



LAURA TOLOMEI

# THE SEX

VIRTUS SAGA BOOK 1

If Sendar stood a chance, perhaps it would be thanks to the arbitrary twists and turns of a blind destiny. Or maybe someone would discover the truth about the ancient ways and compromise our peaceful existence forever. Either way, people needed a hero to shed new light on the age-old mysteries. And he was just about to answer their prayers.

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The Sex  
Virtus Book 1

By

Laura Tolomei

## Dedication

*To my one true hero in this world of petty humans.*

## Introduction

“If Sendar stood a chance perhaps it would be thanks to the arbitrary twists and turns of a blind destiny. Or maybe someone would discover the truth about the ancient ways and compromise our peaceful existence forever. Either way, people needed a hero to shed new light on the age-old mysteries.

But heroes were scarce on a planet ruled by sex, its perception pervading every aspect of our lives, thus making Sendar unique in its kind. Better yet, the concept of using sex to curb violence had no equals in the universe, even if only as the result of an ambitious experiment.

So we sex up our lives without limitations of genders or numbers to spoil our pleasure for the more the better—men, women or both—and no questions asked. Those are our ways, which the phase teaches from early on, training us in the art of loving, the process then completed by the pledge.

The system works wonders for our well-being. Violent impulses, channeled through sex, magically disappear and we avoid all the usual conflicts plaguing humankind since the beginning of time. But today our precious way of life is at risk. I'll try my best to thwart the danger by guiding Sendar's new hero, or heroes as this case requires because one man alone won't be able to stand the tide, yet even if he does we can all just hope and pray to our gods the world as we know it won't collapse on us...now or ever.”

Arthur Fairchild

# Chapter One

First there was music. Sweet, mellow, smooth notes filling the vast emptiness lulled every other sound, drowning him in their velvety thickness, the melodies almost smothering, though new and different every time. Of course, he loved it. Or rather he had no other choice but to love it, even if he knew it was not his creation. Still, he prided himself on being the director of the exquisite tunes.

Then there were lights, thousand of colored flashes dispelling the darkness and connecting to each note, anticipating or delaying it according to the rhythm as shades continually varied in hues to adapt to a new melody. Again, not his handiwork, but he liked to watch the flickers matching the music, depicting the tune even before it became sound.

In time, he had learned to adjust to this foreign world, so different from his original one, although the lack of control grated on his nerves more than he cared to admit. And the nightmares...those he really could not stand.

When they began, he was not sure, though they closely followed the music and the lights to plague him with their horrible visions of violence, destructions, rapes, dismemberments, mutilations, tortures, murders, carnages, massacres. People always screamed in pain or terror, begging for mercy, before dying in atrocious sufferings. And even if the scenarios sometimes changed, the pitiful end never did.

He hated these unwanted invasions controlling his mind, the plunge into a bottomless black pit no amount of soothing music or colorful light could make tolerable. As before, he had no choice, powerless to stop the images however foul and terrifying.

He became afraid to close his eyes, terrorized by each visit, even trying to refrain from sleeping altogether, but there would come a time his eyes would close, despite his conscious effort to keep them open, to carry him into a journey of darkness, ugliness, despair, fear and dread.

There would be no getting used to the nightmares, though he could have endured them if fate had not decided otherwise. Or maybe he simply learned to seize control. Either way, he changed from the cowering, frightened spectator to become the maker of destinies, the killer, the rapist, the destroyer looking for young victims to brutalize unmercifully.

If before their cries had dismayed him, now they excited his senses, awakening a completely new pleasure that egged him to continue on his violent ways, the bloodlust soon spinning out of control as the land plunged into hell itself.

Glancing behind their shoulders, frightened young boys and girls would feel more than his breath on their necks, his craving for their smelly terror and tasty panic far more threatening to their hearts pounded in frantic beats no drummer, however well trained, could ever hope to match. But it was only the beginning. Once caught, his victims begged him for a mercy that was never forthcoming from the ruthless killer into which he had turned.

No, he laughed at their pitiful cries because he had no leniency to spare...or so he assured while cutting their throat, nice and slow, fascinated by the thin red line extending from one ear to the other, shivers running down his back in false emulation of the incomparable lethal throes shaking the body before it went deathly still.



Of course, that was only the final, compassionate end. He usually started by tying his victims to explore leisurely every bit of flesh with his precious knife, the sharp blade cutting and slicing, not in a random pattern, but following a geometric design. He created works of art on insignificant humans, even though they never appreciated the masterpieces that finally dignified their worthless hides. Then again, humans had no sense of what was important... *Or did they?*

Maybe the problem was his. The soothing music and bright flashes, which were still part of his world, seemed a striking contrast to the piercing screams or bloody red gashes dominating his life now. *But were they real or hallucinations of a deranged mind? Was any of it real? Either way, did he care? And more importantly, did it matter?*

While steadily losing the taste for sounds and lights, every experience became more alive than ever, so the rush of violence increased his power as his Virt grew proportionally to the amount of pain inflicted, bloodshed, victims injured or killed.

Just closing his eyes, he captured their agonized cries, though now they hardly broke through the music barrier, getting lost in the harmony somehow. No, better to stay with eyes wide-open to watch intriguing red drops staining pale flesh consumed by fear with a pleasure as intense as blissful sex, if not more.

This had been his world for time immemorial, but lately a new craving was disturbing his dreams. Something or someone out there attracted his attention in spite of the music, the lights or the violence, and it felt as familiar as if it belonged to him, had since the beginning of time, even if it pretended to ignore him. He would have liked to reveal his presence, his Virt mostly, but something held him back, trapped him to be precise.

No, damn it, he was not free to go. To his utter shock, he discovered he was a prisoner of the lights and sounds he had

thought to control. And humans were involved, too, accomplices to a system he now looked upon with quite different eyes, probably laughing out loud at his delusions of omnipotence. A fool...that was what he was for believing he had any power over the mysterious forces surrounding him.

The irony of it all crashed on him and he could not contain his rage. It lashed out to shake his prison's very foundation in an attempt to destroy it without succeeding in the least. This only made him more furious, especially with his human captors against which he unleashed the most horrendous scenarios—body parts carelessly scattered like pieces of a broken doll, dismembered corpses still sputtering fresh blood from the severed pieces, young people screaming with eyes flaming in terror—but to no avail. The more he wanted to escape, the more the lights, sounds and humans closed on him.

Only after several useless attempts did he realize he needed an ally. *But where to find the one?* He had never cared for people, except for purely sadistic motives, yet some seemed genuinely interested in him, even going as far as to try to communicate with him. One voice above all he recognized for it emerged above every sound—noise, scream or music it made no difference—that one soft whisper alone ever present in his mind, not just blending with the sweet melody drowning his senses, rather keeping to the fore to soothe and honey-dew into submission. But having discovered its true aim, he refused to play to its sick game of captivity.

Instead, he sought an ally among those asking for assistance, which he would have gladly refused, although the lights and sounds never shun their pleas. He already knew it had to be a woman. They easily linked to higher beings, unlike their expendable male counterparts, and many came his way to ask for the greatest Virt of all, the one he alone could grant, the one to

replicate life. So he scanned in their midst for the analytical intelligence he needed to set up the connection that would free him, however long it took for time was not a problem. Knowing it was just a dimension created by the mind, he had infinity at his disposal and he used it carefully, patiently selecting, calibrating, evaluating, weighing, hoping.

Eventually, he found her, the one possessing the logical twists and turns that allowed him to penetrate inside and lose himself in their folds. Her physical shell left him soon after they met, but he followed her, tucked away in her brilliant mind, becoming closer than an intimate friend, getting to know her better than herself, and soon convinced her of the necessity to free him.

So she came back. Obviously, his prisoners did not intend to release him, too precious they argued while detaining him forcibly, but this time he did not surrender. Instead, he used her Virt, and that of a helper, to sever the hold with one brutal blow, which he hoped could destroy the odious place to bits.

No such luck however, and he felt sorry for her because, despite her brilliant mind, she was just as limited as any other insignificant human being, refusing to wreak havoc like he wished. But at this point, he could care less, no, not now that he was finally free.

## Chapter Two

Glancing dejectedly at the unfamiliar land, he felt utterly lost. The more the horse strode forward, the more he had no idea about where he was. *Damn! The whole day spent riding home only to be in the middle of nowhere!* But the estate had to be just around the corner, so to speak, he reasoned, thinking he had probably been circling it for the past hour or so.

Furious for the waste of time, he tightened his knees around the horse's back, vowing he would reach home if it was the last thing he did. And he might just have kept his word if a fat raindrop had not hit his nose first, then his forehead.

Darkness had fallen fast, right after Stella's setting, and the sky had looked anything but friendly ever since. Big black clouds had been steadily gathering over the horizon, promising a heavy downpour any moment now, anticipated by ominous thunderbolts, piercing the velvety darkness with distant flashes.

*Damn!* He cursed again. *That's all I need to make a bad day worse.* He needed a shelter and fast, too, even if it was easier said than done, he mused, looking at the flat empty land, which seemed unable to provide protection or useful indications anywhere. *Goddamn it, where's a shelter when you need one?* And after new rain hit him, he hurried along.

As if to spite him, the rain suddenly increased and the fat

drops were now too many to count. And they had the most unfortunate habit of infiltrating through the clothes to run down bare skin, which he found particularly annoying.

Snorting, the horse reminded the rider he might not be the only one feeling uncomfortable. “Hey, Fuzeon.” Bending toward the black head, he urged him. “Let’s get a roof over our heads before we’re both drenched.”

The horse nickered softly in agreement and continued along the same route. Feeling hopeless, he raised his head just as the gods ruled to reward him, making him notice a distant light on the left, a faint and unstable glow to be sure, still the first sign of life in what seemed to be a desert.

Quickly steering Fuzeon, he hurried in that direction, only to realize, once he reached it, he was at the village’s outskirts, just a stone throw away from home. Too tired, but mostly too wet, to care at this point, he got off the horse, leaving him in the stable before speeding to the front door.

