



A  
Savoy Valley  
Novel

# *Kismet*

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*Satin Notes*

Kismet

Kismet

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Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries and Taige Crenshaw

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*Dedication*

To our fans who have supported us. We give you this free read in appreciation for all your support.

Aliyah, McKenna and Taige

## Chapter One

"You *will* be safe here, Kaida. Savoy Valley and her guardians will protect you," a kind voice said by her left ear.

Kaida Miah Ayre wrung her hands together. She had no clue what to say. She was scared--out of her mind, in fact. But she did trust Challen. He had come to her aide, defending her from the very creatures that had killed her mother. They had been after her. Why, Kaida didn't know. In fact, Kaida hadn't known who or what they even were until Challen had told her. Those hideous beings were *ater malum*, soul-eaters. That was also the day she found out what he truly was, instead of just a friend.

Traveler Oracle Challen Valen Kirlus was protector of the gateways. Not that she truly had any idea what that meant, either.

"Where do I stay?" she asked softly, not moving from her spot.

"I have a small house all ready for you. You'll be safe. I'll stop in and see how you are on occasion."

Kaida licked her lips and shoved her hand through her wavy, jet black hair.

"Okay."

"You have to come out of the shadows, Kaida."

Kaida smiled as she saw Challen ahead of her in the open. She hadn't even seen him move. Slowly, she stepped out of the shadow of the trees and into the sunlight. As she reached his side, Kaida turned and glanced over her shoulder to the tree line, the need to remain hidden nearly overwhelming her.

"Kaida?" Challen's voice questioned.

*You're safe, little one.* The raspy yet gentle voice washed away the final lingering worry. *I'm here.*

With a determined nod, Kaida faced Challen again and smiled at him.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

*It's strange he seems to know so much, and yet has no idea you're there, Damu.*

*There are things even he doesn't know. Now, speak to him. I'll be nearby.*

"I'm fine. Just a bit nervous."

Challen stared back in the direction she'd been gazing for a moment. A frown marred his features briefly before it smoothed out.

"Shall we?" he prompted, while pointing with his staff in the direction they should proceed.

A small cabin sat off to the side of the clearing. A mountain served as its backdrop. Parked by the building were an older model truck and a nice, dark orange SUV. As they progressed across the open field, a warm breeze blew, moving the tall, deep green blades of grass and rustling her clothes and hair. It felt welcoming.

Challen paused before the single step leading up to the door, then faced her. The midday sun gleamed off his golden blond hair and caramel skin. Waiting for him to speak, Kaida gazed over him. She took in the rounded chin, aquiline nose, and his golden eyes before dropping her gaze to skim over his attire. He always wore the same thing when she saw him. It was made completely from dark brown leather--vest, slacks, and boots. And he always carried a staff. His knee high boots and staff both were covered in symbols she couldn't decipher.

"About time you got here." A feminine voice intruded. "I brought you this stupid vehicle. What is all the damn secrecy about?"

Panic raced up her spine, and Kaida forced herself not to hide. There was such fury in the woman's tone. Instead, she focused on Challen. A flash of something filled his normally serene gaze before he got it under control.

"Kaida, I'd like you to meet Mika Kendrick."

Challen stepped to the side, and Kaida found herself staring into some angry topaz eyes. If anything, they grew stormier the second they settled upon her.

Kaida held the stare, not willing to back down. "Hello," she said.

Shrewd eyes scanned her from head to toe, and Kaida felt some sort of energy pouring off this woman. Instinctively, she poised for flight or fight.

*Little one?*

*I don't know, but I trust Challen. Don't do anything yet.* She could feel the frustration and fury from him. He wanted to hurt those scaring her. *Please, Damu. Give it a moment. Very well.*

Mika crossed her arms over her chest, the sun glinting off the ring on her right hand. Kaida could see some hieroglyphics, and it looked like the stone was a ruby. It was a beautiful ring.

"I waited here on my *only* day off for you, and you...you show up with a woman?" Mika barely looked at her before cutting her gaze back to Challen. "I do have things to do on my day off, you know."

Kaida longed to melt into the ground. *There's obviously something much deeper going on between the two of them.* If she didn't know any better, she would say that Mika was jealous of seeing her with Challen. She watched as all remaining traces of humor left Challen's gaze.

"Now isn't the time, Mika." His tone was humorless.

"It never is with you, Challen," she bit off.

Challen took a deep breath. "This is Kaida Ayre. She just lost her mother and needs a safe place to stay." He waved a hand toward the door. "Keys are inside?" When Mika nodded, Challen said, "Let's go. Kaida, your stuff is inside. I'll check in on you in the morning."

Moving to stand before her, Challen kissed her cheek. Kaida watched in silence, and some apprehension, as Challen moved to the large orange vehicle and got in on the passenger side. Mika stared at her once more, her gaze hard as she looked her over from head to foot. Then she spun on her booted heel and moved to the driver's side. Kaida watched as they argued before Mika left in a flurry of wheels and dirt.

A deep chuckle resonated in her head. Kaida smiled and ran a hand through her hair as she walked to the door. With a slight hesitation, she grabbed the handle and pushed. The house was well lit, courtesy of the large windows. It was warm and inviting. Nodding, Kaida looked around. Her bags sat in a doorway, beyond which she could see a quilted bedspread. A feeling of security flowed through her.

*You are relaxed, little one.*

*Yes, Damu. I'm going to unpack, then perhaps take a nap or start exploring.*

*Very well. I'm off to find some food.*

Kaida took in the smooth wood floors and simplicity of the cabin. Three rooms, basically--her bedroom, bathroom, and the rest of the open design, which combined a kitchen and living room all in one.

"Hey, what do I need lots of room for?"

With a deep sigh, Kaida shrugged and moved to the bedroom, which was done in earth tones. For the first time since she lost her mom, she began to feel relaxed.

Adamek Nervig ran his gloved hands down his pant legs before he shut off his vehicle. Although the sun shone brightly, it did little to banish the chill he felt deep in his soul. He got out and shut the heavy metal door of his medium blue Bronco behind him.

*I'm not looking forward to this.*

Licking his lips, he took a deep breath, ran his hands over the muted black leather of his ankle length trench coat, and strode determinedly toward the front door of the huge stone home. Reaching the door, he pressed the doorbell and stepped back. His breath caught when the door opened. A beautiful woman stood there with a gentle smile on her face. Something about her made him think of someone he knew a long time ago. Shaking off that feeling, he watched her.

"Can I help you?" she asked, as her gaze ran over him.

Movement above and behind her grabbed his attention before he could answer.

"Dak!" The single word was expelled on a sharp and slightly disbelieving breath.

With an extremely small smile for the woman before him, he said, "I see him. Thank you."

Dak placed his gaze upon Aren Van der Ness as he moved down the stairs. There was a sense of peace surrounding him, and for a brief moment, Dak was struck by jealousy. *Be happy for him*, his mind admonished. Aren had a kind smile on his face

when he reached them. Without another word spoken between them, Dak found himself in Aren's embrace.

"It's been too long," Aren said in Dutch.

Dak nodded. "Too long, my friend," he replied, as he hugged him in return. When they separated, Dak saw the amulet marking his position in the Van der Ness clan settled around Aren's neck. Pain laced through him before he tore his eyes away and met Aren's understanding gaze.

"Dak, I'd like for you to meet Nahia Freeman, my fiancée." Aren slid an arm around the woman beside him. "Nahia, this is Adamek Nervig."

"An honor to meet you, milady," Dak said in his normal quiet tone.

She smiled, and he realized why Aren stared at her like she was his whole world. Even looking at him, he could see her love for his friend in her eyes and smile.

"I'll leave you two to catch up. I'll grab some refreshments and set them out back; it's such a beautiful day."

Dak remained silent when she walked off. He waited patiently for his friend to tear his gaze from the direction Nahia had gone. *Fiancée, hell...mate is more like it.*

"Let's walk," Aren said.

Together, they headed out the front door and around the side of the massive home. Dak felt his breath catch in his throat as they reached a tall marble slab in the ground. An eagle in full flight, with talons extended, was etched into the top. Beneath it were engraved the names of Aren's family. A single flame sat at the base.

Flipping his coat back in a practiced motion, Dak dropped to one knee and bowed his head in respect. *Goodbye, my friend. I'm sorry I wasn't around to fight by your side.* He remained there as mental images of Aren's family passed before him. Jokull's was the last, and Dak felt his heart jerk in pain as his long-time friend faded from view.

"Are they dead?" he asked, getting to his feet. He knew Aren would know he spoke of the ones who'd massacred his family.

"Most," Aren answered, a low thread of malice underlying his word.

Dak turned his head and stared at Aren. "What does that mean?"

"It means there are still a few out there...hiding," he said with loathing. "I'm not sure where. Things in Savoy have been nothing short of volatile lately, Dak."

*I will find them...and I will kill them.* Forcing his anger back under control, Dak nodded. "I understand."

As they headed toward a table where Nahia was setting food down, Aren asked, "What are you doing here?"

It wasn't a nasty question. It was one borne of true curiosity, for Dak was usually far from Savoy Valley, doing what he did.

"Hunting." He nodded briefly at Nahia, who watched them approach.

Aren sat and tugged Nahia close. "And your prey?"

A wry grin lifted one corner of his mouth. "Will soon cease to exist." He grabbed a small sandwich from the tray and ate it.

Jokull's younger brother nodded with understanding. Dak sighed; he and Jokull had hunted together. He was the only person Dak had ever hunted with. They'd hunted demons, daemons, soul-eaters, and more. He'd been hunting a rogue dragon in Ecuador when he'd received the news of the attack on the Van der Ness family. From that moment on, Dak had thrown himself into his work even harder, and this was the first time he'd been back to Savoy Valley.

The direction of the wind shifted, and on it came the scent of a creature he'd encountered twice before in his lifetime. Both times, he'd almost ceased to exist after the meeting. The beast within him roared in fury and challenge. In the next second, the air current shifted, and as fast as it was upon him, the identifying smell vanished.

"Dak?"

Calming the creature within him, he turned to Aren and saw the concern on his friend's face. "I'm fine, Aren." Dak looked at Nahia and jerked his gaze away before he said anything. Getting to his feet, he nodded at both of them as the leather of his coat fluttered against the material of his pants. "There's something I need to do. Lady Nahia, it's been an honor and a pleasure." With one more brief nod, he spun around and

walked off. "I'll be in touch, Aren," he said in Dutch as his steps carried him away to his Bronco.

Dak climbed in and started the engine. He struggled for a moment to wrest control back from the beast within him.

*A red dragon. A fucking red!* They were rare, extremely so. And in his opinion, they were the most vicious of all pure dragons. The scent of a pure dragon is different than that of a dragon-shifter. Dak knew several shifters who were reds when they changed, and while they tended to lean toward the side of more destruction, he wouldn't say they were evil. But a pure dragon...a red, here in Savoy. He didn't like the feeling that knowledge brought him.

He smacked his hand against the steering wheel before driving off. He headed deep into the mountains to a home he'd grown up in. This was the place he'd first met and befriended Jokull. The rest was history, so to speak.

The further he drove up into the Pantera Mountains, the more relaxed he began to feel. There was something special about coming home. This place had a way of soothing his inner demon. One corner away from where he turned off on an access road, he slowed as he passed a drive. His keen eyesight picked up on the vehicle that was mostly hidden.

*I didn't know anyone was living there.*

Without thought, he turned up the drive and headed for the small cabin. Parking, he shut off the engine and climbed out.

"Hello?" he called heading toward the door.

A whisper of feeling floated over him. Dak faced the side of the house where the truck sat. "Come out of there," he ordered.

He looked, and looked again when, from around the corner of the house, a woman appeared. She wore a loose-fitting pair of pants and a tee shirt with the sleeves removed. Her outfit was extremely simple and unadorned, and yet entirely alluring. Her curvaceous body appeared to have been dipped in dark cocoa. Wavy black hair tumbled around her shoulders. She stared at him with eyes that were almost clear,

except for the iridescent chips within them. Flowing around her was the gentle scent of a water lily. It hit him harder than he'd ever believed possible.

The beast within him woke again, but this time it was not for battle--well, not the kind of battle he'd spent most of his life encountering.

*Mine!* Every fiber of his being roared.

Dak's legs felt shaky, and his heart was pounding faster than ever before. Running his tongue over his teeth, he forced his attention away from her curves and back to her face.

"Who are you?" he asked, while trying to calm himself.

"Kaida Ayre," she said as her gaze travelled over him. He knew what look he presented; it was one of the reasons he dressed the way he did.

His skin prickled at the dulcet tone of her words. "What are you, Kaida Ayre? And how have you come to stay here?"

Her eyes grew wide, and she wrung her hands together. "Challen. Challen said I could stay here."

For a second, jealousy raced through him at the mention of Challen's name on her lips. *She didn't even acknowledge my other question.* Drawing himself up to his full height, he stared down at her. "Challen brought you here?" She nodded. "My apologies, Kaida Ayre. This cabin is on my family's property, which is why I wondered who you were. Since Challen brought you, I'll leave you alone." Spinning around, he didn't even get one step before her voice reached him.

"Who are you?"

*I have to get away from her.* Composing his face, he turned back toward her. "Dak."

"Are you sure you're okay with me being here? I didn't mean to intrude."

"Challen is well aware he can use this place for his friends. It wasn't known I was returning anyway." Dak had the most powerful urge to reach out and touch the smooth skin on her cheek.

"Thank you," she said. Without a word, Kaida walked back the way she'd come, without a look back.

*Look at me!* The silent demand went unheeded. Low grunts filtered around the corner, and before he knew what happened, he was striding after her. He came face to face with her trying to move a huge barrel out of the way. It probably weighed as much as, if not more than, she did.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, leaning against the hood of the truck.

She glanced at him and huffed. "Picking flowers. What's it look like?" she snapped, with a fire he wouldn't have pegged her to have. "Are you just going to stand there, or help me?"

He arched a brow and steadied the wobbling barrel. "Where did you want it, and why are you trying to move it?"

"Out of the way so I can pull the truck up more."

"Okay. Get in the truck and I'll move the barrel."

She stomped over to the door, muttering under her breath something about men. Dak followed her with his gaze and waited until she'd started the engine before lifting the barrel and walking it off to the side. By the time he placed it on the ground, she'd shut off the truck and was beside him.

He glanced down, noting how the top of her head seemed to rest just below his shoulder. Images of lying in bed with her filled him. His body reacted, and he swore silently as he struggled for control.

"Thank you," she murmured, looking up at him.

"No problem." Dak tilted his head and stared at her amazing eyes. Again, that shudder raced through him, and he felt the beast within him roar to life, demanding he dominate and claim her as his own. He knew that he had just met his mate. The question now was, what was he going to do about it?

Kaida wasn't sure what to make of the man who called himself Dak. Sexuality in its purist and rawest form was the only way to describe him. Dak stood tall, much taller than she did; her head barely reached his shoulder. The impression he made was even

more imposing since he wore black leather. Coat, pants, boots--all black leather. His shirt was black, but she wasn't sure if it was leather or not.

He had dark blond hair that hung slightly past the collar of his trench coat. His eyes were the color of blue ice, and for the most part, she got about the same amount of warmth from them. For a mere flash in time, there'd been an incredible heat in them before it was instantly replaced by the cold, calculating stare.

The way he moved, looked, and more made her rethink the "no man" policy she'd issued for herself. She knew full well he was packed with muscles, despite the clothing he wore. The ease with which he'd lifted and moved the barrel gave that away. He'd barely seemed as if it were a strain.

At the other end of the spectrum, there was the intensity which rolled off him. Partly, it made her want to hide, and partly made her long to gather him to her and see just how explosive his touch would be. This man was the kind dreams and fantasies were created from. Despite all the sexual tension she felt from him, what Kaida also sensed was comfort and security. And those were feelings she didn't want to lose.

"Can I get you something to eat or drink?"

A shudder overtook her when his gaze perused her body. He seemed almost torn in whatever decision he had to make.

"Water would be great."

"Wonderful." Kaida managed to pull her eyes from the blue ice stare of her guest. "Come on in."

She could feel him behind her. Dak didn't touch her, but the heat from his body cocooned around her, enveloping her in a warm blanket. A subtle scent of masculinity flowed to her nose. Gulping, she hurried to the kitchen and grabbed a glass from the cupboard.

"Tap is all I have, sorry. I hope it's okay. I haven't gone shopping yet."

"Its fine," he said in an assuring voice. She watched as he scanned the room as if expecting something to jump out of the walls at him.

"You can come in, you know. You don't have to stay by the door. I believe you said you owned this place."

His eyes honed in on her so fast she wondered if she hadn't been on a radar lock. "My place is yours, Kaida Ayre," he said in a low tone.

She almost dropped the glass in her hand from the powerful and silky thread of promise in his timbre. *It's like he's telling me something more.*

Steeling her reserve, she ignored the way her body cried out for his. *Just a simple touch.* Focusing back on the faucet before her, she turned it off before the water overflowed. Swallowing, Kaida turned and barely contained her gasp of surprise. Dak stood right behind her, damn near blocking out the light. *I never even heard him move.* Holding out the glass, she stuttered, "He...here you go."

Dak stared at her before he looked at her lips. Hunger flared in his blue eyes before it was wrested under control. "Thank you," he murmured in a silvery voice.

Her belly clenched as his gloved fingertips skimmed hers. Kaida couldn't tear her gaze away from the way his Adam's apple moved as he drank. She longed to trail up his throat with her tongue.

*Get a grip, Kaida.*

When he was finished, he held out the glass to her. Her eyes lingered on a remaining droplet of water on his kissable lower lip. Her pussy gushed and demanded attention--attention from none other than this mystery of a man before her.

"No problem." She turned and put the glass in the sink. "Thank you for helping me out. No telling how long I would have been there trying to move that thing."

He stared at her until that burning longing flowed throughout her entire body. With a small smile, she ducked her head and tucked some hair behind her ear.

"I should go," he said.

"Of course. I'm sure you have somewhere else to be than here. Sorry for keeping you."

"You didn't keep me from anything, Kaida. I'm just up the road, if you need anything."

*You in my bed. Making love to me in the field.* Pushing past him, she moved to the door. "Thank you. I'll keep that in mind." She opened the door and stepped out onto the small porch. Kaida inhaled deeply as he flowed past her. Squeezing her eyes tight, she contained the whimper of longing that wanted to escape.

The wind shifted, and she froze. The air filled with the rank stench that had permeated the air the night those creatures emerged from the darkness and murdered her mother--the rotting, disgusting odor of a soul-eater. Immediately, her gaze fell to the man who had just alighted from the porch to the ground. Whatever it was, he must have smelled it as well. Readjusting his stance so he could see out across the field, he put one hand under his jacket.

"Get inside," he ordered as a shimmering section of air formed into a beastly looking creature and headed toward them at a slow trot.

"Not again," she said, moving so she could see his face.

"Again? What are you talking about?" He never took his eyes off the thing moving toward them.

Kaida didn't respond, just stepped to the railing and reached above her head. She pumped the barrel of her Remington 870MCS shotgun so it was ready to fire. It was configured in breaching weapon mode, giving it a ten inch barrel and no buttstock. A surprised look, mixed with one of respect, crossed Dak's face as he stared at her, followed by disbelief and exasperation.

He narrowed his eyes. "What are you doing? I said get back in the house."

"No way," she bit off, moving down the step. "This is the same type of thing that killed my mother." Kaida tightened her grip on the shotgun and pulled the trigger, only to immediately put another round in the chamber. *Don't think I'll need it, but hey, better safe than sorry.* She packed her own high explosive, HE, shells, and added a small bit of phosphorous to it. They worked wonders.

As the creature lay writhing in agony on the ground, Kaida moved forward, only to be stopped in her tracks by Dak. He'd thrust his arm out, and she ran into it.

"Stay," he ordered in a low tone.

Kaida bristled at the command, but when he withdrew a wicked looking sword from beneath his trench coat, she froze. *Holy shit!* She aimed the gun down at the still-smoldering corpse while he flowed toward it and, with a smooth, well-honed move, sliced its head off. By the time he'd turned to face her, the weapon had been returned to wherever it had come from.

