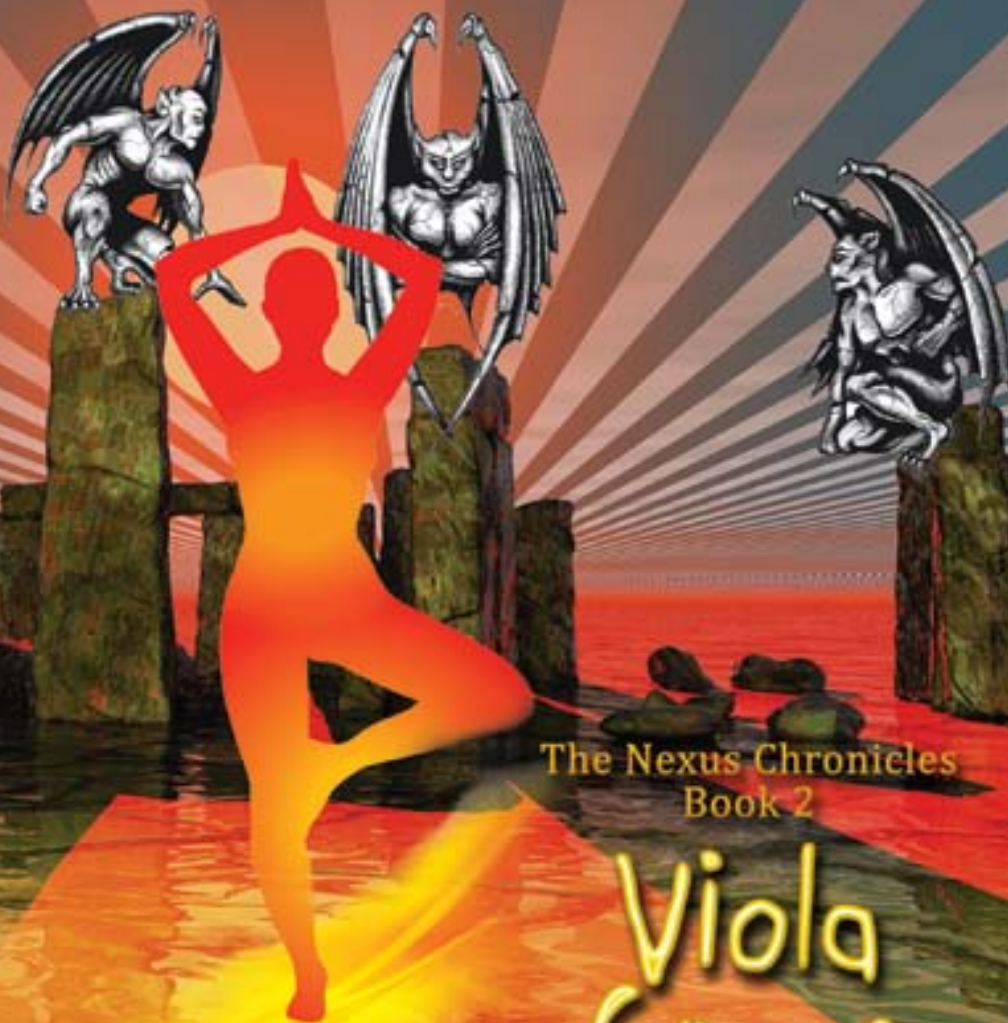


# GARGOYLES in the ROUND



The Nexus Chronicles  
Book 2

Viola  
Grace

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*Gargoyles in the Round*  
*Book 2 of the Nexus Chronicles*

*By*

*Viola Grace*

## Chapter One

Abby sobbed into her sleeve, then cleared her eyes and tried again. The carnage around her was almost unbelievable. She hadn't seen anything like it before, but she had to go through with it. Her mother was coming and she would not react well to seeing the gnomes making dinner. Another vicious stab with the knife and it was over. She continued sobbing as she washed her hands, the knife and finally her eyes.

Cutting onions was hard.

Sniffing, she scraped the savagely destroyed vegetable into the frying pan. Spaghetti wasn't Betsy's favourite, but it was quick to make and fast to eat. Dinner, a short tour of her yard and a trip through her house and it would be time for the visit to end. She hoped. Betsy's visit was a necessary evil.

The sizzle and pop of the hated onions called her back to the frying pan for a quick stir before grabbing the frozen meatballs and the can of tomato sauce. A few quick additions later and the

sauce was on its way.

Harby and the crew were over with Seesee. She didn't trust them at Laura's, they would try to peek in on her and her mom. After the attempts on her life, they hadn't let her out of their sight. When she went outside, a gnome was always in the corner of her eye. It was getting tiring.

Her mother had been hostile toward the gnomes before they animated, Abby couldn't imagine the reaction now that they were living and breathing creatures. Creatures who took care of her house, her plants and her meal plan. They had basically taken over her life and all her care. Itty bitty butlers who had a nightlife she didn't want to know about.

One day, she would have to pay. In more ways than one.

But for now, she was paying the price of having a mother who insisted on seeing her new house. The sauce was done, the water was boiling, the second that her Mom made it through the door, dinner would be five minutes away. An eternity of minutes.

The sound of a car in her driveway brought her immediately to full nausea. It was her Mom. Showtime.

"You would not believe the trouble I had finding this place. I passed it three times before I

realized it was here."

Oops. Abby supposed that they were a little slow on dropping the glamour at the gate. Ah well, served Betsy right for being early.

"Hiya, Mom. Welcome to my house." Abby stepped aside and let her outraged mother pass. "Nice to see you, too."

Her mother belatedly turned to hug her. "This is a much nicer place than I had imagined. You did well if the rest of the house is like this." It was a rousing enthusiastic declaration of approval.

The rest of the tour was uneventful. The toilet seat didn't bite, the couch didn't lick, and her mother enjoyed the spaghetti when they returned to the kitchen. Life was surprisingly normal this one day.

Abby took a deep breath after dinner and escorted her mother to the backyard. The gasps of approval coming from her maternal parent caused a warm fuzzy feeling inside her until she came to the stark realization that the gnomes had done it all.

"Mom, the neighbours helped me with this. I didn't do it on my own." It was as close to the truth as she was comfortable with.

"You must have fabulous neighbours. This is gorgeous." Betsy looked over the yard Abby knew what she saw. Tiny little patches of flowers arranged by colour, size and fragrance. Some

hummed with their own energy and some with Abby's. It made them an unknown quantity, but still very attractive. Now Abby was in trouble. Her mother was enjoying the landscaping far too much. "Mom, don't you have to get to bingo night?"

She was hustling her mother to the back door and almost had her there before the unfeeling woman who had given birth to her stopped to look back. "Oh, yeah. Damn. It is so soothing that I could stay here all night."

"I often feel that way. It is why I bought it." She got her mom in the house and then grabbed her jacket on the way to the front door. Elizabeth Hanover was almost to the door when it opened.

"Hey, Abby! How are you doing?" It was the man she loved to see naked, Xander Desmith, but she could not tell her mother that.

"Hiya, Alexander. This is my mother, Elizabeth Hanover. Mom, this is Alexander, he is my next door neighbour and was going to help me out with a few things around the house." Like the closure on her bra if she was lucky. Lately, she hadn't had much luck fastening her clothing when he was nearby. Dang.

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Hanover." He shook the hand that her stunned mother extended to him. She couldn't blame her, the first day *she* had met Xander, she backed straight through her

house while carrying on a conversation.

"Oh, Elizabeth, please." Her mother was blushing. Dear god, she was blushing. It was a sight that Abby had never thought to see and was honestly creeped out by witnessing.

"Elizabeth then. I do believe that Abby is settling in well here on Oak Point Way, what do you think?"

It was a breathy gush that pronounced, "It's lovely."

Abby bit her tongue to keep from asking if she was referring to the house or to Xander's chest, his t-shirt was exceptionally well fitting today. "My mother was just leaving. She has to attend an important Bingo strategy session."

Her mother snapped to attention at that. "You are absolutely right, Annabeth. I am sorry, Alexander, but I do have to be going. I look forward to meeting you the next time I come to visit, which will be soon, won't it, dear?" Her glare was unmistakable. She wanted a chance to flirt and she was depending on Abby to supply it.

"Yes, Mother." She gave her mother a half-hug and steered her out the door.

Xander's voice was rife with amusement, "It was nice meeting you, Elizabeth."

It was no small feat to get her mother into the sedan and on her way, but with many promises of future invitations, the queen of neat and tidy



made her way off Abby's territory. Exhausted by the exposure to her parent, Abby took up a seat on her front porch and sent the signal to the gnomes and gargoyles that they could come out of hiding. It took them less than three minutes to get back to her and start tidying up her kitchen.

Xander joined her with a plate of spaghetti. "This is good, I didn't think you could cook."

"I got by before I started enchanting garden gnomes. There were a few things that I counted as my specialities. Homemade ravioli was one of them. You can make it, freeze it and take it out serving by serving after work. It's great." She was still calming down after her enchanting visit. Nothing could stress her out like a visit from her mother, no matter how much she loved her.

"That sounds really good. Do you think the gnomes will let you back in the kitchen?"

"Possibly, if I distract them with another kegger. That seemed to do pretty well." Buffy swooped down on her and dropped a rose in her lap. "Thanks, Buff. Where are the boys?" Two baseball hats landed next to her. The male gargoyles hovered just out of reach, but had a palpable smugness. "Now Angel, Firefly, I have told you not to steal these hats from the park. People are capturing you on film and that has to be doing something odd to the local newscasts. Not to mention YouTube."

"Perhaps you should scrap them and start over." Xander slurped at the pasta and almost missed her horrified look. He quickly backtracked, "Or maybe you could make the gnomes responsible for them?"

"That won't work. The gnomes can't fly and I am not giving them that particular skill. As for draining the energy from the gargoyles, I am going to pretend that you didn't mention that one." She loved her beasties. Every one of them. So what if they were a little disobedient, they weren't human, and weren't children. They were independent thinkers and that was the way she liked them. Her creatures. "Not that I don't love having you over, Xander, but you knew my mom was coming over today. Why are you here?"

Harby came over and took the plate from Xander while Bitsy took the hats and rose. "I am here because you have to travel on your first formal excursion as the Nexus. One week from now there is a meeting of the Magical Council and all of its members."

"So, I have to go to a magical trade show? How do we get there? We can't fly. I can't put the gnomes in my luggage." Her mind spun as she tried to work out the logistics.

"The gnomes can't come. They would be too disruptive to the proceedings."

"What proceedings?"

"Miranda's trial. It is being held at the council meeting. It was easier to schedule it this way as all those who are going to serve on the jury will be there anyway."

"The gnomes are coming or I don't go." She knew that she was being pouty, but she didn't care. Those little critters had saved her life on a few occasions and they had provided the means by which Miranda was foiled. She thought of them as her insurance policy as well as faithful companions.

Xander thought about it for a moment. "Will you leave the gargoyles here?"

"Nope. They are still feeding off me. I can't leave them yet." She relented a little, "But I can ground them until we leave."

"And how are you going to do that?" He was sceptical. She could see it in the tilt of his head.

"Simple. Angel, Buffy, Firefly?" She called them to her and within a minute, they had ceased their flitting to come to a halt in front of her. "You are grounded until further notice. No flying, no strafing, no harassing, and play nice with the gnomes. If you don't misbehave in the next few days, you can come with us to the magic event. If not, I leave you here with a magic drip and you guys have to stay in Sargent. Are we clear?" Three little faces didn't look happy, but they nodded.

"Alright, Xander, when do we leave?" She was

braced for anything.

“If you insist on not flying, we have to leave tomorrow.” The instant that he said it, the gargoyles perked up. They only had to behave for one day and then, road trip.

## *Chapter Two*

Seesee was over to help her pack, the entire population of Oak Point Way was heading out with her as Abby's entourage. "Okay, you are going to need a few business-type outfits, an evening dress, and tons of casual wear. At least enough for a week. Also, nice underwear would be a good touch, a few of the races can see through clothing." She was sitting on Abby's bed and her hair was idly folding the items that the Nexus produced for their trip.

"That is just the teeniest bit creepy. How does this kind of thing work anyway? Do we just show up and guess where we are going?" The pink camisole or the white? Both. Same with the slips. She preferred to wear skirts when possible, but jeans would do for the long trip to the unknown locale. Xander had told her it was a two and a half day journey.

"Have you ever been to a sci-fi convention?"

Abby gave Seesee a sarcastic look. "Oh, just one

or two."

"Well, it is kind of organized like that. Different panels. A meet the Nexus event followed by dinner and dancing. The legal proceedings and several hundred panels that you can attend if you like." She rose from the bed and shoved Abby out of the way. "Let me."

"Fine. You have a better idea of what I need anyway." Abby took up the abandoned position on the bed and started to stuff her suitcase. Small hands pushed hers away and she was forced to surrender her packing to Ruffles and Skint. The tiny ballerina was positioning the clothing for maximum space and the naked gnome folded the clothing into shapes that Abby realized would not crease. "You have unexplored talents, Skint. You, too, Ruffles." She nodded at their mental thank-yous and moved from the bed to sit in the doorway. "What are the rest of the pack up to?" An image of her station wagon with its hood up filled her mind. "So, Harbinger got the keys out, did he? I don't even want to know how."

Harby's consumption of her keys had kept her from driving off in a car rigged with a bomb, but since she was unsure of the digestive system of her gnomes, the condition of the keys was in doubt.

"Is there anything I can do here?" She was resigned to being kicked out of her own room, it

happened more times lately than she could count. The gnomes booted her when they cleaned her room, and when they changed her sheets, and when they thought she needed to go and visit Laura. The little buggers kept her on a full social calendar and didn't let her have too much idle time. She had begun to sketch her next creatures, but wasn't quite sure if she should loose them on her neighbourhood.

Jumping through time to the first female Nexus' time had been weird enough, but designing a race of itchy goblins and the first pixies had topped her odd creative impulses. Working with a legend who had mysteriously disappeared had not been a scheduled activity, but the gnomes had accompanied her and it had gone off without a hitch.

Getting shoved out of her own territory was part of the duty of a Nexus, she supposed. When she was pulling magic and dumping it into the modern world, she needed someone to take care of her. The gnomes had taken on that duty. Xander tried, but he had other obligations that he had to take care of and she was currently placing in the lower third. As soon as her life was in danger, she moved up the list, but that wasn't something she wanted to engage in again. Plus, it was a sucky way to get attention. She was better than that, now. But not by much.

A large part of her still melted whenever she saw him, but with his council related absences, she had started to guard herself against his comings and goings. Miranda's trial had been weighing on his mind, his previous relationship with Randi colouring his new arrangement with Abby. It was a confusing situation, but as she drifted through her house and went to watch the goings on around her car, her heart warmed to see Xander directing the gnomes on how to change the oil and check the coolant.

The distinct tingle of magic that she felt whenever she saw the Safety Warlock ran through her. "So, how is the car, will she make the trip?"

"Why do you call it a she?"

"Because her name is Bluebell." Abby walked up to stroke the fender and the hatch of her battered station wagon. The magic jumped into the car.

Xander looked at her accusingly. "Was that necessary?"

"If we want her to take us down south, yes."

"Well, the gnomes wouldn't fit in my car unless we put them in the trunk and I don't think that is an option, is it?"

"Wow. You are a smart fella." He stood and wiped his hands on a rag as he approached her. He swept her into an embrace as he leaned her back against Bluebell.



Physically, his interest in her had no relation to her being the Nexus, but emotionally, he was distant. She shrugged and pressed herself against him from chest to knees. "Is that a wrench in your pocket or are you happy to see me?"

"Harby has the wrench."

The kiss he laid on her was enough to heat her blood, it was also enough to start spontaneous repairs of Bluebell's leprous hide. The car was going to be able to fly if he didn't stop doing that thing with his hands around her waist. Being with him gave her the feeling of being delicate and dainty. Dainty was something she had never before achieved.

"How is it that the gnomes know more about your car than I do?"

"They read the Haynes Manual. I found it under my bed a few days ago. Since Harby still had my keys, it wasn't too much of an issue for me. I wasn't worried about them taking it apart since I obviously couldn't drive it."

He leaned back and scowled. "The keys that I used to get into the car so we could open the hood?"

"Yup. Those keys. Harby ate them the day of the car bomb." Her grin was evil and she knew it. "I haven't seen them since."

He groaned. "Can I give them to you now?" He reached into his pocket and pulled the keys out.

He jerked his hand back as Angel immediately darted from underneath the car to snatch them. Small scratches marred his skin as he brought his hand to his chest.

“Apparently the little buggers don’t trust me not to blow up.” He scuttled away with the keys clutched to his chest but the gargoyle didn’t eat them, for which she was thankful.

“They are protective of you, almost to a ridiculous degree, but I do warn you that the summit is going to be a somewhat challenging environment for them. You may want to try and confine them to your room for some of the larger events.”

“Well, as the current Nexus, where I go, my creatures go.” His distraction was making her insular and weird. She wanted something familiar with her at all times. “I am practicing that phrase because I get the feeling that I am going to need it.”

He laughed.

For just a moment she saw the man that she had fallen head over heels for. The man who had been subdued since she mentioned that her power was evolving. She didn’t know what was going through his head, but before too long, she was going to get tired of this dance, even if a dance was what had drawn them together to begin with. A sharp peck on his lips and she squirmed free. “I

have to check on Seesee and the little ones. Who knows what they are going to consider evening wear?"

He barked out a short laugh.

She smiled as she went back inside. It was safer to be out of his vicinity, her home was already opening the door before she touched it. The extra energy was bleeding off into her house and it liked it. Number thirteen Oak Point Way was getting a life of its own.

Her workshop beckoned and she slid behind her drafting table to start another sketch. She couldn't seem to get the wings right. Sometimes they looked like dragonflies, sometimes like moths. It never turned out the same way twice. Her wish list for fabric and wires was pinned to her first drawings, the tiny swatches not looking quite right on the white paper. They needed more colour. More life. She just wasn't in the mood to provide it yet.

Something was still missing. Some vital ingredient that she couldn't put her finger on. Ah well. She looked out the window, restless. Maybe she should go and visit Laura. She would call first, just in case Verne was over and one of them needed to put on some pants.

She found the phone in the fridge. It was the third of what were becoming common hiding places for the gnomes and electrical appliances.

Abby sighed and dialled Laura's number. "Hey, do you think I could come over for another swimming lesson?"

"Sure. Right now okay for you?"

A whoosh of breath that Abby didn't realize she had been holding blasted through the phone. "Yup. I will be suited up and over in five. And, Laura, thank you."

"Anytime. See you in five." The smile in her voice was obvious before she hung up. Laura was very good-natured for a land bound mermaid. It was one of her more endearing qualities. That and she was playing hard to get with a werewolf made her all the more attractive as a friend with interesting gossip.

She wandered down the hall to her bedroom. "Did you guys pack my swimsuit?"

Seesee looked up from the packing. "Nope. You won't have time to swim at the Summit." Ruffles handed her the suit from a drawer with a bright smile.

"I am heading over to Laura's, do you need anything here?"

"Nope. The gnomes and I have it under control, but I may make a few calls to spruce up your wardrobe when we get there. Is that okay?"

"Yup. Fine. Whatever. Dress me up like a dolly. Don't care. Have to swim." She fluttered her hand at a concerned Seesee and made her way to the

bathroom where Bitsy was packing all of her toiletries for the trip. "Scuse me, Bitsy, I need to change and this is the only room without windows. Shoo for a minute, please."

Sensing her stress, or perhaps reacting to her plea, he patted her on the knee as he walked past.

She locked the door and breathed deeply before removing her clothing to tug on her swimsuit. She was tense. There was no mistaking it. Her body was ready to blow, but it wasn't the magical kind of tension. She was just waiting for something to happen. Damned if she knew what.

Abby grabbed her robe, slipped her slippers on and made her way over to Laura's. The pool was blissfully empty. Her host appeared at her side. "Not swimming today, Laura?"

"I think you need a coach more than a swim buddy. I will be here if you need me." The olive skinned merwoman sat watch as Abby swam silently, with no skill, but a lot of determination. Finally the Nexus pulled herself from the water and sat staring blankly at the ripples of the light on the surface. The silence was enough, she cracked.

## *Chapter Three*

Sobbing as if her heart was broken she wailed her fear, terror, humiliation, confusion, and loneliness over the water. Laura merely sat at her side and waited for her to stop her release. She didn't pass on platitudes or try to hug her into silence, she just let her be.

Abby never knew how long her storm had lasted, but the sun was setting by the time she was finished and she was hoarse from her tears. "Sorry 'bout that." She crackled with power, but subverted it into her skin. The magic swirled and pooled inside her, but did not touch the outer surface of her body.

Laura moved in now to put her arm around Abby, "We have been waiting for it. You have had a helluva time of it. You were far too calm. This was the moment, Abby. The great moment where you accepted what you were and mourned for your loss. You have had someone trying to kill you and you adapted to it with good cheer, after

the initial shock. You are human, never forget that, and sometimes you just need to be a human and not a Nexus. Let us know when you want company, or need to be alone. We will respect it and always come when you call. You are now our friend as well as a tool of the magical community. We are here because we want to protect you so that you can live a long and healthy life. We chose to be here for you. Let us."

Abby sniffled and croaked, "What about Xander? He heard I was evolving and he pulled back. I thought we may be falling in love, but he just shut down and took me with him." A harsh sob broke from her.

"I don't know about Xander. He wants to be with you, but perhaps he knows more about the Council's plan for you than you know. He is going to fight for your right to freedom, but you know as well as I do that wild magic is not something that the council wants. They like control. You are the antithesis of magical control. So they may try to control you. He may just be planning a defence if any of them make a move."

That did sound about right. He had mentioned his concern over the Council wanting to incarcerate her to drain her dry. Perhaps that was at the core of his distance. He was plotting to save her. That sounded nice. "That sounds nice."

"Now, the others are ready to leave, so if you

just grab your robe, slippers and head over to your house to change, we can get underway." Laura giggled and elbowed her.

Abby laughed in return. "So they have just been sitting in their cars?"

"I threatened them with death if they chose to try and hurry you along. Just a warning. There will be more emotional storms. Bring Kleenex." Laura escorted her over to her home and the gnomes and gargoyles took her over from there. Shooing her into a shower, getting her dressed, and handing her her purse and passport. She was going over the border after all.

"Now, my creatures, did you get the drill about going through customs? You have to be completely still. Like the statues you started as. No moving, squirming, sneezing or flirting. If you climbed into the extra duffle bags, that would be great as well. It is up to you."

As one they nodded and she knelt down for a group hug. Laura was right, she was a bundle of tears. A few short sobs into the arms of her critters and she was feeling up to anything. "Alright, boys and girls, it's time for your first road trip." The gnomes looked at each other and giggled. She reminded herself never to ask them why.

Abby stood, took a steadying breath and walked to the front door. It opened at her approach. "Okay, house, we will be back in less



than two weeks. Don't let anyone in and don't let the yard work get out of hand." She was able to send a small surge through the doorframe and the house physically shook in response. She felt it wishing her a good trip and to hurry home. Home. Number thirteen was more home than she had ever had before.

So they had better make it a short trip so that she could be back where she belonged.

Customs was anticlimactic. The gnomes behaved, the gargoyles hid in a duffle bag and occasionally giggled, which made Abby *not* want to know what they were doing in that dark sack. She was busy keeping her documents ready and biting her nails in preparation for answering questions. Those questions never came.

The officer asked Xander where they were going, he answered Lewiston, Idaho. The officer asked why, Xander said it was for a Magic Convention, then they were handing over their passports and getting the nod to proceed with their passports back in their clutches. It was that smooth.

"Does it always go that smoothly?" Abby had to ask. She could vaguely remember the last time she had crossed the border for a shopping trip and the officer had been almost hostile, demanding to know when they would be returning and if they

would use the same border crossing.

"No, it doesn't. That officer happens to be an adjunct to Verne's pack. They have been waiting for us to cross the border all day." He was handling Bluebell well, if her eyes had been less puffy she would have insisted on driving, but he had the bulk of the wagon under control.

She crossed her arms defensively over her chest. It was hard not to feel self-conscious about having a breakdown and then having to jump into a car. "Sorry, I had some stuff to work out."

"So Laura told us. I am sorry that we had to rush you, but since we are driving, we had to get under way as soon as possible. It's over twenty hours of driving. We will be stopping at a few places on the way." He brought the car up to speed and hit the cruise control, then glanced over at the backseat where six gnomes were lined up and immobile. "You can move now. We are over the border, but it will be the same coming back. Remember that and behave."

The immediate squeals and capering that took over the back of the car would have deafened a normal man. Xander merely tightened his grip on the wheel and ignored it. The gargoyles couldn't fly in the back of Bluebell, but that didn't stop them from trying.

"So what kind of stuff am I going to be doing at the Summit? Charging up warlocks so that they

can pull rabbits out of thin air?"

"Well, we have panels like *Magic and the modern world, making your neighbourhood safe and sound and Hiding your attributes, passing for human in the everyday world*. It is a very popular panel."

"I can see how it would be. Will I be able to make appointments to speak to some of the leaders?" She remembered the promise that she had made to Laura and Verne who were in the minivan behind them. They were a convoy of Manitoba license plates moving down the I29. Seesee was with Laura and Verne, her boyfriend, Miklos hidden from light in the back of the van. As soon as the sun completely set, he would take over as the night driver.

"Sure. I can make a few calls. Whom do you wish to see?" He started fishing for his phone.

As soon as he found it, she snapped the phone from his grip. "No. No, you drive. I will make the calls. Just give me the numbers."

"Perhaps you should simply call the co-ordinator and have her make the appointments for you." He rattled off the number. "Her name is Salleth."

Taking a deep breath, she punched the numbers in. "Hello? Is this Salleth?"

"Yes, it is. Who is this?"

"Uh, my name is Annabeth Hanover. I am going to be attending the Summit and was

wondering if you could arrange some meetings for me?"

"Hanover? The new Nexus?" Abby could almost hear Salleth snap to attention.

"One and the same."

"What can I do for you?" Wow, that was weird, she went from bored and almost hostile to diffident in a few sentences. What was Abby going to be in for at the Summit if this was a sample of how people acted around her?

"I need to talk to the clan leader or pack leader of two of the members of the Oak Point Guard. Laura Exner and Verne Fisher. I want to meet with both of them at the same time. Will that be possible?" Abby fought the urge to bite her nails. Making demands like this was new to her. Was she ever going to get up the nerve to get used to it?

"Of course, Nexus. When would you like to meet with them?"

The clicking of a keyboard in the background made Abby blink. She had not thought laptops would be of much use in the Magical world, but Laura had a website and Seesee did a lot of her catering online. It made sense. "Sometime after the trial proceedings, maybe for lunch one day?"

"I will call you with the details and have the information prepped for your arrival."

"Thank you, Salleth. I look forward to meeting

you."

"Thank *you*, Nexus. I am honoured. How far away are you?"

"We just crossed the border. So we have twenty plus hours of driving ahead of us. And can you warn the hotel that I brought the gnomes and gargoyles? I don't want anyone surprised."

"I will, Nexus. Thank you." Abby could swear that the other woman was bowing on the end of the phone. "I will call you when the arrangements have been made."

"Okey dokey." Abby hung up. She looked over at Xander. "She seems nice." She handed the phone back and he held it for a moment.

"She is a naga. Her lower half is a snake. Just thought I would give you a heads up on that one when you meet her." Xander was smiling as he put his phone between them on the console. "It means that she can haul ass through the Summit with speed that will make your head spin. One of maybe nine hundred non-humanoid attendees."

"And here I thought the gnomes would be some of the oddest creatures there. Apparently, I am about to get an education." Abby was drowsy, her crying jag had worn her out. She yawned. "Sorry. I am trying to stay awake, but I am so tired."

"Go ahead and sleep, I will wake you if the phone needs your attention." Xander reached out

with his hand and squeezed her left thigh. His hand stayed there, warm and comforting as she tucked herself into a position that would allow her to rest.

Small hands draped a blanket over her and put a pillow behind her head as she drifted off. Her creatures. She fell asleep with a smile on her face.

## *Chapter Four*

The gnomes were sitting quietly in the back and the gargoyles were pressed up against the back window, watching the passing traffic when his phone rang.

"Hello? No. This is Xander. She's asleep. She has had a rough day. That's a great idea. Celia? Sure. Good choice. She will call you when she wakes up. Yes. No matter day or night. Good night, Salleth." Xander was using some kind of hands free set because his phone was still between them.

Abby blinked at his profile slowly. "Hey, did you answer your phone with magic?"

"Yup. I try not to use the phone and drive when I can." He reached out to rub her arm. "Are you awake? We were going to stop for some food and to refuel."

Abby stretched in the limits of the fabric cocoon she was in. "I am guessing that someone's tucked me in?"

"From all angles. I guess they didn't want you catching a cold." Amusement threaded his voice. A giant sign proclaiming a rest stop blared on the horizon. Xander flashed the car's lights and the vehicle behind them flashed it in return. Okay. One helping of whatever for everyone.

She staggered free of Bluebell and absently took her purse from Harby as he held it out to her. "Okay, guys, you can pick whatever you want from the store and put it on the counter, but try not to be seen. I'll pay for it all when I leave."

She had checked and double-checked the balances on her credit cards before she left. Abby hadn't had a chance to get American currency, so the credit and debit cards were her only way to pay. The gnomes were not going to get away with stealing stuff on this journey. She was going to pay for everything that the gnomes needed.

"I can pay for the food and the snacks for the gnomes, yours as well."

"I wouldn't hear of it."

"The council has given you a stipend for just such an occurrence."

That stopped her for a moment. Free money? "Wow. You were going to tell me about this, when?"

"When it came up, which was now. You have an annual allowance put forth by the council. It



covers clothing, housing and food.”

“I guess it is still cheaper than incarcerating me.”

“That it is.” He draped his arm around her and headed toward the restaurant portion of the stop. The other car pulled up and was soon disgorging it’s passengers of a medusi, a mermaid, a werewolf, and a vampire. All except the last looked hungry.

“That is the elusive Miklos?”

“Yeah, he is a good guy, but not much for sunny day barbeques. He can be out in the sun, he just doesn’t like it.” They were standing at the *please wait to be seated* sign.

When the perky waitress asked, “For how many?” her gaze wandered over Xander from head to toe.

Abby stepped in front of Xander possessively and glared at the cheerleading minx. “Six.” The waitress looked a little surprised, but scurried off to get the tables pushed into formation. Abby was trying not to glare at her the whole time, but she knew she was unsuccessful. When the others caught up with them, she used it as a distraction. “So this is the seldom seen Miklos?”

The handsome vampire could have graced the cover of any fitness magazine, or romance novel for that matter. He had solid brown hair and eyes that hinted at dark chocolate. Abby licked her lips

and Xander stepped between her and the hypnotic gaze.

"That is enough of that. Miklos has a strong talent, hypnotism. It is best if you don't look him straight in the eye."

Miklos came into her field of view again, edging Xander out of his way. "It is an honour to meet you, Nexus. I have heard a lot about you from Seesee. I will try to keep my eyes off you, which is a trial for any red-blooded male, I am sure." He took her hand and bowed low over it.

"That is a load of horseshit, but thank you. Pleased to meet you, Miklos, and call me Abby." She nodded and sent a bit of her reserved magic into his hand, just to see what would happen. It was amazing. Seconds after she shoved some magic into him, every waitress and female under forty-five was hovering within ten feet of him. "Whoa. That was not what I expected."

She quickly withdrew the power that she had sent into him and the women slowly wandered off with confused looks on their faces. "So you have a natural attraction for the opposite sex, or was it something that came after the vampirism?"

He gave her a quick smile. "You picked up on that, did you? You are very astute. Most don't even think that it could be anything other than a vampiric talent." The baffled waitress was leading them to the table and they all took a seat. "It is a

family trait. One of my ancestors was a siren, so I ended up with the attraction talent. My sister is a retired singer."

"Retired? How long have you been a vampire?" Laura asked. The waitress came in and they remained quiet until she had wandered away with their drink orders.

"Seventy years. I was turned at my sister's wedding." As Miklos spoke, Abby kept an eye on the waitress. There was something about her that wasn't quite right. She looked with her inner eye and gave the girl a serious once over. Demon. That was it. She was part demon. Abby was staring so hard she didn't even realize when the girl was back in front of her.

"Miss? Ma'am? Can I get you something else?"

Abby blushed and blinked rapidly, the rest were staring at her. "No. Nothing. I just thought you looked familiar. Like someone I knew."

The girl whose badge read *Courtney* took their dinner orders and walked off, looking back frequently.

Xander took Abby's hand in his and asked her casually, "Who does she remind you of?"

"Steven Murdoch, our postal carrier."

"Hmm. You can tell that just by glancing at her?"

"No. By *looking* at her. The same way that you taught me." She tapped the back of Xander's hand

lightly. "How much of the population has some magical blood in them?"

"We estimate around twenty percent. In most it simply manifests in certain focuses, art, math, language, writing. For others it becomes luck, good health, personal magnetism, peculiarly strong personality traits. Things of that nature. We don't even notice the majority of these."

They sat in silence while Abby mulled that over. The food arrived and they ate as Abby digested more than the meal. Idle chatter was the topic of the night, the roads, the hotel that they would spend the night at the following night and then she could be quiet no longer. "So if someone has a sudden resurgence of talent, a throwback if you will, there is no one to help them?"

The group was silent. They looked at each other and then to Xander. "We don't have any records of those people. There is no way to tell who will and will not have a surge of talent."

Abby drummed her fingers on the table. Power was arcing from the tips of her fingers and she could feel her face pull into a scowl. "What about your archives? Don't they have lists of all those who left the community to marry normal humans?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Then that should be a starting point." She was about to rip out a few more commands when she

saw the fluttering of gargoyle wings in the store area of the rest stop. A few truckers were stopping to look, too. "Damn it. Pay for my meal would you? I have to retrieve the circus." She got up from the table and sprinted into the shop. The pile of snack items as well as air fresheners made her want to cry, but a promise was a promise.

She wandered over to the shell-shocked clerk and nodded to the pile, whipping her debit card out. "I'll take all of this. Funny, it was just the collection I wanted."

He nodded and began to ring it all up.

She took a pack of Ring Dings from Harby and then whispered, "Get the rest outside. Wait under the car until I come out there."

Two hundred dollars and six bags later, she hauled the collection to the back of Bluebell and unlocked the hatch. "Everybody in. We are back on the road in five minutes." The bags went in and she did a head count as they piled in one by one. The gargoyles lifted the gnomes and in no time, they were all accounted for.

She leaned against the passenger door, waiting for the other members of her party to come out and idly feeding Bluebell some of the power she had been hoarding. The car rippled slightly as it absorbed the power reluctantly, as most remanufactured items did. Her house did not fight her, but it was made of wood, wood seemed to

crave the magic, steel and fibreglass didn't.

Her posse spilled out of the restaurant entrance and into the pools of light in the parking lot. "Well, I am pretty sure that the critters just made it to YouTube, again."

"That would explain the stunned crowd with their faces up against the glass." Seesee's voice was wry, but she spoke the truth. The witnesses to the gnome spree were all watching to see where they went and who they were attached to."

"Xander, can you use a spell to hide the license plate?"

He shook his head, then nodded. "Sure, but it doesn't help that you paid by debit card. They have your name."

Abby slid into the passenger seat and buckled up. "I don't care about that, I just don't want them to follow us."

"You think that your car isn't that noticeable?"

"It won't be as soon as we get to the highway."

"What?"

"You'll see. Let's roll." An answering chortle from the backseat had her grinning and getting into the spirit of things. There was nothing like her little beasts getting into mischief to lift her mood.

Xander shrugged, cast a short spell and moved to put the key in the ignition. Bluebell started without manual interference. He shot a short glance at Abby. "How much magic have you put

into this thing?"

"She isn't a thing and just enough. Let's get a move on."

He put the car in reverse and they were off. The engine purred like a large predatory kitten. Xander looked surprised but pleased as the car handled with ease. They were fifteen minutes out of the truck stop when they went around a corner. It was time for Bluebell to strut her stuff.

"Okay, Bluebell, it's time." Abby patted the dash and closed her eyes as the car flexed around them. "Just keep steering, Xander."

"What is the car doing?" He kept steering around the S-curves and switchbacks, the small group of cars that followed them from the stop losing them behind trees.

The blue and battered station wagon was now a sleek four by four, in a violent lavender. Abby had spoken to Bluebell in her mind and explained what she needed. The car had agreed and a bargain had been struck. Power for assistance.

