



Holiday Hearts

*An Antaeus Family
Christmas*

Lex Valentine



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HOLIDAY HEARTS: AN ANTAEUS FAMILY CHRISTMAS

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An Antaeus Family Christmas

Lex Valentine



PPB

Author's Note

This story is a free companion to the Tales of the Darkworld series and is not a standalone Christmas story. If you have not read any of the books, you may have some difficulty understanding this story.

Dedication

For Ross Harrison Koty,
who nearly fell out his bathroom window throwing his boots onto the roof, who put ashy boot prints on his pristine white tile, and who put up with a Disney themed Christmas tree in his bachelor pad... all to make a little girl believe in Santa.

And for the many Tales fans.
Thank you from the depths of my heart.

The car's engine purred, but Vahid didn't.

"If you didn't want to deal with the whole family, we could have stayed home, you know," Emily said in an amused voice.

Her husband's head turned, and he shot her an amazed glance before returning his eyes to the road. "You have to be kidding me," he grumbled. "I swear it was a damned command from Sean that we come to Christmas at his house. No way can I get out of that."

"Yeah, but Sean always commands and you're just programmed to obey. He's my cousin. I could have begged off what my 'condition' and all," Emily pointed out, rubbing a hand over her gently rounded belly. "He would have been okay with it. You're just afraid to go against him."

She laughed softly, and Vahid's frown intensified. "You so love to pick on me with the brown nosing remarks and innuendos," he griped.

Emily laughed again. Vahid might bitch, but he really didn't care if she teased him about how he was known for doing their employer's bidding without question. Despite the fact that Sean Antaeus had stepped down as president of Antaeus International, he was now the Chairman of the Board, and he had just as much power if not more than he had before he'd stepped down. Emily sat on the board with her cousin, while Sean's younger brother Declan ran the company. Holden, the youngest Antaeus brother, held the title of General Consul and his mate Garret Renquist had taken over Emily's former job as Vice President of Finance. Vahid, who had been Sean's right hand since before the two of them left college, remained on staff as Vice President of Operations.

Thinking about her family and their work reminded Emily of another reason her husband might not want to spend Christmas with her cousins. She turned toward Vahid and laid a hand on his rock hard thigh. He gave her quizzical glance.

"Vahid, is Eden the reason you don't want to go?" she asked quietly.

He heaved a sigh. "I don't know. I've seen her briefly a couple of times and it's never been uncomfortable, but this is close proximity with just the family. Everyone knows what happened between me and her and how I used my situation with her to avoid you." He shot her a worried look. "You can't tell me those Antaeus men don't still harbor a little resentment of me for living with Eden for two years when I knew you were my mate and knew you were in pain because we hadn't mated."

Emily squeezed his thigh. "If they do, they will keep it to themselves. I'm sure none of them wants to spoil Christmas, and I know they won't want to upset me," she pointed out. "It's all in the past and it needs to stay there. I don't think any of them will want to be the one who fucks up Christmas by mentioning it."

"I still don't understand why we have to spend the night and all of Christmas Day there. Why couldn't we just go home after dinner tonight? It would be a helluva lot more fun for me to be in my own bed with my own wife and mate on Christmas Eve." Vahid's disgruntled expression returned.

"Oh shut up, Vahid. Look, we're here."

Vahid parked the car, grumbling to himself about not being able to "get any" in Sean's house. Emily hid her smile. She knew something Vahid didn't. He'd be getting a special

Christmas gift from her whether they were in Sean's house or not. She knew her cousin wouldn't expect everyone to be celibate just because they were in his house. Emily had the notion that pretty much every one of the Antaeus family would be busy come midnight. Mated dragons tended to be quite highly sexed, and in an emotional situation like the Christmas holiday, they wouldn't be able to contain themselves very well. She could just about smell the pheromones now.

Emily let Vahid carry the shopping bags full of gifts while she led the way up the walkway. When she rang the bell, the door opened instantly. Garret Renquist enveloped her in a huge hug. He rubbed her belly and kissed her cheek.

"How's my nephew?" he asked with a big grin.

Vahid rolled his eyes. "How did my son end up as your nephew?" he asked as Garret ushered them into the house.

"Emily isn't my boss anymore. She's more like an Antaeus sister than cousin, so that makes the baby bump my nephew," Garret explained logically. He helped Emily out of her coat and hung it in the hall closet as Vahid hung up his leather jacket.

They turned toward the living room where a huge Christmas tree dominated the room. Decorated in gold and silver, the tree smelled lushly of pine, and beneath its branches spilled a kaleidoscope of brightly wrapped presents.

Vahid handed Garret the two shopping bags. "Here, make yourself useful and put those under the tree," he grumped.

"Hey! No bad attitudes allowed!" Holden Antaeus said as he sprang up from his seat by the fireplace. He hugged Emily and rubbed her belly just like Garret had. "What can I get you and Junior? Hot chocolate?"

Emily licked her lips. Anything chocolate sounded good to her. She'd been on a major chocolate craving from the moment she'd become pregnant. Vahid had been out many a night buying everything from chocolate covered raisins to chocolate ice cream to chocolate whipped cream to satisfy her cravings.

Vahid pulled her down on a love seat and wrapped his arm around her shoulders possessively, his fingers automatically tangling in her hair. "What's that you've got, Holden? A hot buttered rum?"

Holden's golden eyes flashed with laughter. "Yep. And I already know you want one. Sean's whipping up a batch in the kitchen, so I'll go get you one and get Em a hot chocolate."

As Holden's lithe form strode away, Emily called out, "Extra whipped cream! Gotta humor the preggo, remember!"

She and Garret laughed and a sultry voice spoke up from a corner of the living room, "Why do they humor you but not me?"

Emily's head turned and she saw Elyisa Granville Antaeus sitting in an elegant wingback chair near the window, her blonde hair swept back in a clip. Dressed in red velvet pants tied with a red satin belt and a loose tank top in a glittery gold material, she didn't look pregnant, but Emily knew the other woman had just announced that she and Declan were having a baby.

“Because they know I humor you enough for all of them put together.” The disembodied voice of Declan Antaeus came from behind the enormous Christmas tree.

“Why are you hiding in the tree?” Vahid asked with a wicked grin.

“I’m not,” Declan protested as he emerged from the back of the tree, brushing pine needles from his black and red reindeer sweater. “Careen asked me to move some of the big presents toward the back because all of you fools keep arriving with bags and bags of gifts!”

Elysia chuckled, her violet eyes twinkling with amusement. “You say that like you haven’t already counted how many of them have your name on them.”

With a growl, Declan scooped Elysia up in his arms and sat down in the chair, cradling her on his lap.

Emily let out a soft breath. It pleased her to no end to see her cousin happy. He’d been miserable longer than she had with no hope of ever attaining his mate. No one understood that better than she did. She shivered imperceptibly as if the icy fingertip of Destiny stroked down her spine.

Vahid’s arm tightened around her, pulling her against his chest. She burrowed into the thick material of his oatmeal colored sweater, breathing deeply of his allspice scent. Holidays like this meant something to her now. In the past, they had just been something to endure in the lonely solitude of her condo.

“Hey! What’s with all the cuddling the moment my back is turned?” Holden protested as he returned carrying a big silver tray.

He set it down on the coffee table and handed hot buttered rum to Vahid and Declan and hot chocolate to Emily and Elysia. The blonde vampire breathed in the scent of the chocolate and licked at the mound of whipped cream that floated on top of the hot liquid.

“Oh, Gods. This is fantastic,” Elysia moaned.

“She says that every night and sometimes during the day,” Declan joked, his amber eyes blazing with love as he looked at his bonded mate.

“You Americans have to bring everything down to the most base level, don’t you?” Garret quipped as he joined Holden on a loveseat near the fireplace.

“You love it too.” Holden nipped at his mate’s earlobe only to have Garret turn his head and take his mouth in a fierce kiss.

“Get a room!”

All eyes turned to the doorway where Sean stood with his friends Marius Granville and Alfred Stone. The three men were dressed similarly in jeans and festive holiday sweaters. Water glistened on Marius’s wheat-colored hair and Alfred’s chocolate colored locks. The tall blond vampire moved into the room and set down a bag of gifts before crossing over to give his sister a kiss on her cheek.

“How’s my nephew?” he asked her with a lift of his lips.

“He stole my line,” Garret muttered.

“Your nephew is fine. He’s not even showing yet,” Elysia told her older brother with a laugh. “Where’s Colin?”

Marius rolled his eyes. "Lagging. Eden called me and told me not to come by to pick them up. Colin was busy with some surprise so they decided to drive here on their own."

Alfred Stone handed Sean three big shopping bags brimming with gifts. "I can't stay. I just came by to drop these off and wish you all a Merry Christmas," he said with a smile that lit up his angular face. "I've got family waiting for me at home so I need to get going."

He turned and his gaze shifted from one couple to the other as he looked around the room. "Congratulations on the baby, Elysia. You and Declan must be ecstatic. As happy as these two." He gestured toward Emily and Vahid. "It's wonderful to see another generation of Antaeus's in the making."

"Let me walk you out, Al," Sean said, throwing a companionable arm around his friend's shoulder. "You'll want to stop and see Careen. If you leave without letting her hug you and kiss you, we'll both be in deep shit."

Sean and Alfred left the room and Emily looked up with a smile as the front door banged open and an exuberant Colin Granville came into the room with the widest grin she had ever seen.

"Holy shit. What has he done now?" Marius muttered and Elysia dug her elbow into his thigh causing him to grunt in pain.

"Nothing, Marius. I have done nothing to embarrass you!" the tow-headed vampire announced.

Marius's eyes narrowed. "I thought you said you had gifts," he said suspiciously.

Colin nodded, his midnight blue eyes bright with mischief. "I do! I do! But first..."

He disappeared into the foyer and Elysia rolled her eyes. "Where's Eden? Doesn't she ever curb him?"

Declan chuckled and kissed her shoulder. "She likes him just as he is, she says."

"The Gods help the woman," Marius muttered running his hand through his already rumpled hair.

Eden's laughter rang out, bringing Sean and Careen into the room. Sean grinned broadly. "Colin says he has a surprise." He sat down in a chair and, like Declan, pulled his mate onto his lap.

A moment later, Eden waltzed in dressed all in black leather from tight pants to bustier to spike heeled boots. She carried a whip and wore a black leather Santa hat with a fluffy white pom pom at the end.

"Dear Gods. It's Mistress Christmas," Marius muttered and covered his face with his hand. "I'm gonna kill my little brother."

Vahid laughed and tickled the back of Emily's neck where the padlock to her collar lay. "Oh, don't be a fuddy duddy, Marius! It's funny!"

"Hey, this is serious business, mister!" Colin growled as he returned. He glared at Vahid. "No laughing!"

Of course, the twinkling of his eyes belied his gruff words, and Emily snickered into her hand. Colin wore jeans and a brown reindeer sweater, but the sweater wasn't like the reindeer

sweater the other men wore. This one had a huge deer face on the front with a big red nose. When he turned around, the back of the sweater had the deer's butt and tail on it. On his head perched a headband with deer antlers and jingle bells. Every time he moved, he jingled.

Eden cracked her whip and everyone jumped. "Where's that ELF?" she bellowed.

Loud bells came from the foyer and Emily's eyes widened as Colin's assistant Corey Green appeared dressed in full elf regalia. The handsome blond haired, blue eyed wildling wore green tights, a green tunic, green leather boots with turned up toes, a red and white striped stocking cap, and a red cape trimmed in fake white fur. He carried a big red sack and began skipping around the room distributing presents.

Colin and Eden stood together in the doorway with wide grins. "By the Gods, I think they like our little show, Ede."

Eden tossed her dark head and cracked the whip again. "They better," she growled, smoke coming from her nostrils.

Emily giggled. She couldn't help it. The three of them looked so happy, so filled with joy and fun that it was contagious. Eden's eyes met hers and her grin widened. She handed Colin her whip and made a beeline for her cousin. When Eden grabbed her hands, Emily let herself be pulled up off the loveseat. Caught in a fierce hug, she could do nothing but return her cousin's embrace. And then Colin was there too, rubbing her belly.

"Hot damn. When's the bump arriving?" he asked with a grin.

"In a few months," Vahid replied, rising to his feet. He shook Colin's hand with a smile and then leaned over to flick his finger at the dimple in Eden's cheek. "The two of you sure know how to make an entrance."

"Fucker," Eden said brightly and brushed Vahid's hand aside to throw her arms around him in a big hug. "Congrats on knocking up your woman. I'm very proud of you!"

Blinking warily, Vahid patted his former lover awkwardly on the back. Colin winked at him and Emily had to stifle another giggle. Obviously, neither Colin nor Eden gave a damn about Eden's former status as Vahid's live-in lover.

Corey came over and thrust a big package into Vahid's hands. "This one's for you tall, dark, and assholic," he teased in his best fake gay voice as he batted his eyelashes at Vahid.

This time Emily let her giggle out. When Corey Green, who was decidedly gay but didn't sound like it, put on the queen act, it was a laugh-riot. She couldn't contain her amusement.

Corey looked her up and down, one hand on his hip. "Girlfriend, you know you coulda done better than this asshole, don't you?" he joked.

Emily burst out laughing and leaned over to kiss Corey's cheek. "You are such a dear to care, but I'm finding him quite easy to train, you know."

Corey rolled his eyes exaggeratedly. "He's the deer." He pointed to Colin who waggled his eyebrows. "And if you're willing to put up with the big butthead, who am I to press the issue," he replied with a stage sigh.

He pulled a small green velvet bag from the big red bag and put it in her hands. "Merry Christmas, everyone!" Waving his hands, Corey headed toward the door.

Colin sprang after him and the two men disappeared into the foyer. Eden stood in the center of the room, hands on hips, surveying all her relatives. "Thought I'd wake you up and get this party started," she announced with a wicked delight on her face. "Did it work?"

Marius groaned loudly, but the others cheered and Eden's laughter rang out. Colin returned and grabbed her around the waist, kissing her soundly in front of everyone. When he lifted his head, he smiled, his fangs glinting whitely.

"Well, whatcha waiting for? Turn up the music and let's party!" he yelled. "Merry Fucking Christmas!"

Sean got up and clapped Colin on the back, his grin just as wide as the vampire's. "Merry Christmas to you too!" he laughed and swept his sister into a hug.

Emily grinned as everyone started hugging and talking at once. Loud music came on and the tree vibrated dangerously. Vahid's eyes widened in shock, but Emily laughed again and threw her arms around him.

"Merry Fucking Christmas, master," she whispered in his ear.

His black eyes gleamed and he fingered her collar before taking her mouth in a long, hot delicious kiss that curled her toes inside her shoes. When he broke the kiss, Emily opened her eyes and over his shoulder she saw Eden give her a thumbs up before Colin pulled her away.

"This is the best Christmas yet," she murmured, as happiness filled every iota of her soul.

~* * *~

It was long past midnight when Holden slid into the bed and instantly put his arms around Garret, hugging him fiercely. "Now, tell me why you're so fascinated with the whole nephew thing," he murmured in his mate's ear.

Garret sighed. "I'm not. I just think it's awesome to see the family expanding and to see everyone so happy."

For all that the explanation carried the ring of truth, Holden didn't buy it. At least not totally. "There's more to it, Garret. Tell me," he urged softly, caressing his lover with hands that knew every hard angle of the green dragon's body. "Or don't you think we'll have children one day?"

A shiver went through Garret. "My childhood was hell, Holden. I couldn't put a child through that kind of misery."

Shocked, Holden pulled back and stared into Garret's troubled green eyes. "You're kidding, right? You can't honestly believe a child of ours would go through what you went through even if he did happen to inherit your brainpower."

"People use you when you're that smart, Holden. You don't understand." The low rumble of Garret's voice conveyed his concern.