He glared at her and shook his head. "When I say to do something, do it."

*Little one?*

*Damu.* Just knowing he was near made her feel safer.

Kaida stared right back. "Look, I don't know you. These things have been after me for a long time. Why, I've got no clue. I'm working on more ways to kill them. Be careful, big guy. I don't know what you are, but I'm pretty damn sure this would hurt you, as well."

Dak narrowed his gaze and stepped toward her. "If you're not planning on using that on me, lower it." His timbre vibrated with fury. Her belly tensed. She didn't doubt he could hurt her. He stepped closer and closer until the barrel of her shotgun pressed against his abdomen. "Do it, or lower it, Kaida Ayre. Don't make me tell you again."

The urge to bait him filled her. "And what are you going to do if I don't?"

She never saw him move. Not until he held her gun in one hand and had her pressed against his chest with the other. Dak lowered his face, full of hard angles, and put his bow shaped mouth near hers. Kaida had to lock her knees so she didn't sink to a puddle at his feet.

*Oh my God. Is this what it's like to be in his arms? And this is with him mad and us both fully clothed.*

"You got lucky with that shot, Kaida. *Ater malum* rarely travel alone. What would you have done with more than three? Trust me. I've been hunting them a very long time. It's what I do. They are not prey to be taken lightly."

"I owe you no explanations!" she swore, pushing against his chest. It was like touching sculpted marble.

"Why do they want you? What are you to them?" His fingers tightened around her upper arm.

"I don't know!" she cried.

*Little one?*

*Stay away, Damu. He's a hunter.*

A low roar filled the meadow. If she'd thought the expression on his face had been serious before, it was nothing like the deadly look upon it as he turned, drew his weapon and thrust her behind him.

"Get inside," he said in an emotionless tone.

*Damu, stop playing games. Don't do this. Please!* She knew it was him, knew his roar.

"No," she refused. *I'm not letting you hurt my friend.*

*Don't worry, little one. It's not my destiny to kill this one. He will not die by my doing.*

Somehow, that didn't make her feel any better.

A low rumble rose up from Dak as he turned toward her. Before she knew what happened, Kaida found herself thrown over his shoulder and being carried inside like a sack of potatoes.

"Put me down!" she hollered.

She watched in horror as the living room slid by, and then the warm earth tones of the bedroom reached her. Kaida gasped in shock when he dropped her on the bed and boxed her in before she could get out of the way. Her shotgun was wrapped in his hand.

"You have a horrible habit of ignoring me."

"I don't know you well enough not to," she said, trying desperately to ignore the feelings he created in her.

"I can tell you are definitely going to create problems for me while I'm here in Savoy Valley, *cukroví*." He nuzzled the skin behind her ear and whispered, "You smell so good, like *leknín*."

Kaida turned to mush. She didn't know what he'd said, but it made her toes curl with wanton desire. Before she could formulate a response, he had placed a respectable distance between them. He looked at her shotgun and tossed it down beside her. Her heart still raced out of control as she gazed upon his large body. *I wasn't wrong. There isn't anything but muscle on him.*

"I'll be back about ten tomorrow," he announced as he headed from the bedroom.

Scrambling to her feet, Kaida chased after him. "What are you talking about?" He didn't answer, just opened the door and stepped out into the approaching night. "Hey! I'm talking to you," she said. Reaching out, she grabbed for his arm. He stopped at her touch. Kaida swallowed as she stared into his eyes. They were a mixture of hardness and passion. *Is it possible to feel both cold and hot at the same time?*

"Ten. Tomorrow. I'll take you into Savoy to get your shopping done." Dak reached out toward her face and, at the last second, curled his fingers into the palm of his glove. *"Dobrou noc, cukroví. Good night. I'll see you in the morning."*

He skimmed her cheekbone with his gloved hand and slipped out the door. Kaida had no clue when she had released his coat. She stared at the closed door and wondered what she had just missed. Sinking to the floor, she gathered her knees up close and rested her chin on them.

"That there is a man who makes me forget there are people out there trying to kill me."

With two fingers, she touched the spot on her cheek he'd caressed. It had burned like no touch had done before, and she wanted more. She wanted to feel his skin on hers.

The longer she sat there, she wondered if it was more of a ploy to try and get on her good side. Dak had been right. Soul-eaters rarely attacked alone.

*Damu?* She sent the thought as she got to her feet.

*I'm here, little one.*

*Do you sense any more soul-eaters?*

*No. I will sleep close. Rest, little one. Tonight, I stand guard.*

Kaida felt much better, and fixed herself a very simple and quick supper before crawling into bed. In her mind, she believed she could still smell the masculine scent that had surrounded Dak. "I don't even know his last name," she grouched, as she punched a pillow and willed sleep to come.

Her dreams were full of sensual and arousing images of Dak. And yet, whenever she reached for him, her body seemed to float through his, much to her dismay.

## Chapter Two

Dak had to force himself to continue to his Bronco. Now that he'd found her, his mate, he didn't wish to leave her. No, what he longed to do was strip her naked and lick her from head to toe and discover if all of her smelled like *leknín*, a water lily, or not.

Kaida Ayre impressed the hell out of him, and that wasn't something easily done. When he'd first approached the house, she'd seemed so withdrawn and scared. Demure even. A spark had appeared when he exchanged words with her about the barrel. That was nothing compared to the flames that were in her eyes as she stood beside him with a sawed-off shotgun in hand. After the *ater malum* was dead, and she challenged him, Dak almost lost it when her body was pressed tight against his. All her curves called to him. Her lips teased, and her gentle scent tantalized.

With a jerk, he opened the door of his Bronco and got in. His body rippled with barely leashed energy as he recalled again the scent of the red. Putting the key in the ignition, he ground his back teeth as the powerful engine roared to life. *Damn it!* Kaida Ayre was a distraction. One he didn't need. He was hunting, and add to that the presence of a red.

*She's my mate!*

Gloved hands tightened on the wheel as he stared back at the small cabin, and the inviting glow that fought off the night. He had to ignore the fact of who she was to him. What he did was dangerous. He had no desire to claim her as his own, only to involve her in his messed up world. He'd seen what happens to his kind when they lose their mate.

*Kaida already is ours*, his beast swore vehemently.

Dak shook his head and shifted into gear, heading towards his family's home. He drove up the drive as the remaining light of day began to fade. Parking he got out and headed toward the stone house.

The hairs on the back of his neck rose and, without thought, Dak moved and had his sword drawn, the double-edged blade's point resting directly in line with his visitor's jugular. A low hiss of displeasure filled the air as it shifted, leaving in its place a woman. Dak never altered his position. His blade was unwavering as she walked up until her throat was less than a millimeter from the razor sharp point. One slight forward move from either of them would result in the flesh of her neck being sliced open.

"Adamek Nervig," she said, with more than a hint of anger.

"Sirantha," he responded without emotion.

"Still have the hair-trigger, I see," she commented, as she touched the flat of the blade with one finger and arched a brow at him. "Is this really necessary?"

"Depends, Sirantha. What do you want?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Do you think you could hurt me with this?" She pushed on the blade again, as if trying to move it. "Do you think you could get me before I got to you?"

"We both know I'm no amateur hunter, Sirantha. Don't assume the blade you see is the only one focused on you."

They held each other's stare for a while longer, until Sirantha expelled a breath of air. "Truce," she muttered.

Dak watched as she stepped back. A sarcastic, yet sad grin filled her ebony features. Blinking once, Dak also retreated a step and, as he did so, he sheathed both of the swords he had drawn. No word was spoken as they walked to the door together. He opened it, entered the house, and hit a switch, allowing light to fill the entryway of the three-story house.

A huge vase with long-stemmed roses surrounded by other accent flowers was the first thing he noticed. A cream hued card sat resting against the crystal vase. Moving toward it, he read in his mother's script: *Welcome home, son*. For a second, he smiled. He should have known. Wiping all emotion off his face, he turned and faced his guest.

"Why are you here, Sirantha?"

Dak watched her glide to an empty chair and settle gracefully in it. Her demeanor was deceptively relaxed.

"You've found your mate," she stated.

He bristled, but didn't say anything. Dak removed his leather coat and laid it upon the back of a chair before returning his attention to Sirantha. She remained silent, and he shrugged out of the harness which held his swords, setting them down on a table.

"Why are you here?" he asked again, not rising to the bait.

Sirantha inspected her short nails before saying, "You're removing your weapons."

Dak leaned against the table which held his swords and looked between them and Sirantha. Then he unbuckled the utility belt at his waist which held guns and more, and placed it on the table. "We both know just because I don't have steel or bullets on my person, doesn't make me any less dangerous." He struggled to calm the creature within him, who longed to answer her challenge. "Last time, Sirantha. Why are you here?"

"If I killed your mate, would you kill me?"

Dak saw red, and it took a moment to regain control. "No."

Silver eyes snapped up to meet his. "You wouldn't kill me if you knew I was the one who'd taken your mate from you? Why? It's not like there's any love lost between us anyway." Anger burned in the depths of her gaze.

She wasn't lying about that. He and Sirantha had never gotten along. Their animosity was so bad that, for many years, they wouldn't even be in the same room as one another.

"Don't get me to try to end your life, Sirantha. I know we don't get along. I'm well aware of what you were doing when you left Savoy. You tread close to the line, but you never crossed over. So had you really wanted me to kill you, you would have crossed the line a long time ago. But to come here and threaten *my mate*... I swear I

won't kill you. I know plenty of ways to prolong life, just so I can torture you more. I would do everything to keep you alive, just hovering on the brink. So if you're seeking death, killing Kaida won't bring you any closer."

Understanding filled her eyes, and she settled back against the chair. "Noted. Now, tell me where my brother is."

He arched a brow. "You have more than one brother. Who do you mean?"

She hissed at him and shifted in the chair. "You know who I mean."

Dak did, but he wasn't going to give in. "I figured Heller would be holed up at Kindred Manor."

"Try again, Adamek," she bit off.

He sighed. "I don't know." When her eyes narrowed at him, he held up his hands. "I haven't seen Dane, nor have I been in contact with him." Sitting on the table, he drew a blackened knife from his belt and twirled it in his fingers. "I sensed him when I met Nahia. What happened?"

She shrugged, and for the first time, Dak saw the woman beneath the hardness she portrayed. "I don't know. He was here, and while he was happy for my return, there was something different about him. Even Aren noticed it. Then he was gone. Not one of us can reach him." Sirantha held his gaze. "None."

"Your brother is very powerful, Sirantha. I'm sure he's fine."

He knew she was aware he had different abilities than she did, and could possibly reach him when she couldn't. But he'd already tried to and hadn't had any success. With feline grace, she unfurled from the chair and flowed across the floor toward him, her hips moving seductively. Dak wasn't fooled; Sirantha was as deadly as they came. Still, he didn't move, just waited for her to approach.

"You *will* tell me if you hear from him."

"I don't take orders from you, Sirantha," Dak told her.

"I'm not a good enemy."

Standing so he looked down on her smaller form, he smiled. "We've never been anything but that to one another. I wouldn't know how to handle you as a friend."

Stepping around her, he walked toward the kitchen. "You know the way out," he said over his shoulder, without looking back.

When he returned from the kitchen with food in hand, she was gone. Sitting in a chair, his food was soon forgotten as Kaida's image came to him.

*Go to her!*

Ignoring his inner voice, he grabbed the full plate in one hand and his weapons in the other. Dropping his food off in the kitchen, he headed toward his room and sank to the floor, searching for inner peace.

*Kaida Ayre is your inner peace.*

"No! I won't do to her what is happening to Sirantha. I'll protect her while I'm here, and then move on. It doesn't appear that she knows she's my mate, and I won't tell her. She'll fall in love with someone else, someone safe, one day."

Even as he uttered the words, he knew there was no way that was going to happen. He would kill without hesitation any man who touched her. With a groan, he dropped his head and desperately sought guidance. He had to figure it out, and fast, for come tomorrow, he would be in her presence again.

The morning came all too quickly, and yet not fast enough for him. As he drove from his home down to the cabin where Kaida was, Dak tried to figure out what he was going to do. Keeping her at a distance seemed to be the best way, and yet, everything inside him demanded he claim her. Turning up the drive to her place, he found himself holding his breath for a glimpse of her. There was nothing.

Shutting off the engine, he hopped out and headed for the door when the wind brought that same familiar scent to him. Red dragon. Dak let his power unfurl and seek out the hiding place of this dragon. There! His eyes opened with a snap, and he homed in on the area it originated from. Eyes narrowing, he began walking toward the spot, his hand lingering above his personally modified HK-MP5K.

Not far from the tree line, he lost the scent. The wind blew around him, and in the strands of it was the light smell that had surrounded Kaida. *Leknín*.

"Kaida?" he called out, not wanting her anywhere near where he'd smelled a dragon. "Are you here?" He dropped his hand from his weapon and allowed the coat to hide it from view.

"Good morning, Dak."

His breath caught as she stepped from the trees into his sight. It was like she materialized from thin air. She wore a white, short sleeve v-neck cotton tee and a pair of drab bronze, wide leg cashmere pants. When she walked toward him, he saw the black leather of a moccasin peek out. Her hair was loose, and she had this air of innocence around her.

*I want to lower her to the ground and just...*

"Dobré ráno, cukroví."

She narrowed her eyes slightly as she stopped before him, her head tilting up to maintain eye contact. "What does that mean?"

"Good morning."

"And the other?"

Dak couldn't stop the smile if he'd wanted to. "Cukroví means...hmm, I'm not going to tell you yet."

"Not nice to call someone names, you know," she muttered.

"Normally, that's true. But I promise, it's nothing bad."

Her gaze burned hotter before she looked away and back down his body.

"Right." He could see suspicion in her eyes when they met his again. "Let's get going, shall we?"

Without waiting for a response, she moved past him and began walking back across the field. Dak couldn't help but stare at the hypnotic sway of her hips in those pants. His cock hardened and pressed tight against the leather of his pants. Resisting the urge to readjust, he cast a glance back toward the woods.

*I know you're in there. I will find you.* Dak knew his stay in Savoy had just increased. After he found Boleslav, the head of the Drekflen, and killed him, he would turn his attention to the dragon. Although, if his encounter with the dragon happened

first, he wouldn't mind. Facing the direction Kaida had gone, he found her standing at the other side of the field, hands laced before her, watching and waiting for him. A flitting sense of peace teased him as he headed toward her.

Kaida watched him cross the grass toward her. If it was possible, she wanted him more today than she had yesterday. Again, he wore nothing but black, and the way it offset the blue ice of his eyes made her long to melt. Her belly clenched, and her pussy throbbed as she stared at his powerful and predatory movement.

He stopped before her and, despite the urge to touch him, she refrained. "Ready?" she asked.

His gaze burned her as it traveled leisurely from the top of her head to her feet and back to her eyes.

"Yes," he murmured.

The sexual longing was so intense between them, Kaida would swear the taste was upon her tongue. She choked back a whimper as he moved away. He had such a strong profile. He was all hard angles, but still, when his eyes filled with desire and molten passion, all she could think of was surrendering to his every whim.

"Kaida?"

Spinning, she saw him waiting for her by the open door of his vehicle. "Sorry." Kaida hurried to his side and looked up at the large step she'd have to make.

*How the hell am I going to get up there?*

Her knees almost buckled when his large hands settled around her waist and lifted her like she weighed nothing. She forgot how to breathe as he placed her on the bench seat.

"Thank you," she managed to say.

She shifted against the seat as he leaned across her, buckling her in. Flames of want rose up within her as he turned his head so they were face to face. Her entire world shrank to just him and her. Staring into his eyes, she shuddered as he skimmed

across one cheek with his knuckles. It took her a moment to realize he wasn't wearing gloves.

"My pleasure," he whispered in a low, graveled tone.

Kaida swallowed and licked her lips. His eyes darkened as they followed the motion, and his nostrils flared.

"We should get going," he said, before backing out and going around to his side.

Her suspicion raced to the surface. *Could it be he knew I would find him attractive, and he's trying to get me to lower my guard?* Kaida glanced at him as he buckled his own belt.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Well, I need to get to a grocery store, pharmacy, and a hardware store."

"Okay." He started the engine, and soon they were driving through the mountains to reach Savoy Valley. "Tell me about you, Kaida Ayre."

"Not much to tell, really. I'm a chemist, and I just lost my mom. I don't know my father, and those soul-eater things seem to be after me. Tell me about you."

She watched a small smile turn up one corner of his mouth. "Not much to tell about me, either."

Leaning back against the door, she put her gaze on him. "I seriously doubt that. You rarely smile, you wear all black, and you're packing some hellish weapons."

"I hunt things. And I do smile."

"Sure you do. You're a regular smiley face. 'Things' is very vague way of putting it. Can you be more specific?"

"Things that go bump in the night," he amended.

*This is like pulling teeth.* Kaida snorted. "Well, now, that explains so much."

He flashed a grin of straight white teeth. "You're not as quiet and demure as you try to pretend, Kaida Ayre."

"You're pretty observant. I'm not as quiet as I pretend, but being a chemist, I'm thought of as a nerd, so it tends to work."

"Not with me, Kaida. Although, even if I had been inclined to think that, the thought would have vanished the second you stepped beside me with that sawed-off shotgun in your hand."

She dropped her gaze and tried not to preen at the way his voice had filled with admiration.

"My mom wanted me to learn to handle a weapon. She never told me why, just that I needed to be well versed. That training and knowledge saved me, along with Challen's help, the day those *bastards* took my mom from me." Her body vibrated with fury.

He didn't say anything, and when she looked up, she realized they'd arrived at a hardware store. Dak stopped her when she unbuckled her seatbelt.

"Look at me," he commanded in a low tone. She did. "We'll finish this conversation; don't think I'm ignoring it. But after we're done in town." Kaida just stared at him. "Do you understand me?" he asked, in that same deep timbre.

"Yes."

Her belly rolled when his thumb swiped across her lower lip. He didn't say another word as he pulled on his gloves. She didn't move until he opened her door and placed his hands at her waist, lifting her out to the ground.

"Good," he whispered near her ear. "You still smell like *leknin*, and that's a wonderfully distracting scent coming from you."

Kaida grabbed the lapel of his trench coat when he went to step back and kept him close. "And you, Dak, smell like the darkest of night, seductive velvet, and danger." She smoothed down the front of the smooth leather of his jacket, reveling in the hard planes of his chest. "Unapologetically sexy."

"*Cukroví*," he said on a low rumble.

"Shop. I need to get some shopping done."

Kaida reluctantly broke contact and headed around him toward the hardware store. She smiled as his long steps quickly brought him around to be at her side.

Brushing up against him as he held the door for her made her shiver all over again.

With a sigh, she turned her attention to the task at hand.

As the day progressed, she noticed how the people in Savoy Valley watched Dak with a bit of suspicion. If it bothered him, he didn't show it at all. In fact, he was damn near comatose with his expressions, except when he looked at her. His eyes took on this warm, almost tender tone to them. When he loaded the rest of her groceries in the back of his Bronco, she noticed a few other items she didn't recall him going to get.

Turning to him, she asked, "When did you go shopping for those?"

Dak winked and escorted her around to the passenger door. "Keepin' tabs on me?"

"Maybe," she quipped, pleased he had loosened up enough to joke with her.

This time, when his gloved hands settled around her waist, she didn't jump. Instead, she kind of sank deeper into his touch. She stared into his eyes as he lifted her with ease. Dak placed his face close to hers, and she felt herself drowning in the depths of his amazing gaze. Kaida dropped her eyes to his lips, then looked back up to his unwavering stare.

*I want to feel your lips on mine, Dak.*

The crunch of a boot on rocks behind them made all the hot intimacy from his glance vanish like a puff of smoke. It was like staring at an iceberg, for all the warmth that remained in there. Licking her lips, she reached in his coat and placed her hand on his arm.

"Relax, Dak. Not everyone is an enemy."

He stared at her for a second before he gave her a short nod. His body only loosened up a fraction. "Most are in my line of work."

"Adamek Nervig," a voice said from behind them. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again." It was a feminine voice.

