

A muscular man is shown from the back, his hands pressed against his hair. The background is a sunset over water, with the sun low on the horizon, creating a warm orange and red glow. The man's skin is glistening, and his muscles are well-defined. The title 'An Angel's Hope' is overlaid in a large, stylized red font with a gold outline.

# An Angel's Hope

**Stephani  
Hecht**

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# **An Angel's Hope**

**By**

**Stephani Hecht**

## Chapter One

**R**amiel was sick of the blood, sick of the wounded, sick of the death. Most of all he was sick of his brother-in-law and his smartass mouth.

"I'm serious," Appolion repeated as he kicked over a smoldering piece of what had at one time been an angel warrior safe house. "You guys give me the word and I'll harness my powers and shoot a blast there."

The archangel's face was smudged with soot and ash and his dark hair was slicked back with sweat, but his piercing blue eyes were alive as always, missing nothing, searching every corner for possible danger.

It was one of the reasons Ramiel continued to take him along on these missions despite how annoying he could be.

"You can't blow Heaven up," he replied tiredly as he watched another pair of archangels carry out a stretcher with the body of one of their fallen comrades.

"Why not?" Appolion challenged savagely.

"It's not like we call the place home anymore. It's only the justice angels and their supporters there now and they could give two shits about us. They were the ones that exiled our asses, not the other way around."

"I left behind my favorite pair of shoes there and it would kill me if they were vaporized by an Appolion Nuclear blast," Ramiel shot back. He knew Appolion was just bullshitting, using dark humor as a way to cope with finding yet another one of their angel warrior teams butchered. Hell, he may have joined in if he was capable of laughing anymore.

"I'll buy you ten pairs if you let me do it. Hell, I'll get you a hundred just so long as I can give those bastards just a little taste of the fear we have to choke on every day." Appolion booted another piece of debris with the toe of his ratty tennis shoe. "I'm getting sick of us just grabbing our ankles and having to bend over and take it like some bitch."

"Interesting visual," Ramiel quipped as he watched them carry the last body outside. "You always do manage to bring the warm and fuzzy, don't you?"

"Are you trying to tell me you don't feel the same way?" Appolion bit back savagely as they went out, the air slightly fresher there than inside of what was left of the house.

"You know better than that." If any family had paid a heavy price in this war, it was Ramiel's. First, his brother Cam had been captured and transformed into half incubus, then his youngest brother, Bear, had been possessed by a demon and almost died before they could get rid of it. That was just the highlights, too, he wasn't even counting the hurt that had been delivered to Derel and Nathaniel. Sometimes it sucked to have such a big family because then there were too many damn ways for someone to come in and attack you.

"It's just getting so hard." Appolion ran his hands through his hair in frustration, leaving it in messy spikes. "I don't know how much more I can take."

These words coming from Appolion were a testament to how bad things had really got. This guy had literally been to Hell and back and for him to be close to breaking, showed how this civil war with the justice angels was breaking everyone. If Appolion, who could face anything and smile while he kicked its ass, couldn't handle this then what hope did the rest of them have?

Slim to none and slim just went and took a vacation.

Looking over the rubble, Ramiel was hard pressed to remember that it was other angels who had caused all this, too. Things had changed so

much since the angel warriors had gone to war and this brutality was just the tip of the crap sundae

"The Chief just called," Ramiel's brother, Case, announced as he ran over. As usual, the twin's flopping blond bangs were hanging in his face, he pushed them away with an impatient gesture, leaving behind a streak of dirt.

"Oh goodie, I'm sure Michael telephoned to share all kinds of happiness," Appolion snorted.

"What did he want?" Ramiel asked as he shot the archangel a warning look.

"He said they lost contact with another safe house and since we're already out, he wants us to check up on them." Case gave a sheepish shrug when Appolion groaned.

"Is he kidding?" Appolion threw his hands up in the air as a flash of anger briefly visited his face. "I haven't seen my mate or daughter in three days. I'm tired, I'm hungry and I'm starting to get a bit cranky."

"Not to mention a bit whiny," Case muttered under his breath to Ramiel.

"I heard that, jackass," Appolion bit back, but all the earlier humor in his voice was gone. His gaze was once again fixated on the bodies that were lined up and covered in sheets.

"I know you're whipped." Ramiel was suddenly aware of how weary he was, too. "We

all are. But Michael can't send another team because he already has all his warriors out. We're scrambling to keep up in this damn war with the justice angels."

Ramiel could relate to Appolion. He wanted nothing better than to go home, too. Of course, he didn't have anyone special waiting for him, but there was a nice hot shower and soft bed calling his name. Besides that, he had nothing waiting for him back home. Not a soul. Nada. Zip. Nein.

"Not true." Case shot off a wicked smile. "You do have your fairy fiancée."

"Stop reading my mind," Ramiel ordered dryly, hating that he was blessed with a family of psychics. "Besides she not my fiancée."

"So you're not going to claim her as your mate then?" Appolion raised one dark brow.

"You know I am." Done with the conversation, Ramiel started to walk away, but of course Dumber and Dumbass had to follow.

"Then that makes her your fiancée," Appolion pointed out as he fell in step next to him.

"No, it makes her my pain in the ass. We have an arrangement, nothing more. She agrees to go to the fairies and ask them to help us with this war, I offer her the *honor* of being my mate. There is nothing lovey dovey or romantic about it."

"So you're really going to do it then?" Case asked as they walked further away from the



smoldering remains.

They all took deep cleansing breaths.

It was no use, the smell of death still clung to his nostrils. Ramiel had been smelling it so long it was a wonder he even noticed it anymore. "I don't see any way out of it." And believe him, he had been nothing but trying to think of one, too. "I made an open-ended vow to her, that if she saved Bear I owed her one favor. My bad luck she decided to collect by way of my ass."

"Have you tired talking to Michael?" Appolion asked. "He is your uncle after all so maybe he can pull some strings or something."

"You don't get it," Ramiel bit out bitterly. "I gave it to her on my honor as an archangel. There is no out clause when you're idiot enough to speak those words."

"Oh." Appolion paused for a while and he looked to be thinking so hard that Ramiel half-expected smoke to come from his ears. "At least she's pretty."

Ramiel grunted in response, because that was one fact he really couldn't argue. Nissa was more than pretty, she was stunning. With a tiny body, full of curves and muscles, she looked like she was made for tangling in the sheets. Despite himself, he imagined doing just that with her, her long brown hair, with those pink streaks running through it, draped over his naked chest. How

would it be to taste those full plump lips of hers? To slowly count the freckles that dusted her tiny nose? To cup those perky breasts and tease her nipples?

Then he remembered how she had tricked him into becoming his mate and he scowled. The last thing he needed or wanted was a mate and now it looked like he was getting one. One that wasn't even the same species as him for crap's sake.

No, as sweet and innocent as the fairy may look, he would be better to remember that deep inside she was a cold calculating bitch who had used his love for Bear to manipulate him.

"Let's go check on the other team so we can get home." He pulled his sword back out, his arm screaming in protest because it had already been used way too much in the past hours.

They flashed out of the carnage and entered into another mess. Even though Ramiel would have thought it impossible, it was a hundred times worse than where they had just been.

Demons. And not just one or two. There were dozens of the bastards attacking what used to be a ranch-style home that had been serving as a safe house. Two teams in one day. When was it ever going to end?

The demons seemed to sense the angels as they appeared because they all swung their misshapen heads around at once and snarled. Even after an

immortal lifetime of fighting the buggers, Ramiel was always taken back by their hideousness.

Once angels, demons began to shift and change as soon as they turned their back on their sacred vows to protect mankind and serve Michael. Overcome by evil from the inside out, they eventually became so damn ugly that not even their own mama would recognize them.

Oh yeah, and they stunk like high heaven, too. A rancid, rank smell of decaying flesh that almost all demons carried.

This group here were average assassins so they were huge masses of muscles and mean. Some had black oily skin while others were green and scaly. They all had huge fangs and black claws. Which they were getting ready to use, along with their swords, to attack the archangels.

"You have got to be kidding me?" Appolion yelled as a couple charged him. He brought up his long sword to meet them head on. The ear-shattering clang of metal hitting metal rang through the smoke-filled air.

"Where's the team?" Case asked as he darted a quick glance over the carnage.

Ramiel followed the direction of his gaze and didn't see anything. At least there weren't bodies like at the last house, so that was something. Not much, but he would take what he could at this point.

Ramiel didn't have time to answer that question before the rest of the demons charged. He let out a hoarse battle cry as he raised his sword and prepared to fight.

\* \* \* \*

"You're not even listening to me are you?" Brolan demanded as he slammed his palm on the tabletop.

"Not really." Nissa didn't even bother to deny the truth because to do so would mean that she felt guilty about ignoring the vermin and that was the last thing she felt.

"Is it really that hard to pay attention for five minutes?" Brolan shook his head, making the multi-colored beads on the ends of his light brown dreads clack.

"Actually it's hard to pay attention to you for one minute," Nissa deadpanned as she scanned the Lehor family living quarters. As usual, it was filled to capacity with the brothers, their mates, friends and pets. The chaos was a welcome distraction to the OCD, drunkard of a fairy who was sitting next to her.

"I am your elder, why can't you give me any respect?" he asked as he took a drink from a thermal coffee cup.

Nissa knew it contained nothing that was even

close to coffee. “Gee, I wonder,” she drawled as she deliberately gave his ripped purple sweat pants, stripped polo shirt and brown work boots the once over.

Truthfully, it wasn’t his odd appearance or even his bat shit crazy ways that were annoying her. In the weeks that she had been living here, she had gotten used to Brolan’s oddness. What was making her mad was his continual insistence that she learn more about her fairy heritage. He actually believed that she was going to go back to them and take up her rightful place as their princess.

Not going to happen, in this lifetime or the next.

“Look, Brolan, I know you’re trying to help me out here, but it’s a waste of both our time. I really could give two flips about Fairy 101.” She sighed heavily. “Unless of course you could give me some pointers on how to keep my wings from popping out whenever they feel like it. That would save me from a few embarrassing moments.”

She grinned, trying to take the sting out of her rejection, because for some odd reason, she didn’t want to hurt the freak’s feelings. While he may be stink and be a lush, he was one of the few individuals who had ever seemed to give a damn.

“Your highness—” he began before she cut him

off.

"Don't call me that."

"Why not?"

His gaze searched her face, way too knowing, damn it.

"That is who you are?" he said.

"It's who I was before my entire family was slaughtered and I had to run for my life. I was so young that I don't even remember that life so why should I care about it?" That was a huge lie. She did remember that horrible night of blood and terror. It still visited her every night in her nightmares, the sounds of her mother's screams still so vivid it was as if it were happening all over again.

There was a loud uproar from the corner of the huge family room where four of the brothers were playing a game of cards. They all laughed as they threw their cards in the middle and one collected the stack of candy they were using as betting chips. Sadly, Ramiel wasn't one of the angels there since he was off on a mission. A slip of unease went through her when she realized how much she was beginning to rely on his familiar presence to comfort her.

Not good for someone like her who had learned at a young age not to trust or lean on anyone else. Even worse when she knew how much he hated her for what she'd done to him.

She looked across the room at her reason for doing all this. Ella. A couple of years ago, Nissa had stumbled across the teen fairy. Alone like Nissa, she had been living on the streets, not even being able to turn to humans for help for fear of them finding out who she really was. The young, terrified fairy had never told what had happened to her parents and Nissa hadn't asked.

Instead, she had taken the girl under her protection and they had been together since. Since the massacre, Nissa had never cared about anyone, but damned if she didn't with Ella. What's more, Ella seemed to care back. The one thing she had never been able to give Ella though was stability and that was what she had found at the angel warrior compound.

She was in the corner of the room, playing on a laptop with two teen angel boys and it was obvious the three were tight. Ella's head was bent forward, the tips of her white blonde spiky hair almost touching the top of the computer screen. She laughed at something one of the boys said, her light laughter so infectious that several of the archangels in the room smiled in response.

Suddenly, it felt as if a hundred pound weight had been lifted off Nissa's shoulders. While Ramiel might be angry at her and their union may never be one of love, it was all worth it because the fairies could never force her and Ella to come

back to them.

Although it chafed on her that she was having to rely on others for her safety. After so long of taking care of herself she wasn't used to having to turn to anybody. Even if that somebody was over two hundred pounds of lean, mean, muscular archangel who was way too cute for his own good.

Almost as if on cue, Ramiel came walking in. It was obvious that he had been fighting since his tight battle leathers were ripped in places and streaked with blood. Even his military cut blond hair was mussed with soot and dirt and his eyes seemed tired and haunted.

He looked over at her and Nissa found herself trapped in his soft blue eyes. While they were always warm and carrying when he was gazing at his family, with her they were closed and guarded. There was a bit of soot on the corner of his full lips and she had the strange desire to wipe it off. Nice and slow so she could enjoy the hard heat of his body.

A tingle went through her as she imagined how it would be to have him hold her in his arms, those baby blues dark with passion. She had seen Ramiel in battle before and he fought with a brutal hard precision that had left her breathless. Would he be that way in bed? Or would he be tender and gentle?



Nissa wasn't exactly a shrinking violet either when it came to the battle game. She had been fighting or training since she had been old enough to pick up a blade. Raised by various human guardians who had been loyal to her royal family, they had taught her how to use weapons before she had learned her alphabet. She was a strong warrior. She had never backed down in a battle. When challenged, she always met it face on.

So why where things so different when it came to him? Since she had called in her promise, he had said exactly two sentences to her. The first had been a gut reaction one immediately following her request. *Sugar, there is no way in hell that is ever going to happen.* The other had been five minutes later, after the ensuing outburst from his family who had been in the room at the time. He had walked up to her, towering over her so she had to crane her neck too look up at him. *Fine, I'll do it, but don't think you're getting yourself a hero because I'm the furthest thing from that.*

Now as she stared at him from across the crowded family room, him looking like the returning conquering soldier, he certainly seemed like a hero to her. A white knight ready to save the damsel in distress. Startled by her own flowery, dopy thoughts, she almost laughed out loud.

"Nissa, if you are done salivating over the angel, then can we get back to this?" Brolan asked

loudly.

Of course his voice carried over all the noise in the room. The only thing missing was the character like *riiiiiiiiiip* as the music came to a halt. Every head turned to her as the entire room looked over to see the fairy making gaa-gaa eyes at the archangel.

Mortification made her numb from the inside out as she started back, caught like a deer in headlights. Her mouth opened and closed several times as she tried to get something out. A smartass comment, an apology, a prayer—anything. All that came out was one mortified squeak that made her embarrassment even worse.

Jumping to her feet, Nissa did something she had never done in her life. Retreated. Moving so fast, she tipped her chair over, she ran from the room, not even daring to look behind her to see if Ramiel noticed.

## Chapter Two

She didn't breathe again until she was in the safety of the kitchen. By some miracle of the Goddess, it was empty, too. Going to the large island in the center of the huge room, she gripped the edge so tight it dug into the palms of her hands.

She had just made an ass out of herself to a room full of angels. What was even worse, was she had run like some scared little kitten, too. The only thing that could have made it better was if she had a wardrobe malfunction on her way out.

The door opened and she braced herself for a confrontation, thinking it was Ramiel. She was both relieved and strangely disappointed when she saw it was a female angel named Tiffany.

Unlike most of the other angels, Tif didn't tower over Nissa and that had made her like her almost from the get-go. To add to her appeal, she was pregnant, and while she hadn't entered the waddle stage yet, she didn't have the same grace

the other angels did. They all moved with such ease they sometimes almost seemed to glide. At times they made Nissa feel like a miniature Godzilla clomping around. She was willing to bet they never tripped or stumbled like she did sometimes.

"Hello," Tiffany said casually as she went to the fridge. She had her light brown hair pulled into a set of braids and was wearing a pair of black stretchy pants and a red t-shirt that said, *Future Empath. Oh yeah, he's feeling you.*

"Hello, Tiffany," Nissa tried to keep her tone even, as if she wasn't still mortified to her toes.

"Call, me Tif." The angel opened up the freezer and pulled out a pint of ice cream. "All my friends do."

"Thanks." Nissa was a bit taken back by the female's kindness. Every since she had dropped the mate bomb, the entire family had been pretty much ignoring her. Taking a breath, she asked, "Do you think they noticed?"

"Noticed that you got caught ogling Ramiel?" Tif cocked a brow as she pulled two spoons from the drawer. Handing one to Nissa, she added, "Yeah, I think that Brolan's mouth pretty much outed you."

"Damn," Nissa cursed under her breath, certain Tif still heard her anyhow.

"Please, if that's the most embarrassing thing

you do, then you are way ahead the rest of us." Tif snorted as she dug into the ice cream. "Now drown your sorrows in some double chocolate chunk and tomorrow we'll be laughing about it."

Nissa somehow doubted that, but she still helped herself. Maybe some icy, gooey sympathy was in order. The two ate straight out of the carton for several minutes. For the first time since coming to live at the compound, Nissa found herself relaxing around someone other than Ella. "Do they hate me?" she finally had the courage to ask.

"Who?" Tif licked her spoon clean and made a satisfied humming sound that only a pregnant female could. "The Lehors?"

"Yes." Nissa looked down at the white countertop.

"I don't think they can make up their mind," Tif responded with surprising honesty. "They are all so grateful for how you managed to exorcise that demon from Bear. I mean you saved his life by doing it. That thing was killing him and we only had days left when you came around. They all love him so much and they could never repay you for that. But..."

"I knew there was a *but* coming," Nissa grumbled more to herself.

"They all are really angry at you for forcing Ramiel into this." Tif shot her a sympathetic look. "They love him, too, and feel like you are taking

away his chance at future happiness. It's not like he can go back either. Our kind mate for life, so once you two do the deed, there's no going back, ever."

Guilt settled into Nissa's stomach, hard and heavy like an anvil. How she wished she could pull back her request and let him out of it. But she didn't have just her own hide to think of. This was the only way that she could guarantee Ella's safety. She would do anything to make sure the young fairy didn't suffer through the same horrors she had.

"Can I ask you one question?" Tif's brown eyes softened as she searched Nissa's face.

"Sure, you shared your ice cream so I it's the least I owe you." Nissa smiled at her.

"Why did you do it?"

There was a long pause as Nissa debated whether or not to tell the truth. Finally, she decided she had nothing to lose. Besides, maybe if she unloaded on someone it would make her feel less crappy about her choices. "Unlike you, I don't want to go home," she said in a near whisper.

"How is Ramiel going to stop that?" Tif rubbed her rounded belly, but kept her attention focused on Nissa.

"I don't know much about fairy culture, but I know one thing. The females are second-class citizens and they are considered the property of

their mates. Once I'm mated to Ramiel, they can't make me go back and live with them. My place as a dutiful wife is by his side and that would mean here."

"Why don't you want to go back?" There was no judgment in Tif's tone, just a genuine curiosity.

Nissa wasn't surprised by that. In her short time with the angels, the one thing she heard them talk about most was their desire to someday be able to go back to Heaven. "What's your earliest memory?" When Tif shook her head, Nissa continued, "Mine is of my mother screaming as she was murdered. Butchered by other fairies because they wanted a new king and queen. They didn't just stop with my parents either. My sisters, baby brothers, uncles, aunts, all slaughtered in the span of an hour and just because someone else wanted their power. The only reason I didn't die, too, was because one fairy was brave enough to help me escape. She managed to get me to some humans who knew about our kind and were willing to raise a fairy child and keep quiet about it."

Too bad showing love and compassion hadn't been part of the package. Her human guardians had been cold and at times brutal toward her. The only good thing they had done for her was to teach her battle skills. It had come in handy when the very elves who had killed her parents had

started to hunt her down, too. Nissa couldn't count the times she had been forced to battle her uncle's soldiers as she ran for her life.

"You didn't have to go through all that to get our help." Tif slowly shook her head. "All you had to do is ask our chief, Michael. Bear is his nephew and he would do anything for you since you saved him."

"Why would I trust someone who I just met?" Why would she trust anyone period when time and time again she had been betrayed?

"Because Michael is good guy," Tif replied simply, like she was answering a simple question from a child.

"There is no such thing." Nissa threw her spoon in the sink, the ice cream churning in her stomach.

"My gosh," Tif said slowly, her face held no anger, but rather a sad understanding. "You really think that, don't you?"

"How can you not with everything that has happened to the angel warriors in the past few years?" Nissa countered bitterly.

"Because every morning that I wake up in Bear's arms, I know that there is good in the world. He lives to make me happy. Look at his family and how much they love each other. Nothing could tear them apart."

"Please," Nissa snorted. "Family is the first to betray you. Do you want to know who led the



coup against my parents? My oldest uncle. He was the one who stabbed my father in the heart and I mean literally, in the heart."

The door opened again and this time it was Ramiel.

Nissa's heart skidded to a halt at the sight of the object of both her dreams and nightmares. He must have taken a quick shower because his hair was wet and he had a pair of jeans and white tee on. While the jeans weren't as tight as his leathers, the denim still fit nicely on his thighs and she wondered how his ass looked in them.

God, she must have really lost her mind. Here he couldn't stand to be in the same room as her and all she could think of was how fine his butt might be? *Crazy party of one, your table is ready.*

"You mind giving us a minute?" he asked Tif.

The small angel nibbled on her bottom lip as her gaze darted from him to Nissa and then back to him again.

Nissa almost laughed when she realized the female was feeling protective of her.

"Okay," Tif finally said slowly. She ran over and gave Nissa a tight hug.

Nissa stumbled back a couple of steps both from the force of being hit and from shock of the sudden affection. Tif was squeezing so tight it was hard to breathe and, after a few awkward seconds, Nissa clumsily patted her on the back.

"Don't back down to him," Tif whispered in her ear. "With the Lehor boys, you have to bite back or else they'll never respect you."

"Bear's been looking for you," Ramiel pointed out with exaggerated calmness.

"Psst," Tif rasped. "It's not like he has to look that hard. I'm as big as a damn house so I'm not that hard to find." She pulled back and turned on Ramiel, hands on her hips.

"Okay, brat, I was just trying to be polite instead of telling you to stop stalling and get a move on already." He smiled to take the sting from his comment.

Nissa could tell his affection to the female was genuine.

"Now move, I promise not to hurt the fairy's feelings."

Tif sighed before she walked at a snail's pace to the door. When she got to him, she stopped long enough to hiss between clenched teeth, "You be nice."

"I will be nice," Ramiel responded, mimicking her tone and speech.

"You're such an ass."

"Now, don't go using your pet name for Bear with me. He'll get all jealous." Ramiel ruffled her hair.

