. Of course she'd lured Fitch; she was desperately ill. But she appeared to be enjoying it with sweet abandon, not thrashing in pain under brutal physical abuse.

God, it was only sex.

Hot, beautiful, indulgent sex. How had his mind twisted it into something bad?

Gladiolas was a woman of age. The vampire could neither impregnate her nor transmit disease. In fact, there was a rumor vampires didn't even ejaculate.

He turned and quietly left, sick that he had found the sight so exquisite.

Now, staring at the stone floor beneath his bare feet, the emotions continued to switch and surge.

Anger. Jealousy. Gladiolas should be his. But that was a selfish thought. He had no right to her.

Arousal. Denial. Regret. He wished she hadn't taken Fitch first. He'd been excluded, and that hurt.

Exhilaration. He reminded himself Gladiolas wanted him too. And he wasn't exactly a slouch. Fitch was unusually handsome, but Balin possessed his own charms, and all women went gooey over muscles.

Could he share? Uncertain excitement quivered in his gut. He'd stared at Fitch, as entranced by the other man's hard body as he'd been by Gladiolas's soft one.

Should he indulge in her? He didn't have to take. He could give. He could be the yin to Fitch's yang.

A sound at the doorway caught his attention. Gladiolas rushed in with a swishing of cotton sheets. She'd fashioned a better toga out of the bed linens.

Fitch lingered, leaned against the door frame looking morose. Probably thought Balin wanted to take his head off.

Part of him did.

She threw herself into his lap, wrapped her arms around his neck, and peppered him with kisses. His anger slipped away.

"I was so worried! You promised you wouldn't leave."

He tried to gently pry her away, if only so he could speak, but she was stronger than she looked.

"I just came down for food."

"We mustn't ever be apart. Promise me."

"Gladiolas..."

"Promise me!"

He glanced at Fitch.

"Better do it, man."

Balin took her by the arms and eased her away. He drew a deep breath. "You seemed to want to be alone." Hot ache accompanied the self-pitying words.

She wrenched out of his grip and slid her arms around his neck again, almost too tightly this time. "Oh, sweetheart. I was sick. He made me feel better."

He pried her away again. "Gladiolas, I realize I was wrong in trying to prevent you from what you needed. You do know what's best for you. If you want him, I won't try to stop you."

She gripped his jaw and held his face still to receive her lips. He hesitated, still feeling like an outsider, then lost himself in her kiss.

For all his brawn, his heart was fragile. He was still afraid to hope.

She nudged his lips apart, teasing gently into his mouth with her tongue. This time, he let himself return the kiss he'd wished he had last night, nipping and sucking at her lips. In a bold move for him, he pushed his tongue into her mouth to mingle with hers. Gladiolas uttered a happy moan and pulled back to smile at him.

"Silly boy. I want you both. Can't you see that?"

His gaze slid hesitantly to Fitch.

The vampire shrugged. "Hell, I don't care. Two's a couple, three's a party."

"While we are here," she continued firmly, "we are three. Do you understand that? Three, or none at all."

Hope and joy surged in his heart. "Yes, sweetheart."

She turned to look at Fitch. He shoved off the doorsill and strolled inside. "Whatever. It's all the same to me. What's to eat?"

"I mean it, you two. We don't know what evils lurk in this castle. None of us should ever be alone."

She stood from his lap, and Balin rose with her.

"And there will be precise equality. Whatever we do, we do together."

Was she actually proposing...?

"I'm making the rules from here on out."

"Are you now?" Fitch teased, absently surveying the long table of food.

"And since I'm making the rules, that means I also get to make them up as I go along."

Gladiolas planted her hands on her hips as she threw a pointed look from one to the other. Her brows crept up. "*Capiche?*"

"I'm game." Fitch sniffed a spoonful of something orange from one of the bowls, decided it smelled good, and slapped it onto a plate. "I've been alive eight hundred and ninety years. I've got to do something to keep it interesting."

Gladiolas looked at Balin. "That means you've got some catching up to do." She sidled close. "Ever since seeing you last night, I've wanted to get up close and personal with this magnificent specimen."

She cupped the shaft of flesh straining against his leather pants.

"Gladiolas..." He caught her hands, then took her in a gentle embrace meant to pacify her.

“No arguments. That's rule one.”

He glanced at Fitch. The vampire seated himself on the long wooden bench on the far side of the table. He grinned while chewing a bite from a turkey leg. “Hell, Guardian, even I was impressed.”

Balin frowned. It changed to a gasp of surprise when Gladiolas dropped to her knees and grasped the waist of his pants.

Right here? She means to...

He groaned when she dragged the zipper down and cool air bathed his scorching-hot erection.

Gladiolas gripped the edge of his pants and hauled them down his thighs. Her tiny hand closed around his shaft.

“Mercy me,” she exclaimed on a hot breath. “You're incredible.” She gazed up at him with limpid eyes.

He was embarrassed with Fitch right across the table but powerless to break Gladiolas's gaze. Her hand felt like a small velvet clamp, and he was wholly imprisoned in its hold.

She closed her eyes and laved out with her tongue, a first, tentative taste of his ivory meat. She moaned happily and opened wide to swallow the engorged cap into her mouth.

Warm, wet magic overwhelmed all other sensations. He felt nothing but her soft mouth sucking his desperate cockhead.

She gripped the trunk with both hands and circled his crown with the flat of her tongue.

“Oh God,” he gasped, then was surprised he'd said it aloud.

It was awkward enjoying this intensely private moment with Fitch watching. He could see the vampire in his peripheral vision and knew the man was staring shamelessly.

She circled the swollen bulb a second and third time, then gripped his ass with both hands and drew the full length of him deep into her mouth. The engorged tip pushed against the back of her throat.

He felt his thickness stretching her mouth and wondered how she could take all of him.

In the back of his mind, he knew it was wrong. The vampires had taught her this, and he shouldn't be enjoying it. But at the forefront of his numbing brain was the intense pleasure her delightful little mouth inflicted.

She moaned on his cock. The vibrations were like an electrical current directly to his spine. She drew him out, tightening her lips the entire way up his long length, then sucked all of him back into her throat. Suck, pull. Suck, pull. It was all he could do not to thrust his hips and fuck her sweet mouth.

“Great gods of Olympus. Sweetheart!”

Her clasp hands squeezed his ass, and the next time she dragged her lips to the tip, she squeezed harder. She wanted him to come.

Merciful gods, she wasn't the only one.

He cursed himself; he'd vowed to cherish her and protect her, but here he was, eager to come down her throat.

Boiling heat erupted in his balls and shot through his cock like a volcanic eruption. Gladiolas breathed in sharply through her nose. Her nails dug into his ass. She opened her throat and swallowed the long streams shooting out of him. In all absurdity, he was embarrassed at how hard he came.

When he was finally finished, Gladiolas went still but kept his cock in the warm cradle of her mouth. Her hands smoothed over his cheeks in a tender circular caress before squeezing gently a last time.

She eased him from her mouth, licking the tip clean with her tongue. Balin collapsed bare-assed on the wooden bench, his pants still tangled around his knees.

Gladiolas straddled his lap and kissed him. Her tired lips were swollen—from my cock, he thought happily—and she tasted like sex.

“You're going to fuck me later,” she whispered against his mouth.

He wasn't sure if it was a question or a command, but he nodded anyway.

She smiled. “Good.”

“Dinner and a show,” Fitch said behind them. “I love it.”

* * * * *

“Housekeeping's discreet,” Fitch said as they reentered the bedchamber. “We should leave a good tip.”

Gladiolas laughed, grateful for his attempt to lighten the mood.

The bed had been magically remade, and the brandy goblet he drank from the night before was clean and stacked beside its four mates on the serving tray. Gladiolas hadn't noticed how much was in the crystal decanter the night before, but it looked almost full now.

“Take shelter, vampire,” Balin said. “I wish to establish the time.”

Without a clock of any kind and shutters covering the windows all around, it was hard to know if it was day or night.

Fitch moved to the far end of the room and stood behind the wardrobe as Balin released the glass panes of the single window and pushed open the outer wooden shutters.

Gray light poured into the room. Thick clouds obscured the sky and filled the gorges surrounding them.

Unable to see to the valley floor, it was impossible to tell even how high they were. Frigid winds swooped in, and outside flurries of dry snow whirled through the air.

The clouds traveled quickly. Where a moment ago had been a thick puff of white, now a jagged spire appeared, and seconds later a sheer cliff, as though

the angry sky mocked the castle's guests with taunting glimpses of their hopelessly inescapable surroundings.

"I believe it is day," Balin said.

Fitch peered around the corner of the wardrobe, then jerked back with an oath. "Oh yeah, it's day." He ground the words through a clenched jaw. "The ultraviolet rays sting my eyes."

"It's so bright, it stings *my* eyes," Gladiolas said. Even Balin turned around, noticing the pain the vampire tried to mask from his voice. "Yes, it would be pitch-black if it were night."

"What do you see?"

"We're perched high in the mountains. There's snow and sheer cliffs everywhere."

"Any sign of the local monster life?"

Gladiolas shuddered at the bold reminder that enchantment protected this place. Unlike most castles, it needed no soaring walls, no battlements, no weapons portals. And similarly, no bars, no guards, no traps keeping them inside either.

She peered over his shoulder as Balin looked down at the shallow ledge that served as the castle's perch. About twenty feet beyond the castle, a low stone wall surrounded what served as the building's yard. "Just some tracks in the snow."

"What's keeping us here?" Gladiolas was almost afraid to hear the answer. "I mean, is there like a force field or something?"

Balin reached his arm through the window. "There is magical energy surrounding us. The pressure increases just outside the structure's wall."

She shrank back.

"I suspect we would not be able to step past the stone wall surrounding the grounds." Balin hauled the shutters closed.

Gladiolas rushed over to Fitch. "It's okay. They're closed."

His upper lip glistened with sweat. He peered around, then stepped out. "It's almost worse up here for me, with the reflection in the snow and the fog."

She placed her hand on his forearm. She wished there were something she could do to ease his discomfort and the deep worry he must be experiencing. At least in the city, he could take cover in the sewer systems if he were caught outside at daybreak.

In the few months before she'd entered the Palace, she'd visited the raves at night, never fully comprehending how fearful the vampires were of daylight. The Palace had been impenetrable. Even the luxury suites for the wealthier guests had solid walls surrounding the domiciles. A vampire had to negotiate a maze of narrow hallways within his apartment if he wanted to gaze out the windows at the night sky. Fitch's misery was raw and vivid, almost contagious.

He placed his hand atop hers. "You're shaking."

"It's just creepy, knowing I'm in a fortress protected from escape by magic and horrible monsters."

"What was the Palace?"

She looked at his hands clutching hers, unable to form a response. She guessed, to a stranger's eyes, the Palace had been exactly the same. Gladiolas shrugged her trepidation away. At least here she had the protection of two virile men intent on keeping her safe.

Balin secured the latch on the wooden shutters, then closed the inner glass panes. "It is magic that will get us out."

"About that," Fitch said, walking to Balin. "Any insight you want to share?"

"I think we should continue our exploration of the castle. There are other doors. Perhaps we'll find a library."

Fitch snorted. "Like they would put a book on magical teleportation here for the count. That's like handing out flyers on effective rioting at Leavenworth."

"No, but possibly a book on the ancient fae. Maybe something will spark my memory."

"I think it's a good idea," Gladiolas said. "At least it will keep us from going stir-crazy."

"I can think of other ways to keep from going stir-crazy."

"Vampire—"

"All right," Fitch said, sighing. "Lead the way, Guardian."

Both men brandished their weapons. This time, Balin started in front, and after urging her to follow, Fitch took up the rear.

Balin looked like a general setting into battle. His intelligent eyes scanned the stairs and great room below, and Gladiolas watched in awe as he hesitated, listening carefully for any sign they were not alone in the castle.

Warm, swirly sensations quivered in her middle and rolled south. The man was just about the sexiest creature she'd ever laid eyes on. Unlike Fitch, whose dark, brooding good looks and bad-boy charisma were wickedly alluring, Balin's youthful, heroic countenance was enhanced by a knightly honor and chivalrous manners.

She suspected part of his reluctance to fuck her was because he viewed her as soiled vampire leavings. The thought made her sad, but she would be the first to agree he deserved far better than her.

She felt a pang of regret that he had not been *her* Guardian and had not saved her before the vampires ever poisoned her. There was a time when she'd been a remotely normal person, despite her stepfather's abuse, and on her way to a degree in advertising on scholarship at UCSF.

Gladiolas forced her eyes away as her growing desire mixed with despair. She felt the effects of withdrawal growing more intense, as if the pain lingered behind a fragile barrier waiting for her to let down her guard and succumb. She took deep, even breaths, willing it away.

Not until tonight, please, when the work is done and they have the time to help me...

The hallway behind the stairs led to a room with a stone crypt in the center. Gladiolas felt a jolt of fear, but Balin and Fitch walked right in. Apparently such rooms were commonplace in castles of old.

The inscription was in Latin.

"Guenka," Balin said in a respectful tone. "Zlatko's wife. A merciful act, letting him spend eternity with her."

"The castle doesn't exactly seem like a prison," Gladiolas commented. She fought to keep her voice steady, hiding the fact the pain grew more excruciating with each step. "In fact, it seems pretty luxurious, considering the time."

"Count Zlatko had ravenous greed and an insatiable appetite for innocents," Balin explained. "It's said he defiled and devoured over a thousand young men and women. His punishment was banishment, to spend eternity in solitude. This fortress is sparse compared to the luxury he indulged in, to serve as a reminder of all he could not have."

They left the tomb, and Fitch closed the door solidly behind them. "Sounds like the Guardian did his homework," he commented.

The hallway descended five steps. Their feet made scraping sounds on the stone as they shuffled down.

"It is important for all Guardians to know of the vampires' lustful hunger." Balin pushed the single door open and found a bare scullery. "To understand what we are up against."

"Well, you don't have to worry about me. I only plan on defiling and devouring one maiden while we're here."

Fitch pinched her bottom, and Gladiolas let out a squeak. Fireworks ricocheted through her body. He had no idea how potent his teasing words or that one little pinch were, but the heat inside her increased dramatically. Her need roared, leaving her dry-mouthed and flushed.

Balin slammed the door shut and turned around, glaring.

Fitch held up his hands. "Hey, it was just a joke."

"It was not funny."

Gladiolas stood trapped between them in the tiny landing. Balin's anger radiated outward and behind her, Fitch's mischievous wickedness pressed like a cloud. Their potency caused an emotional tug of war inside her.

Panting out deep breaths, she sagged against the cool stone wall.

Both men turned and reached for her, their expressions instantly changed to worry.

"Gladiolas, are you all right?"

Balin's concerned grip only intensified the ache of need. She wanted him to grab both arms in those powerful hands, force her back against the wall, and ram himself inside her.

"Just fighting the pain."

"We should get her back to the bedchamber," Fitch said.

"No!" She bit her lip. "I'll be better if I keep my mind on what we're doing. I'll be okay."

Balin's hand slipped away, and her skin ignited with fire that turned to excruciating itch. She needed him so badly, she wanted to scream.

"Are you sure?"

"Let's keep looking for a library," Fitch said, and Balin shot him a surprised look. "The best thing we can do for her is find a way home."

They wandered back into the main room and found a door on the opposite side of the great hall that led to a private study. Inside, two small bookcases stood behind an antique solicitor's desk.

"Not exactly a library," Balin commented. "But it is better than nothing."

"Yeah, if you're into ancient Latin." Fitch removed one of the books and flipped it open. A cloud of dust rose from the book.

"I can read it," Balin said smugly. "Can't you?"

"I missed class that day."

"I read French," Gladiolas volunteered, feeling a little less useless.

Balin glanced at Fitch.

The other man shrugged. "Anything in there in German?"

"There are. Some are in English. You and Gladiolas can look through those. Bring anything to my attention that concerns ancient Ireland, the fae, or magical summoning charms."

They took an armload of books to get started and headed to the great hall.

They left the books piled on the end of the table and fixed themselves plates from the extravagant buffet.

"This seems like a lot of food for just one man," Gladiolas commented, trying to hide the discomfort pulling at every cell in her body.

"Maybe the magic is reacting to the three of us," Fitch said as he dumped a spoonful of something that looked like beef stew onto his plate.

Balin wore a curious look. "Perhaps."

* * * * *

Balin pored through the first book again, certain he'd missed something.

Gladiolas was the first to close her book and go to sleep. An hour later, Fitch set his down. He shrugged out of his clothes and climbed into bed beside her, naked. The vampire rolled away from them and breathed a long, tired breath in and out.

Balin stayed where he was, despite the enchanted room's dimming firelight. Part of him still believed indulging in Gladiolas wrong, and he didn't want to seem overeager to go against his morals.

He set the book in his lap and watched the two sleep. Long moments passed, and Balin thought he might not have to sate Gladiolas's needs. She twitched and murmured in her sleep but otherwise seemed calm.

He cursed Spike, the Palace's leader, for taking her and other innocents like her. What would her life be like had she kept on her chosen course?

A beauty like Gladiolas would have suffered no lack of suitors, and could probably have married well, had she not been physically altered by the Tourin's evil magic. Instead, she'd lost the chance at a normal future.

She would never bear children. Never know a day the Tourin didn't claw at her soul. Never know simple pleasures, like shopping with girlfriends or a date to the movies.

He clenched his jaw. He hoped Spike had been killed in the raid. If not, he might face a prison much like this.

It wouldn't be half the punishment enough.

Gladiolas let out a pained whimper, followed immediately by a sharp cry. She tossed her head on the pillow. Strands of sunshine blonde hair whipped across her neck and face.

Fitch awoke with a start and looked over his shoulder. Realizing Gladiolas's agony, he rolled over and glanced across the room.

"Your turn, Guardian."

Balin remained seated.

"Time to step up to the plate."

Gladiolas moaned. "Balin." She seemed asleep, calling to him from a dream.

At last he rose and crossed the room. Fitch watched him as if he couldn't believe Balin was actually going to do it. A part of him could hardly believe he was, either.

"You can hardly fuck her wearing your clothes." Fitch's gaze traveled down his chest and stuck at the ridge in his pants. Balin's face heated.

"What's with those leather pants, anyway?"

"They hold up well in battle and, even in San Francisco, cause most citizens to avoid noticing us."

"Ah," Fitch said, though condescension still laced his tone.

"Mmm, Balin." Gladiolas's eyes flashed open. "Oh. I dreamed you weren't here."

"I am here, love."

"Come to bed. I need you."

He'd been moving to open his fly, and his hands were at the snap as Gladiolas spoke. His skin burned with renewed embarrassment from looking too eager.

And it only got worse as he stripped out of his pants under two pairs of hungry eyes. The vampire offered no mercy. Balin made a mental note to remember that.

Gladiolas sat up as he slipped into bed beside her. The sheet slipped off her breasts. The rosy tips were rigid little buds, even though the room was warm. She came against him, smiling through tiny kisses, tickling his bare chest with them.

"Finally I get to feel you," she said against his mouth. She leaned back, dragging him down to the mattress.

He glanced at Fitch, lying only inches away. "Are you going to watch?" he said, then wished his tone had been more gruff. Instead, he sounded like an excited little boy.

"You bet."

Gladiolas dotted kisses across his face while her hands roamed and explored with undisguised desperation.

"Must you stay in the bed with us?"

"Yep." The vampire grinned.

"He's so bad," Gladiolas said in a teasing voice. "Bad boy. And you're good. Good and bad. Light and dark. And me, between you both." She cooed happy murmurings and arched her body against his. Excitement ricocheted to his brain.

Balin settled above her soft body. The sudden current of electricity as skin came against skin robbed him of all thought, other than the single-minded need to sink himself inside her sweet pussy.

He'd been a fool to resist her so long.

"I want Fitch here," Gladiolas said. "No one is excluded from anything. You two share me. You share each other."

Balin caught his breath. He would speak to her about that later. Right now, he recognized the drugged quality of her speech and the outrageous suggestions as Tourin withdrawal.

He set his body weight on the mattress, opposite Fitch, and caressed the velvety skin at the side of her breast with his thumb. God, he'd been aching to touch her. Her skin felt like rose petals.

"I find it difficult... That is... I don't know if I can perform..."

Her warm hand closed around his cock, and Balin bit his tongue.

"Ah, the Guardian tells a fib. No performance anxiety here."

Fitch chuckled.

"Maybe he's not such a good boy after all," she teased.

"Not entirely a fib." Balin swallowed. As much as he wanted her, embarrassment was eating him alive. "I am not exactly comfortable..."

"Let me help." With surprising strength, Gladiolas pushed him over and straddled him, dragging the sheet farther down and effectively baring all three of them. "Sweet, noble Guardian is still afraid to fuck me. So I'll just have to fuck him."

Fitch had gone unusually quiet. Balin closed his eyes and did his best to ignore the other man as Gladiolas's warm thighs slid across his hips.

Impossibly soft skin rubbed against him. Heat radiated from her sex. She moved up and down, touching her wet flower to his too-eager shaft. His cock twitched in response, instinctively seeking to drive inside.

Gladiolas bent over him and kissed his neck. Her lips trailed across his collarbone and into the little U-shaped divot at the base of his throat.

"Such an amazing body," she whispered between kisses. "I've wanted to touch you so badly." She breathed out a pleased sigh as both hands slid over his biceps.

"And...I've wanted to touch you too." Immediately he felt stupid. What a pathetic attempt at sex talk. He just wasn't comfortable like Fitch seemed to be.

Gladiolas looked down into his eyes. "I'm so glad. I was afraid you didn't want me."

A pang of guilt stabbed his conscience. Apparently he'd been giving the wrong signals. He firmly put an end to them. "How could you think that? You're beautiful and amazing and so sexy." She made it hard for him to talk with the kisses she peppered over his face. She stopped only long enough to smile, but she looked as though she wanted to cry instead.

"You're such a sweet man."

He cupped her face with both hands. Balin suddenly understood his role here. He must make Gladiolas understand how special she was.

Her slick pussy came against his scorching-hot cockhead. Balin thought he would explode. She swiveled her hips in a circle, kissing him down there with those wet nether lips.

Gladiolas took his hands in both of hers. In one swift movement, she brought his hands to her breasts, leaned upright, and sheathed him with her body.

He groaned as pleasure a thousand times more intense than anything he'd ever experienced crashed over him. Her hot channel swallowed him in a velvet grip. Gladiolas cried out almost in time with him.

He felt her passage resist and then refuse, halting his cock at half-mast. With another whimper, she threw back her head and tightened her grip on his

hands, urging him to squeeze her tits. His large hands completely covered the small globes.

“Gladiolas...”

“Oh God!” Her body shook with a great tremor that rolled from her shoulders to her hips. “Your cock is incredible.”

Had he not been trapped beneath her, he would have withdrawn out of concern for her physical welfare.

Instead, she had him pinned. Trembling thighs pushed up; then she sank down, drawing more of him into her impossibly tight channel.

“Jesus,” Fitch breathed out, but this time his voice held awe. “He's like a giant redwood.”

Balin was momentarily stunned, caught between pride and embarrassment.

“Ooh, you're telling me.” Her head lolled forward. Silken hair tumbled over his hands. “God, such a wonderful cure. Almost makes it nice to be sick.”

She bounced up and down in quick succession several times, inching him deeper. Each downward press of her small body sent shock waves rolling through his cock and outward across his limbs like ripples on a pond.

Balin shifted his hips in a small thrust, exercising Herculean restraint. It was all he could do not to hammer himself deep into her feminine core.

Gladiolas squealed with delight and fell onto his chest. “Oh yeah, baby. Give it to me.”

“Sweetheart, are you sure?”

“Poso-*fucking*-tively.”

She kicked her legs back, one, then the other, so she was sprawled on top of him. Now it was she who was trapped, impaled on his long shaft, unable to push herself off even if she wanted to.

Fitch pulled the sheet farther away and dragged his hand over her backside. "Such a sweet ass." He sat up, gazing between her legs. "What a view. Guardian, you've got her stretched as wide as she can go."

Balin was too drunk on pleasure to be bashful now. He took her hips in his hands and bucked upward.

"Ooh, so good. Again, Balin."

He did, lost in the utter rapture of her sweet pussy. She wriggled her hips, working more of him onto her hungry lower mouth. Her slick juices coated them both now, making it easier for him to slide in and out without resistance.

Gladiolas went still, her back arched, her eyes closed, and her lower lip caught between her teeth. She uttered a low groan. "Oh yes, like that. Keep doing that, and I'll come."

She braced her hands above his shoulders and pushed backward to meet his pounding thrusts. Wet sounds rose from between her legs. Balin traveled deep, driving all the way to the hilt, just as his balls began to boil. His next thrust took his seeking cockhead to the ceiling of her cunt.

He squeezed her ass, forcing her down to receive each powerful plunge. Balin bent his knees, shoving himself off the mattress to buck his hips into her like a wild stallion.

"Oooh yes. Oooh yes," she repeated until each word was little more than a shrill whine of ecstasy.

He erupted a century's worth of cum in long, hot streams.

"Fill me, Balin. Fill me up."

The room went dark, then exploded with light. He wasn't sure which of them collapsed first, but he came back to awareness with Gladiolas sprawled on his chest, breathing hard. Her body rose and fell as his chest expanded and contracted.

He couldn't remember ever having such an intense coupling. He knew now, she was more than special. He was meant to find her.

“Christ,” Fitch exclaimed, craning back to look at them. “How the hell am I supposed to follow an act like that?”

* * * * *

Balin awoke to the sound of a soft giggle. The bed rustled, then jerked. Without opening his eyes, he knew it was the movement of Fitch's hips.

Gladiolas lay facing him, smiling because she knew she had awakened him. Behind her, Fitch lay on his side, looking down at her exposed throat with that devilishly hungry gleam in his eye. His body moved, shifting closer to Gladiolas's.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” she cooed, then gasped. She looked over her shoulder but shut her eyes, concentrating more on what she felt beneath the sheets.

Balin reached toward her with a hesitant hand. He found the silken, soft skin at the dip in her waist, then came into contact with the other man's hand. A spark zapped his fingertip. He stroked down, growing bolder, fingers trailing through Gladiolas's downy patch of hair at the V in her thighs.