"Slow down so they think that the station wagon passed you."

"What just happened?"

"We are now in a lavender SUV with tinted windows. We can see them, but they can't see us."

"But what happened?"

"I made a deal with the car." She crossed her arms and smiled at him, giving him her best

angelic grin. He wasn't fooled for a moment.

"How can you make a deal with an inanimate object?"

Evil grins were so much fun. "Oh, I animated it a week ago."



## *Chapter Five*

They were on day two of the arduous drive to the Summit when Abby finally remembered to call Salleth back.

“Sorry for the delay. I got distracted by something bright and shiny.” Abby was smiling into the phone. Her driver was currently Miklos, he was wearing shades, and Xander was keeping him company in the passenger seat. Abby was in the back with the gnomes and they were behaving themselves.

The gargoyles were making faces at the cars behind them through the tinted glass. They would make faces at anything that moved. Squirrels, racoons, and the occasional deer that they saw on the side of the road, but it was the children who could somehow see through the magic that made them giggle themselves silly.

“Nexus, it is an honour to get your call. I have made the arrangements that you requested and both parties are honoured that you wish to speak

with them privately."

"Wonderful. Now, there is one more matter that has arisen that you may be able to help me with."

"I will do my best, Nexus."

"I wish to address the entire Summit regarding the training of human descendants with magical ancestors. Also the occurrences of those with wild magic need to be addressed. I have met one of those on this journey alone."

"I don't know if they will agree to that, but I will try. The *whole* Summit?"

"Preferably. If the masses know of the problem, they may be able to put pressure on their leaders for a solution. I would appreciate it if you could try."

"I will do my best, Nexus. I will speak with you when you arrive."

"That should be in about six hours. We are making good time, but I will need to rest when we get there." A sudden thought spilled through her, "Should I have made reservations or something? I have my credit card here."

"Your rooms are standing ready for you, Nexus. There is always a suite standing by in case of a Nexus."

"That's great and please, call me Abby."

"Thank you, Abby. I look forward to meeting you in person."

The line clicked off and Abby supposed that Salleth was on her way to make some arrangements, or to couch her request lightly.

Abby had forced her tiny convoy to stop at a local crafter's market. She had sensed something magical there. Sure enough, a woman was making soaps and lotions, putting healing magic into all of them. She spoke to Delaney and asked her about her talent. When the woman looked confused, she let it drop, but bought a bunch of the soaps and lotions to show to the council. This was magic that should be trained and strengthened. Xander and the others could not see it.

It blew Abby's mind. Sure, wild magic was more of a magical wind than a colour on the psychic plane, but this woman was a small tornado. It was a shame to let Delaney stumble along her process when she could be shown ways to make herself stronger and more effective.

Miklos finally got up the nerve to ask her, "You can sense magic in others? From how far away?"

Abby laughed and cuddled Bitsy on her lap. Buffy soon got in on the action and her lap was full. "I do sense other magics, but this was the furthest away I have ever been when I saw her flare. She is really quite powerful and she is sparking like a roman candle. I couldn't have missed her."

"But we were moving. On the interstate. How

did you *see* her?"

Abby thought about it while absently stroking Buffy's hair. "The magic called me. There is no other way to say it, I guess. It was like listening to a song on the radio getting stronger and stronger. When I could make out all the words, we were right on top of her."

Xander was half-turned to look at her and she smiled brilliantly. They had had a nice night at the motel, cuddling surrounded by creatures. It had been gentle warmth that had filled her and not the flaring blaze that she felt when they were alone, but it was good.

"There have been cases before of magic users who were able to sense the approach of wild magic. My guess is that this is another one of the unknown talents of a Nexus. Because none have been allowed to develop outside the boundaries of the Council." He reached back to hold her hand.

She took his warm fingers with hers. Bitsy and Buffy cuddled in her lap, surrounded by the warmth that was taking over the vehicle. Literal warmth. And smoke.

Wide-eyed Abby spun to look in the back of the vehicle. "Put that fire out! You are not allowed to have a cook out inside the car! Get those hot dogs off that stick!" She rolled her window down and gestured for Mitsy to do the same on the other side.

With creative cursing, Miklos and Xander opened their respective windows to let the smoke out of the car. Bitsy grabbed a bottle of water and climbed into the hatch area. He opened the bottle and dumped the contents on the flickering flames inside an upside-down trash can lid. Angel, Firefly, Skint and Splint looked sheepish as the flames came to a complete and total halt.

Abby's eyes watered as she waited for the smoke to clear. She started coughing and felt the car slow to a halt as she kept hacking with the irritation of melted plastic in her lungs. Apparently they had thrown everything on the fire.

Hands pulled her from the car and led her over to a bench where she wheezed her way out of the bright sparks that had started behind her eyes. A tapping on her leg delivered what she needed, her inhaler. She had asthma attacks so infrequently that she forgot she had it. The inhaler was just in case.

Two puffs and her lungs started to clear. A bottle of water was shoved into her hand and she sipped gratefully before coughing again.

Her voice was hoarse as she lectured the four co-conspirators, "Plastic is toxic and fires in a closed space is bad. Please do not repeat that particular adventure in the future. Unless you *want* me to die." Four tiny bodies hurtled against

her knees and shook with sobs. She ignored them for a moment and looked around her.

The bench that she was sitting on was made of Seesee's hair. She was being supported by her friend in a throne of hissing locks. Xander was over at the car, throwing out the stuff that her creatures had collected and the metal disk containing the ashes. Through bleary eyes, she could see a wave of magic cleanse Bluebell and sighed in relief. Getting back into that melted plastic stench was too much to bear.

She tried to stand and was seatbelted in by delicate and deceptively strong strands. "You are keeping your butt down until you can breathe without wheezing. What were they thinking?"

Abby knew that Seesee meant the gnomes. "I think they wanted to make some hotdogs."

"They just ate, Abby." Laura was putting a compress on Abby's face. It came away smudged.

"I know. But you know guys and barbequing, nothing will stop them." She squirmed against the constraints and finally, Seesee let her go. The strands pushed her to her feet and held her there until she stopped swaying. The guilt-ridden critters still clung to her legs, which impeded her movement, but she made her way back to the car slowly. She raised her voice and asked for attention, "Let's get back on the road, we are almost there."

Bemused and befuddled, they got back in their cars. The gnomes were uncharacteristically quiet and kept the gargoyles under control. It was a quick five hours and they were pulling up to the largest tangle of magic that Abby had ever seen. There was no physical presence for her to describe, only a welter of magic that Bluebell was steadily approaching.

Miklos turned his head, his black wrap around shades making him look more sinister than normal, "Welcome to Hotel Spectre. Home of the Magical Summit."

## Chapter Six

The lobby was full of creatures that Abby would have loved to stare at, but, she and her entourage headed straight to the front desk and checked in. Well, they tried to check-in. The slightly green woman at the front desk was a little snotty.

“Hotel Spectre, how may I help you?”

Abby put on her best checking-in grin, “Hello. I am Annabeth Hanover, I believe that I am booked in the Nexus rooms?”

The woman looked down at her computer and then up again. “I am afraid that those rooms are reserved for the Nexus and her entourage.”

Abby blinked for a moment and Xander looked at her as if to say, *this is your show, go for it*. “I am the new Nexus. This is my entourage. May I speak with the manager?”

The woman didn’t speak, only turned and walked away.

Abby’s power was starting to gather. She didn’t



even want to be here, wouldn't have been if it wasn't for the trial she was going to attend. She felt her body charging up and drummed her fingers on her thighs, afraid to touch any items that she could power up or animate. Every second that passed increased her impatience and the power level until the air around her crackled with magic. People in the lobby were staring at her, whispering behind their hands and pointing at her gnomes.

The freak show was going to get more interesting if it took too much longer. Because the air was thick with magic, it came to her without any effort. She was no longer pulling it from between worlds, she was pulling it from the hotel itself.

"Abby, perhaps you had better calm down. You are glowing." Laura offered that sage piece of advice, but kept her distance.

"I can't calm down. I didn't want to be the stupid Nexus to begin with and now they are telling me that I don't look the part? I am getting furious." It was the icing on the cake, the thing guaranteed to boil her blood. She wasn't the person that she had never wanted to be. That was precious.

Ms. Snotty Green Skin made her way back to the front desk without looking at Abby, "The manager will be out in a moment, please be

patient.”

“Oh, sister. Patience wore off three minutes ago. Now I am heading into pissed off.” The concierge’s refusal to look at her was the final straw. Abby uncharacteristically slammed her hand down on the counter and the wood rippled at her touch. A pen hit her pinky and immediately scampered across the countertop. *That* made the green lady look at her.

It had to have been the manager who spoke to her as her temper snapped. “Miss Hanover! I am so sorry. Of course, you must be exhausted and in need of refreshment after your long trip. Are these your creatures? They are adorable...can you control them?” The creatures in question had scampered over the counter and were respectively dive bombing the concierge.

“Of course I can. But since you can’t control your staff, why should I bother with mine?” Anger was still riding high, another one of those pesky emotional storms that Laura had warned her about.

“Here are your keys. You have half of the fifteenth floor for yourself and the Oak Point Guard. Your creatures can have a room to themselves if you wish.”

“I do wish it, Ms...”

“Elthengar, Ravi Elthengar. General Manager of Hotel Spectre and Representative of the Troll

nation." She bowed deeply to Abby. The green concierge was even more green now.

"I would like to extend my apologies, Nexus. I was rude and it was uncalled for. I shall endeavour to give better service in the future." She extended her hand.

Abby didn't shake it. Her own hands were still glowing. "I accept your apology and making sure that the needs of my creatures is met is my greatest concern. If you and the rest of the staff could see to that, I will be grateful. It will be my pleasure to keep them out of your hair. Literally." She waved her hand and called off the gargoyles. The gnomes left the computer with her stern look and a handful of swipe cards came with them as they left the counter.

Another troll, this one shorter than Ravi, came to her assistance. "May I take your bags to your rooms, Nexus?" His nametag read Stu.

"Is Stu short for Stuart?"

"No, it is short for Stupid third child born on an unlucky day." He grinned, showing off the sharp teeth behind his tusks. "It is my honour to serve, lady."

He led the way to the elevators and bemused, she followed him, her key cards in hand. The rest of her troupe closed ranks around her to keep her and her critters from the stares of the crowd filling the lobby.

The irony was not lost on her. She was fighting the urge to stare at the collection of multi-coloured mer people, the man-beasts that she didn't have names for, all sharing space with dwarves, elves, and things with multiple arms. There were also quite a few people who looked human, but their auras flickered wildly when they locked eyes on her. Warlocks, witches and whatever.

Everywhere she looked, a riot of colours assaulted her senses. The very walls and elevators themselves glowed with a soft rainbow pulse. It was as comforting as it was creepy.

Stu pressed the button to call their conveyance and the arrow indicated the approach of the box that would take them up to the fifteenth floor. When it arrived, it was empty and the Oak Point crew and their bellboy, Stu, piled in without ceremony. Stu selected their floor and in seconds they were whisked to their destination.

1502 was just like any other hotel room, except much nicer. It included a receiving room, a study, a very comfortable bathroom and a bedroom that made Abby want to take up narcolepsy.

"Wow, Stu. How much do I tip you?" Abby fumbled in her purse and brought out her multicoloured Canadian cash.

"Nothing, Nexus. Just having you here is compensation enough." He bowed low and brought her bags into the bedroom.

The gnomes went wild. Every inch of the room was covered and examined by a gnome, a gargoyle, or her own Safety Warlock.

"That's very flattering, but I insist." She nodded to Bitsy who ran to get one of the necklaces that she had charged on the drive. A bright blue plastic necklace was presented to her and she passed it on to Stu. "Here you go. It may be worth something. You have to rub it a bit to get the charge out. I didn't want them going off at random."

"Thank you, Ma'am! Nexus. Ms. Hanover. This is more than I could...I mean. Thank you." The troll was turning an unhealthy shade of puce. His wide eyes told her that he was truly pleased.

"Can I ask you questions when I am downstairs? You know, troll stuff or other stuff that might come up?" With a room full of magical creatures looking at them, they didn't have privacy, but Stu didn't seem to mind.

His grin was both enchanting in its innocence and terrifying for its inclusion of teeth. Big teeth. "For this much magic, you can have me run naked through the Summit. Twice. And still ask me questions."

Abby cracked a grin. "How about you keep your clothing on every time you are in public and I will give you another when I check out."

"Done. Have a delightful stay, Nexus Abby." Stu bowed formally and left the room with a wink

and the flash of his terrible teeth.

Her entourage looked at her with astonished and pleased smiles. "You certainly do have a way with people, Abby. I have never seen a troll smile like that without someone bleeding in the vicinity." Seesee was almost laughing at her.

"Well, that's great. Okay. I have a ton of keys here and they all seem to be marked for this floor. Does anyone want to grab some and find rooms?" Abby held out the keys that the manager had handed her.

Verne took one, Laura another. At her raised eyebrow, Verne explained, "We cannot be together without the consent of our clans. Not here."

Seesee and Miklos took a key, then looked over at Xander. He filled in the blanks for them. "Meet back here in two hours. We'll go for dinner together."

The other four nodded and left Abby's suite, leaving Abby and Xander alone with her creatures. "Let's see. I have two more card keys left over, did you guys want to have your own space?" There was a blur and then the cards were gone. The creatures soon followed, leaving only Bitsy and Buffy in the room. Together, they meandered around the suite, taking inventory and making small high-toned comments as they examined the features that the rooms offered.

As alone as they were going to be for the time being, Abby and Xander faced each other in silence. She finally broke the eye contact and scuttled over to take a seat on the couch, only mildly surprised when he snuggled in next to her. "How did you find the trip?"

He took her hand in his and stroked her palm with his thumb. She was distracted to say the least. "It was alright until the gnomes tried to have a wiener roast in the back of the car. That kind of killed the enjoyment for me."

He chuckled and handed her the remote control. "That kind of did it for me as well. I didn't know you had asthma."

"It only kicks in under extreme circumstances. Death by plastic fumes would qualify." That small touch on her hand was filling her with a soothing warmth. The magic that was generated would be relaxing and healing. It was too bad that she didn't have any...hello? "Bitsy, thanks for the glass beads. I needed those."

He nodded smartly and returned to the exploration of the suite.

"They are anticipating your needs. Are they supposed to?" Xander was curious, but he kept up the soothing stroke that had her reliving the last moments that they had spent in a private embrace. It seemed like weeks ago, but was only a few days since she had curled against him with trust and

felt him warm her from the soul out.

"I guess so. I know that I wanted help around the house the day that they came to life and most days since." She idly charged the beads as she ran her hand through the bowl. A few more pounds and she was going to be able to sell magic in bulk. "They get smarter every time they do something new and I am pretty sure that I saw Harby going online at one of the truck stops."

"Do you ever worry about their progress? That they will someday leave you and strike out on their own?"

"I suppose every parent does. I worry about the gargoyles though. The gnomes can blend in and go to ground in times of danger. The gargoyles are far too busy stealing stinky baseball caps to take living life seriously." Abby thought about it for a minute. "I suppose that I wanted to have fun with my magic at the time."

A sharp knock at their door snapped Abby out of her reverie and Buffy stood on Bitsy's head to open it. "Nexus?" The woman slithered in on a serpent's tail.

Abby had to fight the urge to scream and run.



## *Chapter Seven*

Xander's grip tightened to keep her calm and greeted their guest. "Salleth. So nice to see you again."

"Glad to see you as well, Xander. And in such illustrious company, your family must be proud." She bowed from the waist, heck she was all waist, and nodded to Abby. "Annabeth Hanover, Nexus of our time, I am Salleth Cavil, Event Co-ordinator of the Magic Summit." Her hair was straight and black, not a trace of purple or red, just black. Her top was wrapped by an Indian choli covered with sunbursts picked out in beadwork. Her yellow eyes had serpentine slits for pupils when she turned them to Abby.

"Pleased to meet you, Salleth." Abby was exhausted, "Pardon me for not rising, the last leg of the journey was a little too exciting for my tastes. I am still fully charged." She trailed her fingers through the beads Bitsy had brought her and smiled.

Salleth bowed gracefully, bonelessly, from the hips, then slithered forward. "Of course. I was just coming up to give you a few items." A clipboard was held in her hands and she slithered forward.

Abby held her casual pose by sheer effort. Snakes were not one of her favourite creatures.

"Here is your Summit package, your identification badge, your schedule of events as well as invitations for several private parties being held here."

"Wow. Thank you. And about those meetings?"

"The dignitaries that you wanted to speak to are here, so if you are amenable to tomorrow morning, it can be done before you appear at the opening ceremonies."

"Great. That works very well. Can you alert the hotel staff to the possibility that my gnomes and gargoyles may be raiding the hotel carts for stuff? And they are to have whatever they care to from room service."

Salleth was writing notes. "I will make sure that they are all aware that your creatures are to have the run of the hotel."

Abby grinned. "That will be dangerous, but I don't see another way. Also, is there someone I can leave my credit card with for the creatures to order room service?"

"As the Nexus, your entire entourage is given their rooms and amenities at no charge to you. The

councils tithe to a fund that covers your expenses." She continued to make notes. "Charge any food or items that you want to the room and it will be taken care of."

Abby took one hand away from Xander and the other out of the beads. Her stomach growled alarmingly. "Is there somewhere to eat?" She extended her hand for Salleth to shake.

"You can order room service or there is a restaurant on twelve." She blinked at Abby's outstretched hand and took it carefully. No magic transferred and she looked both relieved and disappointed. She handed the bag filled with notes and flyers over and Abby dove into it with relish. There were coupons for vendors in the Dealers' Alley, advertisements to a number of balls and dances and of course, the full schedule of events for the Summit.

As Abby flipped through the schedule, she noted bright blue areas and looked up at Salleth, curious.

Salleth slithered closer and pointed with one beautifully manicured finger. "I highlighted the events that you need to attend in blue. The other time is your own."

*"Being a Nexus in the modern age? Creating magic out of nothing? Why gnomes, the Nexus tells all? Wow. I am guessing that I am the head speaker for those panels."* She immediately got a little queasy.

Public speaking was not her forte.

"Don't worry. All of these panels will be handled by a moderator and you can have as many of your entourage with you as you wish."

"That doesn't help much." She glanced down. "Yikes, even the trial is on here, each and every day. Is it going to take that long?"

"We all hope not, but the defence is going to call all of you as witnesses." She shrugged and her tail twitched restlessly. "It is how long the representatives play it that will determine the length of the trial."

"Just like in the regular world. Leave it to the lawyers."

Salleth's smile exposed fangs.

Abby drew in a breath. "Is that a diamond in your fangs?"

The naga chuckled. "Yeah. I can't trim the fangs because they keep growing back, so I had stones put in them. At least I feel pretty, and don't worry about your reaction. I know what first impression I make with humans when I meet them." She shrugged. "At least you didn't scream."

"I am sorry, but snakes scare the heck out of me and your butt is the biggest one I have ever seen." Her honesty had an effect.

Salleth reared back on her tail until she was around eight feet tall and then she slumped back to a regular height, snickering and hissing. "That

was direct. Thank you." She collected herself and took a deep breath. "You are being assigned a handler to make sure that you make it to all of the events you are scheduled for. Her name is Celia and she should be here any minute."

"This may sound odd, but...can I touch your tail?" She had no sooner gotten the words out than there was a loop of scales on its way into her lap. Her fear was causing a charge to build in her, but she ruthlessly fought it down before stroking the smooth hot scales. "Wow. You are really warm."

She blushed. "I was on a hot rock when I was notified that you were here."

Looking into the slitted eyes of the event coordinator, she slowly let a light trickle of power leach into her fingers. "Do you mind?"

She closed her eyes and leaned back as that tiny surge of power ran through her. Her tail shivered and when Abby pulled her hand away, she smiled. "Thank you, Nexus." The emerald scales were almost translucent with the power running through her. She was about to say something else when there was another knock on the door.

Bitsy and Buffy immediately answered it.

"Oh. Hello. I am looking for the Nexus?" A young woman with distinctly pointed ears entered the room. Her gaze landed on Xander and she smiled brightly. "Hiya, cuz!"

Xander finally rose from the couch to join the

conversation. "Celia, may I present the Nexus, Annabeth Hanover?" He held out his hand to his cousin and another to Abby. "Abby, this is my cousin, Celia Desmith. She will be your handler for the majority of the Summit, when I can't be with you."

Abby took his hand for a moment and let him give her a light kiss on the back of her knuckles. "Well, she may as well start now. If you two will excuse me, I need some dinner and Salleth looks like she needs to give you a lecture." She turned to her new keeper and introduced her honour guard. "Celia, this is Bitsy and this is Buffy. You will meet the others later. Let's get some food." Before the young blonde woman could even get a sentence out, Abby had grabbed a key card, the schedule, and swept out the door.

The menu was surprisingly familiar, even if it had a section that catered to folks who preferred their food *alive*. Ick. "So, Celia, what kind of snack would you recommend at this place?"

"The wonton shrimp are very good, as is just about anything else on the appetizer menu. It gets a little iffy when it comes to burgers. Sometimes they give you a live one by accident, ick." Celia shuddered.

Abby decided that she would be best served by sticking to combinations of appetizers. Nachos

and deep fried shrimp it would be. "How many of these Summits have you been coming to?"

"One a year since I was five. For a lot of us, it also doubles as a family gathering." Celia flicked her golden locks over her shoulder and studied the menu like she was prepping for the SATs.

"How many events would that be, or phrased another way, how old are you?" Abby was feeling invasive and slightly bitchy, people were staring at her and whispering behind their hands.

"Forty-eight. In case you wonder, our family has elven blood and we age considerably better than those who don't." Having made her decision, she folded her menu with precision. "Xander is older than me by fifteen years, so if you are doing the math, don't. It won't matter by the time you grow old with him, because he will keep pace to match you. It's what we do when we find the one we love."

"Uh, Celia. He hasn't said anything about love. We are still working on trust." Abby snapped her own menu shut over that one.

"You may be, but we have a family seer who has seen you together far into the future." Celia smiled as she thought of the seer.

"Is the seer your mother?"

"No. You may meet her during the Summit. She makes Hotel Spectre her home base. She will greet you when it is time."

"No more clues than that? Fine. I will wait for this great seer to make herself known." Abby tried a bit of patience. It didn't feel too bad. Things had been happening far too fast of late. She needed some time to get a grip. The next few days were going to be wild enough.

A server scuttled up on a few extra limbs and took their orders with rapt attention as soon as Celia announced *and the Nexus will have...* He repeated their order and scurried off, nearly knocking over a woman almost completely composed of white. White hair, chalky skin, and a white trouser vest combo. Her eyes were the only spot of color and they were ruby red in her white features. Celia lifted her arm, "Raven! Come join us."

The white woman, Raven, nodded slowly and moved toward them at a measured pace. She stopped at their table. "Hello, Celia, who is your companion?"

Celia made the introductions, "The Nexus, Abby, this is Raven Dexter, she's a council midwife."

"Please, Raven, join us." She took the chair across from Abby and looked at her with those ruby red orbs. "May I ask, what are you?"

The woman grinned, showing white teeth that matched her perfectly. "I am completely human, no magic at all, but I am an albino with the rare



ocular pigmentation that makes my eyes red. With contacts, they look purple."

"Raven is impervious to magic." Celia chipped in.

"What?"

"Impervious. It just runs around me. I can be burned with fire from a lighter, but not an enchanted fireball. I can be drugged, but not glamourised. To have something affect me, it has to be regular physics at work. It's why I am such a popular midwife for the paranormal, I can't carry any charms or spells to harm the woman or the baby." She shrugged. "It was after the third birth that the council put me on the payroll. The first two birth parents gifted me with people, members of their courts, the third gave me a car in which I can be transported to the half realm where most of the non-human types live. It works like a Faraday cage. Without it, I can't get near to the families who have called for my services. It also makes scheduling visits easier."

"Wow. You are really an average human."

"Except for my colouring, yes. Remind me to tell you the story of my first paranormal delivery, it's a hoot." She smiled and her eyes sparkled. "If you are interested in attending one or two of the panels I am running, there is *Safer Sex and Sorcery*, and *Stand and Deliver-adapting to the patient*."

"Those sound neat, but I am pretty booked up

for the whole conference.” Abby fished in her pocket for a business card and handed it to Raven. “Email me after the conference, I would love to know more about some of these races, I have only met a few.”

Before Raven could respond, her beeper went off and she cursed and made a beeline for the exit. One of her patients was at the conference and ready to pop.

“Midwives make lousy dinner guests.” Celia added sagely.

Their food arrived and they tucked in. The wonton shrimp were actually very tasty and the fried wonton bowl that the peppered dipping sauce was served in was lovely and crunchy.

Bitsy kept their beverage glasses filled, much to the consternation of the staff. Buffy was making lazy rounds of the dining room and every now and then, she would take a dive at someone’s french fries. It was hard for Abby not to smile. She just wanted her critters to have one year to make themselves known and *then* people could start swatting at them.

“So, Celia. Do you have an itinerary for me?”

The young woman flinched a bit. “No. Though I am aware of the meeting that Salleth scheduled you for tomorrow. As the other councillors arrive, I am sure that your schedule will fill completely.”

“Well then, I guess it is back to the fifteenth

floor with us." As they rose to leave, three little girls with mocha skin and familiar braids came squealing around the corner.

"Ah, the Montrose girls have arrived. I'd better let Seesee know. Shall we?" Celia had almost rammed into her when she stopped to let the gigglers by.

"Of course, Nexus."

"Abby."

"Of course, Abby."

With a heavy sigh, she ignored the whispers and pointing that followed her wait outside the elevator and headed back to the safety of the floor with her people, her creatures and her lover who seemed on the fence about something.

## Chapter Eight

A paranormal riot was in place as soon as the elevator doors opened. Wolves wrestling with vampires and gnomes piling on an ancient mermaid whose hair was in the clutches of Angel and Firefly.

*I am so not in the mood to be the grown-up here.* “Enough! Stop this! Everyone, my rooms, now!” She didn’t look to see if anyone was listening, just stormed past the fight tableau that her presence had caused and dragged the stunned Celia in her wake. Bitsy scuttled in front of her and he and Buffy got the door open somehow, which surprised Abby, because her key card was still in her hand. They held the door open as the horde wandered in with heads hanging.

She swept inside and sat on her couch, forcing the majority of the group to line up in front of her. Abby rubbed her forehead in irritation. The drive had taken more out of her than she had previously thought, she was exhausted. “Where’s Xander?”

"He and Salleth had to make some arrangements for the trial, they will be back within the hour." Seesee was standing to the side of the room, away from those involved in the fight. Laura was at her side, but the boys were in it.

"Seesee, what the heck was going on when I arrived?"

The mer-matron looked perturbed at being ignored and Laura looked queasy, but they kept silent as the gorgon spoke.

"Avenilia arrived and wanted an early audience with you, but she was told you were not here and she would not leave. Then Kevin and Lath arrived and also wanted to speak with you and they would not leave. It was quiet and calm until Stephan arrived and tried to take Miklos's place in your entourage. That got Verne involved, which got Kevin and Lath involved and then Avenilia spoke to Laura about having *her* replaced on the Oak Point Guard and that is when the gnomes and gargoyles attacked."

"Fabulous. Which one of you is Stephen?" The dark and smarmy vamp that stepped forward looked like a Goth's wet dream. "Nice to meet you, get out."

"What?" He actually looked surprised that Abby had spoken to him in that tone.

"Get out or you will find yourself sorely lacking in the energy it takes to keep yourself upright and

pretty." She waved him off with a dismissive hand, but it was the point where Harby sucker punched him in the back of the knee and the others helped him drag the vamp out that finally lifted her mood.

The mer-woman, Avenilia, looked at Abby with horror. "You can't actually do that, can you?"

She just laughed. "As far as he knows, I can. I can certainly withhold power from the vampires in general because of his actions. That won't make him popular either." The appalled faces of her guests made her smile. "Please, have a seat and tell me why you have come to visit. I thought I was to meet with you tomorrow morning."

The werewolves took the loveseat and the mer-woman took the wingback chair.

Abby waved off her Guard. "Seesee, your nieces were running amok on the twelfth floor, you may want to go and see them. Laura, Verne, go have dinner. Discuss interspecies communication. Miklos, stay and keep an eye on the gargoyles. They look like they are getting ready to attack again." He could also control the wolves if they acted up, but she didn't say that. As the room slowly emptied, Abby breathed again. "Well, that was way too much excitement after a long drive. What can I do for you?"

Avenilia looked at the werewolves and started, "We have some concerns about the relationship

between Laura and Verne."

That wasn't too much of a shocker, it was why she wanted to talk with them after all. "Really." She didn't know if it was Kevin or Lath who spoke, they hadn't introduced themselves.

"It is unacceptable for Verne to contaminate his bloodline with anything less than a wolf." He snorted, "She isn't even human."

Avenilia's eyes darkened with anger. "And mating with a thinking hairball is unacceptable for one of our kind."

"Freeze. Stop where you are. Before we all leave this summit, we are going to come to an agreement that will let Laura and Verne be together."

Both camps snorted, "You can't be serious."

"Do I look serious?" She let her frustration and exhaustion show. Her irritation seeped out around her mouth and her eyes narrowed. "You can go. I will have Celia contact you later to arrange another meeting." She blinked. She had almost forgotten about her handler and turned to look behind her. There she was, taking copious notes. "Got that?"

"Yes, Nexus. A meeting before the end of the Summit. I will see to it as soon as I finish working out your schedule." She nodded like the most professional of assistants as she said that, perched on a chair just to the right and behind the couch.

“And what I would like you two to think about is that I intend to be one of the first Nexuses to live a long and complete human life. For that life span, I will need guards that I like and trust around me. I like and trust Laura and Verne.” She nodded tiredly to her audience. “Keep that in mind while you think about the benefits of having a Nexus at your beck and call. I would do anything for friends and I consider them friends. Night.” Abby got up and walked to her bedroom, sliding the door closed on the murmuring voices.

Miklos opened the door a foot, let Bitsy and Buffy inside and then closed it.

She stared out her window for half an hour, letting the peace and tranquility of the castle’s design sink into her. As soon as she was calm enough, she crawled into bed and curled on her side. Buffy curled against her stomach, Bitsy behind her knees and Abby fell into a light sleep.

*Her dreams carried layers of magic and a whirling darkness consuming everything before it.*

Two strong arms gripped her from behind and she came awake with a shriek, wrapping her body in a bubble of energy and scrambling from the bed. She whirled to see Xander on the bed, on his knees, looking alarmed. “What is it Abby? What’s wrong?”

She took a deep breath and internalized the



energy she had emoted. It took a lot of willpower to hold it in, but eventually she was able to move back into Xander's embrace. "I had a bad dream." She cuddled against him and he held her tightly. She fought the urge to sob like a little girl. "I don't know how long I can manage here. There is no outlet for my power surges and though we haven't been here a day, I am so close to snapping it isn't funny."

He stroked her back soothingly and she relaxed against him. "It's alright, Abby. This is a stressful time and a worse event." He tilted her chin up so that he could meet her eyes and then he teased her mouth with his own.

Desperate for any sort of release, she held him as tightly as he held her and soon they were fighting free of their clothing and rolling around on the king sized bed in a most indecorous fashion. When her body surrendered to his, it was with a sigh of relief and a shudder of mounting pleasure.

It was comforting to hear his own groans of enjoyment as she touched him, but although he kept a slow slide in and out of her, her orgasm broke over her all too soon. Power pulsed away from her body in a slow wave, washing over Xander, then Buffy and Bitsy who had turned their backs on the human interaction to look out the window.

Xander's moment of satisfaction struck him an instant after her magic had entered him. He gave it back to her without a moment's hesitation, which sparked another wave on her part.

Naked and sated, Abby curled against him again, all tension now dissipated. "Thanks. I needed that."

He chuckled in her ear. "So did I. I am sorry I was not here to deal with the delegations for you."

"I have pledged myself to the support of those who step between me and harm. That includes you." She trailed her fingers through his pale locks and smiled. "I don't expect to have to exert myself too much, but I will stand to my oath."

He was bewildered. "When did you make this oath?"

"Moving day. Seesee, Laura and Verne gathered to help me move in and I said if they ever needed me, I would be happy to help." She tugged a lock of his hair. "I keep my word."

He nuzzled at her neck a little. "I know. I never doubted you would keep your word. I just didn't know about the first oath." He breathed deeply and settled her firmly against him. Bitsy drew the blanket over them and tucked them in. Tangled together, they slept.

## Chapter Nine

“Nexus, your first appointment is in half an hour. You may want to shower and dress.” Celia was standing at the foot of the bed, keeping her gaze fixed on her PDA and not on the couple twined together.

“I think we are relatively decent, you can look up.” Xander tucked the sheet around his hips and Abby’s chest. “Who would want her this morning?”

“The prosecuting Councillor, Rakonell.” Celia consulted her notes. “She wants to discuss Abby’s method of subduing Miranda. Apparently some members of the council are a little confused by the tactics.”

Abby sighed. She knew that her more extensive talents were going to be on display at some point. Why not in the public arena? At least then the councils would understand what they were up against when they tried to make a move for her incarceration. “Okay. Let me get a shower and get dressed. Could you have breakfast sent up for me

so that I can eat and run?"

"She will be meeting with you here, but I will have room service bring it up with all speed." She bowed and exited the room, sliding the door shut and taking Bitsy and Buffy with her.

"Your cousin is really formal." Abby flipped off the covers and headed for the bathroom, butt naked.

He followed at a distance. "She had a slightly cloistered upbringing. She takes after my great great grandmother. She's a seer. The Councils don't let seers out of their sight, so when the Summit is over, she goes back under watch."

"That sucks." The selection of soaps and shampoos was heady. She picked something that smelled like wildberries and stepped under the multi head spray. One didn't really get dirty driving on the road, but you felt grimy when you didn't shower. She finished washing and conditioning the smoke residue out of her hair, then gave the rest of her body a good scrub down.

Feeling clean, refreshed and a little remorseful for some of the things she had said the night before, she wrapped her body and hair in a towel and headed back into the bedroom.

Xander was looking perky this morning and he already had on pants and a t-shirt. "Feeling better, sweetie?"

"Much. I am sorry for being such a basket case,

but even though you warned me, I wasn't prepared for the freak factor."

"They stared, huh?"

"And whispered. It almost drove me to blow. I think I am going to have to avoid unscheduled crowds for a while."

"That is probably a wise decision. That, or keep three of us with you at all times. We will run interference." He watched her select a matching set of undies with a perverse grin on his face. "Those are nice. The pale pink looks so cute on you."

She blushed and quickly shimmied into some comfy slacks and a silky blouse, suitable for meetings according to Seesee. A nice set of flats was rejected and she slipped into sneakers.

"Those aren't really suitable."

"If I am comfortable, there is less chance of a chair running down the hallway. You know that as well as I do." She wiggled her toes happily. It was going to be a better day. She smiled brightly at Xander and slid open the connecting door. Her court was in full session and breakfast for about eight had arrived. Time for social eating.

They had torn down the contents of the carts in less than ten minutes, the orange juice was gone and the coffee was down to dregs. Abby protected her horde of bacon and munched slowly as they

swapped stories of their first nights at the Hotel Spectre.

"Abby, did you know that my nieces saw you and Celia last night? They want a Bitsy and a Buffy for Christmas." Seesee's hair was loose and wild. It carried the impression of joy and laughter in every motion.

"We will have to negotiate on that. I don't like my creatures living away from me yet. The world is a dangerous place for wild magic." She continued munching her bacon and used her fork to defend some of it from Verne. "Too slow."

The group laughed and for a minute it seemed like they were having an Oak Point barbeque or picnic. "Well, Laura, Verne, the battle of fish and fur has begun. I am dangling my favour in front of your clans, so that should spur them to a slightly more favourable position."

Laura smiled. "We know. Avenilia asked me if I would really take up with a ground pounder and then she wondered if you would honestly give our clan your favour. I told her that you were a woman of honour and then I told her to go soak her tail and think about it."

Verne grinned and gripped Laura's hand. "It was the same for me, only Kevin was told to go for a run in the woods."

"What about that vamp jackass, Steven?"

"He is currently locked in solitary, with heavy

silver binders. When he gets out, he will have to write *I will not subvert my Guild Master's edict* two thousand times in his own blood. That was Max's idea. She is the Master's Apprentice."