Tif smacked his hands away before she left the room, muttering about *idiots and duffasses* under

her breath.

Once she left, the room all of the sudden felt so small and claustrophobic. Nissa looked down at the countertop, afraid to meet his gaze until Tif's bit of advice came to her. *Bite back*. Raising her head, she locked eyes with him and even attempted a smile. "Ice cream?" She held up the mostly empty carton. "It's really good."

"Pass," he replied dryly as he came in and leaned against the counter opposite of her.

He was close enough so she can detect his warm, spicy masculine scent. "Your loss." She gave a casual shrug as she put it in the freezer. Steeling herself, she turned back to him. "So you wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes." He crossed his arms, the muscles of his chest shifting under his shirt.

Honestly, that had nothing to do with the reason why she was suddenly drooling. It was just leftover ice cream happiness, really. "Okay, then talk. I'm all ears." She used a thumb and forefinger to wiggle one of her pointed ears.

"The mating ceremony is set for tomorrow," he went on, ignoring her joke. "I didn't know if you were aware of that or not."

"Yes, Michael told me. He said that there is going to be a lot of couples being hitched."

"Mated," he corrected with a heavy sigh. "We call it mated. If you're going to insist on being a

part of our world, you may want to take the time to learn our customs."

"I was hoping you would teach me," she shot off in a saucy tone. *Never let them see you tremble.*

"Did Michael tell you how the ceremony is going to play out?" When she nodded, he prodded, "You sure? I don't want you messing it up. It's going to bad enough that everyone is going to be staring at you as it is because of what you are. The last thing we need is for you to do something stupid to humiliate all of us."

She gripped the edges of the counter again, but this time it wasn't out of fear, but rather anger. Okay, maybe she had lied about knowing what went on during an angel mating ceremony, but that didn't mean she was an idiot when it came to how to act around others. That pompous jackass. How dare he act like she was going to embarrass him and his precious angel reputation? "I'll try not to belch or scratch my ass during it," she snapped. "Wouldn't want to shame you in front of all your angel friends."

"Just make sure your wings don't pop out and hit me like they did that night we met." He gave her a cocky grin that made her want to throttle him.

"That was a low blow, angel." She narrowed her eyes at him as she suddenly wished she had a weapon handy.

"Did they really tell you everything about how we mate?" He uncrossed his arms and moved around the island so he was standing in front of her.

"Why do I get the sneaky suspicion you're getting ready to fill in the blanks?" He was so close now that she could have reached out and touched him. Her fingers burned with the desire to do that, too. To run her fingers over the hard planes of his chest, to travel lower to his stomach and then his...

"The ceremony is just a formality." He took another step forward so he was now towering over her. "It's not finalized until we make love. That's when I leave my mating mark on you."

"Mating mark?" Her voice just trembled a bit so hopefully he didn't notice.

"When a male finds his mate, we leave our mark on her skin. It's almost like a tattoo and it's our family symbol." He leaned down.

His breath fanned against her cheek, making her tremble. "Where do you leave it?" She had to resist the urge to reach out and grab his shirt for support because her knees were suddenly weak.

"Wherever we happen to be touching when we both come."

"Come where?" She cocked her head to the side even though she did know what he meant. What was worse was her body did, too. A warm tingle

had spread out all over her and her womb clenched in need. Suddenly she was glad the tee she had on was loose and baggy because she could feel her nipples straining against her bra like they were begging him to notice them.

"Don't play coy with me, Nissa." He drew out her name slowly, as if he were savoring each letter like a fine meal.

That added to the sexy smile playing on his full lips had her knees going weak. He stepped even closer and put both hands on the counter so she was trapped between his arms. The heat of his body called to her and she couldn't help but sway forward a bit. "Coy? Me? Never?" She tilted her head all the way back so their lips were so close that all she would have to do is stand on her toes to give him a kiss. His breath was fresh, minty, like he had brushed his teeth right after his shower. For a brief hysterical moment, she wondered if he had done it before or after he'd got dressed.

"Why me?" Despite the intimate way he was acting, his eyes remained cool and uncaring. "There were a ton of other archangels who would have jumped at the chance to be with you."

*Because it was you I had dreamed of months before we met. Because it was you who rescued me from my life of the run. Because when I'm with you, I feel safe for the first time ever.* Her heart and years of

rejection wouldn't allow her to say any of that aloud so she went with, "You had the biggest sword."

That finally got a real reaction. The hard lines on his face softened with amusement and there was even a brief spark of interest in his stare. "Nissa, you're being coy again."

"Why do you keep saying my name?" Somehow her hands had ended up fisted in his shirt, but she couldn't bring herself to drop them.

"I like it. It's exotic—like you."

His lips were closer now, so much that every time he breathed, she could feel it brushing past her cheek. "An actual compliment. I should mark this down in my journal."

"You still haven't answered my question. Why me? And no more jokes."

He pressed even closer, really invading her space. If he meant it to be intimidating, then he was right, but not because she felt threatened by him. No, it was because of the whirlwind of sensations going through her. Sight, hearing, smell, touch—all were focused on Ramiel. All that was missing was taste. Nissa slowly ran her tongue over her bottom lip as she wondered what about that damn missing sensation. Would he taste wild? Or dark and spicy? Maybe all three.

"I picked you because I knew you couldn't refuse me," she said in a near whisper.

"Oh, yes." His lips spread into a bitter smile. "Because I was stupid enough to vow that I would do anything for you as long as you saved Bear."

"No, it's because you still would have done it, vow or not. As soon as I saw you, I knew you were pure of heart and that your sense of honor wouldn't let you turn your back on someone in need."

"So in other words, you saw a sucker and you decided to take advantage of that," he growled as he pulled away.

She gripped his shirt tighter to prevent him from leaving. "That's not what I mean, damn it!" Nissa felt an edge of panic. Why was she always blowing things with her big, stupid mouth? This was why she hated interacting with others. No matter what, in the end, she somehow managed to drive them away. That couldn't happen with Ramiel though and it wasn't just because she needed his protection as a mate. There were other emotional ties binding her to the archangel. Ones that she didn't even dare think about, but her hammering heart told her were there nonetheless.

"I told you, I'm no hero." He clenched his jaw in a hard line, but didn't try to pull away again.

"Of course you are," she argued with passion. "I've seen how you watch out for your family and how you take care of all the angel warriors serving under you. You're a good archangel and general



for Michael."

"No, I've failed my family so many times that I should be publicly flogged for it." He directed his gaze to the side as an angry flush came to his high cheekbones. "You've seen my brother Cam?"

Nissa slowly nodded as an image of the angel came to her. He was blond and muscular like Ramiel, but that was where the similarities ended. Since Cam was half-demon he shared some of their same anomalies. Not many, but enough that anyone looking at him could tell. His eyes were a dark blue, the pupils larger than normal and shaped like a cat's. Plus he had a pair of fangs, which she knew he used to drink angel blood. That didn't mean he was bad though. He was the leader of the empath angels and he was so devoted to his followers that he was always on the go for them and never seemed to rest. "Of course I've seen him. He lives here, too." She gave a nervous laugh.

"You didn't know him from...before." Ramiel closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "He was a lot like Bear. Scrawny, more mouth than muscles." A sad smile spread over his face. "He couldn't fight worth a damn. I was always getting into it with other archangels because they would give him a hard time. Then the one time he really needed me to be there, I wasn't. Demons captured him and took him to Hell. For a month we didn't

know for sure if he was alive and if so what was happening to him."

"I'm so sorry," Nissa whispered, the burning lump in her throat choking her up.

Ramiel kept going like he hadn't heard her. "When we finally got him back, you should have seen him. The fangs and crap I could deal with, it was the other stuff they did to him. Our brother Derel, the healer, said they had done things to Cam that he'll never forget. That entire time my little brother was in Hell, they were torturing him. They would take him to some room, do things to him and then heal him so they could start all over again."

"But you got him back." Nissa finally dared to reach out and cup Ramiel's cheek in a gesture of comfort. It wasn't much, but it was all she had to offer.

"That's just it. We didn't get all of him back. Ever since, Cam hasn't been the same. His innocence and a piece of his soul are still down there. He'll never get that back. I failed and he paid the price."

"Why are you telling me all this?" She shook her head as her eyes grew wet, but it wasn't from tears because she didn't cry, damn it.

"If you're going to go through with this, then you have the right to know that you're not getting some heroic archangel. You'll be getting someone

who can't even keep his loved ones protected. So don't think I can save you when I can't even save them."

Nisssa's heart broke, not because of his words, but because Ramiel truly believed them. The cold stone conviction in his tone told her that. So did the brief flicker of despair that had broke through his mask of control. She scrambled for a way to make him feel better, but no appropriate words came to her, so she decided to throw caution to the wind. Standing on tiptoe, she pressed her lips against his.

At first, she thought he was going to push her away. His entire body went tense and his lips felt hard and unyielding. Terror made her stomach do a cartwheel as she worried that she had just overstepped her bounds and made a huge mistake.

Then he groaned and wrapped his strong arms around her waist. Tilting his head to the side, he took over control, his tongue darting out to slide across the seam of her mouth.

Nissa gave into his silent command and opened so he could invade her mouth. Her last coherent thought before passion took over was, he did taste like all three. Wild. Spicy. And dark.

## Chapter Three

This was a big mistake, but damned if Ramiel could make himself stop. Nissa's lips were a sweet treat that he had never anticipated. The way her soft body molded into his, her curves fitting so perfectly, made him never want to let go.

How she had deceived him. That she was a fairy. All that went out the window as her fingers curled around his biceps and she sighed into his mouth. Her tongue tentatively came out to stroke his and his cock jacked to attention. Their bodies were pressed together so close there was so way Nissa could have missed it, but it didn't seem to bother her. If anything, the kisses came harder and more frantic.

His sister, Ana, loved orchids and that was what Nissa smelled like. Fitting since the flower was dark and exotic like her. It suddenly made Ramiel very eager for the mating because he had a feeling he was going to enjoy savoring that scent as he explored every inch of her silky skin.

"More," Nissa demanded as she pulled back. Hopping up, she sat on the edge of the counter before she pulled him back in, wrapping her legs around him.

Ramiel bit back a groan when he realized the new position made his cock press against the juncture of the thighs. Her lips were kiss swollen and pink, a temptation he couldn't resist. With a growl, he went in, capturing her mouth in another kiss. She met him halfway, her fists once again balling up into his shirt. A thrill went through him as he realized she was enjoying this as much as he was.

"Maybe this whole mating thing won't be so bad after all," he murmured against her lips. His cock was staining so hard against his jeans it was a wonder it didn't punch through and make an introduction. He couldn't hold back from thrusting against her warmth.

They both groaned as the friction of his erection, rubbed against her pussy. Even though they were separated by layers of clothing, the pleasure that rocked through him temporarily blinded him. Control. He could do this. It's not like he hadn't suffered from blue balls before. Since the war broke out it wasn't exactly like he had a lot of *me* time to go find a female to help him scratch his itches.

Then Nissa let out the cutest of whimpers as

she gyrated her hips into him and Ramiel knew all bets were off. Hell, it wasn't as if she wasn't going to belong to him soon enough. Why not get a head start on things?

Grabbing one thigh for leverage, he thrust against her. This time harder so she knew his intent. Nissa gasped into his mouth as she dug her fingers into his arms. Her hair was up in a sloppy twist and, with his free hand, he reached up to fumble with the clip, finally he managed to work it free so the long, brown tresses tumbled down around her shoulders. The overhead light, made the natural pink highlights stand out even more. "I love your hair." He fingered one soft lock, wondering for the umpteenth time how it would feel against his naked body as they rolled in the sheets.

"It gets in the way when I fight." She thrust her hips forward. "I should cut it."

"Don't you dare." He kissed her jaw line before playfully nipping her chin. "You do and I'll spank you."

"You never know, I may like that." She moaned as he thrust against her.

"Damn, female. You keep talking like that and I'm going to spread you out on the counter and fuck you right here," he warned.

"And I may like that, too." She gave him a wicked smile that matched the smoky desire in

her eyes.

That comment stunned Ramiel so much he was struck dumb for several seconds, too brain dead to think of a snappy response. Of course to be fair to himself, all of his blood supply was currently south. "You say that until one of my brothers walks in and sees every inch of your fairy ass," he chuckled, but didn't pull back. "Don't get me wrong. It's a fine hide, but I don't think you would want to flash it all over the place."

"You like my butt?" She wrinkled her nose at him, drawing his attention to the cute spray of freckles there.

"There's a lot of your body I like and I plan to spend all night tomorrow memorizing it. I'm going to start with your lips, work my way to those pretty breasts of yours, before I get between your thighs. I can't wait to find out what you taste like there."

Her eyes widened in shock and for a second he thought she was going to slap him across the face for his frank words. Then he noticed that she was breathing even faster as her tongue slipped out to lick her lips. A primal thrill went through him as he realized she was more aroused now than ever.

"You know," he used his thumb to caress her bottom lip, "there's nothing that says we have to wait until tomorrow night. Like I said, the ceremony is only a formality. Nobody is going to

care if we're already truly mated."

A look of stark horror marred her perfect features and Ramiel felt guilty for pushing her too fast. Pulling back, he moved back a few steps to give her some space. His cock was still screaming for release, but Ramiel ignored it as he took several deep breaths to clear his head.

"Sorry" he said as he cursed himself for being an idiot. He had never been good with females, feeling more comfortable with a sword in his hand than trying out pickup lines. "I didn't mean to get carried away."

"I think we both did." She brought her fingers to her lips, her brow wrinkled in confusion. "That was nice thought. I never—" she broke off, a flush coming to her cheeks as she ducked her head to the side.

"You never what?" Ramiel had the urge to go back over and take her in his arms again. It took all the discipline he'd learned over the years to keep from doing just that.

"Forget it." She blushed even deeper as she continued to look away from him.

"No, I really want to know what you were going to say." Surprisingly he did, too. He almost forgot that he was supposed to resent her as all that mattered right now was her and how she had felt in his arms.

"No, you'll laugh at me." She hopped down



and started to leave.

As she walked by him, he reached out and snagged her by the waist. "I won't laugh, I promise." He inhaled deep, savoring that sweet scent that was her. She looked up at him, her brown eyes growing stormy with anger. Her spirit almost turned him on as much as her curves.

"I've never kissed anyone before. Are you happy? Now you found out what as a loser the fairy is." She pulled against him.

He held on tight. "So that means that nobody but me has tasted those sweet lips of yours." It wasn't a question, but rather a cocky declaration. She was his and his alone.

"Oh god." She rolled her eyes. "You can drop the ego. It's just I've been a little too busy running for my life to have time for fun."

"I take it you liked the kiss then?"

"You are such an egotistical, arrogant, self-centered —"

He cut off her tirade of insults with another kiss. Nissa gave a gasp of outrage as she batted his shoulders with her fists. After a few heartbeats, she turned soft in his arms, her tongue darting out to meet his. Ramiel fisted one hand in her silky hair, tilting her head back to the perfect angle.

Unlike her, before the war he'd more than had his fair share of fun, but none had been quite like this. The innocent, almost awkward way she

kissed him back had him so mad with desire that his cock was throbbing with need. He wanted more though. As he continued to tease her lips, he wondered what the rest of her tasted like.

"I can't wait to get you into bed. The things I want to do you ought to be illegal." He brushed his lips against her jaw line. When she trembled in his touch, he pulled back so he could look at her. "I promise, you'll like it as much as I do."

"You seem awfully sure of yourself." Her lips were swollen from their kisses, that long hair of hers down and wild around her flush face.

Never in his life had Ramiel seen anything more beautiful. Too bad she was a deceitful bitch.

The door to the kitchen swung open and Appolion poked his head in. His glance went from Ramiel to Nissa back to Ramiel again, but he didn't make a smartass remark.

Ramiel dropped his arms and pulled back, although there was no way to hide what had been going on.

"Sorry to interrupt." The twinkle in Appolion's eyes said otherwise. "Michael's back and he wants to see us in his office."

"Coming," Ramiel said before looking back at Nissa. She still had that flush on her rounded cheeks and there was a hint of confusion playing on her features. Maybe because she hadn't expected the attraction between them either.

"We'll finish this discussion tomorrow night after the mating ceremony," he promised.

"Should be interesting." She tilted her head to side and flashed a cocky grin. "I heard angels have almost as much stamina as fairies."

Appolion hooted in laughter. "She burned you."

"Hate to break it to you, archangel, but she also burned you with that zinger," Ramiel drawled.

"Oh, I have plenty of stamina." Appolion waggled his brows. "Just ask your sister."

Nissa giggled.

"You two think you're just so funny." Ramiel sighed as he pulled away from her. A strange longing hit his gut at the absence of her heat, but he chose to ignore it.

"See you tomorrow?" Nissa nervously toyed with the ends of her hair.

Ramiel got angry at her query. Did she honestly dare to question the sincerity of his promise? It was like a slap in the face of his archangel honor, something no one had ever dared to do before.

"An archangel can't go back on a vow once he's made it, but then you already knew that. Don't worry, I won't stand you up even if you do deserve it." Not looking back, he followed Appolion out of the kitchen.

They made their way through the family quarters and navigated the crowded twisting

hallways of the compound. Since Appolion wasn't yapping a million miles a minute, Ramiel knew something was chomping at him. "What's digging at you?" Ramiel finally asked.

"You were a little hard on her back there," Appolion said, slow and careful, like he didn't want to push too many buttons.

"If I wanted advice on my love life, you would be the last one I would go to," he grunted, hating how Appolion's accusation made him feel more than a bit guilty. First Tif and now him, didn't anyone give a damn that it was Ramiel who was getting thrown under the bus for the cause?

"She has her reasons for doing what she is," Appolion replied, a knowing look coming over his sharp gaze. "Fear is a powerful motivator."

"How would you know that?" Ramiel stopped short, jerking on Appolion's arm. Suddenly Appolion's attitude made sense, it was so obvious that Ramiel was pissed at himself for not realizing it sooner. "You read her mind, didn't you?"

Appolion hedged, running his hand through his dark hair before he let out a deep sigh and nodded. "I didn't think I would ever get through the barriers she put up, but the other day, she must have been stressed or upset and I managed to sneak in."

"What did you find out?" A stab of guilt nagged him, but Ramiel tucked it away.

"What's your earliest memory?" Appolion asked.

Confused by the oddball turn in the conversation, Ramiel shrugged. "I don't know. What does it matter?"

"Nissa's is of her family's murder. She remembers every scream and cry, sees the blood and still carries the horror she felt that night. She watched as they butchered her parents and she couldn't do a damn thing to stop them. What was worse was one of the assassins was her uncle. Can you imagine how it must feel to see someone you loved and trusted turn on you like that?"

"No, I can't." It was true, too. The one thing he knew he could always count on was his family. He couldn't even imagine how it would cut to have one of them betray him like that. Not only that, but he didn't even want to think about how horrendous it would feel to watch them all cut down like Nissa had. She had only been a kid then, too. "I still don't see how getting mated with me is going to help her." Ramiel rubbed his chest, just thinking about losing any of his brothers or his sister had put an ache there.

"The thing Nissa fears the most is the fairies forcing her or Ella to come back and live with them."

"I already promised her that I would always protect Ella even before she tricked me into

becoming her mate." For once, saying the words *tricked* and *mate* didn't make him angry.

"Nissa has trust issues and who can blame her. She thinks the only way to guarantee Ella's protection is if you are mated. Plus, she has the crazy notion that once she is bound to an angel, the fairies won't want anything to do with her."

"That doesn't make sense." Ramiel shook his head, trying to figure out her twisted logic. "What's to stop the fairies from killing me off? Then she would be right back where she started."

"I think she's counting on the fact that you're one of Michael's top fighters. Plus with your brothers and friends, you have an army of protectors. The ironic thing is neither one of those things are going to be what saves your thick skull."

"Really, well since you are so wise why don't you clue me in?" Ramiel drawled as he moved slightly to the side to let a large group of students through.

Appolion waited until they had passed before he answered, "I can't believe none of you have got it yet. Not even Ana and my mate is usually pretty smart about this stuff."

"Whatever did we do before we had the wisdom of Appolion to guide us?" Ramiel cracked as he thought about how a good sparring session was in order with the jackass. Maybe after being

smacked down to the mat a few dozen times Appolion wouldn't feel so damn smart.

"When your mother ascended to the upper realms of Heaven, she became seraphim. That makes her royalty in her world. So as her son, that makes you..." Appolion did the classic do-you-see-where-I'm-going-with-this motion with his hands.

"Oh shit, it means we're royalty, too," Ramiel groaned. He thought about all the times they had rode Raphael for being just that. He'd lost count of the number of incidents were Cam had call the healer *Your fucking highness*. Yeah, this was going to go over like gangbusters with the rest of the sibs. It was bad enough being related to Michael, now they would have this.

It wasn't as if they were ashamed of Michael, or ashamed that Cam was the leader of the empaths and a member of the Order of Four. It was just that things like that tended to draw the attention of demons and they all already had big enough targets on their backs. "I can't believe we didn't realize this sooner." Ramiel wanted to hit himself in the head for his stupidity.

"With the war, Derel being captured for a while, then Bear being possessed by some ancient demon, I would say you had your plate pretty full. I wouldn't beat yourself up too much."

"I can't afford to miss stuff as important as

that," Ramiel countered savagely. "I fuck up and someone around me gets hurt, or worse dies."

"Hey, you weren't the only one who missed it," Appolion soothed as they started walking again.

"I'm the oldest brother. It's my job to look after the others."

"Last time I checked, Cam and the others were more than capable of taking care of themselves. Shit, Ramiel, you have seven brothers and Ana, there is no way you can always be there watching all of their backs at once. You gotta cut yourself some slack."

"I will," Ramiel promised as they walked into Michael's office. "Just as soon as this war is over and we're back home in Heaven where we belong."



## Chapter Four

“**H**ow many did we lose?” Michael asked as soon as they planted their asses in the chairs in front of his desk.

As usual, his uncle was dressed casual, flannel shirt that was unbuttoned, black tee under it, finished off with a pair of torn jeans. Ramiel couldn't remember a time he'd seen his leader in the black leathers all the other angel warriors wore. Michael completed his look by keeping his dark blond hair slightly shaggy so it hung in his face a bit. The others were already there sitting in various seats around the cramped office. Cam was slumped in his chair, his feet kicked up on Michael's desk. The fact that his brother was already working hard to annoy the Chief didn't bode well for the meeting.

“We lost the entire team at the first house,” Appolion reported, his tone bleak, no doubt he was remembering the sight of the covered bodies.

“Shit,” Michael cursed softly, his brown eyes

growing stormy with rage. "How many at the second?"