He saw Fitch hitch upward, and Gladiolas's body jerked. Balin's fingers fell between her legs. His fingertips discovered wet pussy lips stretched wide by a solid trunk of flesh. Seeking farther, Balin discovered a springy patch of wiry hair.

Fitch thrust again, effectively placing his balls in Balin's hand. Before he coherently knew what he was doing, he squeezed the tight orbs.

Fitch's words ground out through clenched teeth. “Don't do anything you don't want in return, Guardian.”

Balin squeezed again. Fitch groaned. His eyes flicked to Balin's and flashed red. His lips drew back, revealing elongated canines. He growled with satisfaction and sank them into Gladiolas's throat.

With morbid fascination, Balin watched the points pierce her skin and travel deep into her flesh. He saw the first traces of blood before Fitch's lips

closed the view. The vampire's features relaxed an instant before his brow furrowed in rapture.

Gladiolas sighed. Balin's palm came against her mons. She placed her hand atop his and urged him to rub with the heel of his hand.

"Oooh yeah." Gladiolas sang her coo of pleasure, already a familiar sound that wove into his heart and left warm little tingles. "That's it, baby."

With each forward press of his hand, his middle and ring fingers spread around Fitch's cock. He glanced up in time to see Fitch lick the two holes in her throat. The skin instantly began to knit. Within seconds, it had healed completely, not a trace the punctures had ever been there.

She urged Balin's hand slower but harder, encouraging him to finish her off with a final stroke before her trembling hand held his still.

The vampire's heavy-lidded gaze found his and gave a flicker of amber fire before drifting shut. Balin leaned into Gladiolas's hair and savored her delicate feminine scent.

Fitch withdrew from her pussy in a long, slow traverse, pulling endlessly between Balin's fingers until the still-firm head passed through, spreading them wider. Balin closed his eyes and imagined what Gladiolas felt with that crowned thickness pushing in and out of her.

Her legs fell shut, trapping his hand against her warm pussy.

With a low murmur, she nestled into his chest, breathed in a long, deep sigh, and fell asleep.

Fitch rolled onto his back with his eyes closed. Balin wasn't sure if he was asleep or pretending. He imagined the man couldn't look him in the eye.

Part of him was horrified at his boldness. Another part reveled in it. He'd never touched another man before and hadn't imagined Fitch would feel so different from his own body.

In placid rest, Fitch looked like a different man. His skin possessed the pale translucence common in vampires, but without the deathly gray undertones of most bloodsuckers.

Long lashes rested on his cheekbones, which no longer seem so serious. His lips were slightly parted. They were evenly shaped, fuller on the bottom, the top bow-shaped. His chiseled jaw also didn't seem nearly as severe as when the man was glaring at him or delivering a snide comment.

The lines around his eyes and mouth disappeared in his relaxed state, making him look much younger. He couldn't have been more than twenty-five when he was turned. He must have been a beautiful human.

Almost as he had the thought, Fitch smiled.

"Got any more tricks up your sleeve?"

The vampire's words startled him so much, Balin winced. A hot wave of mortification rolled across his skin.

"Be sure and share them if you do."

Without opening his eyes, Fitch chuckled. He then rolled away, pulling the sheet up to his shoulder.

Chapter Six

A grumbling stomach and full bladder prodded Fitch awake. He sat up to find Sleeping Beauty cuddling against Prince Charming, both of them exposed to the waist.

He eased from the bed quietly and circled toward the garderobe.

Gladiolas's creamy white skin looked like milk against Balin's gloriously golden flesh. The Guardian lay with one arm behind his head, which made those overdone biceps bulge across tightly pulled tendons.

Overdone, but nice in a weird, surfer-dude sort of way, Fitch remarked privately.

The man's nipples were a warm red color, small, but the tiny buds peaked in the room's cool air.

Gladiolas lay against him, one breast resting against his rib cage. Her long blonde hair trailed over the Guardian's other arm, which held her against his body.

God, he'd never thought small tits would be such a turn-on. In a state of lazy arousal, her half-erect nipples brought the small mounds to pointy tips just perfect for sucking.

Her tiny hand traced lazy circles in the center of Balin's large chest. Fitch met her eyes and realized she was awake. She smiled mischievously at him, then flicked out with her tongue, lashing across the Guardian's almost nonexistent bud.

Fitch stubbed his toe on the marble-topped parlor table and hissed a curse. He dragged his attention away from the two, slipped behind the sheet Balin had pinned up for privacy, and went about his business.

The castle still fascinated him. Sure enough, after relieving himself in the chamber pot within the garderobe, everything vanished.

What a place to spend eternity...especially with these two.

If he were to tell most people he wanted to escape imprisonment in a self-sustaining castle with a sex-addicted nymph who needed to be fucked good and hard just to stay healthy, they'd think he was crazy.

Of course, he was also stuck here with a vampire-hunting Guardian who would probably stake him if he knew the truth about Fitch's employment status. But considering the bleak and desolate jail cell that awaited him in DC, certainly without even a single one of these luxuries, this place was starting to look better and better.

His mind flashed to last night's incident. Sure, he'd thrust into Gladiolas's pussy when he'd felt Balin's fingers roaming around down there, effectively placing his balls in the other man's hand, but Balin hadn't moved away when he'd felt them arrive.

He'd *squeezed*.

And not just once, but twice. *Sweet Goddess Aphrodite*.

Fitch hadn't dwelled on it at the time, because the touch had sent him over the edge of oblivion.

But afterward, as he lay awake long into the night, it was all he could think about.

Crossing back to the bed, he watched his two beautiful roommates in wonder. They were covered by the thin sheet, but Fitch could see the outline of her hand grasping the long column of flesh tenting the fabric.

"Aww poor Balin needs relief," Gladiolas teased. Her arm moved as her hand stroked back and forth.

Balin's grin faded, and his eyes drifted shut.

He was like a lot of soldiers, Fitch thought. Baby-faced brawn, too noble for his own good. Beauty and youth wasted on battle. Only this soldier could transform himself into stone and a beastly form Fitch could only imagine. He hoped he'd get to see Balin's creature someday, if only to satisfy his curiosity.

Gladiolas tossed back the sheet to reveal the Guardian in all his impressive nakedness. She pushed onto her hands and knees and crawled down the bed to kneel between his legs, thrusting her sweet ass into the air.

Pulling her hair over her shoulder and into a ponytail with one hand, she bent over Balin's inhumanly long erection and licked it like an ice-cream cone.

As Fitch rounded the bed, her lovely ass beckoned him, her pink slit peeking between plump outer lips dusted with a sprinkling of golden blonde hair.

He knelt on the end of the bed and took her hips in his hands. Gladiolas tossed a happily surprised glance over her shoulder and gasped, pretending shock at his boldness. He angled between her legs, and she wriggled that gorgeous derriere, arched her back, and spread that pretty pussy toward him.

He took his cock in his hand and dragged it up and down, anointing himself in her moisture. A thrill raced through him at the sight of Balin's muscular legs spread to accommodate Gladiolas, and now him.

He bucked his hips, stabbing into Gladiolas. Only when his straining head landed against the gates of her womb did he realize he had taken her too ferociously.

She gulped over Balin's cock, and her body jerked.

"Pussy sore, love?" he asked.

She stopped sucking Balin to turn her head and nod. She immediately went back to sucking the Guardian but didn't ask him to stop. Instead, she arched her back and pushed her sweet cunt toward his thrusts.

He withdrew slowly, ignoring his cock's twitch of protest. Fitch then guided the length of his aching rod into the valley of her ass and drove upward, smearing her own moisture over the forbidden flesh. He took his time, making sure she was sufficiently lubricated and sufficiently warned.

Fitch leaned back and, after offering a tender kiss before the ultimate conquer, pressed his cockhead against the tightly puckered hole.

He tested her with a slight push, which her body resisted.

It's now or never, babe, he thought. Like dipping into a cold lake, you've just got to take the plunge.

He pushed forward. Her tight ass stretched, refused, and then suddenly he was in.

Gladiolas drew a sharp breath. Fitch held himself still and fought the urge to hammer deep.

The flesh here felt different, foreign, tight, but soft and pliant, unlike her strong pussy muscles, which were shaped to accommodate him and could milk his cock.

She bent trembling knees and pushed herself backward onto his shaft. The sight of his thick girth lodged in her ass was almost too much to take. He met her pressure with equal force, slowly sliding his engorged length inside her.

Her mysterious, dark channel was warm and soft. Her bowels tightened, squeezing him with forbidden love.

And then he felt it—a quivering, electrical sensation that ran through his whole body, a pleasure more intense than he had dreamed possible. So intense, he was reminded of emotions he hadn't experienced since he was human. He felt as though he were encased by a magnetic pull drawing him into Gladiolas and Balin.

It was more than just the two of them fucking her at the same time, he in one orifice and Balin in another; it was a connection so profound that he

understood, without alarm or surprise, the three of them were connected. Above his own desire for pleasure, Fitch could feel Gladiolas's vital need to please and the divine bliss coursing through Balin.

Fitch began a rhythmic rocking, pumping forward without withdrawing, gently inching himself deeper into Gladiolas. He wanted to be more intensely connected with them both. This awe-inspiring sensation surmounted his need for his own release.

In front of him, Gladiolas's shoulders rose and fell as she worked Balin harder with her mouth. He knew she felt it too.

He looked down at Balin's supine body. The other man's eyes were squeezed shut; pure rapture fused into his face. His arms were spread out to the sides, fists gripping the bedsheet. Fitch stared at the beautiful Guardian while pumping into Gladiolas's ass.

He could almost imagine the tight band circling the base of his cock, the soft flesh he rooted deep into, as Balin's.

That was his undoing. Fitch ground his teeth and bit back a groan as the seed spilled out of him. Gladiolas bucked backward against his cock, wriggling her hips to feel the thickness of him pull left and right. Her body rocked forward and back, increasing the motion on both their cocks. The Guardian gasped, pulling harder on the wadded sheet.

Fitch had never come so hard in his life. He could feel Gladiolas striving for more, as well. She rocked her hips back at him while her head bobbed up and down and groans of satisfaction rose from her throat.

She slurped over the enormous crown, and Balin shouted in pleasure. For a brief instant, she turned her head to the side to lick Balin's shaft. Fitch glimpsed of the man's purpled head, a pearly fountain of cum erupting, before Gladiolas greedily sucked him back into her mouth.

Fitch slowed his hips as the last drops were wrung out of him, not sure if he should pull out or let Gladiolas choose his dismount. He waited until she'd finished with Balin and eased the other man's spent cock from her mouth.

She tossed a wicked smile over her shoulder. "You finished back there, stud?"

"For now."

"You sure? 'Cause it feels like you could go awhile longer."

"I'm good, babe." Was she for real? "What do you want me to do?"

"Pull it out... Oh! Slowly, you naughty boy. Oh yeah, that's nice."

When he'd fully emerged from her body, she collapsed, trembling. "Holy cow."

Balin chuckled and sat up to scoop her up under the arms. He dragged her up the bed and tucked her close.

Apparently the Guardian had lost all that sickening bashfulness. Good. Nothing as shameful as a grown man afraid of a naked body.

He gathered her to his chest and stroked the hair away from her brow. "You are a precious gem."

Gladiolas murmured happily. "Always the same line after a guy sticks his dick down my throat."

Balin laughed. "Really?"

"No. Not really." She turned her head and kissed him. "Silly man."

Fitch crawled in behind her. He reached around her and grabbed the hem of the sheet. As he drew it over her, the tip of his thumb brushed over Balin's forearm. Before thinking, he flattened his hand and stroked his palm over the other man's shoulder as he drew the sheet over him. A thrill raced through his gut and shot out through all four limbs.

He jerked away, not sure what had possessed him to do that. It must have been that weird sensation, which was still swimming through his heated bloodstream.

Gladiolas rolled onto her back between them, sighing happily. "Wow. That was intense," she said with her eyes closed.

"I'll say," Fitch agreed, not sure how to put the feeling into words.

"I have never done anything like that," Balin ventured in a cautious voice.

Maybe he *was* still bashful. A week of unadulterated fucking would probably cure him of that.

"Nor have I," Fitch admitted. In all his centuries, loneliness had eaten away at him. When he did confess his nature to women, the horror in their eyes had cut so deep, he learned to avoid even casual sex.

A small part of him, while still disapproving, understood the appeal of the Palace. Were all vampires lonely like him? So lonely that they were driven to violate humankind?

Gladiolas reached up and draped her hand over his shoulder. "You two have lived a sheltered eight hundred years." She giggled.

"Was I too rough with you?" Fitch risked asking.

She smiled yet still didn't open her eyes. "No," she answered dreamily.

He stroked his hand over her velvet-soft breast. He leaned his body against her, trying to urge her onto her side. "Here, let me heal you."

She issued a soft murmur. "No."

He met Balin's vivid green eyes. They mirrored the concern he felt.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded, still smiling. "I like the burn. It's like I can still feel you."

"Sweetheart, I got carried away."

"We all did. That was wild." She opened her eyes and gazed into his. "It was like, when you penetrated me, the three of us became fused together." She turned her head to look at Balin. "Did you feel it?"

The Guardian nodded. His gaze flicked to Fitch's. "I felt *something*."

Her eyes drifted shut again. "It was wonderful."

Concern still nagged at Fitch. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "Gladiolas, I want you to feel no pain at all."

She rolled toward him and snaked her hands around his middle, snuggling close. "You're sweet, but it's a nice ache, really." She nuzzled against his chest. "Besides, I'd better get used to it. The Palace is gone. When we get back, there won't be anyone around to heal me anymore."

* * * * *

Gladiolas drifted off to sleep with an ache much deeper than the phantom burn of Fitch's long cock in her ass.

Her own words squeezed at her heart, though she hadn't truly expected either man to say he would keep her when they got home. She wasn't a pet, after all. She'd just come to feel like one after her treatment at the Palace. And they both had much more noble intentions for her, even if Fitch wouldn't admit it as readily as Balin.

No way was she going to some lab where scientists poked at her like a lab animal. When she got home, she was on her own. Her only chance to live without constant pain would be to find a vampire who'd survived the raid on the Palace and beg him to take her. There was nothing illegal in being an indentured servant to a vampire, if she was willing.

But after spending these magical days with Balin and Fitch, the thought of surrendering herself to another vampire male, or *any* male, sickened her.

These two mighty warriors had possessed her heart as completely as they'd possessed her body.

Maybe they would never get home. She smiled into the darkness. Wouldn't that be pure bliss?

Even as she had the thought, the sickening ache of Tourin withdrawal surged, a cruel reminder that life and bliss would never be said in the same sentence where she was concerned.

It had been less than an hour since Fitch had rammed into her ass and Balin shot his record-breaking flood of cum into her throat, yet here she was, feeling sick and achy already. The power that had surged through them when they were connected had pushed the pain away completely, but that miraculous energy had nothing to do with the speed in which the withdrawals returned.

The simple fact was undeniable. She was sick.

A scraping noise outside the door caught her attention. It was so quick and soft, it echoed through her memory as though imagined.

She sat up, holding the sheet to her breasts.

Fitch, lying on his stomach with his face angled at her, drew a deep breath halfway between a sigh and a snore. Maybe that was what she heard.

No, there it was again.

A scratch. Followed by a snuffling, like something was sniffing at the crack beneath the door.

Chapter Seven

Icy-cold fear doused Gladiolas.

Fitch came awake. He pushed up and looked at her. Immediately, he twisted his gaze to the door.

Grunting, then a growl.

Gladiolas banged on Balin's shoulder. He jerked awake.

Fitch launched from the bed. He ran two steps toward the door.

The bolt wasn't locked!

Balin disappeared from the other side of the bed.

Fitch, hesitating only a second, took two more strides and shoved the thick beam of wood through the metal cradle mounted to the wall.

At almost the same instant, something crashed against the other side of the door. The heavy wood shook, and the ancient hinges rattled.

Gladiolas yelped. She drew the sheet to her face and pressed her knuckles against her mouth.

“Vampire!”

Fitch turned and caught the lance blade Balin tossed him. He whirled back toward the door as the beast on the other side hurtled itself against it a second, and then a third, time.

The creature let loose an unearthly wail that made her blood run cold. Gladiolas scurried off the bed, dragging the sheet with her. Fitch backed up, and Balin advanced until the men stood abreast.

Gladiolas stumbled backward and fell, then decided the corner where the floor met the wall was as safe as any other place in the room.

Whatever it was trotted away, its beastly claws scraping a retreat against the stone landing outside.

She finally tore her eyes away from the door and glanced from Balin to Fitch.

Both men stood in a battle-ready crouch, muscles rippling, erections pointing toward the sky. Long moments of silence passed. Fitch looked from Balin to her. Balin did the same.

Her adrenaline racing, Gladiolas couldn't help but smile at the sight of them. Her two fierce protectors, butt-naked, cocks standing tall.

Her smile gave way to a laugh, which gave way to hysterics.

Balin looked at her like she were crazy, but Fitch chuckled along with her.

Still chortling, she clambered to her feet.

"I'd say that door stays locked at all times from now on," Fitch said, and Gladiolas erupted all over again.

"Yes, as the question of whether or not they can get inside has been answered," Balin stated.

"They?" Gladiolas gulped, suddenly sober.

"We knew that already," Fitch answered.

"We did?"

"We surmised," Balin explained.

"You mean *you* surmised," she shot back. "Without me."

"Might as well tell her," Fitch prompted.

Balin sighed. "There was a pile of animal feces in the great hall."

"A *giant* pile," Fitch added. He threw a pointed look at Balin.

The Guardian scowled but relaxed from his battle-ready stance. "With human bones in it," he finished.

Gladiolas could only stare, eyes wide. How could they not tell her this?

"Why didn't I see it?"

"Our first night here, we didn't let you see it. After we departed the great hall and the enchantment refreshed the room, it was gone. Like the moldy food left from Count Zlatko's final trip inside."

"So, you were trying to protect me."

Both men nodded.

On the verge of telling them both not to do her any favors, Gladiolas remembered what a wreck she'd been when she saw the moldy dead vampire sitting at the end of the table, reigning over his moldy dead food like a moldy dead king.

She drew the sheet around herself and approached them. "I suppose that's fair. But I'd like to make a small request. Please don't keep things from me." She eyed each one pointedly. "So if you have any idea what that thing, or *things*, are, please speak now."

"Hellhounds," Balin supplied. "Undead creatures assigned to protect this castle from escape or intrusion."

"Hellhounds," Fitch repeated, shaking his head. "I thought you said no one could get in or out."

Balin scowled. "I know only what I remember from childhood stories about this place. Much of that is probably derived from rumor."

"Well, you knew enough about it to get us here." Fitch stalked across the room and began pulling on his clothes.

As though he suddenly felt vulnerable as the only one still naked, Balin crossed to the other side of the room and jerked his clothes on as well.

"For that I apologized," he growled as he stomped his feet into Doc Martens-style boots. "I thought I made it clear I had no intention of bringing you along."

Gladiolas suspected Balin meant to intimate Fitch was unwelcome.

"Yeah. Got that, Guardian. The fact remains, I'm here, so is *that thing*. And I have no intention of letting it eat me for supper."

"What are we going to do?" Gladiolas interjected, trying to stop an argument before it started. "Are we trapped up here in this room? We'll starve!"

"Wrong. *He'll* starve," Fitch corrected. He finished tying the laces on his own heavy boots with a savage yank and stood. "You and I can feed off each other."

"I can't survive on your blood!"

"And correct me if I'm wrong," Balin snapped, "but you seem to have a preference for roasted turkey."

"So you're saying I should eat *you*?"

Balin narrowed his eyes. "Perhaps you don't fully understand my powers. I can transform into stone and go months without food."

The men squared off, glaring at each other.

This was going terribly wrong. She hated seeing them fight like this.

She looked at Fitch. "You wouldn't let him starve, would you?" *Please, say you wouldn't.*

Fitch relaxed his shoulders. His features were still severe, and when he spoke, the words were clipped, but they were the right words. "No. I wouldn't let him starve."

Gladiolas smiled. She skipped over and kissed him. "That's my sweet vampire."

She turned to Balin. "And you would feed from him, if you had to." She crossed to him, slipped an arm around his neck, and kissed him too.

When she drew away, he sighed. "If I had to...yes. But only if I had no other choice."

"I don't think it'll progress to that," Fitch ventured. "We're armed, and they are just animals."

"They are the size of steer—"

Fitch held up a hand. "I know." He glanced nervously at Gladiolas.

She managed a smile, even though the fear mixing with the withdrawal effects made her want to throw up. "I think if I were here with anyone else, I would be more worried. Not that I'm *not* worried. I am. But you two have battled magical creatures before, right?"

"Once or twice," Fitch answered with a shrug.

Balin managed a wry smile. "In ancient Ireland, it was how we exercised."

Fitch narrowed his eyes. "So did we, and then *we* roasted them in a pit."

"On my fifth birthday, I got a baby as a pet."

Gladiolas laughed, thankful for their teasing. "Then I'm safe, right?"

Fitch hefted the lance blade and rested the butt end on the floor. "Perfectly."

"Good, because I want some more of that Reuben pie."

Balin stalked over to the dresser drawers standing far against the wall. He drew open the top drawer, then each one below. "I would feel better if you had some clothing."

He pulled out a drab-looking shirt that appeared to be made of burlap. After holding it up and deciding it would suffice, he tossed it to her.

"Itchy," Gladiolas commented. "That old vampire's? Creepy."

"Buck up, little one," Fitch teased.

"Hey, I'm the most bucked up one of us all." She pulled it over her head. It reminded her of the pirate shirts worn by the sexy heroes on the covers of romance novels. It was much too large, but she knotted the ties at the wrists tightly and was able to keep the sleeves from hanging over her hands. She caught the breeches Balin tossed at her.

"Yikes." They were nothing like modern breeches, and pulling them on without panties felt like wearing a sandpaper thong. Thankfully the silk stockings he tossed her next were a little softer.

"These belonged to a man? They seem a bit feminine."

"Blech," Fitch said, dropping onto the chaise to watch her dress. "I hated the Edwardian period."

"I spent much of it in Venice," Balin volunteered. "Trust me, it was worse there." He crossed the room to the armoire while Gladiolas sat in the chair beside Fitch and worked the stockings on. They were soft, but not stretchy like modern-day pantyhose.

"You're supposed to put those on before the trousers," Fitch told her.

"And they go with suspenders I didn't think you wanted to wear," Balin added. He turned around from the armoire, holding lace-up ankle boots. "Lucky for you, Count Zlatko had small feet."

"This is a little weird, wearing his clothes. What if they have magical powers?"

"Even if they did, the castle would strip them." Balin handed her one shoe, which she slipped on her foot, and then the other. They were a little roomy but, when laced up, wouldn't slip off.

Gladiolas stood and, lifting her arms, twirled in a circle. "What do you think?"

Fitch grinned as he got to his feet. "Adorable." He caught her hand and brought it to his lips. "Only a true lady could pull off this look."

She pretended a bashful giggle and gave a curtsy like she'd seen in the movies. "Why, thank you, sir." She then batted her eyelashes at Balin and offered the other hand.

"Simply lovely." He kissed her knuckles, then hauled her against his body. Before she knew it, both men had her pinned between them and were kissing and fondling her.

“Oooh, if I'd known you would react this way, I would have worn them from the start.”

“Are you hungry, m'lady?” Balin asked her.

“Famished.”

He retrieved his sword from the dresser top. “Ready?”

Fitch turned to door with the lance blade pointed. “Ready.”

Balin listened at the crack where wood met stone, then cautiously slid back the bolt and pulled open the door.

With both men in front holding weapons at ready, they made their way onto the landing in silence. The stairs were empty, but the strong odor of urine made Gladiolas gag.

“It has scented the door,” Balin whispered.

“Great.” Fitch snorted. “Marking its claim on its next meal.”

They started cautiously down the steps. A sudden banging from below made them freeze on the stone staircase. The stairs were steep, she realized as she fought a wave of vertigo, and with the open side plummeting to the stone floor below, treacherous.

The banging sounded again, sending the hairs all over her body prickling.

Balin motioned with two fingers. It was coming from the hallway leading to the tomb. Gladiolas bit her lip. Wonderful.

But when they descended the shallow steps, they saw it was the door to the scullery banging open, caught in a draft that seemed to originate beneath the castle. Balin trotted down the steps, pulled it firmly shut, then secured the bolt.

“Do you think that's how it got in?” she asked.

Balin considered it for a long moment. “It seems likely.”

“That draft could mean a way out,” Fitch said, voicing the thought on her mind, and she was sure, Balin's as well.

But he didn't comment. "Let's go to the great hall and gather supplies to take back to the bedchamber." He turned, urging them back up the narrow hallway.

They loaded several bowls with food, and Gladiolas took the turkey platter. Fitch lodged the glass decanter of white wine in his elbow—the red she'd learned wasn't wine but the count's blood source—and piled the sweet potato mash on top of a bowl of what looked like bread stuffing.

"What I wouldn't give for a cheeseburger," she said idly.

"Pizza, gooey with cheese," Fitch added longingly.

"Oh yeah," she agreed.

"Have you ever tried Beechwood's in San Francisco?" Fitch asked her. "It's the best."

"The food here isn't so bad," Balin cut in. "You should eat more of this vegetable casserole."

"I don't like green beans," Fitch said, "but this potato mash is okay."

"You know, there's a rumor vampires don't eat," Balin ventured.

"Yeah, there's also a rumor we don't ejaculate, and I think I've squelched that one."

Gladiolas beamed. "You certainly have."

Once back in the bedchamber, they piled the bowls on top of the small parlor tables. Balin moved the count's possessions from the dresser so Gladiolas could set the turkey platter on top.

Balin immediately went back to the books they'd collected, but Fitch settled down with a fork and dug into the sweet potatoes.

Gladiolas removed the count's clothing and folded it neatly beside the bed. She then fashioned the toga around herself from the sheet off the freshly made bed and sat before him on her knees.

The cotton sheet was much softer, but a small part of her was embarrassed to admit that after all her time at the Palace, she felt more comfortable in loose, flowing garments.

"Tell me about life in the Dark Ages," she prompted.

Fitch considered her. "What do you want to know?"

"Well...surely there have to be inconsistencies between the history books and what really happened."

"Of course. There's tons."

"So like, what really happened to the settlers of Roanoke?"

Fitch laughed. "I have no idea."

"I think she wants to know if vampires ate them," Balin goaded nastily.