In one swift move, Holden pushed his mate onto his back and sprawled over him. "No way would we allow anyone to mistreat our child as you were mistreated. We will be great parents, Garret."

Worry edged Garret's handsome features. "I don't think I can bring myself to have a child, Holden," he said in a low, troubled voice.

Lowering his head, Holden kissed his mate thoroughly, loving how Garret's response kindled quickly and burned hot within moments. He stroked his hands over his lover's hips feeling their cocks leap to life at the same time. Grinding their hips together, they kissed for long minutes, their passion flaring into full-blown lust.

"Damn it, Holden. I thought we agreed not to do this here," Garret panted, his fingers digging into his mate's taut buttocks.

"I never agreed to that. I love fucking you in the bed I slept in as a child. It turns me on something fierce," Holden replied with a smug chuckle. "This discussion about children isn't over, Garret. I'm not going to let your fears keep us from having a full life. You love children and so do I. I'm not willing to be satisfied with just nieces and nephews to play with."

"You know, Holden, you are not the only Alpha in this relationship. Why is it that I have to give in on everything?" Garret complained. "Letting you fuck me in your brother's house. Having kids. Since when did I become the minority opinion in this relationship?"

Holden grinned. "You're not the minority at all. I'm perfectly willing to give in on some things."

With a laugh, he slid off Garret's body onto his back, pulling his mate with him. Garret stared down at him, a frown marring his handsome face. Holden cupped his hands around his lover's face, drawing his head down. "Make love to me, Garret. I love you and I don't care where we are. It's Christmas Eve and you're my mate. We belong together and tonight I need you to fill me with your love."

Garret growled, nipping at Holden's lips. "I'll fill you with my cock."

Holden grinned. "Then get to it, bean counter. I'm waiting with baited breath."

"Rum breath," Garret muttered as he lowered his mouth to the lips waiting beneath his own.

"Garret!" Holden half protested, half laughed at his mate's teasing, but kissed him back.

With a growl, Garret broke the kiss and flipped Holden onto his belly, nipping at his firm buttocks. "That's what you get for calling me a bean counter," he muttered roughly. His hands positioned Holden on his knees. Reaching between his lover's thighs, Garret stroked the thick cock he found here and Holden moaned.

"Damn it, Garret. Are you gonna play with me or fuck me?"

Garret traced the crease of Holden's ass. "Both. But not until you understand how much my heart aches with love for you."

Holden let out a sigh filled with happiness. "Oh, baby. I feel the same. Now, can we get to it? I told you how turned on I get at the idea of us doing this in the bed I slept in as a child."

Letting his thumb brush Holden's anus, Garret growled at his mate who shivered with lust. "You own my heart, but right now, right this moment, I'm taking you."

"Straight to heaven, love," Holden agreed breathlessly.

~* * *~

"I'm glad there is a Jacuzzi tub in my room now," Declan sighed as he eased down into the hot, swirling water.

“Why?” Elysia asked. She slipped out of her robe and carefully got in with her husband, letting him wrap his arms around her as she settled her back against his chest.

“Because your brother and my sister have some weird ass relationship with the hot tub here.” Declan made a disgusted sound. “I’m not going down to the hot tub and sauna and risk running into the two of them getting it on.”

Elysia laughed softly. “You don’t really want to go down to the sauna anyway. You’d much rather pamper your pregnant wife right here in your own room.”

“Well, that’s true,” he agreed. “I swear, Lys. As soon as we move into a house, I’m building a sauna if it doesn’t already have one.”

“You just can’t wait to get out of the condo, can you?”

“We’re going to be a family now. That condo no longer fits us. I want a big house like this one so we can fill it full of children.”

Elysia turned and looked at him with wide eyes. “Full? Like how many full?”

Declan laughed softly and cupped her naked breasts in his palms. “As many as you want, baby,” he murmured, nuzzling the side of her neck.

Wriggling against him so that the thick erection he sported nestled itself perfectly in the crease of her ass, Elysia decided she didn’t much care how many children they had. Whatever the gods gave them would be sufficient.

She leaned against Declan’s broad chest letting his big body cradle her. She always felt so safe when he held her. Not just physically safe but emotionally safe as well. She had learned that he was a man she could depend on. He had an eager willingness to do whatever it took to make her happy. They had both suffered unbearable pain before they’d gotten together. Their current state of bliss meant everything to them both.

“A new house won’t change some things, Declan,” she said thoughtfully.

“Mmmn,” he mumbled, his lips nibbling lightly along her throat.

“Next year, we’ll be back here for Christmas.”

Declan sighed. “Yeah. And if Sean has his way, Di will come home too.”

Elysia knew that the oldest Antaeus, Diandra, had not been home for Christmas since the year their parents had died on Christmas Eve. No one, not even Declan, knew what had transpired between their father, Sean, and Diandra. All Elysia knew was what Declan knew. Their mother had died in a horrible train crash during a raging storm. She’d been decapitated and had died instantly. Their father’s body had been pierced by a huge shard of metal. He had lived long enough for Diandra and Sean to make it to the site of the wreck.

What transpired between the three of them, no one knew. However, Sean and Diandra had never again been as carefree and fun loving as they had been prior to the accident. Diandra had taken over Antaeus International. Sean had still been in college. When Diandra met Ruan McCallan, something happened between her and Sean. She left for Scotland with her mate and Sean had left USC to take over AI. A few years later, Diandra and Sean patched up their differences, but Declan said things had never been the same again.

“That would be wonderful,” she murmured. “The whole family together.”

Declan sighed again. "Sometimes I wonder if we can ever be whole again. On the surface we are, but there are undercurrents between Sean and Di and things the rest of us don't know. I just wish the two of them would stop trying to protect me and Holden and Eden and tell us the truth. And I wish they would stop pussyfooting around each other and acting like there is nothing wrong."

Elysia could feel the frustration that vibrated through her husband. It wasn't the first time they had discussed Sean and Diandra and until the family knew the truth, she doubted it would be the last.

"It would be nice if the past could be healed," she admitted. "Especially with more children on the way."

Declan's big hands caressed her flat belly. "My son," he whispered reverently. "I can still hardly believe it."

A laugh escaped Elysia. "You better believe it, mister. You'll be heading out in the dead of night for chocolate just like Vahid does for Emily."

Her husband's tongue licked along the top of her shoulder. "I don't mind at all. I know Vahid doesn't either."

Elysia shifted, letting his cock rub against her. Her pussy grew wet and swollen. Lust rose in her as she imagined that cock deep inside her as they lay in the room that had been Declan's until he'd left home.

"Baby, I think it's high time we got out of this tub and into something dry," he murmured as he moved her forward and stood up.

She gazed up at him, knowing her violet eyes were hazy with passion. Declan turned her on so damned much she wondered that she hadn't gotten pregnant sooner. They certainly fucked nearly non-stop when they were alone together.

Declan returned with a warm bath sheet and a wicked smile. She let her eyes trace over the clan mark that crawled over his shoulder. Her own shoulder sported the same mark but on a smaller scale. Her eyes skated lower, taking in the thick erection, heavy sacs, and muscular thighs of her bloodmate. Her fangs dropped as lust raked her with fiery claws.

One black brow winged up as he helped her out of the tub and wrapped her in the towel. "Do you need to feed?" he murmured as he nudged her toward the bedroom.

"Not tonight," she replied breathlessly, knowing that as soon as she got in the big bed, he would be all over her, filling her with his big cock, and she would love it.

Declan spun her around and took her in his arms. "You love more than my cock, woman," he growled.

Delighted laughter escaped her as she wrapped her arms around his big torso. "I love something else more. It's so big, and full, and just thinking about it makes me weak in the knees..." she said in a low seductive tone.

He growled again and she licked the edge of his clan mark. "I love your heart, Declan."

He scooped her up in his arms, holding her tightly against that heart. "Oh, Elysia. It beats just for you. I love you, Lys."

She wound her arms around his neck and smiled. "Show me."

Colin floated in the warm pool. "It's not like home," he commented.

"Well, duh." The muffled sound of Eden's voice came from the sauna where she attempted to get the little room hot.

"I think I would rather have been at home, but at the same time, it's a lot of fun to be here." He stared at the cloudy sky, glad the rain had stopped so they could come out to the pool and use the sauna attached to the pool house. "I mean, our pool is nicer, but I love this chance to be with my sister and brother. In the past, it's just been the three of us on Christmas Day. We never did jack on Christmas Eve and well, to be frank, a few times it felt damned lonely."

Eden's dark head popped out the sauna door. "You? Lonely?" Her brows arched. "You're so easy going. I never would have taken you for the type to get lonely on Christmas," she said in surprise.

Colin swam over to the side and heaved himself out of the water. "I get lonely just like anyone else," he huffed, a little indignant that his wife wouldn't realize he had that sort of depth.

Eden rolled her eyes and handed him a towel as he stepped into the sauna and shut the door. "I know you have depth, Colin. No one knows that as well as I do. It's just that you have such a positive personality that I find it hard to picture you in a blue mood. It's such a negative thing. Besides, Colin Granville and negativity are polar opposites."

He grinned. She so had him pegged. Even at his loneliest, it didn't last above a few hours. The moment he immersed himself in something, he forgot to be blue. Tucking the damp towel around his naked hips, Colin relaxed on the bench seat and stretched out his long legs, contemplating the gorgeous curves of his wife and bloodmate.

"I can feel you looking at my naked ass," she murmured wickedly as she dropped a dipperful of icy water on the heated stones. Clouds of steam filled the small room. "Your fangs have dropped, haven't they?"

Colin made a face at her back. "Know it all."

Eden laughed as she turned and crossed the little room to him. She planted her knees on either side of his thighs, kneeling on the bench and rubbing her full breasts against his hard chest. "I know you. You're my own little area of expertise," she purred, nuzzling his ear. "Gods, I love that sugar cookie scent of yours."

"I bet it makes it hard to tell when Careen is baking," he teased, his hands coming up to span her tiny waist.

"Since I don't live here anymore it doesn't matter. And you and I are not the baking type."

She wriggled and reached down between them, yanking away his towel. She lowered her hips until her wet pussy slid along his rising cock. Colin sucked in a breath and she looked up at him with that wicked smile back in place.

"We are, however, the type that gets cookin'," she murmured in a provocative tone.

"Gods preserve me. My wife is gonna seduce me in the sauna of her brother's house." Colin slapped on a wide-eyed expression that made his bloodmate laughed delightedly. His fangs ached to bite her and taste her sweet blood.

"Butthead. Just bite me then," she said and tossed back her long black hair, arching toward him so that he could see the vein that traveled along the side of her neck.

He contemplated the full globes of her breasts, thrust toward him with straining nipples. Vein. Nipples. Nipples. Vein.

"Shit," he muttered in consternation.

Eden grabbed him by the back of the head and pulled his face close to her throat. "Bite now, fuck after," she told him in a practical voice.

Colin didn't need an engraved invitation. He opened his mouth, slid it along her neck until his tongue felt the pulse of her vein. His fangs sank into her flesh and the sweet sangria flavor of her blood burst over his tongue. She shuddered and he could feel the pleasure that flowed through her body from his bite. Licking the wound to seal it closed, he raised his head.

His mate's eyes were heavy-lidded with passion. One hand rubbed her clan mark and he could feel his matching mark begin to burn with the fire of arousal. He pulled her close and kissed her, tasting her mouth with his tongue. She reached between their bodies and grasped his rigid cock, slipping it into her. She pushed down, letting him fill her tightly.

Eden rocked on him and waves of pleasure flowed from her right into his bloodstream. Generally, after feeding, he did feel closer to her than usual, hearing her heart beat, feeling her lungs expand with each breath. Tonight, he could swear he felt her emotions as well.

"You can. I can't contain them," she said in a breathless voice. "I love you, Colin. You are my whole world."

A fire hotter than any he'd ever felt from her before burned through them both. "I love you too, Eden. You are everything to me." He touched her reverently, wishing he had a way to show her anew how special she was to him.

Tears of happiness and pleasure filled her beautiful amber eyes. "You don't need to do anything special. The simple act of your touch, when your heart is filled with emotion for me, I can feel that and it's all I need to know," she husked.

They moved together, their bodies in a give and take dance of lust they'd done dozens upon dozens of times in the past. They stared into each other's eyes, their thoughts linked and open to each other.

I'm about to come.

Colin trembled at her admission. *Me too.*

Do you think it will happen this time?

He shuddered, knowing exactly what she referred to. *I don't know. Does it matter? We're not on a mission like Sean and Careen, are we?*

She shook her head, her hair swirling around them. *No. But I'm curious. I know it will happen eventually. Will we make good parents, Colin?*

Fuck, yes. He gritted his teeth trying to hold back his orgasm so he could concentrate on her thoughts. *Maybe not like Lys and Declan, but we'll be good parents. Just different.*

Different is good. For us anyway.

Eden rode him harder and Colin's sweat had nothing to do with the heat of the sauna and everything to do with the heat of his wife.

Gods, Ede. I'm gonna come.

She arched her back and cried out as her orgasm spiked through her. Colin felt her pretty pink pussy clamp down on his cock and he let go with a muffled roar, his cum filling her.

He hugged her tight, letting her emotions wash over him. The very fact that her heart was laid bare to him filled him with joy and thankfulness. He'd never expected to be so happy, yet here he was on Christmas Eve fucking the most incredible woman he'd ever known with love in his heart.

And love in hers too. So much love, Colin.

"Oh, Sugar Cookie Man, this year is gonna be the best ever. I can just feel it," she whispered against his throat.

"That's just my cock stirring," he teased and she chuckled. "It will be, Eden. If you wish it so, I will make it so."

Good. Can we go to bed now?

Are you gonna pry my ass from this bench? I think I'm stuck.

They laughed out loud together and Colin hugged Eden tightly. Their hearts no longer thundered with passion, but they beat in time with each other and Colin was content in the knowledge that it would always be so.

~* * *~

Emily rode his cock like a prom queen on a parade float, Vahid thought as he stared up at her pale body undulating gracefully above him. She appeared to hardly move, yet she gripped him tightly, working his cock, working him into a frenzy. He held her around the waist, above the swell of her belly, his thumbs teasing her swollen nipples.

Vahid couldn't believe how horny pregnancy had made his wife and mate. She had an insatiable appetite for sex. And chocolate. Gods, he had begun to hate the scent because she ate so much of it in every form imaginable. At the moment though, the scent of their sex permeated the air. He hadn't wanted to do "it" in Sean's house. He'd had a major case of the ick factor. Emily, however, had no qualms pouncing on him and making his cock see things her way. Her argument had included the notion that Sean knew damn good and well that every dragon under his roof would have a case of Christmas lust.

Winning an argument with Emily when she put on her budget face was impossible. She'd been known for her ability to sell a budget to the most intractable of boards. The gods knew Vahid stood no chance with her most of the time. She had the coldest, most practical, logical mind of any woman he'd ever met. Combined with the fact that he constantly longed to please her, he stood no chance of ever coming out on top... except for one itty bitty thing. She loved him.

Heat wreathed his groin as she moved on him, her fingers caressing his chest in time with her strokes. His orgasm began to spiral out from his tailbone and he struggled to hold it back.

"Oh, no, you don't," Emily whispered. "Don't hold back. Come with me."

She ground down on him, shuddering with pleasure. The scent of baby powder filled the room along with clouds of smoke from their nostrils. Vahid flicked his fingertip over her swollen clit and she cried out, digging her nails into his shoulders as she came. Flames licked him as his orgasm hit. His cock flexed inside her as it filled her with his cum. She moaned and collapsed on his chest.

They lay in contented silence, their breathing slowing, their limbs becoming lax. Emily kissed his chest gently, her fingers still caressing him.