"None." Ramiel pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. "Luckily they were able to flash out as soon as the attack began. They weren't caught sleeping like the first group."

"You know, I'm really sick of being the justice angels' and demons' bitch," Cam drawled as he ran his tongue along the side of one of his fangs.

Even though Ramiel agreed with him, he could have thought of a thousand better ways to word that sentiment. Luckily, Michael was so used to Cam's smart mouth that he didn't take offense, although he did reach over and knock his boots off the desk.

"Do you think we should skip the ceremony tomorrow?" Appolion suggested.

"No," Ramiel butted in. "Everyone is looking forward to it. Not only do we have a few dozen couples being mated, but it will also be when Michael formally introduces Rachael as his." He swallowed hard as he thought about how he would be one of those few other dozen couples.

"He's right," Cam agreed. "Everyone has their panties in a wad because the Chief has finally taken a mate. It doesn't matter that you marked Rachael already. To them it won't be final until you do it right and proper."

"*Right and proper?*" Appolion echoed with a

smirk. "Since when do you talk like an old lady?"

"Shut up before I teach Ariel more dirty words," Cam shot back. Ariel was Appolion and Ana's daughter and they were both fiercely over protective of her.

"You do and I'll sic Ana on you."

"Ouch, I'll be good." Cam held his hands up in surrender.

All the brothers feared their older sister's wrath. Ramiel couldn't count the times she'd handed him his ass in the past and she only outranked him by one year. "You better, she's been really cranky since Bear dyed Ariel's hair blue. She's just looking for someone to skin." Ramiel smiled when he saw the look of genuine terror in Cam's eyes.

"Hey, Ariel loved her new look," Bear cut in with a shit-eating grin. He was sporting the same blue color in the spikes of his blond hair. "I don't see what the problem was."

"The problem is the last thing I want or need is to have a Bear Junior on my hands." Appolion glowered at the Goth empath.

Ramiel couldn't blame him, just the mere thought of two Bears in the world made a shudder go down his spine

Michael rapped on the table to get their attention. "We're going ahead with the ceremony. Too many couples have been waiting long enough

as it is."

"I know Ana is really excited that we finally get to do it. " Appolion nodded. "She would be devastated if it didn't happen."

"Exactly the point I'm making," Michael said. "With the way this war has been going, it will be good for moral. Let everyone have a piece of home even it's just for a little bit."

"Little bit?" Cam grumbled. "Mating ceremonies are so long. Not only will I have to go through one of my own with Amadeaha, but I have to preside over a ton more."

"You'll live," Michael replied dryly. "Now I want to talk about what we're going to do after the ceremonies."

"Well I thought you already knew, but if you want I can sit down and give you *the talk*." Cam made air quotes with his fingers.

"As I was saying." Michael shot Cam a warning glare. "I think it's time we went on the offensive. Until now it's pretty much been us defending while the justice council and the demons attacked."

"So we finally get to give a little pain back?" Cam grinned wickedly, his demon eyes glowing.

"Yes, and when we're done, it's going to be the justice angels who live in fear instead of us for a change." Michael's expression grew dark, jaw clenched in fury.

"You don't know how long I've been waiting for this moment." Ramiel smiled and knew it was sinister, but didn't care. After all the hurt those bastards had given his family, he was itching for some retribution. The need for revenge had nagged at him for so long it was like a festering sore in the pit of his stomach. Bear, Cam, Derel, Nathaniel all the wrongs done to them would be avenged by his sword.

Even if he had to die to do it.

\* \* \* \*

Nissa was still in bed, having spent most of the night tossing and turning, too nervous to sleep. She could hear Ella moving around in the bathroom as she got showered and ready for breakfast. After about a half hour, the teen finally came out. Her short, white blonde hair was spiked tall, making the natural black highlights stand out. Nissa frowned when she noticed there were some parallel cuts marking the back of Ella's fingers. "What happened to your hands?" she asked, sitting up in bed. Why hadn't she noticed them before? She felt guilty as she realized she was letting her own worries get in the way of taking care of the younger fairy.

"It's from my bow." Ella shrugged like it was no big deal. "I'm still getting used to it since I'm

new to it."

"Why didn't the school have a healer fix it for you?" Nissa demanded angrily.

"They have a policy that they never heal training wounds unless they are fatal. It's suppose to toughen us up." Ella still acted like the whole thing wasn't an issue.

"*Toughed you up!*" Nissa echoed, rage making her face hot. "You are just kids."

"Kids training to be future warriors," Ella pointed out patiently. "Warriors who someday will be going out to fight real life and death battles."

"Maybe the angels, but not you." Nissa hopped out of bed and went over to the teen. "You're a fairy and you will never have to go out to fight their war so they shouldn't treat you like another one of the recruits." She grabbed Ella's hand to look more closely at her wounds.

Ella angrily jerked away. "I don't want to be treated any differently," she seethed, bright pink spots of rage appearing on her rounded cheeks. "I remember all too well how you and I used to have to run from those bad fairies and hide so they didn't kill us. I want to be able to fight back next time they come for us."

"You don't have to," Nissa argued. "I'll take care of you."

"What if you're not there? I need to be able to

handle myself if I end up on my own again," Ella's voice broke a bit, like she was fighting back tears.

"That won't happen. I promise you." Nissa resisted the urge to go hug the younger fairy, knowing how Ella hated to be coddled.

"You can't promise they won't kill you, too!" Ella yelled, her eyes bright with tears.

"What are you talking about?" Nissa helplessly shook her head. "Who will get me?" When Ella lowered her head and refused to answer, Nissa demanded in a harder voice, "Who? Answer me."

"The bad fairies," Ella's voice was dull and lifeless. "They were the ones who killed my parents. They came in one night and murdered first my mother and then my dad. They didn't find me because I hid like some weak coward."

"Oh, Ella, sweetie. You weren't weak." Nissa finally gave in and ran over, wrapping her arms around the teen. Ella didn't take offense, instead laying her head on Nissa's chest for comfort.

"Yes, I was weak. I should have fought them. Maybe then my parents wouldn't be dead." Ella sobbed.

"You're wrong, honey. They would have just killed you, too." Nissa held her tight, trying to convey through the hug how much she loved the teen.

"I know you're probably right, I just feel like I should have done more. That's why I want to train

as hard as I can with the angels. So I can be as strong of a warrior as Ramiel and his brothers. Then someday I will be able to avenge my parents."

Nissa couldn't begrudge Ella her need for vengeance. Having lost her family in the exact same way, she understood it better than anyone. So she would let Ella train with the angels and she wouldn't interfere no matter how hard it was. "You know what?" Nissa asked pulling back so she could look down into Ella's face. "I think you are going to make a great angel warrior. I can't wait for you to put all those macho archangels to shame."

"All that matters to me is that I'm as good as a warrior as you." A tear formed in the corner of Ella's eye before dropping down her round cheek. "I can't think of anyone I would want to be more like."

Nissa pulled Ella into another hug, this time it was so the teen didn't see that she was crying, too.

Several hours later, Nissa looked down at the dress she wearing and huffed in disgust. She looked like a Greek tragedy come to life. Since the angel mating ceremonies were formal affairs, she was required to dress in the attire the angels had worn when they lived in Heaven. The gown was white and flowing, the long sleeves slit so they



opened to her elbows. While she was sure it looked regal and beautiful on the females, on her she felt like a dumpy marshmallow trying to pass in a sea of swans.

She was in one of the many tents that had been set up around a large lake. Outside, she could hear cheers and the muffled rambling of the crowd. She knew that she should at least peek her head out to see what was going on since she had no clue what happened during an angel wedding, but she couldn't gather up the courage. To see it really happening, even to others, would just bring it home that she was actually doing this.

Although maybe it wouldn't be all bad. Bringing her fingers up to her lips, she remembered the passion she'd shared with Ramiel back in the kitchen. An ache went through her as she thought about how good it had felt to rub against his hard body, to feel his soft lips on her skin, his hands touching her sensitive flesh. She couldn't help but wonder how far things would have gone had they not been interrupted by Appolion.

Then her stomach dropped as she recalled how angry Ramiel had been when he left and all the other times Ramiel had made it no secret how much he resented her for what she'd done to him. It was obvious he hated her and she doubted that would change anytime soon.

Pain sliced through her as she thought about the times she had seen his mated brothers gaze lovingly at their mates. How would it feel to just once have someone look that way at her? To know that someone actually gave a damn about her?

"Get over it," she whispered, even though she knew only crazies like Brolan had convos with themselves. Next, she would be wearing striped socks with paisley shirts like him. Still it brought her some comfort so she continued, "You've lived this long on your own and have managed just fine. You don't need some big, hunk archangel making cow eyes at you, you need to protect Ella."

A rustling sound made her jump and she turned to see one of the Lehor brothers coming in. His blond hair was hanging as usual over his blue eyes and he was in all white, too, except his outfit was pants and a loose fitting shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

"Case!" She couldn't help but smile at the easy-going angel. He grinned back at her, showing off a set of dimples that could make a gal's heart melt.

"Wow, either you're a really good guesser or you are one of the few unlucky souls who can tell Joe and me apart."

"Of course I can tell you two apart." She laughed, some of the earlier anxiety lifting off her shoulders. It was nice to see a friendly face.

"I'm impressed, not even most of our family

can do that."

"How can they not?" Hands on hips, Nissa titled her head to the side. "You're the cute one."

"Oh boy." Case laughed. "I only wish Joe could have heard that remark."

"Why are your pants wet?" She frowned in confusion, noticing for the first time he was soaked from the waist down.

"Joe and Cliona just got done with their ceremony and I stood up for him." She must have still looked confused because he frowned and added, "You know, because we do it in water. That's why we had to go to the lake."

"Why do you have to be in water?" A wave of panic hit Nissa as she wondered what else she may have missed.

"The couple is baptized, symbolizing their past lives being washed away as they become one." He paused, disbelief dancing across his face. "Didn't Ramiel tell you any of this?"

"No, we haven't talked much." She ducked her head, not wanting him to see the blush that was burning her cheeks.

"That jackass," Case fumed.

His outrage was so genuine it made her look up in surprise. His lips were pressed together in a hard line and his eyes had grown stormy with rage.

"The very least he could have done is give you

the basic rundown of what to expect. I'm going to kick his ass for this."

"Please don't." She reached out and placed a hand on his forearm. "He's angry at me and he has every right to be. What I did to him was just rotten." It was, too, and she would have done anything to pull back her request.

"You risked your life to save Bear." Case looked down at where she was touching him, but didn't pull away. "Ramiel should be honored to be your mate."

"I had no right to force him into it. It was even worse that I used Bear as a bargaining tool." She pulled back her hand so she could touch her stomach. The ache of guilt burning there was making her slightly sick.

"I'm sure you have your reasons," Case replied.

His voice was way more caring and understanding than she deserved. Tears built up in Nissa's eyes and she had to blink rapidly to stop them from falling. Time to change the subject, fast. "Why did you come to see me?"

"It's our custom that a member of the female's family walks her to the mating pool." Now it was he who blushed as he nervously tucked his hands in the front pockets of his pants.

"Oh," she replied, stupidly, despair making her brain freeze up. What else could she say anyhow? The closest she had to family was Brolan and there

was no way in hell she would touch him let alone let him walk her down the aisle to her angel wedding.

"Do you have anyone to escort you?"

"No, that was another little tidbit I didn't know." Her voice sounded oddly strained.

"I could do it," he blurted before he turned an even darker shade of red. "That is, if you want me to."

First Tif and now Case, suddenly Nissa didn't feel like it was her against the world anymore. The sensation was strange and almost heady. She had been fighting it alone for almost as long as she could remember. "I would love that. You can make sure I don't trip or something and make a fool out of myself."

"Don't worry, I've got your back." His gaze grew intense as the strangest expression passed over his face. Shaking it off, he cleared his throat. "We better get a move on. You and Ramiel are next up."

"Oh crap!" She smacked her hand on her forehead. "You said you stood up for Joe, does that meant the female has someone, too? I never asked anyone."

"Don't worry, that was one thing Ramiel did think of. Ella's dressed and waiting. He even told her what to do." He cracked a huge grin. "She's more worried that your wings are going to pop

out then than her messing up though."

"Goddess, I never thought of that." Fear seized her, making a sweat break out over her skin. "Promise me you'll tackle me and dunk me under the water if that happens so nobody sees."

"Yeah, because me trying to drown my brother's mate will cause way less of a scandal than you going wing in front of everyone."

They both laughed as he offered her his arm.

They ducked through the flap and he paused to gaze down at her. "You look really beautiful today."

"No, I don't," she scoffed. "I look like the poser I am."

"I'm telling the truth. You're going to put all the other females to shame. It makes me wish that you had picked me instead of Ramiel."

Shocked by his declaration, Nissa looked into his eyes to see if he was kidding, but he'd already turned his head away. With a shake of her head, she dismissed her surprise. Case was just saying that to put her at ease. There was no way she could even begin to compare to the beauty of the angels. Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she let Case lead her to the lake and to her future mate.

## Chapter Five

**R**amiel stood in water that was up to his waist and colder than hell. Behind him, he could hear Bear's teeth chattering. Since he'd already gone through his mating, his clothes were wet all over. He still hadn't hesitated to get back in so he could stand for Ramiel.

Even though Bear was the youngest brother and Ramiel was the oldest, they still shared a close kinship. Maybe it was because Ramiel had always felt so protective of Bear or maybe it was because Bear got him better than anyone else did. Whatever the reason, it had been a no-brainer when the time had come for him to pick someone to stand for him.

Michael was standing to his left since he was presiding over the mating. Nissa was on the other side, waiting for Ella. Her black streaks in her spiky, dandelion poof-like hair were even more vivid in the stark sunlight. She was wearing a white gown, the ends trailing in the water.

Habit made Ramiel scan the surrounding woods for danger. All he saw was the bright green foliage reflecting on the crisp blue water. The sun was shining, sharing space in the vivid Michigan sky with fluffy white clouds.

The shoreline was crowded with angels who had either come to get mated or to watch the ceremonies. Since Michael's was going to be last and he was the Chief of both the archangels and angel warriors, the crowd was huge. Ramiel worried about how Nissa would feel being thrust into such a huge audience.

*It's so damn cold I think my balls have shrunk into my body,* Bear sent out telepathically. All of Ramiel's family had some psychic skills and they often communicated mentally while out in public.

*Hey look at is this way,* Ramiel returned, *at least your lips match your hair now.*

*Funny, Bear groused. I just can't wait to get back home. I'm going to take Tif and snuggle with her under a pile of blankets. It'll just be me, her and a big cup of coffee.*

*Sounds romantic. All you need to add is some footie jammies and your fantasy will be complete.* Ramiel sometimes wondered what Tif even saw in the dork.

The crowd grew silent as Nissa started to make her way through them. Ramiel frowned when he saw Case was escorting her. When had that



decision been made? Then Ramiel returned his attention to her and it felt like someone had hit him across the head with a brick.

She was pettier than anything he'd ever seen. He shook his head. No, she wasn't just pretty, she was make-all-your-blood-travel-south-and-make-you-a-drooling-idiot gorgeous.

Her long hair was pulled up in an intricate twist, the style showcasing her large almond-shaped eyes. Even though she was petite, she may have well been six-feet tall with the regal way she carried herself. A fierce pride went through him when he saw she was dressed in the way of his kind. The white gown hugged her generous curves, curves he was suddenly eager to touch again.

*Oh shit, we have a problem.* Bear's mental voice broke in.

*What?* Ramiel asked, really too distracted by Nissa to care about the answer.

*Case is in love with your fairy.* Bear supplied grimly.

Ramiel didn't bother to ask Bear how he knew this. Not only was the brat an empath, but he had some of the strongest mental gifts in the family. So strong it was scary at times. So if Bear said Case loved Nissa, Ramiel didn't doubt it for one second. Damned if he didn't make him want to deck his brother for it, too.

*You know this could be a good thing, Bear ventured. Seeing as how you don't want a mate, you could always ask Case to step in.*

No, Ramiel returned, adding a mental snarl for emphasis. Of course, something like that had never daunted Bear.

*Why not? It seems like the perfect solution.*

*Because,* Ramiel glowered at Case. *She's mine.* Not waiting for Bear's response, Ramiel pushed through the water and stepped on the bank. Nissa halted in her tracks, her mouth forming a circle of surprise. Pink colored her cheeks as the crowd started to gasp and twitter at Ramiel's flagrant disregard for custom.

Jerking her from Case's arm, Ramiel wrapped her in his embrace. She opened her mouth to protest, but whatever she may have said, was swallowed by the passionate kiss he planted on her. It wasn't a tender kiss, but one of total possession. He was claiming her right in front on everyone. Making sure there was no doubt at all that she was his and his alone. He fisted his hand into the fabric at the back of her gown, titling her back slightly so he could really get at her. At first, she was stiff in his arms, then she gave a little sigh and relaxed.

*What in the hell are you doing?* This time it was Michael instead of Bear in his head. *You're not supposed to kiss her until after the ceremony.*

Ramiel ignored his uncle. All that mattered was how good Nissa felt and how good her lips tasted. Finally, she batted him on the back and he reluctantly pulled back, although he kept her soft body in his embrace.

"I think we're shocking everyone," she whispered.

Her lips were plump and wet from his kisses and it was all he could do not to lean forward to sample them again. "That's okay," he whispered back. "A day doesn't go by where someone in my family doesn't shock the community. You'll get used to it."

"I don't think we should keep your uncle waiting though. He looks kind of ticked." She giggled.

The sound skipped over him like a soft breeze. "I guess we are holding things up," he admitted ruefully. Letting her go, he tossed over his shoulder. "Thanks for watching out for my mate, brother."

"Whatever," Case mumbled as he walked away.

Ramiel knew he had hurt his brother and also knew there would be hell to pay for the slight later. All the Lehor brothers were known for their love of a good fistfight. It was a sure bet Case would be challenging him in the sparring ring soon. After the way he'd seen the sap stare at

Nissa, Ramiel was more than willing to accept that challenge, too. Offering her his arm, they started walking to the lake.

"Oh look at Ella," Nissa exclaimed. "She looks so pretty."

"Not nearly as pretty as you," Ramiel said gruffly. He had never been good at the wooing thing. That was because while all the other archangels in his class had been slacking off and chasing females, he'd been putting extra hours in the training field.

"You don't have to lie to make me feel better." Nissa scowled, her pert nose wrinkling.

"You should know by now I don't say things I don't mean." He gazed into her surprised face.

They had reached the edge of the water and she let out a small gasp of surprise when the cool water hit their feet. "It's okay," Ramiel fudged. "Once you get in you'll get used to it." He only hoped that she didn't notice how hard Bear was shivering.

"It's about time," Michael snapped once they were finally in place in front of him.

Ramiel knew from the twinkle in his eyes that the Chief wasn't really upset

"Sorry we took a wrong turn at Vermont, then got caught in traffic at I-75," Nissa replied back with the quick wit Ramiel had come to expect from her.

"I see." Michael gave a slow nod as he smiled. "All is forgiven then."

The Chief started the ceremony. Cam had been right about one thing, angel weddings were so long it could be used as a form of torture. Lucky for Ramiel, he got to look at Nissa as he passed the time. He studied the way her pink highlights seemed to blend in so perfectly with her brown hair. The way the cute dusting of freckles on her nose made her look both sexy and cute at the same time. Finally, he studied her cleavage and wondered if anyone would notice if he tried to peek down it to see all of her breasts. Even if they did catch him, who could blame him. The way the tight white fabric cupped those twin globes was too much temptation for any male to resist.

So caught up in his ogling he didn't realize it was time for the baptizing until Bear grabbed him and dunked him in the water. Shocked, Ramiel gasped and took in a mouthful of water. He was sputtering as Bear lifted him out. *I'm so going to kick your scrawny ass for that*, Ramiel sent to the twit.

*With the way you were fucking Nissa with your eyes, I thought you could use a cold bath.* Bear gave a devilish chuckle. *Besides, after the way you glared at Case, I'm pretty sure I'm second on your ass-kicking list.*

Wet from head to toe, Ramiel started shivering.

Nissa was doing the same thing. Her lips were turning blue and he could see goose bumps covering her flesh. Before he could even think against it, Ramiel reached out and pulled her to his chest, wrapping his arms around her to offer up his body heat. She didn't even fight him, instead settling into his embrace with a happy sigh. *Bear, I think we have another problem.* Ramiel was careful to keep his face neutral. *I don't think Case is the only one falling for the fairy.*

*Gee, you think?* Somehow Bear managed to sound just as sarcastic as when he communicated out loud. *I don't know what clued me into that one. Maybe it was when you ran to the shore and snatched her away from Case like she was the last cookie in the jar and he'd just tried to sneak it from you.*

Ramiel looked away from Nissa long enough to shoot an aggravated glare at Bear. *Remind me again why I asked you to stand in for me?*

*Because of my charming personality and incredible fashion sense. By the way, it's now officially the time to kiss her. I don't know if you get to skip that part now though since you've already jumped the gun in the lip-locking department.*

Bear was right about the kissing part, Michael had stopped talking and Nissa was giving him an expectant look. Remembering how nice it had been to tease that mouth of hers, he was more than happy to go in for seconds. Leaning down, he

captured her lips with his.

This time he was careful to be more gentle. Using his tongue, he traced the outline of her lips before she finally got the message and parted them so he could slip inside to really taste her.

All of the sudden the cold water, the audience, the fact that he had been forced into this, didn't matter. All he knew was Nissa and how it seemed so right to be holding her. The only thing that was missing was his mark on her and he had plans on taking care of that little detail soon.

The crowd roared its approval and he reluctantly pulled back. There an odd mix of fear, amusement and arousal playing around on her face. Her body felt so small and vulnerable in his arms and Ramiel had a wave of fierce protectiveness go over him.

He knew then he would die for her and that thought scared the ever-living hell out of him. It still didn't make him let go of her though. If anything, it made him hold on even tighter.

\* \* \* \*

After they left the lake, Nissa stood on the banks with Ramiel and watched as everyone started to get ready for the final ceremony, which was going to be of the Chief and his mate, Rachael. The excitement of the crowd was palpable as they all

pressed forward for a better view. Nissa was relieved when Ramiel seemed content to hang back on the fringes of the mass. Even with the sun beating down on her, Nissa was still cold from the water. When a breeze blew over her, she tried and failed to hold back a shiver.

"Why didn't you tell me you were freezing?" he demanded, like she had put him out by getting hypothermia.

"I'm fine," she insisted around her chattering teeth.