"She sounds strict." Another piece of the hard-won bacon went in her mouth. "They let an apprentice make the rules?"

"She's a little unusual. She still has most of her pulse for one thing." Miklos grinned, showing a lot of teeth. "I am heading off for my nap, is there anything else you need?"

"Just your good will and a lot of candy." Abby nodded her dismissal.

As he stood, he swept Seesee to her feet and bent her back in a kiss that would have done justice to any romantic hero and heroine. When he set her upright, her darkly flushed face caused the Oak Point Guard to break into applause. Even the creatures had been held in rapture by the hormonal display. With a jaunty grin, the vampire released his woman and made his way out of the room.

"Okay, obviously being dead hasn't affected his hydraulics." Abby couldn't believe that that comment had come out of her mouth, but the shocked giggles told the story. "I formally apologize, Seesee. That was uncalled for. I seem to have a problem with my inner censor here."

"It is to be expected." Laura's voice was calm

and the others nodded. "I did warn you about this. You have a lot to deal with here, so we are expecting you to be a jackass. We will just take it out of your hide at home."

"Glad to know that someone knew what to anticipate. I just thought I had suddenly transformed into a jerk."

"No. Not really. But here you have to be the Nexus and at home you are just Abby. We accept the difference." Verne was nodding kindly. "However, you are hosting the next barbeque and I want steak."

The gnomes suddenly got together and Abby could swear that she saw Splint fish a notepad out. They were still evolving, she hadn't designed them to write. Neat. Okay, part of her was a little guilty. They were creating a shopping list for when they got home and she knew that they weren't shopping on an account. They were stealing. Darn it.

She was going to ask Celia about the incoming Councillor when there was a knock on the door. Verne beat Bitsy and Buffy to the door, but only by jumping over and under them respectively. He opened the door. "Yes?"

"I am here to see the Nexus. Councillor Rackonell. She is expecting me." The woman was an earthy green, not the aqua that ran through Laura, but a forest green.



"She is finishing her breakfast, please be seated." He steered the Councillor to the conversational area next to the fireplace and then left her there as he returned to his seat next to Laura.

The implication was clear, Abby was in charge and she would start the conversation when it suited her and not before.

"Is there anything for the gnomes to do today?"

Xander made a few suggestions, including harassing the check-in staff.

"Not funny, Xander. Okay, boys and girls, you can have free run of the hotel, enjoy the Dealers' Room, and don't steal anything outright. You can have this bucket of magic beads to buy things with. Most vendors here should take it as currency."

Seesee nodded confirmation. "That's worth a few thousand dollars, Abby. Just thought you should be aware of that."

"Okay. You heard that, fellas, make it count. Maybe you don't want to spend it all today. Pace yourselves." She nodded and her creatures trooped out of the hotel room, chortling to themselves, the bucket of beads between them. Today, Harbinger and Firefly were her honour guard and they stationed themselves by the door.

"Things I need today..." She looked to her Guard and smiled. If they wanted her to be the

Nexus, she would be. "I need some more items to dump power into, I am so buzzed that I can probably start powering kids' teeth. Or the carpets, or the drapes, or this desk. Take your pick."

"There is a dollar store nearby. I will get a few pounds of items for you to play with." Verne nodded to the ladies and Xander, then left the room.

Abby picked up her coffee cup and saucer and made her way to the conversation pit. "Councillor Rackonell, it is a pleasure to meet you." She didn't extend her hand. She had far too much excess energy in her to risk transfer. Xander or the others could touch her at any time, but she didn't want to hand power to strangers willy nilly.

"I am pleased to meet you. I want you to tell me everything you remember about the day that Miranda was captured."

Abby sipped at her coffee. Perhaps caffeine was not the best idea when she was this wired, ah well, it was familiar. And it let her stall. "Why that particular day?"

"Because the defence is arguing that you could not have been in danger, if you had the power to subdue Miranda all along." She opened her briefcase and checked her notes. "The primary charge that Miranda faces is not that of attempting to kill Annabeth Hanover, but the attempt to

destroy the Nexus. If she can prove that she knew you weren't in any danger, then we will have a hard time getting a conviction."

"What about her confession? She ranted on a great length about destroying magic."

"The confession will be inadmissible." Rackonell looked uncomfortable. "Because of your abilities to manipulate magical fields, we can't use the standard Reading methods that are usual during our trials. We are having to take a completely different tactic with this trial and I can't say I like it."

"Tough. I am what I am and she is what she is."

"A magic-less hole, who has tried to destroy us all."

Okay, that was a bit of resentment. "She didn't try to destroy you all. She could have picked you off one at a time." Abby sipped at her coffee again and slurped as her cup emptied. Harby took her cup away and had it back in her hand in under a minute. "She is really a powerful magical talent."

"Magic? She isn't magic. She is the antithesis of magic."

"She calls it, absorbs it, consumes it. She just can't use it. Is that the criteria that you have for entry into the magical community? Because up until this year, I would not have qualified." The snobbery was now apparent. Miranda's attitude was completely understandable. Abby didn't like

it, but she understood it.

"You have always been a Nexus, you just didn't have focus."

"And *she* has always been able to manipulate magic, but no one in her family ever gave her the support to explore the possibilities of her talent." Abby sighed in resignation. They just didn't get it. Without the support of her Guard, she never would have developed as fast as she had and she would have died in the first or second attempts on her life. Either the car or the bomb should have taken her out, but she had survived.

Abby took a deep breath and touched Rackonell's magic. Dryad. Xander had told her about these creatures. They were insular and hostile, but very intelligent. The trees whispered all the knowledge of the world to them, they only needed to listen. "Listen to what the trees tell you about Miranda's family. You might be surprised that she made it to adulthood at all."

"Perhaps, but we still need to go over your testimony."

"Fine. What do you want to know?" Abby leaned back on the couch and she could feel Firefly perching behind her, glaring at the dryad.

"When did you know that you could defeat her?" She had a pen poised over a notepad and kept her head down.

"The instant that I found Bitsy under the roses."

"Can you extrapolate?"

"When I felt my gnome's life bleeding away and knew I had to stop it. I topped him up, but unless I broke the connection, he would die. Miranda was sucking the magic out of him and I didn't want that to happen."

"So you didn't know that you could defeat her."

"No. I knew that I had to. If not for the gnomes burying the explosion, I probably would not have won our little confrontation." Laura, Seesee and Xander were having a quiet conversation at the table, but Abby knew that they kept their focus on the conversation that was going on a few yards away.

"But you knew you would win."

"No, but I knew I would fight. I don't give up easily."

"No shit." It was a murmured comment, but Abby still heard it and cracked a smile.

They spent another hour conversing about her state of mind when she confronted Miranda, but Xander being chained to a tree was only mentioned twice. Apparently, Xander's family had enough pull to stop him from being mentioned as the damsel in distress at the trial.

Abby had to admit that it must have been embarrassing for him to be cuffed to the oak, but he had looked really hot.

## Chapter Ten

“Nexus, I am sorry to interrupt, but you are expected for lunch with some of the Guild heads and then you will be needed at the Opening Ceremonies.” Celia was polite, but she hovered behind Rackonell with determination. Her pointy ears were completely exposed today, delicate braids exposed them and swung with a gentle chime as the bells in them clashed and clanged. The rest of her blonde locks flowed down her back unconfined.

“Well, I would love to say that this has been fun, but at least this torture session is over. I will see you later, Councillor Rackonell. Try and get that broomstick out of your...spine. You might enjoy yourself a little.” Old habits died hard. Abby stood to dismiss her visitor and on reflex, extended her hand.

The instant that the dryad touched the irritated Nexus, her hair burst into bloom. She was a cherry tree dryad. The scent that blossomed in the room

was heady. "Oh, geez. Sorry about that. I am still getting used to it. Do you want me to reverse it?"

Rackonell blinked in shock. She took a deep breath and smiled, exposing teeth that were very sharp for a talking tree. Her voice was breathy when she spoke, "No. Thank you. I haven't felt this energized in years." She delicately patted the blossoms in her hair. Her deep gray gaze bored into Abby's. "They are right about you. You may just be able to bring magic into this century on your own."

"And if they lock me up, that won't happen. I will wither and die as Nexuses have before me." She shook her shoulders and nodded to Celia. "I am ready if you are." It was a hint to the dryad to leave and she took it. As the door swung shut, her Guard stood as well, Seesee in front, Xander next to her on one side with Celia on the other and Laura bringing up the rear with Harby and Firefly.

It felt horribly formal to have Xander at her side without being able to touch him, but she knew that holding hands with her Guard wasn't going to create the proper impression. The elevator popped up so quickly Abby wasn't sure that it hadn't been waiting for them. Celia reached for the button and sent them to the thirtieth floor.

"I have noticed that there is no elevator music here. I would kill for *The Girl from Iponema* right about now." Her companions snickered at her

immediately before the doors slid open to reveal a set of guards that made hers look like fluffy kittens. Wet fluffy kittens. Feeble wet fluffy kittens.

The guards facing them looked like demons crossed with sea urchin. "Who wishes to enter?"

"The Nexus and her Guard." Seesee's voice was colder than Abby had ever heard it.

"Then pass." Woo. Really formal. The demons cleared the entryway and let them pass.

"Whoa." The entire floor was an open ballroom. Magic flicked through the room in tiny bursts as uncontrolled emissions leaked out of the occupants. Over three hundred magical persons or creatures were milling around, eating hors d'oeuvres. They all froze the moment that Abby and her crew had made it fully out of the elevator.

It felt like being on stage at a school play and not knowing her lines.

Salleth slithered up and nodded respectfully to the group. "This way, Nexus. You and your Guard will form a receiving line. No one will get to you that has not gone through them first." She led them around the crowd and to a dais on the far end of the room. Abby was seated in the only available chair on the dais and Harby and Firefly took up positions at her feet. She wished that all of her creatures were with her, but she had no idea that the little meet and greet would be this huge.



The faces of the gathering were filled with a myriad of emotions, some contempt, some trepidation, and a few with hope. It was the hope that she held onto.

A willowy blonde with Xander's eyes, arm in arm with a striking man, was the first introduction, "Nexus Annabeth Hanover, my parents, Seer Amelia Desmith and Warlock Reginald Desmith."

She would have stood, but Seesee held her down with a tendril of hair on her shoulder. So she had to sit. "Pleased to meet you. Call me, Abby." She wasn't allowed to shake hands either.

They nodded to her politely and then made their way back into the seething crowd. Xander looked relieved for an instant before the rest of those assembled got up their nerve to come and greet her.

Her creatures came and stationed themselves on the dais in a semi circle, keeping anyone or thing from getting too close. Verne showed up and handed her a bowl of beads and she smiled and started to charge them. They were seed beads, so it was going to take a really long time.

The faces blurred together for the most part, but little things stood out, like the head of the Creature Council, the minotaur. That would be scary coming at you no matter who you were. The Vampire Guild was represented by the Guild

Master's Apprentice, Max. She was a statuesque woman with Reubenesque curves. It was hard for anyone to ignore her, but it was her personality that stood out. Well, that and the fangs. You just couldn't ignore the fangs.

"The Guild Master will be at the ball tomorrow night, but I am here as his envoy, I suppose." Max stood calmly while the line behind her fidgeted. "If you want to go for coffee while you are here, just send me a message and we can meet in the restaurant." She grinned at Abby and she felt herself smiling back, it was infectious. "Just send a messenger to any vampire and ask for the Abomination. I'll get the message." Chuckling at her own wit, she bowed gracefully and left the dais.

Abby turned to Laura. "The Abomination?" She kept her voice low.

Laura smiled. "She is one of a kind. The only surviving vamp who did not turn by being bitten. She bit a vamp in self-defence and turned slowly into what she is today."

"Which is what?"

"According to the vamps, it's an Abomination." Laura laughed and then sobered as the next person came to be presented.

It went on like this. Hours passed while people and fantastic creatures came to be introduced to the new Nexus. She smiled, nodded, greeted them

and then looked to the next one. Abby was hoarse and exhausted by the time everyone had been presented. Bitsy tapped her knee and handed her a glass of juice and she drank it gratefully. "Thanks, Bits."

Another stage was being set up to her left and one to her right. Celia knelt at Abby's feet. "I am so sorry. They only said they wanted you to meet a few Guildmembers, they didn't say anything about four hours of introductions."

"It's okay, Celia." She croaked. The gnomes had scattered in the crowd and were busy scavenging for her and it looked as if the gargoyles were in charge of snacks. "At least I have met about one third of the people I have to meet." Crackers with a variety of toppings rained from the sky and into her lap. Ruffles quickly shoved an empty plate onto Abby's thighs while glaring at the flying bombardment. She just laughed and put the crackers on the plate. The gargoyles meant well, they just needed to work on their social acumen. Practice, practice, practice.

"Most of them were here. The rest of the attendees don't rate an introduction." Celia was distracted by her PDA and so missed the glare that Abby shot at her.

"Everyone rates an introduction. Even my gnomes for that matter. Anyone can talk to me, I don't hold with the bullshit status markers that

you folks have set up. The only thing that makes the highborn highborn is who fucked whom." Okay, she said that a little too loud. Shocked faces turned to her and she sighed heavily. "I would say I was sorry, but I am not. My bloodlines have little to nothing to do with my talent and everything to do with a twist of fate."

Celia just blinked and Xander pulled her off her knees and to the side. They spoke furiously in a lyrical language that Abby couldn't understand and then Celia nodded stiffly, her cheeks red with embarrassment. Abby sighed and put her elbow on one of the arms of the chair and munched absently at the snacks that were in her lap. When the stages were set and ready, Salleth nodded to the demons guarding the elevators and they responded by standing aside. It was six o'clock and the elevators were suddenly shuttling people into the ballroom, faster than Abby would have believed possible.

Seesee leaned over. "Magic elevators. Multiple cars at any given time."

Ah. That explained it. Abby shook her head. It still amazed her that magic was a reality, but being here in a magical hotel surrounded by creatures of myth and magic did bring it home. Or it meant that she was completely bug-nuts. Either way, it was a spectacular realization.

The Magical Summit began with an

anticlimactic introduction of the new Nexus, Abby stood and waved, an announcement of a change in the schedule regarding a Magus who was not able to make it and a thank you to Salleth for arranging the works.

Abby watched the announcements from her seat and she ran her hands through the bead bowl that Verne had brought her. She waved Celia over and had her scuttle to the announcer.

"And now in an unusual moment, the Nexus would like to address the assemblage." He was a sour faced Magus that didn't like her asking for his microphone.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and anything in between. Thank you for welcoming me into your community wholeheartedly. It has been a great relief for me to have persons such as yourselves greet me with such grace and to you I offer a small token in return." Taking a deep breath, she dug her hand into the charged seed beads and threw hundreds of magically charged particles into the crowd. "Anyone who doesn't get one, come find me later and I will set you up." She was talking to a riot of people who were crawling on their hands and knees to get one of the beads.

Xander grabbed her elbow to pull her away from the mic. "Did you do that on purpose?"

"Sort of. I wanted to see if the elite was as eager for the magic as the others. Turns out, they are."

She sat back down and grumped. The Oak Point Guard had their hands full, keeping the crowd back until it calmed.

Miklos made his way through the crowd and helped with controlling the crush of enthusiasm that tried to crush Abby. She on the other hand, simply sat and watched them with her inner eye, taking measure of their magic. It seemed to be pretty consistent, but fairly faint. The members of the Creature's Guild were the strongest, being primarily made of magic. That information was filed away.

The crowd's excitement waned when the demons came in to help quell the rush. That stopped them rather effectively.

The grouchy Magus made it back to the podium and announced, "I hereby declare this Summit open!" before he slunk back to the grouping of the elite.

Abby smiled to herself as she saw the bright mark of her magic on him. Apparently, he was not too good to take free magic when it was offered.

"I am done here. Can we go?" She was asking Celia and when the elf nodded, she sighed in relief. "Seesee, did you want to invite your family to my rooms for dinner or a snack? It will be easier than trying to push through one of these crowds."

"That would be great. The girls aren't allowed here as they have no powers yet, so we usually

don't let them attend the Opening." Her hair was as excited as the rest of her and she closed her eyes for a moment. "They are excited and they will meet us there. The little ones were disappointed that you didn't see them last night."

"I saw them. I just wasn't in the mood for that much screaming. They were kind of excited." Abby stood and stretched. Harby took the bowl of the leftover beads and as a block of bodies, they made their way to the elevators. The demons kept pace as they moved with the Guard to keep the disappointed attendees at bay. Laura made it to the elevator and hit the button, they piled into the travelling chamber as soon as it opened for them.

When the demons used their bodies to block the elevator, Abby reached out and touched each one on a shoulder, pouring a tiny bit of power into them. They had just turned to her in surprise when the doors slid shut.

"Abby, why did you do that?" Xander pulled her back against him.

"Um. Because I can? Because I don't know how to tip a demon? Because they were all business when I put my foot in it by throwing those beads?" She shook her head as the elevator ascended. "Mostly, it was because I needed to let out some power. Not having that rock or tree is driving me nuts."

"I know. Only a few more days. Once the trial

is over, we can leave."

"So, fast trial means that we can go? Cool." She looked over to Celia. "It starts tomorrow morning, right?"

"It does indeed."

"Then I am going to be the best Nexus that I can be. I will be on my best behaviour, I promise." She held up her hand and the ripple of her oath ran through the elevator. The lights dimmed for a moment, but they were delivered safely to the fifteenth floor.

The Montrose clan was waiting outside the elevator doors. The girls let out an ear piercing shriek when they saw Seesee and then another as they saw Abby smiling down at them. The other gorgons were standing carefully behind the children, ready to restrain them at any moment. "Introductions will be made as soon as I am fortified in my room. So follow me." Abby turned and strode down the hall to her rooms.

The girls were suddenly quiet and Abby glanced back to see each of the gorgons muffling the girls with a lock of hair. "It is okay. You can set free the squealers. I can handle it here." She was smiling, a genuine smile for the first time since arriving at the hotel. Kids did that for her. They were all full of honest energy without subterfuge. Since she could now actually *see* that they meant what they said, it endeared children to her even



more.

As they entered her rooms, she took in the obvious signs of housekeeping. "Critters, can you get me that big box of beads that we got at the truck stop?" Abby took up her spot on the couch and sat for a moment, relaxing her power into the room around her. It earned her a few surprised looks from the sisters, but her Guard smiled at the sign of her relaxation. "Seesee, I would like to meet your family."

The girls came forward one at a time and introduced themselves. The gnomes dragged the box to Abby's side and then scampered away.

"I am Gwendolyn, but most call me Gwen." The eldest curtsied to her and smiled.

"I am Annabeth, but most call me Abby." She dug through the box, pulling out a bright red bead strand that she had used to work off confinement in the car. The left over Mardi Gras beads had been a godsend. "Please, take this magic as a token of my esteem." She held the beads out and Gwen bent her head to let Abby drop the strand over her head.

The girl impulsively leaned forward to kiss Abby on the cheek and her mother's shout came an instant too late. "Its fine, Melly. I am in control right now. No need to worry."

The next girl curtsied and positioned herself where her sister had been. "Hello, Abby, I am

Gennifer. You can call me Genny. My aunty likes you a lot."

Abby's eyes crinkled in amusement. "I like her, too. She's a good friend." Genny got a bright blue strand. She held it out from her body and twirled like a princess. Abby laughed and felt the rise of joyful magic within her.

Georgia was quiet. She was the serious one. "I am Georgia. It is nice to meet Auntie's friend."

"It is nice to meet you, too, Georgia. You can call me Nexus or Abby, your choice." Georgia was barely out of toddler-hood. She pulled out a lovely gold bead strand and placed it around the child's neck. The neck-crushing hug loosened part of her psyche that she had been keeping rigid. There were people here to care about and she had been in danger of forgetting that.

Amellix was next in line after her daughters. "I am Amellix, but please call me Melly. Thank you for your kindness, Nexus." She bowed so low that her hair flowed in a pool around her, writhing as it went.

"You have beautiful children, Melly. Any member of Seesee's family is always welcome to visit Oak Point Way." A look and a small gesture from Abby and the bowl of seed beads was in her hand, carried by Skint. Abby counted out six beads and handed them to Melly. "One for each member of your family."

She bowed frantically. "Thank you, Nexus."

"Abby."

"Abby, thank you." She looked at the beads as if wondering what to do with them.

"Weave them into your hair. You will have them when you need them." Abby smiled at the immediate execution of her suggestion.

"Madam Nexus, I am Trellatrix, but most call me Tinny." She bowed low and her hair wadded itself into a tight knot, as if binding itself in deference.

"Hello, Tinny. Call me Abby." She measured out six beads and handed them over to Tinny. "I don't know what you will do with this tiny burst of magic, but it is my giveaway item for this Summit, so I am making sure that people near me get what everyone else gets." She grinned a little. "Or that they get even more."

She nodded to dismiss Tinny and the instant that all introductions had been made, everyone relaxed. Xander cozied up to her and took her hand. "You do know that most of the people at the Opening ceremonies will try and get an extra few beads this weekend."

"And you know that I can see my own magic. Right?"

His eyes widened in surprise and then he started laughing. "You are testing them."

"I am. It may be a bit bastardy, but with all of

the opposition that we have encountered so far, I want the true measure of the folks I am dealing with."

"That's sneaky." He turned her head and gave her a kiss. "One more reason that I love you."

Shock rippled through her as she heard the words that she didn't think he would ever say. She held his face and stared into his eyes, trying to find out if he was lying to her. Sincerity and resignation blazed out of his blue eyes. "Why resignation, Xander?" Tears were welling in her own hazel orbs.

"Because now that I have said it, if you change your mind about me, you will kick me out of the Guard."

"I love you, you moron! You aren't going anywhere." She punched him in the chest and then leaned forward to give him a heated kiss. She had been holding her emotions at bay for weeks and now they came roaring to the surface, but she still kept them from pulling the magic out of control. She was getting better at this.

Polite applause broke out as their kiss started to tip the PG rating and Abby pulled away. They were both laughing as they turned back to the guests who were filling the room and going over a room service menu.

Georgia separated from her sisters and came to sit next to Abby, scooting against her until she was

almost tucked under her right arm. Taking the hint, she hugged the little girl to her and then lifted her onto her lap.

Xander smiled indulgently at her as the little feet kicked at the air, occasionally hitting his knees, and he pushed a few buttons on a remote. A wide screen television descended from the ceiling and brightened with a few more touches of the warlock's knowing fingers.

It was a recap of the Opening Ceremonies with a highlight on Abby's dispersal of the beads into the audience. "Those were pretty, but not as nice as the one you gave me." Georgia was proud of her necklace and ran it through her fingers. Because she was too young to come into her powers, she couldn't trigger it, so having her and her sisters play with them was perfectly safe.

Xander changed the channel and soon they were watching a recap of notable moments in the last year. When the new Nexus was announced, Abby and the children shouted, "Yay!" and clapped their hands. The other adults in the room looked surprised, but a few looks from Laura and Xander and they quieted.

When the food arrived, Abby and the girls had a picnic on the floor with everyone looking on. The giggling was tremendous and a food fight soon erupted that not even the gnomes could contain.

Abby needed joy and children brought it faster than any other creature on earth.

## *Chapter Eleven*

“Nexus, you are required in the court chamber in an hour. Your breakfast is on the way.” Celia was determined as she shook Abby’s shoulder, but the spark of power that jumped between them still startled her.

Abby groaned and Xander turned to his cousin. “I’ll get her up. Go and make sure the creatures are clean.” As soon as Celia slid the door closed, he dropped a kiss on Abby’s shoulder. “Wake up, my dear. You have to get ready for court and so do I.”

“I don’t wanna go. Can’t they start without me?”

“They can, but Miranda might go free.” Those words had the power to slingshot her out of bed and send her scampering into the shower for a brisk scrub and condition, then a faster and more deadly shaving of her legs.

Her risk was rewarded and soon she was stumbling out of the stall and into the embrace of

the fluffy towel held out for her by her one true love. "I love you, Bitsy. You are always there when I need you." She wrapped herself quickly and darted into the bedroom where Ruffles and Mitsy were selecting clothing and shoes for her. A smaller towel dropped on her head and after batting it away, she looked up to see Buffy smiling her toothy grin. Xander moved carefully past the gnomes and into the shower on his own. She quickly dried her body, slithered into matching undies and then worked the nylons on her legs with deliberate attention.

The skirt was a pearly gray, as was the matching jacket. The shell was a powder blue. She looked positively respectable. The pumps Mitsy selected were a charcoal gray, which brought the whole outfit together. "Good job, ladies. It is a fantastic combination." She turned left and right, admiring her reflection until Xander walked out of the bathroom wearing only a towel. "Oh, heck. I am out of here." To say that she fled was an exaggeration, but she did move swiftly, shooing the creatures in front of her, to get out of the bedroom and close the door behind her.

The dark laughter in the room made her blush.

Laura's surprised face greeted her. "You look flushed."

"Xander is having naked day."

"Ah. Have some coffee." Her lips twitched in



amusement and she poured a cup of coffee for the Nexus, winking at Verne as she handed the cup over. Seesee was fighting her own laughter as she watched Abby carefully not looking at the bedroom door.

Abby reached for the bacon again and tendrils of hair slapped the back of her hand. "More eggs, more fruit, less bacon today, Nexus."

She whined, "But I like bacon." Mumbling to herself, she spooned some scrambled eggs onto her plate and grabbed a fruit cup. The toast was handed to her and she pouted as she munched her breakfast. When a slip of bacon was dropped onto her plate, she looked up, beaming, and then laughed. Firefly was hovering above her with greasy talons. Quickly, she stuffed it into her face and the table at large laughed. She held her hand out to the gargoyle and smiled as he shuddered with the energy boost that she gave him. She put smart and sneaky into that magic and hoped it would take root.

The rest of her food went down easier with the contraband treat.

"How do they know how to do that? Do they read your mind?" Seesee looked ruefully at Firefly who was sitting with a profound look on his face.

"I guess they do. Their bodies were initially powered by my magic, so I suppose part of them still vibrates on the same level." The last scrap of

toast disappeared and she started in on the fruit.

"Does that go for all of your energy?"

"No. They kind of morph it into their own. You guys do it faster than the creatures do, but I can still see it for the first few days." Wow. The strawberries were fantastic, the melons nice and fresh and the grapes popped in her mouth. She had finished her food, gotten one more piece of gnome-snuck bacon and was sipping at her coffee when Seesee attacked. "Ow!"

"Your hair is a mess. Did you brush it at all?"

"No."

"You can't play with my nieces anymore if you are going to be like this afterward."

"Fine." She crossed her arms and let the gorgon have at her with brushes and combs. By the time Xander was dressed in some formal robes that Abby hadn't seen before and getting his own breakfast, she had been pronounced tidy and ready for her day in court. The Miranda Simmons Trial was about to begin.

As Xander finished his coffee, she had to ask Laura, "I don't remember seeing any of the Simmons family last night at the Opening."

"They are not allowed near you. It would be worth their lives to try and get close to you." Verne had his Guard face on, he jumped in to indicate that he was more than willing to kill a member of Miranda's family. Creepy, but it gave

her a warm fuzzy feeling.

Celia stood. "Nexus, it is time to go."

Abby stood and checked her suit for crumbs, clean. So far so good. "Okay, is everybody ready?" She glanced over at the table where Xander was scarfing down bacon, "Hey! Why does he get to eat unlimited bacon?"

Xander stood, brushed the grease off his hands onto a napkin and gave his Warlock robes a once over. "Because I bribed Seesee to keep you from ODing again. You got all of it yesterday." He took her by the arm and gave her a quick kiss that melted her toes inside her pointy pumps. "Behave, Abby. You promised."

"I promised to be the best Nexus I could be. I can still be a brat when my powers aren't needed." She tweaked his nipple through the robes and soared toward the door. It was show time.

"We are gathered here today to hear testimony regarding the attempt on the life of the Nexus, by Miranda Simmons." Rackonell sat on one end of the room and the Defence sat on the other. No one had been introduced, everyone seemed to know their place with the exception of Abby. Her group was seated on the northward side of the room, Miranda and her talentless guards on the far east side of the room with the defence Councillor. The judgment panel was seated on the south side of

the room and as the prosecutor, Rackonell and her crew were on the west side. The room had a balcony from which a crowd looked on.

The centre of the room had a dais, which Abby had to assume would be the spot that the witnesses stood on.

"Miranda Simmons is accused of attempting to take the life of our current Nexus, Annabeth Hanover, in two menial and one magical attacks."

The minotaur nodded. "Call your first witness." The other judges sat still and let him speak for them, though two did not look happy about it.

"I call the Nexus, Annabeth Hanover."

*Showtime.* Taking a deep breath and pushing down the frisson of magic that spilled through her, Abby walked up and, at a nod from Rackonell, took the dais. Head up, shoulders back, and spine relaxed, she tried to settle into her pointy shoes as easily as possible.

"Are you the current Nexus, Annabeth Hanover?"

"I am."

"Can you tell the court how we come to be here today?"

"The whole story?"

"Just the parts that involve Miranda Simmons's attack on your life."

Abby took a deep breath and looked back at her creatures. "I had made a habit of going into town

for coffee at Montrose's Munchies. This day my gnomes blocked the door and one ran to get Alexander Desmith from next door. One of the gnomes swallowed my car keys and then I just had to wait for Xander. When he arrived the gnomes led him to my car. He found a car bomb and levitated it from the vehicle. When it was at eye level it detonated and I caught the explosion in a ball of magic. The gnomes immediately removed the ball of power from my sight."

Rackonell looked over at Miranda. The woman looked defeated. "How do you know that it was Miranda who planted the bomb?"

"Oak Point Way is warded. Normal humans can't even see it and another magical creature could have killed me while I was out running errands." It had been true then, but now any creature attacking her would have a helluva fight on its hands. She would rip the magic from their bodies without thinking twice.

"What was the next attack on your life?"

"I was walking home from town, a small fifteen minute walk. The gnome still hadn't produced my keys, you see. A car came toward me and I stepped to the side of the road. It came straight at me and struck me head on."

"How did you survive?"

"Another barrier of magic that I produced instinctively. I flew over twenty feet and landed in

some pine trees." A few of the judges winced.

"How did you know that that attempt was Miranda?"

"It was her car. I saw the realty company bumper sticker."

"How did the Oak Point Guard react to this threat?"

"We came up with a plan to keep me guarded at all times and I abided by it." The gnomes had drugged her guards, but that didn't need to be said.

"What was her final attempt?"

"She kidnapped Xander, grabbed one of the gnomes and drained the magic from it. A nice, slow, thick trickle. The gnome carried a message for me to meet Miranda at my house and to come alone. She would kill any of my gnomes that got in between us, so I had them stay back and keep the Guard from following."

"How did they accomplish that?"

"Some mild sedatives. Nothing violent."

Rackonell raised her eyebrows. "Interesting. How did you subdue Miranda?"

"I didn't. I invited her to drain my energy." A loud gasp from the balcony caused her lips to twitch a bit.

"And?"

"She did. And that is when she blew up."

"Please explain *blew up*." The minotaur had

furrowed his brow and was looking darned scary.

"The explosion that I had frozen earlier had been buried under my begonias. The gnomes gave me a map and all I had to do was wait until she started to drain my power and then hit the dirt. The bubble gave it up easier than I did and kablooie. Begonia to the buttocks." The wave of laughter caused a flush of shame on Miranda's cheeks and Abby regretted her levity. "After that I freed Xander and the gnomes helped to carry Miranda to the rest of the Guard. Or something like that, I was a little messed up from the power drain by that point."

"Your witness." Rackonell sat and folded her hands in front of her.

The Defence Councillor was a sprite, literally. Blue hair and bright red wings on a black silk suit made quite the statement. "Nexus, did you have any discussions with Miranda about the place of magic in this world before the final day?"

She blinked. "Yes. She told me about growing up as the only non-talent in a talented family and it made me feel sad for her, and for anyone treated as a second-class citizen due to magical talent."

"So you don't agree with the Magical Council's edict on station being determined by bloodlines?"

"Um. I don't know about those edicts. I only know that a person's position should be determined by deed, not by who their parents are.

The greatest person could have a brat for a child who does not deserve the accolades that are heaped on them. And the most humble of persons could bring a fantastic child into the world who is destined for greatness. If you don't acknowledge talent when it shows itself, you are shooting yourself in the foot."

"So you have contempt for magic and the ways of the council?"

"I don't know enough about anything to have contempt for it." She kept her stance relaxed. "I have been aware of my talent for less than half a year. The people and creatures that make up my Guard have my unswerving loyalty and I have theirs. As I learn more, my feelings toward the Council might change, but I will need to continue my education, as does everyone here. The world changes and you have to change with it."

"Wise words, wise words. What would you recommend as a sentence for Miranda?" The delicate sprite turned her back on Abby and she just knew she was setting her up.

"I don't know enough about the penalties offered by this court to suggest one."

"What if she was in the regular human world?"

"I would be in favour of counselling and prolonged incarceration."

"Not death."

"No. Not death. There should be something



else on offer." Abby shrugged. "Death is too easy, too final for this situation." Her own mind began to mull over the options.

"You may be seated, Nexus. Thank you for your participation."

That was it? Huh. She nodded cordially to the judges and stepped from the dais. As she turned to return to her seat, she took in the full scope of the balcony above her table. Everyone who didn't have something better to do was up there. The white on white of Raven caught her eye and the midwife gave her a thumbs up.

She sat in her chair at the centre of the table and was soothed by the press of the gnomes around her legs. Even Harby's wandering hand up her skirt couldn't dampen her relief at being surrounded by her creatures. Buffy and Angel sat on the back of her chair while Firefly perched on Xander's.

"The court calls Alexander Desmith, Safety Warlock."

Xander squeezed Abby's hand and stood to take his own turn at being questioned. Rackonell kept her questions to his part in the explosions and the car bomb. He kept his answers short.

When the sprite took her turn, she kept the questions focussed on Xander's and Miranda's relationship. With his declaration of love still soft in her ears, Abby kept her calm throughout the

questions. She kept her magic tight inside her and even when the sprite took shots at Abby and Xander, she kept her cool.

"Abby was always my destiny."

"Really? Why did you spend time with Miranda then?"

"I thought that the time of the Nexus was further away. At least a year. Miranda was fun to be with, but the second that I saw Abby, I knew she was the one."

"How did you know this?"

"A seer told me."

"Really? A seer? Which one?"

"My Great Great Great Grandmother." Xander's voice was firm and a gasp from the audience spread in a wave.

The sprite stopped in place at that and looked Xander in the eye, then nodded. "No further questions."

The minotaur stood and announced, "We have heard enough today. Tomorrow morning we will reconvene to continue the trial. Enjoy the rest of your day." His fist struck the table and just like that, they were free to leave.

Miranda left in chains and under heavy guard, the judges stayed and discussed what they had heard so Abby shrugged and made for her exit. "Celia, what is next on the agenda?"

"Lunch. And then you have to attend the first

of the panels. *Being a Nexus in the Modern Age.*" Celia bustled behind her.

"Do we have time to look into the Dealers' area?" Abby was almost jumping up and down with the possibilities. "Please?"

"We can grab some lunch in the kiosks there. I will let you know when we have to leave, Nexus." Celia steered her to the elevators and they waited with some of the observers from the courtroom. They whispered behind their hands and looked from her to her creatures.

"Do you have any questions? I can answer them better when I can hear them."

They blushed and scurried away. It was something to behold, the ivory elf's hair turned a flushed fuschia as she turned away and her companion turned a sickly green.

"You may want to curtail your comments," Celia muttered it in a sotto voice. "Some are more sensitive than others."

"Fine. But I hate all the pointing and staring." Abby grumbled and flexed her hands in frustration.

"It will ease as they get used to seeing a Nexus among them. We have only heard about your talent in stories, you know. Few creatures here have even *seen* one of your kind before and *none* have interacted with one casually."

Xander held tightly to her hand and smiled

down at her. "It is why they came up with the experiment of your Guard. If we can keep you safe, then you can remain at large."

"Are you calling me large?" she quipped. Nothing could jog her out of a bad mood better than Xander smiling at her.

"Never in a million years would I be so foolish. Let's have at the Dealers' tables, shall we? I'll get you something pretty." He tucked her under his arm as they walked to the elevator, no longer Guard and Nexus, but two people in love.

The crowd parted when they approached and a few souls bowed. "Thank you. Please rise." She smiled gently at the people near her as they commandeered the box and the doors closed. She snuggled against her honey while they waited to reach the third floor. She was almost bouncing with anticipation again by the time the doors opened. She squealed and would have darted forward, but Mr. Spoilsport held her back until Laura and Seesee could clear the space outside the elevator for her.