Gladiolas swatted at his leg. "I do not!" She grinned at Fitch. "I don't think vampires ate them."

"I know a guy who settled in Virginia in 1585. I'll ask him."

"What did you do for dental floss before it was invented?" She was grateful for the salt, mint, and baking soda concoction in the count's small cloisonné bowl, even if it did make her uncomfortable to put any of the late occupant's personal toiletries in her mouth. Still, she longed for a modern toothbrush and a package of *Reach Cleanpaste* floss.

"We didn't," Fitch told her. "Not only was dental care for the wealthy, but it was regarded differently throughout history. For a long time, the upper classes believed a person's lineage determined if their dental health was weak or strong."

"In fact, that was the belief up until quite recently," Balin added. "Recently to us, anyhow. When you've lived more than eight hundred years, time takes on a different meaning."

"You two are both pretty close in age, considering those terms," Gladiolas said, mostly to herself. "Fitch, when were you born?"

"Eleven eighteen."

“And you, Balin?”

The Guardian was eyeing Fitch curiously, though he appeared deep in thought. “Eleven hundred and thirty-six.”

“And in all that time, over eight hundred years, you two never met?”

Fitch shifted uncomfortably under Balin's probing stare. He jerked his gaze away and forced a chuckle. “It's a big world, honey. Before the communications age, it was twice as big. Being only twenty-four, you wouldn't understand that.”

“I'm not a baby,” she said with a mock scowl. “Before I went into the Palace, I was a college student. What about you guys? Any formal schooling?”

“Yeah, vampire. Did you go to night school?”

Fitch frowned. “As a matter of fact, I'm a medical doctor. Immunology.”

“Looking for a cure?” The sarcasm had left Balin's voice, but still the question was harsh.

“Originally, yes. But I've come to terms with what I am.” He dropped his spoon into the empty potato bowl. “I sure wish you would.”

Balin closed his book but kept it marked with the tip of his thumb. “Considering vampires killed my parents, I think I've done pretty well here with you. After all, you still have your head.”

* * * * *

To hide the fact that the sickness was growing stronger with each passing hour, Gladiolas took the textbook she was reading to bed and propped herself up on the decorative pillows. If she tightened her stomach muscles and let her breath out slowly, she could fight off the sharp pains now stabbing through her upper body every ten minutes or so. As long as they stayed across the room, the men couldn't hear the tiny gasps escaping her.

The reading was slow, but as the time passed, her memory of French sharpened. She relished the time as study; perhaps back in the “real” world she could use it to get a job. She thought back to San Francisco and the

financial area, where she'd spent a lot of time in the evenings around the various rave locations. There was an Air France office on Market Street where she might apply.

Fitch took a break to take a bath, and Balin put his book down to do a gazillion push-ups. She set her own book on her lap and stared at them shamelessly, even though it stoked the longing in her blood to an uncomfortable level.

They were masculine perfection, each with his own unique charm. Fitch's looks were rugged and chiseled and a little bit dangerous, his black wavy hair a bit too long in back. The crisscross of scars mapping his back added to the air of mystery emulated in his dark eyes.

Balin was golden movie-star perfection, with a smile that made her insides melt and vivid green eyes fringed with thick, dark lashes she could stare into for eternity. He had the most kissable mouth she'd ever seen on a man and the most beautiful penis on earth. His tool was thick, slightly curved when it stood tall, and a smooth creamy white color topped with a blush red bulb the same color as his small, flat nipples.

Fitch emerged from the tub and shaved with the count's cream and straight razor. He lifted the stopper from a small decorative bottle, sniffed it, then dabbed the thin oil inside onto the backs of his hands and rubbed it in.

Balin pushed to his feet to do jumping jacks. His forearms bulged from the push-ups, and his bare chest glistened.

Gladiolas's mouth watered for each man. In amiable silence, Fitch dressed and returned to his chair. He poured himself a brandy and picked up the book he'd left lying open.

Gladiolas went back to her own book and read until her eyes grew blurry. It was a French translation of the chronicles of the Russian villages in the Vrehnaza region, which she could only guess was where Château Arnonne sat.

The historical accounts read like *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, but these stories horrific and, more often than not, with sad and tragic endings.

Her eyes fell across a familiar name, and Gladiolas sucked in a sharp breath.

Fitch had been stretching his back. He froze, midreach, and looked at her.

"What is it?"

"This story I've been reading—it's about Boragnis." She swallowed before reading the passage. "The Demon of the Mountain." She glanced up. "This account is dated 1620."

"It's an ancient name, given him by a people who have since died out," Fitch supplied. "He's been called many names throughout history."

She read on slowly, translating into English. "The Demon of the Mountain emerges from his castle lair hidden in the mountains every one hundred years, whence he descends upon the village of Rezhahy..."

"Rez-kaa-hee," Fitch sounded out for her.

"...to choose a new slave. In 1391, a lottery was established among the villagers to select five women...to bear offspring as an offering to the demon. Of those offspring, the female-born are raised in seclusion by priests until the age of eighteen, at which time the Demon of the Mountain returns to take his pick between them."

She glanced up at Fitch. After a moment's hesitation, he nodded. "Unfortunately, a true account."

She looked back to the page and went on. "The Demon of the Mountain is a local cobbler by the name of Boragnis Veskovich, who was cast out of Rezhahy in 1109 for defiling a local maiden to death. He appealed to Baron Vladimir Valtchev, a known vampire, promising to surrender fidelity if the baron would transform him into a night feeder. But once turned, Boragnis betrayed the baron and killed him. Boragnis himself is said to be the evil spawn of a demon and a female slave."

"That last part the VSS doesn't believe," Fitch told them. "But the villagers were completely wiggled out by him."

"Because of his demon blood, Boragnis is more powerful than ten vampires and can transform into a hideous beast of indestructible nature. The female sacrifice serves as his slave until her hundredth year, at which time he devours her."

She paused and took a deep breath. Balin and Fitch stared at her with grim expressions. She knew what went through their minds; this was a fate she herself had narrowly escaped.

"Though many believed the tale of Boragnis Veskovich to be fable, the death of Miloslava Ivanova, the only surviving female born of the lottery of 1491, caused panic in the village, which quickly spread throughout the country. When Boragnis returned in 1509, he ransacked the village until he found a female who suited him. A small band of villagers resisted, and nineteen were slaughtered."

Balin looked at Fitch. "Did you know this?"

He shrugged. "More or less."

"Gladiolas, you have nothing to fear from him." Balin spoke the words firmly. His reassurance warmed the chill that had crept into her bones. "The Guardian headquarters in San Francisco is enchanted much like this castle. No vampire can enter its walls. We will protect you."

"And my agency will do whatever it can to help," Fitch cut in. "The man is a monster who committed countless crimes. There's a bounty on his head. He can't go anywhere without a posse of VSS ready to come down on his ass."

Gladiolas closed the book and set it at the edge of the bed as though it were a vile thing whose horror might rub off on her.

She had never considered what it would have been like to be taken away by Boragnis. The three times she'd endured the excruciating torment of his ferocious needs had seemed like the end of the world. To imagine that could

have turned into a century of unimaginable rape, only to be devoured by those enormous brown teeth in the end, was incomprehensible.

"Maybe the Guardians have already taken care of him," Gladiolas whispered. "Hopefully, he's already dead."

A shudder rolled through her. The Tourin's agonizing pain, precariously close, served as a cruel reminder of all that had been done to her.

Fitch launched from his chair and crossed to her in three long strides. Without a word, he pulled her from the bed and into his arms.

The ripples of pain receded, pushed away as much by the physical contact as his concerned embrace. He let go much too quickly, but Gladiolas found herself turned and fitted into another set of strong arms.

She slid into Balin's embrace and struggled over a sob. He held her gently and nuzzled into her hair.

Her heart soared with love for both her heroic protectors. Gladiolas let herself cry, exhausted from trying to hold the pain at bay. She couldn't fight the tears too.

Fitch pushed up behind her, and the two men sandwiched her between their powerful bodies. Balin's incredible erection pushed against her abdomen, Fitch's randy sword pressed against her bottom. She slid her hands under Balin's shirt as she lifted her mouth to his.

"My years at the Palace passed in a daze," she whispered against his lips. She turned her head and received Fitch's kiss at her cheek. "But these few days have been a wonderful, vivid fantasy. I'll never forget this time with you."

Two sets of hands slid beneath her toga. The fear left for desire, the pain for passion. Warmth spread through her as they roamed over her body. Balin's large hands palmed her bottom and pulled her hips against his. They circled and kneaded gently, offering pleasure without seeking it in return.

Fitch, whom she'd learned, to her great delight, loved to fondle her breasts, covered them with his palms and squeezed. He pressed his chest

against her back, pushing her closer to Balin. He breathed deeply of her hair, savoring her.

Cradled between them, the sickness breezed away. Their tenderness and caring, more than the physical contact, lifted the pain from her heart as well as her body.

That warm and tingly electric sensation soared in with a zing. Gladiolas knew one of her lovers had come into contact with the other. Her heart swelled as their caressing continued, and neither man jerked away.

There were emotions between them, she realized, even if neither was ready to confess it. They'd both admitted that they had felt the connection the first time all three had been joined.

Gladiolas never wanted to be a slave again, but her desire to please Balin and Fitch, to bring these two men closer together, surmounted her wishes for independence. They both bestowed such caring she wanted to return twice as much.

She pushed Balin's shirt up, and he tossed it over his head. She then twisted in their arms and pulled Fitch's shirt out of his jeans and urged it up his chest.

The knot at her shoulder released, she wasn't sure by whose doing and didn't care, and the sheet fell to her feet.

Fitch bent his head and suckled her nipple. Gladiolas leaned back against Balin. Her eyes drifted shut as warm ecstasy enveloped her.

His hand circled her waist, and his long fingers spread across her stomach. She felt his breath at her ear as he watched the other man over her shoulder. The electrical zing flared again—Fitch had leaned close and pressed his belly to hers, with Balin's hand between.

She fumbled at Fitch's snap. He leaned back to tear open his fly and shove his jeans down his hips.

Gladiolas lifted her arm to circle Balin's neck and pull him close. She met Fitch's questioning gaze.

"Together."

Incredibly, it was Fitch who asked, "Are you sure?"

She smiled. "Absolutely."

His eyes drifted shut as he bent to nuzzle her neck. "Don't say no, Guardian."

Balin caught her earlobe in his teeth. "I wouldn't dream of it."

Fitch's tongue touched a warm, wet spot on her neck. "You call the shots, babe."

"Balin first."

Behind her, he drew a long breath. She turned her head to address him while one hand urged his between her legs. "Take my pussy first. Feel how wet I am. Use my moisture."

His embrace tightened in a silent message. His hands left her, and she heard him removing his clothing. Warmer and magically silken, his naked body came back against her.

She bent forward, placing both hands on Fitch's shoulders.

Balin grasped her hips, and a moment later, she felt his thickness prodding the entrance to her body. She gave a slight wriggle of her hips to help him past her outer lips. Once his rounded head met the wetness seeping out of her, he increased his pressure. Sweet ache blossomed as he stretched her wide and filled her pussy with his incredible mass.

She sighed as pleasure traveled with his thick shaft across the walls of her vagina. Delight, mysterious and ancient, rolled outward through her soft muscles.

She relaxed, and Fitch cradled her against his chest, accepting her weight. He collected her hair and pulled it aside, and now it was his turn to watch over

her shoulder as Balin slowly and gently pushed himself deep, coating his colossal cock in her nectar.

He withdrew in a slow, languid caress. Gladiolas let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding.

He grasped himself with a hand and pushed the tip of his cock back and forth across her sopping pussy lips, soaking himself with her slick nectar. Timidly, his rounded tip pressed into the crease of her ass. She felt the stickiness of her own cream trail across her skin in a deliberate journey toward her sphincter.

Anxiety made her tremble. Balin was bigger than Fitch. She knew it would hurt, but she wanted to feel him there desperately.

He pressed against the tight band, but Balin was reluctant.

"You'll have to push hard," she told him, but her words were premature. He gave a quick thrust of his hips and breached her resistant orifice. A shock of pain made a flash of light pop in her eyes, and before she could stop herself, she cried out.

"Sweetheart," Balin breathed against her ear. The pressure of his hips halted.

As if to help, Fitch leaned in and pressed her backward against Balin. "Easy, baby. The pain will fade."

But it was such a glorious pain, so different from the miserable withdrawal effects of the Tourin that she not only welcomed it, she reveled in it.

"I'll stop," Balin offered.

"No! Please don't."

He didn't withdraw, but he didn't probe deeper either.

"Gladiolas, this is such a beautiful gift; you have to know how much we treasure you for it."

She closed her eyes and let the bright lights behind her lids overtake her. He'd said "we."

"Hell yes, babe," Fitch said close to her ear. "You're rocking our world."

Later, she would explain the gift was theirs to her, but now was the time for enjoyment.

She arched her back, testing her ability to take Balin's huge cock deeper. Her pressure didn't exactly cause pain, but she didn't have the strength to do it herself. With one hand on Fitch's shoulder, she reached back and cradled Balin's neck.

"I need you to push, lover. I can't do it myself. Don't be afraid. I want all of you."

Balin seemed to have lost his bashfulness. With his hands bracing her hips, he sank deeper into her ass with solid-steel strength. It seemed his cock grew wider like a cone, stretching and stretching until she felt overfilled. The room began to spin.

Gladiolas leaned back against him. He circled her rib cage and cupped her breasts, holding her weight in his upper arms.

"How does it feel?" she asked him.

"Different. Strange," he spoke against her cheek. "Nice."

Gladiolas felt his words rumbling through his chest against her back.

"Have you ever done it this way before?"

"No. You're my first."

"Oh." She sighed. "Good."

She bent one leg, sliding it up Fitch's thigh. He caught her behind the knee and held it against his hip. Taking cue, he hoisted the other. Now they held her weight completely.

"Your turn," she whispered.

Fitch eased closer, bending over her. "Sweetheart. You're an angel."

His cock found her soaking pussy, landing perfectly at the divot of her well. She looked down to see the long shaft pointing toward the center of her body like a spear.

He pushed forward, every muscle in his body tight like a steel cord as he eased inside. Gladiolas could feel him fighting his natural urge to ram himself deep.

He slid through her weeping moisture easily. His breath came out in a slow *whoosh* timed with his passage to the hilt.

She was filled to capacity, stretched beyond what she'd thought possible. Never, not even at the Palace, had she experienced double penetration. Her heart sang with joy that Balin and Fitch were her first.

The energy burst, coursing between their joined bodies even more powerfully this time.

"Jesus," Fitch groaned. "What a rush."

They squeezed her between the rock-hard walls of their chests, Balin holding her upper body and Fitch holding her legs.

Each man shifted closer and aligned himself beneath her. As they drove upward, Gladiolas felt her body weight shift to her pussy and ass with a rolling surge toward orgasm. Fitch reached the ceiling of her cunt and lifted her with the tight plum of his cock. Balin's enormous girth had reached its deepest possible penetration, and her tight asshole would let him no deeper.

"Oh!"

"Too much, darling?" Fitch asked.

"No. Just right."

"Good, because I couldn't stop right now if my life depended on it." To prove his point, he gave a jolt with his hips.

"Ah!"

"Sweet gods," Balin said over a gasp. As though bouncing back from Fitch's thrust, he also thrust gently. The two men were seesawing inside her.

“Oh yes! Incredible!”

They built a rhythm that she sensed was born of a need to pleasure her, while at the same time, unable to resist seeking their own releases.

The energy surges were coming in steady pulses as though the electricity of their connection had built to a full charge.

She knew both men were coming into contact at multiple points, and even if they were to be embarrassed about it later, right now they were consumed by the earthshaking sensations overwhelming their bodies.

“Can you feel each other?” she dared.

“Oh God yes,” Fitch growled. “It's like he's fucking my cock with your body.”

His ready and enthusiastic answer delighted her. Already their push-pull motion had consumed her entire lower half. Ticklish, orgasmic waves gripped her, shooting upward through the soft flesh of her sex.

She relaxed her body and lay back against Balin, letting the men support her entirely. They captivated every one of the muscles from her rib cage down.

“Closer,” she urged them. “Get closer.”

“I'm going to come,” Balin groaned at her ear. “I want to come inside you.”

“Oh yes, both of you, at the same time.”

“We'll wait for you,” Fitch ground out through clenched teeth. “Or die trying.”

“I've been coming for the last ten minutes,” she practically screamed. The rapture consuming her body rendered her giddy. “I need you to empty yourselves inside me!”

Pulses of fire and light engulfed her. She closed her eyes, concentrating on nothing but the push and release of both men. Their rhythm had changed; now they thrust toward each other and withdrew at the same time, making her body throb like the heart connecting them.

Balin ground out his ecstasy in her ear as the pressure in her ass grew; she knew it was his long streams of cum filling her bowels. He gave a final plunge, forcing her sphincter wider with a pinch of pain, then held himself fast. His cock twitched in time with his eruptions, severe at first as long jets spewed into her, then softer and quicker as the last of his cum spurted out.

Fitch's body grew hot and slicked with sweat. He gasped as he fell forward, now both of them supported by Balin. He drove his hips with strong, quick thrusts until he was fucking her pussy with the tip of his cock. His movement, too, became labored as he poured into her, then, at last, slid deep to rest inside her pussy.

For long moments, they stood together, panting, trembling, in divine bliss. Gladiolas didn't open her eyes, content to wait until both men made their wishes known.

Balin was the first to move. "Give her to me," he whispered. His hands cupped her thighs and lifted her off Fitch's still-erect cock. Immediately her body felt like a deflating balloon.

Then Fitch's hands were under her ass cheeks, cradling her while Balin withdrew. A slow burn accompanied his exit, and then her body convulsed with the too-sudden absence of their heavy masses.

Feeling herself still sandwiched between two strong bodies, though now carried in their arms, she kept her eyes closed and drifted into sweet oblivion.

She was set down upon the hard wooden seat of the garderobe. Long past bashfulness and content with the knowledge that everything placed there immediately vanished, she expelled Balin's cum from her bowels and felt Fitch's trickling out of her pussy.

"Fill the tub," she heard Balin whisper.

He lifted her into his arms again, and Gladiolas was set down into warm water that continued to rise around her.

Hands gently gathered her hair—Fitch's, she guessed—and a folded towel was placed under her neck at the edge of the tub.

Four loving hands rubbed and caressed, bathing every inch of her. Roaming and exploring, they traveled over her most private areas with the authority of the men who knew her best.

She had never felt so loved in all her life.

Balin lifted her from the tub. Both men carefully blotted her dry. Her body met the soft mattress, and fatigue overtook her.

Fitch climbed in next to her; she could tell it was him by his scent. She drifted, listening to the crackling hearth and the splashing of water as Balin bathed himself.

She must have dozed, because she awoke to the sinking of the mattress as Balin climbed in on the other side.

Still holding her eyes closed, she lay happily between them, content and at peace.

She felt Balin's breath on her cheek and knew he was propped on his elbow, looking down at her.

"You know I didn't mean what I said literally," Fitch said cautiously. "I mean, that's what it felt like, but I knew you weren't fucking me with her body. It was just the moment."

"I know," came Balin's simple response.

A brief hesitation, where she could feel Fitch perched to go on. "But there is something happening...when we're all together like that."

"Yes."

"Something powerful."

"Yes."

"Do you like it?"

Balin paused. "Yes."

Gladiolas smiled secretively.

"What do you think it is?" Fitch asked him.

"I do not know."

"Magic," she said, rolling closer to Balin.

"Little minx!" He pulled her close with the arm he'd slipped beneath her.

"Our little angel has a devilish side," Fitch said. He rolled up behind her so that their bodies were all pressed close again. It was the most wonderful sensation she'd ever known.

"You know something?"

"What?" they asked in unison.

"At first, you took turns with me. Now you're sharing me." She pecked a kiss against Balin's mouth. "I like it."

Fitch chuckled. "Roll over, babe. I'm going to heal you."

She came fully awake and craned to look at him. "No. If you do, I won't be able to feel you anymore."

Balin suddenly grabbed her and dragged her onto his chest. She gave a squeak of surprise. Before she could struggle free, he bent his legs at the knees and forced hers open. Sprawled across him facedown, she couldn't close her legs or free herself.

"Hold her down," Fitch said with a mischievous edge to his voice.

"Traitor! You're supposed to be on my side."

"I am," Balin said with a wicked gleam in his eye matching Fitch's.

Fitch rose to his knees and shifted down the bed. With a strong hand placed on either ass cheek, he spread her wide.

She squealed in protest. "You brat!"

"You didn't actually believe I wasn't."

She struggled. Balin took her wrists and drew them over his head. "She's all yours."

“Ooh! So this is how it is, is it?”

Her words cut off as Fitch's tongue slid into her pussy. The combination of that strong muscle poking into her burning genitals and the heady sensation of the healing properties in his saliva made her fall instantly still.

“Oh. *Oh my.*”

He laved her with his tongue before pushing deep again, then traced up and down her slit before moving upward and circling her anus teasingly. Her body turned into a rigid, straining, trembling mass of nerves.

Fitch pushed his tongue into her ass. Every muscle relaxed, and she collapsed on Balin.

“Oooohhh.”

She closed her eyes as tiny explosions lit behind her lids.

He teased her quivering sphincter, poking lightly, then flicking. Licking circles, then pushing in, long and deep.

She could tell right away that he wasn't like the vampires at the Palace. He wasn't practiced in the quick and thorough healing of slaves after using them. But he knew how to provide relief, and quite obviously, he enjoyed doing it.

Where he washed away the ache that helped stay the withdrawals, he also brought a delightful orgasmic tremor that started in her soft tissues and shook outward like an earthquake.

“Oh. Oh my. Oh my God!”

“Do you still want him to stop?” Balin teased. “Fitch, I think she wants you to stop.”

“God no! Don't you dare!”

She arched her back, strained to build on the pleasure, then collapsed as a shudder ran from shoulders to hips. The sparkling sensation, like a low-level electrical static emanating from the point where his tongue touched her, sent her into that dreamy oblivion she remembered from the Palace.

She felt like a recovering addict trying to resist the sweet pull but reveling in the high after a long dry spell and wondering why she wanted to quit.

This time, when oblivion pulled at her, she let it take her.

* * * * *

He stood at the window staring into the night sky. Four hundred miles to the north, Château Arnonne was invisible, hidden by mountains, clouds, and sky.

Still, its energy sang like a beacon, and he would swear a crescent of blue magic illuminated the horizon where it sat.

In three hundred years, he had not felt such powerful magnetism from the enchanted prison. All vampires in the realm knew the moment Count Zlatko had died. The castle's magic had sputtered and stalled like an old machine in need of oil. Now, he could sense the three beings there, and he knew who they were. The energy had surged stronger and more powerfully in the last hour.

And he knew why.

He squeezed his fists, digging his nails into his palms.

They were fucking her. *His* precious little nymph.

Not in a thousand years had he discovered anyone like her. He'd been to all the Nordic countries and still never seen a petite white angel with moon-gossamer hair and sky blue eyes like Gladiolas's.

Her beauty was unearthly. She was fragile and delicate, yet able to take his entire length deep inside her body and always eager to satisfy his most intense needs.

He would never give her up.

"You shouldn't have even come here. If they find you... Borgy...Borgy, are you listening?"

Boragnis shifted the belt on his Gucci trousers, easing the discomfort of his erection. The powerful stiffness was born of more than his eagerness to fuck; he couldn't believe his luck that it truly was Gladiolas at Arnonne.

When that bastard VSS agent and one of those damned Guardians had disappeared with her, he never imagined that they would transport directly to his homeland. Even when he'd heard whisperings among the vampires that Arnonne was again alive, he hadn't expected it was Gladiolas and the two interlopers.

But when he'd reached Romania, he'd known. She was his, and he could sense her, practically smell the musky aroma of her sweet pussy across all those miles.

Gladiolas would again be his. For eternity, this time.

"Every agency in the country is looking for you. You can't go home, and you can't stay here." Savya scowled. "You must leave the country."

The caverns beneath his castle were known only to him. In the nineteenth century, he'd had lavish chambers built deep within the earth in the maze of tunnels where no one would ever find them and the sun would never penetrate, complete with a room of sex machines the size of a commercial gymnasium.

Gladiolas would surely appreciate the complexity of the devices in her new Palace.

"I plan to," he lied to his host.

He drank back the two-hundred-year-old American whiskey in one mouthful. It burned pleasingly as it slid down his throat.

He would enjoy tearing out the Guardian's heart. It was the filet mignon of human flesh. The vampire he might keep around as a pet until he grew bored of him. It had been a long time since he'd enjoyed a male. He'd been too distracted by Gladiolas while at the Palace to indulge. Besides, he preferred his male playthings unwilling. And the icing on the cake—he could be as brutal as he wished to another vampire without worry of killing him.

He set down his glass and faced his host. “But first I have business I must attend to.”

Chapter Eight

"I am going into the tunnel."

Balin lay on his side with his head propped on his elbow beside a sleeping Gladiolas, his position mirrored Fitch's on her other side. He lifted his eyes to meet the vampire's curious expression.

He watched Fitch's eyes flick over his shoulder to the shuttered window. "When it gets dark—"

"Alone."

Balin's gaze fell on Gladiolas. She seemed tragically young and innocent while asleep, yet even now he could see hints of the Tourin's wretched pull marring the smoothness of her brow. She uttered a nearly inaudible murmur, and her lips pursed.

"The best thing I can do for her—for you both—is to find help."

The vampire's brows knit. "We need you to transport us out of here the same way we came in."

"The chances I can succeed in that are next to none."

"What are you going to do, cart me out of here in a coffin? I can't exactly hop in the back of a limo for an afternoon drive to the airport and spend two days traveling from fucking nowhere. I'm a *vampire*."

"Gladiolas is my first concern," Balin said, keeping his voice level. "She is ill. She needs medical help. There are others at the citadel more powerful than me who can be sent for you after we return."

"Right. Like those people are going to help me." Fitch rolled onto his back. "They'll transport up here, all right. Each of them carrying a wooden stake."

"If you truly are who you say you are, you have nothing to fear."

Fitch snorted and let his eyes drift shut. "There's a reason your people don't talk about the VSS. Your boss may know about us, but he doesn't like us. Governmentally sanctioned or not, we're still vampires."