"I need to wash, but I can't move," she complained.

Vahid shifted beneath her. "I'll get a washcloth."

"No, don't move," she ordered. "I'm not ready. I need you to hold me awhile longer."

Wrapping his arms around her, Vahid kissed the top of her head. "This would be better in our own bed."

"No, it wouldn't," she disagreed. "As long as it's you and me, it could be anywhere including on a bench and against a wall. I love you completely."

Vahid's protests about their venue faded away as her words melted his heart. "You are my everything, Em. I could not survive without you."

A long sigh escaped Emily. "This is the best Christmas ever, Vahid. You, me, our baby, and my family. I can't tell you how many years I longed for a family," she said in whisper made thick by tears.

With hands that cherished, he stroked her hair and the satin skin of her naked back. "I would do anything to make you happy, Em. Even have sex with you in my boss's house," he sighed.

She chuckled. "He's not your boss anymore. Declan is."

"As Chairman of the Board, Sean's still my boss, just not my direct supervisor," he mumbled, feeling sleepy. "If you want that washcloth, I need to do it now before I pass out from a surfeit of loving you."

Emily laughed softly and rolled off of him. "You'll never have a surfeit of that."

Vahid rolled his eyes at her and got up. After they'd cleaned up, they lay in quiet silence, their fingers entwined and lying on Emily's distended belly. Beneath their hand, the baby kicked, causing her skin to ripple.

"Just think, next Christmas we'll be parents," she said with quiet awe.

He smiled in the darkness, his heart filled with joy and anticipation. "I can't wait."

"I can. I love that it's just you and me on the cusp of a new phase of our life together."

She snuggled up to him and Vahid's smile widened. There wasn't anything he couldn't do if he had Emily beside him.

"Anything?" she teased, listening in to his thoughts. "We could, um, you know, do it again..."

"No!" he said sharply causing her to laugh. "Not twice in Sean's house. No way."

Emily tickled his chest hairs. "You are such a prude when it comes to my cousin. I can't even get you to kiss me in the office when he's there."

"I kiss you in the office when Sean's around," Vahid protested.

She made a rude sound. "Behind your closed office door." She laughed again and hugged him. "It's okay. I know it's all because of your brown nosing tendencies. Can't have Sean see you as something less than the perfect employee."

"Too late," he muttered remembering the dressing down Sean had given him over Emily before they'd gotten together. "When are you gonna give up that brown nose stuff? I swear you've gotten a shit ton of mileage out of that old joke."

Emily snuggled back down under the covers again, nuzzling his chest contentedly. "I'll give it up when you stop doing it," she murmured.

He wrapped his arms around her as she drifted off, exhausted by the excitement, sex, and the late hour. He listened to the rain drumming on the roof and thanked the gods for the happiness he held in his arms, his Emily and his son. No dragon could ask for more than he had this Christmas. In fact, he couldn't remember a better Christmas, despite the fact that he'd had sex in his boss's house.

~* * *~

Sean stood, arms wrapped around Careen, staring out his bedroom window watching the rain drip down the glass.

"Good things are coming for us, Sean. I can feel it," Careen murmured softly.

Sean hugged her tighter, grateful for her presence beside him, knowing his life would be in the toilet and he would too without her.

"I know. But still, sometimes the best Christmases are the ones in our memories," he said on a sigh. "I couldn't sleep. All night the memories played in my head. My father standing at the mantle as my mother poured us all mulled wine. My father's corny toasts that let each one of us know how much he loved us and loved our mother."

"Oh, Sean." Careen turned and wrapped her arms around his waist, holding him tightly.

He laid his cheek on the top of her head and held onto her, knowing she was his port in a storm now that his father – the big gruff black dragon he'd admired and loved so deeply – had gone to the Afterworld. "I look at them, Careen, and I try so hard to be for them what my father was for me. When I see Emily's happiness, I remember her pain and remember that her mother never loved her as our mother loved us. How two sisters could be so different amazes me. But I know that baby Em carries will never, ever suffer as she did."

"She has a man who has learned the true meaning of love and devotion. He's given up being a selfish asshole and his every thought is for Emily before all else," Careen said as she rubbed her cheek on his naked chest.

Sean smiled even though he knew Careen couldn't see it. They were so close both physically and mentally that he knew she could feel his smile with her heart. "And look how

well things have turned out for Holden. I'll admit I was worried, Careen. Being with a man was so alien to him. I feared he would never accept Garret. Yet, he's accepted it, embraced it, and he's drawn Garret out of his shell. He told me about Garret's childhood, about how everyone tried to use him because he was a genius. Their children will never go through what Garret did. Holden will see to that. He'll protect them all, just as an Antaeus should."

Careen shifted, tilting her head back so she could look up at him. "Speaking of protection..."

Sean sighed heavily. Some things he would never live down. "I was wrong. I know I was. Trying to hold onto Eden the way I did was an insult to her and to me," he admitted. "I'm very happy she's found Colin. He makes her laugh. He makes her happy. That is all I ever really wanted for her truly."

"You and your machinations. They will bite you in the ass some day." Careen's voice was rueful.

"They already have. Diandra ran away because of them. She stayed away because of Ruan. And I'm okay with that. She's happy. I just wish she'd come home once in awhile. I'd like to know my nephews." Pain lashed him as he thought of his older sister who still treated him a bit coolly because of what had transpired between them many years in the past.

"Well, my love, you have done many good things in your life. Your siblings are all happy now. Even Declan who was so sure he would always be alone. And if you're wanting nephews, I think you'll soon be inundated with them with Declan and Vahid's mates both pregnant," Careen pointed out. "And there's a look in Colin's eyes that makes me think he and Eden will soon be following in their footsteps."

Sean smiled down at his wife and mate. "I think my darling one, that it is time I stopped thinking about nephews and siblings and the past," he husked. "I think I need to focus on the one person in this world who truly knows my heart, the one I can't imagine my life without, the one I am determined to knock up before the winter is over."

Careen's delighted laughter rang out. "You gotta be doing something to make that happen, mister. You're all talk and no action this morning," she teased him, running her hands down his back and then squeezing his buttocks.

He felt his libido kick in instantly. No one in his life had ever made him feel more alive than Careen did. He continually thanked the gods for her because he knew without a doubt that before he'd met her, he'd only been half alive.

Rubbing the ridge of his hard cock against her belly through his sweats and her silk gown, he tried to imagine what she would look like when her belly grew as round as Emily's. He decided she would be even more beautiful than she was now.

"Flatterer," his wife teased.

He bent and scooped her up in his arms, carrying her to their huge four-poster bed. "I'm not. I unfailingly, and without finesse, tell the truth. You of all people know that." He tossed her onto the soft mattress, causing the mound of pillows to bounce, then he stripped off his sweat pants and followed her down. He pulled on the silk nightgown and she wriggled until the garment was free of her body. He tossed it to the floor and rubbed his body against hers.

Careen wound her arms around him as she had almost every night since they'd met. "I'm ready when you are, Sean. Are you ready to let your siblings and your cousin go now? Ready to embrace *our* life?"

The pre-cum that puddled on her belly should have told her that he was more than ready, but he knew that after all the years where he'd put other facets of their life first, he needed to say the words.

"I love you, Careen. I want to have babies with you. Lots of babies. I don't even care how many. It is completely up to you how many we have," he promised her.

She stared up at him with bright green eyes filled with love. "Let's just start with one, Sean. And I would love to make him on Christmas," she whispered.

Sean lowered his mouth to hers, nibbling at her lips. "Your wish is my command, my only love. One Christmas conception coming right up."

As their passion spiraled hotter and sweeter, Sean made a vow in his heart. Whatever the gods saw fit to give them in the way of children, he would always love them and protect them, fulfilling the legacy his father had passed to him on a windy, rainy Christmas many years in the past.

~* * *~

Emily crept into the dark, empty kitchen in search of chocolate. She turned on the light over the stove and began to look through the cupboards. Finding a container of expensive chocolate, she licked her lips and went hunting for milk and a mug. Junior, whose name would probably be Ethan Sean Delrey, tumbled inside her joyfully. He seemed to know it was a special day.

Stirring the pan of milk so it wouldn't burn, Emily rubbed her belly with the other hand. She'd gotten Vahid so many presents their tree at home looked like a scrawny thing in comparison to the pile of presents. By contrast, she knew what Vahid had gotten her. Earrings to match her collar and engagement ring.

By accident, she'd come across the sketches when she'd gone to the office to meet him for lunch. They'd been on his desk half buried beneath a financial report of Garret's. Curious about her former employee's report, she'd picked it up and found the drawings. Before Vahid returned to his office she put everything back as she found it and went to stand at the window. When she opened the box, she would be suitably surprised. She wouldn't want to spoil it for him.

She stirred the chocolate into the hot milk and fingered her platinum collar with the dangling dragons in red and black diamonds. Most people thought it was a necklace. Only she and Vahid knew it was a collar, a sign of her submission to him as her master. The collar closed at the nape of her neck with a tiny padlock that had no key. As far as Emily was concerned, she belonged to Vahid forever. The collar would never be removed even after her death and ascent to the Afterworld.

"I smell chocolate."

Emily glanced up into the smiling face of Garret Renquist. He bent and kissed her cheek, patting her belly before pulling a stool up to the breakfast bar. He wore pajama bottoms that she knew were a concession to the fact that it wasn't his home. His bare chest bore the marks

of some rough lovemaking. Her lips hitched up in a grin. Holidays, emotions, dragons... a recipe for sex if she'd ever heard one.

She added more milk and chocolate to the pot. "Hot chocolate is food for the soul," she told him.

He smiled and leaned his elbows on the counter. "I could use some then. I've apparently lost my soul." His British accented voice was amused and Emily chuckled.

"That would make two of us," she admitted.

Garret shook his head wonderingly. "Days like today, in the midst of this family, I feel a bit shocked that I have come so far from my previous life. Holden has changed the world for me."

A sigh escaped Emily. "Oh, I can so relate to that. This might be my family, but Vahid fits in with them better than I do. He's known them longer. Until Vahid and I got together, I never knew what it was like to belong to a family."

"Me either," Garret said with a nod. "It's still a little weird and Holden and I have been together for some time now."

"Well, can you imagine how overwhelming it can be for a newbie?"

Emily looked up into Elysia's beautiful violet eyes. Behind her stood her brother, Colin. Emily reached for the milk, pouring more into the pan.

Colin made a rude sound as he took the stool beside Garret. "I'm newer than you. I don't find it overwhelming," he pronounced.

"Ah, but you're the outgoing type," Garret pointed out. "Em and I are introverts. Your sister is too."

"Then how do you explain me?"

They all started at the sound of Careen's voice. She stood in the doorway to her kitchen smiling at them. Suddenly, Emily realized how funny they all appeared. Each of them mated to an Antaeus, and she mated to such a close friend of Sean's, he might as well *be* an Antaeus. Elysia sat down next to Colin, pulling her tartan robe tighter around her body. Careen walked over to the refrigerator and took out butter and eggs.

"I find them overwhelming too you know. Just because I'm Sean's wife doesn't mean I'm part of their inner circle, you know. Those Antaeus's are special. It's why we all love them, but they can be just as irritatingly arrogant as they can be special," she said in a matter of fact tone as she began to crack eggs into a bowl.

Elysia rolled her eyes. "Dear Gods can they," she sighed.

"Bah. You love it," Colin teased his sister.

She shook her head. "No, I don't love the arrogance, but I love Declan. To have him I will take the good with the bad."

"Exactly," Careen agreed. "And I swear I have it worse than all of you because Sean thinks he has to be the head of the clan."

Colin rubbed his knuckles reminiscently. "He *can* be taken down a peg or two though."

Careen's eyes twinkled in the dim light. "True. And he means well. He has everyone's best interests at heart."

"I'm rather glad Sean's such a busybody when it comes to family," Emily told them. "If he hadn't been, I really don't think I would be standing here making you all hot chocolate."

Every expression turned sober. They all knew she'd tried to death spiral and commit suicide when she'd thought that Vahid didn't want her. They had heard about how she hadn't planned to come back from her business trip to Australia. If Sean hadn't sent Vahid to find her and fix things between them, Emily would have tried the death spiral again in France, far from anyone who would have stopped her. Without Sean's interference, she would be dead.

"Em..." Garret started to speak but his voice broke and he stopped to clear his throat.

She could clearly see the deep emotion in his eyes. Smiling at him, she rubbed her belly and turned the conversation light again. "Now, I have Vahid and Junior. Life is good."

"You're not really going to name him Junior, are you?" Colin asked with a shake of his head.

Emily laughed softly. "Of course not, although it would serve Vahid right. No, I rather think his name will be Ethan Sean."

A chorus of sighs met her announcement. Careen brought the bowl of beaten eggs to the stove as Emily turned off the hot chocolate and took down more mugs. She poured and Careen served. Finally, they were all seated at the breakfast bar, except for Careen who had begun making French toast.

"You realize that this is the last Christmas we will all be like this," Garret said thoughtfully. "Next year there will be babies."

Careen nodded. "And hopefully, Diandra, Ruan and the twins too. I've been working on getting her to come home next year."

Elysia's eyes brightened. "Oh, Declan will be so excited."

Her brother rolled his eyes. "Not speaking for Eden. I've learned my lesson there," he said ruefully. "I know she loves her sister, but I think she's still trying to find her place in this family."

"She is having a much easier go of it with you at her side," Garret pointed out to Colin. "You've made a big difference for her in how she views and treats this family."

Careen nodded her agreement. "He's right. I think the family fits together much better now that everyone is mated. Before, they were all too much alike so they sometimes rubbed each other the wrong way."

Garret heaved a long sigh. "I guess you should know that Holden wants us to have children too. I have reservations, but I see his point. If ever a family needed children, it's this one."

Joy filled Emily's heart at Garret's words. "Oh, Garret. You will be the most wonderful father," she exclaimed softly, reaching out to squeeze his hand. "I'm so happy for you that you are at least considering the possibility."

“Damn. We are just a baby making lot, aren’t we?” Colin quipped, laughter brimming over in his midnight blue eyes.

“That is really not a bad thing at all with all the joyful hearts in this family,” Careen said with a grin.

“Holiday hearts filled with the spirit of Christmas,” Elysia offered.

“Amen,” Garret said and lifted his mug in a salute.

Emily looked out the window at the sky that had begun to lighten with the dawn of a new day. Christmas Day. A day for love and family. She looked at the happy faces around her and thanked the gods for all the loving hearts of her family.

~* * *~

Dawn broke beneath the cloud cover and the rain slowed to a momentary stop. Marius Granville stepped out of the dark, quiet house, turning up the collar of his ski jacket. He lit a cigar and puffed in silence as he walked down the driveway, skirting the double row of cars parked there. At the bottom of the drive, he moved unerringly toward a dark shadow that hovered near a hedge.

Stopping beside Alfred, Marius turned and gazed at the house. A strange state of sadness had his heart in a relentless grip. Sadness and regret.

“Oh, Marius. Don’t,” Alfred’s voice whispered softly. “Your time is yet to be.”

Marius shook his head. Over the past few years, a sense of separation from the world had grown steadily within him accompanied by the slow leeching away of his emotions. “I don’t think so, Al.”

Alfred Stone’s eyes glowed with a preternatural light that Marius had rarely seen from a Magia. He knew that Alfred’s father had been an Archimage. He had no clue what Alfred’s mother had been until this moment. Now, he knew Alfred was part immortal. What kind of immortal, he couldn’t begin to surmise, but the power he knew resided within his friend now had an explanation.

“Marius, take heart. The cold you feel within you now will be warmed again one day. You have my oath on it.”