"The Dealers are arranged in a decreasing spiral. You start on your left and spiral inward, then do the same on the way out. That way you see everything." Celia smiled as she gave Abby this information, but the Nexus had one thing on her mind.

"Where are the food dealers?" Something

smelled wonderful and she wanted it, now.

"I will bring you something."

"No. I think I want to pick it out myself."

Celia shrugged and gestured to her right. The wall extended farther than it should have and each foot of space was covered with something delicious. Even the creepy looking stuff smelled good.

"That looks good, what is it?" she asked the question of a vendor who looked scared stiff at her entourage. The pastries were delicate, fluffy and covered with lovely designs.

"Meat pies. My own special recipe."

She turned to Celia. "Can I eat that?"

"Yes, Nexus. It uses standard human acceptable ingredients."

"I would like one please, any of you hungry?" Verne and Xander opted for one each as well. "How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing, Nexus. Your patronage is very welcome."

Harby tugged at her skirt and she looked at him. He handed her one of the glass beads. "I take nothing for free. Will you accept this in payment?" She extended her hand with the bead in it and the instant that the vendor touched it, his face lit up.

"Yes, Nexus. Very generous. You can eat free here for the whole Summit for this." He was bowing and rubbing at the stone, revelling in the

magic pouring out of the small bead.

She munched at the meat pie and smiled. It was really very good, well worth the fuss. "Hey, guys, do you have any more of those larger ones?"

Three small hands produced about a dozen of the beads and she tucked them into her suit pockets. "Thank you. Now I don't feel so broke." The happy little faces nodded and scampered off into the crowd.

The lemonade vendor took some convincing to take the magic as she wanted to give the Nexus and Guard free beverages all weekend. Although Abby was tempted, she pressed the magic bead into the woman's hand. "Take it, as a favour to me. This is perhaps my one chance to choose who receives the magic, let me have my choice." That convinced her.

A strawberry tart called her name, literally, as she passed, "Abby Hanover, eat me!"

"Nice trick, when does it stop talking? I don't think I am supposed to eat any enchanted food." The vendor had the same pale and pasty look as the pie man.

"The magic is minor and breaks down immediately. Would you like one, on the house that is?"

Abby thought about it. For what she was about to do, she wanted a freebie. "Yes please." She held out her hand and felt the magic in the tart before it

reached her. She separated the magic from the food and watched closely. The berries were still berries but the buzz of magic was now in the silver foil of the shell. Abby leaned down to scarf it and that is when the full impact of what she had done hit her. She had drained an object for the purpose of eating. That couldn't be right. Could it?

The tart was delicious, cream under the fresh fruit and a crisp shell of pastry holding it all together. She passed the man a magical bead. "Take this for your very tasty work. They already speak for themselves, don't make them talk."

"Yes, Nexus. Have a wonderful time at the Summit, Nexus."

With a wave and a grin, they were off. She skipped all of the goblin food, all the troll food, and anything else that smelled good but was wiggling.

"Okay. I am done for now. Let's shop." Laura grabbed some vegetable pies for herself as they left, eating as they walked. Not the most efficient Guard, but Seesee's hair did a good job of keeping the crowds back.

Not that anyone tried to get to close, except for the kids. The kids came right up to her. She wished that she had more of the bead strands that she had given to the Montrose girls the night before with her at that moment. She glanced up and looked to Firefly. He nodded and flew out of

the Dealers' area without a backward glance. "Come back and say hello to me in ten minutes. I will have something for you then." The little pinched faces looked disappointed, but they nodded earnestly.

The first few booths of the spiral were collectibles and jewellery, items to commemorate the event. Clothing was next, t-shirts hung next to tunics. Gowns next to robes. The mix of the modern and ancient was so matter-of-fact that Abby found it easy to simply look for things she liked. Firefly reappeared with two armloads of Mardi Gras beads and chirped at Abby. She held up her hands and her gargoyle dropped the strands onto her. With two arms loaded, she beckoned for the children to come back and she gave each one a strand of beads and sent them back to their astonished parents.

Abby kept the strands lined up on her left arm and whenever she saw a child, she tried to get them to come to get a present. It was a little creepy, but it worked. If the parents saw her, it worked a lot faster.

Her Guards let the little ones through and she handed them the seeds of magic, wanting them to know that it could be given from a Nexus freely, without incarceration. It was a message she wanted these children to remember when they were the elders locking up the next Nexus.



## Chapter Twelve

The *something pretty* that Xander helped her pick out was a full set of Nexus robes, and boots, oh, she loved the boots. The robes were worn over tunic and trousers, the boots laced up to her knees and hugged her calves faithfully. Her colors were the colors of her magic, a dark rainbow that flowed through the fabric through a small enchantment to show everyone what she was. Her power was on her clothing, riding her skin with every stride, and the gnomes were carrying her suit. A belt and pouch came with the tunic and that is where she stored her wealth.

"I think that vendor may never recover from seeing the fabric change like that." Abby was chuckling, but feeling very free in her new clothing.

"Normally, the robes take on a pale shadow of the magic in the user. She is going to have a tale to tell her grandchildren." He looked down at his own dark robes and thought. "Perhaps I should

get a cloak of that nature. I wonder what my true magic looks like."

Abby twirled on her newly shod feet. "It looks as good to me as the rest of you. I would have nothing different." She finished her little dance in his embrace and laid a kiss on him that defied convention.

Celia broke into her kiss with all the subtlety of a verbal fish slap. "Nexus, you will have to continue your exploration of the Dealers' floor later. It is time to get to your first panel."

"Right, *Being a Nexus in the Modern Age*. I will contain my excitement." With a few sharp tugs, she got her tunic back into straight lines. Somehow, he had managed to get his hands under it and unsnapped her bra. She was going to have to squirm or wait until she could hit a ladies room to correct the damage.

At least the outer robe covered the obvious signs of her new freedom. There was a distinctly amused twist to his lips while they headed back to the elevator. With a flick of his fingers, her bra realigned itself and the ladies were back in order.

"Oh, you are so funny, warlock."

"Oh, I know."

Her armload of beads clashed and jangled as they waited so Abby looked down to see a child tugging on her arm. "Hello, sweetie. Would you like a present?"

"Yes, please, Nexus, ma'am." The little redheaded child smiled and three of her front fangs were missing. Abby hung the beads around her neck and she immediately squealed and ran away, shrieking happily.

"Why did you give that gift to a troll?" one of the crowd waiting for the elevator yelled.

"Because she is a child and all children deserve equality. There is time enough for making them battle for their basic dignities when they are older." The words popped out of her mouth and before the crowd could rebut her, her keepers had sighed and shoved her into the elevator.

Not a word was spoken, but Abby could feel the resignation of her Guards. Her gnomes thought it was fantastic and capered wildly, which was disconcerting in the restricted space.

The eleventh floor had the conference facilities and a group was already forming outside the space where the panel was to be held. They perked up and stood from the spots on the floor where they had been seated, and at her approach, a member of the hotel staff opened the door for them.

She was marched unceremoniously through the crowd and plunked at the front of the room behind the panel table. To entertain her, her creatures took places on the table in front of her and took turns making faces at her.

The temperature of the room was cool when they arrived and warmed rapidly with the press of bodies packing into the seats. The Oak Point Guard took up protective positions around the room, but Seesee was the one who had to take point to the left of the podium. It was the only physically accessible position for anyone who wanted to attack her. The table she was on was warded and no one was getting under that table's skirt.

Celia organized the extra seating that was brought in and Abby watched it all. The room was filled to capacity and still people drifted in and tried to take a spot. Seesee's nieces were front row centre and it was all Abby could do not to wave at the cute little ladies.

An organizer who wasn't Salleth, though was clearly related somehow by the similarity of scales, glided forward. "Nexus, are you ready to begin?"

"I am if you are, but I have no idea what I am doing." She tented her fingers together and then rested her hands on the table.

"Celia will co-ordinate the questions, but this is basically a Q and A. They will quiz you on what it is like being you and you will answer." Her forked tongue flicked rapidly with agitation. She nodded to Celia and glided away.

Celia took her place behind the podium and her

voice immediately boomed into the room now holding over three hundred persons of magical descent and one human albino. Raven waved from the fourth row.

Abby waved back with a bright grin.

“Okay, ladies, gentlemen and others, welcome to the panel on being a Nexus in the modern world. There are two volunteers at the back of the room with microphones, if you raise your appendage, you will have the chance to ask the Nexus a question.”

A timid pale hand raised and soon claws, tentacles, and appendages that Abby couldn't identify launched into the air. The two volunteers were troll in nature and scuttled to pick the questioners in order of hand raised.

“First question?” Celia nodded to the owner of the pale hand, the blushing elf from the hallway outside the elevator.

“Do you like being the Nexus? Is it fun to have that much power?” The elf's hair was a delicate pink, indicating her discomfort with being the centre of attention.

Abby leaned forward. “That was two questions, but I occasionally like being the Nexus and other times I don't. Watching people point and whisper at me has been very hard. As for the power thing. It comes and goes. I like to get rid of it as fast as I can, keeping it in too long makes me feel like I am

going to be flying apart. Aside from the animation moments, it isn't too much fun." She nodded to Celia and the next question came flying. She answered them as directly as she could.

"Yes, I can have sex. But my partner has to be skilled at warding." A follow up question. "No. I am not going to tell you why." Xander was trying not to collapse with his silent laughter at the back of the room and Abby tried not to glare at him.

Next question.

"Yes, the power in the beads that I threw out at the Opening last night was generated with agitation, I was unaware you could taste the emotions. I will note that."

Next question.

"The biggest rush of magic? That would have been on the day that a car bomb went off in my face." She didn't add that the rush had occurred after she had tackled and stripped Xander, but the heat of her face might have given her away.

Next question.

"No. I didn't know that I was immune to telepathy. That is fascinating. Why are you trying?" Another pale hand went up and this time Abby sat up and leaned forward.

Raven was asking a question, "How has being involved in the magical community affected your relationships with your family and friends?"

Wow. Abby thought for a moment. "When the

magic came, it drove me out and away from my family and the home that I knew. I didn't even know that until weeks later. My relationship with my mother is as distant as it has ever been, but my friends don't return my calls, or me theirs. It just seems better for everyone that way." She sighed. "I suppose you could say that my previous life has ceased to exist, I have had to start all over. New friends, new family, new magic."

A murmur of surprise went through the crowd. Another hand went up. "Didn't you want to celebrate the new power?"

"Celebrate was not the word I would have used. My first major sign, after the gnomes, was hyper charging magic into a friend. It could have been much less forgivable if an environment hadn't been available. Control has been my goal."

"How do you keep control?"

"It takes a great deal of effort and practice is making it easier." She saw in their faces that they wanted more detail. "Breathing and concentration is key."

"What has been your greatest challenge with magic in your day to day life?" Oh, that was a good one.

"To answer that question, I will turn your attention to my three little flyers here." Firefly, Angel and Buffy ambled closer along the tabletop. "These little beasties have been on national

television and are currently starring in a number of YouTube videos. Their first outing as animated creatures took them to a local park where they raided the baseball caps off every teenage boy they could find. They apparently like the smell."

Laughter rippled through the room. "What did you do?"

"What could I do? I took pictures of them for my next book and held onto the hope that the warding would keep the reporters from Oak Point Way. I know that one day we will be outed completely, but I hope that that day is quite a while away. In the mean time, Sargent is becoming known for having strange creature sightings, including the petty theft carried out by the Gnomes. They like home and garden stores at three AM." More giggles as they had the images in their minds. When the sniggering died down, they were ready to continue.

One troll extended a trembling and clawed hand. "What can we do to make your entry into our society more easy?" More muttering followed that one. Good question.

"Be friendly and say hello. I won't recognize all faces right away, but I should gain some with time. I am horrible with names. Don't try and touch me. I am never sure if I am carrying a charge until someone touches me and we don't want me going off without warning." Laughter



followed that one. "Welcome me. I am new, I want to stay, but this is a little scary for someone who thought that werewolves only changed at the full moon." A round of laughter followed that one, a riot of giggles that let her know that her magical humour had struck the proper chord.

"How are you enjoying the Summit?"

"Parts of it are fun and parts are a pain in the ass." More laughter.

"How do you feel about partaking in sentencing a member of our community to death?" The room went still. A woman was standing at the back and had shouted the question.

Abby looked at her carefully. The hair and build were Miranda's, but the eyes were bright green venom.

"A member of the Simmons's I presume?"

"You presume correctly."

"Then why are you taking shots at me?"

"I thought you were supposed to answer our questions, not the other way around."

"Fine. I am here for the trial of someone who tried to kill me three times. Luck and instinct is all that kept me from being the one with the death sentence."

"You were in no danger."

"I beg to differ. She was striking before I had control. From what I have read, new Nexuses are

very easy to kill." She sipped at water that Harby brought to her. "In fact, few Nexuses have lasted after their powers manifest for more than ten years. The danger was real. The car that struck me was real and so was the bomb that blew up in my face."

"And you were in danger from a powerless human woman? I can hardly believe that."

"I *was* a powerless human woman most of the time. And Miranda has a talent all her own. You were just too stupid to see it." Abby was calm. She had known that Miranda's family would be here, it was to be expected that they would defend their family honour.

The woman gaped at her for a moment and then burst out of the room. Seesee looked impressed and the rest of the room started to clap. The applause swelled into a roar and soon the room was standing.

Abby blushed.

Celia nodded to the Guard and the doors were propped open again. "I would like to thank everyone for coming and please join us tomorrow for *Creating magic out of nothing* and the back to back panel *Why gnomes, the Nexus tells all*. Thank you again." She bowed formally and the nodding and laughing group started to flow out of the room.

Abby remained behind, as if her creatures

would let her go anywhere before Xander had given them the okay. It took longer for the crowd to disperse as many insisted that they come and greet the Nexus properly. Blinking at the friendly outpouring, she stood through rounds of people complimenting her magic colours and the strength of the pattern. Only a few tried to grab at her hands and those few found out that the gargoyles' teeth were not for decoration.

She apologized sincerely for the bites, but it was unnecessary as the other fans pushed them aside and chided them for trying to steal magic. Abby filed that one away.

Finally, she was allowed to leave, surrounded by her friends and creatures. She wanted nothing more than another one of those meat pies from the Dealers' Room, but she was thwarted.

Celia consulted her PDA and announced, "You now have the meeting between the mer-folk and Verne's pack."

Stifling a curse, she nodded and followed Celia and her crew to one of the meeting rooms on the eleventh floor. "I thought that the meeting rooms would be more businesslike than your private rooms."

"Good call." Abby murmured out of the corner of her mouth.

The two involved parties were already there, Avenilia drumming her fingers on the table while

the pack master sat with the stillness of a predator.

"Avenilia, Pack Master. Nice to see you again."

"Kevin. Please." He nodded his head gracefully. "We have considered your suggestions most carefully."

Abby pulled up a chair and faced the two. "Celia, please stay and take notes, the rest of you can either wait outside or run off for dinner."

Laura and Verne looked as if they wanted to speak, but at a stern look from Seesee, they left the room.

"I will wait outside, Nexus."

"Thank you, Xander." She smiled and looked to the two ambassadors for the very different races. "Now, about the fate of Lorifinialwen and Verne Fisher, what have you concluded?"

Kevin nodded for Avenilia to go first.

"I have been in communication with our Matriarch and she agrees that it is best for all concerned if Lorifinialwen is allowed to choose her mate from the other Nexus Guards."

"Very wise. My compliments to your Matriarch." Abby inclined her head with respect. "Whatever I can do in the future for her, she need only let me know."

"I will pass that information to her. She is grateful for your interest in her descendant's well being." Avenilia bowed from the waist, a tricky manoeuvre in the corseted gown that she was

wearing, but a lovely event nonetheless.

"And you, Kevin? What decision have you come to?" She looked over to the sombre representative of Verne's wolf clan.

"I convened a council after we spoke, discussed the matter with other pack masters and talked to Avenilia and I have some concerns." He seemed sincere.

"Name them."

"Offspring. Avenilia has told me of their need for immersion until they can shift from tail to legs."

"If this occurs, Laura and the infant will be transported to her family and Verne will visit several times a year at the creche where the child is, and with Laura, of course. When the child is old enough to shift, she and the offspring can return to Oak Point Way and the position of guard will be held for her until she chooses to retake it. Verne will remain at his post until he is relieved by another member of his pack for those times when he is visiting his family."

"You would make these commitments for them?"

"They already have. We discussed possibilities weeks ago. After they are wed, they will move to Laura's home, as she requires the pool and he does not care."

"I have not yet been satisfied. What if the child

is wolf at birth?"

"Then it will be raised by pack mores and trained to be the best little fur baby it can be."

He blinked in surprise at her ready answer. "Can we submit more wolves for your Guard after they are wed?"

He said it. *After they were wed.* Laura and Verne had won. "Indeed. I have found Verne to be a steady and stable member of the Guard and would welcome another from his pack when the time comes." Despite the fact that Verne had almost torn her throat out, twice, she was fond of him. He was completely serious and very devoted to honour and to Laura. Who could ask for more? "What do you wish in return, Pack Master?" This was the formal trade for their participation.

"Nothing but your goodwill, Nexus. But allowing some of our younger members to come to you to receive your blessing would be an excellent gesture."

"My blessing?"

Kevin smiled grimly. "When our youngest members come to the moment of shifting, it has become a growing trend that they have insufficient power to make the change. I do believe that your blessings may help that transformation."

"What happens if they are unable to shift?"

"Some die, some live half lives always seeing

what is not to be theirs. There is a high rate of suicide amongst those who cannot change."

"Send them to me. I will see what I can do."

Kevin smiled broadly and held out his hand. "Then we have a deal. Verne has the right and ability to propose to Laura and their children shall have full pack status."

Abby shook his hand and let a trickle of power through, but not enough to cause his shift. Power control was coming more easily to her. "I thank you for your co-operation. You both have made two people very happy."

Avenilia held out her hand with a furrowed brow. "We do not normally touch, but if this is a standard custom."

Abby stood and closed her fingers over the offered hand and sent the same gentle pulse of power that she had given Kevin. The mermaid looked brighter and more alert instantly.

"It symbolizes coming to accord. The hands shake and we are equals in the bargaining." Abby smiled. "Thank you both." She bowed from the waist and nodded to Celia. "Well, I think that my wrangler has an additional thousand people who want to meet, grope, or make fun of me. I had better be going."

"Oh, but you will be coming to the werewolf games, won't you? There is a special seat reserved."

She looked over at Celia who nodded. "Apparently it's on my agenda, so see you there."

Kevin grinned and kissed her hand. "I look forward to fighting for the honour of the Nexus."



## *Chapter Thirteen*

Dinner was on the twelfth floor and though Abby wanted to take the stairs, she was herded to the elevators once again. Her friends surrounded her and she relaxed for the first time that day as they talked, bickered and had occasional moments of flying vegetables. No one mentioned the meeting with the pack master and Avenilia and she didn't bring it up. It would be announced at the werewolf games.

The gnomes and gargoyles were at the kids' tables that the harried restaurant staff had set up for them.

"So, Celia, how are you enjoying your stint as my wrangler?" All eyes turned to the delicate elf.

"You are certainly a challenge. Are you always this moody?"

Abby felt her eyes crinkling. "No. Normally I have outlets for my mood and the extra power that I have to carry here."

"Oh. I am sorry. I didn't realize."

"There is no reason that you should."

"Yes there is, I am a seer." She sighed and picked at her chicken fingers. "I know what it is like to be stopped from using your talent by geography."

"So you really see the future?"

"No. Not for everything. I only see love and children. It's a pretty easy gig for a Seer, but does not let me get out much as it would if I saw death or disaster."

Abby thought about that for a minute. "So you are kept or restricted somewhere?"

"At the Seer's Guildhall. I can go out with family, but other than that, I have to stay in the hall."

"Wow. That sucks. Can you come up and visit me after this is all over?" Abby's voice sounded so wistful that she was ashamed of herself.

"I can put it to the Guildmaster. They will probably let me come."

Xander barked a laugh. "Seeing as her mother is the Guildmaster, it is likely she can come up for a visit."

"Xander, you promised you wouldn't say anything."

"And you promised that you wouldn't play the poor-me-I-am-a-seer-trapped-in-a-tower game. You lied, so I lied." He stretched and leaned back, putting his arm around Abby's shoulders.

She had an incredibly normal feeling for just a moment. Out for dinner with friends and talking to Celia, it seemed to her to be the epitome of normality.

Verne looked at his watch and sighed. "I have to go and prepare for the games."

"See you there!" Abby waved brightly.

"You are coming?" He looked a little shocked. "It will be a little violent."

"I have been invited, so I will go. We will see you there." She had to put on a Nexus voice, but everyone around her simply nodded in acquiescence. She turned to Laura. "So what does he have to do to get ready for the games?"

"He has to change into leather that has been enchanted to shift and is embroidered with his pack's crest. Then he has to go down to greet his pack and no, Seesee, they don't sniff each other's butts."

The table burst into laughter and then Laura sobered. "At least I don't think they do." They were still laughing when the waitress came with the check and Abby signed it to her room, making the poor woman turn several shades of aqua.

"Nexus? You are the Nexus? Oh, please pardon me for any offence that I may have given."

"You did fine. See? I put a tip on the bill." She was trying to calm the young lady, but the more that the woman got agitated, the more her horns

started to sprout.

Ah. Half-demon. Abby touched her hand and sent a little dose of magic into the woman. "Be calm, everything was fine. You have done your lineage proud."

The snivelling ceased and she got control over her emotions. "Thank you, Nexus. It has been an honour to serve you."

With a quick gesture, Abby signalled her group to rise and they formed an organized herd on their way out of the restaurant. The gnomes and gargoyles left a trail of French fries so they could find the way back to the food later. And laughing at their antics, Abby hit the button for the elevator without thinking. Nothing happened. Normally she would have felt the magic leave her in a rush, but the hotel wasn't accepting her magic.

Curious. This needed in depth study.

Celia checked her PDA. "Time to get going to the werewolf games." This time in the elevator, they went down to the main floor. Time to see a bunch of hairballs fight for supremacy.

Instead of going out through the main doors, they headed for the back of the hotel. Signs were up with arrows to lead the spectators out into the gardens where the event was taking place.

They walked into the green space filled with bleachers and simply stopped. It had the feel of a

gladiatorial arena with over a thousand people milling around in the stands. Abby wasn't sure where to go, when Lath spotted their group and came forward.

"Nexus. So glad you could make it. Your seats are over here." He led them through the crowds, snarling to get people to move out of their way and soon they were seated in a private box, elevated off the main grounds, but separated from the throng.

"Thank you for your assistance, Lath. It is much appreciated."

"Any friend of the pack deserves courtesy." He bowed and left.

Abby tried not to watch him go, but that tight butt wrapped in black leather was far too tempting. Xander cleared his throat next to her and she shrugged helplessly. "I couldn't help it."

"I will remind you of this if you ever catch me looking at the sirens." He wasn't mad, but his lips had a resigned twist to them.

She leaned over to whisper in his ear. "I promise, if you ever wear tight black leather, or even damp denim, I will be on you like white on rice."

He turned his head and his breath heated her hair and neck, "Promises, promises."

"You betcha." She giggled as she leaned back to trail her fingertips down his cheek. "Just you, me,

the gnomes over with Seesee. And a power shock to be heard around the world. I promise to control the couch this time."

He took in a shuddering breath and his eyes glowed with promise. "I am going to hold you to that."

"You can hold me any time you want to." The challenge in her tone was unmistakable. So she had to laugh as Seesee's hair kept Xander pinned to his chair and off the Nexus. "But perhaps this isn't the time." Abby looked to her left and saw the pensive look on Laura's face. She was going to whisper words of comfort, but a raucous howling started on the field and all eyes were on the wolves. Well, the men. They were doing the howling. No shifted wolfs yet.

"Welcome one and all to the Werewolf Games. We have several games this year, but as a new twist this year, each wolf will choose a lady to fight for and if he is successful in his attempts to win her favour, she will reward him with a kiss. The lady chosen is asked to give the wolf a favour to carry as he competes." The crowd hooted their approval and at some silent signal, the wolves scattered throughout the group and selected their females.

Verne knelt at Laura's feet and she allowed him to take her hand as she removed one of her shell earrings and handed it to him. He kissed it and

tucked it into his pocket.

Abby was so busy watching them that she didn't notice the wolf approaching her. When Kevin knelt at her feet, she could feel the hostility radiating from Xander.

"Will you do the honour of allowing me to compete for your honour?"

"I suppose so, Pack Master." Frantically she ran through the items on her person that were available to give him as a token. A smile broke over her features as she reached into the pouch at her waist and withdrew a bead. As she handed it to him, she pulled the power out of the stone and back into the vast collection that she couldn't free. It was merely a glass pebble, no magic to boost his performance and his rueful grin said he knew it the instant he touched it.

"Thank you, Nexus. I shall win the day for you."

"I shall look forward to it, Pack Master."

He bowed and then rose to his feet, bounding across the field to the group of men gathering for the first event. A new announcer took up the position at the mic.

"The first competition, a relay of pack members. This event stresses speed of shifting and running. The first member of each pack must shift, run the length of the course and back, shift and tag off to the next member." As he spoke, the crowd

of men split into eight groups, each facing the far end of the course, and one member in front. There were six men in each group, the rest of the pack members standing back. "The event starts...now!"

Abby had never really watched Verne shift before, but with all of the wolves shifting at the same time, it was hard not to stare. The skin of their faces expanded as the bones shifted and contorted, the clothing melted back as fur surged forward and soon they were racing down the course on all fours.

Verne's pack was second off the mark and returning for the tag off, but their second shifter was faster and on the ground running seconds after being tagged. Abby and Laura were both leaning forward to watch Verne's pack take first place, but the third shifter was slower than the others and they fell behind.

The last three members of the pack had the race in their hands. Paws. Whatever. When the wolf shifted painfully slowly and tagged Verne up, he shifted in a blinding blur and bolted down the course as if his life depended on it. He was back to tag Lath off in short order and his pack was back in the running for first place.

Lath showed his station with a quick shift and a speeded round, returning to his pack master as first of the fifth round. Kevin's speed was impressive as was his form of a great grey and



silver wolf. With the crowd on its feet, screaming in excitement as the race drew closer to conclusion, Abby found herself holding her breath. It was just the frenzy of the race, she knew it, but it was contagious.

Kevin and the nearest wolf skidded across the finish line less than a second apart. The crowd was on its feet, shrieking with excitement as the judges deliberated, calling the two pack masters over. The broader man next to Kevin was arguing with the judges, waving his hand over toward where Abby was seated. Uh-oh.

In a move that surprised Abby, one of the judges came across to speak to her. He bowed formally and then looked over at her, "Nexus. I give you greetings from the packs."

"I accept the greetings."

"We have a slight problem. Anthony claims that your gift to Kevin contained magic, which aided his completion of the game in first place."

"Ah. I did not give Kevin magic." She smiled.

"How can we be sure?"

"Would you give magic out as a favour with your mate sitting next to you and able to see it?" She snorted, "I would not."

The judge looked over to Xander. "Is this true?"

"That you insult the word of the Nexus by not taking her at her word? Or that she and I are mates? That last is true."

Something about werewolves made all speech so formal, unless he was cussing you out for locking his girlfriend into her tail.

The judge paled as he realized that he had basically called Abby a liar. "My apologies, Nexus." He bowed low and walked back to the table where the others were gathered.

"From what I saw, they were less than a second apart. It was a fair race." She shrugged off the apology and turned to look for her gnomes. "Guys, why don't you take off for the night. Have fun, go shopping, but keep the larceny to a minimum, please."

Scampering across the empty course, the gnomes capered in delight with the gargoyles soaring over them. It was nice to see them out in public without worrying about camera phones.

"We are pleased to announce that the winner of the relay is the Silver Path Pack. By less than two seconds, the Argent Howl Pack takes second place, with the Onyx Run Pack taking third. These three packs will take part in the five-minute melee. This event will conclude the honour bearing portions of the games, with smaller events for the other packs to be held long into the night."

A wave of oohs and aahs ran through the assembled fans. Now the pack teams were increased to sets of twelve. Miklos arrived and kissed Seesee on the cheek as he took his position

behind Abby.

"What kept you?" Seesee was murmuring, but it was loud enough for Abby to eavesdrop.

"Gregori and Max were fighting about policy and they decided to settle it with arm wrestling. I was the judge."

"Who won?"

"I am pretty sure Max did. She leaned over and planted a kiss on Gregori that almost got his heart beating again." He was laughing as he said it.

Abby was going to ask about the Abomination title that Max wore, but a horn blew and it was time to watch the werewolves struggle for dominance. What fun.

The three packs were facing each other and at the signal, they lunged forward, shifting as quickly as they could. They had five minutes to inflict as much damage as they could and shift back to their human forms within thirty seconds after the final horn.

Telling who was who in the snarling pile of fur and fang was not something Abby was able to do, but Laura could spot her honey in the dark. She gripped Abby's hand and every time he was struck, she squeezed.

Amongst the flashing of teeth and claw, the occasional human form would emerge and be dragged off by medical teams. Abby looked more closely and saw that a barrier was around the

fighters and anyone who gave up only had to stick any appendage beyond it. It was a safe way for the medics to pull the injured away from the action without getting into it themselves.

The grass had turned into a combination of mud and blood. A wicked churn that sent a shudder down Abby's skin. Half of the combatants had been dragged free and now the last of the wolves writhed together with jaws snapping at bone crunching force.

When the horn sounded to end the fight, most of the wolves rolled apart and started the shift process. Nothing was done to stop the fighters, but Abby saw Verne take shape almost immediately. Laura breathed a sigh of relief at her side and relaxed her grip on Abby's bruised hand. Shaking her hand to get the blood flowing again, she kept her eyes on the fighters. Kevin and Lath had reappeared as well as two of the others from their pack. A sharp bark from Kevin and two of the still fighting wolves separated and shifted. That was the moment that the second horn blew.

Six figures were still locked in their wolf forms, struggling to become human before collapsing on the ground in exhaustion. The judges came and did a count and assessment. Based on some gestures and held up fingers, there was a point system. One point for each fully transformed pack member and one point deducted for each member

still in the circle but unable to change. That one confused her.

"So why do they deduct points for those unable to change?" she whispered it to Xander.

He whispered back, "Because they should have left the battle rather than endanger the win of the pack. Their inability to shift indicates they are exhausted. In a real fight, that would cause their pack to waste resources defending them."

"Oh. That makes some sense."

The judges held up their hands for silence. "The Silver Path is again victorious and this year's games champions."

Kevin's chest was heaving with an effort to get his breath back, but he stepped forward and raised his hands to still the cheers of the crowd. "It is my great pleasure to announce the authorization for Verne Fisher of the Silver Path to wed the Nexus Guard and mer-woman, Lorifinialwen." The crowd stayed silent.

Laura looked happy and mortified at the same time.

Abby cleared her throat and started clapping. Soon the whole arena was applauding the arrangement and Verne was kneeling in front of Laura. Tears welled in Abby's eyes as she watched Verne propose. Xander took her hand tightly as she sniffled, watching the wolf ask Laura if she would share his life with him for as long as he

lived, because she would outlive him by centuries. She nodded yes and then he slipped a ring on her finger. The crowd went wild. This time, the excitement was genuine. An image of their celebratory kiss was hovering over the centre of arena. Xander's magic was flowing freely, so Abby held his hand to top him up.

Kevin was smiling at how things had turned out, so with a crook of her fingers, Abby beckoned him to her. He moved gracefully toward her and she let go of Xander's hand. "I believe for upholding my honour, you get a kiss?" She glanced over to where Verne and Laura were just shy of peeling their clothing off. "A chaste kiss."

"Appreciated, my lady." He leaned forward.

She met him halfway, curving her hand around his neck, but then missing his lips and pressing her mouth to his ear. "I am about to give you some magic and it would be a great favour to me if you would use it to help the stuck shifters." He nodded slightly and trembled in anticipation. She brought her head back and planted one on his mouth, parting his lips and breathing magic into him.

When she pulled back, his eyes were glowing. He bowed formally and walked across the combat area to speak to the other pack masters. One shook his head, but the other looked thoughtful and called his wolves to him. One by one, Kevin

touched their heads and they shifted back to human form. The other wolves who were stuck on four feet whined at their pack master, but he refused. Said they needed to learn stamina.

Kevin's two men were the last transformed. They stood, shook their heads and then pressed their foreheads to the back of Kevin's wrist.

"So you transferred your power to him?" Xander's face had gone dark since the kiss and he looked a little less ticked now that he had seen what the power was used for.

"Just enough so that he could make a magnanimous gesture to the other packs. I had to prove the perks of giving in to my whims."

He sat there for a moment, this man that she loved, before he burst out laughing. "You are getting devious, lover." He hugged her to him with one arm. "I like it."

"Great, because I am evolving and most of the time it hurts like hell. Knowing that you love me is taking the sting away." She nuzzled at his neck and breathed deep. Kevin had smelled wild, but like a running jump over a waterfall wild. Xander was the scent of dancing naked on a moonlit night, he was just right. And as soon as she got him back to her rooms, she was going to show him just how appreciated he was.

## Chapter Fourteen

Harbinger took the lead, the Nexus was in good hands and this place was fascinating. So many sights sounds and smells, as well as the building soaked in ancient magic. Bitsy and the others followed, chortling with delight at the strange creatures who paid them deference as creations of the Nexus. It was heady stuff.

"Bitsy, how many of the beads do you still carry with you?"

He did a quick count and grinned. "Over forty, Harbinger. Why do you ask?"

"The first shopping trip was for us, this one is for the Nexus. If you hadn't noticed, her schedule is going to keep her from shopping on her own. We know all of her sizes so we will make purchases that she will enjoy. As we all know, a happy Nexus is a powerful Nexus." The others nodded in unison and even Bitsy could see the logic in the expedition.

Their first shopping trip had led them to



discover that each drop of glass imbued with magic was worth approximately a hundred dollars in trade. This was going to be fun.

“Ruffles, make us a sign that indicates the purchases are for the Nexus, as these beings do not seem to be able to understand us yet.” Bitsy was the master of the practical application, it was his pride and joy to be able to anticipate the needs of the world. “Buffy, can you obtain paper and a pen from the front desk, my dear?”

“Of course, Bits.” Her gentle tone wafted over his ears. He loved her voice, had loved it since the day it developed. Angel and Firefly looked at him a little oddly when he spent time with the only female gargoyle, but she was his favourite creature to spend time with. He did it every chance he got, even to the point of pulling guard duty with her. She flapped away with a sassy swish in her tail and he got an eyeful as she flew past him. He sighed happily.

By the time they had made it to the elevators, she was back and giving the implements to their ballerina. The hotel staff was being exceptionally gracious with their assistance, they didn’t even mind the constant goblin porn that the gnomes were having piped into their private rooms.

Not that the goblin porn wasn’t fascinating, but it was far better to let the others watch while he and Buffy had a little necking session out on the

deck.

Angel pushed the button when they got into the elevator and soon they were disembarking onto the Dealers' Room floor. Bitsy moved up next to Harbinger and asked, "What do we buy her?"

"Jewellery, clothing, comfortable things, pretty things." Harby nodded as if it was all settled.

Bitsy turned to the rest of the group. "Alright, we are looking for clothing, jewellery, pretty items that the Nexus may enjoy. Perhaps some new fabric for a new creation? She has been drawing a lot lately." They nodded and the gargoyles flew reconnaissance while the gnomes took the ground. With most of the shoppers at the Wolf Games, there was plenty of space and time for them to look around. So, off they went shopping.

There would be a ball later in the week, so a ball gown was at the top of the list. That would mean that they needed matching with jewellery, but the gown had to come first. With their plan described to them all, they proceeded with their task to get their mistress a proper gown.

The first kiosk that Splint stopped at had gowns, but only if you had multiple appendages. They kept looking. Deeper and deeper into the spiral they went, looking at fabric, gems and items that the Nexus would find useful.

"I have one! It's lovely." Mitsy was hopping up and down as she tried to get their attention. When

two of them had followed her, she ran rapidly down the aisle to a kiosk being run by a spider goblin.

"This is Mistress Galfor and she has the most amazing clothing. I am sure that the Nexus will be pleased." Dressmaker's dummies stood wearing clothing that was fantastical by its very existence. As a spider goblin, each of her gowns was made from her own silk. She had clothing from the most delicate wisp of lingerie to the most elaborate of beaded gowns.