Poorly kept and neglected, the house looked run down with the exception of the annexed stable, a rarity to find in such a place. *Must be Fuzeon’s lucky day. He’ll surely spend a better night than his master will.* Then he knocked loudly.

“Yes, just a minute.” A female voice answered. After a few moments, she opened the door. “Good evening, sir. May I help you?”

At first, he saw a complete stranger standing on the threshold. True, the dim candlelight was not particularly bright and even the brilliant flashes of occasional thunderbolts did not help, but feeling quite sure he had never met her before in his life, he was about to speak when something stopped his casual greeting.

*By the gods, I know her.* An inner voice warned.

Surprised, he looked closer at the dark young beauty with the weird sensation of looking in a mirror, as if she were his

reflection. Well, maybe not exactly, but something about colors and general build was amazingly similar.

Like him, she was slim and tall for a girl her age, which was definitely less than his, perhaps eighteen or nineteen at the most. Her thick, silky hair was as black as his and apparently with the same texture, even if longer, and he certainly did not wear his short.

Her perfect oval face did not quite resemble his except for the straight nose, exquisitely designed soft lips and the clear-cut almond shape of the eyes whose color he could not quite determine due to the poor lighting, though he wondered if they were black as his own.

*Maybe she worked at Black Rose.* But hard as he thought of the many girls employed at the estate, searching his memory, he found no trace of a name he could have easily forgotten. No, not a casual acquaintance at all, he realized for the more he looked at her, the more she felt over and beyond familiar as if belonging to him, which was definitely impossible because no member of his family lived in the village to his knowledge.

“May I help you?” The woman repeated patiently.

The voice startled him and he shifted on his feet to get free from his mind’s odd meanderings. “I’m sorry, milady, but with the rain and all, I seem to have lost my way to—”

“To Black Rose?”

“Hem...yes. I guess you know where I live.” The statement sounded stupid. Everyone in the village knew of Black Rose, which, judging from his clothes, she must have supposed was his destination.

“For that matter, I also know who you are.” She bowed slightly. “Welcome Prince Caldwell.”

*Well, no surprise there either since I’m the local celebrity.*  
“All right, since you seem to know so much about me, may I

enquire on your name, Miss..." he asked instead, uncaring of the rain beating on his back.

"Just Ylianor." And finally, she raised her head, looking straight at him with an amazingly intense green gaze.

"Who's there?" A man's voice cried out.

The angry tone broke the strange magic that had seemed to envelop them. With a start, as if suddenly realizing where she was, Ylianor stepped away from the door. "I'm sorry. It's raining harder and I've kept you outside." She gestured inside. "Please, come in." Then turning around, she raised her voice. "I'm coming, Father." Shifting back to the prince, she added apologetically. "If you'd excuse me..." quickly disappearing up a flight of stairs, carrying a small candle.

Hailed by loud thunder, Duncan Caldwell stepped inside the house, as poor and neglected as the outside. Wavering candles illuminated a table with a few chairs scattered around a cold fireplace near an empty kitchen. Nothing more to see, he waited patiently and after a few moments, Ylianor returned, holding a towel. "Here." She handed it to him. "At least you can get dry."

"Thanks." He accepted gladly, shifting the long hair to rub the back of his neck.

"Would you like to stay the night? I mean, with the rain and all, maybe it would be better." She smiled briefly. "There's another bed upstairs and I could fix you something to eat."

"Where will you sleep?" He looked at the very sparse furnishings.

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'm not sleeping tonight. My father's dying, so I'll need to look after him."

The thought was not pleasant, but choices seemed limited. "I'm sorry. Can I be of assistance?"

"No, thank you. He's been ill for a long time, but tonight I feel it's his last one in this dimension."

"I see." Duncan commented, not sure he did.

"If you want, I'll take care of Fuzeon. I'm sure this thunderstorm has frightened him enough already. Some food and water will do him good."

Surprised, he cocked his head. "You seem to know an awful lot about me."

"Not to worry. I'm the stable keeper's daughter so not only do I know your family quite well, but your horses, too."

*That explains the familiar air.* Actually, David had told him the old stable master was dying and Black Rose was having trouble replacing John Meyer, the man whose horse handling apparently had no equal. "Yes, please, if you could look after Fuzeon, I'd be most grateful. We come from a long journey and maybe I taxed him more than I should've."

She disappeared outside. At the light of thunderbolts, he spied Ylianor from the window as she entered the stable to reach Fuzeon, his dark frame already moving to welcome her, then resting his muzzle on her shoulders while she patted his back. And Duncan watched them perplexed.

Fuzeon was a very special horse that did not trust strangers or his friends for that matter, privileging Prince Caldwell alone after he had managed to overcome the horse's diffident nature. And considering the fact he had accepted neither his mother nor his sister, the animal's behavior seemed even more puzzling.

On returning and finding him at the window, Ylianor pulled out a chair. "You can sit down while I fix dinner." Her voice trailed to the kitchen.

Accepting her offer, he sat down, feeling every tired bone in his body, and watched her gather a few plates, then come out almost immediately, preparations not taking long as he had already guessed.

When she returned, she brought a vegetable soup, some



bread and a small piece of cheese. “Here you go.” She set everything in front of him. “I know it’s not much.” Smiling apologetically, she went round the tablet to sit in front of him. “But I’m afraid supplies are a bit low because, with my father’s illness, I haven’t had much time to look after much else.”

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

\* \* \* \*

“I ate before you came.” The lie came out smoothly while she glanced at what would have been her dinner and part of her breakfast, too. The need for medicines had left little to trade for food since John Meyer had been sick for so long she almost could not remember when it had been different.

*Well, no use dwelling on it*, she reprimanded, looking at the handsome prince sitting in her modest home. After all that happened, the last thing Ylianor would have imagined was seeing him again anywhere, his tall masculine frame almost too big for the poor surroundings, filling the cramped space to capacity. Black eyes and hair, hanging to his shoulders, he looked impressive and particularly attractive with his brownish skin, probably tanned by an outdoor life.

The last time she had seen him...well, the one before the last, was almost ten years ago, right before her banishment from Black Rose. Prince Charles Caldwell had just died and though a mere nine-years-old, Ylianor could still recall the pleasure in Lady Caldwell’s eyes when ordering her off the premises on which she was born.

*“Your time here is over. Do you understand?” Sophia Caldwell had spelled out the words while looking haughty and self-righteous. “My mate is not here to protect you anymore, so*

*pack your things and leave, never to return. I will personally throw you out, if I catch you around Black Rose in the future."*

*And Ylianor still felt the devastating pain, remembering the hateful look blinding Lady Caldwell's gaze or the smug smile curving her daughter Elizabeth's lips. No, the women just could not wait, not even for Charles Caldwell's body to become cold, before taking their revenge, also taking advantage of the fact her only other protector was not there to help her. With a shiver, Ylianor recalled Duncan's absence from his mother's side and the thought that all had not been lost had given her the strength to accept her bitter fate.*

\* \* \* \*

"Hey, slut, where's my food?" The voice upstairs shouted. "Are you going to let me starve, you bitch?"

Duncan turned, surprised by the language.

"Please excuse my father." Ylianor was quick to intervene. "He's very sick I'm afraid. It's a disease, which has consumed his mind as well as his body. Now he doesn't know what he's saying half the times. If you'll excuse me, I'll bring him dinner."

"Is there anything I can do?" Rising from the chair, Duncan felt embarrassed and concerned by the situation.

"No, thank you. No one can do anything for him." She went to the kitchen, grabbed a tray and went upstairs.

The prince sat down and finished the poor meal alone thinking over the events of the past few days and his meeting with Isabella in Harbor Town, something his mother had urged him to do.

*"Duncan, you're twenty-one and it's time you start thinking about settling down." Sophia Caldwell had looked at him*

*annoyed. "We need heirs to pass on the family name."*

*"Can't Lizzy do it for the both of us?" Duncan challenged, knowing perfectly well, what the answer would be.*

*"Your sister Elizabeth is not...qualified."*

*"Why not? Since the pledgers choose one family name, Lizzy's mate may take ours name, rather than his."*

*"You forget you're the official heir, not Elizabeth."*

*"Even so, she may have a Caldwell offspring."*

*"It still wouldn't be...proper."*

*"To have a Caldwell heir from your son is proper, but not one from your daughter?"*

*His mother had shaken her head in frustration. "Duncan, you're giving me a headache." She had stopped to hold her head as if to emphasize her point. "Anyway, I don't understand why it should bother you so much. With your looks, I'm sure you don't have any trouble finding a woman to mate."*

*Ha, to find the right one, that's the real problem. He sighed inwardly, thinking of the many he had already seen and tried. "I'm too young to pledge."*

*"Nonsense! Your father pledged at the same age."*

*Prince Caldwell shrugged. None of the many women he had known inspired any thoughts of a permanent union, most too boring or insignificant. In bed, they were not bad...the first time. Repeating the experience was bound to be as predictable as their conversations, which probably explained his growing lack of enthusiasm over the years despite his heartfelt belief there existed, somewhere in the world, the perfect woman for him.*

*There has to be. He repeated fiercely, each time he felt the aching void, crunching his stomach at times or used indiscriminately countless bodies to forget the only one he really wanted for—*

“Are you done, stupid bitch?” John’s voice invaded his thoughts. “Get out of here! I don’t want to see your ugly face again. Fuck off or go fuck your blasted lovers and leave me alone.”