The eerie echo of Alfred’s words made Marius shiver. He dropped his cigar and stomped on it, putting it out. “Their happiness is my only concern. I worried about them for so long... Lys... Colin... even Sean. He put his life on hold for his family and that was wrong,” Marius said on a soft sigh.

Alfred’s hand came to rest on Marius’s shoulder. “Sean did what he needed to. Everything has come right in the end.”

Marius shook his head, fear trickling along his spine despite the warmth of Alfred’s hand that emanated comfort. “But it’s not over, Al. There are trials still to face for all of us. You’ve indicated that many times.”

“You’re right. But I believe with all my heart that we shall prevail, Marius.” He gestured toward the house where lights began to glow as people awoke. “Can you not feel the love? There is such an abundance of it that it seeps out into the air around us. How can the universe not acknowledge its power?”

Marius tried to tamp down his personal despair. It was Christmas. He had no business being maudlin. As he struggled, Alfred gave him a swift, one-armed hug, then stepped back deeper into the shadows.

"I must go, but Marius, let their love warm you today. Tomorrow you may return to feeling disconnected, but for today, let your family love you." Alfred's voice began to weaken as his form became darker, more shadow than substance. "Your time is coming. I vow it, my friend. And sooner than you can ever imagine."

As Alfred dissolved into the retreating darkness, Marius looked up at the Antaeus house. He did feel the love, exactly as Alfred had described. The emotion filled the very air, drifting around him, its warmth pulling him back toward the house.

Shoving his hands deep into his pockets, Marius trudged up the driveway to the front door. He stepped into the foyer, his sensitive nose catching the scent of bacon, coffee, and chocolate. As he hung his jacket in the closet, his acute hearing picked out the sound of Emily's laughter – a precious thing if one knew of her past. His sister's chuckle joined in and then his brother's animated voice wrought more laughter from the group in the kitchen.

He started toward them, a smile beginning to curl up the corner of his mouth as he heard laughter underscoring the cultured tones of Garret Renquist's voice. And then the dulcet tones of Careen Antaeus took charge. Marius greatly admired the green dragon who mothered her mate's family despite her yearning for children of her own. Her strength and loyalty made him wish for a mate like that even though he knew it would likely never happen.

Stopping in the doorway of the huge kitchen, he watched as Holden emerged from the back stairs, striding into the room to catch Garret in a huge hug and a boisterous, "Merry Christmas!" In moments, he was followed by his brother Declan who had eyes for no one but Elysia. Fierce love for his sibling assailed Marius as Declan demonstrated his love and care for his mate. Elysia would forever be happy thanks to Declan and Marius would always be grateful for it. When Eden bounded down the stairs and pounced on Colin, Marius grinned. Sean's sister might be a handful but she fit Colin perfectly and his brother's happiness gave Marius a huge measure of content.

"Merry Christmas, Marius."

The soft words came from behind him and Marius turned, wondering how Sean had once more managed to sneak up on him without being heard. He arched a brow at his best friend. "Merry Christmas, Sean."

Delight twinkled in the black dragon's amber eyes. "Just think what madness awaits us next year with babies in the family."

Marius let out a sigh and shook his head ruefully. "I can't complain. I wanted them to be happy and look what's been wrought. If nieces and nephews arrive to pull my hair and puke on my shoes, I'll survive. Their unhappiness I would not have survived."

The amber eyes gleamed as Sean's expression turned sharply observant. "And your own happiness, Marius? When will you let go of the past?"

First Alfred, now Sean. Marius shifted uncomfortably. He'd never liked the focus to be on himself. "When it no longer matters," he muttered gruffly.

Sean shook his dark head. "It already does not matter. You are the master of your destiny, Marius. The joy you find in your sibling's happiness, the joy you find in Christmas... it can be yours every day."

Marius wished Sean's words were truth instead of his friend placating him. "Sure, Sean," he said as he started to enter the kitchen.

Sean grabbed his elbow, holding him back. "I am right, Marius. Look in your heart. You will see it and know it for truth."

They stared at each other for a long moment. Then Marius tore his gaze away. "I will try, Sean. That is all I can promise," he said in a low voice.

A bright, grateful smile flashed out from Sean's handsome face. "Good. One day at a time, my friend. Starting with Christmas."

They stepped into the kitchen and Careen smiled at them, her warm green eyes filled with love. "There is nothing better than family at Christmas," she declared. "Nothing more important. Nothing more fulfilling. The love we all share is what blesses us and sustains us through all the other days of the year."

"Hear, hear!" Holden agreed.

"Well, in that case, in the immortal words of a mortal who said it much better than I ever could... God bless us every one!" Marius pronounced, bending to brush a kiss on his sister's cheek while the others looked on with happiness alight on their faces.

~* * *~

Outside the house, a shadow detached itself from the hedgerow and became the tall figure of Alfred Stone. He smiled knowingly.

"Oh, yes, Marius. The gods have blessed you all. Just you wait and see."

Merry Christmas from the Darkworld!

Just in case you missed the first books in this series, the first chapters are provided after the author's information. Keep reading and have a happy holiday!

About the Author

Lex has been writing stories and poems ever since she could hold a pencil. A few years ago, she got caught up writing in an online paranormal serial story. The story was very intense and a challenge to her writing skills. As she began to write more and more, fans of the story and her blog readers began to encourage her to submit her writing. Lex lives in Orange County, California with her long haired musician husband and her teen aged daughter. Lex loves loud music, reading hot stories, reading her friends' blogs and hanging out with them, enjoys building her own computers, and has a propensity for having very weird vivid dreams about Nikki Sixx.

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Tales of the Darkworld Book 1: Shifting Winds

by Lex Valentine

Chapter One

The huge vase of tulips hid the face of Granville Cemetery's receptionist as she carried the flowers into the elegant office of the Chief Financial Officer. At least they weren't red roses, Elysia thought as Marnie set the vase on the corner of the rosewood executive desk, pushing it closer to Elysia's morning cup of coffee.

"You'd think they'd be roses," the receptionist sniffed, unknowingly echoing her boss's thoughts. "You're the CFO here, Miss E. You deserve the best."

A choked chuckle emerged from one of two leather wingback chairs across the desk from Elysia. Marnie stepped closer to the occupied chair and swatted the tall blonde man on the back of the head.

"That's what *you* deserve, Mr. Colin. You're always in here bothering her. Don't you ever work?" she hissed at him sarcastically before walking out. The door shut softly behind her.

Instead of smirking at the way their receptionist goaded her younger brother, Elysia turned an evil look on Colin. "Don't say a word," she ground out, shifting her glare from her sibling to the card peeking from between a couple of purple tulip buds.

"Obviously, you know who they're from without opening the card," Colin observed.

"Yeah, I know who sent them." Elysia snatched up the card before Colin leaned over the desk and grabbed it. She stared at the expensive vellum, afraid to open the small envelope and have the sender confirmed.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" Leather creaked as Colin sat forward in his chair. "C'mon, Lys. You always tell me your secrets. I never spill them to Marius."

Elysia winced at the mention of their older brother. The last thing she needed was for Marius to find out about the flowers. Not that Colin would tell. She always confided in him and he always kept it to himself. If not for Colin, she probably would have died of stress years ago. She had difficulty keeping her emotions bottled up inside her. This time, what bothered her was something Marius would want to know... and exploit. And since it was something intensely personal, Elysia didn't want Marius to have even the tiniest inkling.

"Lock the door," she muttered grimly, turning the small cream-colored envelope over in her hands. She recognized the florist. They were the best in the county. "I can't have Marius walk in on this conversation."

Colin shot out of his chair with lightning fast reflexes that were a blur to human eyes. Fortunately, Elysia was no more human than Colin. In the blink of an eye, he returned to his

chair, his mouth quirked in a grin that showed off the white points of his fangs. He must really be excited to hear her gossip if his fangs were out.

“So where were you last night?” he asked. “Is it related to the flowers?”

Elysia nodded. “I went to the Undertaker’s Ball.”

Colin’s dark blue eyes widened. “You’re shitting me. You really went to that thing?”

She sighed and ran a hand through her long honey blonde hair. “Yes. Marius bugged me about it for a solid week. I agreed to go just to get him off my back. I don’t know why he couldn’t have sent you. I’m sure you would have enjoyed it much more than me. You like dressing up on Halloween.”

Colin laughed. “Of course, I do. I find it ironic to dress as Dracula or Nosferatu on Halloween. Last night, I did Nosferatu. I was scarier than Max Schreck, but that skull cap thing itched. And I had trouble getting the makeup off.”

Elysia cocked an eyebrow up as her brother ruffled his dark blonde curls. She noticed tiny little bits of latex and glue in his hairline along with faint smudges of grey white makeup. “You’ve still got some on your face. Go upstairs and use that stuff Callie has in the prep room,” she said. “That will take it off.”

Colin nodded absently, his envious eyes on her coffee cup. “Yeah, I planned on it, but I had to stop here first to find out where you disappeared to last night. It’s not like you to miss my Halloween party.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe you went to the Undertaker’s Ball. For one, it’s an industry thing. You don’t like industry events. For another, I can’t believe you caved in to Marius. You never do.”

“I know. I know. Believe me; I hadn’t intended to give in.” Elysia sat back in her chair, placing her hands flat on the leather blotter on her desk. She stared at her long fingers for a moment, their plain unadorned expanse, short oval nails, uncolored, unexciting... except that last night they had been excited... in a frenzy of touching...

She jerked her mind away from those thoughts and looked up, meeting her brother’s eyes. “Declan Antaeus was there.” She said the words casually and watched her brother’s eyes widen.

“Really?” Colin sat forward a little. “Did he talk to you about business? Marius said he’s been angling for a meeting for six months.”

“We didn’t talk about work much,” she mumbled, thinking they hadn’t talked much at all.

“So what did you go as?”

Elysia rolled her eyes. “Elvira. I know, I know. Predictable and boring, but you should have seen Declan. He was worse.”

Colin began to laugh. “Oh, no. He didn’t. Tell me he didn’t.”

Elysia nodded. “He did. It was an obvious choice for a man of his height, but still, coming as the Grim Reaper was totally predictable and dull.” She smiled at her brother as she recalled Declan stalking through the crowds dressed in the long black robe. “He was the only Reaper too.”

Colin snorted derisively. "Of course. Everyone else had more creative costumes, didn't they?"

"Yes. He and I were probably the most boring costumes there, barring Alfred in a white sheet," she told him with a reminiscent smile.

"You're kidding. Alfred Stone wore a white sheet?" Colin's eyes danced with laughter at the thought of the head of the Funeral Director's Guild dressed as a ghost in a plain white sheet.

"He did. And he had that same shiny black suit on underneath. You know, the one you call his undertaker's suit."

The two of them laughed at the old-fashioned way of dressing that Alfred Stone of Stone Mortuary Services had cultivated. Alfred was a techie. He loved all things technology based, but when it came to clothes, he always looked like an undertaker from 1900. Elysia usually loved talking to Alfred because she was the computer geek at Granville Cemetery and they had a lot in common. However, she didn't like industry events. At least, not since she'd been rather spectacularly dumped by Alfred's brother Austin at the Darkworld's annual Funeral Director's convention three years ago. That experience taught her that the immortal world was just as hungry for gossip as the human world. Their hunger meant no one ever forgot the most humiliating and painful moment of her life.

Colin let out a sigh, his eyes meeting Elysia's. "So the tulips are from Declan Antaeus?"

"I think so." She opened the card that lay on her desk.

You are so much more beautiful than these flowers, but the texture of their petals reminded me of your skin. Dinner tonight? You and me and that gorgeous skin of yours...

I'll call you.

Declan

Elysia sucked in a shaky breath. The man definitely had a way with words. Her heart pounded so hard that she wondered if Colin could hear it.

He stared at her with an arrested expression. "Holy shit, Lys. Don't tell me you slept with Declan Antaeus!" he said in a low, astonished voice.

Her lips tightened in annoyance. "Okay, I won't."

Colin flopped back in his chair, his expression concerned. "What possessed you to do such a thing?"

"Oh, I dunno, Colin. Hormones?" she quipped, her words just a touch angry. Her irritation grew. Colin acted as if she'd done something completely out of character. Declan Antaeus wasn't the first man she'd had a one night stand with, and he probably wouldn't be the last either. Although, as far as Colin knew, he was the first man she'd been with since Austin had dumped her three years before. Maybe that was what had Colin's briefs in a bunch. Luckily, the two other quick encounters she'd had in the last year hadn't been with anyone her brothers knew. "Declan is a good looking man," she admitted with a nonchalant shrug.

"He's a freaking shifter, Lys. A dragon. Not one of us." Colin's words were exasperated.

She gave him a sour look from her violet eyes. "I never realized what a prejudiced snob you are," she said stiffly, still wondering where her brother's weird attitude came from. She'd never noticed that he disliked dragons before.

Colin ran a hand through his hair, ruffling the golden curls. "I'm not! I swear I'm not. It's just that Marius has this fucked up notion that the reason Declan wants to meet with him is that Antaeus International intends to suck us up."

Elysia's eyes widened in surprise. Antaeus International was a huge conglomerate. They bought all of the little mom and pop mortuary and cemetery operations they could get their hands on. Afterward, they turned them all into highly profitable cremation based ventures. Granville Cemetery was very old and catered to the elite in the vampire world. They offered cremation, but vampires tended to not go that route. There was something about being reduced to a pile of ash that vamps didn't care for. They were influenced by too many cheesy movies about the undead, Elysia thought wryly.

"So Marius thinks AI is after us?" she asked aloud.

Colin nodded. "He said the only reason Declan would want a meeting is because AI wants to buy us out."

Her brother frowned ferociously. Obviously, Colin didn't favor the idea of being bought out. She didn't either, but unlike Colin, who rarely stuck his head into anything related to financials, she knew that the company's fiscal strength would withstand any buyout attempt by AI. However, she now wondered if Declan's plans for Granville Cemetery had fueled his easy acquiescence to her come on last night. She bit her lip.

Colin, seeing her expression and knowing her better than anyone, leaned forward and grabbed her hand. "I'm sure that's not why he slept with you, Lys," he said gently. "Every man in the Funeral Director's Guild, married or single or gay, wants to fuck you."

Elysia smiled. Colin exaggerated, but not by much unfortunately. It was one of the reasons Marius dealt with industry stuff instead of her, even though finance was her area. The fact that men didn't take her business acumen seriously had always been annoying in the past. For some reason, last night at the Undertaker's Ball, she just hadn't cared. She'd wanted to find someone who could take away the ache in her gut and Declan Antaeus fit the bill perfectly. Now, however, she had to figure out what to do about him. Obviously, he wanted to continue on from where they'd left off, but Elysia just wanted to forget it happened.

"It's hard to fake a hard on," she joked. "I'm pretty sure he wasn't thinking about mergers last night."

Colin let go of her hand and sat back, looking at the tulips. "Did you go to his place?"

Elysia made a face. "Yeah, after the first time."

Her brother's eyes registered shock. "Don't tell me you fucked him in the cemetery, Lys. That's just... just..."

"Too Halloween-ish even for you?" Elysia's expression turned wry.

"Well, yeah." Colin let out a deep sigh. "I know you don't listen to my advice very often, but Lys, have you thought about what you're getting into here? Declan Antaeus isn't the kind of guy you just have fun with."

“No worries, Colin. I’m not seeing him again.”

Now, Colin gazed at her stupefied. “You’re completely off your rocker, Elysia. You want a one nighter, but you pick up the man least likely to be interested in one? On top of that, the man is interested in buying us out. He’s ruthless, dear sister, with a reputation for always getting what he wants. And you’ve now stepped right into his cross hairs. This is not going to go well.”

Elysia bit back a sigh. She had a bad feeling that Colin was right. She glanced down at the card again and suppressed a shiver. She looked up into Colin’s worried midnight blue eyes. She loved him to death, but she needed to think without the distraction of his questions and concerns. She pushed the vase of tulips toward him.