When all of the gnomes were at the kiosk, they started to shop. One of the gowns had the colour of flames, another the colour and the glitter of stars. It was a hard decision. The note pad came out and Bitsy queried the goblin, *How much for both?*

"I am afraid that it wouldn't fit any of you, but thank you for your interest." She smiled gently down at them, her pointed teeth only mildly exposed when she gave them their gentle brush off.

*For the Nexus.* He jotted down Abby's measurements and handed them to the seamstress.

"The Nexus? Really?"

*We are her creatures. Check with the front desk. Or ask Salleth.*

"Those gowns are expensive, little ones. Do you

have money?"

Bitsy dug in his pouch to grab a few stones. He placed them on the counter and wrote, *Pay with magic, okay?* He shoved one of the stones at her and she touched it with a wondering finger.

"You aren't joking? You really are the creatures of the new Nexus?" She was shaking with wonder, her four arms hugging themselves in shock.

As one, all nine of them nodded.

"Right. Then which dresses did you want?" She followed them to the gowns that they had selected and on the tablet computer that she was working on, brought up a scan of the Nexus. She compared the notes on her measurements to the pictures on her screen and nodded.

"I have seen her shifting robes and her magic is very vibrant. Perhaps this gown would be better suited." From the back, Mistress Galfor brought forth a gown that took their breath away. Abby had to have it.

*How much?*

"For the Nexus, with my compliments. I will just box it up." She moved swiftly and wrapped it in tissue, stuffing the bodice so that it didn't lose shape. It was the same dark rainbow as the Nexus' magic. "I made it with her in mind, the dyes just came to me as I worked. I would be so pleased if she could send me an email after the Summit to let

me know if she enjoyed it."

*She will. She is extremely courteous and polite. Do you know where we may find a matching wrap for it? We live in Canada.*

"I believe that I have just the thing. A nice iridescent shawl. It will be lovely with the gown."

*That, we will pay for.*

"Fine. Two hundred." She smiled and crossed her arms, all of them.

Bitsy handed her two of the magical stones.

Galfor grinned and accepted them. "A pleasure doing business with you, creatures of the Nexus."

They bowed as one, then continued on their shopping trip. Mitsy looked over at the table and got excited "Look. Lengths of silk that would be perfect for her new designs. We need these."

*How much for the fabric on the table?*

"You can take the lot for one hundred." She smiled as another bead of magic sailed her way.

Laden with gowns and fabric, they tramped out of the Dealers' area to drop the gown and shawl in the Nexus' room and the fabric in theirs. Then they went back to the Dealers' Room.

On the way up, they shared an elevator with Stu, the troll bellboy. He was off duty and asked them, "Hey, little dudes. Can I hang with you?"

Bitsy looked at his strong arms and greater height and smiled. *Yes. We are shopping for the Nexus. You can be our translator.*

"Cool. I am so impressed. You have much nicer

handwriting than I do." He smiled at them and it was terrifying. "Sure. I can even carry all the stuff for you. It must get hard to do."

They nodded back at him. As soon as they went back to the area where the gown had been found, they started to look for matching jewellery.

Mitsy had made a run back to their quarters when they dropped off the fabric and she was now sporting more cash than Bitsy. She went back to Galfor's booth and pointed to the flame coloured gown and another in an ocean blue. Then she held out the beads and let the goblin name her price.

Fifteen beads was the price, but Stu carried the boxes for her and Mitsy was off and running. Soon the other gnomes gravitated to follow as she seemed to have the shopping gene. Bitsy was shocked. She could find the one exquisite piece of jewellery in a boring display without any effort. He simply stood by and handed out the money. The boxes that Stu carried built up exponentially, but each one was carefully selected.

The Nexus need never know that the lingerie was selected by Harbinger, or that her shoes were first tried on by Skint. Bolts of fabric were selected by Splint and danced on by Ruffles. It was a group effort to make sure that the Nexus had good memories of this trip, even if she couldn't be there herself.

The boys even restrained themselves with the fireworks that they purchased to light in the Nexus' back yard. They kept it down to a count of fifty and the seller guaranteed them to be invisible to Customs.

Whatever Customs was.

Triumphant and finally out of beads, they trooped back to the fifteenth floor with Stu in tow. He was trembling with the honour bestowed upon him and quickly and efficiently delivered everything to Bitsy's room. They hugged his legs in gratitude and he laughed and lumbered off.

Using the master key that she had collected, Buffy opened first Laura's door and then Seesee's. They were the recipients of the flame and ocean gowns. That way, when they all attended the ball the next night, they would match. Mitsy was forward thinking.

The jewellery and other accessories, they laid out in the Nexus' conversation area. She and the warlock were busy if the noise from the other side of the bedroom door was any indication and they didn't want to disturb her.

She would see her gifts in the morning and they had the satisfaction of a job well done. Time to get some more of that goblin porn. They really could bend in astonishing ways.

## Chapter Fifteen

Abby was up and running before Celia had gotten up the nerve to wake her. She was sitting at the desk in the room, making notes about the agreements she had started at the Summit so that she would not make any faux pas in the future. She also wanted to remember everything for the Nexus chronicle when she got home. The book was currently high in the oak tree in her yard, inside the nest Buffy had started building. The safest place that Abby could think of.

At Celia's timid knock, she opened the door and nodded. "Into the shower I go." She was clean, damp and pink by the time Xander had rolled over to start his morning stretch routine.

Mitsy had made today's selections and it was the same outfit that Abby had worn the day before. Wait, no it wasn't. There was no color to the robe yet. "Is this new?"

The gnome nodded enthusiastically.

"Aw honey, you went shopping for me? That is



wonderful. Thank you." She hugged her little boxer and then jumped into the clothes and boots with enthusiasm. They were far more comfortable than suits.

Feeling relaxed and in control, she headed for the door. As she entered the outer room, she stopped and looked around her in amazement. Boxes, bags, and bows covered every flat surface of the hotel room. "Oh. Wow."

Laura and Seesee were sitting and fidgeting in an excited manner. "Abby. Open the big box on the coffee table. Now. Or we will."

Curious and just the teeniest bit excited out of her mind, she tore open the large bow on top of the box and lifted the lid. Her creatures gathered around to watch as she fell to her knees to touch the fabric in the box. "Aw, guys. Thank you so much. It's beautiful." She snivelled a little and Harbinger reached out to show her the small card tucked into the bodice.

*My compliments to the new Nexus-Galfor*

"Oh. Is she the designer?" At the frantic grinning nods of the gnomes and gargoyles, she laughed. "Did you pick it out?"

Ruffles shook her head and used both her arms to point at Seesee and Laura.

"Oh, you two got dresses as well?"

"Yes!" With quick twists and lifts, they pulled the fantastic creations out from under the table

and held them up against themselves. "At the ball tonight, all eyes will be on the Nexus' party."

Eager to see the full skirt out of the box, Abby drew the fabric to her and pulled it free of its tissue prison. It was a symphony of dark rainbow with a corseted bodice and a full flow of a skirt. "Mirror. Where is the mirror?" She spun carefully and when she saw the beauty of the dress, she almost cried again.

Xander came out of the bedroom as she finished her turn and he simply said, "Wow."

"Isn't it beautiful?"

"It is fabulous, is that a Galfor?"

Abby hiked her eyebrow at Verne's question. "Yes. It was a gift." A sudden suspicion hit her and she looked at her creatures. "It was a gift, right? You didn't sedate her and make off with this gown, did you?" Nine earnest little faces shook their heads in unison. "Then thank you for selecting it for me. And the gowns for Seesee and Laura. It was very thoughtful." They beamed at her and she smiled back.

Celia's eyes were wide and shining as she looked at the dress. "It is beautiful. Galfor was just starting out when I had my sweet sixteen and though her work was wonderful, I was forced to go with another designer. Now I wish I hadn't."

Xander came up and stroked the fabric. "It suits you, Abby. Beauty and magic all together. May I?"

He took the gown from her and with a few murmured words, it was standing on a dress stand the same size as Abby. It looked wonderful. The silk of the skirt was full and would rustle as she moved. He nodded to Seesee and Laura and they extended their dresses for the same treatment.

The room was now dotted with some of the most fantastic dresses that Abby had ever seen. A small hand pressed another box into Abby's hand and she looked down at what was obviously a jewellery case. "More?" She looked around the room covered with signs of shopping, of course there was more.

She opened the box to find a tiny gnome all cast in silver, on a bright silver chain. "Oh. This I have to wear."

The gnomes grinned.

She put the necklace on and then had to turn to the necessity of eating breakfast. Today, the bacon was hers before Seesee had a chance to ban it. She swooped in on the covered tray to find...oatmeal. "Bastards."

"You need more fibre, Nexus." Seesee was smug.

"So you have plotted against me with the catering staff? How cruel!" Frantically, she threw off the remaining covers and found nothing but oatmeal and fruit. "Fiends!" Giving in, she

drummed her fingers on the table and served herself reluctantly. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't bacon.

Grumbling, she consumed the only food left to her and then slugged a cup of coffee down with deliberate attention. "Fine. I am ready to go."

Xander looked up from his own breakfast and scowled, "I am not."

"Then eat faster, magus. We have court to attend." She whiled away the time by playing with her new gnome necklace. Ruffles brought her a fairly large bag and Abby caught the hint that she was to open it. Inside were two books. The first she recognized and smiled at, *Gnomes of Suburbia*. It depicted her gnomes in a variety of places around a normally bustling city. The second book caught her by surprise, *Gargoyles in the Round*, was not scheduled for release that soon, but here it was. In her hands. Less than a month after the final submission. She had to admit, the photos were great and her gargoyles flying around the mini Stone Henge that the gnomes had built in her back yard were perfect. Absolutely perfect. She could almost feel them flapping their wings. "How did this happen? It wasn't scheduled for publication for another six months."

"Your publisher is a Nexus fan. She put you to the top of the print list and she has sold out this first printing here alone." Laura was peering over

the table to look at the pictures as Abby caressed the books.

"Wait, so my publisher is here? Is a member of the magical community?" Abby sighed heavily and flipped through the pages of *Gargoyles* idly. "Of course. It makes sense. Anything to spur the magic along, right?"

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Don't be. I should have figured that one out a long time ago." She sighed and waited for the warlock to finish his oatmeal with blueberries. It didn't take long. "Can we go now?"

"Wow. Why are you in a hurry?" Xander sipped at his coffee. Laura and Seesee were comparing details on their gowns and had moved the magical dummies together.

"I want the trial over. I want to go home. I want to forget that someone has tried to kill me." She was brittle today. She could feel it. Holding in all the magic was taking its toll. She was getting the urge to just let loose with a wave, but that would be bad.

No one knew what to say to that, so Xander just finished his coffee and offered her his arm to escort her back to the courtroom.

The silent formality of their party was not lost on the judges, nor the Councillors. They rose and nodded their greetings as the Nexus' party

entered the room. Even the gnomes had taken on a solemn mien, with the gargoyles flying silently and directly to the chair backs behind the table where they would sit for the remainder of the morning.

Abby sat at the centre of the table and was comforted by the contact of the gnomes around her feet and calves. Up to the knees, she was protected, with Buffy on her right shoulder. Surrounded by her friends and creatures, she felt safe, even with Miranda glaring at her the whole time. If that woman had been able to suck her power until Abby collapsed or died, she would. What a comforting thought.

Vokal announced the beginning of proceedings and the next round of witnesses were brought forth. Members of the Simmons clan swore that Miranda had no power and therefore could not have engaged in the deadly activities described by the Nexus.

Abby wasn't shocked, but she was a little curious that these people were so convinced that anti-magical talents could not exist. She had felt the effects firsthand and knew what she had experienced. They just had spent so much time convincing themselves that Miranda was powerless, they couldn't wrap their brains around her actual talent. Just another bit of proof that the magical community was stuck in the Stone Age.

As her sisters sobbed over her unjust accusation, Abby sat quiet and still. She was an outsider here and they kept pointing that little fact out. Finally, the sister who had attended her panel the day before made the ludicrous statement that the Nexus' creatures were not truly alive, but in fact they were animated with a standard spell.

The gallery started to murmur violently. This was getting exciting. Abby took a deep breath and reached down to touch the pointy little hats of her gnomes.

"If that is the case, it will be simple to prove. Nexus, may we put a cessation spell on one of your gnomes?" Rackonell paced the room. "If the creatures now have their own lives, it will be proven that the attack of Miranda was not just an attempt on the Nexus, but an attempt on a new and endangered species."

Gasps and applause smattered through the gallery, but Abby wasn't too impressed. She stood. "What assurance do I have that the spell will be what is claimed? I have no idea how spell casting works and I don't want some vindictive cow to try and destroy one of my little guys just because she will find it entertaining." Anger was starting to ripple through Abby. It wasn't enough for Miranda to try and kill her on her own property, but now her family was trying to kill one of the gnomes. Bastards.

Xander pressed his hand over her fist on the table. "I will monitor the spell. If anything goes wrong, I will signal you and you can pull the magic away."

She drew in a deep shuddering breath. "Okay, guys, I have a favour to ask of you."

The gnomes scampered out from under the table to stand in front of it.

"I will assume that you have been listening to the court and I am asking one of you to volunteer for this assignment."

Six little hands shot into the air.

"I don't know if you realize this, but if I have accidentally cast an animation spell on you, you are going to turn into doorstops."

The hands stayed up.

Tears welled in her eyes and with the court looking on, she ruthlessly quelled her emotions, storing the power inside. "Okay, you can pick one amongst you because I am not choosing."

They huddled and debated, finally Skint proudly strutted forward and right up to Rackonell. She nodded to the judges and then raised her hands to begin the spell.

"Wait!" It was Orthea Simmons whose shout had rang out. "How do we know you will not pull your spell? I feel that I should be the one to cast it to make sure it is done properly."

The judges spoke quietly and then nodded.



With a malicious grin, she strode forward, flashing a look of contempt to the table where the Nexus still stood.

Abby contained her fury. Barely.

Orthea quickly raised her hands and started to chant.

Skint stood and stared at her, with his arms crossed and one foot tapping.

Nothing happened.

She tried again.

Nothing happened.

Skint stuck his tongue out at her.

When she raised her hands a third time, Abby moved. "Enough!" She raised her hand and sucked the power of the spell into her hand, forming it into a ball and then throwing it at Miranda with force.

The defendant raised her shackled hands and absorbed the energy. Right there, with the whole room and gallery watching, Miranda Simmons ate the magic.

The uproar was tremendous.

Abby gestured for Skint to come and rejoin his brethren while she enjoyed the shocked look on Orthea's face. She really hadn't believed that her sister was guilty. How touching.

Vokal, the minotaur, was trying to get the room back under control, so Abby merely held up her hand and asked for quiet. No one moved. "We

will reconvene for sentencing tomorrow morning. Court adjourned."

The roar of the crowd commenced as soon as the judges stood and left the room. Xander turned to her. "That was unexpected."

"Sorry. I am in a bad mood today. She just pushed all of my buttons."

He took her in his arms and held her for a long moment, rubbing her back to calm her. "That was a good trick. Did I teach you that?"

She laughed and hiccupped a bit. "Yup. The time I accidentally almost drained myself to death. Grabbing the spell energy before it landed seemed like a good idea. Firing it off at Miranda just satisfied me on several levels, plus it showed them that she wasn't the helpless victim they have been painting her as."

"Yes, but you look a lot more capable of keeping yourself alive now. Well, I guess we will see what the judges decide." His hands were warm and sure on her back. He rocked her a little as she stood and breathed him in to calm herself.

"Yup. I just couldn't stand her picking on my little Skint like that. Three times...she was going to cast that damned spell three times." Abby clenched her hands into fists and tried to breathe through her nose to calm herself. She wanted to wrap her hands around that woman's throat and burn her...whoops. Too far. More breathing.

"Let's go to the Dealers' Room and you can have some retail therapy."

She sighed again. "Frankly, I would rather go back to the room and spend time with the critters."

Celia popped up and to the left of Xander's back, in Abby's line of sight. "You have three hours until you need to be at a panel. I will have something sent up for you for lunch."

"Sounds great. Thanks, Celia." She snivelled a bit and then quickly clamped down on her emotions. Time enough to let loose in the room. She pulled back from her source of strength and smiled up at him through watery green eyes. "Okay. We can get going now. The line for the elevators will be intense if we wait too much longer." With her creatures keeping close, she left the courtroom and headed for the elevators, her Guards in formation around her.

Surprisingly, a path opened for them as they approached the queue. When Celia pressed the button and they waited for their ride, a slow and steady applause burst out. Abby blushed when she realized that all of the maguses, elves, and others who had come to the trial were applauding *her*. With her face on fire, she scuttled into the elevator when it opened and turned to wave at her still clapping audience.

As soon as the doors slid closed so that they

could return to the fifteenth floor, she felt a strong sense of relief. She was going to take what privacy she could and spend time with her beasts. At the door to her room, she paused, "Okay, I need to be alone here. You can gather in the hall, or go have some fun together. I just need to have a meltdown and would love to do it in private."

Xander tried to follow.

She stopped him with a hand on his chest. "No, sweetie. I love you, but I need to be by myself today. The gnomes and fliers are welcome to leave and goof off if they want to, but I need to let go a little." She moved into the room and sighed in relief at the cessation of restriction. Abby looked out the window for a while, watching pennants on the castle's turrets snapping in the breeze. The door opened and Bitsy and Buffy came through it. Xander's back was visible through the closing of the door and she smiled. Safe. She was safe.

That was all it took to release the floodgates of her emotions and send her bawling to the bedspread. Her frustration, with no outlet, had built up until she could release it in the only venue she had, tears. She pounded her fists and wailed into the fabric, verbalizing what she couldn't express with all of the eyes on her outside the doors of her private rooms. She fumbled around to find tissues and a small hand pushed a bag of beads into her hands. A rain of glass drops

showered on her from above and she saw the edge of Buffy's wings as she tried to provide solace the only way she knew how. Give the Nexus an outlet. Emotions equalled magic and an outlet gave her a place to put it.

She ran her hands across the spread, putting all of the beads in a pile and then she cried again, but this time she let the power run into the glass. After five minutes, the beads were vibrating with the energy they contained and she felt better. A little more relaxed, relieved and in control.

She flopped on her back and Buffy landed on her stomach. Abby reached out and stroked the feathery hair, the claws, and the doe-suede skin. "Have I told you recently how pretty I think you are, Buffy? Despite your traumatic birthday, you are my favourite of the fliers." The gargoyle preened. Bitsy held out his hand and she took it. "You two are a couple? Cool." It seemed that everyone around her was pairing off, why not her critters? "Congratulations."

They beamed at her, *Thank you.*

Abby blinked. She had been hearing them more frequently in the last month, but not at all since she locked off her talent here at the Summit. "I can hear you again."

*Thank goodness. We were getting worried. It was a wonderful thing that you did, defending Skint.*

"He is mine to defend. That witch was getting

more and more violent with her spell, I didn't know what that next blast would do."

*But you stepped in anyway. It is why we have stayed with you and not struck out on our own. You still need us, but you are willing to defend us for the honour of our presence. You are worthy of us. The grin that Bitsy gave her was pure impish glee. That is why we have tried to provide for you with the tools you have given us.*

"Wow. I didn't know that you wanted to leave." She thought about that for a moment. "I guess I did design you to travel. That is why you are all gnomes. All you need to do is freeze and no one will know that you are there."

*And we appreciate the care you have taken of us. We will not leave before it is time.*

"And I am grateful for your patience with me as I learn. Thank you."

Buffy walked up her body and gave her a kiss on the forehead. *Bitsy and I may stay with you forever. We wish to remain together and this way we can keep an eye on you.*

"That is very sweet, but you need to do what is best for yourselves, each and every day. Though I won't say no to the company." It was weird, good, but weird to have this conversation with her creatures. It was nice to get it all out in the open though. "What say that you help me open my presents? Clothing first and then jewellery."

*That sounds like a plan. Let's get to it. Buffy's*

voice was lighter in tone, the delicate chime of a bell next to Bitsy's soft rumble.

The next hour was spent talking to her creatures, looking at the tunics, underwear and boots that they had selected. The jewellery all had to be tried on and some of it had a magical charge, but it was all fantastic, even if a few pieces were a tad gaudy. Her creations had chosen them for her and she loved them all.

Now, if only they could stay out of trouble, she would have no problem turning them loose on humanity.

## Chapter Sixteen

“Welcome to the combined panels of *Creating magic out of nothing*, and *Why gnomes, the Nexus tells all*. First I would like to thank those of you who purchased copies of her books, she will be signing them during a ten minute intermission between panels and again after the panels are over.” Celia was a master of the microphone. The crowd fell under her spell and with this bunch that was saying something. “The Nexus will begin by explaining her talent as she sees it and some of the more fascinating things that she has discovered regarding the movement of magic.”

Today, Abby was a little more prepared for the stage fright, but it still shook her. “Okay, I think this would be easier if I stood up.” She gripped the mic and stood behind the table, then she began to pace. “At the first panel, one intrepid person told me that my magic had the flavour of my emotions. That is true. While this panel references creating magic out of nothing, that isn’t what I am doing.



For some reason, I resonate on a frequency, which allows me to tap into a dimensional gateway and draw power between worlds. I don't know where the magic comes from, but the stronger the emotion, the greater the power surge.

"Creative energy is different. When I bring something to life, all of the energy comes from inside me. I keep it running between myself and the thing I am animating until the creature is self-aware. Once I release that energy, it becomes part of the materials making up that creature. The longer the critter is self-aware, the more the magic turns into their own. It becomes part of the living being.

"If I accidentally transfer magic to an already magical being, I can reclaim it until it has become part of the new host." She didn't add that she could rip it from them, no matter what the signature, that wasn't something they needed to worry about. "It isn't fun, but it is possible for me to retain quite a bit of magic at anytime for controlled release." She paused, looked around at the rapt faces and asked, "Any questions?"

Not one creature raised their hands.

"Do you want to just skip to the book signings then? Raise your hand if the answer is yes." The room looked like a forest. Abby laughed. "Book signing it is. Who has a pen?"

The line started immediately and Xander

produced a pen for her, out of thin air.

"Wonderful. Thank you, Xander."

He nodded and stood back to let the line approach.

Slowly but steadily she signed each copy of *Gnomes of Suburbia* and *Gargoyles in the Round* with phrases like *Gnomes do it in the front yard*, and *Gargoyles do it in midair* followed by her signature.

About half of her audience left after the signing, but the rest stayed to listen to her logic regarding her first creations. "The gnomes came about after seeing a group of garden gnomes standing in a back lane. It looked for all the world like a criminal line up and that is when it hit me, gnomes are everywhere, in every yard, garden centre and flea market. Why not create gnomes that lived modern lives in modern garb. So, I created Harbinger." The gnome in question pranced along the table like it was a catwalk. "The instant that he was finished, Ruffles took shape. Then Mitsy, Skint, Splint came up wonky because he looked under Ruffles's tutu while I was working on him. I figured the cast and crutch would be a good guise for him. Bitsy was the final gnome, using the last of my materials, I sculpted him, knowing that his armature couldn't be as large as the others, so he is my dwarf gnome. Just the same, only smaller."

The crowd laughed and Bitsy preened.

"The gnomes have the ability to hide in plain sight in the normal world. They need only stop moving and anyone would imagine that they are lawn ornaments."

The laughter continued to ripple.

"Now, I am going to turn things around a little. I want to ask you a few questions and anyone who is uncomfortable with this can leave right now, no offence taken." Less than a dozen left, which gave her a hundred or so as a remainder. She pointed to a troll in the front row. "You, what is your name and where do you live?"

"Gathgar. I live in New York City."

"Now, Gathgar, is it true that trolls live under bridges?"

"No. I live in a one bedroom overlooking the Central Park."

"Now, for the important question, would you date a human, or are you related to any half-breeds?" That question had a few of her audience wide-eyed and making for the door. She had ceased to be funny. But still, over eighty stayed.

"Yeah. I have three cousins who are Halflings and their kids can actually pass for humans."

"What would you say if those cousins and their kids were allowed to attend a magical summit?"

"I think it would be great. They could network with other trolls and possibly form some alliances." He cleared his throat. "You have to

understand, we are highly territorial, so alliances are important for moving from city to city."

"I do understand and thank you for answering." She picked another face in the crowd and asked the same questions.

Elves, demons, mythical creatures, dwarfs, trolls, they all wished that their Halfling relatives could be part of their community instead of shunned. It gave more hope to Abby than anything she had heard so far. The pure bloods may be fighting to stay that way, but the half-bloods needed to be in a community that understood their needs.

A community that had yet to take shape, but Abby intended to fix that.

"Wow. That was intense. Did you intend to scare away half your audience with those questions?" Laura was walking at her side, Xander had been called to a council meeting halfway through her question and answer session.

"Scare them away? No. Make them aware, yes." She stopped and signed copies of her books in the halls as people stopped them and asked for her. The whole time she kept up her conversation with Laura. "The soap maker was just the representative of the problem to me. How many other descendants of magic are out there, more powerful than their original ancestor because of

their human blood, but untrained and unable to be all they could be?"

"I do not know, Nexus. Thousands?"

"That is what I think as well. The immortals or semi-immortals need to take a hand in their offspring. Breeding without a care because your lover can't find you again has got to be stopped." Abby said the last to a goblin with an especially horrid skin condition. He nodded in agreement and took his book back with a smile that should have sent shudders down her spine. The rows of shark like teeth were truly impressive.

"You have a point. My own cousins have engaged in recreational activities with humans and have given no thought to the results of their unions." They had finally made it to the elevator and the crowd had thinned out. Those who waited with them were now laughing and talking, accepting the Nexus as just one of the group.

It started a feeling deep in Abby, a feeling of acceptance and an easing of a tension that she didn't know she had been harbouring. "Celia, where to now?"

"You must get ready for the ball this evening, I will rejoin you tomorrow morning for the sentencing as this night I must spend with my family." Celia smiled grimly. "And what fun that is going to be."

Abby rushed into the elevator the moment that

it stopped, almost running in to the exiting occupants. "I get to put on my dress." She clapped her hands and kept up the singsong the whole way to their floor.

Laura was hard pressed to keep a straight face. The other Guards just ignored her.

"How will we know when it is time to go to the ball?" Abby had never been to a formal event of this nature. Even her graduation had been boycotted because she wasn't comfortable in a gown that fancy.

Seesee grinned and opened Abby's hotel door for her. "When Miklos comes to join us, it is time. That will mean that the vamps are up and in attendance. All the higher guilds and clans will be there this evening. A veritable smorgasbord of power and talent."

"Let me guess. It is in that room on the thirtieth floor?"

"Indeed. The most warding and best guards with the exception of your own." Laura added that last one.

Abby had a sudden realization. "Oh my god. I am so sorry. I forgot to congratulate you on your engagement!" She reached out to take Laura's hand, but Verne's stopped her.

"And *we* have been waiting for a chance to tell you how much your sacrifice has meant to us. Kevin told me of the bargain that you struck and it

humbles me to realize how much you were willing to do for our happiness."

Abby blushed. "I want everyone to be happy. You know that."

"Yes, but you act to get what you want instead of just talking about it and for that I pledge you my unswerving loyalty." Verne was kneeling.

Abby didn't know what to do. Her hands twisted together in confusion before it finally struck her, "Uh, I accept."

He rose and bowed from the waist. "While you ladies get changed, I will get into my own formal attire."

"More leather?" She couldn't help herself.

"Wouldn't you like to know." With a wink, he let himself out the door and it was just the ladies and the creatures.

"Okay, who wants to get into their gown first?"

Seesee grinned. "Well, since all of your undergarments are here, we may as well get you into it, Abby."

"Fine, but write a list of what you need and the gnomes will go to your rooms and get it." She walked cautiously to the gown and touched the stiff silk, loving the feel. "I don't know where to start."

"Step one, underwear. Go pick out something that matches your gown and get into it. Now. Step two would be matching hosiery, but you needn't

worry about that, step three is shoes. What do you have in shoes?"

The gnomes immediately held up a set of dark rainbow stilettos that complemented the gown.

"Oh. Nice. Can you guys shop for me when we get home? I have a heckuva time trying to get shoes to match weird colors," Laura piped up with that one. "Okay, Abby, to the wardrobe. Seesee will do your hair and I will handle your makeup." She was seated at the table and scribbling frantically on a notepad. "This is what I need if you would care to retrieve it for me."

Harbinger snapped to attention and scampered out the door.

Laura looked puzzled. "But I didn't give him the key."

"That usually isn't a problem for them. They go everywhere they want to." Abby made her way into the bedroom and started to look for the undergarments she needed. Mitsy and Ruffles handed them over in seconds. A nice strapless bra in a dark purple with matching panties. She perched her feet into the shoes and despite her anticipated reaction, was able to stand without pitching to the floor.

She proceeded into the living room where her gown was still standing on its magical pedestal. A little touch of her talent and she absorbed the spell and was holding the gown in her arms. Lacings



closed the back and as she was stepping into the puddle of gown, Harby entered, waving a bundle of objects that he delivered to Laura while ogling his mistress.

Abby quickly jerked the gown up to her breasts to stop Harby's leer. "That is enough out of you. Eyes forward, Harby."

"Suck it in, Abby, I can fasten it." Seesee used her hair to manipulate the laces, pulling them tight against Abby's back. The dress slowly closed under her patient tugging and pulling until it was laced from top to bottom with the central laces knotted in a pretty bow.

She took a few tentative steps and felt the tug and drag of the wide skirt behind her.

"There is a loop at the back for when you dance."

"I don't dance."

"You will when Xander asks you." Laura was almost laughing. "He's a great dancer. It's in the blood."

"The elven portion of his blood?"

"Exactly. Those Desmith boys are light on their feet." Seesee was coming around to see the final product of her lacing. "That gown is stunning."

"I know. I will have to thank the designer in person."

"Galfor would love that. Now let's get your hair into a semblance of a dignified condition."

Seesee arranged a chair in front of the long mirror. "Sit."

Negotiating the constriction of the corset while sitting took some doing, but she managed it. It was good practice for later this evening. The best plan of attack was to sneak up on the chair by backing up until her legs touched it and then to sink gracefully and hope she was in the correct position. Success!

While Seesee started to fuss with Abby's hair, Laura draped a sheet over Abby's gown and neckline and then opened a tackle box full of makeup. That was when Abby got really nervous. To be trapped between a gorgon and a mermaid may be some men's fantasies, but for a woman, it was darned scary. Three combs were teasing her hair while other tendrils belonging to Seesee were pinning, spraying and curling the locks into place.

The gnomes were huddled together and selecting accessories. There was nowhere to run that wasn't powdered or pinned. She looked up when asked, looked down when requested, blotted, blinked and pursed on command. When Laura finally stepped back, Abby sighed heavily. Seesee finished a moment later and Abby almost cried with joy.

"Don't cry. The mascara is waterproof, but the foundation isn't." Laura stepped aside and Seesee joined her to the side, leaving Abby alone in the

mirror.

"Holy hell." She stood and walked up to get a close up of herself in the mirror. Her hair was fantastic and the face in the mirror was far too elegant to be hers. "What did you do to me? I look...beautiful."

"Just a little cosmetic enhancement. I'll show you how to do it once we get home. It's a little involved for a quickie instruction." Laura stripped off while she was speaking and slipped into her own set of undergarments for under her gown.

Seesee laced her up.

Abby put on the necklace that crept down her chest with a series of spiked baroque pearls in a midnight blue with small silver spacers. The bracelets matched the necklace and the earrings matched the bracelets. She felt positively elegant.

She was just finished her toilette when the door swung open and Xander walked in, followed by Verne. Verne looked splendid. He was in his finery, a set of buff leather trousers, deep brown boots, buff coloured shirt and a black leather surcoat. The epitome of a North American knight.

Xander was frozen five feet into the suite. His gaze was covering her from head to toe and back again. "Abby, you look..."

"Let's just go with splendid and then you can get ready for the ball." She smiled and dropped a slow and careful curtsy. The movement on her

part managed to break the spell and he immediately darted into the bedroom to make his change. A flash of magic and he was back in the main room. "Now that is really something." She walked around him. He was wearing high boots, tight black trousers that made her fingers itch to touch, and a snow-white shirt that glowed in the dimming light. Over it all was a deep elegant purple sleeveless robe with a dark green trim. "You look lovely." His golden hair glowed against the dark colour.

"You have taken my breath away." He took her hands and pulled them away from the gown. "I have never seen you looking more lovely." He drew her to him and whispered into her ear, "Unless you were wearing nothing at all."

She knew she was blushing, but she didn't know how much showed around the makeup. "Apparently I have to gear up to dance in this. Problem is, I don't know how to dance with it."

That startled him out of his admiration. "Really? That we can fix. Pick up the train of your gown and we will have a few go rounds."

He helped her find the loop that would hoist the gown's train and she looped it around her wrist as Laura and Seesee finished dressing each other. Seesee's hair automatically assumed an elaborate formation and Laura's was pinned into place by Verne who was once again acting way to

metro for a straight guy.

"In your mind, count one-two-three-one-two-three-one-two-three. And then, relax and let me guide you."

"Usually when you guide me I am nothing close to relaxed." She tried to follow his lead, finally took a deep breath and surrendered to his touch. He only stepped near her feet twice and then they were gliding around the suite, their dance taking them into the bedroom and out again. She was laughing with delight by the time that they had finished their romp through the conversation pit and much less nervous about dancing in public.

He had lowered her into a deep dip and her cleavage was trying to make a run for the border when the door swung open and Miklos arrived.

"The ball is beginning. It is time to go."

Xander almost dropped her.

"Oy. Watch it there, twinkle toes." He righted her and she smacked him on the chest.

"Nexus, you look lovely."

"Thank you, Miklos. So do you." He, too, was dressed in a vaguely medieval theme, but he was in unrelieved black. It made his skin look less tan and more chalky. Very vampire. When Seesee joined him and they stood arm in arm, they made a striking couple. Fire on a midnight sky.

A quick turn of her head to seek out Laura and

Verne caught them necking. Apparently, Laura's lipstick was smudge proof. "Ahem. I think we are ready to leave." They jumped apart as if scalded. The room at large laughed as Laura checked her makeup. She looked as chic and put together as always, but now that she was in an ocean-coloured gown, it seemed more her than anything Abby had seen her in, including her tail.

"Alright. Everyone here looks fabulous, so let's get my first ball out of the way, shall we?" Her gnomes were standing at attention and for the first time, she realized that they might want a change of clothing. The gargoyles didn't have much for clothing at all. She would ask them when she got home.

Laura and Verne were the first rank, Abby and Xander the second, with Seesee and Miklos bringing up the rear. It was quite the formal procession as the ladies' skirts meant they had to stay at least six feet apart or step on each other. It made them a little slower entering and leaving the elevator, but the demons let them onto the thirtieth floor with a nod and grins for Abby. What could she do but regally incline her head and sweep forward into the slowly grinding social cogs of the Magical Summit Ball?

## *Chapter Seventeen*

Music was playing, slow and discreet, while the participants met and mingled. Abby was escorted to leaders of the various guilds and clans. She shook hands with the head of the panel judging Miranda's court case. Vokal the minotaur. The same minotaur that Seesee had bopped so that she could get her place in Abby's entourage.

"I am pleased to meet you in a less crowded venue, Nexus."

"Abby, please."

"Abby then. I find the opening ceremonies a little too short to get to know someone the way I would prefer to." He stepped forward, close to her.

For a moment she thought someone had blocked out the sun. He was seven feet of heavy muscle and bovine head. And if she didn't miss her guess, he was hitting on her.

"And yet, I found them perfect for my purposes, which was to immerse myself in the

Summit before returning to my home with my friends and lover."

She couldn't help it. It didn't seem like Vokal was the subtle type. She bumped into Xander with her hip, begging for help.

"Pardon, Elder Vokal, but my family is eager to meet Abby. They have heard so much about her from me and my cousin." Xander steered her away from the minotaur as the light slowly dawned in his eyes. He snorted noisily as they walked away and turned his attention to hitting on the dryad sitting nearby. Apparently, he didn't have much of an attention span.

"Are we really going to talk to your family?"

"Not now. Miklos needs us to meet his Guild Master, Gregori." Xander gently guided her through attentive fans and a few hostile glances. Finally they arrived at a dimly lit corner where an elegant couple held court.

Max stood to greet them as they approached.