With a heavy sigh, Ramiel gestured one of the archangels who served under him over. Muttering some words she couldn't hear, he sent him off to fetch something. Knowing him, it was a club so he could beat her over the head caveman style. She was shocked when the archangel returned with a heavy wool blanket.

Fully expecting him to just throw it at her and be done, she was stunned when he reached out pulled her closer so her back was pressed to his chest. Then he threw the blanket around his shoulders and wrapped it around both of them.

Nissa couldn't hold back the happy sigh as she felt the warmth of his body envelope her. She couldn't help but be aware of every hard plane and line of his hard body and the way he smelled. Warm and spicy, kind of like the way he acted. Or at least the way he acted toward his family.



"Better?" His voice rumbled near to her ear.

She shivered, but this time it wasn't because of the cold, but from the heady sensation of his warm breath fanning against her skin. She had to resist the ridiculous temptation to tilt her head to the side so more of her was exposed to him. "Yes, thank you," she replied stiffly. This new caring Ramiel was so foreign to her. It made her feel unsettled and unbalanced as a part of her wondered if he was playing some kind of cruel game.

"I can't have my mate freezing to death on our first day together," he said.

She tried to ignore the thrill that went through her at the words *my mate*. "You don't have to worry about me dying from the cold." She smiled, safe in the knowledge that he couldn't see her face. "We're immortal like angels."

"Okay, then maybe I wanted a chance to hold you and maybe cop a feel under the blanket."

His warm sensual tone washed over her like water from a hot tub. Shocked, she turned just enough so she could see if he was pulling her leg. Judging from the raw desire in his eyes, he was dead serious. "You wouldn't dare? Not in front of everyone." She shook her head in disbelief even as she felt desire rocket through her body. It was a good thing she was already soaked or she would have one serious set of wet panties to deal with.

She was saved from whatever response he may have had when Rachael came out of one of the tents. As the female angel made her way to the lake Nissa couldn't help but feel small and dowdy compared to her.

Rachael's short, dark curls were held back by a silver Grecian style headband, making her deep blue eyes stand out even more than usual. She looked beautiful and regal in her long white gown, like she was made to parade around in them. There was the smallest of smiles playing on her lips as she gazed lovingly at Michael.

"She looks so nice," Nissa observed in a wistful tone.

"Not nearly as much as you do." Ramiel shocked her with how sincere his voice sounded.

"If you're being nice just to get me into bed, you can save it," she squeaked, her throat suddenly tight. "Since I need this mating, I'm pretty much a sure thing."

"Did you ever stop to think that maybe I really meant it?" He dropped his voice to a whisper since the ceremony had started.

"Isn't that Jordy's cousin presiding over the mating?" she asked. Nissa had seen the handsome dark-haired male before, but never talked to him. The only reason she knew he was related was because the teen was a close friend of Ella. A unique friendship since Jordy was half-elf and

elves and fairies hated each other.

"Yes, that's Raphael," Ramiel explained. "He's the leader of the healers."

"How exactly does your hierarchy work? I thought Michael was the leader?"

"I guess to a newcomer like you it would be a bit confusing. There are three types of angels. Empaths, whose job it is to soothe humans and other angels when they are sad, mad or upset. They are also able to sense demons quicker than the rest of us since they are more attuned to evil. Cam has been their leader for a few years now. After empaths, the next group of angels are the healers."

"Let me guess." She snuggled into his chest. "They heal you when you're sick or hurt."

"Someone give the gal a gold star." He smiled down at her. "Raphael has been their leader since long before I was born."

"So he's an old geezer then?" she teased. Nothing about Raphael looked elderly. He didn't look older than thirty at most. "So tell me about the third type of angels."

"That would be the archangels. They are experts in battle tactics and are usually the strongest fighters. Michael is their leader."

"I'm confused." She felt dense, but it was hard to make heads and tails of their society. "I thought Michael was in charge of all angels so why would

you need Cam or Raphael?"

"Michael is the leader of all the archangels and the angel warriors," he corrected.

"I still don't get it."

"Not all angels are warriors. There are civilians of all three types of angels. The empath and healer ones answer solely to Cam or Raphael."

They both paused for a moment and watched as Cam dunked Michael in the water. Amadeaha followed suite, baptizing Rachael.

"It gets even more confusing," Ramiel said. "The angel warrior empaths and healers still answer to Cam and Raphael, but Michael is head of all of them." He paused and chuckled. "Am I making sense?"

"Yes," she exclaimed as the pieces finally fell in place. "Michael is the president while Cam and Raphael are both vice presidents."

"A very human way of looking at things, but yeah that's it exactly." He feathered the softest of kisses on the tip of her ear.

It was all she could do not to purr in pleasure. "You know I'm not going to force you to stick around me after we're fully mated." She tried to sound casual even as her heart felt like it was breaking. "You don't have to sleep in the same bed as me and make lovey eyes at me."

He grabbed her by the hips and turned her so they were facing each other. Nissa had expected

him to be relieved instead he looked – angry?

“Let me give you one more lesson about angels, sweetie.” He cupped her chin and glared into her eyes. “We mate for life and it’s not something we take lightly. After tonight, our souls are going to bound in such a way that we won’t be able to live without the other. To try would make us both miserable and useless.”

“What are you trying to say?” Nissa stammered, her heart beating so hard it actually hurt. The crowd cheered it approval as the ceremony finished, but neither one of them broke eye contact. This was a life changing moment and nothing, not even an explosion could have made them look away from each other.

“You will sleep in my bed every night and be my mate in every way. Like it or not, you’re stuck with me.” The seriousness of his tone left her no doubt he actually meant those words.

“I don’t need you breathing down my neck, archangel,” she spat. Angry, she tried to pull away, but his iron hard grip held her firmly in place. “Let me go before I introduce me knee to that certain part of your anatomy that’s poking into me.”

“I’d love to see you try.”

His eyes danced with amusement, adding to her fury. Hissing like a cat, she struggled even harder against him. “I don’t need or want you by

my side." Maybe if she repeated it enough it would be true.

"Then you should have never picked an archangel to mate with." He gazed down at her.

The primal possession she saw in his eyes made her gasp.

"Once we claim our mate, our lives are completely devoted to making them happy and protecting them."

No, no, no that was not what Nissa had planned on. Well the protecting yes, but in a more distant you-live-your-life-while-I-live-mine type of way. "I didn't trade away one prison only to end up in another," she declared in desperation. As soon as the damning words left her mouth, she clamped her lips together and turned her head to the side. She knew they had made their mark by the way Ramiel shut up as his body grew tense.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he finally asked in a hard voice.

"Nothing." She shook her head, still refusing to look at him. "Forget I said it."

"Like hell I'll forget it," he growled. "If someone is threatening you, tell me and I'll stop them."

Hysterical laughter threatened to spill out of her. Little did Ramiel know he would be taking on all of fairy society. No one, not even him could manage that and he was the best warrior she'd

ever seen fight. His jaw clenched as his eyes grew hard.

"Oh I get it," he snapped as he dropped his arms. "You can tell Tiffany all about it, but not me?"

Nissa shivered, her body instantly missing the warm comfort of his embrace. "It's different with Tif. I can trust her more."

"Why's that?" he thundered despite the fact they were beginning to attract attention.

"Because she can't betray me," Nissa yelled back.

Ramiel took a step back, a look of disgust on his face. "You actually think I would?"

"Everyone else in my life eventually has," she admitted raggedly. Her throat was so tight it was a wonder she could breathe let alone talk clearly. The hurt plainly written in Ramiel's eyes made her feel like someone had ripped her heart out of her chest and stomped on it.

## Chapter Six

**B**olan missed his old home. He missed the comfort of being surrounded by his things. He missed all of his cats. Most of all he missed being alone. It was pure agony to be living with so many others. To add insult to his injury, they were stinking human loving angels, too.

Walking through a dense patch of woods, he loudly cursed when he tripped over a tree root. While most fairies loved trees, plants and flowers, he detested them. Give him a warm, dry room and some books and he'd be fine. One of the reasons he left his homeland was because he'd never been one with Mother Nature. Why would he want to live in a hut and have to hunt for his food when he could just call for pizza delivery instead? Humans may be vile creatures, but at least they got one thing right when they invented that convenience.

Finally, after several more minutes of hiking, he found the cabin nestled between a bunch of trees. Grumbling under his breath, he knocked on the



front door. When it wasn't answered right away, he knocked again, this time louder with impatient raps. "Come on, Winnow," he yelled. "I don't have all day and the mosquitoes are making a meal out of my ass."

The door opened to reveal a fairy with long curly blonde hair and blue eyes that were glazed over and vacant. Brolan wasn't shocked to see her dazed state since she'd been that way for as long as he'd known her. Shame really, since she was quite beautiful. The loose fitting pink sundress she was wearing did little to hide her killer curves and she had the purest complexion he'd ever seen. Too bad she was bat shit crazy even by his standards. While he was happy collecting cats, she would probably prefer to skin and eat them.

"Brolan, did you come to return the crock pot you borrowed?" she asked in a vacant voice.

"For the ten millionth time, that wasn't me," Brolan spat out between clenched teeth, a headache beginning to form behind his eyes. One minute in her presence and he was already stressed.

"If you have plans on keeping it, you can just forget it, bub. I wrote my name on the lid with a permanent marker. You can't wash that off no matter how hard you try." She pointed a finger at him.

He noticed she had each nail painted a different

neon color. "That's not what I came here to talk about."

"Oh." She tilted her head to the side as a jarring clarity came into her eyes. "Then you know about Mikah?"

"Of course I know, you idiot. I am a prophet so that would make it a bit hard to keep secrets from me." He rolled his eyes.

"You haven't changed a bit, you sarcastic OCD freak, kitty fetish, son of a bitch," she retorted before she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him into a kiss.

Brolan grabbed her by the waist and pulled her roughly against him as he slanted his lips over her. It had been so long since he'd tasted her, been with her. So much lost time together, a sacrifice they had both made gladly for their dead king.

"Goddess, I've missed you so damn much, Winnow," he declared between kisses. He winced when she fisted one hand in his dreads and pulled as she fought for control of their passion.

"It's almost over." She nipped at his bottom lip, then laved away the hurt with a sweep of her tongue. "Once Mikah reclaims his rightful place as ruler and we have the cooperation of the angels, our promise will be complete. Then we can find someplace far away from everyone and spend the rest of our time together."

"It has been so damn long." Brolan slid one of

the straps of her dress off her shoulder.

"Soon," she cooed. "Have you told Nissa that Mikah is alive yet?"

"No, she still thinks he died with the rest of her family. When she finds out that her youngest brother is alive and I've known about it all this time, she's going to feel betrayed. That's going to make her harder to control."

"Has she mated with the angel yet?" Winnow asked as she started to work the tie loose from his warm up pants.

"They are doing the ceremony today." He moaned when she slid her hand inside. "It's probably already over. The mating won't be official in the angels' eyes until they fuck though."

"Do you think that's going to be a problem?" She frowned. "We need this union with the angels."

"No, I've seen the looks those two have been shooting each other when they think no one is looking. They want one another – bad."

"How bad?" She wrapped one hand around his cock.

He grunted and jacked his hips forward. "Almost as bad as I want you. Damn it! Are you going to invite me in or what?"

"That depends." She ran her fingers up his shaft. "Are you going to give me back my cock pot if I do?"

"For the final time, I don't..." he trailed off when she gave him a squeeze. "Shit, I'll buy you a new one. Just let me come in, please."

"I guess I can compromise." She giggled as she led him inside and to her bed.

\* \* \* \*

"Ramiel, you got a sec?" Joe asked as handed him a glass of punch. Even though all the ceremonies were complete, everyone was still at the lake. Long tables were loaded down with food and drink and a loud celebration was going on.

"Sure," Ramiel grunted as he took the punch. He wished that it was booze so he could drown away his sorrows, but he couldn't even have that since alcohol made angels puke. Still it may be worth the upchucking if he could forget this fuckup of a day.

"Who would have guessed it?" Joe nervously shuffled his feet. "Both of us mated to fairies."

"Who would have guessed I would be mated period?"

"True." Joe nodded. "You always put duty before fun."

"I don't think that's what Cliona sent you over to talk to me about though." Ramiel took a long drink of the overly sweet punch.

"How did you know she sent me?" Joe had the

good graces to look guilty as he darted a furtive glance over at Cliona.

"Because I watched as she whispered in your ear and then shoved you in my direction." Ramiel set the cup down, giving up on the punch. Not even Bear or Cam could stomach that crap.

"That obvious, huh?" Joe blushed.

"Yeah, plus you could never hide anything from me. You still wear your emotions on your face. So why don't you get it over with and spit out whatever it is you're supposed to tell me."

Joe opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, like he was unsure as how to start before he blurted, "Fairies are different than our females. It hurts them the first time they have sex, just like humans."

Ramiel stared stupidly as that information slowly sunk in. That was the last thing he had expected Joe to say. "So when you and Cliona did it the first time, it was painful for her?" Great now he was blushing, too. You would have thought they were a pair of teen girls talking about boys.

"Yeah, at least for a couple of minutes it was." Joe shrugged.

"Are you sure it's not because she's half-human?" Ramiel wasn't too surprised at how frantic he sounded. As if he wasn't suffering from performance anxiety as it was, having to bed her in the same house his entire family was living in.

It didn't help that he knew they would all be aware of what was going on, too.

"Cliona asked around. It's the norm for all female fairies." Joe cocked a brow. "Unless of course Nissa isn't a virgin. Then you would have nothing to worry about."

Ramiel snorted. Yeah, like that was a possibility when she'd never even kissed a guy before. Shit, damn, fuck! He was clumsy enough as it was around females, now that he knew about this, he would be even worse. It was be a wonder if she didn't end up running from the room, begging Michael to find another archangel for her to mate with.

*Not going to happen though because she's mine!* Ramiel scowled. Since when had he gotten so possessive over her? First at the lake and now. Next thing he would start being led around by his cock like the rest of his mated brothers.

"I do have something good to tell you though." Joe brightened up. "Fairies are really sensitive in the spot on their backs where their wings pop out."

"How sensitive?" Ramiel cocked a brow.

"Very much so." Joe gave a wicked grin. "If I stroke and kiss it just right, I can make Cliona come."

"Okay." Ramiel put his hands up. "You went just a little too far with that information." He

paused, reconsidered, before asking. "Really? You made her come just from touching her back?"

"Yup." Joe drained his glass, shuddering from the taste before he put his empty cup down.

"Where exactly on her back?" Hell at this point Ramiel wouldn't be too proud to take an illustrated instruction guide.

"The spot right by the shoulder blades. Don't worry, she'll let you know when you're there."

"Okay, thanks. In case you didn't notice, I can use all the help I can get." While he'd been with more than his fair of succubi in the past, this was going to be his first time with someone who didn't have fangs. Unless you counted Nix the oracle, but she had an inner set of fangs that was ten times more deadly than any demon.

"One more thing. Gabby and Abdiel offered to take the kids to a hotel for the night to give all the couples in our family some privacy. They said Ella could come to if that's okay with you."

"Go ask Nissa, she's Ella's guardian." Ramiel shrugged.

"No, as of the mating you are," Joe pointed out with a *duh* look.

Oh shit, he was right. As soon as he and Nissa were mated, Ella became his responsibility. Adopted or not, by angel custom, she was as much his daughter as if she were of his blood. "I don't care, but still go clear it with Nissa first," he

said once he could breathe enough to talk again.

"I kind of figured that was what you would say. I'll go ask her now." Joe took a couple of steps away before he pulled back and turned around again. "I know you didn't want this, but I've seen you two together. You're right for each other."

Ramiel snorted. "If you say so."

"Just remember that night you and Case found her being chased by demon, it was you she ran to. I think a part of her knew even then that she was meant for you. Just like a piece of you knew you belonged to her."

"How do you figure?"

"Because you ran to her, too."



## Chapter Seven

**R**amiel was still mulling Joe's words over a couple of hours later. The festivities were winding down and gradually the crowd thinned out until there were just a few couples left. Knowing he couldn't put it off any more unless he planned on pitching a tent and camping out, he approached Nissa.

She was standing alone, gazing out at the lake. The sun was starting to set, the pink-red hues reflecting off the water. She was holding a flower in her hand, slowly spinning it. Her heart jumped when he noticed it was an orchid. She must have heard him coming because she turned, a hesitant smile playing on her lips.

"It's so pretty here." She sighed wistfully. "I've lived with humans or been on the run for so long I had almost forgot how peaceful places like this can be."

"Ana set up a room for us at the family quarters. If you want, you can bring in as many

plants as your heart desires," Ramiel offered. "I know that's how Cliona likes it and she told me that's pretty normal for fairies."

"Thanks. That would be nice." She returned her gaze back to the water.

Ramiel felt his breath catch in his chest at her beauty. Never had he dreamed that rounded cheekbones, big brown eyes, and multi-colored hair would appeal to him, but with her it did. In his eyes, there was no female who could even begin to compete with her. "So you don't mind the idea of us sharing a bed?" he asked, cautious of restarting their earlier argument.

"No, if you don't mind being married to a fairy," she returned just as cautiously.

"Right now, as I'm looking at how beautiful you are, I can't think of why I ever objected in the first place." It took only two strides before he had her in his arms. Her body molded to him so perfectly it was as if they truly had been meant for each other. She tilted her head up to look at him, a stray piece of her hair fluttering around in the breeze.

"So is this the part where you take me home and fully mate with me?" Her lids grew heavy with desire as she slowly ran her tongue along her bottom lip.

His cock jumped like it was begging for the same attention. "I will admit I spent the better part

of the last hour thinking about how it would feel to have your soft, naked, willing body under mine." He pulled her harder against him, letting his erection press against her stomach so she would have no doubt whatsoever that he was telling the truth. She sucked in a breath, but made so move to step back. In fact, if anything, she arched her back a bit so there was even more contact.

"So tell me, big guy. Am I going to enjoy it?"

Her innocent question sent a wave of panic through him as Joe's warning came back to mind. "By the time I'm done, you won't even remember your name," he promised, meaning every word. He would do everything in his power to make sure her first time was an experience she would never forget.

"What are we waiting for? Take me home."

A shy smile played on her mouth and he couldn't resist. Kissing her, he flashed them back to their new room.

"That flashing thing you guys do still makes me dizzy." She pressed her fingers to her temples.

"You'll get used to it," Ramiel assured as he captured her lips with his again.

She moaned as she darted her tongue out to meet his.

He got lost in the sweet taste of his mate as they kissed for several minutes. He even forgot that he

was supposed to be mad at her for not trusting him. All that mattered was how good it felt to tease her lips as he made absent circles on her back with his fingers.

Reaching blindly, he trailed his hand up to the ties on the back of her dress. The knot was tight and unyielding and he fought with it for several frustrating seconds. Just as he was getting ready to pull his dagger out, it finally came loose. Never breaking off the kiss, he unlaced her and slid the gown off her body, letting it pool on the ground around her feet.

Only then did he step back, but it was just far enough so he could look at her. She was nude except for a white thong that only covered the juncture of her thighs and a matching bra that seemed to be fighting to contain her full breasts. "I knew you were pretty, but I had no idea you were this beautiful," he marveled as he continued to look her up and down. His cock was so hard that it was painful, but he forced himself to hold back, wanting to make this all about her.

"You don't have to lie to make me feel better." She blushed, the flush even carrying over to the tops of her breasts. As if he needed anything calling further attention to them.

"I'm not lying. Right now, I'm so stunned by you that it's me whose forgot my name." That wasn't too far from the truth either. Never before

had he seen such perfection in a female. The most refreshing thing was she honestly didn't seem to realize it either. There wasn't a vain bone in her body.

Pulling her back into his embrace, he decided to test out what Joe told him. Ever so softly, Ramiel ran his fingers over the spot by Nissa's shoulder blades. She reacted as if he'd touched her with a hot iron. Letting out a loud gasp, she jerked in his arms, her eyes wide.

"Did I just hurt you?" he asked in alarm. Maybe all fairies reacted differently to being touched there.

"Not at all." She shook her head, her eyes still as big as saucers. "I just never had anyone caress that spot before. It's nice."

"How nice?" he prompted as he stroked her again there.

"Very nice," she moaned as she arched against him, her breasts pushing into his chest. "Kiss me, please."

He obeyed because quite frankly at that point he was so jazzed up for her he would have walked through the dungeons of Hell if she'd asked. Suddenly he was hard pressed to remember why he had resisted this whole mating thing. "Turn around and put your hands on the wall," he commanded as he pulled back.

Her eyes flashed with passion as she moved to

do what he asked. Putting her hands above her head, she spread her legs slightly as she looked over her shoulder at him. Since she was wearing a thong, he could see all of her ass and it was all he could not to bow down worship it. Tight, rounded and just the right size for cupping, it was almost a work of art. He'd never been an ass guy before, but one look at that made him a quick convert.

"Nice," he groaned with approval as he ran his hand up one globe, her flesh quivering under his touch. The desire to kiss her there was so hard his mouth watered. He had big plans for Nissa and her fine ass, but that would have to wait for later. First, he had to get her good and ready for him and now he knew one sure fire way to do that.

Brushing his knuckles along the sweet spot on her back, he reveled in her reaction. It was so pure, not some act in order to turn him on. It was all her. Encouraged, he leaned forward and ran his tongue in the area.

"Oh goddess," she shrieked as she jerked.

Ramiel grabbed her by the hip to keep her in place as he continued to lave and kiss her silky flesh. Damn, Joe had been right, you could make them come just by touching them here. He could sense that Nissa was on the edge, maybe it was the psychic in him or maybe it was just male instinct. He wasn't for sure how, but he knew she was ready to have the biggest orgasm of her life.

Just as he was getting ready to drive her over the edge, all things went to hell.

A loud *womp!* was his only warning before something slammed into his face and threw him across the room. Hitting the wall with a painful thud, he slid down and had to shake his head to clear out the birdies.

Nissa let out a cry of distress before she ran so fast from the room she was just a pink and blue blur. She went into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her. *Pink and blue?* Then the fucking irony of what had happened hit him almost as violently in the gut as he'd been hit in the head.

Why in the hell did her wings have to choose now to pop out? If it weren't for the pain of his hard cock screaming for attention that obviously now it was not going to get, he might have laughed. Instead, he cursed in several languages under his breath as he realized he'd lost all ground with her. Not only that, his right eye hurt like hell. Raising a hand to it, he hissed in pain. He was going to have a shiner for sure. Great, how was he going to explain this one away to his brothers? He seriously doubted they would believe a rogue demon had ventured into his bedroom and attacked.