“Put that in the small visitation room,” she ordered.

“That old vamp is in there. The one with no family.” Colin’s voice sounded puzzled.

“Exactly. No one sent any flowers. He pre-paid for his visitation and service and no one’s come. Put the flowers in there. It won’t look so sad then,” she explained.

Her brother got up and picked up the vase. “You’re making a big mistake with Declan Antaeus,” he warned her as he strode to the door.

“You have no idea what I’m going to do, Colin.”

Colin snorted in disgust. “Doesn’t matter what you do. It’s all a mistake. There is no winning with a man like him. Mark my words.”

After Colin left, Elysia spun around in her chair, to gaze out the window at the expanse of green grass marked with upright tombstones. She didn’t want to replay the night before, but after her conversation with Colin it was inevitable...

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By Lex Valentine

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Chapter One

Eden walked into Carpe Noctem wearing a short black dress and thigh high boots. The outfit, along with her long shaggy ‘scene’ haircut, made her seem nearly as young as the crowd that filled the trendy vampire themed nightclub. In truth, as an immortal, she looked younger than her actual years, appearing to be in her late twenties. Her tight, sexually provocative clothing had been chosen to aid the illusion of youth.

Trolling was tough business. Eden knew this from experience. With throngs of beautiful young things packing the clubs, finding someone to fuck could be a major undertaking if you

didn't do something to set yourself above all the other immortals. Everyone wanted to get laid and available partners could be in short supply, especially when it came to vanilla sex. Despite what her older brother Sean thought, she figured her luck would hold better in the vampire bar than the ones she usually frequented. The cheesy vampire paraphernalia, the coffins, stakes and bats couldn't disguise the club's sophistication or fun factor. A sea of people, mostly humans dressed as vampires and true immortal Acerbian vampires, filled the club. Proving Sean wrong when he said the "Queen of Kink" would never go to Carpe Noctem, would give her immense satisfaction.

Ignoring the snarl that begged to get out whenever she thought of her elder brother, Eden turned toward the neon lit bar. She needed a drink before she contemplated the choice of partners offered by the club's patrons. As she elbowed herself a space at the end, her nose twitched. The scent of vanilla filled her senses, and her dragon suddenly itched to break free. Holy shit. Who the hell would walk into a social meat market smelling so innocent?

The smell came from her right. She wriggled in the tight quarters, trying to turn. Based on the sweet scent, she expected to see a woman. Instead, she found a tall man with midnight blue eyes smiling down at her.

"You just go right on trying to move," he quipped. "I'm enjoying it tremendously."

Eden's eyes narrowed. Every time she moved, her body rubbed up against his. Her hip dug into his groin and she could feel a slight telltale swelling there. Despite the fact that the man smelled all girly like a sugar cookie, the bulge held promise. She sniffed again. Sweet smelling. Smiling easily. No display of arrogance. A mellow and amused expression, eyes dancing with humor. Beta. He had to be. Her dragon stretched inside her, urging her to take him.

"Oh, really?" She raised one brow and wriggled against him again. The size of the ridge against her hip increased. Oh, yeah. He just might work out after all, she thought as she realized his more than adequate proportions weren't fully erect yet.

He nodded, his dark blue eyes gleaming as they raked over her from the top of her raven head to the tips of her designer boots. "Of course, we'd both enjoy it a lot more naked in my bed," he told her candidly.

Eden's pupils elongated as Blue Eyes roused her dragon. The scent of vanilla intensified.

"You don't believe in wasting time, I see." She turned, deliberately rubbing against him, breast to chest. In her boots, she almost matched his height.

He quirked a dark blond brow at her. "And you do? You can't tell me that the dragon in you isn't clawing to get at my cock."

Eden began to smile. He might not be a dragon, but he obviously knew them intimately. Good. One less thing she'd have to train him on. "You're a bold young thing, aren't you?"

He laughed. "I'm not as young as you think." His smile revealed vampire fangs.

She pondered the fangs for a moment. People often pretended to be vampires at Carpe Noctem. He could well be one of the wannabes. After all, she'd never met a vampire who smelt of vanilla before. Usually, the real ones smelled of blood. He didn't smell like a human either though. That vanilla scent masked his true nature and it annoyed her a little.

He shifted his hips against her and the hard ridge of his cock bumped against her belly. Her dragon poked her with its claws. Her thong grew damp as she rubbed against his erection. She finally decided he must be a real immortal, an Acerbian vampire.

"I just have a feeling I'm older than you. Indulge me," she said. "I like being a cougar." She reached down and boldly stroked the front of his jeans.

His engaging smile widened. "I'll be teacher's pet, I promise," he joked.

Her eyes narrowed. "Not a bad game. Have you been bad today? Do you need a spanking?"

As the words fell from her lips, she could have kicked herself. Tonight was supposed to be about vanilla sex, not toys or fetishes. However, the blond man just shrugged. "I'd rather just fuck you. All that other crap isn't necessary for me. As you can tell, I'm pretty much good to go."

His eyes gleamed preternaturally, answering her earlier questions about his status as an immortal. One hand cupped the side of her face, the long elegant fingers sliding into her dark hair. Angling his head toward hers, he dropped a quick kiss on her lips. An electric tingle went through Eden's body and her dragon came rushing to the surface of her skin.

When he deepened the kiss, parting her lips with his tongue, she sighed into his mouth. His free hand slid over her hip and curved over her taut buttock. She rubbed herself against him again as that sugar cookie scent grew stronger. Lifting her arms, she draped them over his broad shoulders, feeling the hard muscle and bone beneath his silk shirt. He sucked on her tongue and heat pooled deliciously between her thighs. Gods, he was hot!

"You know, at your ages, you should really get a room," a snarky voice spoke behind Eden.

The blond man lifted his head, his expression tinged with annoyance that only lasted a moment. Recognition bloomed in the midnight blue depths of his eyes and his lips twitched into a smile.

"Hey, I know you. You're..."

"Karl with a K... that elf with the internet gossip show... yeah, yeah," the elf said with a sarcastic laugh. "Everyone knows me, kid. Especially here."

Eden turned and looked at the man on the bar stool behind her. He had a half empty glass of Guinness in front of him and a bowl of bat-shaped pretzels. His grey-green eyes stared at her unblinkingly from behind wire-rimmed glasses. She frowned.

"You're immortal. Why are you wearing glasses?"

Karl gave her a look that would have withered most people. "I'm told wearing glasses gives you character. Since I don't have any character, I figured I'd manufacture some," he drawled.

Her blond hunk openly grinned now. Apparently, he found Karl's snarky sarcasm amusing. "I watch your show all the time. You have plenty of character. You're funnier than all the shows on TV."

"Tell that to my producer. He bitches daily that he's gonna fire me." Karl took a sip of his ale. "I meant what I said, you know. Get a room. All this grinding and humping is for the kids who got nowhere to go. You two are obviously old enough and wealthy enough to afford the room. So go there and grind. I don't like having to protect my drink from elbows that are in the throes of lust," he complained.

Mr. Sugar Cookie Scent chuckled. "Sure, Karl. Nice meeting you." He took hold of Eden's elbow.

Karl raised one brow at them. "We haven't been formally introduced, but I know who you are. And more importantly, I know who *you* are," he said, his eyes landing on Eden with a wicked gleam.

She opened her mouth to tell him to shut up when he waved a hand at her in a shooing motion. "I'm not telling. Names or lack of them is strictly between you two grinders. Now, would you mind letting me get back to my drinking here? Fucking horny immortals," he grumbled, turning away from them.

The blond man pulled her away from the bar toward the exit. "Where to?" he asked as they stepped out onto the street.

A cab whooshed up to the curb beside them and she opened the door, getting in. The blond man followed her. She gave the cabbie the name of a posh hotel on Park Avenue. As the cab took off, the blond man smiled. "From out of town? Me too."

Eden shrugged. "I'm here more than anywhere else. I travel almost constantly for work so I don't have a permanent place to live unless you count a dozen boxes of crap at my brother's house," she said in a dismissive tone.

"I can't imagine not having a home. I'm from the west coast myself."

Tall, blond, and vanilla's chatty behavior started to annoy her so she slid her hand up his jean-clad thigh and squeezed his half hard dick. It responded instantly to her touch. She smiled at him, her curved dragon fangs showing.

He sucked in a breath, his hand coming up to cup her breast. "I gather you're not much for chitchat," he said, his thumb teasing her nipple through the soft material of her dress.

"Nope," she replied. Naturally reticent, when her horny dragon raged, she was even less inclined to words. Only action of a sexual nature would calm the beast inside her. "Just looking for some vanilla sex. Nothing more. Nothing less."

"Well, just in case you feel the urge to shout my name later, it's Colin," he said and grabbed her by the back of the head.

Shock rippled through Eden as he held her firmly. He kissed her deeply, ravaging her mouth with the kind of kiss she'd expect from an Alpha, not a Beta like Colin. If his kiss hadn't

completely overwhelmed her and made thinking next to impossible, she would have wondered if she had pegged him wrong. Where his kiss had been leisurely before, now it burned hot and urgent, demanding a response from her rather than accepting what she doled out to him.

Abruptly, he let her go. Her chest heaved as she sucked in great gulps of air. Colin's eyes glinted enigmatically at her in the dim light of the cab. "You gotta be more careful about judging a book by its cover," he growled.

She blinked. He looked at her with a feral light in his eyes. Ho-ly shit. She'd never misjudged an Alpha before. Of course, her familiarity with vampires fell far below that of dragons and fae men. She'd always been rather skittish around vamps. All that biting and blood sucking...

Colin took her chin in his hand, forcing her to meet his gaze. The midnight blue irises glowed preternaturally again, and she could feel the steely strength in his long elegant fingers. "You're lucky I'm a nice guy and all I want is to fuck your pretty pink pussy," he whispered. "Walking into a vampire club and making snap judgments about my kind can get you drained, despite the fact that you're a dragon."

Her eyes widened a little. He smiled then, and the sunny, amusing persona he'd displayed at the club, the persona that had shouted Beta to her, snapped back into place. "You are going to let me fuck your pretty pink pussy, aren't you?" he asked as his fingers turned from steel to silk, sliding warmly across her skin.

Eden nodded. Several strands of her raven hair caught in the golden stubble that covered his jaw. His vanilla, sugar cookie scent grew stronger and she realized his arousal intensified it. The more aroused he became, the stronger the scent grew. The sweet smell flooded her entire being, making her mouth water. She wondered what he tasted like...

In a split second, the dragon within her roared to life. She pushed Colin against the back of the cab's seat and kissed him hard, her lips and tongue sucking urgently at his. The heat and depth of the kiss pushed her arousal up several notches. It had been a long time since a man had affected her so strongly, and never had one's scent overpowered her as Colin's did. Potent and distinctive, she would have been able to find him in a crowd of thousands at Madison Square Garden. Definitely something to remember if she ever had to hunt for him.

Colin's hands slid up under the hem of her mini dress, his fingers digging into her ass. She rubbed herself against him and he rewarded her with another growl. Pure sex emanated from the sound, with none of the male fierceness that had colored it previously. The sound skittered along her nerve endings, reaching her inner dragon and rousing the beast's tremendous sexual appetite.

Heat and wetness rushed to the sensitive flesh between her thighs. Colin's nostrils flared and she knew he had caught the scent of her sex. Beneath her hand, his cock had swollen to a satisfying proportion. The long thick ridge behind the zipper of his jeans promised to fill her as no one had before. Size had never mattered to her, but then, she'd never had someone as big as Colin promised to be.

The cab screeched to a stop, the centrifugal force pushing her back against the seat and away from the press of Colin's body. She sprawled awkwardly; her skirt hitched up so far her thong showed. The driver didn't even bother to look in the rear view mirror at her. Colin ran his hands over his face, then opened the door and got out. He reached in, holding out a hand

for her. She put hers in it and let him pull her out of the cab. Tugging her dress down, she waited as he paid the driver.

When Colin turned toward her, she saw the feverish glitter in his eyes. He apparently didn't care that anyone who chose to look at his crotch would see the bulge of his erection. He took her arm and they walked boldly into the lobby of the expensive hotel. Exhilaration swept through Eden as they headed toward the elevator. Once in the car, she pushed the six and the car swept upward. Her dragon clawed at her insides. She was so aroused, she expected her cream to drip down her bare thighs any moment.

At her floor, they got off the elevator, and she turned down the plushly carpeted corridor, her long legs eating up the distance to her room. As she neared it, she took out her keycard. She stopped in front of 669, slipping the keycard in the slot. Colin chuckled at the room number. Moments later, he closed the door, sticking the Do Not Disturb sign on it. When he turned toward her, she reached back and unzipped her dress, letting it fall to the floor.

Standing in front of Colin in her black silk thong and leather boots, a sense of empowerment filled her. Her fingers twitched, aching for the thick handle of her whip. Colin looked at her hand and arched one blond brow in amusement, almost as if he could read her thoughts. He casually pulled off his jacket and tossed it on the chair, following it with his shirt.

Eden's eyes raked over the muscles of his arms and chest. He had a fine boned aristocratic caste to his build, with pale gold skin, a shade or two lighter than her own tan. The muscles of his arms, pecs, and shoulders were sculpted and well defined, but not bulky. His rock hard abs had classic six pack ridges. A fine dust of blond hair encircled each of his pale brown nipples... pale brown pierced nipples.

Her lips quirked in a smile. He really wasn't what he appeared to be, she thought as he bent and removed his shoes and socks. When he straightened, she briefly eyed his long narrow feet. Elegant like his hands. Her gaze shifted to those hands. They pulled down the zipper of his jeans, pushing the denim down his muscular thighs. He kicked the jeans away and hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his boxers. She stared at him thoughtfully, deciding that he had predictable taste in underwear. He seemed like a boxers kind of guy. With a practiced flick, the garment in question hit the floor and he kicked them in the same direction as the jeans.

"Will I do?" he asked, as her eyes wandered his hard body. Dark gold hair arched from his navel to his groin. She saw that he kept himself well trimmed and thought that it extended to his balls too. Even from a distance, they seemed smooth. He had a larger cock than the bulge in his jeans had given away, she noted, taking in his girth and length. Her mouth watered at the thought of licking him.

"I believe you will." Desire turned her voice husky and unconsciously, her fingers reached down to her panty line to stroke over her clan mark. The dragon inside her began to pace. Touching the swirling lines of the clan mark that covered the soft skin inside her hipbone made her even hornier.

"Your clan mark?" he asked quietly, watching her stroke it.

She nodded and he walked toward her, reaching out to brush one long finger over the mark. Her inner dragon preened at his touch. She knew the mark just looked like a tribal

dragon tattoo to the uninitiated. However, Colin seemed to know about clan marks and how they reacted to touch.

"You're a black dragon. I'm not sure I recognize the clan though," he murmured, circling her and looking up and down her body.

"It doesn't matter. All you really want is to fuck my pretty pink pussy, right?" she reminded him with a lift of her brows.

Colin smiled angelically. "For now, yes, although, you have yet to show it to me..."

As his voice trailed away, Eden bent over and unzipped her boots. She could feel Colin's eyes on her breasts as if he touched her. The weight of his gaze made her rush and she kicked the expensive designer footwear off, something she never did. She lifted her head, her eyes holding his as she shimmied out of the black silk thong.

Inside her, the dragon roared, knowing that the tension they shared would soon be released. Eden walked over to the bed and ripped the covers back. Lying on the sheets, she spread her legs so that Colin could see the pussy he'd promised to fuck. She didn't need a mirror to know that her flesh glistened wetly in the low light. She could feel her swollen, sensitive lips throbbing. She stroked her hand over the clan mark and her nipples tightened painfully.