He hardly recognized John Meyer in this bitter and vulgar man. Duncan had known him since childhood, a nice person, not very talkative with humans, much preferring the company of animals. *And who could honestly blame him?*

*“No one handles horses better than John,” his father used to say, referring to the stable master’s rare talent for horses. “Promise me you’ll keep him here when I’m gone.”*

*“Of course, Father, don’t worry.”*

*By then, Charles Caldwell had been sick for some time, so Duncan would have agreed to anything, although the request was reasonable. The time spent with John, after his father’s death, had confirmed the wise choice beyond any expectations, making it almost impossible to replace him at his illness’ onset.*

*Many had tried to fill the position, lasting only a couple of days, complaining the job required too much effort. The truth, as David had told Duncan countless times, lay in their inability to handle animals, treating them as things rather than living beings. As a result, his faithful valet had stepped in temporarily as stable keeper on top of his other duties, a situation unsustainable in the long run.*

“I said get out! Get out of my house and stay out! Leave filthy slut. Do you hear me?”

Ylianor came down the stairs.

Duncan rose from the chair. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Don’t worry. The doctor said he’s not going to pass the night so...” She shrugged as if to indicate she tolerated

the nasty behavior to make his passing easier.

“Maybe I could talk to him. We used to be friends when he worked at Black Rose—“

“No, please.” She raised a hand in frustration. “His mind’s so far gone, he hardly recognizes anyone anymore and even if he did, he’d just treat you as bad as he’s been treating me lately.” She shook her head in comprehension. “It’s best if you remember him in his better days, handling his adored horses, rather than this bitter self that has nothing left of him. Besides, his energy’s slipping away fast and it might be too much of a strain for him.”

“He seems to have a lot of energy for someone who should be dead by morning.”

“Well, medicine is not the exact science they would like us to believe, but for his sake, I hope it’s right. Even if it pains me to see him like this, I already have enough problems as it is, what with the house—” She stopped abruptly, averting her eyes, looking embarrassed she brought up the subject.

“What about the house?”

She shook her head. “It’s nothing, really. I was just thinking aloud.”

Not fooled by her denial, he breached the distance between them. “Is something wrong? Whatever it is, I might be able to help you.”

\* \* \* \*

Suppressing the impulse to lean her head on his chest and unburden the heavy load she had been carrying forever, it seemed, Ylianor took a step back. Her mouth already opening to utter another lie, she stopped upon reading the look of concern in his black gaze. Uncomfortable, she cleared her throat. “The

village council needs to reassign this house to newcomers.” She blurted eventually. “While Father’s alive, they won’t claim it, but after, I’ll have to find other accommodations.”

“In the village?”

“I’m not sure I want to stay.” Actually, Ylianor knew Lady Caldwell had put pressure on the councilmen to get rid of her so with John out of the picture, she would have no trouble succeeding.

“But what about your job?”

Ylianor shrugged. “Nothing I can’t leave behind. I work part time at the bakery, but it’s not enough.”

He regarded her for a moment, his gaze searching her face as if looking for an answer. Then he took another step forward. “Have you ever worked at Black Rose?”

His warm body was really too close for comfort, Ylianor realized, feeling the heat envelop her. Moving slightly away, she raised her head defiantly. “Why do you ask?”

He shrugged. “Just wondering.”

It was her turn to regard him coolly. “You have no memory of me, right?” And she expected he would not.

Prince Caldwell sighed. “To be honest, I don’t, but you look awfully familiar, even if I can’t seem to place you anywhere or remember the first thing about you, not your name, how we met, what we did together...” His voice trailed off as his gaze suggested a variety of situations, none too professional.

Ylianor’s face flushed deeply, catching some of the images in his eyes. “You...hem...you probably saw me at the stables while I was waiting for my father.”

“Yeah...probably.” Although he sounded unconvinced and more in favor of his alternative scenarios, he seemed genuinely concerned about her future for he returned to their earlier subject. “So what are you going to do? Where are you going to

live?"

"I don't know. I'll worry about it tomorrow," she replied, making sure her tone indicated the end of the conversation. It hurt simply to feel her empty stomach's pangs of hunger without making the situation worse by worrying about the future. Or the past, for that matter, Ylianor scolded, recalling the strong feelings this man's family had meant for her and still did, if she just allowed them to resurface.

No, she did not want to answer his questions anymore and there was only one way to get out of the embarrassing silence. "If it's all right with you, I'll take you to your room, so I can check on my father for the rest of the night."

Without any objections, he followed her upstairs to the small bedrooms, one of the two occupied by the sick man.

"Your room's right around there." She gestured at a door further away, then noticing he had caught somehow the pain coming from her father, she was quick to add. "Don't worry. He won't disturb you."

"I'm so tired nothing could keep me awake tonight."

Watching him go, Ylianor made sure he got to his room before sitting by her father's bedside to wait the night, doing her best to ignore her hunger as time dragged on in strained watch of his drugged sleep, until dawn broke. Just as she was about to leave for work, he opened his eyes and fixed his gaze on her. "I'm sorry," he managed to whisper. "About everything...please forgive me." Then he was gone forever.

## Chapter Three

Life and death on Sendar were strictly a matter of conventions, much like everything else lying under Stella's bright rays during the thirty-six hours day. A few simple rules, together with a fixed social structure, gave the system stability and prosperity, in complete accord with nature's rhythms.

Nothing artificial on Sendar was probably the best-known rule for everything came directly from the land, the air and the sea, in a harmonious give and take that benefited both environment and humans.

Such balance, the most precious of Sendar's resources, was essential to life so no one ever questioned it, trained since childhood to respect it to the point of being vegetarians. Yes, no one ate meat on Sendar to avoid indiscriminate animal killings and none suffered from it, including those who were in charge.

A classical pyramidal structure, high-ranking noble families had the right to coordinate and manage, transmitting their titles by inheritance alone, although the simple causality of birth was no prize, for the ladder measured responsibilities, not privileges. The further up one was, the heavier the load, at least as far as duties went.

And there were quite a few, particularly within the borders of Sendar's small communities known as Districts. But one thing



they never managed directly was the land, which belonged to everyone to use and share in peace and harmony.

The main authority remained the High Council, the hierarchy's representative body that supervised everything, from the smallest villages to the greater Districts, even if every tiny community had its own local council to help anyone in need.

Applying the same trade-off philosophy used with nature, people exchanged their skills to satisfy their necessities in a system that seldom measured amounts, efforts or time during the long eighteen hours of daylight. Work to live, not live to work was the motto on Sendar, a liberal attitude and the culmination of a seemingly perfect world. *But was it?*

\* \* \* \*

Ylianor Meyer held the unfortunate position of Lady Caldwell's personal enemy, so she had to suffer the consequences of her revengeful whims. After losing her mother at a very early age, her father's work had provided for both of them, up until his illness.

Now Sophia Caldwell, strong of her position as the District's leading figure—at least until her son would take over—was driving Ylianor into a dangerous corner. The part time occupation at the bakery was shaky at best once news of John Meyer's death became public.

Shelter would be a problem as well, to remain in the village a gamble, to leave...well, that seemed to pain her more than anything else. Sure, the best solution was to settle elsewhere, as far away as possible from Black Rose and its odious inhabitants, which would allow for a clean start and less mistrusting looks...or so she hoped. But mistrust hardly defined the complexity of feelings she inspired.

That she was different from normal people, Ylianor had

perceived it early on, though she could not properly explain the sequenced flashes she saw at times instead of people's usual appearance in flesh and blood. Too young and inexperienced at first, she had not known how to interpret the lights, continually shifting colors and hues that glittered around everyone's body.

Today she had learned to decode the bright signals, which unlike hollow words, always revealed a person's true intentions, making her understand the burning desire to possess her most people hid under their apparent scorn, if not downright fear.

Witch they called her behind her back. She had heard them more than once, though they thought she was not listening.

*"Why do you think Lady Caldwell would throw her out of Black Rose if she weren't a witch?" That was the question on everyone's mind.*

*"Yeah, but what must she have done to raise Lady Caldwell's anger to such a point?"*

*Then someone had come out and said it, whispered it actually, afraid even to imagine the absurdity of his explanation. "She might be his daughter."*

*They had all laughed. "Yeah, sure and maybe she can fly, too." A woman had sneered.*

*Well, it was no mystery reproduction was a physical and biological impossibility without a proper ritual, the pledge, which alone allowed couples to have children.*

*"Come on, you know that's impossible. Only pledges bring children and Prince Charles only pledged to Lady Sophia."*

*"I know," the first man had insisted stubbornly, "but why else would Lady Caldwell throw the witch out?" Everyone looked at a loss, so he plunged on. "And don't you think she resembles the young prince in a way?"*

*This time heads shook vigorously. "Nah, just because she has*

*dark hair doesn't mean they're related or that they look alike."*

*"I didn't say they're twins, simply they have something in common."*

*A woman waved her hand. "It's only your imagination, Dorek."*

*"Then you tell us why she's a witch."*

*When no plausible reply came forth, a woman summed it all up. "Whatever it was, it could not have anything to do with being Prince Charles's daughter. No, it must be something else, probably the way she looks at people with those strange eyes of hers or maybe Lady Caldwell was getting jealous because her son seems to like her a lot."*

Somehow though, in spite of the general agreement, the shadow of that accusation had lingered, contributing to the odd reactions Ylianor perceived from the people around her, a mix of repulsion and attraction, which was hard to define, even if they pretended to treat her like everyone else. *What fools!*

"Good morning, Ylianor." The baker wiped his hands clean on seeing her enter to start her shift. "Are you ready for a good day's work?"

Slipping into a starch white apron, she reached him at the counter. "Of course, Patrick, you know I am."

"How's your father?"

Hands frozen behind her back, clutching the strings frantically, she debated briefly about what to tell him. "Well...the doctor doesn't think he'll last the day."

"That's a shame."

"Yes, I know." Then after tying the apron, she got busy with the dough.

After her shift ended, the baker gave her extra rations, more than the day's work justified. "For your father," he mumbled as if

ashamed of his weakness. "I hope he feels better."

That was impossible, they both knew it, but she thanked him for the thought anyway, then rushed home, stopping at the stable to check on Fuzeon. "Hello black beauty." Caressing his muzzle, she leaned her head on his powerful body, feeling his warmth. Then after taking care of his food and water, she hurried to the house.