"My leader is a diplomatic and understanding man." Balin reached over and placed his hand on Fitch's hard biceps. "And I will vouch for you."

Almost at once, he realized he had gone too far. He drew his hand away.

Fitch's features revealed nothing. "Yeah, thanks, Guardian, but I don't think it'll be enough."

His fingers resonated with the phantom sensation of Fitch's corded arm. The feel of the other man was a confusing mixture of powerful masculinity and soft skin. While he had never imagined pleasure in sucking off another male or, God forbid, feeling a guy fuck him, he could understand the appeal of male sensuality.

Balin cleared his throat. "How many of you were at the raid?"

"Just me." Fitch swallowed. His Adam's apple rose and fell.

"Did anyone else know you were there? Anyone, from your side or mine?"

"My boss, Wayne Ellis, head of VSS east coast. The national director, Walt Brimmel. An asshole with the Vampire Task Force named Robert Almaden."

"Will those men communicate with Molin?"

Without opening his eyes, Fitch shrugged. "Dunno."

"Maybe they already have." Balin rolled onto his back. "They will undoubtedly find it strange you simply disappeared."

"Maybe they think I got hit with one of your holy quills."

Balin didn't comment. That was a strong possibility he didn't want to consider. He hoped that if Fitch's superiors did suspect as much, they weren't holding the Guardian sect responsible for the death of their agent.

"All the more reason for me to get back as quickly as possible. I can notify your people that you are well."

Fitch drew a long sigh in and out. He rolled onto his side again and stared down at Gladiolas.

Balin watched the other man, memorizing the handsome planes of his face. There was a good chance he would never see him again.

Something about Fitch stirred memories, or something else, deep within him. In the back of his mind, he realized Fitch was the first vampire he'd ever befriended, even though they couldn't exactly be called friends. But if it came down to it, he wouldn't let a mob come up here to hunt the vampire. He owed Fitch his life, and it wasn't a debt he took lightly.

Fitch picked up a silken lock of Gladiolas's hair and tickled her nose with the ends. She wrinkled her nose and rubbed at it in her sleep. The barest hint of a smile curled at the edges of Fitch's lips.

"You're right, Guardian. Gladiolas is the only one who matters. I can take care of myself. I want her safe, even if it means I can't be with her."

The vampire's words struck a chord in Balin. He'd never considered Fitch had feelings for Gladiolas. A strange mixture of jealousy and gratitude swirled around as a confusing mess in his head.

Gladiolas needed someone. As a vampire, Fitch was even less suitable as a protector-companion than he. Neither of them was suitable as a mate. Each had a job, an eternity-long pledge to an agency dedicated to serving the greater good. Neither man could walk away just because of a girl, and neither could take her along. Most likely their agencies would step in, and Gladiolas would become some pitiable test subject.

But the idea that Fitch wanted Gladiolas, even as he knew he couldn't have her, stunned Balin into silence.

He rolled onto his back and stared at the domed stone ceiling. He supposed it wasn't so hard to believe. Gladiolas was special. She was

unusually pretty, with a wry and witty personality. She was a generous and enthusiastic lover, and not just because of the Tourin. Balin could feel the heartfelt eagerness in her passionate responses.

They were as special to her as she was to them.

Both of them.

* * * * *

The gray light slipping through the slats in the outer shutters was no longer painful to Fitch's eyes. It must be close to nightfall.

Lounging on a pillow, he traced his fingertips though the ends of her hair to lightly scratch her back.

Gladiolas sat on the edge of the bed, silent, as the Guardian dressed. She leaned her elbows on her knees and glanced back at Fitch while knowing but not wanting to put into words that something was different.

Finally, she asked the question. "What's going on?"

By her tone, Fitch could tell she knew and was only seeking confirmation. He rose from the bed and gathered his clothes, letting the Guardian be the one to tell her.

Balin returned to the bed and sat beside her. "I'm going to see where the lower passage leads. There is a possibility I can exit the castle and go for help."

"But what about those creatures?"

"I will take the lance."

She took the man's large hand in both of hers, and her brow furrowed. The tenderness caused that steel band around Fitch's heart to tighten.

"If I encounter them, I can transform into stone," Balin told her. "The cold will not affect me. If they can't eat me, they'll get bored and move on."

Gladiolas choked over a sob.

Fitch rolled his eyes. *Smooth, Guardian.*

She rose onto her knees and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Don't do this. If it's just for me, then don't go."

Balin unlocked her arms and eased her away. "It is for you, sweetheart. You are my only concern. I put your life before mine."

Fitch struggled for a breath as that fucking band tightened again. *Balin loves her.*

Of course he did. The man had spent centuries as a stone beast sitting on a skyscraper somewhere, waiting for an innocent little waif just like her to need a Guardian protector, then here comes one who opens her arms and her legs for him. How could any man resist?

No wonder I can't resist her either.

He shoved the thought away as Gladiolas curled over and covered her face.

"No," she whimpered weakly, knowing arguing with Balin was fruitless.

Balin placed his hand on her shoulder and combed a tangle of hair behind her back. "I will return with a rescue party. I promise it."

The Guardian finished his sentence with a glance at Fitch.

He knew the man meant well, but Balin had a naive view of things. Fitch knew how the world really worked.

Besides, good intentions or not, the Guardian would learn the truth about him when he returned to the real world, and Balin might even be one of those stake-wielders in that rescue party.

"Wait for me." Gladiolas rushed to the armoire and dressed hurriedly. She took one of the count's shirts and fashioned it into a rucksack.

The three of them made their way downstairs to the great hall, where the magical feast presented itself, steaming hot.

She cut several bread rolls in half and made some sandwiches with the roast ham, then did the same with the sweet potatoes on two more rolls.

She handed the fashioned sack to him and squared her shoulders. "I think this is a bad idea. I'm sorry I complained about the food. I can live without hamburgers and pizza. I really think you should stay."

Fitch admired her courage, the words spoken firmly even though her voice quavered over the last few.

She loved him back.

The band had loosened on his chest, but when Fitch saw the way Balin's eyes softened as he cupped her cheek, it drew tight again.

How lucky these two were to have discovered each other. Of course, the Guardian was a fool, going off on his too-noble quest and risking this magic they'd found. Hadn't he learned through his long history that most heroes were little more than martyrs?

"This is for the best. I will be back in a day, possibly two."

"You better." Gladiolas sniffled.

"Yeah, Balin. Don't leave me to do all the work around here for too long."

Balin's eyes rose to his. Fitch felt a kick of something indescribable in the silent message he returned.

"It'll be boring around here without you," he finished awkwardly.

They walked him to the foot of the stairs where the hallway to the scullery wound out of sight. "Bolt the door behind me."

Gladiolas threw her arms around his neck and kissed him fiercely. This time, as he watched them, the emotion he felt was full-on, bright green envy.

When they finally broke apart and Balin glanced at him, Fitch held up his hands in mock defense.

"Whoa, big boy. Don't expect a kiss from me." He then extended his hand. "Good luck."

Balin shook it and nodded.

"Come back to me," Gladiolas whispered. She threw her arms around him again. "Be safe."

The Guardian closed his eyes as he lingered over her embrace, as though a part of him knew this was good-bye for good. "Take care of her," he told Fitch.

He stepped back and moved through the doorway.

"Guardian," Fitch called, stopping him. "Keep your head down."

Balin nodded, then moved into the tunnel. Shadowy darkness swallowed him in seconds.

Gladiolas covered her mouth to muffle a small whimper. Fitch closed the door and slid the lock into place. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. It was the first time she'd appeared cold since they'd arrived.

"Come on," he said softly, taking her under his arm. "Let's put some warm food into you and get back to the bedroom suite."

She nodded and moved numbly along with him.

Now that he was gone, Fitch wished he'd told Balin the truth before he left.

Not that he thought the truth about their long-ago history together would cause the Guardian to stand up for him when he learned of Fitch's true status with the VSS, but maybe after being prompted to remember their past, Balin might not lose all respect for him. Oddly, that mattered.

He wondered if Balin had recognized him and had merely kept silent. Eight hundred years was a long time, but childhood memories were still that, at least to him.

Fitch would never forget the man who, when only a little boy, had saved his life.

Whether the noble Guardian recognized him today or not, Fitch wondered if that memory was as vivid to Balin.

* * * * *

Gladiolas lay in bed the rest of the day. Several times, she moaned against the pain and curled up in a ball.

He suspected her heartache made the withdrawal worse. And through it all, she did not call out to him. He remained in the satin-covered Queen Anne, reading a chronicle of the social climate of Westerbrook, Russia, in the last decade of the seventeenth century. It was a pleasant read in that there wasn't a single reference to vampires or Guardians.

He needed a break right about now.

"I miss him," Gladiolas said, shattering the still.

Strangely, bobbing above the painful envy choking him was a small ache of missing Balin too. There was something to be said for hanging out with good company. Was there such a thing as good by association?

What had it been? Three, four days here? Five? In that short time, Balin had come to accept him, if not somewhat grudgingly. At the very least, the Guardian had stopped staring at the sword with an expression that said he wanted to lop off Fitch's head. And if he could assume anything, it was that Balin trusted that Fitch intended no violence toward either of them, as well.

He thought back to the Guardian's sneaky little forbidden touches, and a smile pulled at Fitch's lips.

Although he'd thought about it, he'd never had a male lover, primarily for the same reason he'd avoided female relationships. No one wanted a vampire for a mate except another vampire, and that didn't appeal to Fitch.

Once, in the sixteenth century, a young man had made overtures. Fitch had put up at a mill house, and the miller's son, obviously a homosexual, had taken interest. He'd come to Fitch by a streambed where he was bathing one evening and made his desires clear. But this was a scant forty years after Meredith had rejected him, and all Fitch had to do was show his fangs to frighten the young man away.

Afterward, Fitch remembered experiencing regret for refusing the young man's offerings. He had no doubt it would have been pleasant, but he absolutely couldn't accept physical intimacy from a person who found his vampirism loathsome.

Balin had made his loathing clear at the beginning, yet that hadn't stopped him from his timid touching later on. Fitch almost wished they could have had more time together, to see how far Balin would take those touches.

"I'm worried about him."

"He can take care of himself."

Fitch was beginning to feel more and more like the unwelcome third wheel. But just as he was beginning to feel really sorry for himself, Gladiolas said, "Enough reading for tonight. Put the book down and come to bed."

In truth, he was achy, tired, and his eyes felt gritty. Not only that, he was also hungry. Yet he had been afraid to go near her. Gladiolas already felt to him like Balin's property.

He stripped and slid into the bed. The candles dimmed, casting the room into near darkness. Strange, but without Balin, something important was missing.

Gladiolas rolled over, turning her back, but she took his hand and pulled him close. He snuggled up behind her and circled her with his arm.

"How are you feeling, sweeting?"

"Not good."

The proclamation was like a knife to the gut.

She closed her eyes and sighed. "But that was to be expected."

"What can I do?"

"Something you won't."

"Try me." He longed to make her pain go away.

She leaned back against him and turned her face up to his, but closed her eyes.

"He told me to keep you safe," Fitch prodded.

She shook her head. "You haven't fed since yesterday."

"I'm okay."

"But you won't be. Feed."

She brushed her hair back and exposed her jugular.

"Are you strong enough?" He looked at the pulse throbbing under her milky skin, and his mouth watered.

She ignored the question. "Normally I don't like it in my neck. Did I tell you that? It makes me dizzy. I think it takes too much blood from my brain." She gave a shallow chuckle. "But today you can. It'll help stop the pain."

"I'll remember that." He cupped her breast with a hand and pulled her back against him. Fitch bent his head and licked the sweet berry. She tasted like candy. "Where *do* you like it?"

She smiled. "Promise you won't laugh?"

"Promise." He kissed her beating pulse.

"My inner thigh. It looks so hot watching a vampire feeding between my legs."

"I'll remember that too."

She relaxed on the pillow. "Fitch."

"Yes, love?"

"Feed. Make me weak."

"Only if you tell me what I can do to help you."

She drew a long breath in and out. "Hurt me."

He froze. "That, I can't do."

"I knew you'd say that."

"Baby, I don't want to hurt you."

"Not even if it would help?"

"It would hurt *me*." The realization was strange; he felt like he would be destroying the small shred of faith Balin had found in him.

Hurry back, Guardian. I don't want this responsibility.

"Then do something else for me."

"Anything."

Anything but cause you further pain. Don't you understand I can't handle that?

"Feed until I'm unconscious. Then do what you want to my body."

"Jesus. Gladiolas." He drew her into a crushing embrace. "You ask too much."

"I'm sorry, Fitch."

He stroked the hair back from her face. "Don't you know I care about you? Maybe not the same way Balin does..."

"Why do you think I ask?" She smiled at his shocked expression. "Fitch, I trust you."

"Then trust me to know what's best." He rose over her, and damn if those limpid blue eyes didn't reach right into him and squeeze his dead heart. "I'm going to feed from you, and then you're going to feed from me."

She turned her head to expose her neck, but he placed his hand on her shoulder and pushed her flat on the mattress.

"And then I'm going to love you more tenderly than you've ever known."

"Oh, Fitch, you're sweet." She stopped, on the verge of begging him, he could tell. "All right, lover. I'll give you what you want."

"I know you will, sweetheart. That's why it will be enough."

He bent his head and suckled her nipple. Her eyes drifted shut with dreamy pleasure. She combed her fingers through his hair.

He slid his hand down her stomach and pushed two fingers between her nether lips. The secret flesh they protected was just beginning to trickle with moisture.

He drew back his lips, and his fangs emerged. Fitch pushed his middle finger into her pussy the instant before he pierced her breast.

Gladiolas arched her back. She burst out a sharp cry that ended on a sigh, and her body relaxed.

He fed until sated, probably more than he should have, but not enough to render her unconscious. He knew she wanted to sleep, hoping when she awoke Balin would have returned. He couldn't give her that. There was no guarantee the Guardian would ever return.

Fitch licked the wounds to heal them, then nicked his vein before his canines retracted. He watched her feed from his wrist like a baby at the bottle, satisfied he was helping her in his own small way.

Obviously, he did help. She smiled as some of the color returned to her cheeks. "Now. About that loving-me-tenderly part."

He met her smile as he eased on top. She wrapped her arms and legs around him.

"You're an angel," he told her. "I know this has been torture for you, but it's been the best four days of my entire eight hundred years."

"Mmm, sweetheart." She cupped his face. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

He took her hand and kissed her palm. "I mean it. I've never known anyone like you."

His cock found her waiting pussy. Her outer lips had spread like a blossoming flower, and the pearly inner flesh was swollen and yearning. He pushed inside and traveled deep in a long, slow stroke.

"Oh! So nice."

He reached the end of her channel and gave a tiny push, testing her ability to accept more. Her body gloved him in hot, wet silk.

This is heaven, he thought. Not cloudy landscapes, not pearly gates, not white-clad angels with feathered wings.

This, the sweet beauty of a warm and welcoming pussy, the tender attentions of a sweet lover. *This* was absolute bliss. The love with which Gladiolas opened herself and accepted him was divinity in its purest form.

She rotated her hips and shifted her body left and right, working him deeper. When he didn't move, she rocked beneath him. He didn't fuck her—this wasn't about his own pleasure—he merely pushed and pulled. This was about *her* needs, ending *her* pain, delivering *her* ecstasy.

Making her know she was loved, even if he was forbidden from loving her.

Their love dance stretched on endlessly. He sensed her surrender to rapture, her loss of awareness of time, her transcendence to pure, liquid pleasure.

Heat surged from the very center of him and shot down the length of his shaft. He pressed deep, probing with the tip of his cock, a sexual kiss placed precisely against her cervix. His seed shot out, flowing directly into her womb.

Gladiolas's orgasm came in the form of utter physical peace. Her body stilled, her skin grew warm, and the last, lingering hints of pain left her features. She went limp, unconscious not from abuse, loss of blood, or the Tourin's grip, but from the sweet gift of love.

Fitch finally felt worthy. He eased from her body, settled beside her, and fell into a blissful sleep without dreams for the first time in centuries.

* * * * *

Balin stopped to listen for the hundredth time, certain now someone, or something, was following him. Animal or animal-like prints in the dusty floor confirmed this was how the creatures had gotten inside the castle. But how?

He'd found the hole carved however many centuries ago, but once it emerged at the side of the mountain, Balin could go no farther. Just as Count Zlatko who, desperate to escape, had followed these catacombs, digging and carving for however many years it had taken, until he'd finally accepted that there was no escape.

Perhaps that was when he'd decided to use the enchanted blade.

The same magic that kept the count from getting out was supposed to keep all others from getting in. After all, Count Zlatko had not been allowed visitors.

And yet gotten in they had.

But what had urged them to enter the castle again, after all this time? Had the beasts smelled the food when he, Gladiolas, and Fitch first arrived? Were the creatures cunning enough to trek down the mountain to the hole and follow the tunnels back to the scullery?

That was a disconcerting thought.

He stopped again. *Not nearly as disconcerting as knowing something is following me that is smart enough to keep itself hidden until the perfect moment to attack.*

The trek down had taken a full day. He'd had to crawl on hands and knees through some of the more narrowly carved passages. He'd now been on the return trek for six hours. He was nearly back to the castle.

He couldn't lead this thing, whatever or whoever it was, back to Gladiolas and Fitch.

Time to take a stand.

A jagged outcropping of solid stone in a tall cavern made a natural corner that served his purpose. He picked up a rock from the rubble-strewn floor and hunkered behind the outcropping, arm raised.

Long moments of total silence passed as he hid. This had better work. If not, he could not return to the castle. He either had to lead the creature away or die trying.

That meant help would not arrive for Gladiolas and Fitch. They would spend eternity in a prison not intended for them.

Oddly, the emotion gripping him was not jealousy, but raw concern and poignant regret. He might never see Gladiolas's beautiful face again. Never hear Fitch's biting sarcasm. Never again watch their two beautiful bodies tangled in the throes of passion.

A rustling sound drew his full attention. Then a snuffle and a swish, closer now. He hurled the rock deep into the tunnel, hoping to convince whatever hunted him that he was farther along.

A grunt, and then footfalls hurried closer, a beast, trotting on all fours.

Balin leaped from behind the outcropping, lance pointed. He immediately jerked the blade upward as the hellhound lunged. It was bigger than he had dreamed possible.

Chapter Nine

Hellmastodon.

A split second of recognition explained how it had gotten past the castle's magical barrier. It was a crossbreed. When the enchantment had faded on the castle, the hellhounds had strayed. One had mated with some poor wild creature, creating this abomination.

The beast reared up, knocking rubble from the cavern's ceiling with its barbed head. A row of thick spikes ran down its spine, not unlike the bristly hackles on a hyena. It possessed a ruff of thick fur, but otherwise its body had the dragonlike, leathery-tough scales of the hellhounds.

It roared, baring dinosaur teeth.

Saber-toothed hellhound.

A paw swiped, claws bared like a cougar's. Balin jerked the lance blade back, but not quickly enough. The creature's meaty paw splintered the wood and sent the sharp tip flying past his head like artillery shrapnel.

He jabbed with the splintered wood, hoping to convince it back down the tunnel. Lightning fast, it swiped again, tearing through Balin's upper arm. Immediately it lunged, snapping at his throat. Balin poked, aiming for its throat as well. The wood crushed, unable to penetrate the thick hide.

"Get back, you unholy thing!"

Snapping jaws caught his shoulder and tore.

Balin tried to transform. A jerk of the creature's head whipped him around. The useless wood flew from his hand.

Another swipe of claws raked down his back, through his shirt. The leather jacket he'd tied around his waist was torn off. He spun, nearly went down. A heavy paw raked across his upper body, the other across his midsection.

The transformation would not come. The castle's enchantment prevented it.

Of course. Why hadn't I realized?

The creature charged but was caught against a jutting rock. Balin shoved away and stumbled up the tunnel. Rubble exploded around him as the creature burst free. Fangs sank into his thigh, picked him up, and slammed him against the ceiling before throwing him to the ground. He tumbled and rolled, crashing against the wall.

Balin found himself lying beside the shattered lance spear. He managed to lift it as the creature lunged. The splintered wood penetrated the beast's soft underbelly.

It reared above him, letting loose another earthshaking roar. Balin turned his head, knowing it wasn't enough to kill the thing.

There, in the dirt beside him, lay the severed tip of the lance. He grasped the blade's neck. The creature came at him, jaws wide. Its stinking, wet mouth closed around his throat.

As darkness draped over him like a warm, welcoming shroud, Balin took the blade in both hands and drove upward while hoping, for Gladiolas's and Fitch's sakes, the blade hit its mark.

* * * * *

Gladiolas didn't know how long she'd slept. Gray light at the cracks in the shutters was her only way to discern night or day.

At first when the Tourin had begun wearing off, the pain came in sudden, bright seizures that had rendered her blind. The need for sex had been

excruciating. Raw desperation to feel the warm drowsy pull of erotic intoxication.

Now, the ache was less severe but constant. Like the low hum of energy through a wire, she always felt turned on to the current of pain. There were no seizures, no sudden attacks, but it seemed the effects lingered as though poised to strike if she were to stop consciously pushing them away for even a second. The energy necessary to hold them at bay was exhausting.

She looked up to find Fitch watching her from the Queen Anne chair, a book resting on his lap.

"What time is it?" she asked, without really expecting an answer.

"You've been asleep a long time. Twelve hours, I would guess."

"Oh." She was embarrassed to tell him how badly she needed him. Anger welled in her gut. In his desire for Balin's acceptance, or whatever strange reason he had for stepping into the Guardian's role, he had adopted the other man's noble integrity and wouldn't give her what she wanted, what she sorely needed, painfully badly, right now.

Tears welled, stinging her eyes. She blinked them away, more ashamed of herself for her inclination to use them to coerce him.

"Hungry?"

"No. Sick," she answered simply. She didn't need to explain further. He would know precisely.

"Sorry." He rose and set the book down on the table. The two steps nearer he took made hope surge as potently as medicine.

"Gladiolas, there's something you need to know. I'm going to tell Balin too. If he doesn't already know."

Fitch glanced away, hesitating. He paced to the side, reclaiming the distance between them.

But he'd sparked curiosity in Gladiolas with his reluctant tone, and she sensed he had something serious to confess. She gathered the sheet around her sweat-chilled body and sat up.

"You know...I told you I was part of a governmental agency."

"The VSS," she supplied.

He nodded but ended up glancing at his feet as though unable to meet her eyes.

"Aren't you?"

"Yes. I mean...I was. But when I was at the raid on the Palace..." His gaze snapped up. Fitch stared into nothingness. "Balin."

"What?"

He strode forward and snatched up the sword. "He's in trouble."

She gasped. The pain forgotten, she threw off the sheet and jumped from the bed.

"Stay here. Bolt the door behind me. Don't let anyone in but me!"

"Fitch?" She trailed after him. "I'm coming with you!"

"No, you aren't." He yanked open the door and gave her a pointed stare that made her freeze. "I'll be back."

* * * * *

The door slammed with a deathly echo. She turned in a circle, not sure what to do.

She was naked. First thing, get dressed.

With trembling hands, she pulled on the count's clothes, stockings first this time, and laced the paddock boots tight.

What did he mean, "in trouble"? Was Balin hurt? Would they need bandages? She should tear the sheet into strips.

No, that was premature.

She glanced around the room. The brandy could serve as an antibiotic. Thank goodness the decanter magically refilled itself.

She strode to the tub and placed her hand upon its edge. *Fill, damn you, and stay filled.* She tried to remember if the tub emptied when they emerged, or when they left the room, like everything else that was refreshed. She couldn't remember. *Damn it, why didn't I pay more attention?*

Gladiolas paced the room, continually glancing back into the tub. The water stayed, steaming hot. Thank goodness.

She strode back and forth, always with one eye on the door, unable to convince her feet to stop moving. She felt helpless, and useless, up here doing nothing.

Balin, please be all right!

A long time passed. She began to tire as the withdrawal effects crawled back, penetrating the edges of the barriers she tried to erect around herself. *No, not now. Please, not now!*

She crept to the door and placed her ear to the thick wood. Nothing. She placed her hand on the bolt.

Fitch had said not to open it for anyone but him.

Horrific visions filled her mind's eye. What if they were both lying out there, hurt and unable to move? What if something else was out there, waiting for her?

She drew her hand away. Whatever had made that unearthly roar, she didn't want to know.

But if Fitch and Balin were dead, she didn't want to go on. She couldn't endure this prison without them.

She placed her hand on the bolt mechanism, poised to slide it open. Just then, she heard Fitch shout her name from the room below.

* * * * *

A knock sounded on the doorsill of Robert Almaden's makeshift office in what remained of the overthrown Palace.

The building had been converted into a hospital for the remaining slaves and a prison for the vampires who had not been pardoned.

The former slaves were the responsibility of the Guardians, under the supervision of the San Francisco sect leader, Molin.

The vampire prisoners were under the watchful eye of the Vampire Secret Service.

What a joke *that* agency was. The VSS barely pulled its weight, yet believed it had carte blanche to do anything it wanted, including keep secrets from him.

And like human prisoners in today's penal system, it seemed the vampire prisoners received more rights than their victims. It galled Robert to no end.

Those two agencies and their charges were all balled into one giant group under the supervision of his agency, the Vampire Task Force. Even though his office building was nearby, as task leader on this assignment, he'd been required to set up shop in the Palace ruins.

Too close for comfort with the bloodsuckers if anyone asked him, but nobody had.

Molin stood in the doorway. Robert gestured with a hand, grateful to see the Guardian leader. The man and his group were a pleasure to work with, and a damn sight more welcome in his office than the VSS, even if half its agents were human.

He supposed Wayne Ellis and his four vampire cronies were courteous enough, but he would never relax sharing an office with them.

Odd, Robert thought watching the door close on the vamp's curious glances, how adversaries could work together, if not somewhat nervously, in the shadow of a mutual enemy. He suspected that Ellis had ordered his agents

to kiss the Task Force's ass in an effort to establish better relations for the future. *As if.*

Robert sat back in his chair and stretched his shoulders, more grateful than he thought he'd be for the moment's privacy from those undead eyes.

"We have a small situation."

He waited until Molin was seated across from his desk. "Is this about the missing VSS agent?"

"Actually, it's about the vampires. One of them."