If you want it, come and get it, bite boy. Standing there staring at it, doesn't do either of us any good.

Colin's eyes jerked to hers and for a split second she had the weird sense that he had heard her thoughts, something that sent fear arcing through her. But then he flashed a seductive smile that widened as he started toward her. In a flood of lust that drowned her momentary fear, she gazed mesmerized at the thick erection that bobbed with each of his steps.

"It really is very pink and very pretty," he said softly, his tone filled with satisfaction.

When he reached the side of the bed, his long fingers trailed over her knee and up the inside of her thigh. Her heart thundered in her chest and her dragon's harsh breathing sent a trail of smoke from her nostrils.

Colin leaned over her, his hands denting the mattress on either side of her hips as he sat on the edge of the bed. "How much foreplay do you want, baby? Because as far as I'm concerned, what happened in the cab was all I need."

Eden licked her lips, watching as Colin's eyes darkened even more. "I don't need any more teasing. Just fuck me hard and fast before I explode from looking at you."

She didn't know what to expect, but what happened next still surprised her. With an economy of movement that made it all seem like a single smooth move, Colin reached out, flipped her onto her belly, pulled her hips back against his and thrust the entire length of his cock into her throbbing wetness. She let out a startled half yelp, half moan. He filled her so tightly it bordered on pain. Taking someone as big as him without any warning had driven every ounce of air from her lungs.

Colin's fingers roughly pinched and twisted her hard nipples. Pleasure ripped through her in a great wave. She had no idea how he knew what she liked. He certainly didn't look like a

rough sex sorta guy. He looked cultured and refined, the elegant and arrogant sort who liked to order women to service him.

He jerked her up off her hands, his chest cradling and supporting her torso. His hips stilled as his hands swept over her body, finding all the places she most liked to be touched. When she moaned uncontrollably, he licked her neck and she shivered. The most incredible sensations buffeted her body when his tongue stroked over her skin. She almost asked him to bite her, but he bent her over again. Her palms hit the mattress as his hips slammed into her ass. He pulled back and thrust into her forcefully.

Eden's pussy stretched to accommodate him while clinging to his thickness. He fucked her harder than she'd ever been fucked before. The head of his cock battered her G-spot with every thrust. Shivers of pleasure racked her body. Her orgasm crested and she cried out, tossing her head.

Colin chuckled but his tempo didn't lessen. He gave her exactly what she'd asked for. She shuddered and gasped for air, her heart racing thunderously. Unbelievably, as one long finger flicked over her clit, she found herself coming again.

She knew he could feel her spasms, feel her pussy clamping down on his thick cock. His strokes became shorter. The slap of his hips against her ass grew more frantic. His teeth nipped the back of her neck as his hands tightened on her thighs.

"Oh, baby. Come for me one more time. You can do it," he growled.

His tongue licked at her neck in time to the glide of his fingers against her clit. His cock filled her so full he could barely press inside her despite the fact that she was wetter than she had ever been. His thumb stroked over her mark and inside her, the dragon roared as heat flooded her veins. Her pussy clutched his cock as her whole body vibrated in a third orgasm.

With a muffled cry, Colin came. His cock jerked inside her and she could feel the gush of hot seed that filled her. Shaking uncontrollably, her arms gave out and her face landed on the sheet, her ass still in the air as Colin's cock throbbed inside her, spurts of cum still erupting from him. Finally, he pulled out of her. She moaned at the feel of his flesh separating from hers, leaving her sensitive, open and exposed.

Colin flopped onto his back beside her and her knees gave out, her lower body sprawling bonelessly on the bed. They looked at each other, both of them gasping for air. Then Colin reached out and brushed a lock of hair off her face.

"I'll give you fifteen minutes to recover. Then I'm pounding that pretty pink pussy again after I lick it into submission."

Eden's eyes popped open in astonishment. She didn't know what astonished her more, the fact that he would be ready again so soon or the way he took control. His lips curved in a grin.

"I don't think you'll need any of the toys I'm sure you have here. We'll just fuck. I'm good at it and I like to do it for hours." His midnight blue eyes twinkled at her. "Unless you're sending me away now that you've come."

Although he hadn't framed his words as a question, she shook her head anyway. "I don't think I can send you away. At least, not until I'm worn out and can't walk," she replied, her own smile growing as approval flashed across his face.

“Good.” He leaned over and kissed her hard. “Time for tongues and fingers to discover cocks and pussies.”

He grabbed her hand and placed it on his half-hard cock, still wet with her juice and his seed. She stroked him, wondering why she’d never been into biters before. Unbidden, her mind went back the phone call that had sent her storming into Carpe Noctem looking to get laid. An outcast to her family, she rarely went home, rarely participated in family events. Even so, she loved her siblings. When one of them had accused her of being the Queen of Kink, an unfeeling bitch of a slut who lived to get off, it stung. Those words from someone she had looked up to her entire life, struck deeply into emotions she struggled daily to control. To survive the pain, she’d retreated into the cold bitch persona she’d been accused of.

Now, that same self-preservation kept the lid on her emotions, when she looked at Colin. The core of her wanted to know him, but the icy bitch who’d taken control of her during that painful phone call refused to let go. The bitch coolly surveyed Colin, wondering why she hadn’t hit on vampires before. She snarkily thought that if she had known biters were this good, she would have been picking them up regularly from Carpe Noctem. And that same cold bitch decided that she had more one item she could add to her sexual buffet menu now that she knew about vampires’ stamina.

Inside her, behind the icy bitch, the real Eden gazed at Colin’s beautiful face and wished her life was different.

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Prologue

Alfred Stone leaned back in the sauna, casually adjusting a white towel over his naked lap. His voice sounded as casual as his demeanor, but to his one man audience, the tone rang more warning bells than a three alarm fire.

"I am Magia. My job is to ensure that nature's intended matings actually occur."

Sean Antaeus stared at his best friend in shock. "You have got to be joking." Nothing in his life had prepared him for the words Alfred had spoken. It wasn't so much what Alfred had said about Sean's younger brother, it was what Alfred had revealed about himself.

The Darkworld held people with power and powerful people. Sean had been living in a dream world thinking that Alfred, as the head of the Funeral Directors Guild, was merely a powerful person. Now, he knew the truth.

"Sean, I wouldn't have told you if I didn't think you could handle the information. My job isn't always easy. Your family has been especially hard. In fact, I need Marius' help too. His family is going to be just as tough." Alfred's brow crinkled with worry as he spoke.

Sean arched a sardonic brow at him. "So you're letting Marius in on the secret too?"

A sigh escaped Alfred.

Sean thought it sounded rather dramatic and long suffering, which made him feel like he'd walked into some kind of set up.

"If you knew what I was up against, you wouldn't ask me that," Alfred replied in a morose voice.

Now, Sean knew he'd been played. Maybe not a lot, because at the core of it all, he knew instinctively that Alfred had spoken the truth, but Sean also could tell when he'd been manipulated. After all, he was a master of manipulation himself. *Took one to know one.*

"So you're telling me that both Diandra and I were the victims of your...gift?" Sean put his friend on the spot.

Alfred shifted uncomfortably on the sauna's seat. "Not victims, Sean. Recipients of a power that managed to keep you from fucking up your life. If it weren't for me, do you think either you or your sister would have ended up mated? Both of you were so stubborn and arrogant, refusing to see the truth, not wanting to be seen as weak."

Alfred made a rude sound and his gaze locked with Sean's. "If I hadn't butted in and used my gift to help you, both you and Diandra would be single today and unhappier than you could ever imagine," he said solemnly.

Sean bit back his own sigh. He couldn't imagine. His life would be awful if he didn't have his mate and wife, Careen. Yet, getting to the place where he'd accepted that he had a mate, a woman he loved beyond everything else in his life, had been a particularly rough road. The same had held true for his sister Diandra. Her path to love and marriage had been every bit as rocky. Now, Alfred made it seem like neither he nor Diandra would have managed to mate without a nudge from Alfred's power.

"Please tell me that you didn't pick our mates," he growled, feeling unnerved by everything Alfred had told him.

"Of course not. Those are nature chosen. But it's my job to ensure that those who are resistant become...more amenable to having a mate." Alfred smiled, something Sean knew he rarely did. "I smooth the path in any way I can without disrupting the natural flow of a mating."

Sean's brain raced as he absorbed Alfred's words. "And now you're telling me that Holden is in trouble?"

Alfred nodded solemnly. "A lot more trouble than you and Diandra put together. I need your help, Sean, or your brother will be unhappy until the day he passes to the Afterlife."

"Fuck." Alfred had him. Sean loved his younger siblings fiercely. He would fight anything that threatened their lives and happiness.

"So you're in." Alfred looked at him expectantly, triumph already shining in his eyes.

This time Sean did sigh. "Yeah. I'm in."

He shook hands with Alfred and realized that he'd sealed a pact of duplicity and manipulation as he did so. Luckily, being Machiavellian was second nature to Sean, and he bet Alfred knew that fact quite well.

Chapter One

The first to arrive, Holden slipped into his seat and opened his leather covered notepad with irritation. He disliked rah rah meetings. Despite all the team building pep talks, things always went back to the way they had always been...with his oldest brother Sean wielding his iron fist and micro-managing while he and his other brother Declan struggled not to let Sean overwhelm them.

In Holden's opinion, corporate life had been worse while Declan had been gone. During Declan's tenure at a European conglomerate, Sean had refused to replace him. Instead, Holden's oldest brother had taken on acquisitions himself in his brother's absence. Sean had gone crazy buying up whatever he could. Declan had a lot more finesse and savvy when it came to choosing the funeral homes and cemeteries that offered the best value. The company needed Declan's firm hand and cool head when it came to acquiring new businesses and Holden had been relieved when his brother returned to Antaeus International.

Declan's return to the company heralded the end of their sister Eden's term of employment in the corporate world. Her contributions to the company were myriad, but all of them had been tainted by her unhappiness in that environment and Sean's determination to keep her there. It had all come to a head not long after Declan's return. Eden had ditched her

marketing job at Antaeus International, packed up her cameras, and headed to New York City. Within a few months, she'd become the fashion industry's new hot photographer, making her name shooting nearly naked men in designer underwear. Sean's fury knew no bounds over her defection and both Holden and Declan had borne the brunt of it.

The door opened and a muscular man with unruly black curls entered the room. Holden cocked one brow up at Vahid Delrey, his brother Sean's right hand man and the company's Chief Operating Officer. Vahid had also been Eden's live-in boyfriend for two years prior to her departure from all things Antaeus. Holden had always been amazed that Vahid had retained his cool demeanor, his deepest emotions, if he had any, masked from everyone when Eden had dumped him. Not for the first time, Holden wondered how Vahid had ever gotten together with his free-spirited sister. They seemed like such polar opposites.

"This is another attempt at a team building meeting, isn't it?" Holden asked as Vahid took the chair opposite him.

A dry chuckle escaped Vahid. "You know Sean. He may suck at something, but his determination won't let him stop trying to master it anyway."

Holden felt his lips curl in a derisive smile. "My brother is a force unto himself that's for sure."

Now, Vahid's brows rose. "Nice way of saying he's an arrogant ass."

The door whooshed open and the subject of their conversation strode in with Declan and another man behind him. Holden's nose twitched. The scent of spearmint assailed him.

"Thanks for the compliment, Vahid," Sean said smoothly, a sardonic expression on his hawkish features.

Declan took the chair at the foot of the table, seating himself on Holden's left. Sean took the chair at the head of the table. The spearmint scent intensified as a man Holden didn't know took the seat beside Vahid. More staff rushed in to join the meeting, but Holden found his gaze caught by the newcomer. Intense green eyes gazed back him, an indefinable emotion churning within them. Holden had no clue as to the man's identity, but an odd sense of familiarity pricked his awareness as he stared into those enigmatic eyes. It was as if knew the man, but couldn't place where or how.

The green gaze shifted as a tall, blonde woman strode into the room. Dressed in an unrelenting black suit and matching silk shirt, her pale hair twisted into a neat chignon, Emily Carrington looked like a fashion model until one noticed her stern visage. As one of the most powerful people at Antaeus International, she held the company's purse strings in her long-fingered, capable hands. The new man smiled at her as she took a seat beside him. Her expression turned smug and the new guy's identity dawned on Holden. The wunderkind of the death care industry's financial sector, Garret Renquist.

Sean and Emily had somehow managed to lure Garret from his position as the head of finance for Stone Mortuary Services, a job he hadn't even held very long. Alfred Stone had hired him away from the biggest British mortuary conglomerate in the hope of turning him loose on the Funeral Director's Guild's financials, a big project that Alfred had spearheaded as the head of the FDG. Instead, Sean and Emily had whisked the whiz kid to Antaeus International. With an internal smirk, Holden briefly imagined the acquisition of the stock market genius taking place over a round of golf. His brother Sean golfed regularly with Alfred

and Marius Granville of Granville Cemetery, the oldest cemetery in their part of the Darkworld. Holden figured the three powerful men brokered all kinds of industry related deals during those golf games. Something told him that Garret Renquist might just have been one of those deals.

“Let’s get started,” Sean said from the head of the table. “This will be a short meeting anyway since we’re all leaving.”

“Leaving?” Holden asked, startled. What the hell was his brother up to now?

Sean’s intense golden stare turned on Holden. “Yes. Leaving. I’ll get to that in a minute.”

Holden watched as his older brother’s hawk-like gaze settled on the new guy. “Has everyone met Garret? Garret Renquist is our new Chief Investment Officer. He’ll also be working in the capacity of Budget Director under Emily, which means he’ll be working with all of you on your budgets. He comes highly recommended and has a great reputation for increasing a company’s investment returns. If you haven’t had an opportunity to introduce yourself to him, I suggest you do so over the next four days...”

Sean’s voice trailed away and Holden mentally braced himself. He knew that tone. Sean was up to something that would probably irritate the hell out of him. His brother’s suggestion that everyone introduce themselves to Garret was a thinly veiled order. Since Eden’s departure, Sean regularly did things that he knew would force his younger brother out of his comfort zone and push the limits of his patience. In the past, Holden had always bounced back from Sean’s Machiavellian power trips. Lately, he found himself beyond angry when his brother’s machinations involved him.

Turning his gaze to his notepad so his brothers wouldn’t see the anger beginning to simmer inside him, his nostrils flared as the scent of spearmint wafted toward him again. Who the hell smelled like mouthwash?

“I’ll be closing this meeting in a few minutes, but we will reconvene tonight at six over dinner at the Gargoyle Resort. You are all to go home and pack. We’re headed out to the mountains for a retreat.”

Holden’s head shot up and his eyes met his older brother’s. A gleam of triumph lit Sean’s amber eyes. Holden’s jaw tightened. Sean had made his feelings clear a few weeks before regarding the woman Holden had been dating. Since Sean had never interfered in his sex life before, Holden had been surprised that he’d even mentioned her. He’d brushed off his older brother at the time. Holden really didn’t give a shit whether Sean liked who he was fucking. It was none of Sean’s business and it wasn’t serious anyway.

Now, however, Sean’s machinations had pissed him off and cost him money. Holden had cleared his calendar for two days so he could have a long four day weekend. His intent had been to spend those days in a sexual stupor at an exclusive spa in Santa Barbara. The steep deposit he’d put down with his reservations for two would now be lost, and the woman he was seeing would require placating. Fury rose within him. The loss of the money didn’t irritate him so much, but the thought of having to soothe Gina’s ruffled feathers made Holden furious with his oldest brother. Even though Gina had a tongue that could lick all day, she also had a rather bitchy attitude that showed up when she didn’t get her way. Thanks to Sean, Holden would now be the recipient of the bitching rather than the licking.