"Good morning, Prince." She smiled warmly at Duncan coming down the stairs. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a baby. What about your father?"

The unexpected sadness at his concern made her lower lip tremble. "He passed away this morning."

"I'm sorry." His warmth and the support she read in his gaze helped her feel less lonely. "Is there anything I can do?"

*Yes, you could hold me tight and never let go.* Then shaking her head, she returned to reality. "Thank you, but I don't believe there is. I'll wait until you leave before calling the authorities. In the meantime, would you like to share breakfast with me?" Dangling the baker's package, she took a step forward.

Duncan gave her a funny look and for a moment, she could not believe what she read in his flashing lights, their shade edging dangerously close to an excitement she had long learned to decipher in many men. But that was not what made her heart stop cold.

Underneath it all, Ylianor perceived the odd current like a wave of no particular color—or rather of all colors blended together—she remembered noticing on one man alone in all her life. And that man was long dead.

Confused, she turned to the table, not wanting to read the prince anymore, desperately hoping to avoid the familiar closeness despite her craving, the huge void left from childhood never quite filled. *But can he... will he... like his father?*

\* \* \* \*

Wondering how she could look so beautiful after a sleepless night, the loss of a father and a half-day's work, the prince felt his senses stirring with the desire to hold her in his arms, perhaps even going further if he were to listen to his cock's undeniable tug.

And few people attracted him like that, he realized, feeling the need to see her again, which was astonishing in itself for she would be the only woman to date to hold such an appeal, even in spite of the differences in their social levels.

Yes, Duncan applied the rules when it came to class distinctions, a bit prejudiced by his aristocratic taste like his close friend liked to taunt, never considering anyone below his level as even vaguely interesting. But Ylianor...she escaped this clear-cut definition as the nagging feeling of familiarity reminded forcefully.

Without a doubt, he and Ylianor were two worlds apart, but equally true she belonged to him in an unexplainable way, tempting him to take her to Black Rose right then and now. But a stray thought stopped him. "Thank you, I'll gladly share breakfast with you."

Ylianor set the table and brought the warm flat wheat cakes, taking one with her. "Now you won't have any problems getting back to Black Rose."

"None at all, I'm sure. But if I were you, I'd be more concerned about myself. What will you do now?"

She shrugged as if uncaring about her future. "Find some decent work and start afresh."

"When do you have to leave the house?" Prince Caldwell insisted.

She shrugged again. "Soon, I bet. I'll find something else." Then catching his concerned look, she was quick to add. "Don't worry."

*Actually, there's no reason to feel worried. She's nothing to me.* But somehow, the thought did not make him feel any better.

"I looked in on Fuzeon. He's fine and ready for action."

"You like horses?"

"I love them!" Her green eyes sparkled with the enthusiasm of a little girl playing with her first doll. "I love animals in general, but horses are my favorite and Father taught me to take care of them. It's just too bad I never had a horse of my own."

"Did you ever ride Fuzeon?"

"Yes, I did. He and I are good friends, especially since he helped me during a very difficult time."

"I'm surprised. Fuzeon doesn't usually allow people to touch him, much less ride on him." He tried to keep his tone normal, not wanting it to sound as impressed as he was. "You must really be a close friend of his."

A sweet smile curved her lips. "I am."

Having finished breakfast, he rose from the table. "I think I'd better go. You have things to do and—"

"Sure." Agreeing readily, Ylianor jumped off her seat. "I'll get Fuzeon for you." And without waiting for his reply, she went to the stables, with Duncan following close behind.

Before getting on, Prince Caldwell turned to her. "Thank you for the hospitality and...condolences for your father's death." Then without even realizing it, he bent and gave her a kiss, his mouth softly brushing her surprised lips. She froze, but as if nothing had happened, he straightened, mounted and left.

As he had rightly guessed all along, the journey to Black Rose did not take long soon the prince smelled the fresh sea air

rushing at him. He loved his birthplace passionately, comparing it to a beautiful woman gracefully sprawled as if on a bed, gazing across the distance at the sea just like he loved to do, looking out his balcony for hours at the crashing waves hurled against the high cliffs.

*His father used to tell him an ancestor had fallen in love with the place, naming it after a solitary black rose that resisted atop the cliff, bravely defying the salty air and impetuous wind. "The rose was looking at its reflection in the water," Prince Charles had explained. "Or so that first Caldwell thought. Anyway, the sight was so beautiful he fell in love with the place."*

And Duncan could not blame him, listening to the narration, fascinating as all legends were, even if what happened was probably a different story.

Approaching the stables, he wondered who would care for Fuzeon this time. Maybe David had finally found a replacement, but if not, Duncan had the perfect candidate under hand.

"A woman for the job?" David's shocked voice could not hide his opinion. "Are you sure, Prince?"

Duncan looked at his valet, a handsome man of twenty-seven, slightly shorter than him, with fine features, partially hidden by a mass of brownish hair. Employed directly by Charles Caldwell, the prince trusted his opinion and often had turned to him for guidance as well as useful advice, always finding an honest answer and a sensible heart.

David's hazel eyes returned Duncan's look with a concerned gaze. "Sir, you cannot honestly think to put a woman in a position that requires a man's strength."

"I assure you. She's perfectly capable of handling horses." The discussion was taking place in Duncan's office, after the

prince had debated with himself every possible objection and even if gender was not a primary obstacle, some jobs were traditionally reserved to men. "She received her training from the best of them." And since the Meyer's had served the Caldwell for time immemorial, in a way, they were family...well, in a distant sort of way, which might explain the air of familiarity, though not why all he could think about was the dark village beauty.

"Impossible, sir. The best was John Meyer, but they tell me he passed away this morning."

Getting up from the desk, Duncan turned to the window. "I know. I was there and no, it's not impossible." He swung back to face David again. "The woman I have in mind is John Meyer's daughter."

"Ylianor?" David's voice was even more worried. "Sir, you don't know what you're saying."

"Why not David? She's perfect for the job. Besides being amply qualified, she's alone in this world and practically unemployed."

"But, sir...your mother will never allow it."

"My mother? What does she have to do with it?"

David's eyes flashed. "Don't you remember she banned Ylianor from the estate?"

"Banned?" The news shocked him. "What are you talking about?"

David gave him a puzzled look. "Are you sure you don't remember? It made quite a scandal, right after your father died."

"I wasn't here the days after he passed away."

David nodded slowly as if recalling the sequence of events. "Right." Raising his gaze, he gestured to the prince. "Please, sit down and I'll try to fill you in."

Duncan returned to his desk. Lunchtime, the eighteenth hour on Sendar, had long passed, but Stella's warm light filtered



through the large bay window at his shoulders.

“Do you at least recall Ylianor’s story?”

Prince Caldwell shook his head.

“Well, sir, her mother was Mary Jane Elspeth who used to work in the house. Does that ring a bell?”

Suddenly feeling icy inside, Duncan was finally able to place the intriguing creature while David’s voice quickly recapped the main events.

*Mary Jane had been his father’s adored mistress, a love so strong neither conventions nor hierarchies could stop. Wrecked by insane jealousy, his mother had hated the usurper of her mate’s love with all her heart, powerless to stop her, especially after the pregnancy. Duncan still recalled the pained tone with which his mother used to talk about “that servant slut and her evil daughter.” By then Mary Jane had pledged to John Meyer, though speculations raged on who was little Ylianor’s father.*

*Whoever he was, it can’t be my father.* Feeling relieved at the thought, he recalled that un-pledged couples could not bear children so no matter what Lady Caldwell thought, Ylianor was not his half-sister despite Charles and Mary Jane’s continued affair. Not just a matter of sex, Duncan had realized growing up. No, his father had loved his mistress passionately, caring nothing about his official mate or his other children for that matter, and nothing ever convinced him to let go of his love...except death.

*When Mary Jane died a few years after her little girl’s birth in mysterious circumstances, Charles Caldwell focused all his love on Ylianor, sternly refusing to leave the child to her father’s cares, much like he had done previously with Mary Jane. In fact, he had insisted on raising her with Duncan, as there were only*

*three years apart, having them study together, which obviously contributed to increase his mother's hate.*

*She was particularly jealous of the relationship between her mate and the servant slut's girl, mostly because Prince Charles manifested a stronger attachment to Ylianor than to his legitimate children. This situation had persisted until Charles's illness, which had empowered Lady Caldwell to drive the hated girl away from the prince's side, although she found the courage to banish her only after his death.*

At the end of David's tale, Duncan remembered fragments of the story like it were full of holes, rather than a smooth sequence of events. No matter how hard he tried, he could find no visual trace of Ylianor as if something had erased the little figure from his memory, leaving the rest of the images untouched. "Mary Jane Elspeth? Yes, now I remember her."

David leaned across the desk. "So do you still think it's a good idea to bring her daughter back here in a work capacity?"

"She's grown a beautiful woman." As if talking to himself, Duncan's tone sounded oddly dreamy.

"I know, but people are afraid of her, mostly because of her past. Some say she's a witch and Lady Caldwell was right to throw her out of Black Rose. Others even go as far as saying Ylianor should leave the village, if not the District altogether. In short, they don't trust her and beauty doesn't make it any easier. She's too beautiful for her own good, they tell me."

"So you haven't seen her recently?"

David shook his head. "No, she doesn't get around much. She's always been a quiet child, not very talkative—like her father I guess, she seemed more comfortable around animals—and with few friends...well, probably none, since she left Black Rose. At times, I even got the impression John Meyer was afraid

of her somehow. The only ones she was close to were Prince Charles and...you."

"Me?"

David nodded. "Oh yes, when you were children, she adored you."

Duncan frowned in frustration. "Funny, I can't remember anything about this girl, not her face or her figure, not even the things we did together."

"Well, since then you've had a lot more on your mind."

Prince Caldwell could not argue the point, well aware life had already surprised him with some unexpected twists and turns. "That's true. Do you think she could be my sister?" Still feeling the soft kiss burning his lips, he was unsure whether he wanted an answer.