Getting up, he went to the bathroom door and frowned when he found it locked. Pressing his ear

to the door, he heard rushing water that did little to cover the sound of muffled sobs. He knocked, but there was no response. "Nissa?" he called, feeling like an idiot. "Come out. It wasn't that bad."

"It. Was. Too." She gasped between sobs.

"It's no big deal." He tried for a laugh, but all that came out was a weak chuckle. "It's not the first time you winged me. If it happens enough times, we can even start calling it foreplay."

"It's not funny!" she yelled.

At least she had stopped crying. That had to count as progress didn't it? "Actually it kind of is," he cringed as soon as the words slipped from his stupid pie hole.

"Go away!" she demanded, her fury palatable even through the door.

"No," Ramiel became indignant. Who did she think she was, ordering him around like that? He led armies of angel warriors into battle and never once had they dared to question his authority. What made Nissa think she had the right?

"I mean it, archangel. Go. Away." Judging by her tone she was good and pissed, but he didn't give a damn. He was the one with the black eye, not her so how dare she cop a 'tude with him? "Nissa, as your mate I order you to come out, now!" he commanded in his best general voice.

There was a loud thump against the door.



Ramiel jumped back on instinct and it was a good thing he did. The blade of a knife protruded from the wood. A cold sweat broke out over his body when he noticed it had been aimed for his cock. "You just threw a weapon at me," he stated the obvious, too shocked to come up with something more eloquent.

"Did I hit you?"

"No, but only because I moved back." He eyed the blade. For it to have come through so much she must have a damn good arm. If the circumstance had been different, he might have been proud of her.

"Too bad. I was really hoping to draw some blood. You bossy arrogant sack of pig shit," she yelled.

"You keep using that language on me, I'll spank that fine ass of yours," he promised darkly.

There was another loud thump as she threw one more knife at the door.

This time it the blade protruded where his head had been. Being the grown up archangel that he was, he kicked the wall in retaliation.

"Nobody tells me what to do. Not even you, you stupid ass of a donkey," she spat.

"Does that make me an asses ass then?" Ramiel goaded.

There was another shriek of outrage, another thump, another blade.

"Damn it, female. How many knives do you have in there with you?" Ramiel exclaimed as he eyed it up. Pretty easy since it had been aimed at his head again.

"Plenty." She gave a humorless laugh. "I can keep this up all night."

"Not if I break down this door and tan your hide."

"I would love to see you try. You wouldn't be the first lunkheaded jackass who made the mistake of underestimating me."

Sweet Moses, the thought of her half-naked and attacking him should not have been such a turn on. There was no denying the ball crunching desire that was roaring through him though. "So you're just going to stay in there for the rest of your life then?" he asked, not caring how condescending the question sounded.

"It would sure beat being around you. Now go away before I throw another knife."

"I'll leave, but only for a little bit so you can calm down and stop acting like a spoiled brat. When I get back, I hope we can discuss this face to face and not through a damn door." Not waiting for her response, he stormed from the room

Going down the stairs to the kitchen, he tried hard not to be bitter about how deserted the house was. Everyone else was holed away in their rooms, celebrating the unions while his unmated

brothers were probably finding some trouble and succubi at the local neutral bar.

Pushing open the doors, he groaned in disgust. His healer brother, Derel, was there with his mate, Heather. The pretty brunette empath was only dressed in one of Derel's shirts and a pair of white socks. Derel wasn't any more modest since he only had on a pair of jeans. Heather was sitting on the edge of the counter and Derel was between her legs as they fed each other strawberries.

Ramiel quickly ducked his head to the side to hide his shiner, but Derel was too good of a healer to fall for that. Leaving Heather, he narrowed his eyes as he searched Ramiel's face.

"Do I even want to know what happened?" Derel asked with a put-upon sigh.

"Forget it," Ramiel growled as he went to the freezer and grabbed some ice. "I'll take care of it myself."

Derel ignored him. Coming up, he grabbed Ramiel by the chin and forced his face down so he could examine his eye. "You must have really pissed your fairy off for her to clock you this hard."

"It was her wings," Ramiel confessed. Might as well fess up right away and get it over with. In a family of psychics, it wasn't like he could keep anything secret.

Derel paused, his mouth slack with shock. "She

socked you in the eye with her wings?"

Heather tried and failed to hide her giggles behind her hand.

"I guess that brings a whole new meaning to the term *butterfly kisses*." Derel smirked, not even attempting to hide his amusement.

"You're never going to let me live this down are you?" Ramiel let himself be led to a chair. Sitting heavily in it, he tilted his head back so Derel could get a better view.

"Nope, as soon as I'm done here I'm going to text everyone and let them know, too. Cam is going to love this." Derel gingerly touched the wound. "So what happened? It's doesn't take an empath to let me know you're upset."

"I'll skip over the gory details and just let you know it ended with her throwing knives at me." Ramiel jerked as Derel kept poking. Why didn't just close his eyes and go into the healing trance already? Known as the quietest of the Lehor brothers, Derel had the bad habit of finding his chatty side at all the wrong times.

"You must have really upset her," Heather accused, her lips pursed together with disapproval.

"I didn't do anything—well at least not enough to warrant deadly force," Ramiel defended. Now that he'd started yapping, the words continued to pour out. "I don't see how this mating is ever

going to work. She's too different than us. What in the hell was I thinking when I ever imagined I could ever find happiness with her. We all know how bat shit crazy fairies are."

"Ramiel—" Derel started.

Ramiel cut him off. "Seriously, how many sane brides go after their mates with a blade on their mating night? It's only a matter of time before she starts collecting cats like Brolan or talking to herself like Winnow."

"Oh shit," Heather breathed, the color draining from her face.

Ramiel followed her wide-eyed gaze and saw Nissa standing in the doorway. She'd gotten dressed in her mating gown again and followed him down here. Ramiel didn't even bother asking her how much of the conversation she'd heard because, judging by the hurt expression on her tear-stained face, it was more than enough. "Crap, Nissa." Ramiel jumped to his feet. "I didn't mean any of that. I'm so sorry." But he may have well been talking to air because she'd already left. He turned to Derel, looking for support, but all he got was a cold, hard stare.

"You can be such an ass at times," Derel spat. "On second thought, you can take care of that eye on your own after all." Grabbing Heather by the hand, he left the kitchen.

Alone, Ramiel finally let lose the curse that was

on the tip of his tongue. If he kept swearing at this rate, he would start putting potty mouth Cam to shame. He wasn't mad at Nissa or even Derel, all the rage was directed at himself, right where it should be.

He knew he'd been a fuckup when it had come to romancing a female, but this was a new low even for him. There was no way he could ever fix this on his own. Sucking down what little bit of his pride remained, he ran up the stairs and knocked on one of the doors.

"The compound better be on fire," Joe grumbled as he answered it.

"I need your help," Ramiel blurted before he lost his courage. He looked over Joe's shoulder to Cliona whose hair was disheveled just enough to let him know what he'd interrupted. "And I need it from both of you."

## Chapter Eight

Nissa sat on the edge of the bed as Ramiel's hurtful words continued to replay in her mind. Even though she had promised herself that she wouldn't cry again over him, hot tears coursed down her cheeks. Nissa impatiently wiped them away, disgusted with herself. What in the hell was wrong with her? After so many years of being cool and always in control of her emotions, all of the sudden she was the thing she'd always hated the most—a weepy female who cried because the cute guy hurt her feelings.

There was a timid knock before Tiffany came in. Today she was wearing a shirt that proclaimed, *Psychic on board. He knows what you're thinking and he's disgusted.*

"I'm not crying," Nissa said by way of greeting.

"I can see that." Tif was kind enough not to add the sarcasm that sentence deserved.

"Because I would never shed tears over a jerk like that," Nissa insisted, even as she wiped them

away.

"You sound like me when I first met Bear." Tif came over and sat next to Nissa on the bed. "I used to think I hated him so much."

"You're just saying that to make me feel better." Nissa sniffed. "I've seen you together. You're crazy about each other."

"Now we are, but during the first three years we served on the same angel warrior team, we fought like a couple of spike demons. The very first day we met, Bear shaved all the fur of my cat and renamed it Hairball. To this day that stupid cat won't answer to anything else." She rolled her big brown eyes, but there was no real annoyance in her expression.

"What did you do to get him back for that?" Nissa asked, somehow she didn't think Tif was the type of gal to take something like that lying down.

"I shot out all the tires of his truck with my bow and arrow." Tif wrinkled her nose mischievously. "You want to know the crazy thing?"

"Something more crazy than arrows and bald cats?" Nissa was shocked at how just having someone to talk to made her feel better.

"Bear later told me that me doing that to his truck turned him on."

"You're right, that is loony." Nissa smiled to take away the sting from the insult.

"All of the brothers are, which is why Ramiel



doesn't really care about something as stupid as wings hitting him in the face. Shoot, he doesn't even mind that you made that door into Swiss cheese." She gestured to the bathroom.

"Sorry, I'm going to have to disagree with you on that one." Nissa snorted. "You didn't hear some of the hateful things he said when he didn't know I was there listening."

"The Lehors do everything with a passion, hate, fight, serve...love." Tiffany's gaze searched Nissa's face, as if she was dying to know what her reaction would be.

"The only problem with your logic is Ramiel doesn't love me and he never will," Nissa pointed out, trying to ignore how much it hurt to say that.

"Are you really that blind?" Tiffany asked gently. "He's so in love with you that's it's scaring the socks off him."

"I'm sure you want to believe that because everyone always wants a happy ending." Nissa looked down at her fingers. "But I ruined any chance of that the day I forced him into this mating."

"Ramiel was mad at you for that." Tiffany nodded slowly. "But he'll get over it. The Lehors may be famous for their tempers, but they are more known for the way they quickly forgive others."

"Even so, I doubt he could ever love me." The

painful lump in Nissa's throat made it hard to get that sentence out.

"Nissa, he fell in love with you the minute you ran to him for help. I see the way he looks at you when he thinks nobody is watching. He did it before you called in the promise and he still does it after."

"You must be mistaken," Nissa continued to protest even as a slight flare of hope sparked in her chest.

"No, I'm not. I've known Ramiel for years and that guy has it for you, bad. I also know it scares the ever-living crap out of him. For him that's a liability, a weakness. As the oldest brother, he's shouldered the responsibility of keeping the others safe. In the past few years, a lot has happened to them, too, and Ramiel has felt like he's failed them time and time again."

"They're big boys now, how can he feel like he has to watch out of all seven of them still?" Nissa's heart lurched at the thought of Ramiel blaming himself for things he couldn't control.

"Eight," Tiffany corrected. "You have to count Ana, too. When they lost their parents, everyone always talked about how it was she that raised the boys and, to a certain extent, that's true. She was the one that took them to a healer when they got hurt, made them do their homework, smoothed things over when they got into fights. But it was

Ramiel who made sure they could all fight, got them in the best training classes and defended them from bullies. So it only makes sense that he would feel like every time one of them got hurt it was a failure on his part."

"What about Michael? He's their uncle so why didn't he step in and help raise them?" Nissa seethed in anger. Why was it left up to Ramiel to shoulder all this while he was still so young? No wonder he didn't know how to socialize, he never had time for fun. He was too busy being the protector.

"That's a long story and one that you should ask Ramiel to tell you," Tiffany replied a bit uneasily.

"Okay, then what happened to their parents?" Nissa had spotted their mother, Lehor, from time to time around the family quarters and nothing she'd seen about the pretty blonde haired female spoke of why she hadn't been around to take care of her kids.

"That's another thing you'll have to ask Ramiel about. I've already told you way more than I should have, but I wanted you to understand why Ramiel is the way he is." Tiffany eyed up the damaged door and giggled. "I'm glad to see that you don't back down from him. That's exactly what he needs in a mate. I think you guys are going to make a good match."

"Then why do I feel like I may have made the biggest mistake in my life by forcing him to be my mate?"

"What fun would life be if we didn't take risks every now and then?" Tiffany struggled to her feet and held her hand out to Nissa. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" Nissa asked as she got up.

"Ramiel has been cooking up something special for you. I was sent in to keep you busy and make you feel better. Which I did very well if I do so say so myself. Damn, I'm so good I should be an empath."

Groaning because she had never met a good surprise, Nissa let herself be led from the bedroom and back down to kitchen. Walking in, she was shocked to see a whirlwind of activity going on. Cliona and Bear were running around, filling up a huge picnic basket with food while Cam and Joe had Ramiel in a corner, the three of them deep into a hushed conversation.

Tiffany marched over to Ramiel and put her fingertips on his bruised eye.

Nissa winced when she saw how vicious the deep purple injury was. All thanks to her stupid wings and her inability to keep them from popping out. No wonder he'd said all those things about her. She didn't blame him one bit for feeling hostile as far as she was concerned.

"It's okay, Tif," Ramiel mumbled. "I don't deserved to be healed."

"No you don't," Tiffany agreed. "But it will make my new BFF, Nissa, feel bad every time she sees it."

"Nissa!" Cam exclaimed like he was shocked to see her.

She wasn't fooled for a second. In her brief time living with the angels, she'd determined two things about the empath leader. One, never get on his bad side because he would make for one vicious enemy and two, nothing ever escaped his attention. "Hi?" She hadn't meant it to come out a question, but it had since she had no idea what was going on. Nothing like being two steps behind to make a gal feel unbalanced.

"How's my favorite fairy?" Cam walked over, smiling so large Nissa could see his fangs.

"Hey, I thought I was your favorite fairy, you Dracula wannabe," Cliona objected as she continued to stuff things into the basket.

"You never gave Ramiel a black eye," Cam countered back. "That makes her my favorite anything. Do you know how many times he gave me bruises when I was still an angel warrior in training? Sparring, he called it. Ha! It should have been called beat-the-little-brother's-ass."

"I didn't mean to give him a shiner," Nissa protested. "It was a complete accident. A very

humiliating one that I wish I could just forget about."

"You have nothing to ever be embarrassed about with us." Cam reached out and lightly chucked her on the chin. "Before you know it, this will be just one more story we talk and laugh about at the dinner table."

"Somehow I doubt that," Nissa replied tartly as she watched Tiffany go into the healer's chant, her fingers still on Ramiel's eye.

"Oh, I'm very sure of it," Cam replied, a wicked glint in his odd eyes. "I'm laughing about it already. If you only knew how many times Ramiel knocked me on my ass while I was a kid. Can someone say *karma*?"

"Is everything all set?" Joe called over to Bear.

"Yup, locked, loaded and ready to roll," Bear announced, grinning at Nissa.

She tried to smile back, but was still too confused to do anything other than stand there like an idiot.

"Then let's all vacate and give these two some privacy." Joe ushered everyone out. Right before he walked out the door, he stopped to look at Ramiel. "Don't blow this. Cliona really wants to have a fairy around who isn't certifiable."

After the others had left, an uneasy silence fell that was so thick she could almost taste it. Since she was still by the doorway and didn't want him

to think she was on the verge of bolting, she ventured in a few steps and leaned against the counter furthest from him.

If there was any comfort to be had, it was in the fact that he looked as uncomfortable as she did. He kept his gaze directed at his shifting feet. She noticed he'd changed out of his white clothes and was now wearing jeans and a dark-colored rock tee. She tried not to feel some amused kinship when she saw it was Green Day since she loved that group.

"I'm an ass," Ramiel blurted, finally breaking the silence.

"Yes, you are." Nissa fiddled with her fingernails. Years of training had left them a shredded short mess. "But then so am I."

"Because you threw knives at me?" The corners of his mouth twitched like he was about to laugh.

Maybe Tiffany had been right after all when she said it took a lot more than hurling weapons to tick off the brothers. "No, for getting you in this whole mess in the first place." She sighed. "I had no right to push you into a forced mating. I wouldn't blame you for hating me for the rest of our lives."

"Since both fairies and angels are immortal that would be a pretty long time to dish out some hate." Ramiel slowly walked over until he was standing in front of her.

Desperately, she tried to ignore the heat of his body, the warm scent of his skin. Her fingers itched to run through his short blond hair. She balled her hands into fists in an effort to keep them by her side instead of on him. "I swear I'll tell you why I did it." She tilted her head up to look at him. "I just need time."

"Like I said, *immortal*." He cupped her chin with one hand and gazed into her eyes. "I can wait. So long as you're willing to forgive me for all those things I said. I let my emotions take control of me and for that I'm sorry." He winced as if having feelings were wrong.

It took Nissa a second to realize that he didn't think having them was wrong, but letting them rule his actions was. She had no doubt one of the earliest lessons archangels learned was to be cold and let nothing distract them. Especially something as trivial as emotions.

It was a hard bitter way to live and Nissa should know. The humans who had raised her had taught her to be the same way. It had worked all too damn well. Before Ella, there had been nobody that Nissa had given a damn about. Now she loved another—Ramiel.

A jolt of shock went through her and she had to fight to keep it from registering on her face. *Love*? Could that be what she felt for Ramiel? Even as the question churned in her head, she knew the



answer. Yes, she loved him so much it was a physical ache at times. "I forgive you," she whispered.

"Just give me time, I know I can do this better." He took a deep breath and uttered a word she knew was hard for him to say. "Please?"

"Like you said—immortal." She smiled, tilting her head slightly so her cheek briefly brushed against the palm of his hand. "I can tell you one thing. Why I picked you."

"Was it because I had the biggest sword?" he teased, bringing up their earlier conversation.

"No, I dreamed about you. For months before I even met you in real life." A warm heat came to her cheeks as she worried how he was going to react her admission.

Shock registered in his eyes as he went a bit slack jawed. "Oh," was all he said.

"I know you probably think I'm a loon like Brolan for even claiming something like that, but I promise it's true." She shifted her gaze to the side, more embarrassed than she'd ever been in her entire life.

"That doesn't sound crazy." He reached out with his free hand and brushed her hair back. "You need to remember what kind of family I come from. The word weird should be worked into our family crest."

"So you believe me?" her voice was shaky.

Normally she would have hated herself for showing such a weakness, but his answer was more important to her now.

"Yes and you know why?" When she shrugged, he continued, "Because I dreamed of you, too. You were lost and needed my help. I knew that I had to find you because even then I sensed you belonged to me."

That had been the last thing she'd ever expected. Never had she imagined that Ramiel had been as connected to her as she was to him. After the shock left, a strange sense of giddiness took over. If he had dreamed of her, too, it surely had to mean the goddess had meant for them to be together.

Nissa squelched that idea as soon as it came up. The goddess had never been with her before so why would she be there now? Still it wasn't everyday that mates dreamed of each other before they had even met. So that had to count for something, didn't it?

"You want to hear something else strange?" he searched her face with his intense gaze. "I can't hear your thoughts. I can with almost everyone else, but with you—nothing." He smiled ruefully. "I hadn't realized until now how much I used that as a crutch when I dealt with others. I feel like I'm handicapped when I have to figure you out the normal way."

Nissa heaved a sigh of relief, knowing he couldn't tap into her secrets and fears. "I guess that makes us even since I can't read your mind. Of course I can't read anybody's, but we won't nitpick that little point." She gave a soft laugh.

"Nissa, I want us to start this again. What I mean is you and I, this whole mating thing. I was hoping that you would give me another chance to make it the way it should be. The way I think it was meant to be." He ran his thumb along her chin. "Can you give me a second chance?"

"Of course I can." She shivered under his touch. "If you can give me one. I promise I'll try my best not to wing you again."

"I'll let you in on a little secret. I love your wings."

Her heart jumped at the word *love* before she shook it off. Before she could think any further about it, he grabbed the basket with one hand and wrapped his free arm tightly around her waist.

"You ready?" His lips were so close to her ear, they brushed against it as he talked.

"Where are we going?" Truthfully, she didn't care so long as he continued to hold her like that.

"Joe and Cliona have a special place they like to use as a getaway. They were nice enough to let us use it today. The only bad thing is I'm going to have to flash you there and I know how much you hate it. You still willing to go?"

Nissa groaned as she wrapped her arms around his waist. "Since you all went to so much trouble, who I am to be a party pooper. Flash away."

## Chapter Nine

**A**fter he had flashed them out of the angel warrior compound, Ramiel continued to hold onto Nissa until he was sure she had her grounding. She clutched him back just as hard, her small body so tight to his she may have well been molded to him. Her eyes were closed so hard it gave her pixie-like face a scrunched look. "You can look now." He chuckled as he slowly dropped his arms.

Nissa opened her eyes and her expression switched from fear to pure joy. She let go of his waist so she could turn a lazy circle, taking in everything. They were in a big clearing, surrounded by large trees, thick with foliage. The lush grass under them was a dark green and it looked so soft that it begged to be laid on. Various bright colors broke up the green as flowers mixed in with the plant life.

The best part was in the center. A small lake, its water a crystal blue that looked almost too pure to

be real. Off to one side was a waterfall that was just big enough to play in.

"Joe and Cliona told you about this place?" she asked, still turning around.

Her eyes were wide with excitement and for the first time since he'd met her, there was not edge of wariness in them. It was as if she had found paradise and he'd been the one to give it to her. "Yes," he answered his voice hoarse with emotions he hadn't thought he was capable of feeling. "They come here when they want to be alone and whenever Cliona feels too closed in from the compound. Even though she's half-human she's more fairy like, so she loves to be around nature just like any one of you do."

"It's so beautiful," she breathed, rocking a bit on the balls of her feet.

Thanks to his earlier conversation with Joe, Ramiel knew what she wanted. "Go ahead, run," he urged.

"No." She shook her head slowly, but continued to do that bouncy thing on her feet. "It's silly."

"It's who you are, Nissa." He wanted nothing more at that moment than to pull her back into his arms, but he knew how much she needed this. "Do it for me."

"You really don't mind?" She was bouncing even more, like she was ready to jump out of her

skin.

"Not at all." He couldn't help but smile at her almost childlike behavior. It was so refreshing and un-Nissa like. "It's one of the reasons why I brought you here."

With a squeal of delight, Nissa took off running, her laughter trailing behind her. She moved so quick, her feet barely touched the ground as she made her way around the lake. Every so often, a plant or group of flowers would be in her path and she would jump over them, never breaking stride.

It was such a beautiful site that he couldn't take his gaze off her. The grace in which she moved put female angels to shame. Light and quick, she somehow also managed to look sensual at the same time. His cock stirred to life as he wondered if she would carry that same carefree passion into their bed.

Forced or not, there was no other mate he could ever want. He took a step back as the truth hit him like a blow in the stomach. Why hadn't he realized it before? He had real feelings for Nissa and it wasn't resentment or anger. It was something else, something much stronger and scarier.

Scarier because to care for her would put another chink in his armor. As if it weren't bad enough he had his family to worry about, now he had her, too. But there was no way he could deny

it any longer. Nissa was important to him—very important.