“This will be an opportunity for us to work on some team building and strategizing. It will also give you all a chance to spend some time with Garret to see how he can help each of your departments maximize your budgets.”

Sean’s smile widened as Vahid got up and handed out brochures and packets to everyone. Holden opened his folder and stiffened. Sean had paired everyone up, forcing them to share rooms. Sean and Declan were together. Vahid shared with Todd Ryan, the Chief Technology Officer and Holden’s draw was...the new guy. His head shot up and his gaze collided with Garret’s intense stare. A little smile quirked up one corner of the man’s mouth. That little smile kicked Holden’s irritation up a notch. He frowned, wondering what it would take to get Vahid to trade with him.

Holden’s eyes tracked Vahid around the table. When the head of Operations returned to his seat, he cocked a brow up at Holden. His smirky expression dashed Holden’s hopes for a trade. Vahid obviously knew that Sean had put the new executive with his youngest brother for a reason.

Fuck! Anger tore through Holden at his brother’s little games. Grinding his teeth together, he eyed the itinerary included in the packet. All the rah rah stuff was there and, even worse, there were scheduled strategizing sessions between each set of partners. Great, now he had to talk business with the finance geek all weekend instead of spending his time getting blown and fucked by the hottest woman he’d dated in a year.

The law degree and MBA hanging on his office wall had made Holden the company’s General Consul and Chief Legal Officer. He dealt mostly with contracts and the mergers that Declan arranged. Anything related to litigation got shuffled off to a firm on retainer. Holden answered directly to Sean, but spent most of his time working with Declan. Looking at the itinerary for the next four days he couldn’t believe Sean hadn’t paired him with Declan. It made better sense to him because he and Declan were in the middle of some delicate takeover negotiations with an Australian company. He didn’t have any strategizing to do with the bean counter, Holden thought with annoyance. Pairing him with the whiz kid had to be yet another Sean Antaeus production.

Holden watched Sean close the meeting. An odd glow of triumph lurked in the golden depths of Sean’s eyes. Holden’s dragon senses pinged. A triumphant Sean wasn’t necessarily a good thing for the members of his family. He jerked his attention from his brother and gathered up his things, fury propelling him out of the board room. Fuck Sean. Maybe he’d just not show up at the retreat. That would teach his brother.

The scent of spearmint caused his nostrils to flare. He turned his head to find that Garret Renquist had followed him out of the board room. His frown deepened.

“I gather you’re unhappy about being paired with me.”

Visions of a cool woodland waterfall flitted through Holden’s mind at the sound of the British accented baritone. Holden didn’t know why it hadn’t dawned on him that Garret was British. The man had come from a British based company.

Holden stepped into his office and Garret followed. Holden shut the door and waved the financial whiz kid toward a chair. As he sat down behind his desk he noticed that Garret’s green eyes flickered over the wall of certificates, awards, and degrees. For a moment, Holden again had the sense that he knew the man. The spearmint scent apparently came from Garret. Holden’s office smelled like a bottle of mouthwash.

"You're the General Consul." Garret's clipped British accent made the words sound almost accusatory, though Holden knew that wasn't his intent.

With a nod, he gestured toward the wall of plaques. "I went to Harvard Law School. I wasn't top of my class, but close." He smiled a little and joked, "All the Boston beauties kept me from studying too hard so I missed out on the top three spots."

Garret's eyes glowed a little and his mouth quirked up in the same smile he'd displayed in the board room. "I've been to Boston. There are a lot of good looking women there. It's a very academic town, isn't it?"

Holden nodded absently. Something about the spearmint scent bothered him, but like the sense of familiarity he had when he looked in Garret's eyes, he couldn't quite place it. He studied the man before him more closely. They had similar builds and were about the same height. Garret stood perhaps an inch taller and he appeared to be a little leaner than Holden. His chestnut brown hair was cropped close around the back of his neck but fell over his forehead with a wave in front. He had a boyishly handsome face, but his reserved demeanor made him look rather stern. Holden wondered if the golden boy of the stock market ever had any fun. He certainly looked all business.

With a mental shrug, Holden studied the man's very green eyes. They held an open expression, but Holden felt sure that behind that expression, Garret Renquist was quite guarded. Had he been the new guy, he'd be totally on his guard.

"I'm not unhappy about being paired with you. I'm unhappy about the whole weekend," he explained, reaching out to grasp his pen, twirling it absently in his fingers. "For one, my brother Sean likes to play at being the puppet master, making us all dance on strings. For another, I had plans."

Two beats of silence followed his words. Then Garret's eyes clouded, the emerald green irises darkening. Holden figured the man didn't like the idea of Sean being a manipulator. It sure as heck wasn't something he'd want to know about his boss's boss on the first day of a new job. He felt a little sorry for Garret now. He'd obviously had no idea what Sean Antaeus was like when he accepted the position at Antaeus International.

"Look, we'll just have to make the best of it, as we do with any of these team building things Sean springs on us. I'm sure we'll find something to work on during the strategy sessions," he said easily, hoping he hadn't scared off the new guy. Sean would kill him if he did.

One of Garret's brown brows arched up. "You don't think we're a good match?"

Holden blinked at the man's odd choice of words. "There's not a lot of interaction between my department and yours. I work more closely with my brother Declan. Declan works with Emily. I'm not sure why Sean put us together."

Garret's mouth quirked knowingly as if he had knowledge Holden didn't. Resisting the urge to shift uncomfortably in his chair, Holden snuck a glance at the guy. He sat there cool as a cucumber, his expression enigmatic, while Holden could barely keep from fidgeting.

Holden looked down at his hands then and dropped the pen he'd been twirling. When he raised his head, his gaze collided with Garret's. The scent of spearmint intensified and a nervous sweat broke out on the skin between Holden's shoulder blades, making his clan mark itch. He sucked in a breath as realization hit him.

"You're a dragon."

Garret nodded, the enigmatic expression giving way to amusement. "Your natural enemy. I'm a green."

Holden made a rude sound. "The dragon clans haven't fought in a millennia. And even then, there was nothing natural about it. All the wars were about power. Not color or clan. Legend says we were all one color in the beginning. Our natural enemies were humans, not each other."

A huge smile broke out on Garret's face. "You're a purist."

Holden's stomach lurched. Geez, the man had the most brilliant smile he'd ever seen. He shook his head. "I'm a realist. Dragons were not born to kill each other. We were never each other's natural enemies. Humans on the other hand instinctively want to be rid of any being stronger than themselves. Their fear drives them."

Both of Garret's brows rose, but his smile stayed intact. "A psychology major."

"Biological Anthropology." Holden grinned, beginning to relax. Maybe the weekend wouldn't be so bad after all. In fact, it would be perfect if he had a victim. "Hey! Do you play...?"

"Tennis," Garret finished for him with a nod toward Holden's college trophies. "Although not in your league."

"That was years ago. My reflexes aren't so fast anymore. I sit at a desk all day after all."

Garret's brow cocked up again. "You don't look so out of shape."

Holden shrugged. "I'm not, but I don't play much anymore and to stay at the top of your form you have to play every day. I had the skill to go pro, but not the drive. I like working for my family." He grimaced. "My brother is a pain in the ass, but I wouldn't work for any other company."

"Your brothers, this company...Antaeus is a powerful name in this industry," Garret said quietly. "I was flattered that Alfred wanted me for the FDG and Stone. I was floored when Sean said he'd pay me more to come here."

Holden laughed. "I'll bet Alfred was tweaked. He's one of Sean's closest friends so I'm sure he gave my brother an earful, but the rest of us would never know it."

"Strangely, Alfred took it all very calmly, as if he had expected it to happen."

Holden prepared himself for the sense of familiarity when he met Garrett's gaze. "I'm sorry if I gave you the impression I was pissed at having to share a room with you."

Something indefinable flickered in Garret's eyes. He rose from his chair. "It's all right. I've been feeling a bit out of my element today so I overreacted." He turned toward the door. "I'll see you up at the resort. Maybe we can get in a couple of rounds of tennis while we're there."

Holden smiled. "I'd like that. Welcome to Antaeus International, Garret."

The other man looked back over his shoulder. "Thank you." A brief smile flashed across his face and then he was gone.

Holden sat staring at the closed door for long minutes, the scent of spearmint lingering faintly in the office. The anger he'd felt at Sean's manipulations had fizzled during his

conversation with Garret. He should know better than to get pissed anyway. It never changed anything. Holden had never known anyone to get his way more than Sean.

On his way to the elevator, he ran into Declan. "Nothing from Australia?" he asked.

His brother shook his head. "Not yet."

They both stepped into the elevator. As the door closed, Holden said, "Why did Sean stick me with the new guy?"

Declan shrugged. "Why does Sean do anything? Everything is about control with him."

"Has he messed with your private life too?" Holden's gaze sharpened as he looked at his older brother.

"What private life?" The words were cool and sardonic with a bitter edge.

Sympathy washed over Holden. His older brother had a huge thing for Elysia Granville, one of the most powerful women in their industry. However, she was engaged to the industry's biggest asshole, Austin Stone. Holden didn't understand how such a smart woman had ended up with such a monumental jackass. A woman like her belonged with a man like his brother, not a weasel like Austin.

"I gather Sean's little jaunt to the mountains is interfering with your plans," Declan said, his voice rumbling out of his broad chest.

Holden looked up to find his brother's expression filled with understanding. "Yeah. It's gonna cost me a bundle too between the deposit on the suite at the spa and keeping Gina from being disappointed."

Declan's eyes twinkled. "Buy her an expensive bracelet. She's mercenary enough to be placated by rocks."

The elevator stopped at the underground garage and they headed toward their assigned parking spots. "Why do you and Sean think that's all Gina wants from me?" Holden grumbled as he watched his brother's tall form move toward his Mercedes.

Declan shot him an amused glance over the roof of the car. "Because it's obvious?"

Holden grimaced. "Money isn't the only thing she wants. She likes my cock too."

His brother grinned, white teeth flashing in his tanned face. "Well, she should. Especially when the man attached to the cock buys expensive presents. Just watch it with her, little brother. She wants the gold ring with rocks and you just want to get your rocks off."

Holden walked over to his SUV. "Yeah, well, she can want the ring, but that doesn't mean she'll get it. I'm not the marrying type."

"Neither was Sean." Declan laughed and unlocked his car, the headlights flashing as the alarm disarmed. "I'll see you at the resort. Good luck appeasing Gina."

As Holden drove to his condo, he pondered his brother's words. He knew Gina wanted to marry him. He knew she was dazzled by his job, his money, and his good looks. He also knew that a woman like her would never fit in his family. For all their money, the Antaeus siblings were all about home and hearth and true mates. Holden wouldn't dream of marrying a social climber like Gina. A woman like her could never be his mate. Maybe Sean's interference wasn't such an inconvenience after all. Although left with only his hand to see to his sexual

satisfaction, being rid of Gina and her demands was more of a relief than he'd wanted to admit.

Holden's condo was in a high rise condominium complex only two blocks from the beach. He drove into the underground garage and parked in the space reserved for the penthouse. His footsteps echoed in the cement structure as he walked to the elevator. Thoughts echoed in his head too. Everything from Declan's bitterness to Sean's manipulations to the prospect of kicking Garret's ass at tennis. The weekend was starting to look up.

In the elevator, he punched in the security code that took him to the penthouse level. The elevator opened onto a foyer that had but one door, his. Unlocking the penthouse door and automatically disarming the alarm, Holden stepped into his home. From his living room, he had an unparalleled view of the coast in both directions. His expensive, but comfortable furniture softened the starkly modern architecture. It was a bachelor's home, not meant for entertaining in spite of its size.

Holden jerked off his tie and jacket, tossing them on the brown leather couch. In the kitchen, he pulled open one side of the huge brushed aluminum refrigerator and took out a bottle of water. As he drank, he eyed the crayon drawings stuck to the refrigerator with magnets. His sister Diandra's twins were the only Antaeus offspring. He, Declan, and Eden were unmated. Sean and Caren hadn't had any children yet. Holden figured his brother wouldn't have kids until all his siblings were mated. It was a very Sean way to go about things.

For himself, he didn't even wonder if he had a mate. He didn't particularly care. Kids and a white picket fence and the kind of woman who would want that life were so not his style. On the other hand, society type women and career women weren't really his type either. People with that kind of driven personality irritated him which is why he was no longer pissed at missing his weekend with Gina. He really only had one use for her and now that he realized it, he was too nice a guy to continue fucking her when he didn't even like her.

As he headed for his bedroom, Holden wondered if Garret Renquist was the driven type. He didn't seem that way, but it was tough to tell with wonder boys. Things seemed to come so easily to them that if they were driven, those around them never noticed. Holden opened his packed suitcase and changed some of the items so that now his clothing was more suited to a mountain business retreat rather than a beachside spa. Once the suitcase was ready to go, Holden picked up the phone and called the exclusive jeweler his family always used. He ordered an elegant ruby bracelet to be delivered to Gina that evening and headed down to his car.

He figured he'd call Gina while he drove so she'd know he wasn't lying to her about having to go to the mountains. It was going to be an uncomfortable call, so doing it while driving also gave him the excuse of the call dropping if he got tired of listening to her rage or whine. The more he thought about how unpleasant the call would probably be, the more he just wanted to be rid of her. And so, when he was halfway up the mountain pass on the way to Gargoyle Resort, Holden found himself breaking up with Gina over the phone.

She whined. She raged. She cursed him in Italian. And then he hit a dead spot and the call dropped. Sighing with relief, he shut off his cell phone. The remainder of the drive to the resort relaxed him and by the time he arrived, Holden looked forward to playing tennis with Garret. He loved tennis and rarely got the opportunity to play anymore. He hoped Garret played well enough to challenge him.

Holden's shared suite turned out to have two bedrooms and a well stocked wet bar in the sitting room between the two rooms. Since he was the first one there, he picked one of the rooms and unpacked. As he stowed away his suitcase, he heard the door open. He walked into the sitting room to find Garret standing in front of the door, taking in his surroundings.

"It's a two bedroom suite," Holden said with a grin. He gestured toward the door across from him. "That one's yours."

Garret returned his smile and picked up his suitcase. "Thanks."

"Can I get you a drink while you unpack? It's an hour until dinner and there's a fully stocked bar here. No mini bottles." Holden's nose twitched as the spearmint scent reached him. He'd never smelled cologne like that before.

"That would be great. Just a glass of red wine if they have it, please," Garret replied as he walked toward his room.

Holden heard the sound of Garret opening his suitcase and then the closet door. He searched through the wet bar's stock of alcohol looking for wine and found a full size bottle of Merlot and one of Cabernet Sauvignon. The Merlot was a decent vintage and he decided he'd have a glass. He pulled out a corkscrew, expertly removed the cork, and poured two glasses before ambling over to Garret's bedroom door.

The British man had his back to Holden, putting folded shirts in the dresser. Holden noticed absently that they were dressed similarly in khaki slacks and polo shirts. Without the suit jacket covering his torso, it was obvious that Garret was taller, yet leaner, with a narrow waist and broad shoulders.

"Here's your wine. They had a decent vintage of Merlot. Surprised me," Holden said as he watched Garret finish unpacking. The whiz kid had an elegance of movement that was graceful in its economy. Certainly not what he expected of a bean counter.

Garret stowed his suitcase, turned, and took the glass of wine from Holden, their fingers brushing briefly. A frisson of awareness trickled down Holden's spine at the touch of Garret's warm hand. Something about him affected Holden physically. First, there was that odd prickling of his clan mark that he'd felt earlier and now the touch of their hands made him feel flushed. Not to mention that damned spearmint scent that assailed his nose.

Magia. The thought flashed through Holden's mind and he wondered if Garret was more than just a green dragon. Sometimes dragons had magical abilities, but usually those that did belonged to the community of Magia rather than the dragons. He wished he understood what unsettled him so much about the other man.