Abby blinked in surprise. The woman was elegantly attired in peacock-coloured chiffon and satin. Gauzy sleeves were held together with tiny gemstones sewn at four-inch intervals and a corset bound her considerable assets into a configuration that could probably support a cup of tea, with saucer. Wow. Peacock feathers were woven into her hair and a chain mail collar adorned her neck. She was the epitome of a goddess of some ancient



times. "Max, you look wonderful!"

"That gown is amazing, Abby. You look fantastic as well. This is the Guild Master, Gregori, of the Vampire Coalition." The introduction was a little careless, but the Guild Master rose to his feet to bow over Abby's hand.

"Forgive my Apprentice's impertinence. I am very pleased to meet you, Nexus, and more pleased that you have welcomed Miklos into your collection."

"He was easy to welcome, very easygoing." It dawned on Abby that with the exception of her friends, she was surrounded by about forty vampires. This would have scared the crud out of her only three months earlier. Today, she took it in stride. "He is a wonderful addition to the Oak Point Guard. Frankly, I just wish he had been there a little earlier."

Gregori put his arm around Max and it was at that point that Abby realized how physically well suited the two were. His Viking raider against her Amazon queen. The Guild Master was a towering six and a half feet tall next to Max's five ten. She would not be a woman to let him physically intimidate her and it was obvious that he enjoyed that.

"I am sorry about that. He was needed to assist in a Guild matter."

"Yeah. To find Gregori before he was turned

into a roman candle." Max snorted. "It was while rescuing his considerable ass that I met the big lug and he gave me a stay of execution."

"Execution?"

"That is a story for another time, but there is a reason that I am called the Abomination." Max's unswerving good humour made Abby grin and all too soon, they were on to the next group who *had* to meet the new Nexus.

She met the head of the troll clans, found out that dryads were not that organized and spent the early part of the evening meeting and greeting. She was starting to feel cranky and asked, "Can we sit down now? I just want to stop wandering around for a while."

Xander blinked. "Why didn't you say anything sooner?" He sighed in a frustrated gust of wind and guided her to an empty table with a *Reserved* sign on it.

She practiced her technique of backing up to the chair and almost toppled over when Xander pushed it toward her.

"Easy now."

"Sorry. When I practiced, you weren't helping." She smiled up at him and he took his seat next to her. The Oak Point group was talking quietly when Xander's parents arrived. "Amelia, Reginald, please have a seat." The round table had enough space for twelve people and was only

half-filled.

Amelia was surprised but pleased. "Are you sure? Our clan has a table over there."

Abby carefully spoke with a smile in her eyes. "I humbly ask that you spend the evening with us if you will enjoy it. If not, go where you will."

"Then we will stay." She seated herself three chairs over from Abby. Still close enough to talk, but respecting the distance of the Guard. Reginald took the seat next to his son.

"I am going to ask a gauche question, why do you all have the last name Desmith? Celia has it and is obviously on your side of the family, Amelia."

Reginald fielded this one, "I agreed to take it when I decided to marry into their family. It is a criteria for any man wedding a Desmith woman that he take the clan name. That way all children are automatically part of the clan as soon as they are born."

"Okay, one other question. What is it like being married to a Seer? Does she know if you haven't put your socks in the hamper without looking?" Laughter rippled over them and the subject matter changed to a lighter tone. The chatter continued until the music took on a steady beat and all around them, couples took to the floor.

Xander paused in conversation with his mother. "Shall we?"

"Is your insurance paid up?"

"Yup, there is even a lady's shoe clause. You can't do anything that can't be healed. Come on." Xander stood, straightened his robe and then extended his hand to her.

A quick glance at Amelia showed the woman welling up with tears at the sight of her son with the Nexus. That or she was having an allergy attack. Abby would never know.

She placed her trembling hand in Xander's strong one and he pulled her to her feet, then swept her onto the dance floor. She just grabbed at the loop on her skirt, pulled it over her wrist and hung onto him for dear life.

They swung into the crowd of dancers and spun with them to the hypnotic and powerful music being played by the goblin band. The first song was vaguely waltz-like in its rhythm, but the second was all swing. She moved with Xander, matched him, twisted, skipped and whirled as they coordinated their movements.

The music slowed to a waltz again and Abby gratefully leaned against him as the room spun around them. It was only them, Abby and Xander, the only two beings in the whole wide world as they danced. Her heartbeat matched his and for that one moment, they were one being and they weren't even naked, how cool was that.

When the band shifted their music again, she

gestured back to the table and they sat down to applause and some iced orange juice. "Thank you. Did I kill anyone?"

Amelia laughed. "You are a natural, my dear. But now Reginald and I must get our exercise." Her husband stood and bowed formally to his wife, who took his hand with more ceremony. Then they were giggling teenagers and swinging with the best of them out on the dance floor. It was amazing how nimble Xander's mother was and his father's ability to lift her over his head for indefinite periods while she squealed and kicked to be let down.

"Well, I think you get the dance enthusiasm from your mom, but your skills from your dad." She eyed them carefully. They really were something together on that floor.

"Yeah. We were exposed to hours of lessons from an early age. It certainly helped the dating situation in high school, I can tell you."

Abby grimaced. "I wouldn't know about that. I didn't get out much. We?"

"I have two sisters. Well, being a dork with knobby knees who could flip a partner through the air had its pros and cons. I could dance, but getting one of them to trust me was tricky."

"So, you aren't trustworthy?" She tsked. "You should have let me know that earlier, before I let you play with my gnomes. Speaking of the

gnomes, where did they go?"

Laura answered that one as she and Verne were returning from a brisk jitterbug. "They are bobbing for holograms in the punch bowl."

That gave her pause. "As a concerned Nexus, I should stop that, shouldn't I?" She shrugged. "What the heck, it's a party."

What a party it was, dinner was served and for that, Abby did keep the gnomes off the buffet. The gargoyles played with feathers stuffed in elves' hair and stole flowers from dryads. Everyone was having a good time.

All except the man who came toward their table with thunder in his eyes.

Abby tapped Xander's shoulder and pointed to the scowling terror. "Who is that?"

"Terric the black. The oldest dragon on this earth and half of the most powerful couple in history."

"Who is the other half?"

"The phoenix, but she has yet to expose herself. We felt her come into the world twenty-five years ago, but no one has seen her." The dragon was almost upon them.

His voice was as harsh as the planes of his face. "Nexus. Where is she?"

"We haven't been introduced. I am Abby and you are?"

"Your elf just told you. I am Terric the black.

Dragon of the deepest earth. Where is the phoenix?"

"I haven't met anyone by that name. Perhaps if you describe her?" Oh, that did it. He took a step toward her and she stopped him. He was almost completely magic and it was easy to hold it in place. No one could see that she interfered with his progress, but he knew it.

"I do not know what my mate looks like, I only know that everything that I am calls out to her. We can only be whole together." He looked dejected. "I have abided by modern laws and only sought her for the last five years. But I still cannot find her."

Abby sighed and closed her eyes for a moment. The instant that she did so, her third eye flickered open and she saw the entire ballroom in that one instant. She was there. The phoenix was in the room and watching the torment on the face of the dragon. Based on the screaming violence of the flaring magic, she wanted to come forward, but was holding back. "Terric, on the last day of the Summit, come to me and I will give you an answer. I will help you find out who she is. Is that fair?"

"More than fair. What they are saying is true, you are wiser than you have a right to be for one so young in the power."

"Well, it is one helluva power."

He grinned. He actually smiled at her. "That it is."

"Would you care to join our table?"

"No. I am used to spending my time alone. This is far too many people under one roof. I will meet you after the Summit." He turned at that and strode out of the ballroom. Conversations that had slowly died when they realized who had entered restarted with new fodder. The demons at the door snapped to attention and stood well away from the dragon as he took the elevator.

"That was exciting." Abby smiled at the table in general where everyone was still gawking at her. "What?"

"He could be head of the Creature Council in an instant. Vokal would dive to the floor in an effort to get out of his way. He can create storms, earthquakes and has a horde that can rival several countries' gross national product and you two just had a *nice chat*." Seesee shook her head. "You have some big brass balls my friend."

"I take exception to that. She does not. She does have more guts than sense though." Xander defended and insulted her at the same time, how quaint.

"Thanks, honey. Love you, too." She patted his thigh under the table. She pursed her lips at him and he gave her a quick peck.

The crowd in the ballroom thinned.



She and Verne took to the floor. It wasn't as smooth as it had been with Xander, but it was still fun to be dancing and not sitting on the sidelines. While they started on their second song, Miklos cut in. The vamp was an excellent dancer, but his cooler body didn't help her relax much, so he was the recipient of her first toe-stomp of the night. He took it with good humour and merely moved them around the dance floor so she wouldn't be able to attack him. On their second dance someone else cut in. Gregori came as a shock to her, but he had style, grace and body heat. "Did you have someone to eat?"

"My apprentice is very obliging." He swept her into a turn.

She gasped as she tried to catch her breath. That one sentence was so intimate that Abby fought a blush. "Max? But isn't she..."

"She is and she isn't. There is a reason that she is called the Abomination. She acquired her power in a most unusual way. A human biting a vampire is not an everyday occurrence." His amusement was all around her.

They hypnosis of vampires must work on an audio connection, it was the only way she would be sharing his wry amusement so completely. With the night growing later, the vampires were taking over the dance floor. Ballroom, swing, interpretive, and styles Abby couldn't describe

whirled past her as Gregori danced her around and around.

Xander tapped Gregori on the shoulder. "Care to trade?" He had Max's hand in his possession and each of the women went gratefully back where they belonged. "Have you enjoyed your first ball?"

"Is it over?" Her voice was dreamy, only appropriate as he floated her around the dance floor, avoiding the vamps with ease and grace.

"Almost. When the vamps take the floor it is usually around two in the morning." He pulled her tightly against him and moved to the music in a slow sway.

If it hadn't been for the sentencing of Miranda the following day, she would have been content to stay there until dawn. Just that one dark thought broke her happy bubble. "I think that I am all danced out." He drew back, looked at her face and nodded.

"Let's go back to the room and I can start getting you out of that bondage kit that you are wearing." His eyebrows wagged lasciviously.

She looked down at the taut expanse of the front of her gown. "Fine, but cut one lace and you are a dead man. Elf. Warlock. Whatever." They returned to the table and a flick of her talent had her creatures gathering around them. "I am done for the evening, you can follow at your own pace.

Enjoy the party." She dismissed the rest of her Guard as she took Xander's arm and let him lead her to the elevator.

They were within ten feet of the doors when three women moved to stop them.

Xander stiffened at her side and she just sighed. "The Simmons' family. How nice to see you."

The oldest of the three scowled at Abby. "That was a nice trick this morning. You know, I never knew that my daughter had a talent, let alone that it was that powerful."

The younger one, the one who had confronted Abby at her panel, spoke, "They would never have believed you if you hadn't proved it."

Abby was tired of this. "You didn't believe it. You treated her like a second-class citizen, played cruel games with her as the target. You fed her hatred of magic and this is the result."

"How could you know that?" The older daughter was looking distinctly guilty.

"Miranda told me, and Seesee, and Laura. You hurt her when she was most vulnerable and trying to fit in, and it warped her into something deadly. Congratulations. If you don't mind. I will be going now." Abby put some pressure on Xander's arm and he started to move forward.

The ladies didn't move, well, not until the demons came up from behind and forced them aside by the simple expedient of moving between

them and making a path.

"Nexus, I hope you enjoyed your evening." They spoke in unison, harsh gravely voices that sent chills down her spine.

"I did, thank you."

"Then we will enjoy seeing you another time. Go safely, you will not be disturbed."

The women were frightened and angry, but not crazy enough to attack the full-blood demons.

"Thank you." Xander pulled her forward and she nodded to the demons who kept the angry family at bay. When the creatures and her elf were in the elevator with the doors closed, she breathed a sigh of relief. "That was intense."

"That is an understatement. I never knew that they were that attached to Miranda."

"They aren't. They are attached to the family name." Abby shook her head in disgust. "They would sacrifice her to those demons if they thought they could make the trial go away."

"Ah." He looked down at her with a strange look. "I didn't know that you were that close to Miranda."

"I am not, I just understand the manipulation of family. You were probably strong armed into coming to Sargent yourself."

"I was a last minute replacement." He smiled. "Celia did tell them that you did not like brunettes, but they felt that throwing Demler at

you would change your mind. It didn't and he returned home in shame. *That* is when they called me. I was already packed."

She furrowed her brow, "I don't remember a Demler... Wait, was that coffee guy?"

Xander barked with laughter. "That was him."

"He disappeared right in front of my eyes. Literally."

"Teleportation is his speciality."

They were on their way to her suite and Abby sighed. The night was over, her first ball done. Now it was time to take down her hair and chisel off the makeup. Every woman's favourite part of a formal night out, turning from Cinderella back into the pumpkin.

First things first. Out of the public eye, she could let herself schlump over to a chair and pull off the shoes that were keeping her feet from being foot shaped. "Oh. That's better." The left shoe came off with an audible pop and she groaned as she flexed her toes to get the feeling back into them again. Warm hands took over her right shoe and eased it away, massaging the life back into that abused extremity. "That feels good." The noises that she was making were not remotely ladylike, but she didn't care. Her feet were being rewarded for the abuse heaped on them earlier.

"The shoes are very nice, but your feet must be killing you."

"Killing stopped at midnight." He had moved on to the left foot and she sighed, leaning back in the armchair that had caught her when she hobbled in. "They have been zombies for hours now. If I do this again, I am wearing boots."

He chuckled and leaned forward, coming up on his knees between hers.

She looked over his face, the blue of his eyes, the soft curl of his hair on his left brow, and the full twist of his lips. Abby felt her heart melt at the sight of this man on his knees before her, helping her get over her first exhausting formal. "Have I mentioned how much I love you?"

"Not recently, but I also think this is the first time we have been alone in over a week." He leaned up and she leaned down, meeting in a kiss that felt like a caress to her very soul. "You dance very well for a beginner."

"You are an excellent teacher." Her hands were clenched in his hair when he leaned forward to pick her up with arms around her hips and a mass of silk and Nexus was now being worn around his waist. She giggled. He wore her into the bedroom and flipped her to her stomach, his fingers going to the ties of her gown. The instant that he undid the bow, she inhaled gratefully. Her ribs enjoyed their new freedom. The warm touch of a kiss on her spine made her smile and as he unlaced her, celebrating the reappearing skin with kisses so

light that she was lulled into a stupor.

Gentle hands rolled her to her back and a slither of silk as he pulled the gown from her was the last thing she remembered.

Dang.

## Chapter Eighteen

“Nexus. Get up. You only have thirty minutes until the sentencing.”

“Mmff.”

“You need to get up.”

“Fuff nmff.”

The annoying voice went away for a moment, but then came back. “I am sorry to do this, Nexus.”

The cold water may have surprised her, but the gnomes and gargoyles jumping up and down on her body did what Celia could not. It got her out of bed and had her stomping to the shower in under a minute.

Hairpins fell as her head got damp and she worked all of the hairspray out of her locks with determination. Her makeup diluted and washed away as she scrubbed, but she was running out of time. She couldn’t get away without conditioner, so she slapped it into her hair while she loofaed the rest of her body in preparation for the day. Her



morning routine was all screwed up and it was only her urge for coffee that kept her going.

Wrapped in towels, she passed Xander as he sprinted to the shower for his own quick onceover. The gnomes were digging for formal wear and she vetoed them. "Comfortable and casual. Black jeans, sneakers and something else." Periwinkle underwear hit her in the face and she shimmied into the bra and panties while tugging on socks and slithering into her jeans. It should have been physically impossible, but she was dressed in under three minutes.

"Coffee, STAT!" Seesee had the cup sliding down the table and Abby caught it with a practiced swing.

"Abby, what did you to your hair?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"I think you may still have some pins in there."

Abby looked into the shiny side of the coffee pot and snorted. She had vertical lift on at least three different fronts. "Can you do anything with it?"

"You eat, I'll try and tame it. Good thing it's still mostly wet."

This morning was fruit and toast. Abby was in mourning for bacon. "Will I ever have bacon again?" Sure it was melodramatic, but it was a dramatic kind of day. Celia was fidgeting from foot to foot while Abby scarfed down strawberries

and munched through seven-grain toast.

"You can have it as soon as we are home, I don't want you weighed down by protein if you are shocked or surprised." A particularly harsh tug emphasized that last statement. "There. Done. I think I am going to draw a grooming premium from the councils for this."

"I have never asked you, how much do you get paid for this? And where does the money come from?" It was amazing that they could understand her through the toast, but they managed.

"The money comes from a pool set up for the support of the Nexus. Investments from a series of patents that have been created, dowsing for mineral deposits, that sort of thing." Laura smiled.

"But how much do you get for babysitting me?"

"Around a hundred thousand per year, plus living expenses and small businesses."

"Whoa." She blinked. "So I am scrimping and saving to pay my mortgage and you get to live there for free?"

Xander joined their conversation after dropping a kiss on Abby's now sleek hair. "Your money is being held in a trust for you. You aren't actually spending anything and we have an absolutely ridiculous interest rate working for you."

"When were you going to tell me?"

"When you asked." He grabbed a cup of coffee and slugged it down, black. "Let's go. Justice can

swing by at the speed of light here.”

Abby rose to her feet and nodded. “Let’s get this over with.”

It was a solemn procession that entered the courtroom and they were the last people to enter. The balcony groaned with the weight of people on it.

Vokal stood when they had taken their seats. “Would the accused please take their place on the dais and face her accusers.”

Miranda moved slowly and faced Abby across the courtroom. She smiled weakly and in her eyes was regret for a friendship that could not happen. Not with the powers they held pulling them apart.

“Miranda Simmons, you are charged with three attempts on the life of the current Nexus, Annabeth Hanover. Judges please stand and pronounce your verdict.”

The other judges stood and took a deep breath. “Guilty.”

“Guilty.”

“Guilty.”

Miranda didn’t even flinch. Not even when he continued, “The sentence is death, to be carried out no later than midnight tonight.”

The crowd went wild.

Abby looked to her companions as they led

Miranda away, her mother and sisters flinging themselves on her to hug her as she was led away. "I need to get out of here. I need to get away from this place." She shoved back from the table and almost ran out of the room. Her friends had a hard time keeping up.

While bolting out of the courtroom, Abby almost took down Raven and Max. They were in deep discussion near the elevators and when they saw her face, they reached out to grab her, "What's wrong?"

"I need out. I have to get away from the Hotel. Now. I just need my purse." As soon as the door opened, she jumped inside. They jumped in with her and the guard and creatures followed.

"I am going to ask a favour of the guards. Abby needs some non-magical attention and Max and I can give it to her." Raven smiled and her freaky eyes were just understanding enough for Abby to want to go.

"I think I would enjoy that. And Max is more than capable of being my bodyguard. She is the Abomination after all."

Xander looked to the others and they nodded.

"Great. I will grab my purse and be back in a minute."

To Abby's utter horror, when she entered the room, she interrupted housekeeping. Ghosts were everywhere, cleaning, fluffing, picking up bits of

fluff that got away. Her gown from last night was now hanging on the closet door and her shoes were neatly beside it. Trying not to disturb them, Abby crept slowly toward her bedside table where she kept her purse.

The ghosts making her bed didn't even flinch as she passed, but one of the transparent ladies winked at her.

She scampered out as fast as she could and then panted as the door swung shut. "Ghosts. There are ghosts as housekeepers."

"Of course, this is Hotel Spectre after all. For those trapped between planes, it is a useful purpose for the afterlife until they move on." Verne was matter-of-fact.

"Okay. But they are in there and they are making my bed. Leaving little mints on my pillow. Its creepy." Abby shuddered, then shook her head and straightened. "Shall we go?"

Raven slid some contact lenses on while in the hallway and when she blinked to set them, her eyes were a deep violet. "Pretty, ain't they? They are technically blue, but my own colour bleeds through."

"And I love your coat." Her black floor length leather trench coat was striking with her colouring, the white of her hair really stood out.

"Thanks. It was the gift I got for delivering the bat-goblin heir. I don't know what animal *donated*

the leather, but I do know that I love how it feels." She ran her hand down her hip and the men looked on appreciatively.

"Right, you are stunning. Now let's go. There is deep fried cheesecake out there somewhere calling my name." Max gathered the ladies together and herded them down the hall. With her four-inch heels, she towered over them, but gave the impression of being completely at ease with her height moving gracefully through the Guard.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I formally give you the day off. Celia, do I have to be back today?"

"Well, there is a family dinner for all the clans on the thirteenth floor at five in the afternoon. Can you be back for that?"

"We will have the princess back for the fried chicken. We promise." Raven put her hand over her heart.

"And, my dear critters, go out and give the necklaces that I didn't have a chance to give away to little kids. Or some bigger kids. Just get rid of them." When they nodded their understanding, she sighed in relief and let the two ladies of mystery drag her out of the hotel.

"My car is out front. Just let me catch up with you in a second." Raven hopped onto a luggage rack with the arched top and nodded for a bellhop to push her out of the hotel.

A bemused Max and Abby waited for her and

then asked, "What the hell was that about?"

"Oh. I can't touch magic, like the doors. I repel it. Since the whole hotel is magical, they have separate quarters arranged for me off to one side of the twenty-fifth floor, near one of my clients. The floor is reinforced and my anti-talent has no effect."

"So what is with the luggage rack?" Max was still looking perplexed.

"I get it. Farraday cage."

"Yup. The magic goes around me. It's also why I use the elevator with another person to push the buttons."

Max sniffed theatrically, "I thought you enjoyed my company."

"Oh, I do,ooky, and I enjoy those supernatural fingers doing the walking in the hotel." Raven was laughing and leading the way to her hatchback.

"Aw. Nice. I drive a station wagon. I love hatchbacks, don't you?"

"Yep, especially if I am driving a mother in labour to the hospital for emergency treatment."

Abby took the backseat as Max called shotgun. "I thought you did all of that stuff at home. The whole point of having a midwife, isn't it?"

"Not if the mother or child are in danger we don't. I haul ass straight to the nearest hospital with my guide and have him wipe the memories

of the staff after the delivery." She peeled out of the parking lot with enough force to make Abby glad to be wearing her seatbelt.

"Where are we headed?"

"There is a fair in town and I thought it would be nice to remind you how the other half lives."

Max blinked. "A fair? Oh I want to go on the Ferris Wheel! Gregori won't take me. He says it lacks dignity." She clapped her hands and bounced in her seat.

"Ladies. Today is not about dignity. Today is about fun and living for the moment." Raven sped down the highway with a sure grip on the steering wheel. "Abby, they gave us feeding instructions for you. Apparently, you are allergic to bacon?"

Abby groaned and put her face in her hands. "They are all against me. They are trying to kill me with fruit and oatmeal."

Max laughed. "Those bastards. It sounds like they want you to stay healthy. Raven, I don't remember them saying anything about deep fried anything else, do you?"

"Nope. Must have slipped their minds."

Abby chortled. It was nice to be in cahoots with someone.

The foothills of the mountains flashed by and their conversation twisted and turned. Around forty-five minutes into the drive Abby caught the telltale sight of a Ferris Wheel. Oh hell, they were



going to have to ride it with Max.

They parked in the half-full lot and scrambled to be the first in line. Max paid for their entrance and soon they were wandering the columns of stalls with funnel cakes parked in their hands. They had almost completed their first round when Max saw a stall that brought her up short. "Oh. A fortune-teller. Let's get our cards read." She waved three twenties and ducked inside. A pale white hand emerged and beckoned Raven and Abby forward.

"Oh. What can it hurt?"

"Famous last words." But she followed the albino into the dim interior and sat on one of the folding chairs provided.

"Raven should go first. Ease her way up the power ladder." Max was whispering loudly to her friends.

"One of you, any one of you needs to come and sit at the table." The fortune-teller had some genuine talent, it glowed through her faintly.

Raven shrugged and took a seat. She watched the psychic shuffle the cards and cut the deck when asked. The woman laid the cards on the table and began to turn them. "I see babies, lots of babies. But they are not yours. The babies are in your hands and then they are not. I see a man of magic, he is near at all times and guides you, but his feelings toward you are conflicted. You need to

stay patient, he will come around."

"That's him alright. Conflicted right up to his pointy ears." She chuckled as the woman shook her head and pulled the cards back into the deck.

"Next."

"Oh. Me next." Max was in the chair so fast Raven almost fell over. "I want a pony and a pretty ribbon..."

"I am not Santa Claus. Cut the cards." The reader's talent was growing a little more brightly as she warmed up. "There is pain in your past and blood in your future. A dark man keeps you tightly to his side, he is deadly and protective at the same time."

Max just grinned.

"You are...oh my. An Abomination to your new people. If not for your protector, they would hunt and kill you. A great danger will fall and a final choice must be made by you, to live a half-life or die. I am sorry. This is what the cards have said."

"That's okay. It's about what I have figured." She used her charming grin on the reader and the woman blanched at the pointed fangs, then looked outside to the bright sunlight.

"I guess I am last." Abby smiled.

"I don't know if I can do anymore readings today."

"I can replenish any talent that you use." She

sighed. "Please try. I have some stuff I need to work out."

The psychic was looking a little worn out. The readings that she had must have confused the heck out of her. They weren't the regular I-want-to-marry-rich-and-have-tons-of-kids kind of readings that she was probably used to.

Her hands shook as she shuffled the cards and cut the deck. She hadn't had this done in years and then it was so vague as to be a non-event.

As the woman laid out the spread, Abby held her breath.

"This is really weird." Her brown eyes darted to meet Abby's, "Sorry, but I haven't seen anything like this before. You are surrounded by power and wield it easily, but it isn't yours. Recently, you have caused a death, but you don't know how to feel about it. The cards are telling me to remind you that death is just the end of one specific life. Life always starts again." She shuddered and sighed. "I am sorry. That is all that I can see."

Abby reached over and touched her hand. "Thank you. That cleared up a few things for me." The trill of power was miniscule, but the woman sat up as if electrified. They filed out, leaving her awash in a fully activated talent that she had only grazed before. "I don't know if I should have done that, but if she doesn't use it, it will fade with

time.”

“You just jacked her up, didn’t you?” Max was smiling and Raven was shaking her head.

“Yeah. Let’s go pet the bunnies, I think I am starting a plan here.” For two hours, Abby sat in the bunny pit, letting the fluffy critters climb all over her and scratching them just the way they liked it. Finally she sat up out of her fluffy cocoon and sought out Raven who was over with a pregnant sow discussing the difficulties of multiple births. When Abby yelled, “Raven!” the bunnies scattered, leaving little rabbit raisins behind.

“You are done your meditation? Go wash your hands.” Raven guided her to the wash station and waited until she went through it twice. “What did you want?”

“I wanted to know how you get a birth certificate for a baby that isn’t fully human.”

“I have some contacts. Why? Are you thinking about Laura and Verne?”

“No. Something a little more imminent.”

Max came skidding into the petting zoo and the animals went wild at the large predator in their midst. “I found the cheesecake!”

Laughing, they followed her out of the tent and back into the sunlight. “This is the last treat and then we go back, alright? I want to thank you both by the way. This has been the most carefree

afternoon I have had in quite a while.”

“Then if cheesecake is the last stop, get a burger now.” Raven was practical and she was right. Eating the burgers on the Ferris Wheel was a bit of a trick, but they posed for a Polaroid before the machine started moving, burgers in hand. A snapshot of their day at the fair, for only ten dollars. Vaguely nauseous, they staggered free after their ride and made their way in search of deep fried cheesecake.

Gnawing at the treat on a stick, Abby sat in the backseat and kept thinking about her day. She ignored the dark start as best she could, but it kept rearing its ugly head. The ladies with her had done an excellent job of distracting her and so had the bunnies. She had the proof on the bottom of her shoes. She would tell Raven later.

When they pulled up to Hotel Spectre at last, Abby could feel something was wrong. Nothing was visible in the hotel lobby as Abby and Max pushed the midwife around on the luggage cart, but she could feel something was happening elsewhere in the hotel.

It wasn't even four o'clock yet, but Abby wanted to find her creatures and her Guard and draw them to her. Not for her safety, for theirs.

## Chapter Nineteen

Miranda had been surprised by the familial affection after the execution verdict, but when the key was pressed into her hand, she understood. She was not to disgrace her family name this way. She needed to go out fighting.

But she was so tired. Abby was good for Xander, good for the crew on Oak Point Way and if she didn't miss her guess, she was going to try to be good for the half-bloods. She was a woman who needed to be respected and kept alive and free to use her talent. It was a pity that Miranda's own talent wanted to kill her.

When her guards locked her into her cell, she sat for a long time, looking at the key and contemplating what it would mean to use it. Her guards were powerless, she didn't need to worry about them as long as she didn't leave her cell. They would have no idea that anything was amiss until a mage on another floor figured something else. By then, it would be way too late.

She had a decision to make. To die as the

council had decreed or to take the hotel and its occupants down with her. Miranda glanced at the clock. She had time to make her choice, but that time was running out.

\* \* \* \*

"Hey, do you two feel anything?" Abby was fidgeting at the end of her play date.

"Like what? Nausea from you two spinning me on the cart?"

"No. Like something is about to happen."

Max cocked her head. "No. Should we?"

"I don't know. Something feels off. If you have friends or clients who don't need to be here, then you should probably get them out of the hotel as soon as you can." Abby's voice was sure, but she didn't know how she knew.

"Gregori won't be up for a while. I kept him up into the wee hours of the morning. As soon as he is awake, I'll haul his carcass out of the hotel."

"I will suggest to my client that this many conflicting magics are not good for her or the baby. That might work." Raven was taking it just as seriously as Max.

"Okay. You two get going on that, I am going to try and find the gnomes and have them prepare for anything." The girls looked at each other and then back to Abby.

"Anything? They can do that?"

"You have no idea." She fondly remembered the *boom*. "Go. I need to ask some questions of the front desk." She sashayed up to the pale green woman who had given her such a lovely time at check-in. "Hello."

"Hello, Nexus. How can I be of service?" She was practically vibrating with tension.

"Where are the stairs?"

She looked alarmed. "What stairs?"

"The stairs that were here before the elevators were installed or created, whatever." Abby was drumming her fingertips lightly against the countertop.

"I...don't know. Let me get the manager." This time she scuttled off at speed and the manager arrived seconds later. "The Nexus wants to know where the stairs are."

"The stairs?" She looked alarmed. "Is there something wrong with the elevators?"

"No. But I am having a slight problem with enclosed spaces today. I need to walk up and down the stairs for the rest of the day." She could claim neurosis without any problem, if it would get her what she wanted and that was access to the stairs.

"Oh. Of course, Nexus. This first Summit must have been a trial for you." She hauled a chatelaine up from a chain on her waist and started to sort



through keys. "Here it is." She snapped the key free of the links and handed it to her, then turned to show her the way to the stairs. The hidden doorway was right next to the elevators. "It takes a small bit of magic to activate the door, but that should not be a problem for you." She nodded to the wall and waited until Abby's gliding hand caused the door to spring into existence.

The key fit the lock and as she eased the door open, she put the key in her bra. It may fall out of her pocket, but never her bra. Nothing left her bra without her permission. As soon as she took her first upward steps, the urgency took her over. Something was happening, it was not good, and she had just taken on the slowest manner of getting there. The thirteenth floor beckoned and Abby was regretting that cheesecake.

\* \* \* \*

The families had arrived early and the children were busy chasing the gnomes around the floor to get more of the necklaces that Abby had left for them and the gargoyles and gnomes were having fun with the budding magic users. Xander smiled and watched all of the groups together, smiling and laughing at the antics. Everyone had arrived long before five o'clock in the afternoon in an effort to get the last bit of connection out of the

Summit.

The kids were playing games, the adults were standing and talking or taking a swim in the pool, both with and without tails. He hoped Abby was enjoying her time away. After the trial, he understood her need to get out of the surroundings that had cost Miranda her life.

Miranda. If she had just come to him or anyone in his clan at any time before the Nexus Project, she could have been guided through her power until it was defined and controlled. Instead, she had kept it hidden and Abby had almost died. And she had had to rescue him, how humiliating was that?

He was hoping that one day he could share his complete lineage with Abby and that she would understand, but this event was neither the time nor the place for that bombshell.

Seesee was over with her nieces, cuddling with Georgia and looking wistful. It was times like this that Xander despised the restrictions that were put on the gorgons eons ago. Only three could be powered at any time and there were always six. Three with power and three to receive the next generation.

Laura was lounging in the pool while Verne hovered nearby. Xander wondered idly when they would set the date. He was jealous. He knew it wasn't yet time for him and Abby, but being one

of the few people who knew that the first female Nexus had married and had children made him wonder if Abby wanted to follow in her shoes or if the creatures would be enough.

During the Summit, he had been dragged off twice to defend Abby's right to be free and to learn her talent inside and out. Her demonstration at the second day of the trial had both impressed and frightened the spectators. They loved her power, but were afraid she might decide to turn it against them. It was a natural fear, but anyone who knew Abby also knew that using her power aggressively would be her last resort, not the first.

He hoped she was having fun. Max and Raven would pull her back into the human world without any difficulty, he just hoped that she chose to return.

\* \* \* \*

Abby wasn't in great shape. By the twelfth floor, she was almost done in. Leaning against the wall, she collected herself and straightened as much as she could. "I solemnly swear to eat better and exercise if I plan on fighting evil." She gasped for a few more seconds. "Ever again."

She was close enough to feel her creatures and she held her breath as she called them.

\* \* \* \*

The gnomes were gone and the gargoyles were no longer taking dive bombs at the buffet table. Something was wrong. For the thousandth time, he wished that he had a direct line into Abby's mind, or that cell phones worked in the hotel. She was calling them from somewhere and with the speed of their disappearance it was urgent.

"Seesee, Verne, with me." Xander started to leave the gathering and he got to the hall in time to see the gnomes disappear into the wall between the elevators. He had almost reached the spot where the gnomes vanished when he stopped. A deep violet cloud was billowing down the hall, gaining speed as it approached. That cloud was not a good thing, it reeked of malice. "Get everyone back into the room at the gathering. We need wards and we need them fast."

Seesee grabbed a few warlocks and elves, shoving them to Xander for direction as he started to build up a wall of protection in the giant opening of the great hall. Speed was a factor as they worked. As the cloud collided against the newly forming wards, the gathering came to a halt. Everyone watched, feeling the malignancy of the power that had been stopped just a few feet from them.

"Xander, what is going on?" Amellix was

standing between the seething wall of energy and her children.

"I don't know. But I do know that Abby is on the other side of whatever that is and that she is safe. So I am not nearly as worried as I should be." He sat down and rubbed his face with both hands.

Celia looked at Xander and tried to assuage his worry. "She is safe and you will eventually live happily ever after. There is just some stuff you have to work through first."

"If things don't change this afternoon, I sincerely doubt it."

One of the elves promoting the ward came toward him. "Xander, there is something out there eating the power. The wards are draining at a steady pace."

That was the clue he needed. "It's Miranda."

"I thought she was being kept sedated."

"Her mother could have burned it out of her system in that one hug. Damn it! I knew there was more to that familial sympathy than met the eye." Those psychotic cows that Miranda called family had helped her escape. "The Simmons clan is not going to fare well through this if anyone in this room survives."

"We can hold the ward for a few hours, but eventually whatever that cloud is made of is going to come into this room and we are trapped here. Sitting ducks."

## Chapter Twenty

She set up their war-room on the eleventh floor. Whatever was going on seemed confined to the thirteenth.

Abby had a headache. She was holding all the magic generated by her tension inside and her skin wanted to fly apart. When Bitsy finally tapped her on her leg to get her attention, she sighed in relief. "Did you get them?" Her entourage had been gone for what seemed like hours. She had sent them off to collect explosives the instant after she had hugged them all to assure that they were safe.

The smiling faces said it all.

"Good. Then light them up, one at a time. Buffy, Angel, get me a large basket or a backpack." Abby reached out to get the fruits of the gnomes' scavenging. "Excellent work. Now, let's get started."

The clock was ticking. Because of her lack of power, they couldn't sense where Miranda was,

but fortunately, she still seemed obsessed with killing Abby. *Yeeha*.

The first fuse on the firecrackers was lit and then it was a matter of counting down. A second before the pop, Abby encapsulated it and froze it. She then repeated the procedure thirty seven times. She felt relief when it was over, the magic drained into holding bubbles and her only weapons.