Kaida watched as his eyes grew shuttered and his jaw clenched. The urge to protect him roared through her like freight train. Tightening her grip on his wrist slightly, she smiled softly at him. Dak returned her small grin and sighed.

"Saskia," he said, turning.

Past his shoulder, Kaida found herself face to face with a tall, Amazonian type woman. Her brilliant blonde hair was confined in a five strand braid with rib accents, highlighting her stunning, large blue eyes. Big eyes which didn't even acknowledge her, just remained focused on Dak, or rather, Adamek Nervig. She wore skin molding clothing, and a wave of jealousy tore through Kaida at the thought of these two being intimate with one another.

She smiled, but to Kaida it lacked warmth. "I'd hug you, but I don't think you're over that touching thing."

That helped Kaida feel a bit better. He'd willingly touched her. She shifted on the seat, content to sit and wait, all the while imagining what an explosive round would do to the blonde giant.

*Get a hold of yourself, Kaida. You haven't known him very long, and you definitely have no claim over him.* That didn't help. Despite her suspicions, she wanted a claim over him, wanted something more with this man. *What I'd like is for Miss Blondie there to back up off him.*

"Who's your friend?" Saskia asked, finally looking at Kaida. Friendship and niceness wasn't something Kaida would claim to see in her stare.

Dak turned back to her and looked between them both. "This is Kaida." He didn't elaborate, and Saskia didn't ask for more. "We need to go, Saskia."

"Can we catch up later?" She reached for him, and stopped just short of touching him when he turned his hard stare to her.

"I'm here on business, not pleasure, Saskia." Without a word, he put his back to her and gently closed the door, then walked around and got in the driver's side.

A little time after they'd left, Kaida decided to bite the bullet. "Don't you think you were kind of abrupt with her?" She could see the muscles in his jaw tighten. "Or is that your norm?"

"I'm not a chit-chatty person, *cukrovi*. No point in wasting words when I don't care what the person thinks of me or has to say to me."

*Damn, that's harsh.* "What exactly is your business here?"

"Hunting," he said.

"That's it? Nothing more?"

"What do you know of Savoy Valley, Kaida?"

"Not too much. Challen just said I would be safe here, and the valley's protectors would protect me as well."

"And?"

"And what? That's what I know. There's some sort of magic here. I'm not entirely sure, but I get-" She clamped her mouth shut.

"What? You get what?" he questioned.

*Damu, I don't know what to do.*

*Trust yourself, Kaida. You were brought to Savoy for a reason. This is a magical place. You're here to find out about your past, and more about you.*

"My past?" she muttered, shaken by Damu's words.

"What about your past?" Dak asked.

Shaking her head, she looked out the window and ran a hand through her hair.

*"Cukrovi, answer me. You get what? And what about your past?"*

Her skin began to tingle as it did when she got really nervous or frightened.

"Nothing," she mumbled. "I just got lost in a memory."

"It happens," he responded.

She snuck a glance at Dak and found he was watching her, even as they drove along. "Shouldn't you be watching the road?"

"Yes."

Silence filled the cab as he expertly navigated the mountain roads, and soon he was backing up to the door of the cabin. Kaida watched as he scanned the area before helping her out of the Bronco. He remained mute as he carried in most of her bags and placed them on the counter.

Kaida watched him as he stood outside, closing up his vehicle. There was a wariness about him. Tucking some hair behind her ear, she padded up beside him.

"Thank you for taking me into town. I probably would have gotten lost. One day, I'll have to drive and learn the roads."

"I'll go with you," he said, without taking his gaze away from the meadow.

"Waiting for something to come from the trees?" she asked, only half joking.

Dak looked down at her. "In a manner of speaking, yes." Fear began to fill her. It must have shown on her face, for he touched her cheek with a hand once again gloveless. "I won't let anything hurt you, Kaida. Believe me."

She did. But she was still nervous and suspicious of his true motives. *Time to make sure I'm up on all weapons.* "Okay," she said. "Can I fix you dinner as a thank you for taking me to Savoy Valley?"

A sexy smile tipped up the corner of his mouth. "That would be wonderful."

Her nipples tightened as his gaze dropped and roved over her. Swallowing, she turned and walked back inside. It didn't take long to put away the groceries and get something cooking in the oven. Then she moved to her other bags and pulled out some items she got at the pharmacy and at the other store. She lined it all up on a covered table and stopped as a low whistle filled the air. Jerking her gaze up, Kaida found Dak standing on the other side of the table, arms crossed, staring down at everything.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Getting ready for the next attack." She lifted a shoulder. "It's gonna come, and while Challen said I would be safe here, I prefer to have my own security as well."

Dak grabbed a chair, turned it around, and straddled it, his arms draped across the back. "Tell me how you went from being a chemist to creating your own weapons. There's a difference between knowing how to use a weapon and packing your own ammo."

*This one fishes for information, little one. Be wary how much you give away. I don't think it would be wise to mention anything about me.*

*I won't tell him of you, Damu. I'm suspicious as well, but I don't think I'll be giving away any trade secrets that he doesn't know about. This man is packing more weapons than I believed possible.*

*He is not entirely a man, little one.*

*Damu?*

*I do not sense malice from him...well, not toward you. Just be cautious.*

Kaida put her gaze back upon Dak. His eyes were narrow slits, and she could feel the coiled power within him, ready to strike at a moment's notice.

"Everything okay?" she asked, putting down the shotgun shell.

"I'll have to take a rain check on that dinner." He got to his feet and righted the chair. "Stay inside tonight, Kaida." Dak moved to the counter and wrote something down on a piece of paper.

Kaida followed his fluid movement, unsure of what he was up to. She swallowed hard when he walked up to her and crouched down so they were eye to eye. He moved, and between two fingers, he held up a scrap of paper.

"This is my number. You call me, no matter what time, if you sense anything out of the ordinary. Anything." His stare was steady and resolute.

With a nod, she reached for the thin sheet and pulled it from his fingers. "Okay."

"I meant what I said, *cukroví*. Stay indoors tonight."

Her skin tingled at the firmness in his command, and the way he stared at her. It was as if he could see something deep in her soul that she had yet to discover. But she didn't want him to think she could be ordered about.

"I have this," she waved the paper, "and will put it in my phone. But I'm telling you now, if I want to go outside, I will. Why are you all up in my business? I thought you had things to take care of here in Savoy. Remember the 'I'm here for business, not pleasure, Saskia' statement?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. Kaida rolled hers and got up, walking him to the door. She worried her lower lip in her teeth as he moved past her, clenching her hands into fists so she wouldn't grab him. He stopped just outside the door and looked back at her, not allowing her to leave the cabin.

*"Zatím nashledanou, Kaida."*

"And that means?"

"Bye for now."

Kaida tilted her head slightly and asked, "What *is* your business here?"

"I told you. Hunting."

Licking her lips, she crossed her arms over her chest. "What does that make me?"

Feral flames rose in his eyes as he leaned closer. Kaida shook with desire and the craving she felt for this man. She whimpered when his hand sank into her hair along the back of her head. Dak lowered his mouth so it was scant millimeters from hers.

"*Potì šení.*"

"What's that?"

"Pleasure." He didn't just speak, he purred, and she almost collapsed from the sexual promise that dripped off the single word.

With a strong gulp, she tried to appear unaffected. "Thought you said you didn't have time for that."

He kissed her. His lips landed upon hers, and his tongue swept through her mouth, searching, seeking, exploring. He tasted so potent, she was immediately hooked and wanted more. So much more. Her pussy pulsed, and her blood felt like it was burning. Her nipples were tight and crying out for his touch. Kaida believed her bones may have melted as a result of the heated kiss.

"I lied," he rumbled against her lips when he pulled back.

Dak was gone before she could recover. As her gaze lingered on the retreating taillights of his Bronco, her fingertips caressed her lips, still swollen from the pressure of his kiss. Kaida wasn't sure what to do. She felt disoriented. Closing the door on the outside, she sank to the floor and allowed the memory of his kiss to pour over her.

### Chapter Three

Dak tightened his hands on the wheel. It took everything in him not to turn around and return to Kaida and finish what they started. Her taste was on his tongue. She was addictive. A ripple of his other form made him hiss. It recognized its mate and wanted to claim her. The primal part of him might want her but the man had to be cautious. He couldn't afford to blindly claim her.

*Oh but you know that you want to.*

Pulling into his driveway he parked, shut of his car and got out. As he stepped into the warm sunshine he glanced idly around his garden and home. The flowers were in bloom and his home looked beautiful against it.

*Would Kaida like my home? Would she want to make it her's?*

Dak ran his hand through his hair. It was a foolish thought. Yet he could not shake it. Although he traveled all over to do what he did Savoy Valley was his home. The place he always returned to. In the last few decades it hadn't been as often. Too many memories. He glanced toward the direction of the house Kaida was staying in. Besides her being his mate there was something else about Kaida that wasn't adding up. It was a puzzle he would figure out. He turned and strode up the walk to the door. He opened the door and stepped inside. Dak stilled then turned abruptly striding down the hall to his living room. He leaned against the door frame and looked at the woman sitting on his couch.

She leaned back against the couch like she owned the place. Dak crossed his arms over his chest and glared. The woman smiled a baring of her teeth.

"Breaking and entering is against the law. You should know better especially in Savoy not to enter someone's house unless invited. People tend to leave nasty surprises. "

"I missed you Adamek." Her husky voice washed over him.

He shook his head. "Don't pull that on me Saskia."

Saskia laughed. She stood in an effortless move. Her tall full lush body was covered in a supple leather body suit. It was the type of clothing he knew she preferred.

People underestimated her when they saw her in them. Saskia was cunning and deadly. She shook her brilliant blonde hair confined in a five strand braid with rib accents and lowered her stunning large blue eyes.

"Coy doesn't suit you," Dak said.

Saskia raised her gaze. The sharp intelligence in her gaze was as he remembered. She flowed toward him in a loose gait. It looked laid back but he better than most knew it wasn't. He did the same often enough before he took out someone or thing that needed to be removed.

"Adamek Nervig in Savoy. I was blown away to see you here," she said softly.

He heard the underlying longing and sadness in her tone. Saskia reached him and stood a few steps away from him. She knew that he liked his space and didn't like people touching him unless he initiated it. Dak closed the steps between them and pulled her into his arms. Saskia stiffened then relaxed. He almost laughed knowing he surprised her with his sudden move. He spoke against the side of her face.

"I missed you Saskia. I can't believe you are in Savoy. Ar-"

She turned her head and raised her hand covering his lips cutting off his words. When she spoke it was soft.

"No one knows I am here."

"What?" He looked at her.

Saskia smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. "No one in Savoy knows I am here. Only those who I choose can see or feel my presence."

"You are shielding from everyone in Savoy?"

Saskia nodded. He glanced at her speculatively.

Saskia chuckled. "Yes it is possible. I'm that good."

Dak laughed with her. "I can see your arrogance hasn't changed."

"Fact. This is fact. It's only arrogant if you can't back it up." Saskia winked.

Dak smiled then sobered. "Why haven't you told -"

"Don't Dak. Don't."

Her use of the short version of his name made him know she was serious. Dak studied her carefully contained expression. He nodded once abruptly. Saskia returned it. She put her hand around his waist. He put his on hers. She looked at him. Her steady blue gaze was unnerving. Dak waited her out.

"So who is the little barbie you were with?" Saskia said nastily.

He raised an eyebrow at that. It wasn't the way he would describe Kaida.

"As I mentioned her name is Kaida. Challen brought her to Savoy."

"Ah, I heard the tales of his death was exaggerated. Does he still look so sexy?"

Saskia grinned.

Dak's eyes narrowed. "Sexy? How the hell would I know if he's sexy? He has the same ugly mug as usual."

"Men." She rolled his eyes. "Of course he is sexy." She cupped his cheek. "So are you. You sexy man you."

"Cut it out," Dak growled.

Saskia laughed. "Hell, Savoy has some good looking men. I saw Dane a few weeks ago. Yum. Heller is taken now but still all get out hot. And Killian too." She shuddered. "Damn they got some good genes."

"You are just doing this to annoy me."

"Maybe." She batted her eyes.

Dak sighed. Saskia grinned then sobered.

"There is something about Kaida that doesn't add up," Saskia said quietly.

"You feel it to. What is it?"

"I can't get a feel on what it is. There is something not right about her. Familiar yet not." Saskia got a faraway look in her eyes.

Dak was silent letting her work it out. Saskia blinked slowly then looked back at him.

"I can't get a full feel of her."

Dak frowned. For Saskia not to be able to articulate what it was about Kaida or even figure out what was the something about her that they both felt made him more

uneasy. Kaida's face flashed before his eyes. Although he knew there was something more to her than he knew his gut told him that she had no clue about whatever it was. With her bluntness, open way and their connection she would have told him. She was not putting on an act.

"She is your mate Adamek Nervig protect her well." Saskia's words were very formal.

Dak glanced at her sharply. "What are you not telling me?"

Saskia smiled gently. "Guard her soul, it is in jeopardy Adamek."

"She was brought here after the *ater malum*, soul-eaters, murdered her mother and tried to kill her."

Saskia cocked her head to the side. "The *ater malum*, soul-eaters, are on the move. They have been getting bolder. They almost killed –A–" She paused then cleared her throat. "Nahia a while ago."

Dak narrowed his eyes. "You interfered."

Saskia shrugged. "Dane started it but he needed help. Even though he never knew I was there. I couldn't let her die."

"Saskia, you need-."

"Let it go, Dak." She shrugged him off violently.

She stepped pass him and walked back to the front door. Dak followed her. She reached for the door handle. He grabbed her arm. Saskia stopped, glanced down at his hand on her arm then up at him. The cold look and promise of death in her gaze would have made most people run for cover. He wasn't most people. Dak crowded her back against the door. Saskia raised her head defiantly. Dak studied the sculptured cheeks and Nordic features he knew so well.

"Don't forget who I am Saskia," he warned.

"I'm not the same woman who you knew years ago," she countered.

Dak nodded slowly. "I know. You are suppressing it but I can almost feel your power along my skin. It has grown. Tremendously."

Saskia looked stricken. "You have no reason to fear me Adamek." She reached out to touch him but stopped before she did.

Dak caught her hand and put it against his cheek. He turned his head and kissed her palm before returning his attention to her face.

"I never will fear you, *kleine strijder*."

"*Meester*, no one has called me 'little warrior' in a long time." Saskia smile was bittersweet.

"No one has called me Master in a long time either," Dak stated. "The title no longer applies. You learned all you needed then went your way to grow into your own powers."

Saskia squeezed gently. "Did I ever tell you thanks for being there?"

"Many times."

"I know what I asked you to do was hard but you abided by my wishes. Thank you." She lowered her hand and squeezed his hand.

Dak returned the gesture.

"Does the barbie know why the *ater malum* tried to kill her?"

The change of subject didn't faze him. Saskia tended to do that.

"No she had no clue and from the conversation I had with Challen he doesn't know either."

"Hmmm... yet she accepted that there are other beings in this world and Savoy Valley so readily."

Dak shrugged. "Her run in with the *ater malum* would make anyone a believer."

Dak smiled as he remembered Kaida cocking the gun.

"What is that smile for?"

"She reminds me of you. A warrior."

Saskia eyes narrowed then her hand flashed out hitting him in the chest. Dak winced.

"Hey, what is that for?"

"I'm nothing like her," Saskia hissed.

She stepped back and melted into the door. Dak opened the door. Saskia was striding along the house. Dak leaned against the door frame. A loud roar broke the silence. A gleaming motorcycle sped from around the corner of the house. Saskia revved the bike and drove down the drive. Her taillight disappeared from view as she turned the corner.

*If you need me Adamek call.* She spoke in his mind.

*I will and if you need me call.* Dak said in return.

Dak glanced in the direction of the house Kaida was staying. It would be best if he stayed away from Kaida until he sorted out what this mystery surrounding her was about. But he wasn't going to. He straightened and went back inside.

Saskia leaned into the curve as she sped down the road away from Adamek. An uneasy feeling gripped her. Since she found out that Kaida Miah Ayre was attacked by *ater malum* she had been watching her. The times she had been by the house she had felt something there but could not put her finger on what. For all intents and purposes Kaida was human. Yet there had to be something the *ater malum* wanted for them to attack her. Now with Adamek being involved and Kaida being her mate to boot it was even more complicated. She might not like the idea of Kaida being her Adamek's mate but she would keep an eye on things.

A shimmer appeared in a little distance in front of her. Saskia eyes narrowed while her pulse started to race. A muscular man who had to be at least six- five stood in the middle of the road. His bald head and onyx skin gleamed in the sun while his pale yellow shirt flared in the wind and his dark black pants molded his strong legs which were braced apart. His feet were bare. Saskia glanced back at his face. A strong chin led to firm lush lips and sharp cheeks. His mirrored shades covered his eyes. The man seemed relaxed. A blank expression was on the man's face. He watched her unmoving as she sped towards him. Saskia revved the engine of the bike and gave it more gas. She didn't slow as she reached him.

The scream of metal came just as she reached him. The front of her bike crumpled like paper and the back wheels rose off the ground. The crumple reversed and was whole again and the back wheels were gently lowered to the floor. The bike was shut off. The man never moved or changed expression. Saskia rested her arms over the handle bars of her bike and braced her legs on the asphalt watching the man.

"Why have you been watching Kaida?" His voice was soft and a deep bassy growl.

Saskia frowned. She was shocked he had seen her. She sure as heck hadn't seen him. It would figure the barbie would somehow be associated with this man.

"Why are you blocking my way?" she countered.

The man didn't reply. Even though she could not see his eyes she knew he was studying her.

"What are you?"

Saskia grinned. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Very much." The man replied without hesitation.

Saskia blinked not expecting that response. She put her hands under her chin.

"What are you?" she asked.

The man raised long lean fingers, lowered then removed his mirrored shades. Saskia gasped as his eyes came into view. The silver of his eyes with the gleaming red pupil let her know what he was.

"Red Dragon!" she hissed.

Saskia flicked her hand palm put. Her whip flared out. She gripped it and lashed it at him. She pushed off with her legs and flipped off her bike. She tightened her grip on her whip. It wrapped around the red dragon. His kind was rare, extremely so. Not to mention the most vicious of all pure dragons. She couldn't believe she hadn't scented him. A pure dragon had a very different smell than that of a dragon-shifter. She knew unlike a dragon-shifter whose first form was human then their alternate form was dragon - a pure dragon first form was dragon and their alternate form was human. And not all dragons could take human form. Only those who were at least an ancient and

with major power. Cautiously she watched him. He hadn't even moved to defend himself. He looked strangely more amused.

"Don't you know better than to attack something you don't know anything about?" He sounded more curious than upset.

"I know lots about you red dragon," Saskia countered.

"Damu Kijani."

"What?"

"My name," He stated.

"Blood Warrior." Saskia interpreted his name.

The name suited him. Although he hadn't done much she could tell he was holding back. He was so calm and almost removed.

"Yes. Preconceived notions about my kind are what makes us so secretive and why we keep away from other beings." He paused then continued. "I've watched you watch Kaida and could see your curiosity. Aren't you curious to know more about me?"

"No," Saskia snapped.

"Liar." Damu smiled a flash of white teeth.

Saskia stifled a gasp. The smile made him even sexier if that was possible. She refused to dignify his question of her curiosity with a reply. He was right and from his smile he knew it.

"I'm intrigued by you Saskia," he said.

Her name on his lips caused all kind of things inside of her. Her vision dimmed then everything seemed to whirl then brighten painfully. She bit the inside of her cheek not daring to let him see what she just realized.

*Ah, shit.* Saskia replied out loud. "I get that a lot."

Damu laughed a rich sound echoing in the silence. He shrugged his shoulders and her whip disappeared. Saskia glanced at her empty hand then back at him.

"Hey that was my favorite whip," she said.

Damu shrugged again then held out his hand. Her whip was in his grip. Saskia stepped forward to take it. Damu grabbed her hand and pulled her into him. Saskia

gasped but didn't fight him as was her instinct. She brought up her shields. He leaned in and inhaled deeply. He turned his head to her. His silver eyes with the gleaming red pupils seemed to see everything. She held her breath. Damu watched her for another moment then he disappeared. Saskia stood in the now empty road. Closing her eyes she prayed that he would never figure out who she was. Although she should keep her distance she could not. Kaida having a red dragon who was also keeping an eye on her only made the feeling there was more going on with her increase.