"Tell VSS. Other than Gabrielle's sister, the vampires are Ellis's problem. We've got our hands full."

"She doesn't want Ellis. She's demanding to speak with you."

"Oh really?" *Of all the fucking nerve.* "The prisoners don't concern me. You can tell her that if you want. In fact, please do." Best to make them understand they were still walking this earth only because he didn't have the authority to execute each and every one.

"That's the thing, she isn't a prisoner. She was pardoned, but she refuses to leave. In fact, she was undercover for the VSS. Cvetelina Jezliakova. She's richer than God—"

"Like I give a shit." With a grumble he didn't try to hide from Molin, Robert smacked down his pen and stood.

"Where is she?"

"Sixteenth floor, suite twelve."

The penthouses. Bloody beautiful. She *must* have more money than God. The records they'd seized showed Spike had charged a million dollars a month for those suites.

Robert ignored the perked interest of the vampire agents as he stalked from his office. He ground his teeth as he rode the elevator to the sixteenth floor. He reached for the suite's doorknob, then gritted his teeth again, blasted a furious sigh, and knocked.

“Enter,” a regal voice called from within.

This just gets better and better.

Robert stepped inside and faced the vampire female, momentarily halted by the stunning beauty before him. This broad wasn't your typical undead monster.

But clearly she was a monster of another kind: the rich, my-shit-doesn't-stink, the-gum-stuck-to-my-shoe-is-better-than-you snob.

The worst kind of monster.

As though she'd been waiting impatiently, she stood in the center of the room balanced on one impossibly high designer heel while she tapped the other, arms crossed over her chest.

She couldn't have been more than TA-twenty-five—turned at twenty-five—frozen in time with unblemished, unlined skin. Rich brown shoulder-length hair was styled to perfection. Her eyes were the deepest forest green he'd ever seen. The only hint of makeup he detected was a frosted sheen of pink gloss on her full, luscious lips.

More money dangled from her earlobes than he'd paid for his car. A cashmere sweater coat draped elegantly over a silk blouse. Her tailored skirt was fastened with a fashionable belt made of tiny silver loops with a YSL logo dangling at the end. Her long, slender legs were covered with almost transparent silk stockings complementing the cream color of that very expensive skirt.

“You are Robert Almaden?” she demanded, thick with a Slavic accent that rolled the *r*'s and *l*'s.

“I am *Agent* Almaden.” He crossed his arms. “You're the vamp who refuses to leave?”

“I am Cvetelina Jezliakova. I am not a criminal. If anything, you should be thanking me.”

He raised his brows, stunned by her audacity. "You indulged in an illegal palace—"

"Ah. Meester Ellis. Please explain to zees man who I am."

Wayne Ellis entered silently through the opened doorway. Robert's hackles went up. Governmental agent or not, he didn't like the addition of a second vampire in a confined space. Although the Guardians held the upper hand by a sliver of authority in this building, no one but Molin knew he had come up here alone, unarmed.

Ellis nodded, offering no more in the way of pleasantries and certainly not expecting any. There was no love lost here. "Almaden."

Robert swiveled toward the newcomer, effectively putting them on either side. He would never let a vampire have his back. "You take care of this. I have work to do."

"The girl who vent missink. She is very special to me."

Robert glared. "Yeah, funny, that. None of the vamps want to give up their slaves."

"She vas not my slave." She shot a look at the vampire agent. "Tell him of my role here."

"She was undercover...in a sense. She led Agent Galloway here."

"I thought you said he was rogue," Robert spat. More evidence they weren't being upfront with him turned his mood foul. *Fouler*.

"He was. He is." The man scowled. "But that was a...recent development."

Robert grumbled low in his chest. "Jesus. I don't have the time or the patience for this. Miss Jezliakova, make your point."

"I vant to help you find Gladiolas. She is in danger. Boragnis has escaped—"

"We will take care of Gladiolas." He refrained from using the girl's real name. There was a chance none of the vampires knew it, in which case he

didn't want them to. Whatever he had to do to protect these poor, innocent humans, he would. *Including the pleasurable task of being rude to a vampire.*

"Meester Almaden, I am very concerned. You must believe me when I tell you I care for zees girl."

"I'm told you're a lesbian," he cut in.

She straightened her back and stared down her haughty nose, clearly fighting to keep her cool.

Transform, and I'll stake you, you snooty vamp.

"She was not my slave. I did not torture her; I did not rape her. She came to me for healing after others mistreated her. We formed a bond that had nothing to do with sex."

"But you *did* have sex with her," he prompted.

She hesitated. "Yes."

"We're done here." He turned to leave.

"Vait! I can tell you where they have gone."

* * * * *

His lungs burned, and every muscle in his legs and back screamed as he started onto the stairs with Balin slung over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

At his first shout, Gladiolas hauled open the door. She'd probably been standing behind it since he'd left.

Fitch had found Balin lying unconscious, but alive, in the tunnel. A dead hellhound the size of a bison lay beside him with the blade of the splintered lance embedded in its throat.

As he carried him back, Balin had been semiconscious, occasionally mumbling incoherently. Then he'd fallen unconscious and seemed to double in weight. Thank God Fitch could sense him and knew he was still alive.

The last time he'd seen so much blood... He pushed the thought away.

Gladiolas ran onto the landing and let loose a shriek that could strip paint from a battleship. "What happened! Oh my God, Fitch, who did this to him?"

"Hellhound," he said with his last breath as he pushed past.

"Oh God, I knew it. No no no!" She slammed the door and shoved the bolt into place.

He ambled into the room and knelt on the bed. Sharp, icy slivers knifed through his back as he bent and eased Balin over his shoulder. The man flopped onto the mattress, deadweight.

"Oh please, Fitch, do something!" Gladiolas jumped onto the bed and cradled his head. "Please, save him! Oh God, why did he have to go? Fitch, please, don't let him die!"

The wounds at Balin's neck were the worst, though by the grace of God, the beast had missed the arteries. Balin would have died before Fitch found him if the creature had hit one.

He grabbed Gladiolas by the arms. "Go to the great hall. Get the knife on the table and the bowl of red pepper relish." Her eyes were peeled back to reveal the whites, but she wasn't really seeing him. He shook her. "Gladiolas!"

"The knife," she repeated, finally focusing on him. "And the red peppers."

"Go!"

She scrambled from the bed and scurried away. He heard the leather soles of her boots whisking a frenzied departure on the stone landing.

Fitch pulled away the shreds of fabric that remained of Balin's shirt. Thank goodness most of this blood wasn't his.

Sensing the steam from the bathwater, he soaked a towel and swiped gently across the ruined flesh of Balin's throat. The man moaned and turned his head to the side. "I...can't transform."

"Neither can I," Fitch told him.

"I'll die... Tell Gladiolas—"

"No, you won't," Fitch ordered, but Balin didn't hear. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he fell unconscious again.

Fitch bent over him to survey the puncture wounds to his neck. He'd never healed anyone so badly injured. Not successfully, anyway.

"You better not hate me in the morning."

Balin's heartbeat was strong, but if there were internal injuries, Fitch would never know. Even if he did, with his tongue unable to transform and elongate, there was nothing he could do about them.

He licked at Balin's neck, applying his healing saliva to the worst of the punctures on the right side of his throat.

Balin moaned.

"Take it easy, Prince Charming. I know you're a virgin. I'll be gentle."

The wounds closed slowly. Did his urgency make the healing seem slower than normal, or was it more of the evil magic of this place? Or were these wounds just too severe?

Gladiolas ran inside cradling the knife against the bowl she supported in both hands. He reached carefully for the bowl, avoiding the lethally sharp blade—the one thing in this macabre prison that could kill him.

"Cut off his clothes. Be careful, that knife is sharp. Start at his hip and go down."

Sobbing in short little bursts, Gladiolas crawled onto the bed and cut through the waistband of Balin's leather pants.

Fitch brought the bowl of peppers to his nose. Tears sprang to his eyes, and saliva surged in his mouth. He bent over Balin and swiped his tongue across the remaining punctures at his neck.

Above the briny taste of the hound's blood, Balin's blood was rich and pure. He was strong. There was a chance he might pull through this.

Come on, Guardian. Don't die on me now. I'll tell you everything, I promise. Don't leave me here alone.

He used the towel to wipe the blood clotted at the ends of Balin's hair. Fitch remembered its glossy sheen and his secret urge to brush the back of his hand over it, to see if it was as soft as it looked. If only he had done it when he'd had the chance. Balin probably would have broken his arm, but at least he'd know.

Now, he might never get the chance.

He heard a *thump*, and then another, of Balin's boots hitting the floor.

Gladiolas jerked the blade against the reinforced stitching at Balin's pant cuff and angled around to his opposite hip.

Fitch bent his head to Balin's neck and continued his work. He paused only to inhale the spicy fumes from the peppers again before laving his tongue through the deepest of the four gashes on the man's chest. It appeared the hound had swiped him with claws extended.

Gladiolas cut through the other pant leg and pulled the remaining shreds of leather from beneath him. Her rhythmic whimpers turned into choking sobs.

"God, he's hurt s-s-so badly." Her eyes were wild, but unfocused. She was in shock. "What m-m-more c-can I do to help?"

"Soak another towel," Fitch said softly. "Help me clean him up."

She moved off the bed, and Fitch glanced over Balin, now completely naked. He was a ragged mess of ruined flesh. Deep gashes crossed his stomach, hips, and thighs. A thick glob of blood clotted at his groin. Rather than wait for Gladiolas, whose state was precarious and quickly growing worse, Fitch gently grasped the Guardian's limp penis and eased it over to see better.

"Jesus." The three slices crossing his hip had nicked across his organ before tearing into his thigh. Balin had come within millimeters of being castrated.

"Must have been a cranky bitch," he said of the devil dog.

"What?" Gladiolas sniffled as she crawled onto the bed again.

“Nothing. Wipe gently, like this.” He showed her how to clean around the wounds without touching them. “Not the ones I’ve healed, all right? Those will be fine on their own.”

“Is he going to be okay? Please, Fitch, don’t let him die.”

“I’m doing my best, sweetheart.”

Her hands trembled as she gently blotted around each remaining wound.

Fitch looked at the injuries to Balin’s neck. They were still horrific. He couldn’t be sure the healing was working, but he had to keep going.

He bent over Balin’s chest. A spike of pain shot down his neck like a needle probe; he’d strained something when he first hefted Balin over his shoulder, but he wasn’t going to quit.

You didn’t give up on me all those centuries ago, he thought. I won’t give up on you now.

Chapter Ten

Gladiolas cleaned around the slashes on his thigh and then crawled up the bed to cradle his head. Fitch heard her whispering sweetly to him. Her endearments brought a surge of joy to his heart. If Balin heard, they would help him too. The power of love was a strong medicine.

“Balin, sweetheart, you're going to be all right. Just stay with us, okay, baby? Don't you dare leave us now. It's going to be all right, you just have to keep fighting.”

Another whiff of the peppers brought a surge of new moisture to his mouth. He eased Balin over and worked on the four long gashes across his back. Balin flopped back against the mattress, limp.

Fitch moved his way lower, content with the knowledge he'd closed the life-threatening wounds and now worked on flesh wounds that would merely leave ugly scars if left untreated. His tongue felt like hot sandpaper, but he continued, determined to keep Balin from ending up looking like him.

Nobody deserves scars like mine.

Balin's body tensed on the mattress, every muscle tightening like a bowstring. “Feels...like...amazing.” He jerked, writhing with his hips.

“What's wrong with him?” Tears trailed down Gladiolas's cheeks.

“It's the healing process. Remember what it feels like?”

“Um...oh yeah.”

“It's kinda nice, isn't it?” he prompted, hoping to lift her spirits.

“Y-yes.”

Fitch glanced down and noticed Balin now had a fierce erection. Obviously the healing was working; the Guardian was no longer comatose.

In more ways than one.

"That's what he's feeling now."

She nodded. "Good."

"I think it's his first time."

"Oh." Her response was hesitant. Fitch sensed she understood what he did—Balin wouldn't like knowing he'd been healed by a vampire, but also that the Guardian was a little too pigheaded for his own good.

At the head of the bed, Gladiolas rocked gently. She stroked Balin's face while whispering soothing reassurances against his temple. This time Fitch didn't feel like an outsider. He was both needed and wanted, and it felt good.

He trailed his tongue from the third gash on Balin's midsection and swiped over the next wound. Only after the fact did he realize he had just run his tongue across the other man's shaft.

Balin went stiff and gripped the sheets with both fists. An anguished sound caught in his throat.

"Shh, it's okay, sweetheart," Gladiolas whispered. If she noticed what he'd done, she didn't seem distressed by it. "Stay with us, baby. I can't lose you now. You have to come back. You promised."

Balin's stiff cock throbbed, pulsing with his heartbeat.

Strong. That's good. But I knew you were. Fitch flattened his tongue and slid it over the thick girth, satisfied the wounds had stopped bleeding.

Balin groaned at the mixture of pain and pleasure, and his organ twitched with anxious wanting. Fitch had never been healed by another vampire, and even if he had, it wouldn't have felt the same to him as it did to a human, and apparently did to a Guardian too. He only had the word of others, who described it as "more intense than sex" and "megaorgasmic." If what they said was true, he was almost embarrassed for what Balin was feeling now.

He dragged his tongue up the long shaft, breathing in the deep, musky aroma of the other man.

Gladiolas's sobs had turned to quiet little whimpers as she rocked him gently in her arms.

"Sweet Balin. We love you, darling. Stay with us."

This was the closest he'd ever come to another man's cock, and Fitch was a little embarrassed about how much he liked it, as well.

Was this what he looked like, ultra-close up? Was his skin as smooth? Were his darker hairs thicker? Did the flesh stretch as tightly over his shaft? Did his cockhead turn such a deep purple and gleam shiny like the skin of a plum?

No. No one else on earth is as beautiful as this man.

Although there was no injury there, Fitch ran his tongue to the tip and circled the rounded head. Balin moaned and thrust his hips, a silent, unconscious plea for more.

Fitch's heart thundered in his chest as he considered his next move. He shifted onto all fours, positioning himself over the other man. When Balin thrust his hips again, Fitch opened his mouth.

Balin's cock pushed through his lips.

Fitch bent to receive it, sucking the thick length deep into his throat until his nose buried in the curly hair flanking its base.

Balin's body shook as he settled back on the mattress, marking his own journey out of Fitch's mouth. His cock popped free and quivered like a taut wire. Another swipe down the length, and Fitch realized the slices in the flesh were completely healed.

Thank you, whatever gods are watching over us.

A groan slipped out of Balin. His thighs tightened, and he thrust again, nudging Fitch's chin.

This time, Fitch bent over Balin and sucked him deep of his own accord. There was no shame, no humility, no bashfulness at doing something he'd previously thought would be repugnant.

This wasn't the act of sucking cock. It was the act of sucking *Balin*.

He'd never been attracted to other men, never thought of a cock as beautiful before. Balin was what made the difference. He truly was a god among men.

But Fitch had known this for centuries. Only now, at this precise moment in time, could he admit to himself he had always admired Balin.

He grasped Balin's shaft and angled his cock upward, easily sliding him deep this time. He pulled with his lips, working the Guardian's amazing pole.

Balin's impossibly thick girth had the softest skin, almost like silk. Seeking deeper exploration, the rounded crown pushed against the back of Fitch's throat. Jesus, he was huge, and dimly Fitch realized he must be terrible at fellatio. It wasn't exactly a skill in which he wanted a claim to fame.

Balin's muscles tightened and released in time with Fitch's up-and-down sucking, fucking his mouth.

What was left of his conscience nagged him about the violation; even though Balin was enjoying it in his unconscious state, he wouldn't let it happen otherwise.

I can live with that, Fitch told himself. He hates me anyway.

The first stream of cum hit the roof of his mouth, and Fitch recoiled over a gag. He drew Balin deep and forced himself to open his throat. The next jet slid down easily, and Fitch swallowed the cascade that followed. He cupped Balin's balls and squeezed gently, urging the man to give all he wanted. The flavor itself wasn't unpleasant; his cum tasted a bit like fresh goat's milk.

The heavy spurts diminished until they ended completely.

He became aware of the heavy silence. Balin lay still, relaxed at last, his heartbeat calm and steady. Gladiolas cradled his head, her eyes closed, still except for gentle stroking of his hair with light fingers.

Suddenly afraid to wake a sleeping giant, Fitch eased Balin's cock from his mouth and laid it gently against his abdomen.

"Fitch."

He moved farther back, unable to meet her eyes even though he knew Gladiolas was the last person who would ever pass judgment on him.

"His thigh."

He glanced down and noticed the still-untreated trio of gashes on Balin's left thigh. He bent his head and trailed his tongue through each of the wounds. Once finished, he sat on the edge of the mattress.

"He's so pale. Is he going to be all right?"

"He's lost a lot of blood."

"Balin, can you hear me? Please wake up." When Balin didn't respond, she turned to him. "He needs your blood."

Fitch shook his head. "He wouldn't want me to." It felt odd refusing to let the unconscious man feed after sucking him off, but Fitch knew Balin would consider that a much deeper offense. He hated vampires and would probably rather die than have his pure blood tainted.

But Gladiolas's face scrunched up, and tears welled in her eyes. She moved her lips, mouthing, *Please*, though the only sound that came out was a high-pitched whine that probably had dogs for miles around perking their ears.

Damn. He never could deal with a woman's tears.

He drew a grumbling breath as he got to his knees. "The official record is, I didn't want to do this."

"Please, Fitch, you must." She eased away, laying Balin on the pillow, and swiped at the two fat tears that trailed down her cheeks. "Come, lay beside him."

He called forth his fangs and nicked his wrist. Gladiolas took his hand and brought the flowing wound to Balin's lips. For a moment, Balin lay still as blood trickled against his mouth. His lips drew together as he became aware of the moisture, and Fitch watched him taste the blood cautiously.

He held his breath, expecting the Guardian to come awake in a fury and spit the blood back in his face.

Instead, Balin's reaction surprised him; he leaned into Fitch's wrist and fixed against the flowing wound greedily.

Gladiolas held Fitch's wrist at Balin's mouth. That odd connection was established again; a strange coursing of energy that seemed to stem in his bloodstream. It wasn't exactly the same as when the three of their bodies were connected, but something magical flowed through Fitch that seemed to originate in Balin and Gladiolas, and vice versa. The power was overwhelming, as was the sensation of Balin's lips fixed upon his wrist.

Fitch leaned back on the pillow and closed his eyes. Fatigue overtook him. He felt the last of his strength evaporating from his muscles. Darkness crept in from the edges of his awareness and encircled him like the grasp of deathly fingers.

"Balin." It was Gladiolas's voice pulling him back from warm nothingness. "Balin, stop!"

The bed shifted. Gladiolas's fingers touched his face, turning him to look at her. "Fitch, are you all right?"

"Fine." He wanted to ask her why but didn't have the strength to form even a single word more.

Her warm, soft body slipped into the bed beside him. She was naked again. The mattress sank beside his shoulder as she crawled around him on her knees. He peeled open his eyes to find her kneeling above him, and for a moment he thought he'd fallen asleep while they were fooling around.

"You aren't *fine*." She straddled his face and pressed her inner thigh to his mouth. "Feed, sweetheart. Now!"

He blinked, finding himself staring up her sweet little body. Her pretty pussy hovered an inch over his face. He breathed in the musky aroma of her arousal.

"Pushy, aren't we?" He laved out with his tongue, flicking across the pearly pink flesh.

Gladiolas grabbed a handful of his hair and forced his face against her thigh. "Fitch, damn it. Feed!"

"Oh that's right, you like it in the thigh."

She pushed his mouth against the velvety-soft skin. His fangs elongated in response to the heavy throb of her femoral artery. He sank deep and was rewarded with a strong flow. Almost at once, he realized the potent need for it. The next instant he came back to awareness, understanding he'd been on the edge of a blackout.

Balin had nearly drained him into unconsciousness.

Chapter Eleven

Balin was cartwheeling out of the sky, unable to extend his wings. Burning hot whip lashes gouged his legs, chest, hips, even his cock. The agony of death, which he'd secretly hoped for all these long, lonely years, was now a black pain he struggled to escape. He wasn't alone anymore, and even though he couldn't have the love he'd found, he fought toward it with soul-deep desperation.

He clawed out of the depths of nothingness into a lighter dream. The pain faded. The sweet girl's tenderness felt like a blanket of soft, warm cotton. He could picture her pretty face, even hear her lovely voice, but right now, there was no reason to recall her name. Her being, her essence, was what mingled with his.

Like a perfect complement to her light beauty, the dark-haired man took control of his awareness.

Vampire.

But not a bad one. For the first time, he realized such a thing as a good vampire existed.

These are my lovers, he understood without a hint of shame or surprise. “*We are three.*”

In fact, the realization was awe-inspiring. He'd waited ten lifetimes for this. What a sad irony he was not allowed to keep it.

Slowly, the pain inched away, replaced by cool, tingling magic that rippled across his flesh like sheeting snow on a frigid landscape.

A strong mouth closed over his cock, sucking him into oblivion. Instinctively he knew this wasn't Gladiolas. The mouth was strong, deep, and decidedly male. It touched him with the kind of reverence only another man could show. Yet instead of being repulsed, he found himself thrusting into the other's throat, yearning for the experience he knew, somehow, was a first for them both. Pleasure came in a rush, the pinnacle to the incredible sensation that took away all the pain.

Then came the blood, the sweet, flowing sustenance that bonded him to the other with a final permanence, sanctifying the amazing link that was already there. The link that he couldn't decipher, couldn't even remember how he knew existed, but just, simply...*knew*.

He drifted into a state of calm, a plateau absent of pain, knowing he would live, remembering the attack of the hellhound as if it had been a long time ago. Knowing that whatever bound them to this strange place, whatever problems waited back in their world, what they'd found here existed on a higher plane that made everything else insignificant.

He'd found bliss.

* * * * *

Fitch blinked his eyes open to the feel of a warm, soft body sliding against him. Trails of silken hair dragged over his shoulder. He lifted his hands and found the two creamy globes of her firm little ass.

"Fitch, I'm sick."

Hot, wet nether lips placed a moist kiss to his abdomen. He shifted his hips, seeking to kiss back with the taut head of his cock.

"You lie still. I'll do it." She spoke just at his ear and finished with a kiss to his neck. "I'll take what I need."

"Where's the fun in that for me?"

"You're my prince, do you know that?"

"Sure. I'm called that just about every day."

"You saved him. You're my hero. I love you both so much."

"Happy to be of service."

She swiveled her hips, blindly placing her greedy pussy against his now-ferocious erection. Another swivel, and she coated the rounded tip with her cream.

"No more trying to leave. We're going to stay here and fuck each other until I say otherwise. Rule number four."

"I think it's five."

She pushed back, forcing him into her tight little body. "Six, seven, eight, and nine." The tight clench of muscles parted, and his fat bulb sank inside her.

Fuck each other. All right by me. He lifted with his hips and squeezed her ass, urging her down his member.

Gladiolas sat down on him, forcibly impaling herself.

"Easy, babe. I'm flesh and blood, remember?"

She rode back up, coating him with her nectar. This time, when she pushed herself back down, she swallowed him hard. He slid through the slick wetness until the tip of his cock landed against the end of her feminine core.

"I need it, Fitch. I'm sick." She gripped with her muscles on another ascent. Jerked back down to ride him hard. "You just relax. I'll do it."

"Careful, little bird. I'm not sure I have the strength to heal you."

"Good, because I wouldn't let you anyway. I need it hard, Fitch. I need it to hurt."

The sickness must be driving her mad. He bent at the knees and thrust off the bed.

"Oh yes. Shove it inside me."

He obliged, his need for release bordering on desperate. *Forgive me, but I'm still thinking about that gorgeous cock.* New strength filled his muscles. Fitch bucked into her with abandon, giving her what she needed.

Gladiolas dragged herself up and down his cock. She threw her head back, arching her back to angle him just the way she wanted him. He opened his eyes and fixed on those luscious little tits bouncing up and down.

“Oh yes, baby. That's right. Give it to me deep.”

Her muscles clenched around him like a fist, squeezing his cock. The cum gushed out of him in waves. He closed his eyes again, watching a kaleidoscope of lights bursting behind his lids.

When she finished with him, Gladiolas collapsed across him and draped her head on his shoulder. Her sheath rippled with fading tremors that rolled across his shaft like a whisper.

He dragged his fingers over her back in a gentle scratching motion. She rose and dismounted him, leaving his abused cock lying askew across his hip. With a sigh that turned to a giggle, she collapsed on the bed between him and the still-unconscious Guardian.

“Thanks, babe. I owe you one,” she teased, pretending aloofness like a dude.

“I'll let you make it up to me,” he mumbled at the edge of sleep.

She giggled again. “I can hardly wait.”

* * * * *

Balin awoke to the *pop* of firewood in an otherwise silent room. He turned his head, feeling the tingle of sore muscles.

His bedmates lay asleep beside him—Gladiolas on her stomach with her head turned his way, and Fitch lying on his back.

Balin swallowed a hot mouthful of shame as he recognized his emotion as admiration. Fitch's lips were slightly parted, his thick lashes feathered across his cheekbones like tiny fans. Without the harsh cynicism in his features, he looked beautiful, young, and untroubled.

Balin sat up and drove his fingers through his hair. Every muscle ached as though he'd had an extreme workout the day before. The burn was not

unpleasant, but the idea it had come from savage injuries lingered as an unsettling memory, like knowing a tarantula had crawled across his foot.

As though of its own mind, his dick shifted and filled with blood. His stomach swooped as he remembered...*everything*.

He shoved out of bed and padded to the window. Once there, he turned back to look at his sleeping roommates. At Fitch, who had parted those lips and sucked him deep into his throat. At Gladiolas, who had watched it all with that elfin fascination she seemed to have about everything.

Like a traitor to its master, his cock stretched tall, as if to say, *Don't lie to yourself. We liked it.*

You liked it, he argued back, hating himself for the confusing emotional pull spinning him in circles in his own mind.

Why did he have these feelings? The Guardian in him, the professional warrior he strove to be, seemed to be evaporating before his eyes.

I am not a fae. Damn it, I am a Guardian!

The only difference between the fae and the slaves at the Palace was that the fae didn't need Tourin to make them want to give themselves.

Gods teeth, I am a warrior! I do not lay myself out to anyone who looks at me with half an ounce of lust in their eyes.