David did not reply immediately for the question was a difficult one no matter how one looked at it. "People have argued both ways, Prince."

"But it's impossible, right, David?" Duncan fixed his gaze on the hazel eyes, not wanting to let him off the hook that easily.

"It would appear so. Your father and Mary Jane did not pledge, so Ylianor should not be their child. Still, apparently witches can break the rules and if she's one like her mother..." His voice trailed off, leaving Duncan free to reach his own conclusions.

"I'll never believe it, David! But in the remote possibility she might be family," he continued more gently, "don't we have an obligation to her well-being? Maybe it's time for things to change."

"Sir, I wouldn't start something without knowing where it could lead." David's sensible tone could not hide the look of concern clouding his gaze.

"I don't intend to go anywhere. I'm only offering a job to

someone in need, a person highly qualified for the position, I might add.”

“The fact she has a history with your family should deter any further involvements.” The even tone pressed his point.

*But that’s exactly what makes her all the more intriguing, my dear David.* “Enough talking. My mother’s inappropriate action was almost ten years ago, so I’ll try to make her see reason, but if she doesn’t, I’ll simply remind her who’s in charge.” Leaning back in his chair, the prince fixed his gaze on David’s face. “Please bring Ylianor here as soon as John’s funeral is over, conveying my job proposal and...” He paused to think over what would convince her to accept his offer. “These days Harbor Town’s hosting the annual fair, right?”

“Yes, the best place to get fine horses around here.”

“Exactly and since I need to repay for last night’s hospitality, you’ll go there tomorrow to get her a horse.”

“A horse, sir? Isn’t it a bit too much as a gift?”

“Not at all. The woman gave me all the food she had for supper, without eating anything herself, I’m sure, in order to feed me. I think she’s more than entitled to a fair repayment.” He turned to look outside the window. “Besides, we have several young stallions we need to trade back and what they offer in return will fit Ylianor’s needs. You’ll deliver her the horse, along with my work proposal, and the moment she accepts, inform the village’s Head Counselor she’ll be living in Black Rose from now on. Is that clear?”

“Crystal clear, sir.” David got up to leave. As he was walking out the door, he stopped and turned to stare at Duncan. “Excuse me, sir. What should I do if she refuses your offer?”

“Refuse?” The thought had not crossed his mind. “Why should she?”

David shrugged. “I don’t know, but the Caldwell family has

treated her bad enough, so she might not wish to suffer further humiliations.”

“You’re wrong, David. True, Black Rose holds some bad memories, but from what you told me, it has also been the happiest place in her life. She won’t pass up the offer that easily, I’m sure, because it’s simply too tempting.”

David turned to leave, but again, he stopped as if a new thought crossed his mind. Leaning on the door, he looked at an invisible point in midair. “Does this decision come from your head or your heart?” Not particularly addressing the prince, he looked intently at the empty space in front of him, then without waiting for an answer, he left the room.

## Chapter Four

Standing frozen on a side, Ylianor watched her father's body burning in the huge funeral pyre blazing on the village square, almost uncaring about the many who came to pay their last tribute to a much-loved member of the community whose life leaned on the dramatic. Unrequited love and questionable heritage seemed his destiny and, even if this daughter had proven worthy in the end, Ylianor knew in her heart, it hardly repaid John Meyer of all the pain, anger and humiliation he had suffered.

Well, whatever had happened, it was all in the past now, Ylianor thought, deeply lost in herself. A few touching words, a few tears, but most people had just been silent and sad. Only she had looked far away as if the ordeal did not concern her in the least, gaze fixed on the fire as if staring at something no one else could see.

In reality, she hoped to shut out the intense lights flashing even more brightly than the dancing flames. An impossible task, she knew it from experience, clearly reading the increased fear and desire now that she was alone.

But she did not care, not of them, not of her future, she assured defiantly, returning home, her mind trying to weigh alternatives when it did not stray to Prince Caldwell,

remembering, as she crossed the threshold, the odd sensation of seeing him there, so out of place in her run-down shack. *No, not even my wildest dreams had ever managed to put him here.*

Most girls around the village dreamt of him and Ylianor had heard more than one openly wishing for his attentions, especially if they went to work at Black Rose. Strangely though, and completely unlike their vibrant sexual tradition or his father's attitude, Duncan was no easy target, preferring women of his own standing. *Who could blame him? After Prince Charles's experience, it would be the wisest policy, something I'd do well to remember, too.* Closing her eyes briefly, she wondered whether to relive the pain, the attachment, the sharing, but it was already too late and she was helpless to stop the past or its bitter dues.

*Prince Charles had loved her very much, she knew, recalling fondly their times together and his genuine affection. Those first years in Black Rose, Ylianor lived the happiest times of her life as a member of the family, studying and playing with Charles's son, a privileged, almost inseparable companion in little Duncan's adventures. But the dream shattered abruptly with the onset of Charles's illness and Lady Caldwell's prohibition to see him, even if no amount of obstacles had stopped Mary Jane's daughter from reaching the dying man, the one she loved with all her nine-years-old heart.*

*"Princess," he had whispered, "I'm so glad you came to see me."*

*She had neared the bed. "So am I, papa."*

*He winced. The term disturbed him, she knew, but she lacked other endearments to express her deep feelings. He had told her repeatedly, he was not her father and though she believed him, the word came out unbidden, so he had come to*

*accept it through the long illness.*

*Unknown to Sophia Caldwell, Ylianor had managed to spend the stolen time with him, sitting by his bed and holding his hand tightly, understanding he was too weak to talk or do anything else, but sure her visits made him feel better anyway. Upon hearing a noise outside the door, she would kiss him on the cheek and scramble to the window from whence she had come, disobeying the rules until the bitter end, which she had never forgotten no matter how hard she had tried.*

*That last time, he had stopped her on the windowsill, fixing his burning gaze on her small body. "Don't ever forget that I love you, Princess." At this final painful breath, he had closed his eyes forever and the world had gone eerily silent.*

*The pain inside had hurt so much she promised herself never to love another human being again, dreading another special bond like the one tying her to Charles. Yes, but how much more loneliness or empty silence can I take?*

After darkness had fallen like a heavy curtain, cutting off light and life, only John Meyer's influence had guarantee Ylianor's survival in a place, which was anything but friendly. Now also this last shield had gone, leaving her defenseless. *What to do next? Go where no one knows my past or stay to face—*

The imperious knock on her front door cut through every thought, making her scramble to her feet. "May I help you?" Confused, she looked at a handsome stranger, standing on the threshold. Actually, the man looked familiar, yet she could not quite place him.

"Are you Ylianor Meyer?"

\* \* \* \*



The question was redundant. One look at the girl and it was like being with his adored master. Amazed at her transformation despite the similarity to her younger self, David studied the vague resemblance to the prince. Nothing particularly distinctive, he had to admit, looking her over one more time, but what made it remarkable was a certain Caldwell air she seemed to possess innately, reminding him of Duncan in the assured pose and the way she held her head.

“Yes, I am,” she answered at last, after having done some checking of her own.

“Then I have a gift from Prince Caldwell. He wishes to thank you for the hospitality.” He gestured toward a beautiful gray mare behind him.

“Oh—” Moving toward it, she opened her mouth, but quickly closed it as if overwhelmed by a wave of emotions.

David turned, wondering if she would convince the mare to accept her. Her owner had warned him she was not an easy one to tame, many having tried and failed before. Then again, if Ylianor had to prove her worth, it was best if she started right away since Prince Caldwell’s rash decision already worried him for it would inevitably upset Black Rose’s peaceful balance.

And to think he was part of it, ever since Prince Charles in person had chosen him as young Duncan’s valet, made him all the more apprehensive. David loved his job, now more than ever, envied and respected for his unique position among Black Rose’s staff, although the real privilege was being close to Duncan, growing attached to the dark prince, now turned into a stunningly handsome man. And if the established ways had worked for Duncan as they did for most everyone else, their relationship would have already turned into something more intimate. Or maybe it was just a matter of luck, even if he hated to admit it. What he felt for Prince Caldwell went beyond mere

lust, an attraction as dangerous as a sensual embrace, threatening to drown him at every turn, though Duncan seemed unaware of it. Not that the prince lacked in empathy, simply his stern principles kept him away from those he did not consider at his same level. Wise decision, David approved, having heard too often of masters getting inappropriately involved with the staff, losing their dignity in the process as Prince Charles's example had clearly shown.

Now this new twist pleased him little. It felt like trouble, whichever way he looked at it. For one, Ylianor was too beautiful for someone in her position. Secondly, her doubtful heritage bothered him, even if biologically, he knew there could be no blood relation between her and Duncan. Thirdly, Lady Caldwell would have a fit once she learned the girl was back. *And last, but certainly not least, what'll happen if the prince gets emotionally involved like I fear?* Too bad because Ylianor would actually be perfect for someone like him, he mused, watching the girl's approaches with the horse.

Walking very slowly toward the mare, she held out her hand. "Hello, Starlet, you're beautiful, you know that?"

The horse shook her head.

"Why Starlet?"

"That's her name." Ylianor's assurance sounded confident as if the mare herself had revealed it.

Starlet shook her head again, then approached the motionless girl with her hand outstretched until she stopped to smell the raised palm. Probably sensing an acceptance of sorts, Ylianor reached over with the other hand and patted her neck. "Starlet, you're a beautiful fine horse."

"She is and she's also your new mate."

"Your prince is very generous."

David cleared his throat. "Actually, he was hoping this gift

would make you more willing to consider a job he has in mind for you.”

“Really?” Still cuddling the mare, Ylianor did not turn around. “What sort of job?”

“He would like you to take charge of the stables.”

“He wants me to fill my father’s position?”

“Precisely.”

Avoiding a reply, Ylianor kept massaging the horse that responded by nuzzling her forehead. “Does he know his mother banished me from Black Rose?”