Saskia turned and walked back to her bike and got on. She started the engine and revved and took off down the road.

*I'll just have to be careful.*

*Careful is good but caution around me is not necessary. At least not yet. Figuring out what you want with Kaida and what ties you have to Adamek already had my attention. Couple that with you being so intriguing Saskia. And I enjoy figuring out intriguing things. It will be my pleasure to find out what you are and what you are hiding. Ah that will be will be most entertaining. I'll be seeing you again soon.*

His voice in her mind was almost a physical touch. Saskia gripped the handles of her bike.

*Don't you know it's rude to listen in to other people's thoughts or talk to them without asking first? Keep out of my head Damu.*

*If you didn't want me in your thoughts you could have kept me out if you wanted to Saskia and you choose not to.*

Saskia smiled. She couldn't fault his logic.

*True. Just expect me to return the favor and ease drop.*

*You can listen to me anytime.* The promise in his voice made her heart race.

*Leave me be, Damu.*

*Soon, Saskia.*

He cut off communication. Saskia continued down the open stretch of road. She didn't know what was going on with Kaida Miah Ayre but adding Damu to the mix she was intrigued. Very intrigued.

Kaida walked into the kitchen. She tripped over the rug and her empty cup she had been drinking tea in went flying. Horrified she watched it start to fall. Instinctively she put out her hand even though she knew she was too far away to catch it. Suddenly the cup stopped falling and started to rise. She gasped as the palm of her hand started to feel like it was burning. Swearing she looked at her hand. Nothing was wrong with it. She glanced back at the cup. It hovered just off the ground. Cautiously she went toward it. She stopped then put out her hand to touch it. A tickling gently brushed her fingers. For some reason it felt like breeze. She glanced at the closed windows in the room trying to figure out where it was coming from. Returning her gaze to the cup she bit her lip.

Slowly she shifted her hand in a circular motion. The cup twirled in a circular motion. Kaida gasped continuing to move her hand. After a few moments she laughed then made an away motion with her hand. The cup flew across the room towards the cabinet. She made a come here motion before it hit the cabinet. The cup flew at her. She ducked out of the way. She turned and glanced at the cup as it flew through the kitchen doorway. In a slower motion she made a come here motion. The cup returned to her slowly. She put her palm out and it stopped. Awed Kaida put her other hand over her mouth.

*Oh my God. How can I be making the cup float?* Kaida made a gesture toward the counter.

The cup floated to the counter then lowered to the surface. Slowly she walked over to it. Heavily she leaned against the counter and stared. Picking it up she turned it over looking for what could have been making it float. She could see nothing. It was the same as when she was drinking her tea. Just a normal cup. Kaida set the cup into the sink and braced her hands on the counter. She closed her eyes and shuddered. She didn't know what was going on. A searing twinge made her gasp and jerk. She rubbed her left hand against her right pulse.

She blinked startled at the marking that seemed to be a hieroglyph that was now on her pulse point of her right wrist. It hadn't been there before. She rubbed harder against it trying to get it off. The symbol seemed to undulate below her fingers caressing her. Kaida withdrew her hand. She stared at the marking. A loud knock on the kitchen door made her jump. She moved to the drawer next to the fridge. Opening it she took out her sawed off shotgun. Cautiously she went to the door. She placed herself so she wasn't in the line of fire of the door. She peeked out the window curtain. Her pulse started to race. She walked to the kitchen island and put down her gun then went back to the door. Smoothing her hair she put on a calm expression on her face. Opening the door she tried to keep the bland expression on her face.

The sexy smile on his lips and wicked look in his eyes the color of blue ice made it difficult. Kaida let her gaze wander down Dak's muscular body. When she had first met him her first impression of him was sexuality in its purist and rawest form. Now that she had tasted him. Felt the passion of his kiss it was all she could do to control herself from climbing his long body and kissing him senseless where he stood. He was in his usual black leather of coat, pants, boots and a shirt that she now knew was soft supple leather too. Her palms ached with the need to touch his shirt and stroke that firm chest it covered. His dark blond hair was pulled back from his face.

"Da-"

He pulled her to him and kissed her cutting off what she was about to say. Kaida's knees went weak. She clung to him. He was through, firm and it was as if he was letting her know she was his. He pulled back and stroked her top lip with his firm callused finger.

"I've been thinking of you, Kaida." His voice was soft.

The deep velvety texture of his tone made her pussy spasm. He chuckled then put his forehead against hers.

"I want to show you Savoy Valley. The Savoy Valley I know. Will you come with me?"

Who could resist such a tempting offer? Kaida knew she couldn't. She looked him in the eyes and replied.

"Yes."

Dak smiled. Kaida grabbed her bag from the hook by the door and followed him outside.

Kaida sighed as she looked out at the dark night. A smile curved her lips. Dak had showed her a lot of Savoy in the past few weeks. Exploring the beautiful town was both exhilarating and frustrating. The exhilaration came from discovering new hidden treasures he showed her. Panthera Mountains was awe inspiring. The hidden glens that dotted the area were oasis's. The hot springs that literally seemed to flow out of Ramulius - another of the mountains that surrounded Savoy Valley – was a special treat. Each new piece of Savoy he showed her made her fall more and more in love with it.

Kaida put her hand under her chin and tried to still the heady feeling in her body. That was the frustrating part. Being with Dak on an almost daily basis was hell on her libido. Their close proximity she could have handled. The random touches and scorching kisses was what was driving her slowly to the brink. If she had any girlfriends to share with they would have probably told her he must be superman to have not had sex with her yet. And she should take matters into her own hands.

She groaned in frustration. It had been so long since she dated. Heck she had never had to make a move to let any man know she was ready before. There was no possible way Dak didn't know she wanted him. She knew she was shamelessly unapologetically addicted to his kisses and touches. Restless Kaida stood from where she was sitting. She wandered through her darkened house. Reaching the front door she slipped her feet into her sandals, opened the drawer and took out a weapon. She tucked it in her pocket then grabbed her key and went outside. Closing the door and locking it behind her she put the key in her pants pocket.

Aimlessly she walked through the moonlit night. Kaida stopped, closed her eyes and raised her face to the night sky. A soft breeze wafted over her. She would never have even thought of wandering so late at night alone. Yet so close to the house she had come to think as hers she felt safe. With a laugh Kaida started to run through the foliage. Suddenly she stopped just before the door of the house she had only seen but not been in. She put her palm up almost touching the door. The door swung open. Kaida nipples pebbled as she took in the sexiness that was Dak. His chest was bare. All those muscles she had felt was there for her to view, lick and taste. She licked her lips.

Raising her gaze to Dak's she stepped forward. He backed up. She walked inside pushing the door close behind her. Dak stopped. Without breaking stride she went to him. Reaching him she put her hands on the edge of his hair. Tugging she stifled a moan as he lowered his head to her. Sinking her hands in his hair then along his shoulders she laced her fingers around the back of his neck. Jumping slightly she locked her legs around his waist. His warm hands cupped her ass. Kaida whimpered. Dak licked his lips and his breath got harsh. Kaida went with what she knew. Being blunt.

"Dak, I'm tired of waiting. Your kisses and touches make me feel you want me. I want you to fuck me now. If you're not agreeable to it let me know now and I'll walk away." She paused then looked him in the eye letting him know she was serious. "And we can be friends but the kisses and touches have to stop." She took a breath. "Now decide Dak. Are we going to fuck until we both can't walk or do we walk away and be friends?"

Kaida watched his eyes waiting for his answer.

## Chapter Four

Before he moved, she saw the answer in his gaze. Dak leaned in and kissed her hungrily. His arms banded around her. Kaida gasped and tightened her legs around his waist. Dak walked rapidly to the stairs, going up. He didn't let up on his kiss. In moments, Kaida was laid down on a soft bed. He blanketed her body. She gasped as his hot, slick skin met hers. Kaida's eyes widened. She didn't know how he had removed her clothing, but she didn't care. She tightened her fingers in his hair. Dak growled. The sound vibrated in her mouth, straight to her clit.

She moved against him, making their heated skin slide against each other. Kaida raised her legs higher. Moaning as the head of his erection pressed against her aching slit, Dak shifted and, in one motion, impaled her. Whimpering, Kaida arched, feeling the slide of his cock moving against her pussy walls.

"Kaida," he said against her lips.

He moved fast and deep inside of her. Kaida ran her hands down to his shoulders, gripping him as he pounded into her. It was untamed and forceful. Wild sounds of abandon reached her ears, and she couldn't believe they were coming from her. Foggily, she wondered where he had been hiding all the need and passion he was taking her with.

"More... more.... take... more..." He punctured each word with a sharp thrust.

Kaida just held on and let his masterful taking overcome her. Planting her feet on the bed, she pushed up to meet his downward stroke. The change of angle made the base of her stomach tighten. Her thighs strained as she met each of his thrusts. Dak growled low in his throat, a basal sound. Kaida matched it and gripped his ass. The flex of his muscles as he thrust into her caressed her fingers. She dug her nails in. His sharp hiss vibrated against her lips. Dak moved his head and dropped it into the cradle of her

neck. His teeth scrapped against her pulse. Kaida arched her neck, murmuring as his teeth tantalized her.

*"Dak."* Her scream lost sound as his teeth bit down on her pulse point.

The orgasm swamped her. Kaida loosened her hold on his butt, hands scrambling for something to hold onto as the pleasure filled her. She gripped the headboard, the metal biting into her palms. Sharp talons of pleasure gripped her. Arching, she moaned, a loud, wanton sound, as her body spasmed. Dak did not let up his thrusts. He continued to take her as she creamed with passion. Her orgasm continued on and on, never ending, peaking again and again.

Dak stroked deeper into her silken heat. Her face was set in lines of harsh ecstasy. She had never looked more beautiful.

When she had shown up at his door, he had felt her outside. As he opened the door, he hadn't known what to expect. The fierce, yet vulnerable, look on her face made his heart ache. Before he knew it, he was backing up. It was strange. He never moved away from anything, yet Kaida had made him. Each step was as if she was stalking him. She had jumped up and made her intentions clear. The forceful, decisive way she stated her intent was an aphrodisiac. The vulnerability was still there in her eyes, yet she put herself out there.

It was all he could do to not take her as they stood at the door. He had resisted her in the weeks they had spent time together. There was still something about her he couldn't put his finger on...something that was off. The time spent getting to know her only made him want her even more. The need he felt grew each day, and his control was tenuous at best. Her coming to him had broken it into a million pieces. He hadn't used words to answer her. He'd let his body do the talking. With each touch, kiss, and stroke, she matched him.

Kaida moaned louder. She pushed up as he pumped down. The flex of her muscular thighs against his side egged him on. Grunting, he pumped harder into her. She met him thrust for thrust. He braced his hands next to her head, pushing into her. Undulating his hips, he leaned down. Her gasp tickled his lips. He licked her lips. Her whimper was music to his ears. He stroked his tongue into the hot cavern of her mouth. Kaida suckled his tongue, then bit down.

His other half roared, wanting to mark its mate. Dak shuddered and groaned. With an iron will, he suppressed it. He would not make the choice for her. She would have the chance to choose, and soon.

*You must speak with her soon, Dak. We cannot hold back what we are. If she is to have a choice, make it soon.* The warning was clear from his other half.

It receded, but stayed with him. The pleasure he was experiencing was doubled with all his senses engaged. He rolled his hips. Her pussy clenched around his hard shaft. The continuous vibrations of her inner walls were mini orgasms. He gave her another nip on her neck, infusing it with his dragon kiss. His other being purred and sucked in the pulse of power from her orgasm. Kaida screamed. Her cunt gripped him as she bucked. He covered her body with his, putting his hands over hers on the bed rails. With a few deep thrusts, he held her pleasure in his grip.

"Please... D...a...k... more.... Nee...d....gi... ve... me," she babbled and whimpered.

Each sound and undulation of her pussy caused a vibration in his soul. His other screamed in his mind seconds before his release overcame him. The pleasure made his skin ripple as if his being was going to take form. Then his other subsided, curling up, basking in its releases. Dak arched as his seed flowed from him. He tightened his hands on hers. Kaida turned her hands and clenched them over his. Dak stroked once, twice, then a third time. He slumped against her, lowering his arms as he continued to

shudder. Kaida's arms came around him, holding him. Her soft murmurs soothed him and his other. Sleepiness dragged at him. He went to shift off her. Kaida held him close.

"Stay where you are, Dak." Her voice was fierce.

Dak smiled softly and settled more comfortably into her embrace. The sound of her breathing followed him into sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Come on," Kaida said, tugging on his hand.

The enthusiasm in her voice made him smile. He let her drag him to another booth. He absently glanced around at the Savoy Valley Seasons Fair. Each quarter, to celebrate the various seasons, a street fair was held in various retail areas around Savoy Valley. This quarter, it was being held in the area locals fondly called Shopper's Strip – the real name was, aptly, Nirvana. This particular stretch of stores had some especially colorful characters of Savoy Valley.

He waved at Artemis, who ran a boutique with original designs for pregnant women. Her brother, Apollo, nodded at Dak. Apollo had taken after his father and had a love of baking. He owned a bakery that had sinful desserts. Dak made a mental note to take Kaida by to taste some of the confections he made. He noted the humans mixing with the other beings. A Siren passed him by, looking him up and down.

Kaida growled in her throat and tightened her grip on him, glaring at the woman. A pleased feeling overcame him. She was starting to make her claim on him. Soon, he would let her know she was his and he hers. He raised her right wrist to his lips. He glanced down as he kissed her on the tattoo on her wrist. As usual, the hieroglyph on her pulse point seemed to tickle some memory he couldn't fully form. He glanced at her sexy eyes and, leaning over, kissed her softly. She melted against him and murmured.

"Get a room already," a voice said behind them.

He raised his head from hers, slowly releasing her lips from his.

"You think if we ignore them, they would go away?" he asked.

"You invited them," Kaida replied.

"I didn't invite *her*."

Dak sighed, put his arm around Kaida's waist, then turned to face Sirantha Sidorov Van der Nes. She had a smirk on her face and was leaning against her brother, Heller Sidorov, who had his arm around the waist of his wife, Kira Winters Sidorov. Next to them were her friends, Mika Kendrick and Zanna Mattis. Dak glanced behind the women at the glowering Challen Valen Kirlus, who was staring at Mika. Killian Sidorov looked as usual--like a surfer dude--and was eyeing Zanna. Zanna glared at him and made a "humph" sound. Killian whistled and tried to look innocent. It wasn't working. Dak glanced at Aren Van der Nes and his fiancée, Nahia Freeman.

"Who invited the mean kitty?" he asked.

Sirantha purred at him, then bared her teeth.

"Behave, Sirantha," Aren told her before replying to Dak. "Like anyone has to invite her. She showed up as we were leaving and leaped into the back seat. It seemed a waste of time to make her stay home." Aren's tone was long-suffering.

Dak stifled a smile. He knew Sirantha was a handful. He could only imagine what it was like to be related to her. Sirantha smiled, a flash of white teeth.

"I feel so unloved." It sounded like she was offended.

Dak knew better. It took a lot more to offend her. He wasn't even sure if it was possible.

"You should," Dak replied. "Hey! What was that for?"

Dak rubbed his arm where Kaida had smacked him. Kaida gave him a look, then went over to Sirantha and linked arms with her.

"Ignore him, Sirantha. I'm glad you came. Let's go explore."

Sirantha gave Dak a weird look, then looked at Kaida. "I'm used to them and not offended, you know."

"I know, Sirantha. You were doing as you usually do and being a bitch. But that's okay. Being a bitch is fun. I'm sure Mika would agree," Kaida replied as they walked away.

Dak started forward as Sirantha's face darkened. He stopped as she surprised him. Her delighted laughter filled the air.

"How did I miss your delightful bluntness? Although I do think Mika has me beaten in the bitch area." Sirantha linked arms with Kaida and they went skipping down the aisle.

Dak shook his head and stared after them. He could have sworn Sirantha was about to kick Kaida's ass.

"That woman has some backbone. Surprisingly, I like her." Mika made a rude noise.

Mika glared at Challen, then sauntered off. Zanna followed her. Kira kissed Heller thoroughly, winked, and went behind them. Nahia gave Aren a chaste kiss, then smacked him on the butt. She gave him a hot look, then went after the women. Dak looked after them, then looked at the men standing around him. They were all watching the women, who had caught up with Kaida and Sirantha. They all linked arms and skipped together. Dak laughed, then punched Aren in the shoulder.

"Pull your tongue back in. You can jump her later. You too, Heller. Kira will be there later. Killian and Challen...well, you can play Parcheesi." Dak grinned.

Challen flipped him off. Killian rocked back on his heels with a grin.

"Shall we enjoy the festivities?" Dak made a motion with his hand.

"If you plan on skipping, I will kick your ass," Challen growled and stalked away.

He made straight for Mika, but when she looked at him, he crossed his arms over his chest and gave her a bored look. A woman walked up to Challen and touched his arm. Mika's eyes narrowed. Dak shook his head again. Those two were amusing to watch, but he wasn't planning to be referee today.

"Let's go before Challen and Mika get into it."

The others started walking toward the women and Challen. Dak followed, but stopped and glanced around. A sensation went over him. He looked beyond his friends. Saskia stood almost within touching distance of the group. A wistful look was on her face as she looked at them.

*Saskia, show yourself. H-*

Saskia looked at him sharply. *Leave it, Dak. I've made my decision, and I'm living with it.*

Saskia looked one last time at the group, then walked away. Dak watched her leave and ached for her pain. He glanced back at the group. Kaida was looking in the same direction he had been. A frown marred her forehead. She looked back at Dak. Dak walked over to her quickly. He kissed her before she could speak. Kaida leaned against him and kissed him back.

"Get a room already," a bunch of voices said.

Dak released her, saying, "You're all jealous."

"Yep. Really jealous. Can't control myself," Sirantha replied drily.

She stepped between them and tugged Kaida away.

"Come on, Dia, let's go check out what Katrina Moore has at her table for her store, Deepest Desire. She makes the sexiest lingerie. Oh, A'rlian Ramus is with her." Sirantha glanced at Kaida's hair and lifted the tips. "Did you ever think of getting gold streaks?"

"Huh?" Kaida asked.

"Sirantha," Dak called warningly.

"What? She wouldn't even have to go to the salon, just let A'rlian do like she did to Katrina," Sirantha replied, blinking innocently.

"Don't make me beat you, Sirantha," Dak said.

"Don't get me horny, now," Sirantha purred, then glanced at Kaida. "And then make me lose my new friend. Dia, I don't want him. He couldn't handle me anyway."

Sirantha laughed and tugged Kaida to the booth. The other women went with them. Dak and the men looked at each other, then sighed loudly and went to find their own thing to do. Dak glanced back at Kaida. She was looking at him. "Later," she mouthed. He smiled, turned around, and went to join the men.

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Kaida stifled a sigh. She continued to swirl her finger, watching the funnel cloud of books she had placed on the center table float in the air. Whenever she got a moment

alone, she practiced this new found power she seemed to have. She was getting more able to control it. As the items floated, her mind wandered.

She and Dak had been spending a lot of time together, in and out of bed. Each time they were together was hot and intense. The times out of bed seemed to take on a new meaning. She hadn't mentioned to him that she had any power. Kaida couldn't put her finger on why she hadn't. It never seemed an appropriate time.

She leaned back, crossing her arms under her breasts. The items continued to swirl and float. A frown came over her face. Their time together would have been idyllic if it wasn't for one thing...Saskia. It seemed as if everywhere she went, she saw Saskia somewhere in the foreground. If she didn't know better, she would swear Saskia was following them. Each time she mentioned it, Dak shrugged it off and distracted her.

As her thoughts turned to Dak, the items swirled faster. Dak had made love to her until she couldn't talk, then left, telling her he would be gone for a few days. He didn't tell her where he was going. He left before she could even ask. Since then, no word from him. It was startling, after being together so much, that he was gone.