He unlatched the glass panes and swung them inward. Gladiolas stirred at the rumble of the wooden shutters' bar sliding open. He pushed the outer doors open, reveling in the frigid blast that rushed in and swirled around his naked body.

Sunlight flooded the room, filtered only by the fluffy clouds surrounding their mountaintop prison. He stared out at the snowy landscape and enjoyed the biting sting to his eyes.

He heard Fitch startle awake and turned to see the vampire tumble off the far side of the bed.

"What the hell!"

"You touched me."

"Balin!" Gladiolas shoved off the bed. "Close the window!"

"You put your mouth on me." He started across the room, his blood boiling. "You sucked me!"

"He saved your life!" Gladiolas rushed past. The gray light in the room snapped out as she wrenched the shutters closed and threw the bar back into place.

Balin rounded the bed just as Fitch came to his feet. He punched the vampire square in the mouth, sending him back to the floor.

Some of the man he used to be felt reclaimed. *I am superior to vampires. I am a Guardian!*

Fitch was a quick fighter. He scrambled to his feet and threw a punch that glanced off Balin's jaw.

His blood raging on adrenaline, it hardly fazed him. Balin backhanded him with the other fist, sending the vampire spinning.

Across the room, Gladiolas shrieked. She hunkered into a crouch against the wall and pressed her hands against her mouth.

Fitch shoved him away. "I don't want to fight you!"

Balin punched him solid in the face, caught him by the shoulders before he could hit the floor, and threw him facedown on the bed. He caught Fitch's right hand and twisted it behind his back before the vampire could push himself up.

Balin braced his forearm across the other man's neck, forcing him down. "How do you like it, vampire?" he growled into Fitch's ear.

Everything in his vision burned red as Fitch struggled beneath him. Balin braced with his thighs and managed a solid pin. He realized he'd forced Fitch's legs wide and sprawled between them, his raging cock pressed at the crease of the other man's ass.

Fitch's body went rigid. He trembled, as taut as a steel wire.

"Kill me, or fuck me, but whatever you do, Balin, make sure it's what you really want."

The softness of his words triggered something in Balin; not exactly a memory, but an emotion that seemed distant and nearly forgotten.

The rage flowed out of him like water. In the back of his mind, he heard Gladiolas sobbing across the room. But more important, the forefront of his awareness was engrossed with the body beneath him.

Fitch no longer fought. He never really had, Balin realized.

What in Hades am I doing? he asked himself. I care about this man. Why was it so hard to admit?

Because he touched me in a way he never should have without permission.

But hadn't he granted permission with the liberties, small as they may have been, that he'd taken himself? Hadn't he just as well urged the man on?

Even as he asked himself this, he couldn't move. He shut his eyes, waiting as his racing blood returned to normal. Fitch was warm and solid beneath him.

And afraid. He was still shaking, and Balin saw the pulse pounding in his throat.

He released Fitch's arm. Fitch gave a small groan as he gingerly arranged the twisted limb back into a normal position, but otherwise didn't try to move.

I hurt him. It wasn't what he'd wanted, and Balin felt like crap for it.

He pushed off the man, feeling the ridges of the scars on his back.

The room vanished, and darkness filled his vision. Darkness and blood. It was still Fitch he saw, only centuries ago.

Strung up, naked, spread-eagle. The scars weren't there yet; instead...deep, bloody slashes.

His hand remained pressed against Fitch's back. He spread his fingers and dragged his palm across the scarred flesh, his touch now gentle.

"It's you."

His own voice brought him back into the castle bedchamber. He eased off the other man and looked down at the scars, at the edge of Fitch's jaw turned over his right shoulder, much like it had been that night as he had lingered on the edge of consciousness, hanging from the beams in the stable.

"It's you," he said again. He rose and stood at the foot of the bed, not knowing what else to say.

Fitch pushed up and crawled to the edge of the bed, where he sat and drove his fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry. I took the healing too far. It was unforgivable. You have every right to be pissed off."

"Do you...remember me?" Balin suddenly felt foolish and ashamed.

Across the room, Gladiolas's sobs petered off.

"Of course I remember you. You saved my life." He managed a weak laugh. "Kind of a shitty way for me to repay it, huh?"

Balin sagged onto the foot of the bed. "How long...? When did you recognize me?"

"The first night. Only I never knew you were fae. I was a little confused about that."

Fae. Even Fitch knew. *He knows me better than I know myself.*

"You killed my parents," Balin said, only testing the words. He didn't even believe them himself.

"No. I killed the blacksmith, yes, but he was vermin. He deserved it."

Balin glanced at Gladiolas. She sat, still and silent, at the crook in the wall. Her tears had stopped, and she watched them with wide, sad eyes.

He would apologize to her next. First, he needed the answers to questions he'd waited centuries to ask. Yet now that he was faced with the opportunity, he didn't know where to begin.

"I never wanted to be a vampire." Fitch leaned his head on his hands, elbows balanced on his knees. The scars gleamed in the firelight like satin. "I was turned against my will."

"Before the laws, almost all were." Balin swallowed. What a stupid thing to say. Everyone knew that.

"I'd heard there was a Guardian stronghold near Bloomwicht. I was on my way there when I came across the blacksmith's."

"My parents took me to him when I was eight," Balin supplied. "They said he was my uncle, but I'd never met him before. I was to apprentice. I understand now, I was indentured to him because they were too poor to feed me."

Fitch *hmp*hed. "Uncle Pervy. For ten pence, he put me up and gave me a bowl of stew. For five more, he said I could take you into the barn. Said you were...*untouched* as of yet."

Gladiolas smothered a whimper. Balin glanced over to see her covering her mouth with her hands, new tears glistening in her eyes.

He glanced to the floor as memories flashed to life, vivid and bright. For the most part, he had been unharmed, though the blacksmith had fondled him and made lewd overtures. Had he remained there any longer, Balin was sure it would have progressed to rape.

"You tried to run with me."

"Yes." Fitch swallowed. Balin heard the sound in the other man's throat. This was not easy for him either. "We almost made it. Just bad luck. His two friends happened along as we squeezed through the broken board in the back of the structure."

Balin remembered the night clearly. Fitch had paid the additional five pence, taken him out to the barn. That night, Fitch had seemed so mature, larger than life. He'd knelt down to look him in the eye and taken him by the arms. Had said they were leaving, that Balin must never come back here.

The three men quickly overpowered Fitch. After beating him unconscious, they strung him up between two beams in the barn and doused him with water. The blacksmith then whipped him, suspecting he was a vampire. When

the wounds didn't heal, they continued anyway, trying to beat a confession out of him.

For attempting escape, the blacksmith had slugged Balin so hard, he'd seen stars. He'd had been ordered back to the meager dwelling to await his own punishment and hadn't seen much more of what was done to Fitch. Even still, what he had seen had branded his memory like the gory, flash-frozen images of crime-scene photos.

Still not convinced, the blacksmith and his friends had staked Fitch to the ground in the wide yard separating the dwellings. Growing drunker by the minute, they'd waited for the sun to rise and prove once and for all he was a vampire.

When morning came, and Fitch didn't erupt in a ball of flames, the drunkards had lost interest and went to sleep it off.

"Despite whatever punishment they doled out to you, you still had the courage to free me. Only eight years old, and you cut me free and begged me to run. To save myself."

"I frayed the rope where it attached to the stake to make it look like you broke free," Balin explained, not feeling very heroic at all. "The next few days, the blacksmith kept to himself. I think he was afraid you would come back with the constable."

Across the room, now understanding the gravity of the story and the tragic past they shared, Gladiolas wept softly.

"I made it into the forest when the vampires found me. They didn't kill me, because it was more entertaining to see if I'd survive my injuries. That's why I have scars. For days they watched, taking bets. When they realized I wasn't going to die, they turned me but didn't stick around to see if I survived the transformation. There was nothing I could do. I was still too weak to resist." He shrugged. "They would have killed me if I had tried."

"Fitch, I am sorry." Balin placed his hand on Fitch's shoulder. The other man winced under the touch. Balin drew his hand away, knowing he'd destroyed a fragile link. Regret sank in his stomach like a ball of ice.

"Once I regained my strength, I made my way out of the forest. I encountered the caravan at the edge of Riechert. The vampires had been there and gone. Your mother was barely alive. She said your name on her dying breath." Fitch's voice had taken on a pained edge. His shoulders rose and fell. "I went straight to the blacksmith's and killed him. It was the first and only time I have ever let the bloodlust overtake me. I took you on to the Guardians, and that was the last I saw of you."

"Then you saved my life too."

Long moments of silence passed. Fitch didn't turn around. Balin felt like a shitheel for not remembering Fitch, for not respecting the significant bond they had, for letting his rage get the better of him against the man to whom he owed everything.

He glanced over to Gladiolas. As soon as she wiped her cheeks dry, two new tears fell.

"You got the life I wanted," Fitch said. Only now did he swivel toward Balin. "In a way, I saved the dream I had for my own life by sending you down the path I'd chosen."

Fitch's eyes were glossy with emotion. "The Guardians raised you until you were twenty-four, and gave you the choice."

Balin realized Fitch knew this because it was what he'd wanted for himself. "Yes. My grandfather found me there when I was twelve. So even then I had family. He was still alive when I chose to become a Guardian."

Fitch's mouth twitched in what was barely a smile. "You chose right. In a way, I feel responsible, and I couldn't be more proud of you. You are the man I wish I were."

Right now he didn't feel worthy at all. Balin grasped Fitch's forearm. "There is nothing wrong with the man you are."

Fitch swiveled away, gently pulling his arm free. "You don't know me. Don't know what I'm capable of." He rose and circled the bed, stepping wide around Balin.

Balin couldn't move. He was afraid to extend the reed out of shyness, not shame. *Coward.*

Fitch walked over to Gladiolas and helped her up. She slipped into his arms, wrapping hers around his neck. They stood in front of the hearth, and the firelight gilded the tiny hairs on their bodies. She placed tender kisses over his face and neck before whispering in his ear. Balin didn't hear but saw the words on her lips.

I love you.

She then padded over to Balin and hugged him the same way, kneeling on the bed to cradle him against her body. Her kisses warmed his heart and lifted his confidence.

"Sweetheart. My love. I'm so sorry." She placed her whisper against his temple.

Gladiolas settled on her knees, dragging her hand down his back. The small pressure she placed there was all the urging he needed.

Balin rose and crossed half the distance to Fitch. He stopped in the center of the room. "I drank your blood. We have a blood bond."

"Such a thing doesn't really exist." Fitch shook his head, staring at the shuttered window as if he could see out. "An emotional talisman. It's only what you make of it, like a wedding ring doesn't really make spouses stay true."

Balin willed himself to close the distance between them. "You're right." He placed his hand on Fitch's arm again, and when the man winced, he felt it as a stab in his own heart. "Our bond is much older, and much more significant."

“Look. You were a little boy. I'd have had to be a real piece of shit to leave you there.”

“But you came back.” He felt the tension leave Fitch's shoulders.

“Mostly for revenge.”

Balin knew this was Fitch's way of dealing, just as he had been afraid. “I am the man I am today because of you. For that, you will forever have my gratitude.”

He eased closer. Their bodies were a hairbreadth from touching. Balin brought his hand to Fitch's shoulder. His forearm brushed across Fitch's back. This time the other man didn't wince or shrink away.

“Let's call us squared, then,” Fitch said.

“Not quite.”

Chapter Twelve

“What do you want?” His voice trembled over the question. He was almost afraid of the answer. Finally, he turned around and faced Balin.

“I'm thinking.”

Gladiolas moved across the room on silent feet. She slipped into Balin's arms, and the other man folded her against himself.

“If you're not ready to go further yet, you can experience each other through me.”

Balin's gaze slipped down. He kissed her. “No. I'm ready.”

Fitch's heart skipped a beat, followed by a painful kick as Balin looked up at him.

“You'll not resist me,” Balin commanded.

“No.” It came out as a whisper. He cleared his throat. “I won't.”

Gladiolas turned around and transferred her embrace to him. Fitch collected her close, reassured by the pureness of her angelic love. She cupped his cheek, and Fitch turned to kiss her palm, eyes closed.

Nothing to fear.

“Gladiolas is ill.” Balin's words floated over an otherwise silent room, where only the crackle of the hearth lulled them with its promise of heat. “When we join our bodies, that strange energy, whatever it is, takes away her pain.”

Fitch nodded.

“However, she cannot withstand repeated double penetration.”

"I know." Fitch had been thinking of a solution, but now wasn't the time to bring it up. Besides, he didn't think he could formulate an explanation if he tried. His mind was reeling, and his only thoughts were to hope Balin would forgive him.

"What do you want me to do?"

Balin leaned close to Gladiolas and whispered in her ear. "Mount him."

She stroked the length of Fitch's cock throbbing against her belly. "My pleasure."

She grasped his rod and angled it between her legs. Behind her, Balin leaned close and lifted her body. She was sopping wet, as excited as he was scared.

Fitch didn't move. Gladiolas urged his cockhead to her moist entrance, and Balin settled her onto him, sheathing him with her body. She moaned with pleasure as she drew him deep and seated herself against his pelvis.

Fitch took hold of her ass and shifted her closer to receive more of him. She sighed with pleasure and rolled her hips to accept him. "I love the way you feel inside me."

Balin angled around them to pick up the decorative glass bottle from the dresser. Fitch's heart double-kicked. *Body oil*. Thin, slippery body oil.

Fitch watched him saunter back, all cut muscle and honeyed skin glistening in the firelight, his magnificent cock pointing to the ceiling and swaying with his step like a metronome.

He moved behind Fitch, pressing his warm bulk against his back. Fitch caught his breath. "Are you still angry?" he asked fearfully.

"I am not angry."

"Because you wouldn't be trying to hurt me, would you?" Fitch's voice shook. Damn, his whole body shook.

"I do not wish you to feel pain."

The glass stopper was placed on the stone mantel with a tiny *plink*.

Fitch felt the pressure of the small bottle's neck placed just above his tailbone. The oil trickled out and ran down the cleft of his buttocks, over his balls, and down his thighs. Another *plink*, and the bottle was set down beside its stopper.

He nearly yelped when Balin touched him.

The other man's hand slid over his ass, following the oil's path, gently pushing between his cheeks. Strong fingers traveled over his hole, slid past, and cupped his balls.

He would have enjoyed it as the greatest sensation he'd ever experienced if he weren't terrified of what he knew was coming next.

Balin dragged his hand back up through Fitch's cleft, this time pressing his middle finger deeper in the valley of his ass to trail over the tightly puckered star.

The other arm slid around Fitch's chest. Balin placed his hand over Fitch's pectoral muscle, feeling for his heartbeat. Fitch felt the other man's body shift behind him and knew Balin was rubbing the oil onto his cock.

"Is he losing his erection?" Balin asked Gladiolas over Fitch's shoulder. The man's breath came warm at his neck.

"God no, he's hard as a rock."

"What do you expect, with you wriggling on me like that?"

"Calm your breathing, vampire."

"Jesus, I can't."

"Don't be such a wuss. Gladiolas has taken us both this way."

"That's different. She's a woman. She's meant to be penetrated."

She clenched with her sex. "Oh really?"

Balin leaned close, pressing his broad chest against Fitch's back. All other thoughts fled. He roamed with his fingertips, one thick digit pressing directly against his tight ring.

“Relax.”

Easy for you to say.

The finger pushed, probing, then passed inside him. A strike of terror lanced his heart, then vanished. *This is Balin. The man I owe. The man I love.*

I want this.

Balin's finger sank gently to the first knuckle. There was a slight burn, but nothing unpleasant. Just as he decided he liked it, the finger withdrew. Fitch felt the smooth, solid mass of the other man's cockhead push through his cheeks. His knees trembled.

“You do realize, in all my eight hundred years, you're about to go where no man has gone before.”

“I consider it an honor.”

Excitement warred with fear. If any man were to take him like this, Fitch wanted it to be Balin.

Balin rubbed the crown of his enormous cock up and down, smearing the oil until Fitch was so slippery, he was powerless to resist. The hand at his chest squeezed.

“Say no, and I'll stop right now.”

Fitch considered it out of raw terror. But his desire to have this man possess him outweighed all resignation. “I don't want you to stop.”

Balin pushed forward. The tight band of muscle resisted and was conquered. The shock struck him like a thunderclap. Bright lights exploded in his eyes.

Balin's enormous shaft pushed inside and traveled slowly and steadily, like a locomotive climbing a rise. Fitch felt every inch of Balin's monstrous cock sliding into his sensitive flesh, the oil lubricating his ass allowing him to feel every minute sensation of that huge phallus moving deep into him.

Fitch locked his arms around Gladiolas, needing something to hold on to, to ground him in reality. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back, giving

little gasps of delight as his cock jumped and twitched inside her. He bent his head to her neck, breathing in her sweet feminine scent as he willed the burn away.

"Easy, lover," Balin spoke softly. "All right?"

"All right," he said, his breath racing. "Are you...all the way?"

"Not quite. Can you take more?"

"I can take...what you can give."

Balin withdrew to half-mast. This time, he thrust harder, forcing deep into Fitch's ass.

"Oh Jesus."

"Do you feel it?"

Is he kidding? Then Fitch realized that strange energy had overtaken them again.

"Oh yes!" Gladiolas cried.

"I feel it," Fitch ground out.

The current traveled between their connected bodies, fusing them together as one. The pain in his ass turned to a sweet, raw burn, and above it all, Fitch recognized the sensation of being joined emotionally.

Balin began a slow humping rhythm. "I'm going to fuck you now," he whispered at Fitch's ear. "You're going to take my cum."

He encircled them both and placed his hands over Fitch's where he held Gladiolas's ass. She lifted one leg, then the other, wrapped them around both their hips, and used her suspended body weight to bring Fitch's raging cock deeper into herself.

His knees quivered, and Fitch realized Balin was supporting her and half of Fitch's weight. They leaned into the corner of the wall, Gladiolas's back against the stone.

The power between them was an energy surge that rose above all other sensations. Fitch was aware of the solid mass spreading his backside and pushing deep into the very center of his body, but it was an accompaniment to the overwhelming intensity coursing through every cell in his body.

Every time Balin's thrust reached its pinnacle, a jolt of intense rapture deep in his bowels hinted at a climax of amazing pleasure. The strong arms locked around him brought Gladiolas hard onto his cock with each homeward thrust, and Fitch realized Balin was fucking both him and Gladiolas. *Or using himself and Gladiolas to fuck me.* Fitch wasn't sure which, but he gladly surrendered himself to it.

Gladiolas snaked her arms around Fitch's neck and held Balin's shoulders. "Oh God. Fuck me. Fuck me. *Fuck-me-fuck-me-fuck-me!*"

The pleasure burst as Balin's cock brought forth a strange and magnificent orgasm, rolling through the sensitive flesh of his bowels and high up into his body. Delight spiraled outward, rippling through his soft muscles and cascading into his limbs. His seed shot forward, jetted into Gladiolas as she screamed in wonder.

He felt Balin's phallus jerk and warmth spread into his bowels as the man let loose inside him. The pressure built, but the channel grew slicker with Balin's cum. Fitch lost all awareness except for the rock-hard stabbing of Balin's thick cock spearing into his soft region.

Pure bliss.

He wasn't sure when it ended, but a few minutes later, the three of them were still, leaning against the stone wall, panting and slick with sweat.

Balin let Gladiolas's legs go, and she placed her feet on the floor, taking her own weight. Fitch caught a sharp breath, then groaned. He felt thoroughly fucked. Thoroughly, divinely, beautifully fucked.

"How about it, Guardian?" he asked in a weak voice. "Are we square *now?*"

* * * * *

Boragnis stopped to catch his breath. The sheer cold had prevented him from extending his wings and flying directly to Château Arnonne.

Undead as he might be, he was still composed of mostly water. If his wings were to freeze during flight, he'd plummet to the forest floor, probably battering himself on the sharp cliffs and jagged rocks on the way down. Healing abilities didn't exclude pain, and pain was something he liked inflicting on others, not experiencing himself.

Besides, he didn't want to take off his bearskin coat until he absolutely had to. And a broken wing, or other serious injury, meant healing time. He couldn't be caught outside when the sun came up.

The night sky lit up with a glowing crescent at the peak of the mountain. Boragnis could see it encircling the single, square turret that composed the castle's blocklike construction.

They were fucking her again.

The energy their bodies gave off was like a magnet-to-magnet pressure that pushed him away, yet as his rage peaked, the fatigue racking his body vanished. He charged through the negative energy and up the jagged mountainside with new strength.

How dare they fuck his Gladiolas! She was his; he'd claimed her. No others would have her and live. Especially not a vile Guardian and a traitor vampire. He would be less offended if she were fucking a human.

He ground his teeth as he fought through waist-deep snow. He would see to it those two wished they'd never been born.

* * * * *

"I was thinking," Fitch began as they made their way down the stairs.

They arrived at the stone floor and took Gladiolas between them, linking their arms. He would swear the energy sparked, just from this simple contact of three.

He was a changed man, he realized. They were all changed, after their time together, but mostly him. *I've had Balin's cock in my ass. Of course I'm changed.*

But it wasn't just a physical change. It was in his heart and soul. The power of their connection was prevailing and more quickly brought on, as if their emotional progress had made it stronger.

Where he'd always thought sex with a man would be awful, something to be ashamed of, instead he found himself reveling in it.

And it was more than that, he now understood. Where he'd always resisted others, and resented those who found love, he now relished in it himself. What irony he'd found love in such unlikely mates: a Guardian and a human.

That's what they were—*mates*.

The three of them walked slowly across the main room's stone floor, content in each other's company. They were all fully dressed, embarking on a formal dinner together. Balin now wore a pair of Count Zlatko's too-tight breeches and a linen shirt, looking like a dashing rake of the Victorian era. God, Fitch missed the nineteenth century.

"We might be here a long time. Gladiolas's illness should be our top priority."

Balin cast him a sly look.

Fitch frowned. "I was *thinking*," he repeated, "we might try some experiments to bring out this energy that makes her feel better."

Balin's brows crept up.

"Get your thoughts out of the gutter, Guardian."

Gladiolas giggled and leaned her head on Fitch's arm. "What did you have in mind?"

"We might try both of us putting a finger inside you tonight as we sleep. Maybe that will be enough."

"But I like fucking you both." She leaned up to kiss Fitch on the cheek. "At the same time." She then leaned over to kiss Balin. "I like it a lot."

"But you can't do it all the time, sweetheart. Your body just can't take it."

"Is this the same man who first said, 'She's been fucked several times a day, every day, for more years than she can remember. Once or twice by us isn't going to kill her'?"

Gladiolas perked up. "He said that?"

Balin grinned. "You were unconscious."

"Ah."

"All right. Forget I suggested it. Jeez."

"No, it's a good idea. It's worth a shot, anyway," Gladiolas said. Her gaze turned sly. "Of course, we could try it any number of ways."

"Yeah, like I could put my finger inside Gladiolas, and she could put her finger inside you."

"Watch it, Guardian," Fitch sent back to Balin. "Gladiolas is right. It could go any number of ways. We could *both* put our fingers inside *you*."

Gladiolas giggled. "I'm liking this idea more and more."

An unholy roar shattered the beautiful peace. All three froze, eyes on the main doors. Gladiolas winced as the hellhounds, several of them by the sound of it, bellowed their bone-jarring howls.

They were fighting—or attacking—something.

The cries of one, and then a second, turned from a roar to an animal scream. Another shrieked, and then something large hit the doors. It rattled on its hinges so violently that it seemed to shake the castle's very foundation.

"What is it?"

"The second barrier will protect us," Balin said in fast, clipped words. "The hellhound that got in was a hybrid and entered through the tunnel where the second barrier wasn't as strong."

“What's the first barrier?” Despite Balin's assurances, she backed away.

“The castle is the first barrier,” Fitch supplied. “The enchantment is the second, and the hellhounds are the third.”

A boom sounded like a clap of thunder directly on top of them, momentarily deafening, and the ground vibrated.

The doors exploded open. Gladiolas screamed. Her eyes went wide, and she screamed again when she saw the demon standing in the open doorway, two dead hellhounds lying bloody at his feet.

Boragnis loomed twice as large as she remembered, three times as fierce, and ten times as evil. He stood naked, bloodred, fists on his massive hips. His freakishly huge cock pointed straight out, aiming at her like a divining rod. His eyes glowed in rage. For the first time, she understood the purpose of those huge horns curled around his head. *Weapons.*

“Glaaa-deee-oooo-lissss! I've missed you, my sweet!”

Chapter Thirteen

"Where is the sword?" Balin demanded.

"In the great hall." Fitch grabbed Gladiolas by the arms. "Get upstairs and bolt the door."

She whirled around and ran up the stairs, sobbing like a fool.

How did he find her? How on earth...? And why was he in demon form?

He transformed outside the castle because he can't transform inside, that's why, she understood with absurd calm. And being twice as large, twice as strong, he'd smashed through all three of the castle's barriers with ease.

She glanced back, stumbling on the staircase. Balin charged him, barehanded. Boragnis backhanded him, sending him flying. He crumpled to the floor and lay still.

"No!" She tripped and fell across the steps, pushed herself up, and skipped up the last five steps.

Fitch raced toward the great hall. Boragnis hefted the scrapped table and hurled it over his head. It hit the doors to the great hall and crashed to the floor in a splintered heap, barricading Fitch's entry. He quickly changed direction and leaped onto the stairs.

Boragnis threw back his head and erupted with unholy laughter. He then charged across the main room, closing the distance in twice the speed.

"Gladiolas, get inside!" Fitch shouted.

She sobbed as she backed across the landing, willing him to run the stairs faster. Boragnis loomed behind him, an evil Mack truck bearing down with ferocious intent.

She wouldn't close Fitch outside. Boragnis would kill him in seconds.

Her only hope was to appeal to the demon in exchange for her lovers' lives. She prayed Balin *was* still alive.

Fitch rushed across the landing, and together they threw the doors shut. Boragnis crashed through, sending them both flying.

Gladiolas scrambled to her feet and backed away. "No. No! Please!"

"Thank you for comink to my homeland, sweet Gladiolas. You have saved me much trouble. You veel like my castle. It has many sex machines to help you give me much pleasure."