"If it worked once, it should work a second time. Now, if only I could power up enough to get through that barrier, I would feel a whole lot better." She wasn't talking to herself, but her creatures couldn't come up with an answer. She drummed her fingers against a table and tried to come up with more of a plan of attack.

She had her weapon, the exploding balls of firecrackers. Now she needed to get them and herself through the no-magic barrier that Miranda had erected. Each floor that had been occupied was covered with that purple power-sucking smoke. Tension was mounting in the building, Abby could feel it. The barrier must be closing tight. Miranda had taken the idea of bubbles and made it her own.

Abby's fear was slowly building the power levels, but not fast enough for what she needed. She needed a boost that would protect her and let her pass through the power sucking vortex.

Despite his recent distance, she needed Xander.

As she thought about him, a shadowed figure entered the room and stopped a few feet in front of her. It wasn't Xander.

\* \* \* \*

"I have to get to Abby." He was pacing restlessly in the tightening crowd of magical creatures. The other Guards of Oak Point were just as jumpy as he was. They knew that she would stop at nothing to get them free and clear, but she may not survive the process if she had to do it alone. Wherever Miranda was, not one of the mages or seers could find her. And they were really looking.

Laura rested her hand on his arm. "She will do what she can, in the meantime, we need to figure out how to get out of this bubble."

"She needs me. I can feel it." He paced back and forth, fighting the urge to charge the gray mist that bordered the atrium.

"Can you meet her on the psychic plane?" Seesee came to him, one of her nieces clinging to her thigh. "It seems that it uses a different level of magic, Miranda might not be able to block it."

"You have a point there, but do you think there is a place where I can get some quiet to try it?"

The little girl at Seesee's hip giggled. "You rhymed." She clapped her hands in glee. "Quiet,



try it." She looked up at him and was thoughtful for a moment. "You can have this if it will help." Georgia pulled her necklace down and handed it to Xander.

He could feel the power as soon as he touched it. "Abby gave you this?" The power pulsed and shifted in the plastic mardi gras beads that she had picked up at one of their stops.

The little one nodded.

"Did your sisters get one as well?"

"Yup, all the kids did."

With dawning hope, Xander looked out over the groups of magical families who were huddled together. His eyes pinpointed the brightly coloured beads on each child's neck. "Seesee, can you go and collect the beads? I am sure that Abby will recharge them after this is all ratified."

"Gotcha, Xander. Hey, Georgia, let's go and ask the kids for their necklaces nicely, okay?"

"It will help Abby?"

"It will. So let's get started." Seesee enlisted the help of her other nieces and soon they were making their way through the crowd. Some of the children snivelled at having to part from their shiny necklaces, but their parents calmed them and told them that they would be helping the nice lady who gave them the pretties to begin with.

In fifteen minutes, Seesee had enough necklaces collected to cover both of her arms from shoulder

to fingertip. "Okay, I have them. Now what is your plan?"

He looked at the enormous collection of enchanted beads and smiled. This was going to pave his way back to Abby. "I need a dozen of them looped together into a rope. A small corner to meditate and a few feet of space. Also a curtain for privacy would be good."

"I'll get Salleth to set it up." Seesee dumped the beads on a nearby table and whispered to Georgia. The little gorgon started to loop the strands of bead into a rope. Apparently braiding was linked to the XX chromosome.

Flexing his fingers, Xander tried to send his mind out past the barrier. It was thinner on the psychic plane, but still there. With the beads and Seesee's help, he should be able to punch through.

Salleth waved her hand to call him over and Georgia followed with her craft project mostly assembled. "Excellent work, Georgia, or do you prefer Georgie?"

"Georgia, please. My mommy named me for a reason." The tiny voice was a prim version of Seesee's and he couldn't help but smile.

Privacy screens had been taken from the cabana to make his meditation zone. He would have privacy, enough power to punch through the barrier and enough energy to bring him back safely. He hoped.

"When are you going to try it?" Seesee hovered near him, her hair weaving wild patterns in the air. Her hands kept a solid grip on Georgia and the little girl concluded the rope.

"May as well be now. If the barrier starts to shrink, we will have even less time. Give me five minutes and then try and wake me. I am going to start now." Xander took a position on the cushion that Seesee's other niece had provided. Georgia surrounded him with the beaded rope and he could feel the power around him. Abby had really charged those bead strands.

He took several deep breaths, wrapped the power around his mind and then left his body, heading for the barrier. It was now or never. With everything in him, he reared back and punched into the wall of un-magic. Xander was hoping that Abby had a plan on the other side, because all he could do was help her call more magic.

\* \* \* \*

"Abby. It is so nice to see you again. I had hoped to meet you for the second time in more structured circumstances, with Xander's introduction, but thanks to the null's attack I have had to venture out." The voice was female, but nothing else was familiar.

"Have we met?" Abby felt her eyebrows draw

together in confusion, but the gnomes were not alarmed so she knew that there was no immediate threat.

"Once, a long time ago." Thin pale hands reached to flip back the hood of the cloak and suddenly a memory surged into Abby's brain, "My name is Elspeth and you saved my mother and my village as I knew you would."

"Oh my god. You are Terranor's daughter. But that was years ago. How could you still be alive?"

"Come with me and I will show you." She held out her hand.

Abby took it. Nothing, no power transfer, just a solid grip and a friendly tug to get her moving. "Where are we going?" With the eleventh floor eerily empty, Abby followed the Halfling to the elevators. The doors slid open without any trouble. Apparently the facility was still functioning.

"To talk to my mother. She's in the basement." Elspeth pressed the button for the basement as the doors closed and smiled brilliantly at Abby. "It is so nice to see you again."

"It is nice to see you again as well. I can honestly say that I never thought I would see you after that one moment."

Elspeth was still smiling. "I knew that I would see you again, but I thought that you had had enough shocks for one lifetime at that moment."

"Wait. Why would Xander be introducing us?" The bell chimed and the doors opened to a luxurious expanse of a meadow and the vast expanse of what seemed to be the outdoors. Less than half a kilometre away was a small village. Abby knew that village.

Elsbeth remained silent.

"Well, what does he have to do with this?" She was getting frustrated and her power spiked again.

Terranor approached them and stood just inside the warding stones that they had laid together centuries earlier. "Elsbeth, why is she angry?" She was as beautiful and human as Abby remembered, but there was a swirl of grey through her hair, the only sign of aging.

"She is asking me about Xander."

"What about my grandson? What has he done?"

Abby almost fell to her knees.

"She's surprised, bring her inside. I'll get some tea." Leading the way into her home, Terranor set about making some tea. "I am sorry for the shocks, but we have been trying to find a way to neutralize the null before she could strike. We miscalculated."

Abby's hands were shaking so hard she could barely grip the cup. Terranor's companion, Terza, patted her lightly on the back of the hand.

"Seriously, you are Xander's great great great great grandmother?"

"Oh. You are still on that. Yes. Elspeth wed one of the local villagers, Samoth, and their daughter left the safety of the wards to see the world. She and her spouse returned when she got pregnant, he was an elf of the northern expanse. Finland, I think you call it. When her daughter, Amelia, was born we moved to the new country, lock, stock and barrel. It took some doing to get enough sensitives together to effect the transport, but we got here and settled as far west as we could."

"Where is Strykr?" Mention of Terranor's husband brought a rueful smile to her lips.

"He is off at the library, we don't get wi-fi here. Samoth is with him, running through the perils of Google."

It surprised Abby for about a minute and then she started to laugh. "Let me guess, the Library of Congress?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess. So why don't you age?" This question was offered to Terranor. Abby twitched a bit. There was something tickling at her mind and she needed to focus on it.

"I do if I exit the village for too long. As long as I stay inside, I can stay alive and locked at one point in time."

"Abby, Xander is trying to talk to you on the

psychic plane." Elspeth grabbed a cookie from a plate and munched as rubbed her forehead.

She didn't bother asking how Elspeth knew, freaking Seer. "How do I let him make contact?"

"Just relax and open your mind. We won't pay attention, we swear." Xander's matriarchs winked at her in unison.

Abby was blushing, but she sat still, closed her eyes, breathed deep and sent her mind to the astral plane. He was waiting for her, but he was wavy. "Xander?"

"Abby. I am so glad you are safe." He came toward her and she went happily into his arms. There was no scent on the astral plane and that was what parted her from him finally. "Where are you?"

"I am safe. With your grandmother."

"Oh. Oooohhh."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was working up to it. It wasn't something that would come easily to me."

She snorted, "I guess not. But I am glad you know. It has explained a few things. Like how you knew exactly how to train me."

He grinned "That was pure skill, babe."

She punched him in the ribs. "Very funny. Tell me, how is your Grandmother Elspeth at temporal spells?"

"She is one of the most powerful spell casters

alive. Having her mother as a Nexus has been part and parcel of that distinction. She should be able to manage it. What do you need a temporal spell for?"

"I have a plan." Suddenly it occurred to her. "Are you safe? What is going on?"

"We are behind wards, but we can't keep the energy up indefinitely."

"Do you know where they were keeping Miranda?"

"A cell on the thirty-first floor."

The image of all those stairs flooded into her mind, she groaned. "If I swear that Miranda is no more, will the councils take my word for it?"

"I will make sure that they do, or Grandma will. Either way, no problem." Xander's voice took on an urgent tone, "Abby, whatever you are going to do. Do it fast. We are running out of mages to keep the wards up and I don't know what is happening on the other floors."

"Can I give you power through the astral plane?"

"I get the feeling that before you can transfer it, the barrier will stop it." His image wavered and her hands passed through him. "It's fighting me now. Will be waiting for an update. I love you."

"I..." She couldn't say anymore. He was gone. "Damn it!" With pounding fists on the table, she opened her eyes to see Terranor and Elspeth on



the other side of the room in polite conversation. They glanced over to her and drifted lazily to sit with her again.

Terranor started, "The barriers are all over the hotel, anywhere that there are staff or guests."

"She is on the thirty-first floor, is it locked off?"

"There is a pass key required." Terza scampered up the wall, took down a key hanging there and dragged it over to Abby. Terranor closed her eyes for a moment. "She has not sealed that floor. Her guards are unpowered and should be reasonable if you explain that you are the executioner."

"Do you actually think I will kill her?"

"I think the life of Miranda Simmons will end today. I have foreseen it." It was spooky, her voice was completely flat, but Elspeth was serious.

"I need something from you."

Xander's Grandma perked up.

"Is there a spell to reverse time about...thirty-six years?"

"Transient or permanent?"

"A reset. Back up thirty-six years and let time take over again. Is there something like that?"

Elspeth drummed her fingertips across her lips.

"How long do I have?"

"Xander asked me to hurry."

"Then we will hurry." Elspeth gestured and Terranor and Abby followed her into the

workshop. Books lined every wall and the seer was humming idly as she ran her hands over the spines. "Aha!" She struck like a snake, grabbing the book that called out to her. Placing the book on the table, she held her hands over the book and it flipped open. "This is it."

"Can you cast it into an object?"

"Sure. Terza?" The critter scampered off and found a button for the spell to be placed on. Elspeth chanted while sweat started to pour from her. When she finished she smiled. "All done."

Terranor stepped forward. "May I?"

"I would rather do this myself. I know Miranda a little, know how she might react. I need to hide this and carrying magic that matches the Hotel might spook her."

"But..."

"I will have the gnomes bring you some firecrackers and you can practice on them. Holding in the explosion is the hard part. The freezing in time happens automatically."

She looked like a child being offered a new toy, all hope and hyper. "Excellent. I will wait to practice until Strykr gets back." Rubbing her hands together with an evil grin, Abby saw the young mother that she remembered.

Looking at the button that was holding folded time, she took a deep breath. One chance to do it right. "I need a piece of paper."

Terza dragged some parchment over.

Abby took it with whispered thanks. Working carefully, she held out her hand and filled it with power, then she flattened that disk of power, turned it over and pressed it against the button. With her fingers arched into claws, she picked up her enchanted button and wrapped it in magic, front and back. When the spell was locked up and her magic was as smooth as she could make it, Abby folded the button into the parchment and slipped it into her bra, next to the key.

Terranor was looking at her in surprise. "I didn't know you could do that. I thought you would touch off the spell with that magic."

"Well, this is kind of tricky, but the magic isn't touching it."

"What?"

"When you push a ball of magic to a wall, you compress the unmagic space between the power and the wall."

"Right."

"So, here, I just pushed the unmagic space around the button. I kept it attached to the magic, if that makes any sense."

Terranor was nodding with dawning understanding, but her daughter just looked confused. "I understand it. You are pushing with the magic."

"Exactly. Now, Elspeth, can you do a

transportation spell? Something that could take three gnomes about five hundred yards?"

"Do you have an object?"

Abby frowned. She had her purse and it was pretty empty. A hotel pen hopped into her hand that that was it. "Here we go, a teleporting Hotel Spectre pen."

"A one-time trip?"

"Yup."

Less than ninety seconds later, the pen was bespelled and back in the purse. One click would set it off.

"Pens are easy."

"So are gnomes." Abby giggled at Elspeth and they listened for the telltale shuffles outside the domicile. "They are on guard duty. It has been quite the week." Something struck her, "By the way, please tell me that I can take the elevator to the thirty-first floor."

"If you go now, yes. In five minutes, no." Terranor had that faraway look again.

Abby hugged her tightly, the only other creature on earth that knew what being a Nexus was about. Xander could try, but he couldn't know what her days of self-control had cost her. "I will come back next year, if I am invited to the Summit."

"Or, perhaps I can come for a visit."

"That would be great."

“Or for your wedding to my great great great great grandson.”

“Back the truck up, Terranor. No one has mentioned weddings.” She used the time as an excuse to escape, “Oh, I am running out of time to use the elevator, got to go, sweetie.” Her urgency transferred to her gnomes and gargoyles and they ran in front of her, holding the elevator doors open as she bolted.

With the first Nexus and her daughter standing and waving goodbye, she waved back as the doors slid closed. “Thirty-first floor, please. Homicidal rogue talents.” Bitsy stood on Harbinger’s head to push the button and they were off.

Time to kill.

## Chapter Twenty-One

“*I* really need elevator music. Really.” Her creatures were raring to go, the tiny magical bombs at the ready. She needed to get them some little commando gear. The amount of time they spent getting psyched for battle was ridiculous.

With the gnomes carrying the basket of explosions, she was almost ready to leave the elevator when the doors opened on the thirty-first floor. Empty hallways led off the lobby and it was the glimpse of a guard down one of the halls that pointed her in the right direction. The guards snapped to attention as she approached and she eyed the double doors with trepidation.

“Nexus. We weren’t expecting to see you.”

“I am the designated executioner.”

“Sorry, ma’am. You don’t look like any executioner I have ever seen.”

She glared at the shorter of the two, the mouthy one. “Were you at the trial?”

“Yes, Nexus.”

"Then you saw me take a spell, drain it and throw it at the accused?"

"Yes, Nexus."

"I am currently full of power from the stresses of the last few days. What do you think that magical energy will do to you once I strike you with it?"

"It will probably hurt, Nexus."

"You are correct. Now if I don't manage to carry out the death order and Miranda makes it out of there alive, you can say I am a bad executioner, until then, remember who brought her down so that she could be captured in the first place." A hint of movement near her knees caught her eye. "Harby, they cannot have any of the shiny balls. We don't want them getting hurt, now do we?"

"What are those, ma'am?"

"Devices to control Miranda if she gets out of sorts before I can carry out the sentence."

The guards looked to each other for guidance and finding none, stepped aside. "We will give you five minutes and then we are coming in."

"Fabulous. I won't need that long. Open the door." They did as she ordered and against the instinct that screamed for her to run, hide, be safe, she stepped inside.

The so-called *cell* that Miranda was being held in was a well-appointed suite. It looked very

similar to Abby's own rooms and so it was without surprise that she found Miranda in the bathtub.

"Abby. So you came. Are my little barriers frightening your friends?"

"No. Not yet, but they are close to killing people and as I recall, you only wanted to kill me the last time we met." Abby's fear at being this close to the woman who tried to kill her was keeping her power pulsing hard, but she throttled it down so that Miranda wouldn't get spooked. The last thing Abby wanted was a naked null to deal with.

"This is true. But upon seeing the Summit and the variety of beings here to *see you* specifically, I changed my mind."

"Your family has already left, haven't they?"

"Hours ago. Right after giving me the tools to free myself."

"They didn't give you the tools. They made you a weapon. There is a difference."

She shrugged, splashing the waves of water over the edge of the tub. "It is all the same in the end. I will probably drain them last, just when they think they have won it all."

"That would be poetic, but I am afraid I can't let you do that."

"How are you going to stop me? Another begonia bomb?"



"No. I am going to end your life." Abby fumbled in her bra and brought out the button, unwrapping it with nervous fingers.

"With a magically charged button? Oh, you have to be kidding." Miranda leaned up in the tub, her bubbles still concealing her assets, and began to draw Abby's magic to her.

Tears in her eyes as she fought the pain that was ripping through her, Abby held the button toward Miranda with a shaking hand and it flipped into the tub. The instant that it contacted her exposed skin, a wave of magic pulsed away from Miranda and Abby jumped to contain it.

She forced her hand onto the button, slamming it onto the slick hip of her enemy as she fought her under the water and stripped the power protecting the spell completely away.

Miranda's eyes widened with shock as the spell surrounded her and Abby yanked her hand back as the temporal magic took hold. Water foamed and churned as Miranda screamed as she fought the spell, then went silent.

Abby darted forward and pulled the infant from the water before it could drown. She wrapped the squalling little girl in a towel and called her gnomes into the bathroom.

"Ruffles, Skint. I want you to take this baby and teleport to your rooms. Stay there until I come for you. Order milk from room service and give it to

the baby if she is hungry, but keep her out of the view of the public." She fished the pen from her purse. "Hold this pen and click it when you are ready to travel."

She turned her back to them while they wrangled the screaming, kicking infant and addressed her other creatures. "Everybody, grab some balls and start flinging. I don't want those guys to have a clue as to what transpired here." She looked to her troops. "Are we ready?"

At the nods that her troops gave her, she smiled. A genuine, relaxed smile. For the first time in weeks, she felt that all was almost right with the world. Well, her world. "Okay, let's go!" Abby grabbed two of the explosions and threw them into the bathroom. The rest were dispersed by her creatures and she started to run, pulling her magic back into her as she went. The explosions ruptured the silence and they threw the doors open, running from the devastation that they left behind them.

"Go. Run. She's gone and this place is going to blow!" The dramatic script was over done, but with the explosions constant and the confusion of noise and smoke, the guards ran into the room for a few feet, then turned and followed Abby and her crew through the halls as the explosions continued. Thirty-seven bombs was just enough to get them all into the elevator and as the doors

closed, Abby breathed a sigh of relief. "Miranda is dead. She imploded."

"How did that happen?"

"I surrounded her with magic and she imploded. I don't know how, but I do know that you won't find her in this hotel." She shrugged and pressed the button for the thirteenth floor. The space near the elevators was choked with people, but with some attention to her surroundings, she pinpointed Xander talking to Seesee near the wall. Pushing her way through the crowd, she hurled herself into his arms.

"Abby. Oh gods. I was terrified that you had confronted Miranda. The barrier disappeared a few minutes ago."

"I did."

"What?"

"I did confront Miranda. She is gone. Dead. Ceased to exist. Eradicated." She was speaking loud enough to be overheard and her Guard were suddenly around her, stopping the effusive congratulations that were trying to spill onto her. The crowd suddenly cheered, realizing that she had saved them from the mist generated by Miranda. "I thought you should know that the Simmons's had a hand in Miranda's attack. That is why they aren't in the hotel right now. They wanted her to take everyone with her and die in the process."

"Abby?" Xander could not seem to get his mind around it.

"We need to get back to our rooms. It is important that I get away from this group." The energy that was rioting through the room was catching. Abby's skin was tightening as it tried to hold it in. The faces grew closer and closer and after days of the strain, she lost it. With a deep breath, Abby let loose a pulse of power that rang through the halls of the hotel. It recharged all the beings who had held the wards for their friends and families, it refreshed the tired and exhausted workers, it gave the gnomes and gargoyles a spring in their step and it caused Abby to faint.

Voices surrounded her as her eyes fought the light being shined in them. "Ow. Ow. Ow. Fucking ow." She groaned as she tried to sit up. Abby slapped at the flashlight that Bitsy was shining in her face. "I know you saw that on television. Stop it. I am up. If you want something useful to do, get Harby and bring Raven here." He looked relieved at the task and grabbed her first gnome to fetch the midwife.

"Abby, are you alright?" Seesee was hovering nearby.

"Yeah. Just a little tired." The pillow she reclined against shifted and she looked up into Xander's eyes. "I am fine and the business of

Miranda is taken care of." *At least for two decades*, she amended to herself.

"Why did you send for Raven?"

"All will be made clear in a few minutes." She grimaced at the pounding in her head. She hadn't been this empty of power in a really long time, or so it seemed. "I hope."

"Can you sit up?"

"Will you let me?"

"Yes."

"Then I probably can. Can I get some water?" Laura handed it to her as Xander propped her up. The room was full of watchful eyes all trained on her. "I am really fine. What is the problem?"

"We never expected you to have to kill, Nexus." There were tears in Laura's eyes.

Abby reached out to take her hand. "It isn't as bad as that. You'll see." She squeezed the hand that she held. "Wait until the gnomes get back. The situation will be made clear."

The room at large fidgeted as they waited and when Raven made her appearance, they all turned back to Abby with expectant looks. She stood, wavered, steadied and chirped, "Back in a minute."

Raven looked at her askance as she passed, but Abby merely winked and went down the hall to the first of the gnome rooms. She knocked and when there was no reply, she went to the next

room and knocked again. "Open up, Ruffles, Skint." The door swung open and a gnome covered with baby spit opened it. "Thanks, Skint. I can take her now." The look of relief was comical.

She slipped into the room after waving at Xander who was watching her from the suite's doorway. Inside was a mess, but it was one of the ghosts rocking the baby that made her laugh. Ruffles was flat on her back, tutu askew. She made a mental note. Gnomes were not babysitters.

"I think I can take her now." The spectral woman nodded and handed the infant over. The baby smiled at Abby and she felt her heart beat a little harder in her chest. She had done the right thing. Cradling her in the crook of an arm, she made her way back to the suite.

Xander took one look at the pale bundle and fell back, confused. "What, who is that?"

"That is up to Raven." She swanned into the suite and plopped the infant into Raven's arms. "Look what I found."

"Where did this precious one come from?" Raven swayed and cooed at the little cherub.

Abby checked to make sure that the door was closed. "It's Miranda. I had a friend prepare a spell and it blew a temporal rift open, taking her back to her infancy. I figured that if she had a proper upbringing with people who loved her, nurtured her talent, and accepted her for what she was, that

she might turn out differently.”

The room wasn’t in an uproar. They were all too shocked, staring at the little bundle in the hands of the baby catcher. The little girl chuckled and waved her arms.

“Raven, can you arrange a birth certificate for her?”

“I can. Give me a few days.” She swayed a little and the bright blue eyes closed, one pudgy fist stuck in her mouth. “What shall we do with this little bundle in the meantime?”

Abby ran her hands through her hair. “I have thought long and hard on that. Seesee, would you take this child into your home, to raise as your own adopted daughter?”

Raven took the hint and carried the little one over to the stunned gorgon. Seesee may have been conflicted, but her hair was not. It reached out to caress and cuddle the child, lifting it gently and bringing it close. What could Seesee do but hold the little girl tightly to her?

“I think Gaia would be a good name and would match the rest of the Montrose family.” Abby peeked over at the little girl being held in Seesee’s careful arms.

“Gaia. It’s a good name.” She smiled and her eyes watered. “I will have to have a shower. I need a ton of baby stuff.”

“So you will do it?” This was the only portion

of the plan that Abby had not been able to predict with certainty.

With a sobbing hiccup, Seesee looked down at the sleeping face. "How could I not? I was her friend, I will embrace being her mother." Tears tracked down her cheeks. "A baby of my very own, I never dared to dream it."

"Seesee. No one knows about the baby except the people in this room, so you had better stay in while we get some basics from the Dealers' Room. Xander will have to teleport you back with Gaia because you can't stay at the Summit with her. I'll babysit while you make your withdrawals to your family. We will head out in a day or so and be with you as soon as we can."

Seesee was lost in a baby-scented world. Abby doubted that she even heard her. She addressed her creatures, "Boys and girls, I am going out shopping and don't want anyone coming in here before we get back. Not room service, not Celia. No one. Barricade the door if you have to. Do you understand me?"

The solemn faces nodded.

"The rest of you, we have some shopping and rumour spreading to do. Seesee has been short-listed for a baby and is expecting notice at any moment. She didn't want to tell anyone until she got confirmation." They were nodding in assent. "Then let's go." She grabbed the pouch full of



magically charged glass beads and headed for the door.

The gnomes closed ranks as they left and Seesee hummed to herself and the baby, happily.

Abby asked Xander, "How do we tell Miklos?"

"Very carefully, he is pointy."

She snorted with laughter. It was nice to have a moment of peace after the pressure of the last few weeks. With a new baby in the neighbourhood, who knew how long it would last?

## Chapter Twenty-Two

The shopping was far too easy. With the amount of children that attended and the popularity of Raven's services, it wasn't too much of a stretch to realize that babies were big business here at the Summit.

"Alright, we are here to find baby stuff for the imminent arrival at Oak Point." She looked at the men as well as Laura. "I want you to sing out as soon as we see something suitable. We need a basinet, a car seat, cradle, bedding, and clothes, clothes, clothes."

"Gotcha. Let's roll." Laura grinned and led the charge to find things for the baby girl who was joining the neighbourhood.

At the first baby-related stall that they attended, they looked speculatively to Laura and Verne, which left Abby laughing her ass off. Oh, this was going to be fun. Everyone thought the baby items were for them.

With rueful looks at her, they let the rumour

mill get rolling. When the next vendor looked at them the same way, Abby let her snickers run amok. They didn't even need their cover story. It was too funny. When Abby rushed to a hand carved cradle giving off a soft magic, she squealed, "Xander, look. It's perfect." She got her own share of speculative glances. Darn it.

"Is it for you?" The vendor, a burly goblin of blurred heritage, asked her with a friendly grin.

"What? No. No, it's for a friend. I thought since I was here that I should do some shopping for the baby shower." She knew she sounded defensive, but the thought of having her own little darling in that crib was too tempting.

"It has a relaxation spell on it, so the baby will get a better night's sleep. I carved the dragons and fairies myself."

"You did wonderful work. How much are you asking for it?" She settled in for a long haggling session while her crew waited behind her.

"Three hundred?" He looked a little unsure.

"Done. Sort of. Will you take magic in exchange?"

"Of course." He waited while she fished out the pretty pebbles. "Can I interest you in the matching blankets and beddings?"

"Sure." She flipped another bead next to the others and his eyes gleamed with appreciation.

"Boy or girl?"

"Girl, I think. Pink, yellow, or purple would be good." He gave her a sceptical glance and dug through his supplies. A vibrant purple was the colour of choice. Apparently, goblins liked colour.

"Can we pick it up on the way out of the Dealers' Room?"

"Of course. I will put it aside for you with a sold sign on it." He immediately took it off display and hid it under a swath of fabric.

Abby nodded, took one of his cards and continued down the aisle to look for more baby stuff.

They came away with self-heating bottles that were always the correct temperature, colour changing diapers that would warn you when they were occupied and Laura and Abby spent far too much time cooing over tiny gowns and dresses, one of which was donated to the effort by Galfor. The designer was tickled at how much the Nexus had enjoyed her gown and she swore to make as many dresses or gowns as Abby required now that she had her measurements. The tiny silken baby gowns she had were just too cute and Abby spent a lot of currency at her stall.

"Okay, boys and girls, I think we had better get back. Let's collect the big stuff. Boys, you get to carry." Abby and Laura were weighed down with bags, but it was a happy burden. The cradle was just as beautiful when they picked it up as it was

when Abby first saw it. She hoped that Seesee liked it.

They trooped back to the elevator, their hands laden with their burdens. Abby got to push the button for the first time since they arrived. The tingle of Terranor's magic was palpable. If she had done this earlier, she would have noticed that power signature, the flavour of the magic. She shook her head and sighed.

When they got back to the fifteenth floor, as soon as they opened the door, they could hear the baby. "I guess we were gone longer than I thought." They sprinted en masse to the suite and when they opened the door, a harassed Seesee looked at them gratefully.

"Abby, your babysitting starts now. I am going to see my sisters and explain the new arrival to Miklos as soon as he wakes. I hope you found diapers and I will be back soon."

Abby only had enough time to drop her parcels and grab the soggy infant as Seesee ran past her. "Well, Gaia. You are making a terrible fuss. Let's get you into clean clothes and get food down you. Okies?" She held the baby at arm's length and made faces. The gnomes were cowering on the other end of the suite. "Goobers, get me the changing pad and some of those damp sensitive diapers." They scrambled to be of service while staying as far away from the screaming baby as

they could.

She laid Gaia out on the changing pad and took care of the most obvious source of her unhappiness. "Guys, get me one of the baby bottles and some milk. I don't care if you have to milk a goat, she needs milk." One of the pretty dresses that Laura had picked out looked lovely on the tiny tyke. The baby snuffled and sucked her fist in frustration.

The noise of the infant screaming didn't bother Abby and that made her smile. The gnomes had desensitized her. When Gaia's little eyes went wide, her caregiver looked up and saw the gargoyles acting as a living mobile. "Thank you."

A rinsed but empty bottle appeared at her elbow and less than three minutes later, a panting Splint arrived carrying a carton of goat's milk. "Way to go. You are staying on my Christmas list, Splint!" She carefully poured half a bottle full of milk and sat amazed as it heated to blood temperature. Scooting Gaia into the crook of her arm, she slipped the nipple of the bottle between the plump lips and immediately the little wonder clamped down and started eating. "Prep me another bottle, she is a little hungry."

She sat on the couch and fed the little miss until she stopped eating, then took a cloth and draped it over her shoulder to burp her. As she rubbed the baby's back lightly, the gnomes looked up at her

worshipfully. "Thanks, guys, but you can take five." With a mighty belch, little Gaia settled her dinner and Abby shifted her around so that she was leaning against her torso while she talked to Xander. "So. How often are you going to babysit when Miklos and Seesee have a playdate?"

He looked a little shocked. "I don't know. I think I will practice with you for a while and let you give me the required training." He sat next to her after carefully moving the changing pad.

The door swung open and a breathless Seesee came through it. "What did I miss? I finished saying my goodbyes as soon as I could." A stunned Miklos trailed after her

Wow. So her frantic exit had not been to escape the infant, but to return to it as fast as possible. "Um. I fed her, changed her, and burped her. Not necessarily in that order."

"Oh, that dress is adorable. What else do I need?" Seesee took a notepad from the desk and started to write.

"Well, you need some baby wipes, penaten cream, and a supply of milk. I fed her goat's milk today and she seems to be tolerating it fairly well." She picked the baby up and cuddled her against her chest as she talked to Seesee, walking always worked for soothing babies and to help her focus. "We have a basic selection of clothes, some colour changing diapers so you can tell when they are

loaded, bottles that are self-warming. A lovely crib with a set of crib blankets. You still need a car seat, any other kind of portable blanket or play centre that you want. There are a few cuddly quilts and fluffy toys that the guys picked out."

Miklos was hovering nearby.

"So, how do you feel about the sudden addition?"

He blinked in surprise at being addressed, his full attention had been on the little creature kicking and punching the air.

"I am happy that you were able to resolve the situation in such a manner, but it is a bit of a shock to be a Daddy after all these years."

Abby smiled at that. "Did you want to hold her?"

He reached out, then pulled his hands back. "I might hurt her."

"That is a phrase that has been stated by men for centuries. She won't break. In fact, she is quite bouncy." Abby showed him how to hold his arms and before he could change his mind, she dropped the baby in them and then held her in place while he got settled. "There you go. You are a natural." She stepped back and noticed his posture. "You can walk around if you want to." The baby was starting to fret. The stiffness in his arms was translating itself to her. "Relax. If you don't, she will feel it and we will hear it."



He immediately walked toward Seesee and she watched him with a fond gaze. "Show me how to do it right."

Softly, she whispered to him, "You are doing just fine. Support her head and rock her a little."

He nodded and followed her every whispered instruction with dedication. Her hair caressed the combination of her boyfriend and new baby with a slow sensuality that was hard for Abby to watch. Her throat closed up at the sight of the new family being born in front of her eyes.

This was the best thing that had been brought to life since Abby became the Nexus.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Miklos had remained behind to take Seesee's place in the active Guard. He would get his rest later, after his duty had been done. Gregori had given him enough of his blood to sustain him and Miklos had been authorized to skip his duties to the Guild Master.

"Bye, Seesee. See you and the little one when we get home!" Abby was whispering as loudly as she could. Gaia was asleep and the pile of baby stuff was all around her and her new Mommy.

Xander took Abby's cue and whispered, "Are you ready?"

"You don't have to whisper, she is out like a light." Seesee nodded. "I am ready."

"Call us when you arrive."

"Will do. See you in a few days." She waved one hand at them and then a thunderclap resounded in the suite as the power flared from Xander's hands. When he lowered them, Seesee was gone.

Abby rushed to her fella and pressed her hands to him, filling his depleted energies with her own. The power rush that he had used had made her blink. No wonder they chose to pick and choose their uses of magics. It really hurt them and they may even spend too much and do permanent injury.

"I am fine, Abby. Thank you, but you shouldn't be spending your energies on me."

"Who better?"

"Some of the council members who were caught in the cloud. They need boosting. A few are in a coma."

"Then why are we here? Why aren't we helping them?"

"I wanted to make sure that Seesee was safely away with her bundle. That is far more important." He turned and took her in his arms, rocking her while rubbing his hands up and down her spine.

A soft warmth flowed from him and Abby relaxed, letting the magic come. It was the most gentle of her charges yet, but one of the most powerful waves that had filled her. She whispered into his chest, "The magic is changing. Can you feel it?"

"Yes, it is changing and so are you. Yet, I love you more each day." He rocked her back and forth and her magic kept pooling.

"I...ah, have met your family. The ladies at least."

"Have you now?"

"Yes. I have to say, one of your grandmothers is most familiar."

"She said you would say that. I never understood about your little adventure until I got here and spoke with her. Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"It was complicated." Sure, going back in time without an escort, meeting the first Nexus and helping her create a community safe from time and magic. That fell easily into conversation, not.

He laughed. "I can imagine that it was. Things usually are where the Seer is involved."

Elsbeth's tiny serious face as a little girl was in her mind. She had goaded her mother into writing the book that would bring Abby through time centuries later. She had always been a complicated child, now she was a complicated adult. Just like her grandson. "Do you have the gift that your grandmother had?"

"Foresight? No. It only runs on the female side of the family. The ladies are the plotters and schemers."

"So it was your grandmother who sent you to me?"

"No. It was Celia."

"But she only foretells love."

"I know. Who knew that love would lead me into adventure and disaster?"

She laughed and nuzzled against his shoulder. "It has always been my place to fall into weirdness, but usually it was just a sci-fi convention. My life has surpassed that level lately."

He snickered, but said nothing.

It was self-evident. She was right. Part of her hated being right.

"Are you willing to help those who are drained?"

"Of course. Lead the way." She pried herself away from him, then took his arm in hers. Miklos stood nearby, with Laura and Verne watching them indulgently, she blushed. Public displays of affection were not her forte and way out of her experience level. "Sorry, folks."

"No problem, Abby. I would be all over Verne this very moment if it wouldn't cause a bit of a sensation here, not to mention our kind who don't like our union would be furious." Laura was remarkably chipper. "As soon as we get home though, stay away from the pool for a few days. I am teaching this wolf to go fishing." The frisky connotations were unmistakable and suddenly they were all laughing.

"Thanks. I needed that." Xander was smiling as they made their way down the halls. "Hang on to

the happiness, Abby. They have set up a triage on the ninth floor and that is where the injured and damaged are."

"I can't heal damages."

"No. But you can recharge the healers."

"Oh. Right. I keep forgetting that I can charge others the same way I can power you guys up." She sighed and shook her head. "This is taking some getting used to."

"There is a great big magical world out there. You have only seen the top of the tip of the iceberg." Laura smiled over her shoulder. She was in front with Verne with Miklos at the rear of the procession. The gnomes had disappeared again, with currency in hand, but the gargoyles were hovering overhead.

Groans and sighing were emanating from everywhere as soon as Abby stepped onto the ninth floor. "Why am I feeling my power everywhere?"

Xander looked sharply at her. "What?"