She had gone to the library the day he left. Entering the doors of the Savoy Valley Library was like going home. She missed her job as a librarian. She'd worked her way through college as one and even though she was 'officially' a chemist, she still loved the quiet solitude a library gave her. The scent of books had sent a thrill through her. She had spent hours exploring the Savoy Valley Library. She'd even had a nice chat with one of the librarians, who, upon finding out Kaida was a librarian too, had mentioned there was a position available if she wanted to apply.

Kaida had thanked her, but hadn't said either way. She longed to apply and get back to what she was good at. However, until she figured out what the *ater malum* wanted with her, she wasn't making any long term plans. She had used the time in the library to get all the information she could on dragon shifters. With Savoy having

various beings living there, the library was well stocked with information. She had read all she could get, and even checked out the Savoy Valley website, which had a special area with even more information.

She had filled her time so she wouldn't miss Dak so much.

Cursing herself, Kaida lowered the items to the table. They settled in their original position. Getting up, she went to the floor to ceiling window of the living room. The beautiful sunny day did nothing to dissuade her mood. A sound made her turn. She gasped as Dak stalked toward her. His body was slick and smooth. The hunger in his eyes made her pulse race.

He came to her, lifting her off her feet. Instinctively, she put her legs around his waist. Kaida shuddered as her bare pussy touched his hard cock. Dak was always so impatient to have her that he used his power to make them both naked fast. He sank into her warmth. She tightened her legs around him. He thrust into her, hard and urgent. She gasped as her back hit the warm glass. Dak put his hands against the glass and pinned her body against it as he took her.

"Dak," she moaned.

He growled in return and continued to pump into her. Kaida moaned as his cock filled her. Each thrust of his erection rubbed against her walls. He knew just how much pressure, how fast and hard she liked it. He licked her lips, then kissed her hungrily. Kaida returned his kiss. She tightened her arms on his shoulders. Dak grunted as her nails dug into his skin. He thrust harder. Kaida whimpered. Dak licked along the side of her face, then down the side of her neck. He bit the pulse in her neck. A shock of pleasure filled her. Her pussy spasmed, and an orgasm snatched her in its sensual grip. Pleasure gushed from her. Dak pumped his hips, and then he roared his release. He rested against her breathing, harshly.

Kaida held him, murmuring to him.

"I missed you, Dak," she said softly.

She cursed herself for saying it. He raised his head and looked at her. The emotion in his gaze made her breath catch.

"I missed you, too." He kissed her softly.

After a few moments, he raised his head and looked at her.

Kaida cleared her throat and asked absently, "Where did you go?"

"Looking for the *ater malum*."

"Without me? I could have helped. You shouldn't go looking for them alone. They're dangerous."

Dak smiled gently. "I'm used to hunting alone. It's what I do. But I wasn't alone this time."

A strong suspicion filled Kaida, and her eyes narrowed. "Let me guess. You went with Saskia."

"She's an apt hunter," Dak said.

Kaida pushed at Dak. He stepped back. She lowered her legs and stomped out of the room. She could hear Dak's footsteps behind her. She went to her bedroom and got some clothing. She got dressed, ignoring Dak, who stood in the doorway. After dressing, she brushed by him. Dak grabbed her arm. Kaida glanced at it, then up at him.

"Let me go," she said through gritted teeth.

"There's no need to be jealous. Saskia and I...it's not like that."

"You stupid man. I'm not jealous of that blonde Amazon."

Dak laughed.

"I'm glad you find it funny." She jerked away and went down the stairs.

He followed, saying, "No, it's not that. Saskia calls you 'Barbie'."

She stopped on her way to the door and stared at him.

"Whatever."

"So why are you mad if you're not jealous?"

She lowered her gaze, then looked at him.

"You didn't even tell me where you were going, knowing that I wanted a piece of *ater malum*. But you took her. Since you automatically assumed that I was jealous, I can see you didn't tell me because you thought I would be."

The guilt on his face was explanation enough. The hurt choked her.

"I'm not some whinny female, Dak. I might not have powers like you or that blonde Amazon, but I can take care of myself. I know when to stay and not interfere."

"Kaida, I'm not used to explaining to anyone. I'm sorry." He reached for her.

"Don't. Just don't. I'm going for a walk. Don't follow me." She shook her head, looked at him, then cupped his cheek. "Next time, don't be an ass. Tell me what you're doing." She dropped her hand, then went to the door.

She looked back. Dak was standing where she had left him, looking at her. She went outside and closed the door behind her. With quick steps, she went down the stairs, then to the path that she knew well.

*You're upset, little one. What's wrong?* Damu asked.

*Damu, I haven't heard much from you these last few weeks.*

*I thought it prudent to give you and that man sometime alone,* Damu replied.

Kaida tried to stifle her blush. She had wondered why Damu was suspiciously silent these last few weeks, and now she knew why. She was grateful for his discretion.

*Talk to me, little one.*

*I can't right now, Damu. I just need some alone time.*

*I will be here when you need me.*

He withdrew. Kaida continued on. She reached her favorite sitting rock and used her power to float up to it. Sitting on the top, she put her hand under her chin and looked out at the glen below. It was flourishing and huge. It was such a beautiful area. To think it was on Dak's land was amazing. Thinking of Dak, Kaida wondered why it bothered her so much that he hadn't told her where he was going.

*You want his trust.* Kaida sat up, realizing that's what it was. From all they shared and told each other, she'd thought he trusted her. Now with this, she wasn't sure if she was putting more into what was going on. Kaida frowned and thought of Dak. He wasn't the one for subterfuge, at least not with her. Her gut told her she wasn't wrong about them. They were building something together. She remembered the regret on his face as he'd stated he wasn't used to explaining to anyone. She wasn't either.

Kaida laughed. They were perfect for each other. Standing, she used her powers to lower herself to the ground. Dusting off her pants, she started back the way she had come. She and Dak had to talk. A sound whispered on the wind. Smiling, Kaida turned, expecting to see Dak.

Her eyes widened as the hideous being she would never forget--the *ater malum*, soul-eater--raised its arms and sent black light toward her. Kaida knew that, without a weapon, there was no way she would be able to survive against it. She raised her hands and prepared to call her only weapon--the wind. Although she knew how to use it, she didn't know enough to kill with it. It would not stop him. but she would go down fighting.

Kismet

*Forgive me, Dak. Remember me. I will love you always.*

## Chapter Five

Kaida felt the wind rush to embrace her. The black bolt bore down on her in a deadly arc. Before it could hit her, a body got between her and it. The blow spun the person who had stepped in all the way around. Kaida instinctively put out her arm to catch the person and collapsed under the weight. Shocked, Kaida glanced down.

"Why?" she cried.

"Dak," was the answer

Kaida glanced at the Nordic features and golden hair spread over her lap. Saskia gasped, then bucked. Her body shook hard. Kaida held her. Saskia stilled, then suddenly started to seize.

"I'll be o-" Her breath slowed and her eyes closed. She went slack in Kaida's arms.

Kaida felt sorrow as she looked at the woman she resented.

"Aw, your protector is dead," an insidious voice hissed.

Rage bubbled inside of Kaida, boiling over. Using her wind, she covered Saskia with it, protecting her. She put her down gently and rose to her feet. Narrowing her eyes, she looked at the thing that had killed Saskia. Fear leaked over the being's face. With a decisive move of her hand, she sliced down. The being screamed, and black blood gushed. Kaida smiled. She used the rage she felt to slice the being to bits. Slash after slash of wind hit it. It threw bolts at her, trying to protect itself. She blocked it with a wind shield. The being backed up, howling, and she walked step for step as it moved. With one hard arch, she split it into two. It cut off mid-howl. Breathing hard, Kaida turned to face Saskia.

"Mother fuckers!" she cried as she ran toward Saskia.

More than fifteen *ater malum* were rushing to Saskia. Kaida knew she would not make it in time to stop them. In a desperate attempt, she flung her hand out. Her wind bounced back at her, making her fly backward. She flipped, landing hard on her knees.

Glancing up, she saw a wavering field. The *ater malum* stood over Saskia, staring down at her, a look of horror on their faces. Suddenly, a loud humming sound filled the air. Saskia's body started to glow, and she floated in the air. The *ater malum* turned and ran. They seemed to bounce off the same field that stopped her wind. They ran around the bubble, pounding on it. As Saskia rose, she got brighter and brighter. Light flowed from her tall, full body covered in a supple leather. The air crackled.

"Soul saver!" the *ater malum* shrieked.

Saskia's eyes flashed open, glowing a stunning blue. Her brilliant blonde hair confined in a five strand braid with rib accents flowed around her, rising in the air. She looked directly at Kaida and winked, then sobered. She glanced at the *ater malum*.

"I am Saskia, the *zielbespar*, soul saver. I deem you all unworthy. Your sentence is death." Her voice boomed.

The *ater malum* shrieked, then disappeared in a white light. Saskia gasped and collapsed on the ground. She knelt, her head back and eyes closed. Her breathing was harsh. Kaida stared at her in awe and walked over. A hand gripped her arm, and she called wind and pushed out at the person. She pulled it back as she realized it was Dak. He frowned and looked at her other hand; Kaida realized she was holding the wind. She sent it away. His eyes narrowed.

"We'll speak of this later," he warned.

"Why-"

Before she could finish, she felt a push of power, and then Challen stepped forward out of thin air. The Elementals, who she recognized from meeting them earlier, followed behind him. Again, she had the sense of extreme power. The two men and two women each wore a different color. Olorun was the one in white and had dark pigmented skin--not jet black, but very dark. His black hair reached long past his shoulders. His black eyes stared at her. Haurun wore a lighter shade of brown than his hair. He was tall and Caucasian. His hair was long as well, but brown in color. Darago was dressed in red and looked to be Filipino. Her long, straight black hair was pulled

back from her face. Juras-mate was in blue and had very pale skin and blue eyes. Her hair was ash blonde and was flowing free past her shoulders.

Challen and the Elementals nodded to her and Dak before glancing at Saskia.

"Saskia," Challen breathed. He looked at Dak, his eyes narrowed. "You have much explaining to do. Does-"

A loud cry rent the air. Kaida raised her head to the sky. The eagle swooped down and hit the ground, shifting as it landed to their right. Aren strode toward them.

"Dak, I felt something I could not have." There was anguish in his voice.

He turned his head and stopped. He was so still Kaida didn't even see him breathe.

"Saskia." His roar made the ground shake.

He ran to her. Aren bounced, similar to the how Kaida had. He flipped and landed gracefully on his feet next to Dak. He started forward. Dak put out a hand to stop him. Aren glanced at Dak. Kaida took a step forward at the look of rage on his face. Challen pulled her back.

Aren got into his face. "I thought you were my friend. How could you?"

"I'm her friend, too. I love you both. I had to abide by her wishes," Dak said quietly.

Aren shrugged him off. "You will explain this to me later, Adamek Nervig."

Aren's tone was cold. Dak's shoulders slumped, and then he straightened and glanced at Aren.

"And you'll tell me what you would have done."

Aren stared at him another moment, then started to go to Saskia.

"Stop." Challen's voice cut the air.

Aren stopped and looked at him in question. He looked about to protest, but subsided.

Challen looked at Saskia, still on her knees. "There's no need to protect Saskia from us. Don't you think it's time you showed yourself?"

A rumbling laugh rent the air. A man shimmered into view, holding Saskia. Kaida gasped. Although until this moment she had thought she had never seen Damu in person, she now knew the dark, bald man she had seen in her dreams was her protector.

*Damu.*

The man looked at her. *It's me, little one.*

She took a step to him. Dak dragged her back.

*"Red Dragon,"* Dak hissed.

Damu glanced at him, his look unfriendly. "Why are all you hunters prone to attack before thinking?"

Dak bristled. "I'll think a lot as I kill you. Let Saskia go."

Damu glanced at Saskia and smiled, a predatory grin. "I won't. She's mine."

Damu leaned down and sniffed against Saskia's face. Kaida's eyes widened as she realized what he meant. Dak and Aren stepped forward.

"Stop," Challen ordered.

He glared at the two men, then looked at Damu. Damu met his gaze. He leaned over, eyes still locked on Challen's. He inhaled deeply, then made a rumbling sound.

"Mine."

Suddenly Saskia gasped, her stunning large blue eyes opening. She turned her head into Damu and groaned. She stiffened, then pushed at him.

Damu growled, then said, "Mine."

"Like hell," Saskia replied.

She pushed out at him. Damu flew away from her. He floated in the air, then landed on his feet. He crossed his arms and stared at her. Saskia glared at him.

Aren stepped forward. "Saskia."

Saskia stiffened, then looked at him, stricken. Shakily, she got to her feet.

*"Aren."*

Kaida frowned. She could hear the love and longing in Saskia's voice. Aren took a step toward her. Saskia backed up. Damu's eyes narrowed, and he started forward. Aren stopped.

"Stay where you are." Saskia glared at Damu.

Damu stopped. Saskia glanced at Aren. Aren stood looking at the pain on his face.

"Aren, you were never to know."

"Why, Saskia?" His voice was raw.

"I didn't want you to hate me...hate me for their sacrifice." There were tears in Saskia's eyes.

Aren frowned. "I don't understand. What sacrifice?"

Saskia's look was sad. "I'm not the woman you once knew...the woman you once loved."

Kaida's eyes widened. Saskia and Aren. Aren took a cautious step forward.

"I don't care. I love you, Saskia."

"You can't. I'm not as I was," she cried.

Aren stopped and gazed at her. His eyes widened, and then he dropped gracefully to his knees, bowing his head. Saskia stumbled back, tears streaming down her face. Kaida felt Dak let go of her hand, then watched as he dropped to his knees and bowed his head. One by one, Challen and the Elementals dropped to their knees, also bowing their heads. Saskia raised a shaking hand to her mouth and glanced at Kaida, misery on her face. Kaida didn't know what was going on.

"Please don't do that. I'm not worth it," Saskia implored.

Aren raised his head and said quietly, "You are too worth it." His voice deepened, and he said in a solemn tone, "Let there be witnesses to this event."

"Witness Adamek Nervig concurs this event." Dak's tone was as solemn.

"Challen Valen Kirlus concurs this event," Challen echoed.

One by one, the Elementals all spoke the same words.

Aren spoke again. "With the sacrifice of two ancient eagles was born this soul anew. We bring before you the *zielbespar*, soul saver. I give you the Phoenix, the bringer of soul justice and taker of those who forsake it." Aren paused, his voice sounding thick. "I give you Saskia Van der Ness, my sister, who is alive... alive because my parents deemed her worthy to carry the greatest being of our kind."

Shocked, Kaida glanced at Saskia. She was Aren's sister. She had been told all of Aren's family was dead. Yet now Saskia was living proof they hadn't all been killed. Saskia trembled.

"So mote it be," Challen stated.

The hairs on Kaida's arms stood up. It was as if something had changed. Saskia glanced at Challen.

"Why do you kneel to me?"

"Not to you. For you, as witness to this event. Don't you feel it? The ritual your parents started all those years ago is complete, as it would have been already if you had let us know of this. Let someone bear witness." Challen raised his head as he replied. He stood proud and tall. "Saskia Van der Ness, you have returned to us, bringing with you a great gift, the *zielbespar*, soul saver...the Phoenix." His voice dropped into almost a singsong tone. "Each millennium, two Phoenixes will be reborn. Time will decree when it is needed. For each to be reborn, it will take a great sacrifice of two ancient eagles of royal blood to bring them about."

He paused, then continued. "Your parents knew what was needed, and they did it. The *ater malum* did not know what they did when they hunted and killed the Van der Ness line. They brought the one thing that could end them. You."

He shifted his gaze to the Elementals. "She is the Phoenix. There must be another. We must find the other one."

"He's dead," Saskia whispered.

Challen glanced at her sharply. "What?"

Saskia glanced at Aren, then back at Challen.

"Jokull. Auntie and Uncle gave him their eagle to make him Phoenix too, but the *ater malum* somehow killed him before the change was complete."

"My Jokull!" A roar ripped through the air.

A white tiger flew across the clearing and hit Saskia in the chest. The white tiger put its paws on her chest, then put its face close to Saskia's.

"And what did you do?" it growled.

"Kill as many of those fuckers as I could before they ran," Saskia replied calmly.

The tiger raised its head and bared its teeth. "Try it, dragon boy. I like me the taste of some pure blood dragon."

Damu stalked closer, not paying any attention. The white tiger sniffed them and looked at Saskia.

"Christ. Only you would come back from the dead, and with a mate to boot."

The tiger shifted, and Sirantha's naked form came into view. "Saskia, my friend, I've missed you."

Damu stopped and watched the women.

"You don't hate me for living, while Jokull --" Saskia trailed off.

Sirantha kissed her cheek and leaned back. "My sister, I could never hate you. Jokull" --Sirantha paused then continued-- "may be lost to me in this life, but we will see each other again."

Saskia gripped her shoulders. "You won't be dying anytime soon, Sirantha. This shit is about to stop."

Sirantha narrowed her eyes. "Who are you to dictate to me?"

"I'm the big soul shit around here, and I see lots of years in your future."

"God, you were such a bitch before. Now there'll be no living with you."

Saskia laughed. "I love you, too."

The two women started hugging and laughing. Aren approached them. Saskia looked up at him. Sirantha got off her and patted Aren on the shoulder as she walked over to join the rest of them.

"Sirantha. Clothes," Challen said, exasperated.

"Oh yeah." Sirantha grinned, and light formed around her, and she was dressed. She winked at Kaida. Aren reached out for Saskia.

"Fly with me, sister. Come meet your future sister-in-law."

Saskia put her hand in his. Aren smiled. From one moment to the next, he changed. A proud eagle stood in his place. He took flight. Saskia smiled.

"You may take some time with your family, Saskia Van der Ness. But I'll be coming for you soon."

"I don't need your permission, Damu. You can come for me all you want. It doesn't mean squat." Saskia bared her teeth.

"You tell him," Sirantha called.

Saskia smiled at her. "We'll catch up." She shimmered, and then a light bloomed, glowing whiter and whiter. A majestic bird of glowing white flew into the sky. The tail flowed behind it in the colors of fire-- red, orange, yellow, and white, then leading to pale blue. It was beautiful. The eagle circled it, and they played in the air. Moments later, they streaked across the sky, disappearing over the trees.

"Come here, little one." Damu's voice caught her attention.

Kaida walked over to him, smiling. He took her hands and kissed her palms. Dak growled close to them. Startled, she glanced over at him.

"King Damu Kijani of the Red Dragloon. Welcome to Savoy Valley," Challen said formally.

Damu kissed Kaida's cheek. "Give me a sec. Stupid protocol."

Kaida watched him. He was a king. Her protector was a king.

"Traveler Oracle Challen Valen Kirlus, Guardian of the Gateways and of the title which we will not say in mixed company. Thanks for your welcome to Savoy," Damu replied, a small smile on his face.

Kaida knew what Challen was, and yet it seemed from what Damu said, he was more. She looked at him. Challen had an unfathomable look on his face.

"As a sign of good will, don't you think it's time for them to show?"

Kaida didn't have a clue what he meant. Suddenly, a wash of power filled the area. Wide eyed, Kaida watched as men and women started to appear in the clearing. Dak hissed and swore. She glanced at him. He looked furious. She looked back at the men and women in the area beyond Damu. From her count, there were nineteen of them. She couldn't understand what caused Dak's reaction.

"Ah, more than one," Challen said. He spoke again, in the same formal tone. "King Damu Kijani of the Red Dragloon. King Tanguy Ries Zahn of the Gold Dragloon. Welcome to Savoy Valley. We grant you a home if you wish it."

"Challen-" Dak started.

Challen looked at him. Dak subsided, a muscle ticking in his jaw. Kaida glanced behind Damu at the man closest to him. She would peg him as the other King. His stature reminded her of Damu. Regal and arrogant. He was as golden as Damu was dark. His toffee skin was offset by golden hair that fell in a braid over his shoulder. He was solid muscle and standing seemingly innocent. She wasn't buying it for a moment. From her recent dealings with things that weren't what they seemed, she knew he was dangerous. He winked at her.