Fitch, holding a splintered piece of wood, pushed to his feet. Boragnis punched him square in the face, his long arms preventing Fitch from getting anywhere near enough to strike. Fitch careened backward and smashed the chaise into a million pieces.

Boragnis closed in on her. "Such a pretty dress," he said of her toga-sheet gown. "You knew I vas comink."

He swiped lightning fast, tearing it from her body. His claws raked a stinging trail of bloody gashes across her torso. Cool air washed over her sudden nakedness. Boragnis's eyes flashed red at the sight of her bared body dripping with blood.

He grabbed her by the throat and lifted her off the floor as easily as hefting a beer bottle, huge claws squeezing the life out of her. Noxious breath wafted over her face. His long tongue snaked out and slathered across the gashes he'd made. The wounds itched as they began to heal.

"You are very bad girl." The other hand waved a finger back and forth across her face, its long claw a lethal killing blade. "You make it up to me vis much fucking."

She gripped at the fist holding her throat as black spots swam before her eyes. His mammoth cock pressed against the blonde curls at her pussy. "You're right! You're right, Boragnis. I came here to be with you."

His gaze narrowed with suspicion.

"I'll go with you. I can't...I can't wait to see your castle. Just, please, let them go. They didn't do anything."

"Lies!" He flung her onto the bed, nearly snapping her neck with the force. "You have fuck them both. I sense the energy."

She scrambled backward. She had to do something to save them. If he killed Balin and Fitch, she would kill herself.

"I'm a slave! You know I have no choice!"

"Then they shall die for raping my Gladiolas." He turned, headed toward an unconscious Fitch.

"No!" She changed direction, scurrying off the bed toward him. "I needed them...because there's no Tourin here! I was dying; they saved me. Boragnis, they saved me...for you!"

She grabbed his arm, halting him in midreach for Fitch.

The world spun. Gladiolas kept her eyes away from the jutting cock throbbing in her peripheral vision. She could not imagine letting that ugly, foul monstrosity inside her body ever again, but if it meant saving Fitch and Balin, she would gladly endure a hundred years of it.

She shuddered as she remembered the book chronicling Boragnis's unholy appetite. A hundred years of inhuman rape, only to be devoured by those long brown teeth.

Fitch sank his fangs into the demon's ankle. Boragnis let out a howl. He kicked, sending Fitch flying against the wall.

"I deal vis you now!" he growled, yanking away from Gladiolas. In two long strides, he'd crossed the wide room and yanked Fitch up by the neck. He held Fitch in front of him, beady animal eyes narrowed in thought. "Maybe you make good example."

"No, please! Don't hurt him!"

Boragnis swatted Gladiolas away like a fly. She hit the far wall, smacking her head against the stone. The breath rushed from her lungs. She slid to the floor, fighting the blackness narrowing her vision.

Boragnis turned and strode back to the bed. "Maybe I take *two* slaves." He threw Fitch facedown on the bed, knelt beside him, and pinned him to the mattress with a fist planted on the back of his neck.

The demon tore his clothes away in two easy swipes—Fitch's shirt first, and next his jeans like they were tissue paper.

Fitch thrashed like a wild man but was no match for Boragnis's monstrous strength.

"No, please, Boragnis, don't!" Gladiolas begged.

The other thigh came down between Fitch's legs. Boragnis kicked with his knee, shoving Fitch wide.

"You learn lesson. Vampire earn many enemy turning on own kind."

Boragnis took his cock in his hand and aimed it at Fitch's ass.

Gladiolas screamed, her vision blurry from the tears streaming from her eyes. "Please, Boragnis, I'll go with you. I'll do whatever you want. Please don't kill him!"

Boragnis laughed. "I don't kill him. Do I kill you? No, I just teach him lesson. He is vampire. He vill heal."

"It's all right, Gladiolas." Fitch's words hissed through clenched teeth. "Don't watch. Turn around; you don't have to see this."

"Yes, Gladiolas, vatch!" Boragnis shouted with demonic glee. "You like to vatch this! Come, join us. Join me vile I fuck your lover into half."

She pushed up off the floor. Boragnis guided the gnarled crown of his hideous cock between Fitch's cheeks.

Fitch squeezed his eyes shut.

Gladiolas stepped onto the bed and placed her hand on Boragnis's shoulder.

"I knew you different from other slaves," Boragnis hissed. "You always like the kinky fucking—"

Gladiolas plunged the enchanted blade into his back. Boragnis howled in pain and shoved her away. She sprawled onto the floor.

Boragnis rose off the bed and stood over her. "Stupid girl, you can't hurt me with a little sliver!" He threw his arm over his shoulder to yank out the blade. His face twisted with pain. "Bitch... I kill you... I fuck you to death."

Boragnis turned his arm the other way, trying to reach the blade from beneath. He stumbled toward her. Gladiolas scampered away.

"You...can't...kill me..." His arms dropped at his sides, and he tilted back his head. He opened his mouth and let out an unearthly roar. The sound frosted her skin with a crust of ice.

Boragnis tipped forward and fell flat. Gladiolas screamed and darted backward, nearly being crushed. The demon's face smacked the stone floor at her feet.

The blade in his back throbbed with his last heartbeat, then went still.

Fitch pushed up onto his elbows. Gladiolas tore her eyes away from the demon.

"Fitch."

He scrambled off the bed and knelt beside her. She slipped into his arms, not sure which of them was shaking more.

"D-d-did he h-h-hurt you?"

"No. You saved me, love."

The body made a crackling sound. His skin wrinkled as it turned brown, and Boragnis shriveled up, resembling jerked beef.

"You killed him."

"Are you s-s-sure?"

"I'm sure."

She collapsed against him. “I h-h-hope so. Is he going to b-b-burst into flames?”

“Not in this case, sweetheart. The blade is enchanted.”

Balin charged into the doorway, arms braced on either side. He did a quick survey of the room, then rushed inside.

“Balin! Thank God!” Gladiolas struggled to her knees, and Fitch helped her up the rest of the way.

Balin threw his arms around them both and squeezed tight.

“I was so worried he'd killed you,” she sobbed.

“*You* were worried about *me*?” He drew back far enough to smile down at her. “Darlin', you're amazing.”

“You don't know the half of it,” Fitch said with a nervous chuckle. “She did that.” He inclined his head toward the decomposing corpse.

“Are you naked again?” Balin knit his brows. “What's with you, vampire?”

Chapter Fourteen

Popping sounds like rapid gunfire ended their delicately jubilant triumph. The sound originated in the main room below.

Gladiolas tensed. "What was that?"

Fitch drew out of their embrace. "*That* is the cavalry."

For them, it was rescue. For him, it marked the end to what now, despite his near-rape experience, had been a sweet vacation.

Deep voices rose from below. Fitch recognized Wayne Ellis as the one giving orders.

"Murphy, Mac Donald, great hall. Williams, St. John, search upstairs. You, guard the door."

Booted feet clambered up the stone stairs.

Fitch locked eyes with Balin. He didn't move. Silent understanding passed between them.

It was over.

Another voice shouted over the sudden din from below. "Stay here!" Robert Almaden of the Vampire Task Force. What were *those* dickheads doing here?

"No, I vill not!" a female voice with a thick accent argued. Fitch recognized his comrade spy, Cvetelina. "Gladiolas!"

"Cvetelina?" Gladiolas started toward the door. She shrank back when two armed men charged through the doorway and took quick account. Fitch picked up the torn sheet and wrapped it around his waist. The vampire woman pushed past. "Gladiolas? Gladiolas!"

She ran in and angled carefully around the dried vampire and gathered Gladiolas in her arms. "Oh, you poor dear. Vat has happened to you? I vas so vorried!" She shrugged out of her fur coat and wrapped it around Gladiolas.

"I'm okay. I had two strong men taking care of me." Gladiolas turned and gestured. "This is Balin. He's a Guardian. And this is—"

"Fitch Galloway, you're under arrest." Agent Almaden pushed into the room. "Take him into custody."

"What? No! He helped us." Gladiolas pulled away from Cvetelina, but Balin caught her. "Balin, tell them."

"What's going on here?" Balin demanded, but he collected Gladiolas against him, and his gaze slid to Fitch, suspicious.

Agent Almaden's soldiers moved over cautiously, clearly not wanting to get near him. One finally lashed out with the handcuffs, slapped them on, and jerked away as if Fitch were foul to the touch. The sheet fell away and pooled at his feet.

"This man is wanted. He's rogue."

"But he helped us! He saved me from Boragnis at the Palace, and he's been taking care of me while we were here."

Agent Almaden stepped in front of Balin. "Is this true?"

Balin glanced back at him. The coldness in his eyes frosted over Fitch's heart.

"It is."

"That will be taken into consideration." Agent Almaden looked at the corpse. "Which one of you did this?"

"I did," Gladiolas snapped, glaring at the man. She must believe Fitch would be in trouble if he claimed responsibility.

Agent Almaden looked amused, at best. "Really? Quite a feat, little lady."

Cvetelina turned to the brawny man standing beside Balin. The Guardian leader, Fitch surmised.

"I told you she was special," Cvetelina said, flashing a gorgeous smile.

"She certainly is," the man agreed.

Balin tucked her close and laid his cheek against her head. Fitch swallowed back sore regret. Already his lovers felt as if they were a million miles away. In seconds, they would be.

Ellis pointed at Fitch with the antenna on his radio. "Take him downstairs."

"Wait! You can't have him!" When Gladiolas tried to move away, Balin pulled her back. "He's...indebted to us."

Bless her sweet heart, she'd wanted to say, *He's ours*. The soldiers yanked Fitch toward the smashed-in doorway. He gave her a last smile, but he couldn't force it to look truly happy.

"It's all right, hon. I knew this was coming." He nodded at Balin. "It was fun while it lasted."

The Guardian returned a stony stare.

Gladiolas twisted in Balin's arms and hid her face against his chest. Her sobs followed him onto the landing and down the stairs. Behind him, Cvetelina offered soft consolations.

"There, there, sweetheart."

Four women stood in the center of the great hall. Beside them, three more VTF agents, three humans and one vamp, stood guard, automatic rifles at the ready. Fitch knew they contained silver bullets. They wouldn't kill him, but they sure would sting worse than lead.

The women were dressed in opalescent white, space-age bodysuits that clung to every curve. All three had their long hair pulled back into tight knots at their napes. Their vivid green eyes glimmered, even across the wide space separating them. *Fae*.

So the race was alive and well, after all.

The soldiers steered him toward the tallest one with the biggest tits. He chuckled to himself. A sliver of mercy, if ever there was one.

He gave her a randy smile, raking over her with his eyes. "Nice outfit. Thanks for not wearing a bra."

Her expression didn't even flicker. The soldiers each released his arms. The woman stared at the middle of his forehead, as though it were beneath her to meet his eyes, and placed her hands on his shoulders.

There was a *pop* that seemed to originate inside his head; the breath was sucked from his lungs, and then darkness.

* * * * *

The day after their rescue, Balin was surprised to learn that because Robert Almaden's Vampire Task Force had set up temporary headquarters in the overthrown Palace, Fitch was being held in a cell constructed there instead of being taken directly to Washington, DC.

He'd learned the raid was, for the most part, a success. The Palace had been overthrown, and all the vampires captured. Gabrielle had been rescued unharmed, but Davin had been seriously wounded.

Balin exited the elevators on the fourth floor of the makeshift hospital and headed toward Gladiolas's private room.

Cvetelina sat by her bedside, stroking the back of her hand. Gladiolas appeared half-conscious, her stare vacant, but Balin had been warned to expect this.

She'd been given a powerful sedative to help stave off the effects of the Tourin and had been started on a mysterious regimen the Vampire Secret Service was testing at their facility in DC.

Gladiolas reached for him and offered a weak smile. "Balin. My love. I'm so glad to see you."

He bent over her and kissed her forehead. "How are you feeling, darling?"

"So polite. Don't be fooled, Cvetelina. He's a very passionate lover."

The vampire woman gave him a sarcastic smile. She didn't like seeing Gladiolas like this any more than he did, only Balin suspected she found him partly to blame.

Unfortunately, neither of them could do anything about it.

Gladiolas sighed and shifted on the bed. "Where's Fitch?"

"In prison, Gladiolas. He's a criminal."

"No."

"I'm sorry. I'm disappointed too."

She managed a weak laugh. "Not in Fitch. In those jerks." She threw an arm wide, gesturing beyond the walls, and then tried to sit up. "I want to leave. Let's go find him."

Balin urged her back down. "Gladiolas, I know it seems difficult to believe now, but these people know how to take care of you."

"These people are idiots."

Cvetelina barked out a laugh.

"I can't live like this, Balin. I hate the way the drugs make me feel. I'd rather be dead."

"I'm sorry, love. It'll get better, you'll see." He kissed her forehead again and backed a step away. He couldn't stand this room, or the sight of Gladiolas lying there half-drugged out of her mind.

"Come back soon?"

He smiled and nodded, lying. He couldn't come back, not ever. The sooner she got over him, the better off she'd be.

"Be well, sweetheart."

He was a soldier in the sect of the Guardians. His life was devoted to fighting evil vampires.

So why do I feel so shitty for it?

Because while the Guardians needed him, Gladiolas needed him more.

He rode the elevator to the basement where the makeshift prison of silver-plated bars had been erected in the gutted playroom. It was hard to believe that only eight days ago, this was the luxurious club they'd stormed.

An armed guard stepped in front of him.

"I'm here to see Fitch Galloway."

"Name and rank," the guard demanded.

"It's all right, officer."

The man Balin recognized as Wayne Ellis, head of the VSS DC branch, approached him. "What do you want with my prisoner?"

Balin bristled. The man obviously hated Fitch, and that didn't sit well with him. "I need to ask him a question."

"I suppose it's the least we can do for you, considering you're partly responsible for capturing him. But make it quick." Agent Ellis nodded at the guard, who stepped aside. "This way."

He led Balin through a maze of temporary walls, past hastily set-up cubicles and a common room where several agents chuckled around a coffee machine. They saw him and cut off immediately, staring like he was some freakish being. He guessed, in their eyes, he was.

Another sliver of guilt nagged him. Neither Gladiolas nor Fitch had ever looked at him that way. He owed Fitch for so much, but most of all for his unquestioning acceptance.

"Lot of empty cells," Balin commented when they entered the long hall of bars.

"Most of the vampires who weren't destroyed in the raid have been pardoned with probation. This raid led to the largest tag-and-register ever known."

"Did you know about the Palace before Fitch infiltrated the building?"

Ellis didn't turn around. "Talk to Molin if you want a debriefing."

Balin stopped, making Ellis stop with him. "I'm asking you." He squared his shoulders, towering over the man. "Simple question. Yes or no."

The man ground his teeth. "We knew of it. Not where it was."

"Yet your man was inside."

"He revealed the location four hours before your raid. He was ordered to back off." The man nodded curtly. "He'll go before a federal judge."

Fitch probably had followed orders and stood down. *But then he saw Boragnis about to kill me.*

"Depending on how you write your report."

The man stared back, challenge seeping from every pore. A long minute ticked by in which each vied for the win. Finally, Ellis broke eye contact.

"He's this way."

Fitch lay on a cot, his face mottled with the still-healing bruises of a recent beating. Very recent, considering they still showed. He sat up when he saw Balin but didn't rise from the narrow bunk. Fitch had been given a pair of tattered jeans that were a size too large for him, a button up shirt, and a pair of athletic shoes that all looked like they came from a thrift store.

Balin frowned, glaring at Ellis. "So this is the way of your people, is it?"

Fitch laughed. "Didn't you read my personnel report? I'm uncooperative, belligerent, and cocky." He shrugged. "If you remember, I took a couple of your sucker punches as well. Among other things."

Balin shot him a look and cleared his throat. "About what happened at the castle—"

"Hey, don't worry about me, Guardian. I get it; what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas."

Balin cast a nasty glare at Ellis. The man grimaced before striding away. He waited until the VSS agent left the holding area.

"Why were you at the Palace?"

“Same reason you were. More or less.”

“When I first met you, I thought you were a dickhead. I'm thinking I was right.”

Fitch scowled. “What's got your undies in a bunch? In case you haven't noticed, you're on the free side of the bars.”

“Answer the damned question.”

“I was hunting Boragnis. I told you this already.”

“Your agency told you to stand down, yet you went in anyway. Why?”

“An agent in the field sometimes has to make a call. The pencil pushers don't always know what's best.”

“You didn't think to wait until you had a team together?”

Fitch gave him a mouth shrug. “No team to muster. Boragnis was preparing to leave.”

Balin voiced his assumption. “Cvetelina told you Boragnis had purchased Gladiolas.”

Fitch eyed him. “Yeah. But I didn't care about that. She was just another slave.”

The vampire's proclamation wounded him. It was as he suspected. Fitch didn't care about anything except his assignment.

Yet he'd said *was*.

“He had to be stopped, for all their sakes,” he finished, making Balin rethink his anger.

“When I learned he was leaving, I had to act,” Fitch went on. “He'd made plans to ship himself and that poor girl to the Black Sea in a cargo container. She would have been insane by the time it was opened up.”

“Are you trying to convince me that you are such a dedicated agent you risked your entire career to bring down one criminal?”

"My entire career *was* that criminal." Fitch leaned his elbows on his knees and drove his fingers through his hair. Then he shrugged. "What the hell. Believe what you want."

"It was personal."

A long moment of silence passed before Fitch answered. "Yes."

"Why?"

"Why do you care?"

"Just pretend I do."

"Long story."

"Vampire, you've got nothing but time."

Fitch worried his lower lip between his teeth as he glanced at an imaginary spot on bare cement floor. He finally drew a deep breath and blasted it out. "Those vampires in the forest I told you about? He was the one who turned me. So yeah, you bet it was personal."

It made sense. Boragnis had robbed Fitch of the life he wanted. A sudden, painful rage flash-boiled in his gut. Fitch had killed Balin's parents' murderer. For this alone, he owed this vampire a debt that could never be repaid.

Fitch slid his gaze around, as if reluctant to meet Balin's eyes. "Where is Gladiolas, anyway? Nobody will tell me shit."

"What do you care?" Balin threw back at him.

"I just do, okay, fuckhead?"

"Do you love her?"

Fitch barked out a laugh. "Yeah. I love her. Believe it or not, I love you both. How screwed is that?"

Balin's heart thundered against his ribs. Fitch stared at the floor, undoubtedly waiting for the pain of that confession to fade. It had been difficult, no, near-*impossible* to admit. Balin felt the steel band around his chest begin to loosen.

"Fitch Galloway?" a meek voice called.

His gaze snapped up. "Jesus, the room service in this place sucks. I distinctly remember putting up the DO NOT DISTURB sign."

Balin stepped aside as Ellis and a nerdy little man in thick glasses stopped at Fitch's cell. "I'm Horace McMorton from Bank of America."

Fitch barked out a laugh. "You're kidding. That's really your name?"

"Um, yes it is, why?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. What do you want?"

"I have the documents here for you to sign..." He fumbled with his briefcase. It flipped open, and a cascade of papers fluttered onto the floor.

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm in jail."

Horace glanced up and around, baffled by the odd surroundings but too polite to say anything. "Yes, well, um, I can see that. But you're still entitled to your money."

"Yeah, think about it," Ellis sneered. "In the two hundred years you'll be here, it'll appreciate nicely."

Horace glanced across all three. He burst out laughing, thinking it was a joke. Obviously he didn't realize he was staring at a real vampire. When no one laughed with him, he cut off abruptly.

"What's going on here?" Balin barked.

The little man winced. "And who might you be?"

"Balin Renforth," Ellis supplied. "You have papers for him too. Lord knows neither of them did shit to earn it, but the little girl wants them to have it."

"Oh good. This is convenient. I have a dinner engagement in an hour. The traffic in this city is intolerable."

"I have dinner plans too," Fitch said, rising for the first time. He leaned on the bars and opened his mouth to reveal his fangs, unbeknownst to the banker, who bent over his spilled papers.

Ellis poked at Fitch with a cattle prod. It stung him on the hand where Fitch grasped the bars. He hissed and jumped back, retracting his fangs. "It was a joke. Lighten up."

Horace looked from one to the next, blissfully unaware. "That is a bit harsh, don't you think?"

Ellis snorted. "Galloway, if you care about your job at all, you'll straighten up and fly right."

"Can't. These damned rooms are too small. I thought this was supposed to be a top-notch hotel?" He returned a menacing glare at Ellis. "And maybe I just don't give a shit about my job anymore. Maybe I'm resigning."

Balin held his breath. Was it possible? He was still reeling from Fitch's proclamation, yet he couldn't discuss it further until these two dickwads left.

"Oh, praise the Lord." Ellis waved his hands dramatically.

"I'm guessing you two don't work well together," McMorton said with a nervous chuckle, obviously trying to defuse the situation.

"What is this about money?" Balin prompted.

"The money, oh yes, the reward. Miss Amy Thompson has decreed you should each receive—"

"Who?" Fitch asked.

To Balin, it made perfect sense. "Gladiolas."

"What, you think that was really her name?" Ellis snapped wickedly. "All the Palace victims were given slave names."

Horace looked at his watch. Obviously he wanted to get his paperwork done and get the hell out of here.

"Here you go, Mr. Galloway. And Mr. Renforth"—Horace righted one of the spilled papers—"this is yours."

Balin looked over the document. It was fairly straightforward, showing bolded numbers at the bottom of a tally sheet. "This is one million five hundred thousand dollars."

“Miss Thompson kept two million for herself and split the remaining three million between the two of you.”

Ellis made a sound of disgust low in his throat. “Un-fucking-believable.”

Balin glanced up and found Fitch staring back, stunned. “I forgot about the reward.”

That was the proof Balin needed. He glanced at the agency man, calculating his plan in his head.

“Now, I just need to know where you two wish to receive your money. You can transfer the funds into your own accounts, or I can arrange for new accounts to be set up at our bank. I have the necessary paperwork with me for whichever you choose.”

Both Balin and Fitch chose new accounts. While Horace filled out the paperwork on the back of his briefcase from a folding chair, Balin took Ellis aside.

“Do you truly want him out of your hair?”

He guffawed. “You have some doubt?”

“What if he were to give you his resignation?”

Ellis gave a snide laugh. “What, you think there's a position for him with the Guardians?”

Balin rolled his eyes skyward. “Why is it no one around here wants to answer a simple question?”

“The man went against federal orders.”

“Yeah, about that. I'm thinking there's something more serious going on here. You wouldn't be covering up some ineptitude on your agency's part, would you?”

Ellis lost a percentage of his rudeness. “What are you offering?”

“Release this man into my custody, and I'll make sure he never sets foot or fang in DC again.”

"I report to a higher authority. I don't just make decisions like that and open up the jail cells."

"This is no official prison. And about that higher authority—your office is in the White House. That means the president knows about you. If he were to get wind that Fitch is responsible for bringing down your number one wanted vampire, I don't think he'd look too kindly at you for keeping him locked up like this."

"A little girl brought him down. That would be an embarrassment to Fitch."

"To your entire agency, I would guess." Balin crossed his arms. "You don't seem to want to be rid of him very badly."

"Fuck that. He's yours." Ellis sifted through his keys as he strode to the gate. "Galloway, get the hell out of my prison."

Fitch handed papers to the banker through the bars. "Sure. Just let me leave a tip for the maid."

* * * * *

"Come now, sweet. Look how pretty." Cvetelina held up the designer dress on one hanger and its matching sweater on the other. "The doctor is waiting for you. Please, get dressed."

"What's the point?" Gladiolas rolled onto her side. Balin and Fitch were gone, back to their exciting careers as Guardian and government agent.

They were not coming back for her.

This afternoon, she'd faked taking the pills, yet she still felt numb and out of sorts. But it wasn't the drugs that made her feel so awful. It was heartache.

"Please, love. For me. I am so very worried about you."

With a sigh, Gladiolas pushed up and looked at the dress. Cvetelina had done so much to help her. It was just rude to act so disinterested.

She hopped out of the hospital bed and swayed slightly as the lingering effects of the treatments made her dizzy. She slipped the ugly green hospital gown over her head.

Cvetelina helped her into the designer dress. She angled Gladiolas in front of the narrow mirror on the back of the door and smiled at their reflection over her shoulder. "Aren't you pretty?"

"Thank you, Cvetelina. It's lovely." Her heart ached. Balin and Fitch would never see her in it. Never get the chance to tear it off her.

A knot formed low in her belly. Already the need for them made itself known.

That was all right. She would rather feel the pain than be dulled from everything. Besides, it wasn't the Tourin withdrawals making her hurt. It was the loss of the two men she loved more than anything in this world.

Cvetelina retrieved the low-heeled sandals with a delighted smile. "These are Prada. Very popular here."

Gladiolas sat and let Cvetelina place them on her feet. The vampire woman gently fastened the straps at her ankles. "There now. You go see Dr. Godfrey." Cvetelina cupped her cheek gently. "He will make everything feel better."

That was impossible. Only Balin and Fitch could do that. But Gladiolas smiled obediently and stepped into the hall, where a waiting nurse escorted her down to the small office.

She sighed as she entered the makeshift office.

"Hello, Amy. How are you feeling today?" Dr. Godfrey asked.

"My name is Gladiolas."

"Your name is Amy Thompson." The smarmy man wagged a finger in her face. "You certainly look better than yesterday. What a pretty dress you have on."

"I feel dead inside."

"I have good news for you." He took her by the forearms and guided her to the examination table, where he urged her to sit. "Your cell structure has made significant improvements in the last twelve hours. You're a landmark case. Why, one of the other refugees who spent as long at the Palace died."

She tried to feel emotion. The only girl at the Palace longer than her was Hyacinth, an unfriendly, solitary girl who didn't like Gladiolas. Still, while she deserved remorse, Gladiolas felt incapable of summoning it.

Balin and Fitch had saved her. By giving her what she needed, they had saved her life.

"You don't know what's best for me. I don't care what your microscopes or your blood tests say."

He frowned comically, entertaining her. "Let's just see how this medicine turns out after a week, shall we?"

He handed her a pill, which she wedged in the crook of two fingers and only pretended to pop in her mouth. He turned to retrieve a cup of water, and Gladiolas forced it between the pads of the examination table.

His hand settled on her knee, under the hem of her skirt, as she drank the water.

"That's a good girl."

She hopped down. "Can I go now?"

"We're not done with the examination yet, Amy. I just need to have a small peek."