She let out another shout of laughter, her face alive with delight. To know that he was the only one who ever got to see this side of her felt like a treasured gift. Usually she was so guarded, her eyes always scanning a room for escape routes and danger. It wouldn't have surprised him to find out she slept with a knife under her pillow and boots on her feet so she'd always be ready to face danger. Until now, he didn't think he'd ever seen her so at ease.

She rounded the lake and headed toward him. The pins holding her hair had come free and her long hair was trailing behind her, the sun picking up both the brown and the pink highlights streaking through it. She ran right toward him and it only seemed natural for him to open his arms.

Right before she got to him, she leapt, wrapping her long limbs around him.

Ramiel let her body weight carry them back so they fell to the ground, her landing on top of him. Nissa let out another giggle as she looked down at him, a glow all around her. He noted that for all her running, she wasn't even out of breath.

"I love it here," she declared, making no move to get off him.

For that he was eternally grateful. "I love—" Ramiel caught himself, realizing how close he'd



come to blurting out his true feelings.

"You love what?" she asked innocently.

"I love seeing you run." It was lame, but he hoped it was good enough to be convincing.

"I didn't look dorky?"

"Are you kidding?" He reached up and twirled a lock of her hair in his fingers. "You were the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Right." She snorted. "With all those gorgeous female angels? I'm nowhere near as pretty as they are."

"No you're not," he agreed still playing with her hair. It was so silky and soft, he could have gone on touching it forever. "That's because you're way prettier than them."

"You're just saying that because you still feel guilty about earlier," she accused, her eyes narrowed.

"Does this feel like a lie to you?" he thrust his hips up so his erection rubbed against her.

She sucked in a breath as her eyes grew huge. "No that doesn't feel like a lie, what it feels like is a—"

He cut her off with a kiss. It wasn't that he didn't want to hear what she had to say because knowing his gal, it would be a doozy, but he couldn't wait another minute to possess those lips of her again.

She squeaked in surprise before she started to

return his passion and then some.

This time she was the first one to dart her tongue out to stroke the inside of his mouth. He plunged his fingers into her hair and urged her on with gentle nips and laves of his own.

She pulled back, a worried look dancing in her eyes. "What if someone sees us?" she asked, her glance darting around.

"Don't worry, nobody knows about this place but Joe, Cliona and now us." He let one hand slide down to her thigh. The gown had rode up so he met with bare flesh. Desire shot through him when he felt how warm and soft her skin was.

"So that means we can do whatever we want and not get caught?" There was a wicked twinkle in her eyes.

"You have something special in mind?" he teased as he let his hand travel up further. It was now on her hips, just inches from her rounded ass.

"I think I might." Her lips curled up into a saucy smile as she slowly rocked her hips against him.

Ramiel hissed in passion as the movement sent waves of pleasure through him. "You sure you wouldn't rather have your first time be in a bed?" he asked in a strained voice as he brushed the back of his fingers along the curve of her ass.

"No, I want it to be here. I can't think of a better place. That is unless you would rather do it

somewhere else." She rocked against him again.

Ramiel had to grit his teeth so he didn't lose it right then and there, finishing things before they really got started. "Nissa, sweetie, I would do it in the trunk of my car just so long as I got to make love to you." By now, he was boldly caressing the creamy flesh of her rump, but she wasn't objecting.

"I'll pass on that location." Despite the light banter, there was still a flush to her cheeks that let him know she was feeling the same passion he was. "I've seen the trunk of your car and I must say you are one pig."

Wanting to have more freedom so he could explore even more areas of her body, he rolled them over so he was on top. Pulling back just long enough to take off his shirt, he returned to her mouth, kissing her with a passion he had never thought possible. It was as if every moment of his life had been leading up to this and he would finally be complete now that he'd found her. Her gown was still bunched up and he wasn't too proud to take advantage of that. "You're so soft," he murmured against her lips. "I can't wait to nibble on every part of you."

"Every part?" she whispered as she clutched his arm.

"Each and every single inch of your tight body. Starting here." He deliberately let his hand brush

against her core. "Damn, Nissa, you're already so wet for me. I can't wait to lick up those sweet juices of yours."

She moaned in response as he pushed her skirt up even higher so it was pooled around her waist. The only thing separating him from her pussy was that thin piece of material she called a thong. He nudged it to the side so he could caress her slippery folds.

"Ramiel," she shrieked as she arched against him.

It was all he could not to unzip his pants just enough to free his cock so he could plunge into her moist heat. But he wanted to take this slow, not only because of what Joe had told him, but because he wanted this first time to be special for her. His mate deserved no less. "Easy, sweetie. We need to go nice and easy." He slid one finger inside her and almost groaned when her body yielded to him. "You're so tight and small I need to get you ready for me so I don't hurt you."

She grew stiff under him. "Is there something wrong with me?"

"Nothing," he assured as he gave her a small peck on the tip of her freckled nose. "You're perfect in every way." Slowly withdrawing his finger, he replaced it with two, stretching her. Trailing kisses down her jaw, neck and collarbone, he worked his way until he was hunched between

her creamy white thighs. Sliding her panties down her long legs, he ran his tongue up her ankle, the curve of her calve, the dip of her knee before he was finally inches from her pink, glistening folds. She still had the gown on and he left it that way for now. At the moment, his only concern was tasting her.

Dipping his head down, he slowly ran his tongue up the slit of her pussy. Nissa acted as if she'd just touched a live electrical wire, her body arching up as she wailed his name. *His name*. Because she belonged to him and there would never be another for either one of them.

He licked her again, reveling in how she tasted like peaches and cream. Sweet and smooth, just right. If he lived another hundred years, he would never get enough of it. Again, he slowly licked his way up her slit, pausing to curl his tongue around her swollen clit.

"You're so sweet," he crooned as he fingered her again. "So perfect." Grabbing her by the hips to keep her still, Ramiel tasted, teased and played with her until she tightened her thighs around him, screaming out his name as she came. By now his cock was so hard it was painful as it pressed against the zipper of his jeans. At this rate, he would have a permanent zigzag pattern embedded there.

"Naked," he growled as he sat up on his knees

and gazed down at her. "I need you naked now so I can touch you everywhere." Sitting up, she started to fumble with those damn strings in the back of her dress and he reached around to help her. When the knots wouldn't give, he tore the laces in his eagerness to get her undressed. He peeled the garment from her body, slowing kissing the flesh as it was exposed. Soon she was only in her bra and he quickly got rid of that, too, so all of her body was open to his appraisal.

Her breasts were perfection, just large enough for him to hold, the nipples a dusky pink. He leaned forward and placed a light kiss on the tip of one of them. She threw her head back as she hissed in pleasure. Maybe it was the isolation of the lake, but she didn't seem to have any qualms about being vocal and he found that trait more than a little appealing.

"What about you?" she moaned. "Are you going to take your pants off?"

Nodding like an idiot, he fumbled with his pants and boots until he had them off. Naked, he eased her back onto the grass and positioned himself between her thighs again. Once she was spread out under him, he leaned down so he could kiss and lick her nipples again, alternating between the two until she was panting with desire.

"Please, Ramiel," she begged in a husky

whisper. "I need you inside me." When he moved to put his hand on her pussy again, she shook her head wildly. "Not that, I need *you* inside of me."

"Okay, but we take it slow and easy. I don't want to hurt you." He drew back in alarm when he saw tears glittering in her eyes. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No," she assured him as she lovingly stroked his cheek. "It's just no one has ever worried about hurting me before."

His heart lurched at the thought of her being alone and uncared for in the the world. While he'd lost his parents, at least he had his sister and brothers there to care about him. "You will never be alone again. Do you hear me?" his voice shook with emotion.

"Yes," she replied so softly he had to strain to hear.

He knew she was far from convinced, but he would make her see the truth. Even if it took the rest of their immortal lives. A strong surge of protectiveness went over him and at that moment, he knew that even if she hadn't forced this on him nothing would have stopped him from claiming her. She was his from the moment he found her running from those demons. Very carefully, he eased just the tip of his cock inside her pussy. Even though his body was screaming at him to go all the way, to slam into and finally make her his

in every way possible, he forced himself to still.

"Ramiel?" She wrinkled her brow in confusion.

"Slow and easy, remember?" He gradually eased in, inch by torturous inch, her hot, wet pussy wrapping around him like a fist. Then he found what he'd hoped he wouldn't, but knew deep down would be there—the thin membrane that marked her virginity. Reaching between them, he started to caress her swollen clit.

She moaned and started to undulate her hips.

He put out a hand and stilled her. The last thing he wanted was for her thrashing to send him deeper inside her. At least not yet. He was hoping if he got her good and worked up it would be less painful to her when he fully thrust in her. He continued to work and tease her clit until she came twice, each time screaming his name both times. A few times the palm of his hand tingled and grew warm and he thought for sure he was going to mark her, but every time it faded before anything happened. Just as he felt her body tense over him a third time, he thrust forward, driving his cock past that damned barrier.

Nissa let out a loud gasp as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Even though it was the hardest thing he'd ever done, he didn't move, letting her body get adjusted to him. "I'm sorry," he babbled like a teen boy who'd botched his first kiss. "I didn't



want to hurt you."

"Don't worry."

Her eyes were heavy and dark with passion, her hair messed just right, her full lips were swollen. In other words, she was the pure definition of sexy. Ramiel's cock jerked inside her as if it were demanding he get the show on and quit stalling.

"It doesn't even hurt anymore," Nissa assured as she rolled her hips against him.

Ramiel moaned in pleasure, but still managed to maintain his control. Then she did it again, this time nice and slow, making shockwaves of pleasure bounce all over his body. "Nissa, you keep this up I'm going to give you the thorough fucking you're begging for." He clenched his teeth as sweat broke out on his temples.

"Good, I was hoping you would get the hint." Again, she wickedly grated against him.

"Sweetie, you're so tight I'm afraid I'll hurt you if I'm not careful."

"I'm stronger than you think. It doesn't hurt at all, but I do ache with need." She dug her heels into the small of his back, urging him on. "Ramiel, I need it so bad. Do it now or I'll start throwing my knives at you again."

"Why do I get the feeling that this isn't the last time you're going to threaten me to get what you want?" he asked right before he pulled back and

thrust into her again. They both moaned as he went in deep, touching the entrance of her womb.

"More." Nissa clawed at his back. "Harder."

So Ramiel gave his mate what she wanted. He started to make love to her at a quick pace, slamming into her so hard her breasts bounced with each thrust. Nissa's shriek of pleasure was so loud that it was a wonder they didn't hear her all the way back at the compound. The male in him took pride in knowing he could make her react that way. "Mine" he growled as he continued to pound into her. "Say, it Nissa."

"Yours." She thrashed her had back and forth, making little mewling sounds. "I'm Ramiel's."

Ramiel reached under her and wrapped his hand around her back, right above her left butt cheek. "Mine!" he growled one more time as he felt his hand growing warm. This time the tingling feeling didn't go away and he found he couldn't have moved his hand or stopped making love to her even if he'd wanted to. He was making her his and every male angel who came into contact with her afterward would instinctively know she belonged to him. Ramiel had never been one to go for that whole he-man, caveman act, but right now, even he felt a primal thrill of ownership go through him as he knew from this moment she would always carry his mark.

He felt her pussy tighten around his cock as she

came, so he finally let go of his control and joined her. Throwing back his head, he moaned out her name as he released his seed inside her. It was the most intense orgasm he'd ever had and it seemed to go forever. Nissa didn't seem to mind though, she just rubbed his back and whispered words into his ears. It was a language he'd never heard before, but at that moment, she could have been talking Pig Latin and it would have been sexy.

Finally, it was over and he collapsed at her side. He was pleased to see her panting, so while the run couldn't take her breath, obviously he could. She giggled and touched the tip of his nose.

"Look at you, with that smug expression on your face," she teased, lightly.

"Why shouldn't I?" he teased back. "My ears are still ringing from your screams and I'm pretty sure you left scratch marks on my back. Excuse me if I take that to mean I pleased my mate very much."

"Are all archangels as arrogant as you?" She gave him a playful swat on the arm.

"Just the ones who have beautiful mates."

"You keep saying that and I might actually start to believe it." She leaned up to give him a kiss.

As he returned it, he couldn't help but feel he'd accomplished a huge victory since it had been her that had initiated it. After it was over, he scooped her up and carried her to the lake.

"Is this the part where you throw me in and walk away?" she asked with a weak smile.

Ramiel's gut grew tight when he realized she was only half-kidding. What kind of childhood had she had to think that everyone was ready to hurt her? He vowed then that no matter what it took, he was going to hunt down the ones who damaged her this way and make them pay for not doing right by her.

"I would sooner throw away my sword than you," Ramiel vowed, working hard to keep the anger from his voice, lest she think it was directed at her. "I'm just going in there so we can both get cleaned up." His seed was all over her thighs as well as her virgin blood.

The water here was much warmer than the lake earlier and he took his time, running his hands slowly over her body. When he got to the spot where he'd left the mark, he paused to admire it. It looked like an intricate tattoo and was of his family symbol, a tiger with bright orange and black stripes. It's mouth was open like it was roaring and it was standing over a long sword.

A sense of contentment came over him as he slowly traced it with his finger. Now he understood why Bear, Cam, Derel and Joe acted the way they did around their mates. Ramiel was feeling the same protectiveness they had displayed toward their mates and he knew at that

moment that he would kill to protect Nissa and not even think twice about it.

## Chapter Ten

“**N**o, you idiot!” Case yelled as the new Archangel recruit took another blow to the head. The ringing of a practice sword hitting the dork’s metal helmet clanged loudly in the large practice gym. “You have to learn how to protect both sides of your body while you fight.” He turned to the other recruit. “And you, don’t get too cocky just because you scored a hit on him. My baby niece could beat his ass.”

“Gosh, you don’t have to be so harsh,” the first one complained as he shook his head to clear out the birdies.

“Oh, I’m so sorry I hurt your bitty baby feelings,” Case mocked. “Do you actually think the demons are going to give a rat’s ass about that? No, they will find that weakness and use it quicker than you can say, I-am-a-douche-bag. Here’s another news flash, too, they won’t say sorry after they’re done gutting you either.”

Case knew he was being hard on the recruits,

but it was a necessary evil. To send them out unprepared would be a gross negligence on his part. As they were now, he would be signing their death warrant if he put them out in the field since they were nowhere near ready.

The problem was they needed more warriors and they needed them yesterday. With all the hits they'd taken, thanks to the justice angels and demons, the angel warrior ranks were thinner than they ever had been. Crap, at this rate they would be bringing teens like Jordy and Dominic into the fighting soon. Taking a deep breath, already hating himself for the next order he was going to give, Case said, "Take off the helmets." Both trainees gapped at him, their mouths hanging open like a couple of fish.

"But if we do that and I hit him on the head, I'll really hurt him," the second one finally found the courage to say.

"Then he'll learn the hard way to protect his side better." Case was careful to keep any ounce of concern out of his voice. "Don't worry, so long as you don't decapitate him, a healer will be able to make him better."

"What if he does cut my head off?" the first one squawked, his eyes so big they looked ready to pop out of his head.

"Don't be a pussy. You're using practice swords so that won't happen." Case gave a grin that he

knew was wicked. "At least I think it won't. And you guys better not think of pulling back your strikes either. I'll know if you do." He turned around to leave, already dismissing them from his mind.

*The asshole wouldn't dare talk to us that way if he wasn't related to Michael.*

Case pulled up short. Even though one trainee had only thought that statement, to a telepath it was if he had shouted it out loud. Turning slowly, he pinned the second recruit with a hard glare. "You should count your blessings that I am related to the Chief," he bit out angrily. "Because of him, I'm not using your ass right now to mop the sweat off the mats. I promised him that I would be a good little nephew and stop fighting so much."

Now they were looking at him with terror and revulsion—fantastic. Nothing like good old-fashioned fear to make you feel like a freak. When was he going to learn not to let what people literally thought get to him? He just had to shoot off his big mouth and flaunt his gifts instead of hiding them like Ramiel, Mael and Nathaniel did.

"Sorry, sir," the first recruit recovered quickest. "We didn't mean to disrespect you like that."

Case gave a curt nod before he turned back. He had been training or fighting out in the field nonstop for the past few days, not wanting to have



to go back to the compound and see Nissa and Ramiel together. The only reason he knew Ramiel had marked her was because Joe had told him.

While he wanted nothing better to go back to the family quarters so he could take a long hot shower and then sleep in his own bed, Case didn't dare until he finally got his act together.

The bad thing about living with a family of mind readers is they would catch on pretty quick that you were carrying a torch for your brother's new mate. Call him crazy, but he didn't think that would exactly make him the most popular sib. So instead, he headed to the dorm that all the other unmated male angel warriors stayed at. He was so tired, he wouldn't even mind the hard bunks there.

Sniffing his shirt, he wrinkled his nose. As tired as he was, he would definitely have to hit the shower in the training center first. If he didn't, he would start scaring the demons away with his stench before he could even draw his sword.

His stomach grumbled, reminding him he needed to eat soon too. Frowning, he tried to recall the last meal he had. It was some stale manna he had snagged from a healer's backpack during a mission. What he would do right now for some of Ana's home cooked food, but he knew better. His sister would take one look at him and know something was wrong and she wouldn't even

have to read his mind to do it. Ana had a way of knowing when something was wrong. She also had a pesky habit of poking her nose into everyone's business and that was the last thing he needed.

If anyone deserved some happiness and a good mate, it was Ramiel. He just hoped his big brother was smart enough to realize what a treasure Nissa was. Again and again Ramiel had put himself last in order to make sure the rest of the family was safe and happy. It was only right that for once he got something good in life.

Still it hurt like a bitch to know that Ramiel was now with the only female Case had ever desired. And that made him feel like a bastard for being so selfish to begrudge his brother even that little bit of joy.

"You were too easy on those trainees," a husky feminine voice broke into his thoughts.

Case jerked to attention, his gaze snapping into the direction of the speaker. It was one of the elves who had come to live at the compound when they had formed an alliance with the angel warriors. She was tall and willowy with long, dark auburn hair that she kept loose so it spilled down her shoulders and back. She was in dark green leathers that were of elf make so Case knew even without touching them they would feel buttery soft. The sleeves were tight all the way from the

shoulders to the elbows and then they flared out so he could see a glimpse of her forearm. Her dark green eyes were slanted at the tips and she had pointed ears. Both were a common trait amongst all elves. Case much preferred the rounded faces and eyes that the fairies had.

"Careful," the female ordered in a low dangerous voice. "You're not the only one who can read minds."

"Insulted that I think fairies are prettier?" Case shot back, letting just a hint of a mocking smile play on his lips.

"I'm insulted that you even thought about my kind in the same sentence as fairies." She curled her lip in disgust.

"So I take it you don't own any Tinker Bell jammies then," he drawled, trying not to let his anger show as he got insulted on Nissa's behalf.

"I don't understand." She tilted her head to the side.

"Tinker Bell is a...oh just forget it. Why are you even talking to me? The entire time you guys have been living with us you have never said two words to an angel unless it was in a tactical meeting."

"I need assistance with something and I think you are the perfect angel for the job." She took a couple of steps forward so she was standing directly in front of him.

He noticed she was only a couple of inches shorter than him. He also noticed she had a bow and quiver full of arrows slung on her back. There was no doubt in his mind that she wouldn't hesitate to use it either. Elves were bred for warfare and it dictated every aspect of their lives. Hell, he wouldn't have been surprised to hear that mates duked it out to see who got to be on top for sex. "You need my assistance for something?" he asked, just to make sure he hadn't been mistaken.

"Yes, I do."

It seemed to pain her to admit that. Of course that meant there was no way in hell he was going to make things easy for her. "I'll try, but fair warning, I don't know anything about making cookies or toys, so if that's what you need, than your SOL, beautiful."

"I don't even know why we bother with you heathens," she huffed, her cheeks burning with anger.

"And yet it was you who sought me out and not the other way around." He grinned at her, doing his best to make sure it looked like one of Cam's shit-eating ones. They always seemed to annoy others the most.

"Yes, and you're not making it easy on me." She balled her hands into tight fists.

"How about we start things with you telling me your name?" Case suggested. "I try to make it a

habit not to assist elves when all I can call them is *Hey you!* It's just so awkward and hard to write in an e-card."

"This concerns my cousin, Jordy," she seethed, her eyes glinting with fury.

Yeah, he was getting to her all right and after the shitty week he'd had, it felt way too good. "Oh, you mean *Raphael and Gabi's* cousin." Case placed great emphasis on the angel healer's names.

"He may be their kin on his angel side, but his elf half is related to me. As such I have every right to have a say in his upbringing."

"Newsflash, baby cakes." Case took a step forward, really invading her space. "Your prince agreed that Jordy could stay with Raphael and you elves would take a backseat as far as he was concerned."

"That was before you had a bunch of fairies living with you." This time, she took the step forward.

Case had to admire her gumption, most females would have backed down to an angry archangel. "What's your name?" Case asked. They were so close now he could smell her earthy, woody smell. It wasn't flowery like Nissa, but it wasn't that unpleasant either.

"Iollnia." The I's seemed to roll over her tongue.

"Well then, Iollnia, I'm sure Raphael would

appreciate your concern about Jordy, but the kid is doing just fine. You want to help, why don't you give him private lessons with the bow? I heard he could really use some help with that."

"How can you say Jordy is fine?" Her voice echoed with incredulous outrage. "One of his best friends is a fairy. I shudder to think of what kind of influence she is to him."

"Why do you hate fairies so much?" Case didn't know why he gave a damn, but for some reason he'd suddenly become curious.

"Why do you hate demons?" she countered quickly.

"Because they destroyed my family's innocence." The words slipped out before Case could censor them.

"And that is why I hate the fairies," she replied in a cold voice.

"Maybe they did," Case conceded, from what he'd heard of fairies something like that could very well be possible. "But, Nissa, Cliona and Ella are innocent. They don't even live with the fairies for Pete's sake."

"Who is this Pete and what does he have to do with our conversation?" she gave a puzzled frown.

"You live on this realm with the humans, but you haven't taken the time to learn anything about them?" He shook his head in disgust.

"Why would I? They are almost as disgusting as fairies."

"I have to hand it to you elves. At least you hate everyone with an equal passion." He didn't even attempt to hide his scorn.

"If the fairies are so great, then why did you move out of your family quarters after your brothers mated to two of them?" she asked with a shrewd narrowing of her eyes.

"You've been watching me?" Case's stomach clenched at the thought of anyone knowing his personal business.

"Yes, Case, son of Lehor. I have been following you for the past couple of weeks and I've learned some interesting things about you."