*Do not fear me, little one,* a familiar voice said.

Kaida's mouth dropped open. It was a voice she remembered from her childhood--her imaginary friend Re. At least that's what she thought. He smiled at her. She felt a soft, ghostly touch on her cheek. Kaida smiled at the familiar touch. She knew it was him. She returned her attention to Damu as he spoke.

"Traveler Oracle Challen Valen Kirlus, Guardian of the Gateways and of the title which we will not say in mixed company. Thanks for your welcome to Savoy. We can only accept your offer if you grant sanctuary to Queen Isis Biehn of the Silver Dragloon also."

Challen's eyes narrowed, and he exchanged glances with the Elementals. "The Silver Dragloon are all gone."

"They are not. Their race has been decimated, but some of them still live." Damu stated firmly. "Queen Isis and I were trying to join our clans with a wedding, but now

that's impossible." He glanced the way Saskia had flown, then looked back at Challen.

"So what will it be?"

"Queen Isis Biehn of the Silver Dragloon will also be welcome here."

"There is a Blue Dragloon with her, the last of their kind. What about them?"

Damu smirked at Dak.

"Challen, you cannot possibly be granting them a home here. Look at them. Pure blood dragons. Not just pure, but they're all ancient and very powerful, to be able to take human form. Red and Gold is bad enough, but Silver too. And a Blue. The fucking Blue is their enforcer. They can kill from a distance. Be here in a blink of an eye. Walk through the veils. There is no way you can know they can be trusted." Dak roared.

"How do we know you can be trusted?" A soft, languid voice countered.

Dak glared behind them at Tanguy, who had spoken.

"You go by beliefs that have been fed to you. Damu, I told you we should have gotten a good press secretary." Tanguy's tone was dry.

Damu chuckled. Dak hissed and took a step toward Tanguy. Kaida felt more than saw Tanguy move, preparing for battle.

"Although I would love to see you all go at it, it would upset Kaida, and I don't want that. Challen, we accept your offer," Damu said.

"What do you care about Kaida?" Dak glared at him.

"It's the reason they can be trusted," Challen said quietly.

Dak glanced at Challen. "Why?"

"Come here, Dak. Kaida will need you beside her for this."

Dak walked stiffly over to her. He stood close, but away from Damu.

"Well, well. This must be family reunion time."

Kaida gulped, glancing at Damu. Damu smiled at her gently.

"Our family line is one of the reasons the *ater malum* wants you." Damu held her hand gently. "I'm your uncle. My sister was your mother."

Kaida shook her head. Damu nodded gently.

"She loved you very much, little one. When she found out she was pregnant with you, she was ecstatic. Then reality hit. She loved your father, and he loved her desperately. Yet they were not each others mates. He was her mate, but she wasn't his."

"That's not possible," Dak said.

"It's rare, but it happens. One of Fate's little hiccups," Damu replied. "She knew your father, being the honorable man he was, would stay with her and forsake his chance at a mate--the other half of his sou--for her. She couldn't allow that. She left and never told him about you. Dragons mate for life, and protect their mates no matter what, even at a cost to themselves. She knew your father would not give up on finding her. So she endured a painful process to become human." Damu paused. "It was the one way she could ensure he would never find her. Who would imagine a dragon becoming human? The secret of how this was accomplished, she took to her grave."

"Why?" Kaida cried, overcome.

"Your father is probably thinking she was selfish and is angry at her deception, and I should fry his ass right where he stands for it. But I won't, since he is your father. No matter what he believes, she did it for love--love of you, and for him. Even if I don't think he's worthy of her love, or her sacrifice."

"You were my protector from the time I was a child. Mom never said she knew about you."

"It was the way she wanted it. She wanted you to have someone to turn to in case of anything." Damu looked sad. "I'm sorry that I wasn't there. I went to a meeting with Isis, and by the time I felt it, I was too late to save her. But not too late to save you."

"You helped me, even then. Uncle Damu," Kaida said tentively.

Damu grinned at her and hugged her close. Kaida closed her eyes and inhaled his scent. It was familiar to her. Damu released her, then turned to Tanguy.

"Take everyone home."

"You have chosen where you will build your homes?" Challen asked.

Damu laughed. "Like you didn't know I was scouting the area. Ramulius Mountain, with its wild untamed areas, felt like home as soon as we saw it. We would not have presumed to start making our home there without your offer. So thank you, and the council of Savoy, for your hospitality."

"The council will want to discuss one of you taking a place on it. It took me a bit to know you were there. And I wasn't quite sure what you were. I knew you were tied to Kaida, and it would be fine. Ramulius is a fine place. Good luck with your new neighbors." Challen sounded amused.

Kaida frowned. She didn't know anything about the people who lived on Ramulius.

"It will be an adventure." Damu laughed, then motioned to Tanguy.

Tanguy walked over to Kaida and kissed her cheek. He ignored Dak's growl. He winked on her.

"We have some secrets to share, little one," he whispered.

"You have some explaining to do," she countered, kissing him on the cheek.

Tanguy nodded, then with a whoosh, he changed into a magnificent Golden Dragon. Kaida gasped at his beauty. The area rippled with power as each of the people took their true form. The Red Dragons ranged in color from burgundy to crimson, the Golden Dragons from gold to pale yellow. They circled the area, then streaked across the sky. Kaida frowned. From her recollection, Ramulius Mountain was in the other direction. They were going the wrong way.

"Damn, Tanguy," Damu sighed.

She looked at him in question.

"He's meddling, as he usually does--checking on Saskia's safety. He knows she's mine and will probably leave some protectors for her...which will piss her off." Damu grinned.

"You are so bad, Uncle." Kaida laughed.

Damu sobered and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry that you lost your mom. It's her blood, and your father's, that made the *ater malum* come after you. Although you are not able to change into one of us, the blood in your veins is a mix of us and his."

Kaida's heart pounded. She reached for Dak. He stepped closer and held her hand.

"You know who he is?"

"She never would tell me who it was, and I didn't understand what she did tell me. But since coming to Savoy, I've figured it out." Damu raised her right hand, covering the marking on her wrist. "This made it official."

Damu glanced at Challen. Kaida looked at him and gasped.

"Show them your wrist, Kaida. Aren't you going to come and greet your daughter?" Damu called.

Kaida lowered her gaze and put out her wrist. Gasps rent the air. A hand was put out next to hers. The marking on the wrist was the same. Kaida steeled herself, then glanced up at the man who was her father.

## Chapter Six

Kaida had a hard time trying to control the rapid beating of her heart. For a brief moment, she'd wondered if Challen weren't her father. He wasn't, for the man staring back at her did not have golden eyes. No. His eyes were as dark as the night sky on a moonless and starless night. The one before her was Olorun, Elemental of the Air. His eyes mirrored her own shock and surprise. Kaida shook her head and tried to find her bearings. As she stared at Olorun, she felt Dak slide his hand into hers. It was bare skin, as opposed to the soft, supple feel of the leather glove that he always wore. She clutched his flesh, needing the strength she knew was there for her to take, should it be needed. And it was.

"I think," Olorun said, never looking from her face, "that we have some things to talk about."

"That's putting it mildly," she muttered. Exhaustion poured over her, and she longed to sink beneath the fertile earth and hide.

"Kaida," Dak uttered. "*Cukroví.*"

Turning, she saw his eyes of blue ice narrowed and fixated on her form. "What?" she questioned.

"You're fading."

Kaida looked down her body and saw she was no longer solid, except where she held onto Dak. *Shit! Well, that's new.* As she stared, her body became solid again. Head spinning, she glanced back to the dark-skinned man draped in pristine white.

"Yes. I believe now would be a very good time for us to talk," Olorun stated matter-of-factly. "Come, my child."

Kaida could feel Dak immediately tense at those words, and she removed her gaze from her newly discovered father and placed it upon a man who'd come to mean so much to her over these past weeks. Forgetting there were many people staring at

them, Kaida walked closer to Dak. She reached up with her free hand and touched the side of his face. The stubble on his face prickled the skin of her palm.

"I'll be okay, Dak," she whispered. "This is something I have to do. If I can learn more about this power growing within me, I have a better chance of being even more help in a battle."

His piercing gaze held hers, and she could see in the depths of it the warring emotions he had. "We have much to discuss ourselves, Kaida Ayre," he murmured, turning his lips to her palm.

"I know." She squeezed the hand she held. "Let me go do this, and you go handle what you need to. I believe you and Aren have things to discuss."

He nodded. "We do." Dak kissed her palm and stepped back. "I'll see you soon, *cukroví*."

She watched as his hands became gloved again. When she glanced back at his face, he was staring past her, and she knew who he was watching. Olorun. No words were spoken between the men, at least none that she could hear. Dak dropped his eyes back to land upon her face, where they softened. Then he spun around and strode off without a single word. Kaida noticed how the others, extremely powerful in their own right, stepped back and allowed Dak to pass. She lingered upon the way his trench coat moved with each stride he took. Only when he had vanished from her sight did she turn back around.

Olorun still stood there, his black gaze waiting for her. He had his hands gathered before him, and the sleeves of his robe covered them. The picture of serenity is what he appeared to be.

"Come, Kaida."

Swallowing back her trepidation, Kaida moved closer to him, not looking anywhere but at Olorun. "Okay. I'm ready."

He reached for her, his hand gently clasping her elbow. The feeling of air flowing gently over her was the only sensation she had, and when it stopped, Kaida noticed they were nowhere she'd ever been before.

"Welcome to my home, Kaida Miah Ayre."

Silent, she looked around. It was comfortable and very open. Spacious. "Thank you," she finally said. *What did one say in a situation like this?*

Turning her attention back to Olorun, she was shocked to see he no longer wore the robes. Instead, he wore a partially unbuttoned Helmsman shirt and what looked like pirate pants, both white in color. Upon his feet were white sandals. It was the item resting against his chest that grabbed her attention. Around his neck hung an exact replica, in gold, of the hieroglyph that wound around her wrist and was upon his own.

"So what happens now?" she asked.

"We could talk. Get to know one another."

"Are you mad, you know, like Damu said?"

"No. Damu is wise, but he does not know all. He's right. I would have stayed, and I did look for Asha. But I can't be mad that she protected you."

Kaida's heart hurt, hearing her mother's name spoken aloud for the first time since she died. She followed Olorun's gesture to take a seat, and soon she was across from him in one of the most comfortable chairs she'd ever sat upon. There was a tray of fresh fruits and chocolate before her, as well as tea.

Worrying her lower lip, Kaida stared out across the amazing view he had before looking at him. Olorun watched her with endless patience. "Do you know what I am?" she finally asked.

"My daughter." His response was immediate. "And from the looks of things, a very powerful woman."

Popping a piece of chocolate-covered pineapple into her mouth, Kaida chewed slowly as she thought of the best way to phrase her next question. "If you are so powerful, how is it you didn't know who I was, but the *ater malum* did?"

Black fire sparked in his gaze before it was wiped away. "The ones who were after you were merely following orders." He frowned. "I wonder," he muttered.

"Wonder what?" she asked.

"Something I want to know for sure before I say anything about it. Now, tell me about this power of yours, and what I can do to help you learn to control and wield it better."

Kaida sighed and sat back, knowing pressing him for more answers wasn't going to help with anything. With barely an effort, she lifted the items off the tray and made shapes with them in the air--hearts, circles, ovals, diamonds, and more. At one point, she even had things orbiting others. When she looked at Olorun, there was only one word she could think of to describe his expression: pride.

They talked while he had her do small tasks. Kaida realized he wanted her to learn to do things without having full concentration on it, almost like an afterthought. And the more he worked with her, the easier it became. Granted, she was nowhere near his power level, but Olorun just smiled and reminded her, he'd been doing it for far longer.

Dak threw his Bronco into neutral, set the brake, and got out. Senses alert, he approached the woman walking down the road toward him--Nahia Freeman. There was a fierce look of anger on her face. It smoothed out when she looked at him, and the smile she gave him was forced.

Inclining his head slightly with respect, Dak asked, "Are you okay, Lady Nahia?"

"Peachy," she ground out.

"Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

"Colorado?"

"Sorry," he said, fighting a grin. "Not going that far. Anywhere else?"

"Are you hungry?" she asked, meeting his gaze.

"I could be."

"Good. Take me to Sanjai's. My treat."

Dak turned his head and watched her walk to his vehicle and climb in. With a sigh, he followed and got into the driver's side. "I thought you were meeting--"

"Don't," Nahia bit off. "So help me, if you mention *her*..."

Shifting the Bronco back into gear, Dak held up a hand in surrender. "Not a word. I promise."

Turning the vehicle around, Dak had them headed for Sanjai's. They entered together and grabbed a table in the back. Sanna soon arrived to take their order, and then it was just the two of them again.

"Where's Kaida?" she asked once their food arrived.

Dak picked up a fry and ate it. "Off with her father."

"And you were on your way to see Aren when I distracted you."

He shrugged. "A lovelier distraction I couldn't have asked for. And Aren will still be there."

"How true. Now, enough talk about him. Tell me of your travels. Have you been to Peru?"

"Yes. You as well?"

"I studied near Iquitos for a while."

Dak nodded. "It's beautiful there. There's nothing like the Amazon River and the lush life surrounding it."

Nahia smiled at him and continued talking. After they were done, and Dak had paid the bill, he walked her outside to his Bronco. As he drove them along the road toward the Van der Ness estate, Nahia had her hand out the window, riding the air currents. When he pulled up to his usual parking place, they were treated to the sight of Aren heading toward them, on his face a fierce scowl. Dak took a deep breath, turned off the engine, and climbed out.

"Where the hell did you go?" Aren thundered as he bore down upon them. "And then to turn up with him?"

"Dak and I had lunch," Nahia replied calmly. "I needed a friend to talk to, and he was there."

Leaning against the hood, Dak watched the interaction. Aren's brownish gold eyes glared at him before he put them back on Nahia. "I'll get to you in a second, Adamek," Aren growled.

"Leave him alone," Nahia snapped, anger evident now where, before, there had been none. "Don't take this out on him."

"Now you're defending him?" Aren asked, astonished.

"I don't understand why you're so mad at him. You should be mad at *her*. She's the one who caused you all this hurt. Not Dak."

Turning his head to the side, Dak murmured softly, "See, Saskia. Your hiding *has* brought pain."

"She's my sister!" Aren snapped at her.

"I know that. And while I'm ecstatic that she's alive and back in your life, I *hate* her for the pain she's putting you through. For the pain she *did* put you through. So you keep that in mind, Aren Van der Ness, when you yell at your friend, who was only listening to her wishes. She's the one to blame, not Dak."

Nahia jerked out of Aren's grip and stomped off--again, not toward the house, but the tree line. When she was further away from them, she shimmered and vanished before their eyes. Aren growled low in his throat before turning his attention to where Dak waited.

"We need to talk," Aren ground out. "Let's go."

Pushing away from the support he leaned against, Dak followed him around the massive house to the back. As they passed the monument erected in Aren's family's honor, Dak hesitated. *Could Jokull still be alive as well?* They continued on until they reached a basketball court. Aren picked up the ball and launched it through the air to sink through the basket. Without a word, Dak removed his trench coat and tossed it over a bench. For a while, the men made shots without talking.

After a while, Aren passed him the ball and asked, "Is Jokull alive? And don't lie to me, Dak."

Licking his lips, Dak dribbled five times before taking his shot. "I don't know. I swear on my honor, I haven't a clue if he is or not. I am sorry about Saskia, but that was on her request I not tell you."

Aren got the ball and passed it back to him. "Okay. I just...I have hope after all these years."

"That why you aren't wearing your amulet?" Dak questioned calmly as he made another basket.

"If Jokull is alive, he's the rightful leader of the Van der Ness family."

"True. He is the eldest." Dak missed the next one, and so he and Aren traded places.

"Maybe I didn't search hard enough. Perhaps I could have done more." Aren sank his shot easily, and Dak pushed the ball back in his direction.

"Life is full of what-if's, Aren. If you want to place blame, then blame me for not being there to fight at their side. Jokull was my best friend. We all have regrets about that day."

Dak saw the numerous emotions that crossed Aren's face. He remembered Aren as a much more carefree man than he was now. Nahia helped, but his eyes were still those of one who had seen much and lost even more. The sudden reappearance of his sister was hard on him, and Dak could easily see that below the joy he had.

"Now," Aren said, "tell me why you took my fiancée to lunch."

He laughed and dodged the ball that Aren threw at him. "See, missed the basket. My turn."

At once, both men snapped their heads up and focused in on a sound. A vehicle turned off. Dak watched the smile that filled his friend's face. Leaning back against the post, Dak allowed the reunion between friends before he moved up to say hello. He found himself staring into a pair of tawny-green-gold eyes.

"Good to see you, Dak."

Shaking the offered hand, Dak smiled in return. "And you as well, Dane."

Kaida laughed as she floated through the air. *Why the hell would a person walk if they could do this?* The grin still firmly in place, she gently touched down on the floor of the cabin. She'd opted to come back to the cabin, as opposed to Dak's house, where, to tell the truth, she'd been spending most of her time. The simple comfort of the small building brought her pleasure. Not that his home wasn't nice, but she preferred less splendor and more comfort. *Really, why have all those rooms if you aren't going to use them?*

A slight noise from outside had her grabbing for her shotgun. She felt immediate relief as her fingers curved around the familiar weight of the gun. Loading a shell into the chamber, she waited for whatever it was on the other side of the door to come through.

"Put the gun down, little one." Damu's voice reached her right before he strode through the door.

Kaida watched him walk in. It was difficult to see him in human form after all these years of seeing him rarely, if at all, and then only in dragon form. He'd removed his mirrored shades, and she could see the red pupils he had.

"The gun, little one," he reiterated. "Could you not aim it at me?"

Stepping behind the table, Kaida set it down and began packing more shells.

"What are you doing here?"

"You're mad at me."

His statement made her roll her eyes. "Mad? No. Disappointed? Yes."

He walked toward her and sat down across from her at the table; his lean, dark fingers picked up an empty shell and began to pack it with her own formula. "I don't want you disappointed with me, little one."

"What do you expect me to say, Damu? I am. You knew how much I mourned my mother's passing. Hell, you never even *mentioned* her name. My mother. Your own sister. It's Asha, in case you've forgotten. I heard it from another's lips for the first time today, a man I'm told is my father. I thought you were my friend."

"I am, little one." He spoke with the same calm assurance she had come to crave from him over the years, but right now, it only made her angrier.

"No!" Kaida shook her head. "You aren't. You let me believe I was alone, that I had no family. You *lied* to me, Damu. And despite everything, I don't know if I can forgive that."

She could feel his sigh as well as hear it. Kaida refused to look at him, instead focusing on the task before her.

"I think perhaps it's better if I leave you for a while."

"I think so," Kaida said emotionlessly.

"I'm always near if you need me," he said softly. "All you have to do is call."

She ground her back teeth so she wouldn't answer him. Kaida felt him withdraw, even though there was no noise to tell her. Her head spun with the amount of information she had learned today. It was really no wonder she was feeling a bit short and cross.

Kaida stayed at the table until her stash of shells was replenished. She carefully stored them and, grabbing the shotgun, headed outside toward the field. Her moccasins made no noise as she moved through the plush grass and, at the tree line, she halted. With her gunless hand, she reached for the nearest tree and pushed at it with the wind she now knew how to control a bit better. Fascinated, she watched it begin to bend, while none of the others moved.

Setting the shotgun down at her feet, Kaida used her other hand toward a different tree. It, too, began to bend, only in the opposite direction of the first one. She ended the wind, and the trees returned to their upright position.

*Can I use it as a weapon, even if I'm not angry?* She thought back to how she'd cut into that *ater malum*. Staring down at the grass, she slashed her hand, grinning when the tall blades fell to about an inch above the ground.

"Well, that would save a lot of time in mowing the yard," she said, amused and proud of herself. Kaida tried again, this time using both hands. Laughter bubbled out of her when she was finished. "Now I know how crop circles are made." With barely a wave of her hand, the flattened grass stood tall again.