She recoiled. "No."

"Oh come now, you've suddenly developed shyness? Why, you walked around naked and gave yourself to any who asked for nearly four years." He moved closer, pinning her against the table. "And I'll bet a lot asked. You're such a pretty little thing."

She swiveled around. Too late, she realized it gave him the opportunity to rub his erection against her bottom.

“Don't.”

“I need to check for injuries. After all that use, there's sure to be damage. The vampires don't always clean up their messes, I'm told.”

Gladiolas tossed a seductive smile over her shoulder. “That's so *clinical*,” she purred. “Wouldn't you rather fuck me? You could feel everything that way, and we'd both like it so much better.”

The smarmy little man beamed. “Well, I dare say, *I'd* like it better.” He stepped back and raked her with his seedy gaze. “I'll be good to you, Amy.”

“One thing.” She stepped closer, pulling the short sweater off her shoulders. “I'll give it to you good, just as long as you call me Gladiolas.”

Chapter Fifteen

Fitch walked through the lower maze beside Balin, hardly able to believe the man had negotiated his release. Was it possible Noble Boy had done it for something more than nobility? His heart hammered as he considered it, but he didn't want to take that leap just yet.

"How'd you convince him?" he asked quietly as they walked past guards who shot them dirty looks.

"I promised him your resignation."

"As if I have second thoughts about that. That guy was a dickhead."

"That, and you never go back to DC again."

"Aww, shit. I knew I should have seen the Lincoln Memorial while I had the chance."

They turned a corner and headed toward the elevators.

"You're in my custody now, vampire." Balin's words dripped with deadly seriousness. "Go against *my* orders, and I will choke you to death with my cock, if it takes five years of ramming it down your throat."

The doors slid open, and he stepped into the cab as casually as you please.

Fitch's heart danced. "Is that a threat or a promise?"

Balin punched the button for the fourth floor. "Are you willing to surrender your reward to Gladiolas?"

"Hell, it's *her* money." The high-speed cab surged upward and lurched to a stop at the fourth floor. The doors slid open, and he followed Balin down the hall. "Why?"

"I have a plan." They pushed into Gladiolas's room. Cvetelina sat in the bedside chair, reading a magazine.

"Where is Gladiolas?" Balin demanded.

"She is vis Dr. Godfrey."

"That sleazebag?" Fitch spat. "Where's his office?"

Alarm filled her features. Cvetelina jumped to her feet and ran down the hall ahead of them. She could really move in those spiked heels.

At first, the examination room seemed empty. Cvetelina went back into the hall, and Fitch followed, looking up and down for Gladiolas. Moaning from behind the examination table stopped Balin on his way out.

The doctor lay on the floor, clutching his privates. Balin took him by the lapels and hauled him to his feet.

"Where is Gladiolas?"

The man yodeled in pain. "Gone. She kicked me in the balls and left."

Balin shook him. "Why did she kick you in the balls?" Fitch showed his fangs and hissed. The doctor began to cry.

Cvetelina placed a hand on Balin's arm. "Go. Find Gladiolas." Her scowl was wicked, almost monstrous. She was on the verge of transforming. "*I* will take care of him."

Balin dropped the doctor to the floor and stalked out. Fitch hesitated, stopping Cvetelina as she bent toward the trembling little man. "The prison cells here aren't pleasant. Don't do anything you'll regret."

"Do not worry." Her words dripped with deadliness. She inclined her head toward the door. "Go."

No one they encountered had seen Gladiolas, until they came to a bored security guard in the cavernous lobby.

"Hot little blonde with blue eyes, wearing a fluttery dress? About five minutes ago." He pointed to the doors. "That way."

They stepped into the brisk San Francisco evening. "We should take to the sky," Fitch proclaimed. "My wings are stiff. I could use a good fly."

Balin stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Not yet. I think she's headed this way." He pulled Fitch onto the sidewalk headed downtown, toward Market.

"What if you're wrong?"

"Then we fly."

They hurried down Stockton Street as the last traces of twilight turned from lavender to indigo. Far ahead, at the end of the street, a gleaming blonde head turned the corner. Immediately, three skinheads emerged from a doorway and started after her.

"She's being followed," Fitch growled.

"This way." Balin darted into a narrow alley. They hooked right, met Market Street, and came out ahead of them.

"We wanna take you to a party," one of the skinheads was saying.

"Not interested."

"Whatsamatter, babe? Don't you like us? We'll show you a real good time."

One of the skinheads laughed wickedly. "Now seating, party of four."

"Sit here, first," another said, placing two fingers to his mouth and making an obscene gesture with his tongue. His friends laughed along with him.

"She said no." Balin stepped up and placed his hand on her shoulder.

Gladiolas gasped. "Balin."

The leader of the group flipped out a switchblade. "We saw her first. Go find your own pussy."

Fitch bared his fangs and hissed, glowing eyes and all. Balin drew out his wings through the specially tailored slits in his leather jacket. The skinheads changed their attitude instantly.

"Shit!"

They took off in the opposite direction, running for all they were worth. The leader stumbled and dropped his knife, but kept right on going.

Gladiolas threw her arms around Balin's neck and buried her face to sob something Fitch couldn't understand. She then whirled out of his grip to grab him.

"Miss us?" He bent his head and seized her mouth for a passionate kiss. Gladiolas melted against him, falling against his lips with abandon. She tasted sweet and desperate, and he felt the powerful need he'd hardly dared to hope for.

"Um, let's get out of sight," Balin said, having tucked his wings. Down the sidewalk, a transient woman stared with an oddly calm expression.

Balin urged them back into the alley.

"I thought you'd left me."

"Never," Balin said, catching her as she leaped into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist. "Just had to bail out our friend here first."

"You saved him. My hero." She leaned backward and would have flipped to the ground if Fitch hadn't caught her.

"You're loopy," Fitch said, laughing.

She smiled, her seductive look exaggerated like she was drunk. "You know what I need, baby."

"They put her on that experimental drug the VSS was working on," Balin told him.

"Tried," Gladiolas said, twisting back to Balin. "Since this morning I've been faking it." Her smile vanished. "If I couldn't have you, I wanted the pain."

"You don't have to worry about that. I'm going to be hanging around for a while," Fitch whispered against her hair, assuring her he wasn't going anywhere. He crushed close, sandwiching her between them. A glimmer of exquisite energy tingled in his fingertips. "I'm jobless and homeless, and it's *his* fault."

Balin laughed.

"He'll be sticking around too," Fitch added. "I figure it's Balin's responsibility to put me up until I get back on my feet."

"On the contrary, vampire. You work for me now."

"I like the sound of that." Gladiolas purred. "Were those wings I saw?"

Balin risked a secret smile. Fitch wished he'd been able to get a closer look as well.

"I want to fly," she said.

Before she'd even finished, Balin shot his wings out. Fitch hadn't thought he could have been any more turned on by his muscled counterpart, but damned if that didn't do it.

The next instant he'd soared into the sky, eliciting a surprised yelp from Gladiolas. They disappeared into the low-hanging clouds, but Fitch heard her laughing and whooping, which caused startled pedestrians on the street to look up.

Without tailored slits in his shirt, he had to tear through the fabric to follow. He launched into the clouds, noting how Balin was a superior athlete. Fitch was stiff and tired from two days in the prison cell but recognized that even at his best, he'd have to race to keep up.

He caught them hovering above a dense cloud that made him feel like he was flying in a dream. Balin cradled Gladiolas against his chest.

"Oh my God, I'm alive again!"

"Gladiolas." Balin gulped over a laugh, and Fitch saw she was struggling with the zipper on his pants.

"I need you *now*," she shrieked. "Fitch, where the hell are you?"

He swooped in behind her. "Right here, baby."

She glanced over her shoulder and brightened when she saw him. He flew close, and together, he and Balin held her aloft.

"Rule number ten. Fuck me now."

"You're the boss."

"*I'm* the boss," Balin corrected. His grin was downright boyish, making Fitch tingle inside.

"Last I heard, you report to her."

"Well, that is true," the Guardian conceded.

"Stop talking. Start fucking!"

"She's not a slave anymore, and suddenly she's bossy!"

The flying was a bit awkward, but Fitch was willing to struggle through the clumsiness to feel her again. He inched her skirt up her thighs and took hold of the little panties at her hip. One jerk, and they came away in his hand.

"Look out below," he sang, dropping them back on the city.

Gladiolas burst out laughing. "This is incredible! Woo-hoo!"

"We ought to go a little higher if she's going to shout like that," Fitch advised. His voice was laced with a giddiness that almost made him embarrassed. Less than an hour ago, he'd been looking at an eternity-long sentence in a dark box.

Balin—*Balin*, of all people—had saved him from that. The man hadn't come out and said so, but he wouldn't have done it if he didn't have—dare Fitch hope—feelings for him.

"I agree," Balin responded. "Though I doubt anyone would suspect beings were flying above them—"

"Fucking each other's brains out," Fitch finished.

He felt the subtle pull of the other man as if they were operating a Ouija board. Gladiolas shrieked as they swooped left, then soared deeper into the thick clouds.

"Put your arms around my neck," Balin told her. He tilted his body so she was hanging beneath him, his strong arms linked beneath hers. Fitch had perfect access to her dangling legs.

Gladiolas wasn't used to flying, and she flailed about, but after Fitch managed to shove his jeans clear, he swooped in below her, took her hips, and aimed his aching cock at her juicy slit. He knew he should go slow, but they were all feeling anxious after their separation. And flying like this, it was impossible. He sank into her sweet warmth, coating himself in the slick nectar gushing from her pussy.

She let out a moan of pure bliss. "Heaven on earth, that's the best medicine."

"Fuck yes," he agreed. Above her, Balin grinned. Fitch tilted his head back and relished in the sweet feel of her clenching pussy while cool wind from Balin's flapping wings washed him in heavenly splendor.

With Gladiolas impaled on his shaft, it became easier to angle them. He gently lifted her trembling body until they were all upright, Gladiolas sandwiched tight and safe between them.

He nibbled at her earlobe. She turned her head so he could kiss her cheek, and he realized she was crying.

"All right, love?"

"I was so scared I would never have this again. I thought you'd left me."

"Never, sweetheart," Balin assured her. "We are three."

"Three," Fitch repeated.

She smiled through the tears. "Not yet we're not."

He glanced over to Balin and found the other man watching him with heavy-lidded arousal. "Can you keep up this rhythm?"

"For longer than you'd believe."

Each with a wingspan that stretched ten feet easily, all it took was slow, languid strokes to keep them treading air. Fitch leaned in close to Gladiolas. "Hold your skirts. It's okay, we've got you."

She gathered them around her middle. Fitch placed his hands at her hips.

"Just like before." Only it was Balin's monstrous shaft she'd taken in her ass the last time. He hoped that this way it was a little more apropos, he with the smaller cock. Not that he was "small," by any means.

He withdrew slowly from her clenching pussy and pressed the slick tip between her cheeks. "Okay, baby?" Aloft like this, he didn't possess the kind of control he would need for precise care.

"Now I am."

"Tell me if I hurt you."

"Fitch, you're not hurting me enough." She arched her back. "Come on, bad boy. You know what I need, and I know you can give it."

"Better do what she says," Balin warned.

Fitch thrust with his hips on the downward stroke of his wings. He surged upward against the gravity pulling her down. Slick with her fluids, he pushed through her tight hole and shoved himself to half-mast. Gladiolas jerked, and a squeak slipped past her lips, but she immediately moaned out a throaty affirmation.

Carefully he inched himself deeper, knowing a new respect for what Gladiolas was feeling now that he'd felt it too.

"Your turn." Fitch bit the words out through clenched teeth.

"Can you hold her weight?"

Balin eased her backward, and Fitch slid his hands around her waist. "I've got her."

Gladiolas cooed as most of her body weight sat on his shaft. "Oh yes. So good."

Balin quickly worked his pants down. One powerful flap brought him up against them again, and on the second, he fell into time with Fitch's wings again. He sank into her with his third surge forward.

"Ah! Oooh."

Almost immediately, the buzzing energy started again. Balin reached around Gladiolas and locked his arms around Fitch's back, under his wing arches. With her body solidly impaled on both their shafts, neither had to support her weight with their arms.

"My God. This is incredible!" Gladiolas sang out. "I want to spend the rest of my life this way!"

"It'll be my pleasure, sweetheart," Balin told her.

A slow downward swipe of their wings propelled them up. The upward stroke dropped them down. They rode in and out of Gladiolas in a gently thrusting motion, up and down. Up, down. Wonderfully, magically, up and down.

Clouds like cotton swirled around them, sometimes thick, sometimes with gaps that let them see the glittering water below. They had flown out over the Pacific. The surprisingly balmy breeze caressed their bare skin, and the air smelled clean and salty.

"Is this hard?" she asked between gasps.

"For us, it's like walking," Balin told her. "We don't even think about it much, but eventually we'll get tired."

"But we're in good shape," Fitch added. "Like walking, we can fly a long, long time."

"Oh good," she said and gave a delighted squeal of pleasure when Fitch added a tad of extra force to his next downward stroke. "I—oh!—don't ever—oh God!—want to stop."

Her hair floated around his shoulders and tickled his jaw. A tiny zap accompanied the brush of Balin's balls against his.

"Lift up your legs," Fitch said against her ear.

She squirmed, hiking one leg up Balin's hip, then the other. Each effort squeezed at Fitch's cock and wriggled her body against him until he thought he'd go mad.

Balin let go of Fitch to grab her behind each knee. Obviously, the Guardian liked it too, because he gave a more forceful thrust into her. Their balls came into contact with all the power of a lightning strike. Balin took her mouth and kissed her deeply.

Fitch reached under the curve of her thigh and grasped Balin's balls. The Guardian groaned into her mouth. Fitch squeezed, feeling the sticky, slippery coating of Gladiolas's sweet nectar.

Balin released their kiss, eyes closed, and grabbed Fitch behind the neck. His mouth came down on Fitch's.

There was no hesitation on Balin's part. His kiss was bold and rough, demanding and powerful. He tasted raw with masculinity, his mouth hard, skin slightly prickly with stubble.

Fitch sucked in a breath, as amazed as he was delighted. Balin pushed his mouth open, gently but with dominance. Fitch's world turned upside down when the other man's tongue swept inside and mated with his. He kissed back, meeting the velvety caress boldly. Fitch leaned into the kiss and tilted his head beneath Balin's. Like the beta dog who rolls over and shows his belly, he gladly let Balin take dominance.

I love you, he thought, knowing the others could sense his thoughts through the connection coursing between them. I love you both.

As her sweet cries grew more shrill, Fitch sensed the orgasm building in Gladiolas like an explosion. She was wriggling on his cock, clenching and squeezing, bouncing up and down, and he couldn't hold back any longer. He didn't want to hold back any longer.

Balin eased away from him, his mouth agape but eyes closed, and Fitch felt the man's orgasm erupt as clearly as he felt his own. They came in crescendo, like an orchestra reaching the pinnacle of a powerful symphony.

The sky had gone completely dark by the time Fitch opened his eyes and took in his surroundings. Below, the ocean glittered with diamond reflections of the city's lights. The air had cooled, but still embedded in Gladiolas's body, he was warm and content. Balin had slipped his arms around them both again, and the other man's powerful wings did most of the work to keep them aloft.

"Fitch?"

Gladiolas's body quaked with tremors, glorious aftershocks of their fucking.

"Yes, sweet?"

"I love you too."

* * * * *

Fitch emerged from the opulent shower to find Balin sitting by Gladiolas's bedside. The Guardian watched him approach, his hungry gaze sliding over Fitch's towel-clad body.

"How's she doing?"

"Better. I phoned my superior while you were in the shower. He retrieved her medical files. Her blood cells are repairing themselves at almost double the speed of any other rescued slave."

He glanced up from the sleeping girl to find Balin watching him with gentle eyes. "You think it's because of us?"

"I know it is," Balin answered without hesitation. He looked down at Gladiolas, and Fitch admired the strong curve of his jaw. "Not only because of our sexual activity but also because of our emotional bond."

"That makes sense."

“What do you think?” Balin looked back to him, but now there was caution in his eyes. “Can we live here together?”

Was the man crazy? As if he'd throw away the first real friends he'd ever had. The first true lovers.

I could live with you two on a sun-drenched tropical island.

The building Spike had purchased for his Palace was to be transferred into the ownership of the San Francisco Order of the Guardians. For three million dollars in the form of a donation to the order, Balin would be allowed private ownership of the penthouse at the top of the building.

When Balin proposed they live here, Fitch's first thought was how odd it would be to live above a Guardian facility. Then again, this had been the penthouse where Cvetelina had lived.

His second thought was, Why the hell not?

Fitch shrugged, trying not to appear too anxious. “I made a promise to Gladiolas.”

“As did I.”

“You got other plans?” Fitch held his breath.

Gazing at Gladiolas, Balin shook his head. He then turned back to Fitch and stared at his midsection.

“I, um, listen, Guardian. I owe you a second debt. You saved my life again.”

“Ellis would not have executed you.”

“That's not what I meant.” He placed his hand on Balin's shoulder.

The other man covered it with his own. “I know.”

Fitch's chest lurched. Maybe there was a heart in there, after all. He cleared his throat. “Anyway, I know it's you calling the shots here. I'm fine with that.”

Balin stood. He crossed to the tall dresser where he opened a small decorative box. He removed a butt plug made of solid Pyrex with a bluish tint, and examined it, looking momentarily bewildered. "I don't think Gladiolas would like that. She wants...equality."

Fitch understood. This was about the last time they'd joined...as three.

"Look, Balin, you don't have to do anything you don't want to do. Don't be afraid to tell me, or her, that."

He dropped the apparatus back in the box and flipped it shut. His next words shocked the hell out of Fitch.

"I want equality as well."

Fitch closed the distance and stood behind Balin, so close he could smell his raw sexuality and see the pulse thundering at his throat.

"I feel somewhat like I did the first day at the castle."

"Afraid?" Fitch reached out, a hesitant, first touch. *Extend the reed.*

Balin flinched under his hand, but it was not one of revulsion. Fitch slid his hand over Balin's ribs and pressed it to his chest. Balin covered it with his own and held it against his heart. The pressure he added brought their bodies together. Glorious heat flashed at every point they touched.

"Yes."

"I would never hurt you."

"I know."

Fitch leaned in, pressing close. The towel dropped away. He took Balin's earlobe in his teeth, surprised to find his fangs elongated. He sucked the fleshy part of Balin's ear into his mouth, then dragged the sharp tip of one canine across, raising a thread of crimson. He sucked the coppery reward into his mouth, and his own blood lit with fire.

Balin sucked in a sharp breath but didn't pull away.

"You have the purest blood I've ever tasted."

“Will you...feed from me?”

“You aren't ready.”

“I don't think I will be until you just do it.”

“There's a lot I want to do to you.” Fitch's blood raced, making his voice quaver. “But I will *never* without your permission.”

Balin turned his head, leaned back, and Fitch buried his nose into the soft golden locks.

“I give it.”

Fitch almost laughed. “You don't know what you're saying.”

“You doubt I know my own heart?”

“Guardian fool, I don't want you to know regret.”

“A wise man once said, 'You only regret the things you didn't do.' I learned that was true at the castle.”

He worked the zipper on his pants.

Fitch went speechless. Balin bent to shove them down his thighs, and his bare ass touched backward. Fitch's raging cock pressed lengthwise into the seam of the other man's buttocks.

Any minute he would stop. Fitch was certain. Balin kicked off the leather pants and stood upright. For a long moment, neither moved.

“Don't leave me out, Fitch. I won't allow it.”

“Is that what this is about? Feeling left out?” He asked the question while he leaned in, sliding his arms around Balin in a tender embrace. Their bodies connected with an explosion of sensation. Fitch felt reborn.

“No. It is about me knowing you as well as you know me.”

His own body had started trembling. “Because I know what you feel like inside me.”

“Yes.”

“There are other ways for you to know me.”

"This is the way I want, right now."

"Are you sure?" *Gods, I can't resist much longer.*

Balin grabbed a full tube of lubricant from the dresser. He offered it over his shoulder. "Please stop trying to talk me out of it."

Fitch did stop. He took the offered tube. It was new. He tore off the cellophane wrapper and dropped it aside, then opened the cap and squeezed a cool dollop into his hand.

"One condition."

"Name it."

"You allow me to heal you afterward."

A heartbeat passed. "Done."

He glanced at the bed. Gladiolas was awake, watching them with dreamy eyes.

"And we don't leave Gladiolas out of the fun."

She smiled.

Balin glanced over his shoulder and smiled back. "I wouldn't dream of leaving Gladiolas out of the fun."

She took the edge of the sheet and flipped it away. Her creamy skin was an inviting contrast against the silver-blue silk bedsheets.

Balin kicked out of the tangle of clothing at his ankles and started over. "I'm a little nervous."

He knelt on the bed. He was excited too. Fitch could sense it as clearly as he could see it in the other man's towering erection. He was already poised to mount Gladiolas before she parted her legs and lifted her arms in welcome.

Another advancement for the Guardian.

"Be inside me," she told him. "I want to help."

Fitch watched him settle over her and ease down. Her eyes drifted shut, and she sighed as he slid inside her waiting sheath.

Fitch knelt on the bed, aware Balin watched him in his peripheral vision. He gave the other man a moment to settle inside Gladiolas and prepare himself.

Balin's body was a magnificent sculpture of male perfection. He'd watched the other man fucking Gladiolas before, but never had he looked at Balin's gorgeous body knowing he would possess him as wholly as he would now. The understanding alone brought on a heady dizziness.

Fitch placed his hand against Balin's ass and deposited the dollop of lubricant that was melting off his fingers.

Balin tensed and drew a sharp breath.

"I promise, you won't feel the slightest pain."

He glanced at the pillow beside Gladiolas's head as if he didn't quite believe it but was resigned to it.

Fitch stroked him gently, up and down the valley between his muscular buttocks. He explored with his fingers in a tender caress, never once penetrating or even touching the tightly pinched band of muscle guarding the inside of his body.

After several minutes of the tender touch, Balin's trembling subsided, and his body relaxed. His strong muscles unclenched, and before long, Fitch's fingers were traveling back and forth over his sphincter.

"Spread your legs."

Balin tossed a fearful glance over his shoulder but obeyed.

Fitch pushed onto his hands and knees and angled into position. He took his own cock in his wet hand and rubbed the lubricant over the tip, and up and down his shaft. He wished it weren't so engorged, for Balin's sake. He didn't remember ever having such a swollen erection.

He guided himself toward Balin's center, and his purpled crown touched between Balin's widespread cheeks. This time, Balin didn't flinch. Instead, he'd

relaxed against Gladiolas and nuzzled in her hair. She had her eyes closed too, writhing ever so slightly beneath him and nuzzling him back.

Fitch began a languid caress, up and down, sliding through the crease of Balin's ass, over the tight pucker. He leaned forward, planting both hands on either side of his two lovers.

He gave the slightest push, merely applying pressure. Fitch angled his cock up and down again, rubbing gently. Long moments passed like this. Press. Slide. Press. Slide.

"Thrust in me," Balin ground out. "I'm ready."

"No."

Fitch pushed his rounded cap against the small hole. The pressure was slow and gentle. He wouldn't cause even the slightest pain on this first time for Balin. He wanted the man to know what it felt like to be possessed, without a single hint of discomfort.

Balin's body spread and accepted him at its own speed. When finally the rounded crown slipped through the tight band of flesh, Fitch knew he was safe to increase the pressure. Yet still, he kept his descent into the other man's body achingly slow. Where he'd expected the restraint would be torture, instead he savored this magnificent journey.

"Are you...all the way inside me yet?" Balin risked asking over his shoulder. "I can feel the energy."

"Halfway there," Fitch assured him.

"I expected there would be pain." Balin's voice quavered.

"Never."

"You're...gentler with me than I was with you."

"Is that a complaint?"

Balin's response was a sigh.

"You want more? I'll give you more."

“Yes.”

Fitch drove home. Balin groaned out a sound like acceptance. “Oh God.”

“Too much?”

“No.”

“I'm going to come,” Gladiolas mewled.

“Perfect timing, little love.” Fitch words sounded breathy, even to him.

“By the saints. It's like...two orgasms.” Balin's voice was heavy with awe. Fitch felt a surge of pride. He wanted to provide nothing but pleasure to these two. *My lovers.*

The energy flared so bright, Fitch felt like he was standing outside on a sunny day. God in heaven, they'd given him back sunlight.

He drew back slowly and plunged once more inside Balin, and that was all it took. The release rushed out of him with hurricane force. He settled his body across Balin's warm back, counting the million pinpricks of sensation at every point they touched.

Balin gasped once, then moaned against Gladiolas's neck; tight shivers racked his body as his own release flowed. Fitch felt it as if it spewed from his own cock. *Incredible.*

When it was all over, Fitch urged Balin's trembling body to slide sideways, still embedded in him. He eased next to Gladiolas, still inside her.

“I'm going to pull out slowly,” Fitch told him. “You can push if you want.”

Sensing Balin's helplessness, Gladiolas dismounted his still-enormous cock. She leaned up onto her elbow and caressed his cheek. “My brave hero,” she whispered before placing a kiss on his temple.

He let out a low gasp as Fitch removed his cock. Finally, his body relaxed.

“We're not finished yet,” Fitch reminded him.

“No?”

“There was a condition. Remember?” He pushed Balin with a gentle hand at his shoulder, making him roll against Gladiolas.

Fitch then dragged his hand over Balin's back, and down, reminding him.

“But I feel no pain.”

“Doesn't matter.” Fitch licked the spot where the valley of his cheeks began, directly at Balin's tailbone. “A deal's a deal.”

THE END

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Crystal Kauffman has been a closet erotica writer since high school. Her mother found one of her works and dealt a heavy dose of guilt as punishment, but that wasn't enough to stop Crystal from writing (and reading) the steamy stuff. She just did a better job of hiding her work. Then the greatest thing happened; publishing houses catering specifically to erotica were born, bringing Crystal out of the closet. The formation of Romance Writers of America's *Passionate Ink* chapter, where she could mingle with other like-minded erotica writers, was the proverbial icing on the cake.

Crystal Kauffman is a native San Franciscan who also writes action thrillers. She is a four-time nominee for the prestigious Golden Heart award given by the Romance Writers of America, and took home the win in 2008.