"Okay you haven't just been watching me. You've graduated to full-blown stalking. I was ticked, but now I'm just out and out pissed." He growled to give his words added emphasis. Unfortunately, she didn't seem fazed by his anger at all. She didn't even take a step back.

"So does that mean that you won't help me get rid of the fairies?" Her cold gaze never wavered as she stared at him.

"No, in fact if I even catch you sneezing at any of them, I'll kick your ass to the curb so fast you won't know what hit you."

"I don't know what all of that meant, but it sounds like a threat, archangel." Her tone was

now as cool as her gaze.

"It's not a threat, lemon drop, it's a fucking promise," he snapped. "Leave the fairies alone." Except maybe for Brolan as far as Case was concerned, that freak was free game.

A slow smile spread out over Iollnia's red lips. "I've always loved a challenge and it looks like you are just that." Spinning on her heel, she left him.

Case stared after her, wondering how someone so beautiful could be such a complete and utter bitch.

\* \* \* \*

Ramiel was sleeping with Nissa spooned to his chest when a loud knocking interrupted his rest. Carefully sliding out so he didn't disturb her, he went to answer it.

"Oh god," Cam shielded his eyes with his hand. "You want to put some clothes on there, big guy?"

"Not really," Ramiel grunted.

"Seriously, dude. What if I had been Ana?" Cam gave an exaggerated shudder.

"I sensed it was you, plus nobody can manage to make a knock annoying but you." Ramiel scrubbed his hand through his hair. "What do you want anyhow? It's three in the morning."

"Mike thinks he knows what safe house might



be attacked next. He wants us to stake the place out so we can ambush the demons and justice angels when they come."

"Okay." Ramiel yawned. "Give me a second to dress."

"Yes, do. The last thing you want is to leave extra body parts dangling out. It makes for too tempting a target for the demons. The last archangel that tried it is singing soprano for a boy's choir."

"Yet they call you the best leader the empaths have ever had even when you keep dropping gems like that," Ramiel drawled.

"Said the dude who can't even manage to find his clothes before he answers his door." Cam looked over Ramiel's shoulder to the bed. "Oh look how cute your fairy looks sleeping. I have high hopes for her. Since she was able to exorcise the demon out of Bear, maybe she can do the same thing for the stick up your ass."

Ramiel shut the door in the jerk's face and walked back to the bed. Sitting on the edge, he started to gently shake her shoulder only to find that she was already awake. Sitting up, she stretched and yawned loudly. She had just the right amount of bed head and Ramiel couldn't think of the last time he'd seen anything so cute.

"Cam sure likes to talk doesn't he?" She stretched again, making the sheet slip down so her

perfect breasts were exposed.

Ramiel's cock instantly responded, springing to life. "You look so damn tempting right now," Ramiel groaned, hating that duty was taking him away from his mate and their bed.

"You look pretty appealing yourself, big guy." She scooted forward and curled her fingers around his erection. "Especially when you go around pointing this thing at me."

Ramiel chuckled. "I love how I never know what's going to come out of your mouth next."

"How long do you think you can put off leaving?"

While her look was all innocence, the way she leaned down and blew against the tip of his cock wasn't. Ramiel sucked in a harsh breath as pleasure made his knees weak. "Only about five or ten minutes." When she slowly ran her tongue along the head of his erection he quickly amended, "I can stall for at least half an hour, maybe longer. Just don't stop what you're doing, babe."

"Won't you get in trouble?" Her eyes danced with mischief as she licked him again.

"It would so be worth it. They can whip me, beat me, take away my internet rights, the only thing that I couldn't take is if you quit doing this." He plunged his fingers in her hair and gently urged her on. "Please, Nissa, suck me."

"I love how you say my name," she admitted before she parted her lips and took him into her mouth.

Ramiel moaned as his cock was enveloped in a moist heat. Many times in the past couple days, he had hoped she would do this, but he hadn't dared asked, not wanting to push her too fast. Now that she was finally doing this, it was all he could not to grab her harder by the hair and thrust forward. It felt so good. He fought that urge both because he would never mistreat his mate like that and because it was the sweetest torture to let her timidly ease into it.

At first she moved slow, almost like she was afraid of hurting him, but using his moans and whispered encouragement, she soon caught on and he was clenching his teeth together to keep from coming too soon. He wanted this to go for as long as possible.

Nissa slowly pulled back, her tongue flattening out on the underside of his cock as she used one hand to squeeze his sack. Using her tongue, she traced a lazy path around the crown of his erection, before slowly licking up his shaft. The entire time she continued to massage and roll his balls with her nimble fingers.

Ramiel almost came, a short blast of cum shooting from his cock, but he clenched his teeth even harder together and managed to hold on. She

pulled back and, for a brief second, he thought he'd turned her off with his lack of control. Then she ran her tongue over her lips and made a sound reminiscent to that of a satisfied kitten.

As if suddenly hungry for more, she scrambled up on all fours so she could get at his cock better. The movement made the sheet slide the rest of the way off her and he could finally see every inch of her spectacular body. Not too thin, not too fat, she had the muscles of a warrior, but yet somehow still managed to look sensual and feminine. He growled in pride when he saw the Lehor tiger on the lower part of her back.

She worked him with her teeth, lips, and tongue, binging him to the edge again and again. Each time he was able to bring himself back. That was until he saw her slide her hand between her legs and stroke her own drenched pussy. The sight was so erotic, so wanton from his mate that Ramiel threw his head back and came with a roar. Closing his eyes, he could feel her lips work against him as she swallowed his seed. It still wasn't enough. He needed all of her. Needed to feel her hot core around his cock. To hear her screaming his name in pleasure as he took her.

Pulling back, Nissa looked up at him, her eyes dark with passion. She was still on her hands and knees, her hair messed up and there was an untamed look about her. She looked like the wild

fairy she was and she was his for the taking. His cock was already getting hard just thinking about it. "Stay right like you are," he commanded. "Don't move a muscle. The only thing you're allowed to do is still stroke yourself. I love seeing how your juices coat your fingers."

"Ramiel, please I need you," she panted as she rubbed her clit.

"What do you need?" He walked around the bed until he was behind her. Climbing up, he leaned down and nipped at the Lehor tiger.

"I need you to fuck me," she pleaded as she rocked against her hand.

"You're close, aren't you?" He gave the tiger another love bite, this time adding a soothing lick after. "You're about ready to come and I haven't hardly touched you yet."

"Yes, now screw me already and finish this," she snarled, looking over her shoulder at him.

"Never let it be said that I didn't obey my mate." Ramiel grabbed her by her soft hips and plunged into her wet pussy. Nissa screamed out his name and he groaned hers in response. Pulling back, he slammed into her again so hard she fell forward onto her forearms. The new position titled her ass up just perfectly so he went into her even deeper. "So sweet," Ramiel crooned as he continued to thrust in her. "Your pussy is like heaven." He ran his hand up and down on the

special spot on her back.

"You keep doing that and you're going to get another black eye," she moaned as she fisted her hands in the sheets.

"The pain will be worth it, just so long as I can feel your body squeezing my cock as you come." He caressed her back again. "Do it, Nissa. Come."

Nissa tilted her head back and did just that, calling his name out in a hoarse cry. The sight of her sweaty and flush with passion was enough to throw him over edge. The orgasm shot through him, making him shake from the intensity of it. After he had come back to his senses. He leaned forward and kissed the tip of one of her ears.

She giggled as she batted him away so she could climb back under the blankets.

"Aren't you even going to walk me to the door?" he teased as he reluctantly got up and started to get dressed.

"No way." She snuggled more into the bed, a look of pure satisfaction on her face. "The last thing I want is Cam to see me naked. I think he was shocked enough seeing your fine bare ass as it is."

"You think I have a nice ass?" He grinned as he pulled his black shirt over his head. Grabbing his scabbard and sword, he strapped them to his back.

"You know I do, you vain angel," she snorted.

Ramiel chuckled as he sat on the edge of the

bed and pulled on his boots. They were both silent as he laced them up.

"Promise me you'll be careful," Nissa finally said. "It would upset me if something happened to you."

"Don't worry, you won't get rid of me that easy." He bent over so he could give her a kiss on her brow. At the last minute, she turned and tilted her head so the kiss landed on her lips. It was long, lingering without any of the desperation that had been between them earlier.

"I'll be waiting for you," she whispered.

There was so much he wanted to say as he gazed down at her. So many emotions were playing around his head and he wanted to let her know how he felt about her. However he wasn't sure even he knew what they were let alone be able to confess them aloud. Another loud knock on the door saved him.

"Hate to break it up," Cam yelled from the hall. "We really do have to get moving though."

"Get some sleep," Ramiel said to Nissa as he caressed her bare shoulder. "You're going to be needing it when I get back." As Ramiel got up and left, he couldn't help but feel as if he was leaving a piece of himself behind with her. Somehow Nissa had managed to wiggle her way into his battle scarred heart and damned if he wanted to change that. It felt nice knowing that someone was

waiting for him to come back from a mission. Shutting the door behind him, he joined Cam in the hallway.

"It took you a long time to get dressed," Cam observed with a knowing look. "Did you lose your clothes or something?"

"Leave it," Ramiel ordered as he started to lead the way to Michael's office. Of course Cam being Cam wasn't about to follow that command.

"I never thought the day would come where Hardass General Ramiel would snag some time for nookie before going out on a mission."

"And I never thought the day would come where I would hear any incubus, even one who is half-angel, use the word *nookie*." Ramiel wished that there was time to take the smartass out back so he could beat some sense into him. Not that it had ever worked in the past. No matter how many times Ramiel had tired, Cam's cocky attitude and mouth had never changed.

"And this incubus knows what you've been up to. Not that I would need my added sex demon sense for that. You guys were so loud they probably heard you all the way back in Detroit." Cam gave a wicked smile that showed off his fangs.

Ramiel remembered how there had been a time, not so long ago, where his brother would have hid his fangs because he was ashamed of his demon



half. It was nice to see him more open like this. Even if he was doing it while giving Ramiel a hard time. "Let's just get this mission over so I can get back home to her." Ramiel cursed under his breath, angry at himself for uttering that sentence. Cam was sure to grab onto that and go with it.

"You can't wait to be with her again?" Cam asked, not disappointing. "So she means something to you then?"

"I just knew you would have to go there." Ramiel shook his head. "You're as nosy as Ana."

"I'm serious." Cam grabbed him on the arm. "Do you love her?"

Ramiel paused, not knowing what to say because he wasn't sure of the answer himself. "I don't know," he admitted. "I have strong feelings for her. I'm so protective of her that if anyone tried to hurt her I would probably attack first and ask questions later. She's all I can think about and I miss her every second we're apart. If that's love, then yeah I guess I do."

Cam's reaction was the last thing Ramiel expected. A look of worry and sadness spread over the empath's face, completely erasing away all his earlier carefree attitude. "That's not good. I never thought in a million years you would fall that hard for her."

"So I finally get a piece of what you all have with your mates," Ramiel snapped back, angry.

Was it really such a sin that for once in his life he didn't just live to serve? "Where is it written that I can't be happy, too?"

"You know I would never begrudge you that," Cam protested, his voice soft with concern.

"Then what's the big deal? You're acting as if I just drowned a basket of bunnies or something."

"I just don't want to see you get hurt." Cam sighed as he ran his hand through his messy styled hair, making it stand on end more than usual.

"Nissa would never do that to me." As soon as Ramiel said those words, he realized how true they were. Nissa would never betray him, he had seen the same emotions he was struggling with dancing around in her eyes. She might not know it yet, but she cared more than a little bit about him, too.

"She may not have a choice." Cam seemed to weigh his words carefully before he said, "What are you going to do if the fairies demand that she goes back and live with them?"

"She doesn't want to go back," Ramiel argued even as a brick of dread formed in his gut. "She told me so herself."

"Which is exactly why she forced you into this mess. For some reason, she has this twisted notion that if she's mated to an angel she's somehow protected from having to go back. That trick might

have worked if she was just your everyday normal fairy, but not when she's their own personal Anastasia. For centuries, she's been a dream, a fleeting hope those fairies who want to regain the glory of their old days. Now that they know she really is alive, they will do anything to get her back and they won't hesitate to eliminate anyone who gets in the way."

"Tough, they'll just have to be disappointed," Ramiel growled. "She's my mate and she stays by my side."

"Even if it means ruining any chances we have of making an alliance with them?" Cam asked, his face even more bleak. "They won't hesitate to kill you if you try to stop them from taking her. That happens and any chance of peace with them will be shot because Michael will go after them with a vengeance."

"Michael may be my uncle, but he will still be able to put the good for the angel warriors above the need to avenge me," Ramiel dismissed.

"No, he won't and neither will I," Cam bit out savagely, his demon eyes bright with rage. "If the fairies touch one hair on your goddamn head I will go after them with all I have and you know what I'm capable of."

Yes, he did. Cam could conjure fire and throw it around without even thinking twice about it. He'd seen his brother blow up a good part of a stadium

one time to free Derel from the gladiator pit. It hadn't even winded him either. So to say Cam had some serious mojo and no qualms about using it, would be an understatement.

"I hate to be a prick about this, Ramiel, but we really need the fairy armies if we are going to win this war. Sure we have the elves and some demons, but the justice angels have a whole hell of a lot more demons on their side and they also have the Powers and we know what those fuckers are capable of."

Anger coursed through Ramiel as he thought about the Powers. Neither angel or demon, they were something unique and more evil than anything hell could spawn. They existed only to kill and destroy. As if that wasn't bad enough, they were also known cannibals. Ramiel still had nightmares about the time they had found an angel warrior team butchered, part of them eaten away.

"I'm really sorry," Cam said, looking close to tears. "I just wanted to get you ready in case she had to leave."

All the air left Ramiel's lungs as he realized that could very well happen. What could he do? Now that he'd found his mate and a reason to live, he may have to give her up or else the angel warriors could very well lose this war.

## Chapter Eleven

**R**amiel was still feeling bleak as he crouched by a bay window of the living room in the angel warrior safe house. Even though it was dark and he could only make out shadows, he knew who each and every one of them was. He'd been fighting with his brothers and friends for so long he could recognize them simply by the way they moved or carried themselves.

While their presence usually brought him a measure of comfort, today he was dismayed to feel a bitter resentment. Mostly toward the mated ones. While they were happy and had the privilege of a life with their mates, he was going to have to sacrifice his for all of them.

"You never expected to fall in love with her did you?" Michael whispered as he came over and crouched down next to Ramiel.

"No, I didn't," Ramiel admitted. It was no use trying to hide anything from the Chief. He had a way of knowing things.

"I did from the moment I saw you two together. The way you looked when you gazed at her and the way she turned to only you for protection, there was no doubt in my mind that the fates meant you to be together."

"I dreamed about her. Months before we even met. I knew she was in danger and she needed me," Ramiel confessed.

"That doesn't surprise me," Michael mused. "The bond between you two is strong."

"If the bond is so strong and the fates meant us to be together then why..." Ramiel trailed off, not having the heart to finish the rest of his sentence.

"Do you trust me?" Michael asked, his gaze steady and unwavering.

"Of course I do, you're my Chief," Ramiel answered automatically.

"No, I mean do you trust me as your uncle?"

That question took Ramiel by surprise and made him do a double take. Ever since Michael had revealed that he was their uncle, he and Ramiel had never really discussed it. It was kind of the big fat elephant in the room that neither one of them wanted to touch. While Mike had gotten really close to Cam, Ana and Bear, it was easier for Ramiel to still keep his uncle at arm's length. "Yes, of course I do," Ramiel replied, not sure if he was telling the truth or not. The wry smile on Michael's face showed that he'd picked up on

Ramiel's uncertainty.

"I will find a way to make it so you can keep your mate, I swear it to you," Michael vowed solemnly.

Even in the dark Ramiel could see the determined glint in his uncle's brown eyes.

"Just promise me you won't go and do something stupid," Michael said.

"What are you getting at?" Ramiel narrowed his eyes. Since when had he been anything but the perfectly obedient soldier?

"Just promise me," Michael persisted.

"Michael, I—" Ramiel broke off and peered more intently through the window. "We've got movement outside. I can't make out who or what it is though."

Motioning Cam forward with his hand, Michael asked, "What do you pick up?"

Cam closed his eyes for a few seconds before answering, "Demon assassins and some Hounds from Hell. There are also a half dozen justice angels."

"Angels coming to murder other angels," Michael hissed in disgust. "I still can't believe Jehel and the justice council would stoop so low. Even after all the times I've had to come scoop up the remains of my warriors."

"Well this time they're in for a nasty surprise," Cam said with a wicked chuckle. The darkness

was filled with the sound of metal rubbing against leather as the archangels pulled their swords out.

"I know that we are going to be facing not just demons, but our own kind. I don't want you to show any mercy though," Michael ordered darkly. "The only way we're going to make the justice council think twice about attacking is if we put the fear of God into them. I just want one justice angel to survive and that's only so he can go back and tell the council what happens to those who dare strike at my warrior teams. Understood?"

"Yes, Chief," they all answered in hushed voices.

Ramiel gripped his sword tight and waited in the tense silence with the others. Just as the door was kicked down and the house was invaded, his last thought was of Nissa.

\* \* \* \*

Nissa sat at the dinner table with the rest of the mates of those who had gone on the mission. A tense heavy silence covered the room as they all picked at the food on their plates, nobody really eating anything.

"Where are the children tonight?" Cliona asked as she pushed her plate away.

"They're all camped out in Dina and Megan's room for the night. They're making popcorn and



watching movies," Gabbi replied in a dull voice. "We thought it would be better if they weren't around when the guys got back in case any of them were injured or..." Her face pinched in worry, she didn't seem able to go on.

"Nothing will happen to them," Rachael assured as she reached across the table to grab Gabbi's hand. "This is just another mission and they'll come back like they always have before."

"For how long?" Ana asked, her blue eyes bright with tears. "They are going out so often now, I keep thinking it's only a matter of time before something horrible happens."

"You should say something more horrible than what's already happened," Tif added bitterly as she rubbed her belly. "I don't know how much more of this I can take."

"I'm sure they'll be okay," Nissa blurted, hating to see her new friend upset.

"As if you care," Ana snapped, her blue eyes as cold as ice. "Oh wait, you probably do because then you would lose the archangel bodyguard you worked so hard to manipulate into mating with you."

"Ana, that's not fair," Tif chastised.

While Nissa would have liked to speak up in her own defense right now, she was too struck stupid by the verbal attack from Ana. It was dumb of her not to have expected it. She'd heard how

protective Ana was of her brothers. Maybe she had let her guard down when Ana hadn't said something to her in the weeks leading up to the mating. Why she had waited until now to speak her mind was a mystery to Nissa.

"Nissa does care about Ramiel, otherwise he wouldn't carry around her bonding scent. Female fairies only put their scent on males that they really have feelings for. That's something that can't be faked," Cliona told Ana.

"I left my scent on Ramiel?" Nissa asked, feeling like a complete and utter fool for not knowing more about the way of her kind. "Why do we do that to our males?"

"It's our way of letting other females know to back off. You know kind of like a dog marking its territory, but a lot nicer smelling and less gross," Cliona explained patiently.

"Oh I didn't know that." It hurt Nissa to admit that because she felt like her ignorance was her biggest weakness.

"That's just it, you dove right into this stupid plan of yours without any clue of what the repercussions could be. What's worse, is you dragged my brother along without giving him any say in the matter. For all you know, your fairy followers could kill Ramiel for even being with you."

Nissa put a hand to her stomach as it lurched

with dread. "Oh goddess, I never thought —"

"That's just it, you didn't think at all," Ana cut in harshly. "Even if the fairies don't kill Ramiel, he's going to be stuck with a twit for the rest of his life."

There were several gasps from the females at the table. Nissa gripped the table hard as the familiar feeling of being lost and alone hit her. Then she did what she'd always done in the past. She shoved the pity party to the back burner and brought out the fight. Raising her head, she fixed Ana with a death glare of her own. "I am many things, bitch, fairy, hardass fighter, but the one thing I'm not nor will ever be is a twit." Nissa leaned forward even more. "So I suggest you take that back now."

"Or else what?" Ana tossed back, looking completely unconcerned.

"Or else I will shove my foot up your fine angel ass so far you will be tasting the sole of my sneaker for the next millennia."

"I'd like to see you try." Ana shot to her feet, hands balled into fists.

"Fine." Nissa jumped to her feet, too. "Let's go to the training center. I would hate to ruin all your pretty dishes when I throw you across the room and beat some sense into that empty blonde head of yours."

Cam flashed into the middle of them. "As much

as I love a good chick fight, you two are going to have to put this on hold. The others are coming in and we have some wounded."

Instantly, the hostility in Nissa was replaced with bone chilling fear. "Is it Ramiel?" her voice trembled.

"No, he's not hurt. At least not physically," Cam hedged, clearly holding something back.

Nissa ran to him and grabbed his roughly by the arm. "What do you mean *not physically*?" she demanded. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's going to need your support bad." Cam gave a heavy sigh. "I wish I could tell you more, but I have to deal with the wounded. Can I count on you to take care of Ramiel?"

"Of course you can, he's everything to me," Nissa whispered, wishing she had told him that before he'd gone on the mission. Maybe if she had, he wouldn't be suffering so much now.

"I know he is, sweetie." Cam placed a brotherly kiss on the top of her head. Turning to the others, he said, "Abdiel, Nathaniel and Derel got the worst of the injuries. Appolion is healing them enough so they can flash back, but they are going to need more attention when they get here so we need to get prepared."

There was a rush as everyone ran around, getting ready for the wounded to show up with the rest of the team sent out on the mission. Even

though she was sick with worry about Ramiel, Nissa jumped in to help, clearing away the table and helping to set up makeshift beds in the large living room.

“Why don’t they just go to the infirmary?” she asked Tif as they spread out clean sheets on one of the cots.

“After all the attempts on their lives and with the huge bounties on their heads, Michael and the others don’t like to broadcast it when they are wounded. They don’t want the enemy to know they are weak lest they use that opportunity to try to attack.” Tif gave a shrug with one shoulder.

“I guess I can’t blame them for that.” Nissa smoothed a wrinkle out on the sheet. “I know better than anyone that you can never be too careful, not even amongst your supposed friends.”

“Don’t feel too bad, Cam learned that the hard way, too. It was another empath that told the demons where he would be the day they captured him. After that, any of them have a hard time trusting anyone outside of the inner circle.”