Kaida reached down and grabbed her gun before heading off into the trees. She wanted to think, and there was a spot that helped her with that. There were many places in Savoy Valley which were good for thinking, but she had a few that seemed to calm her and make her feel remarkably relaxed. There was this one small place she'd discovered where a thin waterfall was carved into the earth, and she loved to sit at the base of it and watch the fish in the small pool.

Her heart felt better as she sat upon the warm rock, the sounds of nature flowing around her and welcoming her. Rolling her head upon her neck, Kaida set her gun beside her and closed her eyes. Offering up a prayer for guidance, Kaida tried to sort through her thoughts.

Dak sat in the gathering room of Aren's house. Dane sat, looking all deceptively relaxed, on the couch, and Aren lounged back in an overstuffed chair.

"So, Dane. What brings you back?" Aren asked.

"I came to see you, and to make sure I hadn't been seeing things when I saw Saskia a while back. Apparently, I wasn't mistaking that."

"Where have you been?" Aren asked.

Dane smiled slightly; it was more of a strain than anything. It changed to a true smile when Nahia walked into the room. She headed straight for him, and Dak watched the clenching of Aren's jaw when his fiancée kissed Dane warmly and ignored him. A smile teased the corners of his mouth. *Apparently, she's still upset with the recent events.*

Nahia sat at the other end of the couch from Dane and curled her feet up beneath her. "It's so good to see you, Dane."

"And you, Lady Nahia."

"Dane," Aren's voice was hard, and Dak knew if it were anyone else, a battle would be coming within moments.

"I left because I had to. I did what I could to protect Lady Nahia, but in giving what I did, I left myself weakened and vulnerable. I would have been a liability during that battle." Dane spoke with the manner of one who had accepted his fate.

Dak sat forward. "You gave part of yourself to protect a woman not your mate?"

Tawny-green-gold eyes flashed to him, filled with mild reproach which was quickly wiped away, leaving nothing in its wake. "Yes. Aren is my best friend. I didn't wish him to go through what Sirantha went through." Dane raked a hand through his black hair and smiled at Nahia. "I'm better now. My defenses are strong again."

*You are far from better, my friend.* Shaking his head, Dak laced his fingers together. "You're not staying."

Nahia and Aren both looked quickly to Dane, whose grim expression gave them their answer.

"Your family?" Aren questioned.

"I'll go see them next." He got to his feet and took Nahia's hand, bending over it and kissing the back. "You are radiant, my lady. Pregnancy becomes you."

"What?" Aren shouted.

Nahia stared at Dane, her eyes wide with shock.

Dak got to his feet. "I think this is my cue to leave, as well. Congratulations to you both." Shaking Aren's hand, he too bowed over Nahia's before following Dane out the front door. The men walked in silence to their vehicles.

"How are you handling the darkness, Dane Sidorov?" he asked, stopping by the dusty Jeep.

The eyes that turned to his were tired. "It grows weary. I'm keeping it in control."

"You gave up that part of yourself when you protected Lady Nahia. You may no longer be weak, but you are close to losing control over the beast within you."

Dane nodded. "You and I were never that close, Adamek Nervig, but I hope if it comes to it, you are the one who hunts me."

"Let's pray it doesn't come to that. Where are you going?" Dak understood Dane's wish to get away from those he cared about. But the thought of hunting Dane Sidorov didn't sit well with him.

"Unit's going to Siberia soon."

"And the people here?"

A flash of pain crossed his face. "Many think I am hiding from my duties to Savoy."

Dak understood that, as well. Although there were many who travelled to and from Savoy Valley, those that stayed could sometimes believe you should always be there to protect her. Things just weren't that simple. And Dane Sidorov was one of the men who protected outside of Savoy. Dak respected the hell out of him for that. It was hard doing what they did, being away from your family, and then to have people not always support him...

"They're foolish. There are more beings out there causing problems than the ones in and around Savoy. You have a bigger job than just Savoy Valley. Especially if every time you engage in battle with them, you lose more of your control."

Jumping into his Jeep, Dane smiled tiredly at him. "You sound a lot like Jokull. It's no wonder you two were such close friends." He started the engine. "Take care of your woman. I like her."

In a flurry of wheels and dirt, Dak was soon alone. He frowned as he wondered where Dane had met Kaida. Climbing into his vehicle, Dak headed home. He knew she wasn't there before he even turned off the engine. Closing his eyes, he searched the link he shared with her. He could sense her confusion, although it was intermixed with an impression of contentment. Turning around, he headed down to the cabin where he'd first met her.

Parking, Dak got out and shoved back his initial reaction of snarling at the scent of Red Dragon. Apparently, he was going to have to learn to get along with him. *Do you care the woman you know is your mate has ties to a Red Dragon?* Dak shook his head. He didn't need to start second guessing everything. It didn't matter. She was his other half. With a silent hiss toward the scent of Damu, Dak headed off to where he knew Kaida was.

Creeping softly through the woods, he smiled when he came upon the woman he sought. She sat cross-legged upon the rock, the sun filtering down around her. His

heart leapt as she opened her eyes and stared at him. Her eyes never ceased to amaze him. They were nearly clear, with iridescent chip sprinkles.

"Hello, Dak," she murmured.

From a standstill, he jumped up onto the rock and stared down at her. Her eyes followed him, then changed to mother-of-pearl briefly, and then back to how they had been. Dak frowned and waited for her to say something.

"Damu says to be nicer to him."

He shook his head and crouched down beside her, his trench coat flowing out around him. "Forget Damu." Dak stroked his hand along the side of her face before pulling her to her feet.

Kaida slipped her arms around his neck and stared at him. Dak felt a longing deep within him for this woman. He licked along her lower lip before drawing it into his mouth. She purred and arched against him, her fingers tangling in his hair. His cock throbbed as her pelvis teased him.

"Dak," she whispered.

It didn't take long for him to divest them of clothing. With a thrust of his hips, Dak encased himself deep within her heated core. The beast within him roared. And for an instant, he lost himself over to the pleasure of her body, driving deep and hard into her.

"Dak!" she screamed, her body curving into his. He withdrew, hoping he hadn't hurt her, until her nails dug into his flesh and a low rumble of displeasure emerged from her. "No."

"No? You want me to stop?"

She growled again, a noise that sounded more like a roar. "Claim me," she commanded.

The beast in him demanded acceptance of her order. Dak tapped it back. "Kaida," he ground out, barely holding onto control. "There will be no going back from this. Do you know what you're asking? This isn't something you get to change your mind about down the road. This is for all eternity."

His other half raged against his offering her a chance to change her mind. Dak somehow found the strength to contain it. He could deal with a good many things, but having Kaida Ayre look upon him with hate for what he'd done to her wasn't one of them.

*I'm positive, Adamek Nervig, her sultry voice whispered in his mind.*

His dragon roared in approval.

Power began to surge through him. Grinding his back teeth, Dak consented and loosened his iron control on the beast raging to be free.

*Let go, Dak. Please. I want this. I need this.*

Covering her mouth with his, Dak thrust his tongue deep into the recess of her mouth and let go. In his mind, he could see a shadowed form of Kaida as she met his dragon. His energy rushed into her, surrounding her.

*So much power, she purred, reaching out and stroking the dragon. Ice. So cold and unforgiving, yet I don't feel cold in the slightest.*

*Kaida, he warned. Cukroví.*

She laughed and never flinched when the being rose above her and wrapped its tail about her middle.

Dak powered into her, ignoring the beast and focusing on him and the woman below him on the rock. Kaida met each of his thrusts with undulations of her own. Her eyes were open, and they stared at him in that pearlescent shade they had when she spoke to a dragon. His own was teasing her, trying to scare her, but Kaida just laughed and didn't show any fear.

Her body began to tighten around his stroking shaft, and he increased his speed, groaning in pleasure.

"Uh, uh, uh, uh," Kaida's mewled.

Her slit gripped him like a vice, and he could tell she was about to crest. Placing his hands under her head, he rendered her immobile as his hips continued to power into her. Her tongue matched his, delving and swirling in his mouth.

His dragon had her suspended in the air via its tail, one hooked claw poised before her, above her heart. Her face showed no fear.

Nipping her tongue, Dak felt her body seize as she orgasmed around him. Her pleasure spilled over him, and he came with a loud roar to the heavens. As she rode the seemingly unending wave of bliss, he felt her stiffen with pain, and he knew it had begun. His dragon had pierced her heart. Her whimper tore at his gut, but Dak refused to let her move. He gentled the kiss and continued to slide within her. Slowly. Tenderly. In between kisses, he murmured to her in Czech.

"Dak," she gasped. "It hurts." Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes.

"Almost over, *cukroví*." He held her gaze.

His dragon lowered her form to the ground, the hole over her heart closing. It turned its gaze up and said, *It is done. We are one.*

Loosening his grip on her, Dak nuzzled behind her ear. "It's done, *cukroví*."

She arched against him. "I feel different."

*So do I.*

Pulling out of her haven, Dak used his power to dress them, not wishing to let go of her. He gathered her close and held her, waiting for her to speak.

"Is it supposed to feel like this?"

Dak rested his chin on her head, staring off through the trees. "I don't know," he admitted honestly. "I've never done this before."

"Yet, you knew how?"

"I didn't. My dragon did."

Her hand settled upon his chest. "I feel stronger. Does that make sense?"

Dak searched within for an answer. None was forthcoming, his dragon uncharacteristically silent. Unsure of what to tell her, he held her closer.

## Chapter Seven

A few days had passed since the divulging of all the secrets surrounding Kaida and her past. At the moment, they were heading further up into the Pantera Mountains. Kaida smiled and placed her black moccasins on the dash of Dak's Bronco. The window was down, and she had her arm outstretched to play in the air as it flowed over her skin. The weather was damn near perfect. She wore a loose fitting tee shirt and slightly baggy blue jeans. Her hair was drawn back into a high ponytail.

Her gaze drifted to the man driving. All black leather, as was his norm. His blond hair called to her fingers to sink in and tighten around the silken strands. *Doesn't matter what he wears; he is still so fuckin' hot.* He had taken her to some caves within the mountains to explore. A soft smile graced her face as she recalled what else they'd explored. Her body thrummed at the memory.

She was grateful to him. Ever since he'd marked her, their connection had been deeper, more fulfilling in a way. It took what they shared to a level she'd never had the slightest indication even existed. He led her to a plane where nothing but them mattered. Their feelings were intertwined.

But when she wasn't in his arms, she needed distraction. It was hard for her to digest everything that had been revealed to her. Sure, at the time, it had seemed wonderful. But truthfully, she'd been overwhelmed. And now, she was conflicted and confused.

She and Olorun were making headway. She had respected him beforehand, and she knew that his not being there for her wasn't his doing. There was something he still hid from her, and she knew it bothered him. What it was, she had no clue, but she could sense his worry. Kaida could sense a lot of things.

*The problem is with Damu.* Her lip curled up in a sneer. *Uncle Damu.* Since the hubbub had died down, she'd had time to think. And the more she thought, the angrier

she became. He had reached out to her through the link they shared, but she'd rebuffed him each and every time.

*I can't shake this feeling of betrayal.* Still, she missed him as a friend and confidant.

Dak shifted into a lower gear as they continued to climb. "Maybe we should have Damu over for dinner," he suggested without looking at her.

*What?* She looked at him and brushed an imaginary piece of dirt off her jeans. "Why?"

He turned his attention from the road and placed it on her. For a second, Kaida was lost in the depths of his ice blue eyes. Dak lifted a shoulder nonchalantly and said, "If he's going to be family, I should learn to tolerate being in the same room as him."

She could feel he was holding back. "And?"

Dak stared at the road again. "And the two of you have some things to work out."

Kaida fought the urge to stomp her foot like a petulant child. *What if I don't want to work things out? What if I want to be angry at him for a while?*

*Then be angry at him, cukroví, but remember, he thought he was protecting you.*

She jumped as his voice flowed through her head. "Can you always hear my thoughts?" she asked.

His rich, sexy laugh filled the Bronco. *Would it bother you if I could? Or would you be embarrassed by your lovely recap of what happened in the caves?*

"I thought you could only read them if I wanted you to."

This time his laugh echoed in her mind. "You can block them. But this doesn't change the fact you need to work things out with him."

Kaida did stomp her foot this time. "Am I not allowed to be angry?"

"I didn't say that, *cukroví*, nor did I imply it. I just said you should talk to him."

"All those years. All those fucking years and he never tells me. Never even called her by name, and he acts like I should be okay with it. Well, you know what? I feel like a fuckin' pawn, so forgive me if I am just a teensy bit upset."

Dak pulled off the road and turned toward her. “*Cukroví*, I’m not telling you how to feel. I wouldn’t dream of it. But I can feel the pain you have when you think of him, and while I don’t personally give a damn how he feels, I don’t like you hurting. That’s what I care about. Not him. You.”

His words made her anger slide away, and she closed her eyes. Kaida opened them again at the touch of his palm against her cheek. His eyes were unusually tender.

“What?” she asked.

“*Miluji ti.*” There was such emotion and depth to his voice it sent goose bumps up along her skin.

“What did you say to me?”

His thumb stroked her lower lip, and a gentle smile turned up a corner of his mouth. “Let’s go. There’s something I want to show you.”

Kaida kissed his palm and sat back. She stared out the window at the beauty passing them by. The closer they got to the top, the more her skin felt as if it were burning.

“What’s wrong, *cukroví*?”

She didn’t want to tell him, didn’t want anything to ruin the rest of this wonderful day. “Nothing. I’m just antsy.” Kaida smiled. “A lot on my mind.”

He looked at her, disbelief apparent, but he remained silent, and Kaida was also pleased she didn’t feel his touch in her mind. About five minutes later, Dak stopped the Bronco. He got out and opened her door for her, assisting her to the ground. Looking at him, Kaida was struck by the almost boyish expression on his face. Dak took her hand and led her down a path that she easily would have overlooked.

When he stopped, the view she was presented with took her breath and the burning feeling away. They stood on a rock outcropping that overlooked a huge drop-off over a deep valley. The sun shone brilliantly down upon them, as well as glinting off the waterfall across the wide space.

“Oh my God! Dak, this...this is beautiful. What is...where...?”

His arm slid around her midsection. "I call it *nebe*. Jokull called it *hemel*. Both words meant the same thing--what it was to us. Heaven."

"This is absolutely unbelievable. I had no idea anything like this actually existed. It's damn near mythical."

She shuddered as his lips caressed her temple. "Come fly with me, *cukroví*."

Kaida cocked her head. "How do you propose we do that?"

Before her very eyes, he stepped away from her and off the edge. Before she could react, a huge Silver Dragon rose up even with the rock she stood upon and perched at the edge. Words escaped her as she stared at the creature. Wildly beautiful, untamed, elegantly dangerous were a few that came to mind.

*Come cukroví. Let me show you my Savoy Valley.* Dak's warm voice poured over her like liqueur.

Stepping to the edge, Kaida settled herself onto his back. The skin was warm to her touch and not scaly, like she thought it would be. *I'm ready, and you still need to tell me what that means.* Large wings spread, and with a large flap, they took to the sky. Kaida held on as she looked around in awe and amazement. *What a way to see the world.*

*Something to see, isn't it, cukroví?*

*I had no idea the world could look like this.* Again, words seemed to escape her.

*Enjoy, cukroví, enjoy. And it means "sweets".*

How could she not? As he carried her high above the mountains, Kaida felt peace settle around her soul. Sweets--it was the best endearment she'd ever had. That, and the other word he called her. Waterlily. *Leknín*.

Dak stared down at Kaida as she slept. They had stayed in the cabin after coming back from their day. She laid on her side, curled up with a pillow, wearing a pink camisole and pale green sweats. The blanket piled over her feet. Her hair fell about her in a tousled mess. She fit so perfectly against him, and he never wanted to let her go. Raking a hand through his hair, he walked out to the kitchen to grab a glass of water.

Setting the empty vessel down, Dak hissed a low warning as a sword appeared in one hand and his fingers hovered just above the hilt of the other.

"What do you want, Red?" he growled low.

Damu appeared right at the end of the katana's blade--not that it mattered; it was a double-edged blade. Even though it was about two in the morning, Damu wore mirrored shades. He was not much shorter than Dak, and power just rolled off him.

"You're young, pup. Fearless--"

"And very good at what I do," Dak interrupted in a low warning rumble. "Don't call me pup."

Damu waved a hand as if his words were unimportant. "You're little more than a baby to me." He gripped the sword and frowned.

Dak smiled harshly in response. "Your powers don't work on my weapons. I've done a lot of research and had a lot of failures before the ones I carry now, Damu Kijani. And the only reason we aren't battling right now is because we both love the woman sleeping in the next room. So say your piece and leave."

"Arrogant pup."

"I'm mated to your niece. I can feel you because of my link with her." Dak narrowed his eyes. "But there's also something else."

Damu sighed and removed his glasses. "You feel it, too."

"Yes." Dak lowered the weapon and hopped up on the counter. He skimmed Damu and fought a grin when he saw his bare feet. "What is it?"

With a wave of his hand, Damu brought a chair to him and lowered himself gracefully into it. "You know Zhivko." It wasn't a question.

"*Koříženec!*" Dak bit off. "I'm well acquainted with the bastard." His fingers itched for the feel of his weapons. "He's the one behind this? Behind the attacks on Kaida, and those before on Lady Nahia?"

"At first that's what I believed. Now, no." Damu got himself a glass of water without moving. "These attacks were so malicious. Zhivko went after men and women.

Recently, it has been women. Kira. Lady Nahia. And," his voice lowered to a deadly growl, "my niece. Lady Nahia's mother was killed, as was my sister, Asha."

Dak longed to push him, but waited. The skin along the back of his neck prickled in warning, and he shifted slightly.

"There are rumors circulating that Zhivko is dead." Damu put the empty glass down and opened his palm. Fire danced along the skin like a lover. "According to the rumors, the new ruler of the *ater malum* is Miloslava."

The dragon within Dak roared at that. *Kurva! Bitch! Whore!* If there was anyone they didn't want to take over, it was her. Graced with the face of an angel, Miloslava had no heart or soul to speak of. She was evil, plain and simple. She enjoyed making people suffer--got off on it even. *Zrádce!*

Dak pulled himself together and stared at Damu. "Then we know a battle will be coming."

Damu rose with eerie elegance. "You protect my niece."

"Not anything you need to tell me, Red. You need to work this out with her. She's hurting, and *that* is something I will not put up with." He jumped off the counter and headed back to the bedroom where Kaida slept. There was no need to say anything to Damu; they weren't that good of friends. Curling up to her, Dak closed his eyes and tried to sleep when she snuggled against him.

It was late in the afternoon of the next day when that sliver of warning snaked up his spine. He leaned against a tree, watching Kaida play with her newfound power in the field near him. Earlier that morning, Damu had shown up in human form and taken her on a walk with him. He assumed whatever problems lingered between them had been resolved, for he no longer sensed the troubled emotions around her when she thought of Damu.

"Kaida!" he yelled, even as he ran toward her.

She didn't hesitate, just rushed to his side, her shotgun in her hand. Dak smiled. Even with her power, Kaida still trusted her weapon.

"I feel something...something I've never felt before." Her voice was hushed and tense.

The air around them shimmered, and like before, *ater malum* appeared and headed toward them, their mindless faces blank, just the thought of a fresh soul keeping them on track.

His swords were in his hands with barely a whisper. The beast within him was poised and readied for battle. Every instinct in him longed to demand she hide, but Dak knew that would be a waste of time and energy.

*Mind your surroundings, cukroví. This is naught but a small scouting wave. More, many more, will be coming.*

*Thank you for trusting me enough not to tell me to leave.* The air was rent with the unmistakable sound of a shell being loaded into a shotgun.

*I don't want you here, cukroví, but I would rather have you near me than out of sight. Plus, I don't think you'd go. I remember how well you ignored me that first night we met. Save your shells for later. You know how to defeat these without a gun.*

*I didn't know you from Adam. Why would I listen to you? And you're using your weapons.*

*You know me now, and you still wouldn't go. I'm a hunter. This is what I use.*

*True. Fine. Wind first, white phosphorous later.*

He chuckled at her tone, despite the severity of the situation. Dak moved like lightning and, within seconds, the *ater malum* lay on the ground in pieces. "Call your uncle, Kaida. Tell him to spread the word."