Abruptly, he turned and walked back into the sitting room, opening the slider to the balcony. He stepped outside into the crisp mountain air and sat down on a comfortable patio chair. Garret followed him and took the chair on the other side of the small table.

"This is a very tolerable Merlot."

The smooth British accent caused Holden's clan mark to prickle yet again and even though they were outside, the spearmint scent was just as strong as it had been inside. Holden didn't understand why the man had such an odd impact on him. Again, he wondered whether Garret was Magia. It would certainly explain his reactions to the guy. His annoyance at being unable to figure out Garret rose.

"So how are you settling in?" he asked abruptly. "Are you looking for a place to live?"

Garret nodded, his eyes twinkling a little as if he had a secret. "Yes. Something with a view of the coastline, rather more modern than not. Nothing I need to spend time keeping up...that sort of place," he replied.

"You should look around my neighborhood. There are lots of very nice condo complexes like that. In fact, I can ask my association manager for a list of availabilities if you'd like." Holden couldn't believe what had just come out of his mouth. He didn't need the new guy living in the same building! Not that he could take the words back now...

"Thank you. I would appreciate that very much."

Garret's cool, even tones set Holden's back teeth to grinding silently, although for the life of him, he didn't know why. "I'll call her this weekend and have her fax a list to you at the office," he muttered, lifting his wine glass to his mouth and gulping down half the contents.

The emerald eyes of his companion glittered knowingly. Frustrated by how the man unsettled him, Holden knocked back the rest of his wine and rose to his feet. "It's almost time for dinner. I'm going down to the restaurant."

Garret's expression turned sympathetic as if he knew how Holden felt. He didn't speak, but those uncanny eyes watched him like a hawk. A muffled sound of exasperation escaped Holden. "I don't get you," he ground out in a low tone that expressed his frustration. "Are you Magia or what? Cause I'm all edgy and weird around you and I don't know why. My clan mark is prickling. You smell like a pack of spearmint gum. Every time I look at you, I think I know you from somewhere, but I can't place where! What the hell is going on?"

The glow in Garret's eyes intensified as he rose to his feet, facing Holden. "Think about what you just said to me, Holden," he said quietly. "Think about what those things might signify. I'm not Magia, but as far as you're concerned, I'm something far more rare and important."

He walked over to the sliding door and then stopped, looking back at Holden. "Open your mind, Holden Antaeus. Life doesn't always fit in neat little boxes or compartments. Things happen for a reason."

Garret stepped into the sitting room, disappearing behind the blinds. Holden stared at the empty doorway for long moments. Emotions tugged inside him. Even though Garret had gone inside, Holden could still smell his spearmint scent. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. That scent...his dragon lore came rushing back to him and his jaw went slack with shock.

Holy shit! No fucking way!

He shook with reaction, his fingers clutching the empty wine glass convulsively. It couldn't be true. It wasn't possible. Somehow Sean had set him up. His brothers were punking him, playing him off against the British man somehow. The guy was probably some tennis stud who would kick his ass six ways from Sunday the moment they took their rackets out. Yet, how could they have manufactured his scent and Holden's reaction to that scent?

Holden stormed into the suite, fumbling a little with the door and the blinds. As he stumbled into the sitting room, Garret turned, his hand dropping from the handle of the suite's door. Their eyes met, Garret's sympathetic. Holden knew his expression was wild with disbelief. This couldn't be happening!

Garret sighed loudly and turned his back on the door, facing Holden fully. "It's not as complicated as you think, Holden," he said quietly. "I don't know why either. I just know it *is* and I recognized you right away. What you do with the knowledge, how you deal with it, is up to you, but you cannot change it unless one of us dies."

A growl began deep in Holden's chest as fear took hold of him. "Something's wrong!" he burst out, his emotions wildly overwrought.

Garret shook his head. "No. Something's very right." He moved, crossing the room swiftly to stop a few inches from Holden who wanted to recoil but somehow managed not to. His voice when he spoke was soft, but firm. "Holden, you're my mate."

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Prologue

Stepping into the spare but elegant interior of the exclusive BDSM club above the famous Paris nightclub Wicked Pleasures, every muscle in Vahid's body tensed. Deep in the core of his dragon heart, revulsion flared at what he was about to do. Still, his body and his psyche needed the release. He'd become too tense, too crabby, too pain-ridden. Without the release, the pain would become unbearable and his control would suffer.

Garrick Forrester appeared before Vahid had taken more than a few steps into the lobby. While the master had never done anything to make Vahid uncomfortable, the steel in his eyes was unnerving. Tall and angular, the Magia had run Beyond Pleasure for countless decades. Certainly, Vahid remembered hearing Garrick's name whispered when he'd spent a year living in France as an exchange student. His interest in BDSM had pretty much bloomed along with his puberty that year and he'd found out all he could about Beyond Pleasure and the Forrester brothers.

"Welcome back, Vahid." The low tones of Garrick's voice gave away his status as master. Casually commanding, but with a mesmerizing note that would have been beyond compelling to any submissive. The tone never worked on Vahid. He'd never been a sub.

Falling into step with Garrick, as the master turned and began to walk down a thickly carpeted corridor, Vahid noticed the unusual quiet of the club. Often, when he came to Beyond Pleasure, the crack of a whip and low moans could be heard.

"Slow night?" he asked the older man.

Garrick's dark grey eyes flicked over him. "New soundproofing," he replied with a slight smile.

Pushing open a door at the end of the corridor, Garrick ushered Vahid into a luxurious locker room. "Your things are where they usually are. You've been given the Red Room. I believe you know the way." Garrick raised a brow and Vahid nodded.

"Yes. I do. Thanks."

With a nod, Vahid turned away, crossing the room to his personal locker. Placing his palm on the front of the locker, he waited for the spell-lock to sense his presence and open the narrow metal door. It took a few seconds, but the door popped open and Vahid reached in, pulling out the trappings of his life as a Dominant.

He changed swiftly into the leather outfit he preferred when having a scene with a new sub. He reached for the whip's handle, letting it warm to his palm. He stepped out of the locker room and made his way to the red room. Because he'd been there countless times before, his feet automatically knew the path.

A few steps from the door, the strong scent of baby powder assailed his nose. Startled, he stopped in the center of the corridor, sniffing. The baby powder scent intensified and he stiffened. A mixture of astonishment and rage swept through him. Turning, he sought the direction of the scent. He twisted around and his gaze landed on a plain wood paneled door some eight feet away.

Silently, Garrick appeared again, his face set in harsh lines. He strode over to the door and pushed it open, moving with a speed that surprised Vahid. The instant the door cracked open, the scent of baby powder became overwhelming. Following Garrick into the room, Vahid saw a thickly muscled man dressed in a loin cloth and wielding a barbed cat o' nine tails. His sub hung from chains attached to the leather cuffs on her wrists, her feet restrained by a spreader bar. Nearly naked, her back a mass of bloody ribbons, her blonde head lolled on her neck, indicating her unconsciousness. Fury streaked through him and he reached for the man's whip arm, but Garrick beat him to it.

The master of Beyond Pleasure ripped the whip from the man's hand and tossed it down, ordering, "Out! Do not show your face here again. It is your duty to know when your sub has had enough."

"She didn't use her safe word," the man whined, cowering away from Garrick.

"No excuses." Garrick's grim expression didn't change, and the man slunk out of the room.

Vahid strode over to the unconscious woman, carefully cupping her face in his hands and avoiding the mess that was her back. His chest tightened painfully as he stared down at her beautiful face and softly breathed her name. "Emily."

PART ONE

Three Years Ago

Chapter One

On the second day of the second week of her new job, Emily got a whiff of allspice. Her nose twitched as the scent grew stronger, smelling like a freshly baked pumpkin pie. She knew what day it was, but glanced at the calendar anyway. July third. Hot dogs and barbeque ribs season, not pumpkin pie.

Two deep voices rumbled in the corridor outside her office. She tensed. She had yet to meet her cousin and new boss, Sean Antaeus. They had corresponded and spoken on the phone numerous times over the past few years, but had never met. So far, she had met both of his brothers, but not his sister. The younger Antaeus men were highly intelligent, obviously talented, and beyond good looking. She could only imagine how gorgeous the oldest Antaeus was. Their dark beauty made her feel pale and insignificant.

Swallowing hard, she fought back her fear and self doubt, armoring herself with a cool façade. She stepped to her office door and peeked out. Two men stood about five feet from her door with their backs to her. Both had black hair. One was tall and lean with a hawk like profile. The other man seemed built like a tank. His head was some three or four inches below

the tall man's yet his shoulders were just as wide if not wider. Emily could sense the thick muscles bunching and rippling beneath his clothes as he moved.

Riveted, she stared at them, the scent of allspice growing stronger by the second. Her pulse began to race and her heart pounded. Dear gods. Something inside her went completely haywire. The taller man spoke and his words caused her spine to stiffen.

"Have you met our new head of finance? Alfred swears she's a genius."

The shorter man snorted rudely. "I haven't met her, but her reputation precedes her," he replied in a nasty tone.

His voice wafted over her like a fingertip stroking her pulse points. She shivered. He had the most beautiful voice. It slipped along her skin like a silk shift, cool and rich, evocative... Something inside her snapped and she felt an insistent tugging as she breathed in the allspice scent. It came from him... the man with the voice... the shorter one...

"I've heard she could freeze the balls off a brass monkey," he went on. "No emotion. No personality. No tits."

A stabbing pain ripped through Emily's chest. The man whose rich scent roused every cell in her body thought she had no personality or emotion. She almost choked on the gall that rose in her throat. Thoughtless words. Cruel words. By the gods, he didn't even know her!

"Stop it, Vahid. That's no way to talk about a colleague you haven't even met yet," the tall man admonished sternly. "Listening to gossip doesn't become you either. You'll get farther in this world making your own judgment calls rather than relying on the observations of secretaries and clerks."

The muscular man made another rude sound. "Yeah, well, I've heard enough to know that Miss Emily Carrington from her rich, red dragon family is just as stuck up as I thought she'd be," he countered. "Maire dropped something in front of her and she just stepped over it and kept on walking. What a fucking stick up her ass popsicle. She probably has no mate because no man's willing to risk sticking his cock into a block of dry ice."

The instant the man said 'mate', Emily froze. Pain exploded in her chest and her head. With a little cry, she turned from the door, pushing it shut and stumbling across the huge corner office to the plate glass window. She stared unseeingly at the coastline that stretched for miles in either direction. Her eyes filled with tears; she willed them back, struggling to regain the cool, haughty expression she usually hid behind.

The scent of allspice had been so strong! That alone should have given the truth away. The tugging in her chest. The way his voice sent her senses into a tailspin... The man in the corridor was her mate. Vahid—the shorter one who had been so scathing—not the tall one. The taller man must have been Sean Antaeus. The other man could only be his Chief Operating Officer, Vahid Delrey.

Emily drew a shuddering breath. She'd cultivated the cold, businesslike exterior for a reason. No one had ever penetrated her armor and discovered the reason for its presence. She had always thought one day she would meet her mate, and he would take one look at her and know what she hid in her heart, despite her icy exterior. She blinked back tears as her dreams shattered. Vahid Delrey might be her mate, but he had no clue who she was. He wasn't even open-minded enough to listen to his boss about her.

She stared out the window at the marine layer blanketing the coastline. She leaned her face against the glass, a chill settling into her. Her future lay with a man who would never appreciate her, never be able to see beyond the façade she showed the world. Why had Fate dealt her yet another painful blow? Didn't she warrant even one of her dreams coming true?

A knock sounded on her door and she forced the icy mask of her public demeanor into place as she swallowed her sobs and turned around. Sean and Vahid entered, polite smiles on their faces. Actually, Sean's smile was more than polite. The black dragon seemed especially pleased to meet her.

"You must be Emily," he said striding forward to shake her hand briskly. His amber eyes flashed with pleasure. "Alfred's told me so much about you. Welcome to Antaeus International."

"You're Sean Antaeus." She smiled, knowing the movement of her mouth didn't match the expression in her eyes. She kept herself firmly guarded against both men.

Her new boss nodded, ignoring her coolness. He gestured toward the shorter man. "This is Vahid Delrey, the Chief Operating Officer. Officially, I am your boss and you report to me. If I'm not available, you go to Vahid or my brother Declan," Sean told her.

She inclined her head, knowing that the movement seemed arrogant and regal. Her eyes met Vahid's and he murmured a greeting, as he raised his hand to meet hers. The instant their palms met, fire rippled through Emily, threatening her icy outward calm. Her dragon clawed at her, wanting Vahid. In his ink dark eyes, she saw a recognition, a spark. His warm fingers caressed her hand. She fought her dragon for control, ruthlessly taking it from the beast who wanted to pounce on Vahid and bathe him in her dragonfire.

"How nice to meet you, Mr. Delrey," she murmured and pulled her hand free of his.

A slightly bereft expression flickered in his eyes. "Vahid," he said absently, his nostrils flaring.

She wondered how she smelled to him. Every dragon's mate had a unique scent. For Emily, Vahid smelled of allspice. She could tell he'd scented her, knew she was his mate. She wished she knew how she smelled to him.

"Baby powder," he murmured softly as if he'd heard her thoughts.

She jerked, taking a step back. Turning her attention to Sean, she spent the next ten minutes discussing her new duties with him while Vahid stood just out of her range of vision, completely silent.

When they turned to leave, Vahid glanced at her, and she saw the question in his black eyes.

I'm not what you want or need, Vahid Delrey. You said it yourself. I have no tits, nor warmth. And no interest whatsoever in being the mate of a man with such narrow-minded views. On the other hand, you're going to have to learn to work with me no matter how much your dragon wants me. I'm just bitch enough to be amused watching you work on that.

Vahid's eyes widened as he heard her thoughts. Cruelly, she turned her back on him, and shut him out of her head, the shards of her shattered heart ripping at her from the inside. Now, that her dreams of one day finding happiness had been ground into dust, she had to

figure out how to survive because she knew the pain of being without her mate would grow with each passing day.

As the door closed behind Vahid, Emily slumped against the cold glass of the big window. Palms and face pressed to the smooth coolness, she stared down a dozen floors to the street below. If she didn't think her dragon would shift and save her, she'd just jump.

She laughed softly. Today was nothing. She hurt, mostly from the loss of her illusions, but it was minor compared to what she now faced and what she had condemned Vahid to. In a few years, when the pain became unbearable, she might have to seek the option of suicide. It might be better than letting circumstances drive her slowly insane.

Pushing off from the glass, she went to her desk and pulled out her cell phone. She stared at the contact list, her chest aching. Then she dialed. Shaking, she fought for control as a click indicated that the call had been picked up on the other end.

"I didn't think I'd ever see you here again."

The man's voice was dispassionate, cool, yet held a note of curiosity.

"I just found my mate and blew him off," she said tersely, trying to keep her voice from shaking with fear and pain. "You'll be seeing a lot more of me now."

The man on the other end of the line sighed heavily, his regret palpable. "Em, I don't advise this. Make up with him and mate. You really don't want to travel this path."

The soft warning hardened Emily's resolve. "I was meant to fuck up my life. You already knew this about me, Dave," she growled harshly, a little laugh escaping her. "What's one more punishment in a lifetime of them?"

"Em, you're not thinking. This isn't right. You shouldn't come back here." Dave's voice sounded urgent.

"It's where I belong, Dave. I was wrong to think I could ever escape. I'm damaged goods and I always will be." Her voice was a soft whisper, a bare thread of sound. "Make sure there is someone who can accommodate me. I'll see you at seven."

Emily hung up and glanced out the window again. This time she could see her reflection, beautiful, cool, poised. Every inch the executive. Inside, her dragon moaned in pain.