"My magic is everywhere on this floor. Literally, everywhere." She looked into the crowded conference room filled with cots and blinked in surprise at the sight of her gnomes doling out the glass beads to the wounded. Those who could still move were recharging, using the power in the beads.

The Nexus and her Guards were on their way

into the room when Xander's cell phone rang. He spoke quietly and then announced to the group, "It's Seesee. She is good, all tucked in, and one of her employees is bringing her some emergency supplies until she can get into town. She will see us soon."

They all smiled in relief. "Excellent. Now, let's charge up some drained people." Abby rubbed her hands in relief and headed for the first recumbent form, hovered over by a watchful wife. "Flyers, can you please identify all of the most serious cases and perch at their feet so that I can find them easily? Xander, stay nearby and scare me if I get a little low."

"That, or something else to charge you. Don't worry. You won't leave my sight." Xander knelt and whispered something to Harbinger.

The gnome shook his head, but then beckoned for one of the others.

Two of them scampered out of the room, but Abby only saw their disappearing silhouettes. Her first patient was of the goblin variety, severely drained and barely alive. He had given his all. A female that she assumed was his wife wept softly at his side.

"It came on so quickly he only had time to push us inside."

She didn't ask inside what, it didn't matter. "Stay strong, ma'am." She took the scaly claw in

her hands and brushed power against him until his eyes flicked open. She nodded formally and moved on to the next patient.

It became an endless cycle of touch, charge, nod, and walk. She gave them just enough energy to keep them alive without difficulty and to get them mobile again. She ignored the effusive thanks and kept plugging along.

Xander was as good as his word, he goosed her, unsnapped her bra, and dropped an ice cube down her back to keep her adrenaline-laden power up. Abby was exhausted by the time she finished, but she was happy that she had managed to help a few people while draining herself. At least, people knew the face of their new Nexus now. Even if it was only because hers was the first face that they saw after a coma.

As the last of the coma patients woke, she sighed, "I need some coffee."

Xander steered her to a chair in the corner of an unoccupied conference room that had a coffee pot percolating in the corner.

She fell upon it with ferocity, embracing the rush of caffeine over and over again. "I don't know how long I can do this."

"Do what, Abby?"

"Be around all these people. No wonder previous Nexuses went nuts. They grab at us with their minds. Like walking through a crowd in a



tight skirt. You expect them to look, but the touching catches you by surprise."

"One more day, Abby. Just one more day." As a mantra, it lacked poetry, but she would take it, especially when Xander murmured it in his dark honey voice.

"Well, I am leaving the instant that I can." She sighed as a warm lassitude filled her. The caffeine was wearing off far too fast. "I think I would like some —"

A dragon burst through the door. "I am tired of waiting, woman. Tell me who she is."

"She is a lovely woman with deep blue hair. She appears to be around twenty-five and is five feet eleven inches tall." She shrugged. "And she left right after the null cloud spread through the hotel. As soon as she was free, she and her family left the building."

He cursed and slammed his hand into the wall, denting the metal and tearing through the drywall. His energy got darker and stronger as she watched. He built the storm until it was no longer contained, the swirling dark energy wild with fury. It was too much.

"That's it. Knock it off!" She sucked in his energy and held it in her fist. "I came here for a little peace and quiet and you start throwing a temper tantrum about your non-existent love-life. Boo-hoo. You were flying or napping or whatever

the hell it is that you do and people were coming closer to death with each second. You selfish jackass."

She had the rant up and running now. She pulled more power from him and stood over him with the energy swarming around her hands. "Why would she want to leave her family and that happiness for an extremely long lifetime with you? What have you done to be worthy of her? What will you do once you have her, collect her and keep her like a jewel?" He leaned back as she kept taking, more and more. "She will come to you when she is ready and not before. Wait for her. You have nothing but time, use it wisely."

She pushed his power back into him an instant before he passed out. He reared up in shock and moved away from her as quickly as he could. He quieted and bowed. "I thank you for the information, Nexus. Farewell."

She was left with the residue of his fury still pulsing around her.

Celia came through the door and walked right up to her. "Abby. Have you considered yoga for your stress? It is easier than pulling power from mythical beings."

"Yoga? Are you kidding?"

"No, and no time like the present. Shoes off." The elf stripped off her shoes and waited for Abby to do the same. "This one will be particularly

effective for you, it will help you focus your energy. It is called *the tree*." She pulled her left foot up and rested it on her right thigh, then put her hands together and pointed them to the sky.

Abby looked over at her gargoyles who sat perched on different tables, watching with interest. "If I fall over, no laughing please."

Xander nodded and focused on pouring himself some coffee.

She took a deep breath and tried to pull her body into the pose.

Celia scuttled near and made small corrections to her posture.

When her foot was just so and her hands were together in a firm but loose manner, the elf stepped back.

"Okay, Abby, breathe. Let the energy flow through you and out your hands."

The strain of keeping her balance fell to the side as she began to relax into the pose. The excess energy started to emerge from her in soft pulses. It did not emit from her hands, but from her entire body. A truly freeing experience. When she felt balanced, she let out a deep breath again and put both feet back on the ground. "That was better. Thank you, Celia. What have you been doing?"

"One of our clan leaders was drained during the barrier's first occurrence. I was visiting."

The disapproving masculine voice emanated

from the corner of the room. "That wouldn't happen to be Devonish, would it?"

"None of your business, cousin." The blush and hostile glare told all.

"He won't consider you as a life partner with your pedigree. He wants power."

"Shut up."

"I don't mean to hurt you, cousin, but it is true."

She stomped off with a flounce and a wave as Abby yelled, "Thanks for the yoga. So she is in trouble being of less than pure blood?"

"Only with the elvish. The others don't care as long as she is inside the magical community." He chugged down his coffee with a certain amount of enthusiasm. "Shall we go?"

"Are we done here?" Abby slipped her sneakers back on.

"Yes. Yes we are." He held out his arm.

She took it gratefully. Her knees were wobbling, but she felt much more clearheaded after the yoga than she had been before.

"Back to the suite then. Did you want some dinner?"

"Sure. We can grab a burger on our way." As they left the conference room, she found out why they had not been disturbed, except for the dragon. Miklos and Verne were on either side of the room's door, but Laura was at the entrance to

the hallway.

“Sounds good.”

Abby called her creatures to her and they left the room to collective applause. She smiled and waved graciously to her fans, leaving the few scowling faces in a vault in her mind. She kept it light as she nodded to those she met on the way to the elevators.

Having more people out there who wished her ill just seemed par for the Nexus course.

## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

The closing ceremonies was her moment. The Room was completely packed. While the opening ceremonies had been rather sparsely attended, it seemed everyone who was still here was in the same room. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the Nexus."

The applause was gratifying, but they would not like what they heard next. "Thank you, Salleth. Over the past few days I have learned a few things about the magical community and this group of beings in particular. When I arrived here, I was excited, thrilled to be amongst so many unique and beautiful creatures who understood magic. What I have learned since then is that you understand how to use magic, but you do not understand it. Magic is a creative force. An energy putty that can take any form you choose to shape it to. Most of the beings here who control magic do it for their own ends. This is useless and it really honks me off." The titter of laughter spread

through the room

"The one thorn in my side has been the treatment of the half-bloods. Those who have one normal human parent. On the way here, I ran into two people who had talents that would awe each and every one of you, but they are out there, alone, with no one to share the joy of the magic that they can manipulate. They are alone because you have decided that non-powered humans are not worth associating with. For the majority of my life, I have been a non-powered human. It was great, I had friends, family and my share of troubles." More laughter ensued.

"When I activated as the Nexus, my world snapped shut. No new humans entered my life, but they are the dominant species on this earth. When I have hidden my power from my mother, I have known the isolation that comes from hiding my magic from those I love. This is something that the half-bloods live with every day.

"I propose an online society with safeguards to keep the non-powered humans from interrupting. Then if all goes well and there is enough of a demand, I propose mixers to be run here at Hotel Spectre so that they can meet others in the same boat and so that some of you can volunteer to be mentors for those with similar talents." There was a concerned murmur.

"For those who are concerned, you need not

participate. But these children were born of magic and they deserve to know it fully." She took a deep breath, now was the time to push for broke. "When I destroyed Miranda to keep the rest of you alive, I took the chance that she might kill me, to keep the rest of you alive. I risked my life and the life of my creatures for you.

"Run this pilot program for two years and evaluate the benefit. This is the one thing that I will ask of you and the only thing I want." She waited until the hubbub in the room subsided.

"For those on the councils who are wondering if it would be a good idea to keep me confined, I will give you one warning. Try it and you will become a non-powered human. I will pull the magic from you so fast that your head will spin." She looked over the shocked crowd. "Aside from those points, I had a great time. Go magic!"

A few hesitant claps started and then quickly drained away.

Abby smiled, handed the mic to a stunned Salleth and nodded for her Guard to take their places around her. The gnomes followed and the gargoyles hovered overhead.

They went to the elevator and Abby pushed fifteen. "Well. I guess we can go home now."

"Yeah. Before they lynch you." Miklos chuckled. "I have never seen so many open jaws without blood being spilled."



"Fine. Then when we get to the fifteenth, you guys go pack while I talk to some folks that need an update." Abby wanted to get back to the underground lair of the first Nexus, to say goodbye properly.

"Do you swear that you will be safe without an escort?"

"As safe as I can be with you. I trust them with my lives." She smiled. "I solemnly swear that I am in no danger and will come back in under two hours." Abby shooed them out of the elevator. "Now, go pack."

They were so surprised as the doors slid closed that she laughed. She hit the basement and waited for the door to open and disgorge her to the hidden level. The thick moss cushioned her steps, but lights were on in the village and she nodded to a few faces that she recognized. She knocked on Terranor's door. "Tea is ready. Apparently you started quite the stir."

"News travels fast."

"Well, I am part and parcel of the hotel now. What it knows, I know. And you have demanded that half-bloods get equal treatment. The elders are still screaming about it." She smiled and tilted her head in that quirky fashion that she had when she was listening to her children. "Yup. Still screaming about it."

"They will calm down. But we don't live in two

separate worlds anymore. We live in one big world where everyone is now connected. It is imperative for us to join together now, before the small pockets of magic collapse or die out. They just don't see it."

Terranor was pouring tea for both of them and all too soon, it came time for Abby to leave. "I know. You have to go. But it has been wonderful seeing you as Nexus in your own time. I hope that you can visit again, but after that conversation you had at the closing ceremonies, you might not be invited back." She was laughing as she rose to give Abby a hug.

"Then I may just have to crash the party. Hey, would you be interested in attending a baby shower on Oak Point Way?"

"That sounds like fun. Send me an invitation and I will be there." She smiled. "And even bring a gift, which I remember is protocol for these events."

"That sounds wonderful. I will see you there. But how do we explain you?"

"Well, we can tell the truth, or we can lie. In the past I have been an aunt or a cousin for the Desmith family."

"That reminds me. Why Desmith?" They were making their way to the elevator.

"Ah. That came from something that happened when last names came into vogue. They were

calling me The Smith. That changed to Deh Smith, which I changed to Desmith when my children and grandchildren left the village. We even make the men take our name. It's a proud heritage."

"It certainly is." She turned and enjoyed hugging the only other Nexus active on the planet. It was a warm hug, like hugging a mother who didn't always nag. "See you soon."

"Watch those gnomes. Oh, and consider pixies for your next creature. All of mine were harvested by unscrupulous wizards in an effort to steal their power."

"I think I already am. I have begun drawing them and pixies seem to be the most likely line of offspring." She gave Terranor one final hug and stepped into the elevator. "It has been fantastic to see you again. Be well."

Waving goodbye as the doors closed, Abby sighed in relief. She hadn't had to expose what she did to Miranda, but perhaps Terranor had already figured it out. She hadn't asked, but it was a logical conclusion to the spells that she had gotten Elspeth to prepare. Well, logical if you had a creative thought process. If not, she would probably put two and two together when she saw the new baby.

Her crew was waiting for her in the hallway outside the elevator. "Well, you are either ready to go, or this is a firing squad."

"We are doing what we can to prevent the latter. The gnomes have already taken one trip to load the cars and two of them are pulling your car around front for a quick getaway." Xander came toward her and they packed into the elevator en masse. No luggage carts, just an endless relay of bags and suitcases until they were all snugly assembled. "Is that everything?"

Everyone nodded with the exception of Abby. She had no clue, but anything she was missing could be replaced eventually. Getting them all away until the community calmed down was the imperative.

When the doors opened on the main floor, there was a crowd waiting. The two demons from the upper floor were there and waiting for Abby when she exited. They approached her with a steady pace and stopped a few feet in front of her as her crew emptied the elevator.

"Nexus Annabeth Hanover, we have been charged with the duty of taking you into the custody of the council." They took another step forward and then in a sudden move, turned their backs to her. "We are rejecting the order and offering you our protection for your safe exit from the hotel. We are at your disposal."

Abby blinked and the crowd gasped. She took a few steps forward and a goblin stepped forward, nodded and turned her back to Abby to keep the

crowd away. As she moved forward, people, creatures, demons and things she couldn't describe, all combined to create a tunnel that she and her Guard could walk through. A few members of the council tried to press past her champions, but they were dragged back by the crowd. The people had spoken and it was a resounding *yes* for the new Nexus.

Through the glass, she could make out Bluebell swinging onto the curb, Harbinger standing on the driver's seat and steering. He put the car into park, but left the engine running, then scampered around as the hatch opened. Stu, the troll bellboy, locked the doors open and helped them haul the baggage into the station wagon. Laura and Verne could drive the van empty, while the rest of them pulled up at the nearest gas station. She and the creatures could pack into the backseat for the big run. Better to be uncomfortable than to start a war.

She didn't have a chance to hug the new friends that were standing by, but she did give everyone a short wave from the backseat. In under a minute, they were under way with Laura and Verne in the van behind them. Abby had a lap full of creatures and was both happy and sad that the Summit was over for her.

Miklos and Xander were in the front, Xander driving and they both had their war faces on. They were ready for anything and driving a station

wagon. Somehow it made the situation a little less serious.

They hauled ass back down the highway until they reached the first service station and then they unpacked the back of the wagon so that Bluebell was a little less butt-heavy. The gargoyles immediately took over the cargo space, stretching wings and purring happily. "Aw, honeys, are you purring?" Abby reached over to stroke Buffy's fluffy head and she pushed against the hand on her head and a louder rumble ran through her. "I am so proud of all of you."

The gnomes cuddled up against her.

"All of you. You behaved, no stealing and I only got a report from the hotel once on your goblin porn fetish. Well done, all of you."

They preened and fluffed their hair, straightened their caps and looked very presentable.

"Now, for important things. Who wants new clothes when we get home?" The round of hands was not as unanimous as she thought. Skint definitely wanted a new outfit, but Harby and Bitsy were content. The girls each held up two hands and Abby laughed. But Splint looked unsure. "Hon, if I take your cast off, you will be fine. Your little crutch will be gone as well."

He raised his hand.

"Alright. New wardrobes are on the agenda."

She chuckled at the capering that ensued. Now for a long ride back home.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

“Home!” Abby couldn’t contain her shriek after the hellish car ride that had been twenty hours of torture with Xander and Miklos fighting for emotional supremacy. That much testosterone in a small space was enough to make her stampede out of the car and into the safety of number thirteen.

“Oh, baby. I have missed you.” She placed her hands on the hearthstone and poured twenty hours of frustration into the granite. The house sighed in welcome and she could feel the power pulsing under her feet. She sat there in quiet appreciation for several moments. Squeals of rage from the backyard let her know that the weeds had taken over the garden spaces. Abby rose to her feet when she heard her door open. “Oh. The bags. I forgot. Let me help.”

Xander grunted and put two of her suitcases down. “What? And deprive myself of an opportunity to do my masculine duty? Never.”



Smiling at his efforts, she gave him a quick peck. "My hero. Is that it?"

"Oh, no. There are all the bags of items that the gnomes picked up, as well as your gown." Xander grinned and returned her kiss with a quick brush of lips on the tip of her nose. "That was why we brought the van. Shopping at your first Summit is always irresistible."

"You have no idea. There were items there that I would have loved to have, but explaining them to customs would have blown their minds. I don't care if they were werewolves or not, there are some things they are better off not seeing."

"Let me know what I can do to get those items brought to you. The Nexus needs to be supplied with any tools that I can provide." His chuckle was wicked and she fought the urge to blush. He pulled her tightly against him, holding her by her hips and pressing her against his body from chest to knees.

"Aren't you tired after that long drive? I know you smell."

"Never that tired. I have been waiting for you to be alone and relaxed for a week." His hands roamed her back and she squirmed against him.

She sighed heavily and nuzzled his neck. "I still want a shower. Bitsy dumped some of his slurpee on me at the border when they froze for customs. They froze and then I froze."

His snicker stiffened her spine.

"You know I hate being uncomfortable. You aren't getting anything until I get a shower."

A new voice sang out from the doorway, "And I want the cars unloaded before you two get frisky." Verne was scowling from the doorway and Laura was carrying far beyond what a woman should have been capable of while wearing a designer outfit and heels. "Then you can have at each other for as long as you wish."

"You unload, I will grab a shower and confiscate any baseball caps that the gargoyles come back with. I want to stop seeing them on YouTube." Abby headed off to the shower, shedding clothing as she went. By the time her bra and panties were on the bathroom floor, she was almost drooling at the thought of her own shower, her own towels, in her own home. As the water warmed and she stepped under the spray, she let the tears come. She was home. She never wanted to leave again.

But how was she going to effect a change on the community if she wasn't in it? That was the problem. She must have been in the shower for a while because suddenly she had company and it wasn't knee-high company. It was aroused company and Abby was as happy to see him as he was to see her. She was lifted and held in position while he worked his way inside her and she held

onto him for dear life as he pressed her up against the slick shower wall and pounded into her until she threw her head back, cracked her skull and gasped with her orgasm.

While she caught her breath and wound down, she gasped, "I see stars."

"Thank you." He was smugly satisfied.

"I think that is the concussion that I gave myself that caused the stars, but you were great, too." He was still inside her. Softer, but still there. With an effort, she unclenched her thighs and he slid free. "It is so nice to be home."

He nuzzled her neck and held her tightly to him. "You can say that again."

"I think you got it the first time. Now let's get you dried off and wearing nothing but a towel around your hips, because I plan to molest you again. And possibly again." Abby pressed her lips against the pulse at the base of his throat and flicked him with her tongue.

He stood her up on wobbly legs and helped her towel off. "That sounds like an excellent plan. I hope you are up for it."

Abby was up for it once, slowly peeling the towel from him as he lay at her mercy on her bed, but as soon as she had finished riding him to both their satisfactions, she fell asleep on top of him.

She woke covered in gnomes and draped in

magus. A grin pulled her cheeks. This was truly what being home should be all about. The ones you love around you and... "Stop that, Harby. I am not a toy." She slapped the questing hand and snuggled back into Xander's embrace. "Go make breakfast, you little miscreants." She heard the giggles in her head as the feet pattered out of her bedroom. "They are really glad to be home."

"So am I. I was sure that the council was going to find a way to keep you."

"I am glad that I had more supporters than I thought."

"You have no idea. Do you even know what you have started?" He propped his head up on his fist and looked down at her.

"I have a pretty good idea. Family is important, to lose chunks of it due to prejudice or paranoia is a crime. You folks are almost like magical Amish, shunning anyone who leaves to marry outside of your community."

He thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "I suppose you could look at it that way. Are you cold?"

"The gnomes were keeping me warm because some lunatic forgot to climb under the covers before sleeping last night."

"Ah. That would have been me?"

"Nope, me. I was using you to keep me warm for most of the night. I should have just crawled

under the covers. My own stupidity." She snuggled up close to him and sighed. "But you are really warm."

"And we now have all the time in the world, so I am going back to my place, grabbing a change of clothes, checking my email and I will see you for lunch."

His kiss could have melted stone and morning breath was suddenly the furthest thing from her mind. "Fine. I am getting some breakfast and checking in on Seesee and Gaia."

"I still can't believe that you didn't tell me about that." A swift jump and he was out of her bed while she sat up and leaned forward.

"I didn't know if it would work. I would have taken care of her the old-fashioned way if there was no other choice, but I wanted to give her another chance."

With his jeans on and nothing else, he leaned forward and met her gaze, eye to eye. "You still could have told me."

"Not with all of the telepaths at the Summit. If I didn't know what I was doing, you couldn't possibly know. But it was really nice seeing Elspeth and Terranor again."

He looked at her silently for a long time. "When I get back, you are going to give me all the details of the first time you met the first Nexus." He left.

She covered her face in her hands. Damn. It had

just slipped out. She had just been happy to see friendly faces. Her little unsupervised time travel episode had not been something she had intended to share, but it obviously was wearing on her mind or it would not have slipped out.

She headed for the shower and noticed one other little matter. Neither she, nor Xander had bothered with protection last night. The proof was on her body and probably swimming north as she stood there. She did some math in her head and grimaced. All the stress of the last week had already thrown things *off*, there would be no way to tell for at least another month.

She might be starting her own Nexus line. Desmiths step aside, the Hanovers may be coming.

## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

With their breakfast duties, the gnomes had also wrangled together a banana cake, which Abby was holding as she wandered over to Seesee's house. She knocked and the wail of the infant made her smile. Seesee was coming to her door.

"You're home!" She was bouncing the little brunette on one shoulder and the baby's cries subsided as a belch broke the pattern. "She is really gassy. What kind of milk did you use at the hotel?" The usually tidy gorgon was looking pretty frazzled. Her shirt was spotted with spit-up and her hair seemed irritated.

"Goat milk. Pretty standard for lactose intolerant babies. My mom gave it to me and I grew up just fine. I can pick some up for you."

The woman looked so relieved. "Thanks. I have been asking for a few supplies, but I didn't want to give away too much before you all got here. It was a safety issue."

"Do you have a baby seat for your car?"

"Not yet. I need one of those. Actually I have a list of items that I would like, could I ask you to get them for me?"

"No problem. Just gimme the list and away I go." Abby was smiling. It was like having a regular girlfriend and helping her with a new baby. Seesee scribbled a few additions to the list and Abby was away, leaving the cake on the table near the door and laughing out loud at the addition of junk food. She ran home and grabbed her keys, then jumped into Bluebell.

She was starting her car when she froze. The last time she had tried to drive her own car, there had been a bomb in it. Panic started to rampage through her, power building with nowhere to go. Deep breathing helped. Putting the car into reverse and starting to drive was the key. The road was sparsely occupied and the town was just as she left it.

"Stuff for babies...stuff for babies," she muttered to herself as she looked at the small collection of shops. "Aha!" Something with pink and blue fluffy toys in the window. She took her list and did what she always did in specialty shops, simply handed it over to the shop clerk and let her run with it. It was far less frustrating than trying to pick out the nuances in the different styles of car seat.



The blankets and pads on the list piled up next to the car seat on the counter. "Is it for a friend?"

"More like adoptive family. It finally came through and the baby is literally on the way. She doesn't have half of what she needs because she was afraid to hope for it. This is all stuff that she will need when it gets here." It was close enough to the truth. When Seesee started to circulate with the little one, it would gain the baby immediate acceptance. "How about one of those baby Bjorn thingies?"

"Excellent choice. There. That's everything. How will you be paying for this?"

Abby whipped out her credit card and sighed with relief when the charge went through. Anything over a hundred bucks still freaked her out. She loaded up her car with help from the clerk. Apparently, if you spent over five hundred bucks, they carried it for you, even in a small town like Sargent.

She waved her thanks and drove to the next stop on her list. The grocery store. She grabbed the basics for herself and then all the baby formula, powders, creams, and disposable diapers. When the errands were done, she dropped off half of the food at her place, bringing the rest of it to Seesee. This time, Abby just strode in with the bags, went to the kitchen, warmed a bottle of goat's milk and handed it to Seesee on her way out of the living

room. Shuttling the bags, boxes and bins into the house only took her a few minutes. "There. Got it all. Now, give me Gaia and go take a shower. Go. Shoo." She scooped the baby out of her mother's arms and snuggled with her as she sucked noisily on the bottle.

Abby remembered something she had seen on television and turned the bottle so that the baby wasn't sucking in as much air, then sat back and rocked in the chair until the crib midget was full. Burping wasn't something she undertook lightly, she liked her shirt unsullied. She sat the little one up and rubbed her back. The air escaped in a rush, little Gaia smiling at her triumph.

"Hello, short stuff. How was your first teleportation. Was it fun?" A smell that was familiar and repulsive all at once filled Abby's nostrils. "That good, huh? Where does your mommy keep your changing stuff?"

A quick recon found the changing table, so with one hand, she grabbed the baby supplies she had picked up and with the other, kept hold of the little stinker. Changing the small one wasn't the most pleasant task, but with the proper equipment, it was less appalling than it could have been.

"There. You are all clean and neat now. Time for a nap." The baby cooed and gurgled, grabbing a fistful of Abby's hair and trying to stuff it in her

mouth. "No. My hair can't defend itself like your mommy's can. No munching."

Gaia drooled in response.

"Have you been all right?" Seesee looked recovered and much neater.

"Fine. I will keep the little princess here while you get something to eat. There is a banana cake on the end table, near the door. Start with that. It's gnome approved." She winked and bounced the baby while they followed Seesee through her house. "How have the last few days been?"

"Once she and I get into a schedule, things will improve. I just needed to have you nearby, I couldn't leave her alone, being what she is."

"What? Chubby and cute as a button?"

"No. The previous owner of the house next door."

Abby gave Seesee a long look. "This child has never been here before. Everything is new and shiny for her and for us. We have a chance here to help her become everything she could have been the last time. We are her second chance and she is ours."

"Wow. That is pretty heavy for conversation over banana cake." Seesee smiled. "I know what you are saying. So what I am thinking is that we should have an old-fashioned blessing day."

"What is that? Remember, I am still learning all of this as I go." She stroked the fuzzy crown of the

baby's head absently.

"Well, there would be two days. One for my family to come and bless the baby, but one for my friends as well. As a magic user, you give something to the child that would stand it in good stead later in life."

"Wait, is that like the fairies in sleeping beauty? They all gave a gift, but because the eldest and crankiest had not been invited, she got cranky and made her gift a curse instead?"

"Something like that. But no one is allowed to curse anymore. It is considered tacky." Seesee sighed and pushed her plate away. "Do you mind if I have coffee?"

"Go ahead. All of the supplies that I picked up are in the hall. Me and shorty here will just continue to get acquainted." She bounced the cherub a little and laughed at the face she got in return. That sour little pucker was hilarious. "Sorry, Gaia. You can chew on my hair again." She propped the girl against her shoulder and started to walk up and down the hallway, humming idly.

"Where is Laura?"

"She and Verne are celebrating their engagement the old-fashioned way. Naked." Abby paced slowly. "Ignore any sounds of a wolf drowning. It is probably foreplay."

Seesee was laughing so hard she almost missed

the filter as she scooped coffee. "Thank you for that mental image."

The grin that crossed her features was almost evil. "No problem."

"When do you think they will choose to tie the knot?"

"I don't have a clue, when is spawning season?" She giggled a little.

"Oh, you are horrible. Where are your creatures?"

"In the backyard, taking care of the weeds."

"Ah. I thought they would be with you."

"No." Another chuckle. "The baby scares the heck out of them."

"So no free baby sitting there then."

"I work from home, you can bring her by anytime." It surprised Abby that the offer was genuine. She really meant it. The little one would not interrupt her schedule, she didn't have one.

"You have no idea how much that means to me."

"I can guess." The bright blue eyes looking up at her were so trusting, so new. Nothing would endanger her on Abby's watch. And all the Guards of Oak Point Way would stand between this precious one and harm. The face near her own was getting sleepy. "Where is the crib?" She kept her tone conversational.

"In my bedroom. Left side of the bed."

"Okay. Be right back." Abby walked slowly down the hall, gently tipping Gaia horizontal as she went. By the time she had reached the master bedroom, the baby was sound asleep on her forearm. A few gentle motions and she was in the cradle, tucked in for a little sleep.

The coffee was ready when she got back to the kitchen. "Miklos had to sleep. Gregori gave him enough blood to keep him awake for two days straight, but he was not a happy bunny by the time we got here. Xander and him kept picking fights with each other and he scampered off as soon as he could."

When she turned from filling up her cup and saw Seesee's stricken face, she hurried to say, "He is fine, just sleep deprived and cranky. Kind of like Gaia, with fangs."

"How is Xander?"

"Tired and nursing a few claw marks. I was a little out of sorts as well." She sipped daintily while Seesee sputtered.

"I don't need to hear about your sexual adventures."

"No?"

"No. You always leave a magical blast wave if it was any good."

The feeling of coffee shooting out through your nose is one that you never forget and Abby was sure, as she mopped the spill with a napkin, that it

would remain in her memory for a while. When she was tidied up, she asked, "You just had to say that, didn't you?"

"You know I did. It was funny."

"Fine. It was. Now. When do you want to have the Blessing Day?"

"Traditionally the first full moon of the child's birth."

"Fine, invite your family and I will get you the invitations for everyone on the cul-de-sac. I have a box of them that I have been dying to use." Abby chortled evilly. "First full moon it is. Invite everyone. Family and friends alike are going to claim this little one."

"Are you sure?"

"If you don't mind, I don't mind. You are her mother and I trust you to do what is best."

"You'll accept it?"

"Well, I will try and change your mind, but I will accept it if you don't." Honesty was the best policy. Especially since they both felt responsible for the baby. "Not to change the subject, but...what do I wear?"

Seesee snorted, "It's all about you, is it?"

"I am glad you finally noticed."

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

### *Blessing Day*

“How do I look?” Abby twirled in front of the mirror, wearing her Nexus robe over her ball gown. It was quite the fashion statement.

“You look fantastic. Really.” Xander was straightening his collar and pulling his tunic into neat lines. He looked better to her every day and she could only hope for the same.

“I invited some of your relatives to the event tonight.”

“My parents?”

“No. Your grandmother and Elspeth. And Strykr of course.” She finished fussing with her hair and looked out the window into the front yard where the crowd was gathering. A few pops of magic inside the centre of their street and Abby swallowed. “They are here.”

“Holy crap. I can’t believe that they would be here of all places. Will you introduce me?” He



looked suddenly nervous.

She moved to calm him. "Of course I will. They are here. Let's get going."

"I love you, you know."

"I love you, too." They faced each other and met halfway in a kiss that rocked her to her toes. Souls met and combined into a magical tangling before separating back into their respective bodies. "Now. Let me introduce you to your grandma."

Arm in arm and laughing, Strykr and Terranor came toward them the instant that they left the house. Xander was almost humming with eagerness as she stopped and introduced him, "Xander, this is Terranor and Strykr. You may have met them as a friend of the family or a long lost aunt and uncle before."

"I have indeed. May I say I am honoured to meet both of you." He bowed formally and the elf and Nexus smiled at each other before moving forward to catch him in a rib-cracking hug.

Abby left them catching up on politics and the state of magic in the modern world while she wandered over to Seesee's family. "Hello, everyone. How are you on this happy occasion?"

"I am so excited for Auntie Seesee. She has always wanted a baby." Gwendolyn was holding the baby and Gennifer was filling Abby in. Her mother was standing nearby and she gave Abby a

friendly nod. Amellix was talking to Laura and it seemed they were talking about wedding arrangements.

Seesee and her other sister were speaking quietly, keeping one eye on the girls with the baby. "Hello, Seesee. Trellatrix, how are you this evening?"

"I am well, thank you, Nexus. You look wonderful."

"Abby. We are at home and I am thrilled to be out of that hotel." She was honest. "And thank you. I am trying to get more than one use out of this gown, not easy in a town this small."

They all laughed. Women in the modern age had been fighting this battle for years, how to multitask a gown while leaving it intact. They kept the chitchat up until moonrise and then the group fell silent.

Abby felt the instinct to gather in a circle on the green. She stood next to Xander and waited as a power started to build. The earth itself was sending power to greet the baby. Seesee held Gaia in her midnight and stars embroidered gown out on extended arms. "We are all here tonight to join in a family that will guard and protect this little one, guiding her through the life ahead and teaching her the ways of magic. This night we give her gifts. Gifts to guide her through the trials and challenges of life. Tonight we gather."

As one they answered, *"Tonight we gather."*

*"Tonight we give."*

*"Tonight we give."*

*"Tonight we welcome her among us."*

*"Tonight we welcome her among us."*

*"And now we give her gifts."*

*"And now we give her gifts."*

Solemnly, Seesee handed Gaia to Amellix. "From my family, you will receive joy, laughter, health, and a love of dance." The little girls placed a hand on the baby and she glowed in their mother's arms.

Trellatrix was next. "I give you the love of knowledge."

Miklos held the child confidently. "I give you sight in the night. It's a handy skill, short stuff." His power wrapped her eyes with a pretty light show.

Verne spoke, "The love of the wild is my gift, enjoy it with every breath."

Laura was next. "The ability to swim is my gift."

Terranor and Strykr held her together. "The truest love of your time, for only with true love can you feel whole." The smile they shared as they gave their gift made Abby tear up.

Elsbeth took her. "The greatest adventure of a lifetime shall be yours." She rocked her as she gave the gift and the baby squealed with laughter.

Xander held her a little awkwardly. "The talent of judgement so that you may always know where your destiny lies."

Abby took her from him after the power faded. She looked down into the little face, so wide-eyed and innocent. "From me, you will receive kindness. You will give it and receive it." Small hands patted her knees and she looked to her creatures and knelt so that they could touch the baby. "From the gnomes you will gain your love of things that grow and from the gargoyles, a love of the open sky."

The power that ran through Abby and into the baby was impressive. It was a ripple of energy that spread out from the baby, hit the earth and bounced back to be absorbed.

Seesee leaned down and had her hair pick the baby up so that she could hold her close. "Gaia Montrose, my beloved little one. The earth gives itself to you, welcomes and embraces you. I give you my love and use my love to seal in all the gifts you have been given this night." She leaned down and kissed the forehead of her beautiful little girl. With that kiss came a potent magic that wrapped around them both, binding them as one.

The moonlight beamed down on the assembly and bathed them in its light. They stood still for an endless moment and then the focus of light faded and they were alone on the green in the middle of

the cul-de-sac.

"Thank you for your joining our family, sharing your souls and your magic. From this night forward, should anything happen to me, Annabeth Hanover will take over the raising of little Gaia. She understands the needs of a child like Gaia and I will brook no interference in the custody of my little girl." The group nodded, even if Seesee's sisters did not look too pleased.

"Now. With the serious moments out of the way...let's eat!" Laughter took over the night as the gnomes scrambled off and came back with a keg. The gargoyles swarmed overhead with sparklers and a few roman candles. They hung on too long and ended up in one of the trees, but it was all in good fun.

As the night waned, Abby smiled at the love of all those who were visiting. There was a calm peace over Oak Point Way, a deep serenity that she wanted to enjoy for as long as possible. When Xander left his family and came to put his arms around her as the dawn crept over the horizon, she knew one immutable truth. Happiness was only as far away as you were willing to put it. It was within arm's reach if you just reached out to hold it to you.

And Abby was holding on for dear life.

## *Author's Note*

Thank you for joining me in Book 2 of the Nexus Chronicles. It has been wonderful sharing time on Oak Point Way with Abby and her gnomes. The gargoyles are getting the hang of life, and in the next chapter of the series, Pixies in the Park, they will play a pivotal role in the resolution of the next problem that will arise in the little cul-de-sac.

Remember.

Gargoyles do it in midair

Gargoyles do it in trees

Gargoyles do it in parks

And Gargoyles do it in the round.

See you again for Pixies in the Park.

Thanks for reading!

Viola Grace

## *About the Author*

Viola Grace was born in Manitoba, Canada where she still resides today. She really likes it there.

She has no pets and can barely keep sea monkeys alive for a reasonable amount of time. Her line of day job tends to be analytical which leaves her mind hopping to weave stories. No co-worker is safe from her character analysis.

In keeping with busy hands are happy hands, her hobbies have included cross-stitch, needlepoint, quilting, costuming, cake decorating, baking, cooking, metal work, beading, sculpting, painting, doll making, henna tattoos, chain mail, and a few others that have been forgotten. It is quite often that these hobbies make their way into her tales.

Viola's fetishes include boots and corsetry, and her greatest weakness is her uncontrollable blush.

Her writing actively pursues the Happily Ever After that so rarely occurs in nature. It is an admirable thing and something that we should all strive for. To find one that we truly like, as well as love.

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