They didn’t have time for any more conversation because the warriors started to flash back in. Nissa’s heart pounded as she searched their faces, hoping to see Ramiel. Finally, he flashed back across the room from her. Nissa let out a choked sob when she saw the condition he was in. Streaked from head to toe in blood, he had

a bleak, haunted look in his eyes. His head hung on his shoulders like he had the weight of the world there. Even though there was chaos around him as the others rushed around to help the wounded, he didn't seem to notice. It was as if he was in his own world of internal suffering.

Without thought or doubt, Nissa instantly went to his side. As soon as she reached his side, she searched him up and down with her gaze, making sure he really wasn't injured. She felt a little relief when she realized none of the blood was his and he was free from injuries. At least external ones. Cam had been right. Ramiel was very much injured on the inside. She only hoped she could heal those. Holding out her hand to him, she ordered in a soft voice, "Come with me, mate of mine."

For a fleeting second she thought he wasn't going to come out of his self-imposed exile long enough to hear her let alone obey her. She took in a shaky breath, wondering if she had lost him just as she had finally realized how much he meant to her. Then finally, he raised his head and looked at her. "Please, Ramiel. Let me take care of you." She almost cried in relief when he took her hand. His skin felt so cold that she wanted nothing more than to hold him forever so he would never be chilled again.

Without another word, she led him up to their

room. Once there, he stood stock still while she slowly took off his sword and various other weapons strapped to his body. Next, she peeled off his clothes, stooping to unlace his boots. When he was naked, she grabbed his hand again. "Come on, let's get that blood off you," she urged in a soft voice. Turing on the shower, she then stripped off all her clothes and pulled him under the spray of water with her.

"Poisonous," he rasped in a barely audible voice.

"What?" Nissa asked as she began to run her hands over his arms, trying to wash away some of the gore from the battle.

"Some of this is demon's blood. It's poison to angels if it gets inside us. I don't know if it could be bad for you, too."

"Don't worry about me, I'll be fine," she reassured.

"I don't want you to get hurt." His breath hitched a bit.

"I'll be fine," she repeated in a firm voice. Picking up the shampoo bottle, she stood on tiptoe and washed his hair. Next, she used a washcloth to clean away all traces of the battle. It wasn't until every last bit of blood was gone that she turned the water off and grabbed towels. Barely taking the time to wrap one around herself, she returned her attention to him, slowly patting him dry. A

spark of hope flared in her chest when she saw some of the light come back into his gaze.

"Why?" he asked, his voice cracking.

She didn't have to ask what he meant, knowing instinctively that he was wondering why she had taken care of him. "Because despite the fact that you're the most arrogant stubborn male that ever met, I love you more than life itself." She cupped his cheek and smiled at him. "I would be so lost without you."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew what I had to do tonight." He averted his gaze.

"There is nothing that could ever change that."

"Not even the fact that I killed one of my friends in cold blood?" He made a choking sound like he was trying to hold in a sob.

"What happened?" she pleaded. "Talk to me, please."

"When the attack started at the safe house, it was just the demons at first. We had no trouble fighting them back. Even though they are pretty vicious fighters so are we, but everything changed when the justice angels joined in the fight. Even after everything they've done to us, it's still hard to fight other angels." He stopped and shook his head.

"Go on," Nissa urged as she grabbed his hand and pressed a kiss to his knuckles.

"I started fighting one of them. It was dark



inside the house so I really didn't get a good look at him. We fought with our blades and at first, it was pretty even, but eventually I started to get the better of him. I had him beat into the corner and knew what I had to do next. No mercy, that was what Michael ordered. Just as I was about to strike the killing blow, the justice angel started to beg for mercy. Shit, Nissa, I knew his voice instantly. He was one of my old buddies from angel warrior school. We had trained as archangels side-by-side. He was my friend and he was pleading for his life."

"Oh Goddess," Nissa sobbed, tears running down her cheeks. "What happened?"

"I did exactly as ordered, I showed no mercy." Ramiel closed his eyes. "Some of that blood you washed off me was his. What kind of archangel does that to one of his own friends? I'm a monster, no better than the demons."

"Don't talk about yourself that way," Nissa cried as she threw her arms around his waist. "You are the most honorable male I've ever met. If you hadn't of been there to stop them, then another warrior team would have been murdered. You were only defending other angels, which is what you swore to do as an archangel."

## Chapter Twelve

Ramiel looked down at Nissa's tear-stained face, shocked by the love and understanding she saw in her eyes. How could she even stand to touch him after what he'd just confessed? She should be running away in disgust, not holding him even closer. "Did you mean it or did you just say it to slap me out of my funk?" he asked as he brushed some strands of her wet hair away from her face.

"Mean what?" She wrinkled her nose in that cute way she always did when she was confused.

"That you love me?" He cupped her face in the palms of his hand and gazed into her eyes.

"Yes, I did." She nervously bit her bottom lip. "I guess that makes me pretty pathetic. Mooning after a guy who never wanted me in the first place."

"Nissa, I think I was born wanting you," Ramiel admitted. "I love you so damn much that it scares the crap out of me because I can't even

stand the thought of anything ever happening to you.”

Their lips met together with a desperate passion. The towels that had been wrapped around their bodies ended up on the floor as they were ripped away. Ramiel grabbed her by the ass and lifted her up, glad when Nissa caught on, wrapping her strong legs around his waist. Pinning her to the wall, he drove his cock inside her with one strong thrust.

Nissa gasped out his name as he started to make love to her with the same desperation his kiss had possessed. He was pumping into her so hard her body slammed into the wall as the sound flesh smacking into flesh mingled with her cries of pleasure. She didn't object to the rough treatment though. If anything, she encouraged it, her nails digging into his shoulder as her heels pushed against his back so she could get better leverage

“I love you,” she repeated over and over, her voice breathless.

Ramiel was too overcome with emotion to respond in kind. Instead, he tried to make his love known with every stroke, every caress, every hot kiss he pressed to her neck. All the pain he had been feeling earlier seemed to melt away as she held him in her arms. “I love you, too,” he was finally able to say right before her body tensed up as she came. The sensation of her pussy rippling

around his cock made him join her. An orgasm shot through his spine as he slammed into her one last time.

As he spilled his seed into her, he couldn't help but wonder how it would be for her belly to be rounded with his child. The wonderful glow of pregnancy on her face as she carried their offspring. His deepest desire at the moment was that somehow they could get through the mess of this war so that someday he could see that happen. More than anything he wanted to live long enough to have a child with her. One with fairy pointed ears and archangel temperament.

"I will always love you," he vowed as they both came down from their sex high. She unwrapped her legs from his waist and he let her slide to the ground, but he didn't release his hold on her, wanting to have the comfort of her in his arms for just a bit longer.

He held her like that for several long blissful moments before she whispered, "Let's go to bed. You look tired and I want my mate rested so we can do this again soon."

"You've really become insatiable," Ramiel teased, but he stood back and let her go. "I think I've created a sex monster."

"I'm afraid you may be right." Her eyes twinkled as she brushed her hand against his cock. "Now take me to bed so I can show you how

insatiable I really am.”

Ever the obedient mate, Ramiel did just that.

\* \* \* \*

It was hours later as Nissa lay in the comfort of Ramiel’s arms. He was spooning her, his hard body pressed against her back. She loved it when he held her like that, his warmth soothing her. “I was five when it happened,” she whispered, her heart thudding with anticipation. This was something she had never dared to fully talk about, the memories too dreadful to remember.

“I’m so sorry, sweetie,” Ramiel replied. He didn’t probe for more, letting her share the information at her rate and for that she fell in love with him all over again.

“I was asleep in the room I shared with my sister, Fiona. She was younger than me by a year.” She let out a sigh at the memory of her lost sibling, who had been so beautiful with bright blue eyes and a head full of blonde curls. “We loved that room so much because Mother had let us decorate it in all pink. Thinking back on it now, I realize it looked like a cotton candy disaster, but then I thought it was the most beautiful thing ever.”

“My nice Ariel is the same way.” Ramiel chuckled. “Sometimes she’s so bad that she even tries to get all of us to wear pink.”

"Let me guess," she smiled, "all seven of you do."

"Of course we do. We're suckers for her."

"My father was the same way." For the first time since the massacre, it didn't hurt her to think of him. "He was so busy, doing his duties as king, but he always took time out for us. We all felt so loved. It was a happy house—peaceful. I never knew how brutal the world really was until everything came crashing down around me."

Taking a deep breath, she did something she had never willingly done before—gone back to that nightmare of a night. "I was awoken by the sounds of my mother crying as she ran into our room. She rushed Fiona and I out of bed, not even letting us get dressed. She took us to her room, where most of the other family was waiting. I know that she did it, thinking to gather us all together so we could make a run for it, but I know now it was a huge mistake."

"Because you were all in the same spot and your uncle's followers could kill you that much easier," Ramiel said grimly, catching what she was alluding to. "There was no way your mother could have realized that though. She was probably too focused on getting you all to her so she could make sure everyone was safe. I'm sure she didn't realize she was just making you all one big target."

"Father came running in, my baby brother, Mikah, in his arms. He yelled at Mother to take us and get out, but it was already too late. My uncle and his soldiers burst in, their swords already bloodied from killing our household staff. Mother shoved me toward the bed and I scrambled underneath. I went as far as I could so my back was pressed to the wall, but I could still see and hear everything that went on."

"Shit," Ramiel cursed as his hold tightened. "You saw their murder."

"Yes," Nissa sobbed, not ashamed to be crying, it was the least she could do to honor their memory. "I will never forget the screams, the smell of blood, the fear I felt as I cowered there, so sure they would find me and I would die, too."

"How did you get away?" He kissed the tip of her ear.

"One of the nurses, Winnow, found me hours later. She smuggled me out and took me to a group of humans that knew about fairies. They were more like a cult than anything. Half the time, they worshiped me, the other half, they treated me like I was some disgusting coward for surviving while the king died."

"Did they ever hurt you?" he asked harshly.

"Yes." No point in denying the truth, not when she'd gone this far. "Usually it was when they were training me to fight. If I didn't take to my

lessons quick enough or if I made a mistake, there were consequences." Her stomach grew tight as she remembered some of those incidents.

"Are any of them still alive?" Ramiel demanded, his hold growing even stronger. "If so, I want to know where they are so I can teach them a lesson or two of my own."

"I don't know," Nissa said, warmed by his protectiveness. "As soon as I was old enough, I left and never looked back."

"We're not supposed to hurt humans," Ramiel admitted. "But for what they did to you, I could kill them."

"It's okay," Nissa reassured. "They did teach me how to handle myself and I needed it, too. My uncle somehow found out I was alive and ever since, he's been sending his soldiers out to hunt me down and kill me. Lucky for me, I'm better than they are and I've always managed to kill them first."

"He still sees you as a threat," Ramiel observed.

"I think so. Brolan told me the hold my uncle has on the throne is shaky at best and that the fairies wouldn't hesitate to replace him should it be found that one of the legal heirs is still alive. Brolan thinks that I will go back and take my rightful place on the throne. He's excited about it, but I hate to break it to him, that's not going to happen." Twisting around, she looked at him. "I



never want to go back there, Ramiel. I don't trust the fairies nor do I like them. I remember how they are, brutal and weird in their ways. I don't want to live like that nor do I want Ella to. That's why I forced you to mate with me. I was hoping that if I had an angel for a mate, the fairies would leave me alone. I'm so sorry I dragged you into this mess."

"You don't have to be sorry." Ramiel kissed away her tears. "You are the best thing that's ever happened to me. Plus, I understand some of your desperation. While my parents were never murdered out right like yours, I lost them, too."

"How?" she asked.

"Both of them were empaths. One of the dangers of being empaths is that if they get around too much evil, their systems can't take it and they overload. At first, they just get the shakes and start vomiting, but if they are around it too much, it gets worse. They start having convulsions and then go into a catatonic state. My parents were captured and taken to Hell. When they were finally returned to us, they were gone. While they were still alive, they were in a permanent vegetative state. They never recovered from it."

"Oh, Ramiel," she cried, the tears now for him and his family. "I'm so sorry."

"They were put in the infirmary and it was just us kids after that. We had our Aunt Amitiel, but

she never gave a rat's ass about anyone, not even her own son, Dominic."

"What about Michael?"

"We didn't know he was our uncle, then and he had made a blood vow to our mother that he would never tell us," Ramiel said bitterly. "Lehor and Michael had been fighting for so long that most angels even forgot they were brother and sister."

"So you were left to fend for yourselves." Her heart lurched for all of them as she thought about how lost they must have felt.

"Ana was almost grown by then so she took care of us. Did a damn good job of it, too."

"I've seen your mother around though." Nissa shook her head in confusion. "How is that possible if she never recovered?"

"When the war broke up, she and my dad left their bodies and their souls ascended to the upper realms of Heaven. It's an honor that only a few angels earn and it's like a rebirth of sorts. The only bad thing is it's a one-way trip and you can't come back."

"If that's the case, then how is it that's she living here with you guys?" Nissa was even more confused than before.

"Mom's never been good at following the rules," Ramiel chuckled.

"I guess not." Nissa laughed as she snuggled

into his arms. She had thought that after sharing her memories of that night, she would have felt bad, but strangely, it felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted off her chest. There were no more secrets between the two of them and it was refreshing to have everything out in the open. There was one worry she still did have though. "What am I going to do if the fairies try to make me go back?" she asked, her voice trembling just a bit.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to," Ramiel promised. "I vow to you that if you don't want to go back there you won't have to. Not so long as I have breath left in me."

## Chapter Thirteen

Ella stared down at the heavy textbook in her lap and tired not to throw it across the room in frustration. "Why does there have to be so many different types of demons?" she demanded, trying hard not to be so loud to disturb the archangels training a couple of feet away. She, Jordy and Dominic had decided to study for their quiz on demon studies in the training gym so they could get away from the chaos of their living quarters.

"It is damn inconsiderate of them if you ask me," Jordy said with light sarcasm. His slanted green eyes danced with delight as they always did when he joked around, which with him was most of the time. "Why don't you go knock on Hell's front door and lodge a formal complaint with Lucifer?"

"Or at the very least send a harsh letter of complaint," Dominic added. The carbon copy of Michael, the teen tended to be as serious at times as his famous uncle, however around Ella and

Jordy he was almost carefree.

"I may just do that," Ella mused as she stared at the picture of a slug demon. *Eww, disgusting!* "Right after I knock on the pearly gates of Heaven and bitch to whoever is in charge about smartass bossy archangels."

"You may have trouble getting into Heaven." Jordy's lips curled into his trademark cocky smile. "I hear they have a very strict dress code." Like her, he had never been to Heaven.

"Do they now?" She exchanged amused looks with Dominic.

"Yes, all white, halos, wings and you must carry a gold harp at all time." Jordy turned serious as he turned to look at Dominic. "I do have one question though. Are there really pearly gates in front of Heaven?"

"Remind me again why I hang out with you." Dominic rolled his brown eyes.

"Easy," Jordy replied brightly. "Nobody else will have you."

That was true for all of them. Outcasts at the angel school they all attended, the three had turned to each other and formed a strong bond. They were tight friends who knew they could count on each other for anything, which is why Jordy and Dominic had given up one of the few rare weekends off they got to help tutor Ella on demon studies, a topic she continually struggled

in.

Angel warrior school was tough. Not only did they push the students hard in academics, but there was additional weapons and warfare training, too. Failure in any of the areas was not acceptable either and they didn't cut her any slack because she was new at all this or because she was a fairy. Ella went home most days with fresh bruises to both her body and ego.

Yet, she had never been happier.

For the first time in what seemed like forever, she had a steady place to live and she wasn't always looking over her shoulder for the bad elves. Most importantly, she had friends her own age. She didn't know how she ever managed to get by before she had the support of Jordy and Dominic. Funny how things work out. Her best buds were an angel and another angel who also happened to be part elf.

A heavy shadow fell over her book and she looked up to see a female elf towering over them. Ignoring both her and Dominic, the female glared at Jordy.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded in an icy voice.

"Hey, Iollnia. I'm doing fine, thanks for asking. And how are you?" Jordy replied with thick sarcasm.

"You should be studying the customs of your

own kind. Not hanging out with those who are below you." She flicked a disgusted look over them. Ella was half-tempted to look down to make sure there wasn't a stain on her shirt or something.

"Thanks, but I'm fine where I am," Jordy replied in a tone just as icy as Iollnia's. "Now go away."

"I am your elder and you will obey me," Iollnia snapped as she reached down and jerked Jordy up by the ear. "I better never catch you around these two again either."

"Hey!" Ella protested. "Stop that, you're hurting him."

Jordy was struggling to get away, unshed tears of pain in his eyes.

"Stay out of this," Iollnia hissed. "Maybe a little pain will teach him to respect his elders."

"And maybe a little pain will teach you not to pick on kids," a voice declared.

"Nissa!" Ella cried, more happy than ever to see her guardian. Nissa must have been coming in to train because her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she was dressed in workout clothes. She gave Ella a reassuring nod before she returned her glare to the elf.

"Let him go," Nissa demanded in a hard voice.

"This doesn't concern you, fairy," Iollnia spat. "Now go away before you get hurt."

"The only one who is going to get hurt is you if

you don't let Jordy go." Nissa flexed her fingers before balling them into fists.

Iollnia laughed as she let go of Jordy's ear. Walking a couple of steps closer to Nissa, she taunted, "And just who is going to hurt me? You? Like I would ever be afraid of some little fairy."

"You should be," Ella shouted. "Nissa can probably kick your ass in ten seconds."

"I'd like to see her try." Iollnia moved even closer to Nissa, trying to intimidate her. That trick wouldn't work though because Nissa wasn't afraid of anything.

"Watch this," Ella whispered to Jordy and Dominic. "Nissa is so going to kick the elf's ass."

"I don't know," Jordy replied rubbing his red ear. "Iollnia is one vicious bitch."

Iollnia struck first, her fist arching out to connect with Nissa's jaw. Nissa ducked just in time, bringing her foot up and hitting the elf in the stomach. Iollnia recovered quickly and soon a full out fistfight was going on.

The entire training room came to a halt as everyone turned to see the show.

When Ramiel came up, Ella put a hand on his arm to stop him from going in to stop the fight. "You can't interfere." Ella gulped when he turned that hard gaze on her, but she didn't back down. "If you butt in, it will make Nissa look weak. She has to win this on her own."



"Don't worry, I'll let her take care of the elf witch on her own. I just came in to cheer my female on." Ramiel gave the cutest of smiles.

Ella could see why Nissa was so gah-gah over him. She realized he wasn't the only who had come to watch the fight either. All of the Lehor brothers were there and they and formed a protective half-circle around the teens. Ella jumped in surprise when she noticed Bear staring at her.

"Nice hair," he mused. "You ever think of how it would look blue?"

"Don't you dare," Ramiel growled. "Ella looks fine the way she is."

"Buzz kill." Bear grinned, looking almost as cute as Ramiel had.

"Your mate sure knows how to fight," Cam observed with a satisfied nod. "She might not be as strong as the elf, but she's quicker and not afraid to fight dirty. Got to love that."

It was true, too. Nissa had a bloody nose, but Iollnia looked a lot worse. She had an even worse bloody nose, plus a cut lip. Nissa finally ended things when she gave the elf one last punch on the jaw. Iollnia fell down and didn't get back up. The entire training room erupted into a cheer. Ramiel whooped in joy as he ran to Nissa and grabbed her in his arms, swinging her around in a circle.

Ella was stunned when he came back over to

her and put an arm around her, too.

"Did you see that, Ella?" he asked. "Our Nissa finished off that elf without even breaking out in a sweat."

"It was pretty cool," Ella agreed with a giggle.

The entire room grew somber as Michael strode in, his face dark with anger. He walked up to them and glared at Nissa.

"I need to see both of you in my office now," he ordered Ramiel and Nissa.

Ella's stomach dropped as she realized that Nissa was in big trouble.

\* \* \* \*

"What's the big deal, Chief?" Ramiel demanded once they got to the door of Michael's office. "You've never got this pissed about a fist fight before."

Nissa didn't say anything in her defense, afraid that she would only make matters worse with her big mouth. Instead, she clung to Ramiel's hand like a lifeline and tried hard to ignore the aches in her body.

"That's not what has me mad." Michael paused, his hand on the door. Looking intently at Nissa, he said, "You don't have to do anything you don't want to. Remember that."

"What's going on?" Nissa asked, her heart

suddenly in her chest. She realized this had nothing to do with her fight.

"A headache, that's what," Michael grumbled as he swung open the door.

Nissa gasped as she realized his office was packed with over a dozen fairies. She recognized Brolan and her old nurse, Winnow amongst them.

"Come in." Brolan stood and gestured with his hand.

"What if I don't want to?" Nissa asked even as she walked in and took a place up front by Michael's desk.

"It's time to come back home," Winnow said.

"I don't think so," Nissa shot back angrily. "The last time I went someplace with you, I spent a couple decades living with a crazy human cult. You'll have to excuse me if I don't trust the Winnow Travel Agency anymore." She could hear Ramiel snort in laughter.

"The time has come for your family to rule us again," Brolan declared, ignoring Nissa's smartass remark. "Your uncle's hold on the fairies has never been weaker and we have to strike now while the time is right."

"She's not going anywhere," Ramiel declared in a hard voice as he took her hand.

"You need to reason with your nephew, Michael," Brolan advised in clipped tones. "If you ever want to have the fairies cooperation in your

war, you need to help us out with this."

"Then we don't need your cooperation," Michael returned quickly. "Not like this. I'm not going to sacrifice one of my warrior's mates so I can get your help. We will find a way to win the war without you."

The fairies all gapped at each other, apparently stunned that their biggest bargaining chip had been taken off the table. Nissa wanted to laugh in joy as she realized that not only did she have Ramiel backing her up, but all of the angel warriors.

"So I guess that means this meeting is over." Ramiel gave them a mocking bow. "Now if you'll excuse us, I need to get my mate back to our quarters."

"You have to come back with us," Winnow protested, her voice edged with panic.

"Sorry, there is nothing you can say that will convince me," Nissa replied as she started to walk out with Ramiel.

"Not even if we told you that you weren't the only child who survived?" Brolan called.

Nissa stopped dead in her tracks, dread skittering down her spine. "What are you trying to say?"

"Mikah lives." There was a smug look on Brolan's face and at that moment, Nissa hated him for it.

"He's not the only one," Winnow added. "So does Fiona."

Nissa could hardly breathe. Her baby brother and sister were alive and she never knew it? How could that be? Brolan delivered the bombshell that shattered her newfound happiness.

"And the only way we'll tell you where they are is if you agree to go back with us."

## ***About the Author***

Stephani Hecht is a happily married mother of two. You can usually find her snuggled up to her laptop, creating her next book.