That Duncan apparently had no recollection of his childhood’s schoolmate and friend had seemed odd to David, yet stranger things had happened to his knowledge and it certainly wasn’t his position to question it anyway, however unexplainable it appeared to be. “At first he didn’t remember, but then I supplied the missing pieces.”

“And...”

“He didn’t seem to care. He’ll talk to his mother and since he’s the master now, he decides who comes and goes in the estate.”

Again, Ylianor fell silent, meditating. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

The opportunity to speak his mind was simply too irresistible so David took it at once. “To be blunt, neither do I.”

This time she turned around to stare at him. All the gossip he had heard came rushing to the fore and he had no doubt her frank approach was partly to blame for the mistrustful feelings she aroused. Few tolerated such an open confrontation, preferring to avoid direct eye contact if possible. And if the intense gaze searching his face caught him off guard, too, he did his best to sustain it, feeling he deserved it somehow.

She held a steady gaze on him. “You think so, too?”

“Yes, partly because of the past, but mostly because of the future. I cannot ignore the fact people consider you a troublemaker, not to mention those rumors about your birth...” His voice trailed off, unwilling to discuss in details the many negative aspects that came to mind.

“I know what you mean.” She turned to look at Starlet. “But it’s the best offer I’ve received all day.”

“It could be dangerous.” He snarled.

A hint of mischief lit her green eyes. “Very, I guess. On the other hand, what’s life without a little risk?”

“Life is nice just as it is.” David spat. “With its set of rules and regulations followed by each individual. If you take that away, all that remains is—”

“Chaos.” She finished as if she could read his thoughts. Then she shrugged, almost indifferent to this fate. “Perhaps, but it’s probably a lot more fun than any boring order.”

Annoyed, David shifted uncomfortably. “Does this mean you accept?”

An odd brightness spread on her face. “I guess it does.” Then she shook her head perplexed. “Funny, I had every intention of refusing, but...” She stopped as if unsure of how to word the strangeness.

“You still can.”

“What choice do I have? I could remain where I’m unwanted or go to a place I still consider home. True, no welcoming committee there either, but at least I have an ally...or maybe two.” And her intriguing eyes blazed, pleading him to understand.

Nervous at the turn of the conversation, he cleared his throat. “Look, Ylianor, I’m simply following orders. As you said, no welcoming committee is waiting for you except for the prince, but I honestly don’t know if it’ll be enough.”

She threw back her shoulders in defiance. "It'll have to do." Then switching to a gentler tone, she cleared her voice. "Thank you for helping me make up my mind."

"Glad to be of service." He bowed sarcastically. "I just hope we won't regret it."

Moving toward his horse, ready to leave, he caught her low mumble. "So do I."

"All right, I'll see you by tonight."

"I'll pack up my things and come straight over."

David reached his horse, but before he left, he felt he had to tell her one last thing. "By the way, I'm sorry about your father. He was a good man and we all miss him at Black Rose." Then without waiting for a reply, he mounted and left her alone.

\* \* \* \*

As Black Rose came into view, Ylianor regretted her decision once more, particularly since it still escaped her why she had accepted Duncan's offer. Before David's arrival, hard reasoning had almost convinced her to leave the village, if not the District altogether, yet here she was, returning home. Bad things were going to happen, she felt sure of it.

*Don't be silly.* An inner voice scolded. *What could possibly go wrong?*

Well, for one thing, Duncan as her master was dangerous in itself, especially if she had to contend him with the rest of his proud family.

A flash brought back the image of Elizabeth Caldwell, standing at her mother's side during the banishment. Only a few years older than Duncan, Lizzy, as her brother called her, was an unfortunate child on whom the gods had played more than one cruel trick. Not content to make her physically unattractive, they

had also laughed at her love for her brother and father, which neither had seemed to return in quite the same way, as Ylianor had perceived from the sad look of dissatisfaction. Even more painful, Ylianor had known Elizabeth would have tolerated life without love, had not her place been taken by a little impostor who should not have been allowed anywhere near the Caldwell's. *And maybe she was right.* Briefly, Ylianor considered whether the reason for her return hid a desire for revenge, but quickly shook her head in denial. No amount of spiteful retaliation would bring back the wonderful world of her childhood or the heart-shattering love of the two men she had considered as hers. It was time to grow up anyway and let go of risky feelings that often lured innocent victims only to kill them with sheer hurt power, a mistake she had vowed never to repeat.

*Don't kid yourself.* The same voice scorned. *Why do you think you came back if not for him?*

Yes, the prince was reason enough. Apart from all other considerations, she was particularly grateful for his exciting gift, although the mare had not been easy to tame, her trust issues working hard against Ylianor's attempts to gain her confidence. Now at the twenty-eighth hour, a much later time than she had anticipated, she reached Black Rose's gate, finding it open. Plunging straight into lane—right around the second bend, she played hide and seek with Duncan while, a little further up, Prince Charles liked to walk with his little princess—she curved around familiar and beloved places until she came in view of the stables first, then the graceful house, standing proud on top of the cliff.

Taking Starlet inside her new home, Ylianor gave a look around and again it was like stepping back in time. Just as she remembered, the place was big and comfortable, hardly changed despite the years, looking also reasonably clean and well kept.

None of the superficial trimmings, however, could hide the eerie sense of abandon, which coursed like a thunderbolt through her body. Unsettled, Ylianor glanced around, trying to determine the exact origin of the sensation, but she had no time to dwell on it. As if recognizing an old friend, the horses called her and Ylianor could only respond enthusiastically. "Hello, Fuzeon," was her first greeting, accompanied with a generous pat on the black shiny mantel, to her favorite horse of all. Then she turned to a beautiful white mare on a side. "Hello, Lady Rose. And nice to see you again." She patted brown horse that had brought David to her home earlier. "Though I'm afraid I didn't catch your name."

"He's Oscar and I usually ride him." David's voice rang out in the semi-darkness.

"Pleased to meet you, Oscar. I'm sorry we didn't have much time to get properly acquainted today." Ylianor turned around to embrace all the horses with a single sweep. "This is Starlet, your new mate."

"Prince Duncan would like to talk to you." David could not hide his impatience. "What took you so long? We thought you weren't coming anymore."

"I've had a little convincing to do." Ylianor smiled, taking the gray mare to the back of the stable.

"I said the prince is waiting."

Unruffled by David's reprimand, she continued with her business. "First, I'll settle Starlet. Having waited so long already, I'm sure the prince won't mind five more minutes." Finding an empty stall at the back end, she took the horse, stroked her reassuringly, gave her some fodder, then turned to David. "All right, let's go."

Pitch dark outside, with the exception of a few candles burning in the windows, she followed him to a side entrance,

which she remembered, gave access to Black Rose's ample kitchen.

"My dear pet, how glad I am to see you. I've missed you so much. I could hardly believe my ears when I heard you were coming back." A stocky, plump woman threw her arms around Ylianor and embraced her tightly.

"Mrs. Peacock, I'm also glad to see you again," Ylianor managed to say, smothered by the warm reception while memories triggered the images connecting her to the wonderful woman. Anne Peacock, the Caldwell's cook ever since she could remember, had been also a close friend of her mother and when she had passed away, had taken over with loving care, growing very attached to Mary Jane's daughter.

"It's Anne to you, pet," she scolded affectionately. "Don't you remember? You used to call me Aunt Anne." Taking a step back, she kept Ylianor at arm's length. "My dear girl, let me look at you." A quick penetrating glance seemed to be enough for Anne. "You look beautiful and so much like your—" She stopped abruptly as if unwilling to finish the sentence. "Oh, I'm sorry for your father's death." She shook her head sadly. "He was a good man."

Ylianor nodded gravely. "Yes, he was. I burned his body this morning and many people came to pay their respects." Of course, she knew Anne would have never come for her entire life revolved around Black Rose's eating necessities.

"I wish I could've been there, but with all the work to do here—"

"Ladies, if you please." David's annoyed voice cut her off. "The prince is still waiting."

"Right, dear, you mustn't keep him waiting. There'll be plenty of time to catch up. Go now."

Following David along the hallway, Ylianor passed in front of



the main entrance, curving to the left until he stopped at a door on his right, knocking softly. "Come in." A voice rang from within.

David opened the door. "She's here," he announced, then made way for Ylianor to enter. Once inside, he left, closing the door behind her.

Ylianor's first glance swept the office, furnished in a man's taste. A long desk, with a couple of small leather armchairs facing it, stood in front of a three-sided bay window, which Duncan covered partially with his back. On a side, the fireplace shed a warm light that enhanced the candle's dimmer glow. A leather couch, a low table and a library lining the walls with books and papers, completed the room lined with blue carpet.

\* \* \* \*

Duncan sat behind the desk. As the day passed without any sign of Ylianor, he had been afraid she would not show up at all, a horse giving her an easy way out from the village, from Black Rose...but especially from him. And for some unexplainable reason, it hurt, more than he cared to admit, to think he might never see her again. She was nothing to him, he kept repeating, so it really should not have mattered one way or another, yet it did. Now, just seeing her at the door, his heart skipped a beat, a reaction usually reserved for someone else entirely. "Welcome to Black Rose." He rose to greet her. "I'm glad you could make it. Please, sit down." Gesturing at an armchair, he looked at her closely, trying to determine the truth about her origins. He was disappointed, however, for her face revealed nothing different from the previous night while oddly, the feeling of familiarity seemed stronger than ever.

Sitting down, Ylianor fixed her gaze on him. "To be honest,

I'm still not sure if I intend to stay."

"Why not?"

She frowned. "For one thing, I don't know how people are going to react to my return."

He sat, too. "Are you planning some kind of revenge? Perhaps a curse could help you overcome the past." He teased with a challenging gaze, wondering how people could consider her a witch.

"If I did, would that bother you?"

He leaned back on his chair, amused by her frank attitude. "It might or it might not, depending on what kind of revenge we're talking about." His eyes searched her face. "But I find it hard to believe a person so caring of animals and of a bad-mannered dying father could harbor such thoughts."