"Dak..."

"Now!"

Weapons by his side, but no less ready, Dak waited almost impatiently for the next wave to show themselves. *Ater malum* were dangerous and persistent, but they lacked the intelligence for a sneaky attack. So until some of the more cunning ones appeared, it was more than a safe bet they would all be coming at once and in a line, like the good little soldier drones they were.

A small smile cracked his face as he watched a creature fall to the ground in two parts. Kaida was beside him, her shotgun by her side, and using her power of the wind as her weapon.

A low rumble flowed over the area, and the ground shook with some unseen force. Prickling ran up his skin, and Dak knew the main force was arriving. Beside him, Kaida's gasp told him it was not what she was expecting. It was like the bowels of hell just spit up. The area was flooded with a stench that made his eyes water. Creatures came from land and air.

*There are so many, Dak.*

His blood pumped with the prospect of a battle. Tightening his grip on his weapons, he waited. *We aren't alone, cukroví.* Even as he told her, the sun seemed to be blotted out by a large shape. A sadistic smile curved up one side of his mouth. *Your uncle is here.* He could feel her relief through their link. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Olorun appear, without the robes. This time he wore white leather pants and a vest.

"Glad you could join us, Olorun," Dak said.

"I will not let any harm come to my daughter," he said in a tone that was laced with anger.

"Let's end this," Dak ground out.

*Battle well, cukroví.*

When Damu shot a stream of fire to engulf one of the flying creatures, Dak ran, weapons at the ready, to engage the enemy. Blades flying, blood spilling, he cut a wide swath through the mix to reach the one he wanted. He was blocked by a green and brown lizard-man creature. It was well over eight feet and had yellow spikes on its back, which were sharpened to a point. Held in one hand was a massive sword.

The creature was an elite guardian of the *ater malum*, an elgyrd. Dak held his ground as the elgyrd raised its weapon. Before it was even over its head, a large white tiger hit it in the chest, large claws and teeth shredding it almost like paper. Dak recognized Heller. Casting a sweeping glance around, he saw people he'd not fought

beside in a long time. That was one thing you could say about Savoy Valley: when there was a battle, most answered the call. In the back of his mind, he was pleased there was no sign of Jokull's younger brother. Aren needed to protect his woman and the unborn child she carried within her. He saw Saskia, though, and he was glad she was there to assist.

Dak focused his attention on a spot to his left, leaving Heller to do what he did so well. Bile rushed to his mouth, but he knew he couldn't back away from this responsibility. "Show yourself, Miloslava. We both know you're there," he said in a toneless voice. He lowered his swords, blood dripping from them to be soaked up by the fertile earth.

From the air stepped a woman shrouded by a hooded cape. She lifted her head and pushed back the hood, then untied the cape, allowing it to fall to the ground. Her flawless skin shone in the sun like porcelain. Around her swanlike neck hung a gold coin scalloped dangle necklace. Miloslava wore a deep blue countess dress made from crushed velvet. The bell-cut sleeves and square neckline were trimmed with a gold floral pattern and encrusted with dark jewels. The open cut front was lined with gold lamé and the entire ensemble showcased her hourglass shape.

Her blonde hair, which at one point had reached past her lower back, was cut short. Soft layers tapered around her face, lengthening toward the shoulders, creating a slim and feathered look. The upper half of her hair was crunched, allowing the strands to flow in all directions while the lower portion was straight and styled toward her face. She was a true ice princess.

"Adamek," she purred. "It's been so long."

"*Zrádce!*" he bit off.

She stepped toward him, and he countered automatically, well aware of how much distance he needed to maintain. Miloslava blinked her large eyes at him and pouted, an act which, in the past, would have gotten her her way. Not anymore.

"That's all you have to say to me? You call me a traitor after all this time."

"There's nothing else to say. And you are. You know I can't allow you to live, Miloslava."

A glint of malice filled her expression. "You'd kill me? Could you really? Look deep in your heart, Dak, and tell me--could you kill your own sister?"

Kaida almost forgot to kill the *ater malum* flying toward her as she heard the words come from that woman's mouth. The power rolling off her was intense, but never in a million years would she have thought it was his own sister. Ever since the battle had begun, she'd felt the need to be near Dak, and so she'd fought continuously to reach his side. She was tired.

"Mind your safety, daughter." Olorun's deep voice reached her as he literally pulled the air from the very lungs of the creatures rushing her.

Shoving back her exhaustion, Kaida nodded. "It won't happen again."

A wave of intense power poured over her and made her clutch her chest in pain.

*Dak!*

He was at her side, his sword blocking a downward thrust from an opponent before slicing him in two. *Talk to me, cukrovi.*

*Don't you feel it?*

*Feel what?*

Kaida didn't know what to say. She felt as if she were on fire. Through her tears, she saw Miloslava walking toward them with single-minded purpose. The imposing woman stopped before them.

"Kaida Miah Ayre. I've waited a long time for this," Miloslava's tone dripped with venom. "Zhivko was foolish and weak. He listened to me when he sent his second in command after Nahia. I killed him. Now I will kill you and take your powers."

Dak stepped between her and his sister. "I don't think so, Miloslava." His tone as was as harsh and unforgiving as she'd ever heard it.

"Ahhh," Miloslava said in a syrupy voice. "You've mated with her. How revolting. No matter. We both knew one day it would come to this, brother."

Kaida stepped up even with Dak and gathered a spike of wind, launching it at Miloslava. "I won't let you hurt him," she vowed.

The attack glanced off the blonde, and she turned her eyes toward Kaida. "I don't remember asking your permission, child."

Anger grew in her belly. Kaida hissed and shot five more arcs in swift succession. One hit, and the beauty on Miloslava's face was wiped away in a blink. Her eyes went completely opaque.

"You *will* pay for that."

"Show me what you've got, bitch," Kaida growled, raising her shotgun and firing it three times. Miloslava screamed in agony, and Kaida sent in even more razors of wind. "Hurts, don't it?" she sneered.

A piercing screech ripped apart the sky and, creating a shield around her and Dak, Kaida looked up in shock. It was hard to tell what was what up there, but she knew something wasn't right.

*Dak?*

*I feel it too, Kaida. I don't know what it is.*

The sky flashed and a black creature, dragon-like in appearance, was there when the light faded.

"Oh my God," she muttered. "What the hell is that?"

Kaida had to force herself to focus back on her opponent. But the moment it's blood drained it's life away, she looked up again. She knew both Damu and Dak were large dragons, but this...this was enormous. Kaida watched in horror as Damu led the attack on it. Whatever it was, it held no fear of the oncoming assault.

"*Previtas,*" Dak uttered, decapitating a pig-looking creature. "What did you do to it?"

Miloslava preened like a proud mother. "A little of this and a little of that."

Damu's cry of pain and rage filled the skies.

*Help him, Dak.*

*No. I won't leave you.*

The burning returned. *Go, damn it! He needs your help.*

"What's the choice going to be, brother?" Miloslava taunted. "Up there? Down here?" She wrung her hands together and laughed manically.

*Please, Dak.* Kaida emptied her gun into Miloslava, smiling at the screams of pain. She dropped it on the ground and began gathering the wind to her. *Go help him.*

Kaida could feel his hesitation to leave her. A cry reached them, and a dragon plummeted to earth. Immediately, she sent the wind she'd called under the limp yet magnificent creature, lowering it gently to the ground. To her right, Dak shifted into his dragon form, froze two more *ater malum*, then rose to the air and joined the battle going on there.

*Miluji ti.* The phrase flowed over her mind like a whisper.

The pain returned. Building a shield around her, she fought for her breath as she looked around. Everyone was engaged in battles--Shifters, Elementals, and more. Some she knew, some she considered friends.

"Guess that leaves just us," Miloslava said on a thread of silken danger.

Shoving her discomfort to the back, Kaida glared at the blonde woman before her. This woman was behind her mother's murder. The rage she felt pushed all fear away.

*Don't engage her blindly, cukroví. It's what she wants. She will try to mislead you and get you to attack rashly.*

*I love you, Adamek Nervig. Just wanted you to know.*

*We must talk about your timing, cukroví. But I love you, too. Miluji ti. I love you. Take care of yourself down there.*

Kaida could feel his love surround her. It eased the pain and calmed her racing mind. Fixing her gaze upon Miloslava, she asked, "Why?"

They circled each other.

"Power, of course. Power like this." Miloslava sent a bolt of electricity toward her.

Kaida trembled. Calling upon the wind, she knocked it away and, with a show of defiance, sent it directly into one of Miloslava's minions, incinerating it upon impact. They tossed jabs back and forth with one another after that, Kaida relying solely on the air for both offense and defense, while her opponent used many things.

She lost track of time as she did her best to hold her own against Miloslava. Each strike she delivered caused the pain to grow. Fire licked along her veins, making her feel as if her skin were melting.

"Ahhh!" she wailed, sinking to the ground. Her fingers dug into the fertile soil as she tried to shove the pain behind her.

*Cukroví?*

*It hurts, Dak. Make it stop! Please!*

Kaida didn't register how vulnerable she was until Olorun stepped between her and Miloslava's attack.

"Get up, Kaida," he said.

"I can't." Tears streamed down her face. *Dak!* She could feel the beast within him answer her scream. Collapsing fully to the ground, Kaida jerked as the pain increased tenfold. She stared through the spots beginning to cover her eyes as a large silver dragon folded its wings and rushed toward the earth.

"Get up, Kaida!" he ordered.

"Fuck off!" she bit out. "Do you think I'd be here if I could get up...ahhh!" Another lance of fire screamed through her. An answering cry came from Dak as he shifted right before he landed.

"Get away from her!" Dak's growl filled her ears. Kaida watched through hazy eyes as a wave of energy launched Miloslava back. He sank beside her and gathered her into his arms.

It was a struggle to focus on him, but she latched onto the image of his face like a lifeline. She had no further energy for words. *I can't take this pain. It feels like I'm being boiled alive.*

*Hang in there, cukroví.*

"You're pathetically weak," Miloslava hissed.

She ignored the woman. *Can't you feel it?*

No. His grief was palpable.

His face vanished. She knew what that meant. She was blind. The sounds of the battle surrounding them amplified. *Put me down, Dak. You need to protect yourself.*

*Cukroví, you're crying blood. Tell me what to do to make it better.* His lips pressed against her cheek.

"This is a lovely turn of events," Miloslava said. "And when she dies, so will you, *bratr.*"

Kaida could feel her heart, which had been slowing, speed up again at that announcement. *Is that true?*

*Yes. I die if you die. Something which I don't plan on letting happen for a long while yet, cukroví. We have a long life ahead of us.*

Kaida shook her head and fought against the overwhelming pain. *I won't let you die.* She pushed weakly against his chest, and he got the message, placing her on her feet.

*Listen to me, daughter. You're experiencing the birth of your dragon. I wondered and feared if you would have this.* Olorun's voice was soft as the air in her mind.

*Dragon? My dragon?* Dak's fingers held her elbows, steadying her.

*Even though your mother, Asha, became human, she was still Draconian. And therefore, you are as well.*

*What...what do I do?*

*Open yourself up to the pain, little one.* Damu's voice entered. *Don't fight it.*

*But it hurts!*

*You there, pup?* Damu asked.

Kaida sighed when Dak answered, *I'm here, old-timer.*

*You are of the ice. Soothe the flames so they don't burn as much. Olorun and I shall protect you both.*

Dak's lips caressed her forehead. *Let me in, cukroví. I'll do my best to help.*

*I know you will.* She felt Dak lower her back to the ground. His hand settled over her heart, and she sighed, opening herself up to whatever might happen. Immediately, heat rushed over her, and she struggled not to tense and fight. Soon, a coolness flowed across her, and she knew it was Dak. The icy caress cooled the fire which had surged over her.

After a few moments, the combination became a lukewarm liquid that poured through her veins. In her mind, she could see two dragons, one on either side of her, as she hovered in the air--fiery red and icy silver. As one, they turned to her and breathed. She stiffened as their power poured into her. The wounds she'd sustained from the battle today began to heal.

She opened her eyes and found Dak staring at her, his concern for her obvious.  
*I'm fine, my love. Trust me.*

*With my life.*

He helped her to her feet, and Kaida grinned as the power continued to flow into her. She opened herself to Dak and let him feel some of what she was experiencing.

*Your sister or Previtas, Dak?*

*Let me take my traitorous sister. You go with your uncle and father against him.*

*Very well. Miluji ti, Adamek.*

*You understand Czech?*

*I'm a quick study. Take care of yourself.*

She spread her arms out and began to rise, Olorun keeping pace, and the Red Dragon who was her uncle flapped his wings and took to the sky as well. Kaida glanced down and watched Dak step up to confront his sister, then looked at her father, who watched her, pride evident all over his face.

"Shall we end this?" she asked him.

"By your side, my daughter."

Dak had to force his attention back to his sister from where it lingered on Kaida. Two dragons, plus the power of an Elemental. *One hell of a woman I've got.* Through their shared link, he could feel her amusement at his thought.

"Miloslava," he said. "It's time for you to pay for your crimes."

Her face contorted, and she snarled at him. "You're not strong enough to defeat me."

Withdrawing his weapons, he stared at her. "I wish I didn't have to prove how wrong you are about that." He watched her carefully when she created a sword out of devil's fire. "Just tell me why."

"I was tired of living with the rules. You and I were special. We were stronger than the other ice dragon shifters. You...you had it easy. Just play all day, you and Jokull. Me...I was sold off to the highest bidder."

"Not true. It was prearranged to strengthen our clans."

"Are you really so naive? I was sold like a piece of meat to a man whose cruel streak was hidden away. My life changed when I killed him. I saw how things could truly be by taking what I wanted."

"You should have come to me. You could have told me. I would have helped you."

"I didn't want your help. I shouldn't have been sold off in the first place."

His heart was heavy. "And you made your choices. Now you must live with the consequences."

She brandished the sword and beckoned to him.

Dak engaged her. Back and forth they parried. She was good. He hissed when she sliced across his upper arm. Miloslava sneered. The battle for him closed around just the two of them. Sweat poured down his body as he continued to fight. Each of them had suffered superficial cuts, and both were bleeding.

A loud shriek filled his eardrums, and Dak knew Previtass had been defeated by the look of pain on Miloslava's face. Her guard wavered for an instant, and he pressed the advantage. She stared at him, disbelief and amazement in her blue eyes.

"I never thought you had it in you," she murmured as blood leaked from her mouth.

"I'm sorry it had to be this way," he whispered, removing the blade from her chest and watching her sink to the ground.

A foul stench reached him as a black shadow rose up from Miloslava's body. It spun rapidly and disappeared from his sight. Casting a look around, Dak felt better as he saw Kaida return to the ground and head toward him at a run. Everywhere else around him, the battle was rapidly coming to an end. Those few remaining *ater malum* were swiftly disposed of, and the creatures in the air left after Miloslava collapsed.

Kaida reached his side and laid a hand upon his arm. "I'm so sorry," she said softly.

"She made her choice," he said, sans emotion. Standing there, they watched her body disintegrate into dust and float off into the air.

Olorun appeared before them, once again covered in his flowing robes. There was no way to tell this man had just spent the past few hours in a battle between good and evil. He stepped close to Kaida and opened his palm. Above his hand was a necklace, a black leather band and a pendant, which was the hieroglyphic around her wrist. On each side of that posed a dragon, one red and one silver. Olorun slipped it on over her head and pressed a kiss to her cheek. When they parted, Dak would swear he witnessed tears in both of their eyes.

When Olorun stepped back, Damu approached. Dak could see his own reflection in the mirrored sunglasses he wore. Instead of moving to Kaida, Damu stood in front of him.

"You have a lot to learn, pup. But you're not bad for a hunter."

A smile curved up part of his mouth. "I'll take that as a compliment. You're not so bad for a Red."

Damu flashed white teeth at him before kissing his niece, as well. Whatever they shared was private. Without a look back, Damu walked away until he just disappeared.

Silence fell around them, and Dak looked down at the woman beside him. She had some cuts and bruises, but to him, she'd never looked better. He reached for her hand and squeezed it gently.

"What happens now?" she asked softly. "Everyone's gone."

He smiled down at her, pulling her in close. "It's over, for now. They all went home to be with loved ones."

"I didn't get to say thank you."

"You don't have to. They know." Kissing her lightly, he said, "Carry us to the cabin."

She chuckled and looped her arms around him. "Getting lazy on me?"

"Just restin' up for more important things. Come on, woman."

Dak grinned when there was nothing but air below his feet. Kaida set them down not at the cabin, but at his home, with a gentle touch. He swept her up into his arms.

"What are you doing?" she asked, not struggling all that much.

"Thought we could clean up together."

"Wonderful plan," she muttered into his neck.

Stripping her, Dak froze as he stared at her back. "*Cukroví*, you have new artwork on your back."

"What are you talking about?"

"Dragons. And the hieroglyph. It's identical to the necklace your father gave you."

Kaida frowned as she gazed at it in the mirror. "I don't know how that got there. I don't remember anything about it." Her clear eyes shifted down to his groin. "And there's something else I'd like a bit more right now."

"Anytime, anyplace, *cukroví*."

After their shower, where they'd made love one more time, Kaida sat in his lap on the porch swing. "Did you mean what you said about loving me?"

"Never doubt it."

Dak held her in his arms as she finally succumbed to exhaustion. He carried her to bed and headed back outside. Leaning against a pillar on the porch, he sighed heavily and said, "Show yourself, Saskia."

She appeared beside him and smiled softly. "I see you've exhausted Barbie."

"Not rising to the bait, Saskia. What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be sleeping or something? Hiding from your new beau?"

"He's not my beau," she snapped.

Dak laughed. "Right. Then what brings you here?"

"That cloud that left Miloslava. It was a Vilaiz Symbiant."

Dread welled up within him. "How?"

She sighed. "I don't know. But there's one who may know. Problem is, he's not in Savoy. He's hiding out in the Altay Mountains."

"I'll find him," Dak swore.

"I can go, Dak, I—"

"No. You have some things to take care of here, Saskia. I'll go." He pushed away from the support he'd leaned against. "I'll head out in the morning."

She vanished, and he went back inside. His sleep wasn't restful in the slightest, and when he awoke at five, he stayed awake. Walking outside after grabbing his last bag, Dak froze when he saw Kaida sitting on the hood of his Bronco. She wore black leather and looked perfectly comfortable as she reloaded her shotgun.

"What are you doing, *cukrovi*?"

Kaida continued what she was doing. "I think the question should be, what do you think you're doing?"

He moved to stand between her legs after tossing his bag in the open window of his vehicle. "I wasn't going to leave without saying goodbye."

"You're *not* leaving without me, Adamek Nervig." Kaida looked up, and he saw the determination in her gaze. "The way I figure it is, if I die, you die, and vice versa. The best way to keep that from happening is to go with you and fight by your side." She tossed her hair and pushed him back so she could jump to the ground.

## Kismet

"What about Savoy?" he asked.

"What about it? This is a wonderful place, and I hope in between hunts we come back. But my place is with you." She kissed him fast and hard, leaving him wanting more, before she opened the door and slid across to the passenger side. "So, come on, let's go bag us whatever it is we're hunting."

With a smile and chuckle, Dak did as she ordered and climbed in, shutting the door behind him. Starting the engine, he glanced at her and was met with a wink.

"What did I do to deserve you in my life, Kaida Ayre?"

"It's fate." She blew him a kiss and leaned back in the seat.

Driving off, Dak knew she was right. No matter where they went, he knew Savoy Valley would be home, but he no longer would be a lone hunter. Kaida would be with him every step of the way, making his life better each and every day. He sent up a silent thanks to the gods, for their paths may not have ever crossed if not for a little thing called Kismet.

We hope you enjoyed Kismet. Check back next week at Satin Notes ~ <http://www.satinnotes.com> for our new story.

For more about Savoy Valley and Satin Notes check out the site.

Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries, and Taige Crenshaw