"I beg to differ, Prince. You don't know me at all." She spat, looking straight into his eyes.

Quite comfortable under her stare, if not downright excited, he challenged her openly. "I think I do, given our past."

Ylianor threw back her head in defiance, black hair flying around. "That's a joke. The other night you didn't even recognize who I was."

"I still don't for that matter. I can't find any image of you in my memory, but David helped me piece your story together."

"No memories at all?" she asked, sounding disappointed.

He shrugged. The gods knew how hard he had tried to pick up something, anything from his usually good memory, but to no avail. "I'm sorry, none at all."

Her incredibly green eyes flashed. "Then why did you want me back here?"

He leaned across the desk. "To take John Meyer's place. From what I can see, you're the most qualified and I'm in sore need of someone to take proper care of Fuzeon. That's the only

reason.”

“Then you’re lying.”

Duncan leaned back on his chair, looking intently at her with the poor aid of fire and a few candles. “You’re probably right. I may have some . . . ulterior motive in mind.”

An ironic smile curved her lips. “And I can’t wait to hear it.”

Oddly enough, he was having a couple of ideas, all requiring horizontal positions, which distracted his senses more than he would have normally allowed. Feeling close to a dangerous point, Duncan had to remember his tastes did not include different classes or people with doubtful origins, even if Ylianor escaped definitions, her incredible power of attraction enough to make any other man lose his mind in a second. “When I find out, I’ll tell you.” His tone sounding harsher than needed, he reproached himself as the words left his mouth, even if he could not shake off the nagging feeling she could read the images running through his mind.

“Perhaps I could help you—”

“I hardly think it possible.” He cut her off coldly, unwilling to continue the subject. “Have you had dinner?”

She shook her head. “I’m not hungry.”

“Listen, Princess, I—” Duncan stopped abruptly at the sight of Ylianor becoming so pale, he was afraid she would faint.

“Why did you call me like that?” She breathed hoarsely.

“Like what?”

“Princess.”

Duncan shook his head puzzled. “I don’t know. It just came to me. Why do you ask?”

Ylianor took a deep breath. “Your father, Prince Charles, always called me like that.”

In the momentary silence, broken only by the sound of wood crackling in the fireplace, Duncan felt his father’s presence as if

she had conjured him from the dead. The impression lasted the space of a moment, but it felt so real the prince had to sweep the room just to be sure they were still alone. “Maybe it was an old memory,” he said to justify his lapse.

Ylianor shook her head. “He only called me Princess in private, never in front of any family member, especially not in front of his son.”

“Then it could be a promotion.” He smiled broadly.

“Already?” Her eyes twinkled in amusement. “I haven’t even started the job yet.”

His smile deepened. “Life’s full of surprises, isn’t it? Anyway, I want a healthy stable keeper, so I won’t have you skipping meals, as you did the other night.”

She blushed deeply. “I didn’t —”

“And the first rule about stable keepers is they never lie.” Prince Caldwell cut her off. “I know that was your dinner, if not the only food you were going to have all day,” he added more gently. “So go to Anne and she’ll fix you something to eat.”

“Yes, sir. Is there anything else?”

“Like you probably know, your quarters are above the stables.” He frowned as if he wanted to set his priorities straight. “Look after the horses. That’s all.”

“All right.” Getting up to leave, she turned around on second thought. “Thank you for Starlet. I really appreciated the gift, though you shouldn’t have.”

“You shared everything you had with me, so it was the least I could do to thank you.”

“I’d have done the same for anyone, but thank you again. She’s a beauty.”

“I haven’t had the chance to see her yet, but I trust your judgment and David’s. If I have some spare time, I’d like to see her tomorrow.”

"I'd be happy if you did." She bowed slightly. "Good night then."

"Sleep well."

When she left, he felt alone. He should have asked her to his bed, rather than sending her to a cold and empty room. Certainly not a wise decision, but it would have made for quite a different night. Instead, a gnawing hunger tightened his stomach, forcing him to toss aimlessly as sleep eluded him at every turn, replaced by flashing green eyes and tempting lips that begged him to take her immediately, forcefully, his cock slamming hard in her yielding flesh until the spurt of fluid flooding his hand brought him back to a solitary reality.

## Chapter Five

F itful sleep spells fragmented by a series of vivid dreams, which mostly involved Duncan, disturbed Ylianor enough to keep her from a good night's rest. When dawn broke at nine o'clock, she tossed the covers aside and began to take possession of her new job. Since there were seven horses in the stable, Starlet included, she wanted to be acquainted with each, and everyone, practicing on what she remembered were her father's instructions. "The secret to a good relationship with a horse is to know him and show your appreciation for its beauty and elegance," John Meyer used to tell her. "This will earn you his trust and obedience." And she had a natural talent with animals, working beyond mere physical needs to touch their energy, too, a process few knew or cared to learn. So Ylianor started her rounds in the dark stable, time running fast in spite of her turmoil, until the smell of flat wheat cakes and freshly baked bread reminded her just how hungry she was to work efficiently.

"My pet, good morning." Anne's booming voice greeted the moment she opened the kitchen door. "How did you sleep? I hope well. How are you this morning? Have a seat and some warm breakfast."

It was almost impossible to interrupt her flood of words, but Ylianor tried anyway. "Good morning, Anne. I'm fine."

"Are you sure, pet? You hardly touched what I left you yesterday for dinner."

"I know, but I was too tired to eat anything."

The woman's penetrating glance searched her face. "Is that why you look like you didn't sleep much last night?"

"I'm fine, really." And before the cook had a chance of another look over, Ylianor slipped through the opening.

"Sit there." Anne gestured toward the center table while piling a plate with eggs, wheat cakes, rolls and potatoes all in one. "Here you go." She handed Ylianor the huge platter. "Eat up."

"Anne, I can't possibly eat all this food."

"Just try, honey, at least to make up for everything you didn't eat last night. You're all skin and bones and that's what skipping meals can do to you. You're too thin for my tastes and a little food never hurt anybody." She did not quit watching Ylianor until she saw her nibble the first piece. "So how did you really sleep?"

About to repeat her earlier assurances, Ylianor opened her mouth, but Anne beat her to the answer.

"Not so well, eh? I can tell from your face. It must be hard to be back, considering all the painful memories you left behind."

Surprised at how Anne had summed up with a few simple words the anguish tormenting her, Ylianor nodded. "I'm still wondering why he called me here and whether he's told..." Unable to pronounce even the name, she stopped. "You know." At this conclusion, she took another piece of the hot wheat cake.

"You mean if he has told his mother? No, I don't believe he has or we'd have heard the screams. Probably, he's keeping the surprise in store for today. As to why he wanted you here..." Anne shrugged. "Who knows? It's true we need a stable keeper and have been looking for one since your father's illness. No one so far seemed good enough for Prince Caldwell. He's so

particular about his horses, especially how they're treated." She frowned. "Come to think of it, he's particular about women, too. His mother is furious at him with not being pledged yet."

Suddenly very curious, Ylianor leaned forward. "What do you think is the problem?"

"The same as the stable keeper, I guess. He hasn't found the right one yet. The gods know he tried more than his share, but none seem good enough for our prince. I think he's just too choosy about everything, from horses to people. That's why he has few friends, no mate and no stable keeper."

"Come on, Annie." Ylianor scoffed. "Aren't you being a bit hard on poor Duncan?"

Anne shook her head. "Don't get me wrong, pet. He knows a lot of people, but most hardly qualify as friends." She checked a boiling pot. "As for women, they're always after him, one way or another, but that's different from having a mate, don't you think?" She returned to the table. "Anyway, his only real friend is Lord Templeton."

Unbidden, a shiver ran down her spine at the mention of the name. "Templeton? Would that be the same Templeton I know?"

"I believe it would, my pet. Christopher Templeton..." Her voice lowered a notch as she stared at a point in space. "Never liked the boy and never will. He's not a good influence on our prince, if you know what I mean."

*Never has been, for that matter.* "I'm afraid I don't. I just remember him as a little boy."

"A hateful and spiteful one, that's the sort of man he's going to be. And it's a shame he only has eyes for our prince." An ironic smile curved her lips. "That poor Lady Elizabeth is wearing her heart out on a sleeve just to attract his attention—without any success, I might add—hoping he'll become her mate." A hearty laugh broke from her lips. "Ha, that'll be the



day!”

Ylianor sipped a hot brew the plump woman had handed her. “Elizabeth’s not pledged either?”

“Of course not, my dear. Who’d want an ugly creature like her for a mate?”

“Anne, aren’t you exaggerating?” Ylianor scolded gently, uncomfortable at the turn of the conversation.

“I wish I were, my pet! I’m only telling the truth. That’s all. Can you believe Elizabeth has set her heart on someone as beautiful as Lord Templeton—and you know, however many bad things I can say about him, he still looks like a god—since the first day she saw him? I heard her say it with my own ears.” She nodded vigorously as if to stress the truth of her statement. “Too bad he’s never been interested in her. In fact, just between you and me, I don’t think he’s interested in women at all.”

“Really?” Gulping down the last of the tea, her gaze urged Anne to give more details.

Just then, a blondish girl walked in. “Good morning, Mrs. Peacock. Is breakfast ready?”

“Yes, Sarah, have a seat. This here is Ylianor Meyer, the new stable keeper. Ylianor, meet Sarah Jennings, our chambermaid.”

Sarah’s blue eyes widened with interest. “So you’re the one? I didn’t think it possible the prince would give this man’s job to a woman.”

Anne took a step forward. “She’s perfectly qualified, better than any man for that matter, and I don’t recall too many experts filling that position lately.”

“That’s because the prince is never satisfied. Now it just doesn’t seem...proper somehow.”

“It’ll turn out good and proper. Don’t worry.” The cook handed a steaming cup of herb tea and a plate filled with food. “Here, take your breakfast.”

Sarah swung her gaze to Ylianor. "Does Lady Caldwell know you're here?" The question did not prevent her from attacking her plate with a hungry growl.

"Hmm...I don't know."

"I don't think it's any of your business, is it, Sarah?" Anne scolded, refilling Ylianor's cup with fresh infusion.

"Just wondering, Mrs. Peacock. Don't get ruffled."

"People around here mind everybody's business except their own." The cook's mumbles trailed after her as she returned the kettle to the fire. "Sarah here, for instance, makes the prince's affairs her own."

"That's not true, Mrs. Peacock!" Sarah flared up. "I simply look after his chamber."

"And his bed particularly, giving us detailed accounts on how he spends his nights and with whom." Anne grinned, turning to Ylianor. "I swear, sometimes I think she spies on him."

"I certainly do not!" Sarah cried. "I'm just curious. That's all."

"Too bad the prince never notices her. As we were saying before, he's too choosy about people, especially the ones below his level."

Sarah's face became bright red. "Mrs. Peacock, if you please...I never said—"

"Your mouth never said, child, but the rest of you did plenty of talking. One would've to be blind to ignore all your wasted efforts to get his attention."

"Well, he is so handsome I wouldn't mind if he asked for some...extra work." Sarah smiled mischievously. "Don't you agree, Ylianor?"

"Me?" Ylianor thought a while before answering. "He's...attractive, true, but unavailable."

Sarah nodded in agreement. "Ain't that a shame? Many of my

friends have much more than a working relationship with their employers, most of which not even half as good-looking as our prince.” She shook her head perplexed before plunging back on her food. “Anyway, don’t take Mrs. Peacock seriously. She likes to think the worst of people, but she cooks so wonderfully we always forgive her in the end.” At that, Sarah got up and embraced Anne, kissing her softly on the cheek.

Anne returned the kiss. “My child, I say those things because I hate to see people get hurt.”

“But few listen, right, Anne?” Ylianor concluded more to herself than to the others. “I had better go to my horses.”

Before she left, another woman came in. “Has everything been set in the breakfast room?” Shifting her gaze between Anne and Sarah, she requested an answer. “Lady Caldwell is about to come down any minute now and she likes her herb tea hot.” Turning to Ylianor, she continued with the same enquiring tone. “And who are you?”

“She’s Ylianor Meyer, the new stable keeper.” Again, the cook took care of introductions. “This is Mrs. Merryweather, our housekeeper.”

“Ah...the stable keeper.” Mrs. Merryweather showed her contempt with a simple headshake. “Yes...well...” Turning away, she focused once more on her concern. “Is the tea ready?”

“Here it is.” Anne handed her a tray.

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Merryweather.” *And good riddance.* She could not resist the ironic comment, watching the woman disappear from the kitchen. Then before the cook had the chance to tell her all about the housekeeper, Ylianor squeezed her plump shoulder. “See you later, Anne.”

“Yes, my pet, I’ll call you when it’s lunchtime.”

\* \* \* \*

Just as Ylianor crossed the space between the kitchen and the stables, Duncan stopped on the stairs to look at her from one of the upper windows. The little witch looked intriguing even by daylight, he mused, remembering the sleepless night filled with erotic dreams of her. His gaze unwavering, he even went as far as devising a seduction strategy before realizing he needed something very hot and very strong to wash away the silly thoughts. So he speeded up and entered the breakfast room. "Good morning, Mother. Good morning, Lizzy, did you sleep well?"

Lady Caldwell did not answer.

His sister eyed him coldly. "Fine, I guess."

Duncan braced himself for the inevitable argument. "Is something wrong, Mother?" Deceptively disguising his feelings, he sounded calm while sitting in front of her. "If so, please tell me. Perhaps I can do something about it."

"Don't you think you've done enough already?" Sophia Caldwell almost choked on her flat wheat cake. "You're the reason something's wrong and now you want to do something about it? Ha, that's a laugh! Congratulations, you've outdone yourself this time."

"Are we talking about—"

"Yes, we're talking about your outright disregard of my orders. How dare you bring back that hateful creature into our home?" She cried almost at the top of her lungs.

"Mother, please lower your voice if you want to talk to me. I'll explain my reasons and—"

"I don't care about your reasons. She should've never set foot here again."

"Fine, but need I remind you who makes decisions now?"

Lady Caldwell's eyes flashed. "I banished that creature when

you were a mere child.”

Getting an empty mug from the table, Duncan counted mentally to restrain what would have been a snappy comeback. “Then it’s about time things changed around here.” He spat at last, reaching for the steamy teapot and filling his cup with hot brew.

“You cannot do this to me. The woman has to leave immediately.” Sophia Caldwell’s insistence had become a shout.

Without even tasting the infusion, Duncan got up, ready to leave the room. “All right, Mother, it’s obvious you’re too angry to talk, so call me when you’ve calmed down.”

“Mother, let him talk.” Turning to the prince, Elizabeth looked at him apologetically. “Duncan, you know how Mother is. She’s upset because that...thing really hurt her a lot and there’s no need to remind her of all that pain.”

“Lizzy, tell Mother people grow and things change. I don’t think that girl caused any pain,” he added in a gentler tone, moving closer to Sophia. “If anybody harmed you, it was probably the girl’s mother, but she’s long dead.”

“That woman was evil and her daughter’s even worse.” Lady Caldwell spat, hardly mollified by Duncan’s attempts. “They’re witches who trapped your father, both of them. They work dark magic on men and I remember you weren’t immune either.” Her gaze now pleading, she lowered her voice. “Don’t you understand, Duncan, I’m trying to protect you?”

He caressed her cheek. “I’m a big boy now. I can take care of myself. There are many dangers out there, I know, but you and Father taught me well, so please have a little faith in my judgment. Father did, otherwise he’d have never left me in charge.”

His mother’s eyes blazed. “Not in an official capacity, yet. We still have to read his will.”

Nervously, Duncan ran a hand through his hair. "Which we will in a very short time from now. I've already made arrangements with the lawyer to—"

"Reading it won't make up for your lack of experience with women." Sophia quipped.

"What do you think I've been doing all this time if not working on my experience with women?" He snapped angrily, pulling away from her.

Lady Caldwell's eyes blazed. "Then why haven't you chosen one, yet? What are you waiting for?"

"I told you already. I haven't found the right one yet."

"Well, try to find her soon. Once we read your father's will, I expect you to carry out your responsibilities and stop harboring unsavory creatures in our midst."

"Ylianor stays, Mother, just as I told you. As for my duties, don't worry. I'll fulfill them." With an angry scowl, he left the room more upset than he cared to admit, then took the fastest route to the stables.

Outside, the day was not looking good. Clouds were steadily piling up in the sky and the air was getting cooler by the hour. In the distance, a fast approaching darkness was threatening to cover Stella's few remaining rays, but Prince Caldwell hardly noticed. Despite the weather, he needed a ride to clear his head and fast. "Get me Fuzeon," he ordered, when Ylianor came out of the stables.

She looked first at him, then at the sky, nose twitching in midair as if she could smell the rain coming. After one last glance at Duncan though, she brought the horse out without uttering a word.

He was about to leave, but changed his mind at the last moment. "Come along. I'd like to see your mare in action."

It sounded like an order, rather than an invitation, but Ylianor did not seem to notice the difference, quickly bringing out the horse and mounted on her back. "I called her Starlet."

Looking at her for the first time since coming out the house, he noticed she was wearing an old pair of trousers, which probably had belonged to John Meyer, judging from the loose fit and the worn fabric, though not loose enough to hide the shape of her firm buttocks. "That's a curious name for a horse," he commented as they left Black Rose. "Does it have a special meaning?"

"Well...in my mother's honor. People who knew her told me she shone like a star, so it's a way to remember her."

At the mention of Mary Jane, the ugly scene in the breakfast room replayed in his head, so he retreated to silence, being in no mood for conversation or anything else for that matter, not even to glance at the magnificent countryside around Black Rose with its series of hills, valleys, lake and rivers. Wrapped up in his anger, oblivious of the weather, too, he pushed his horse forward, reaching the dark cover that had been only a distant mass, its clouds so black they turned day into night, the only light coming from faraway flashes. And the prince felt revitalized by the air's crackling energy coursing through his blood, charging his senses to the point he craved the explosive release only a storm, or something very physical, could provide. As if wanting to plunge straight into the tempest, he egged Fuzeon to go faster in spite of the horse's increasing nervousness, which made it difficult to keep a steady pace, particularly since the wind took a turn to the worse. When thunder broke overhead, Starlet whined desperately just as Fuzeon veered off course.

"What's happening?" Duncan cried, suddenly aware of nature's temper.

"I think a storm is about to drown us," was Ylianor's

noncommittal reply.

“We should find cover.”

“That sounds like a great idea. Any suggestions on where we might find one?”

Duncan looked around. He had ridden without giving much thought to where he was going and now had to get his bearings fast. Luckily, he knew the area by heart and one glance was enough to recognize the spot near Lake Lilly where his father had set up a shelter. With some effort, Prince Caldwell forced Fuzeon to follow his direction and not one moment too soon for a flood of water broke over their heads, the thick, fat drops hitting their back while he hurried to where he was sure to find cover. When it finally came into view, he sighed with relief, thanking once again, the Shelter System that spread on the land to offer travelers a safe haven. “We can rest here until the worst is over.” Duncan shouted to overcome the heavy noise, turning behind his shoulder to check on Ylianor. “Fuzeon and Starlet can stay here.” He headed to the stable next to the log cabin.

After settling the horses, they ran inside the shelter. The layers of dust testified to its infrequent use, though it lacked none of the usual supplies, like a pile of dry wood next to the fireplace, which Prince Caldwell immediately put to good use, providing the place with a brilliant light and a warm blaze.

“Just what we need with these drenched clothes.” Amused, Ylianor shook her head, abundant water dripping from the long strands as she neared the fire.

For a moment, he admired her figure, wet cloth clinging to her skin and hiding nothing of her curves. “Maybe we should take them off...” Duncan suggested mischievously.

Ylianor’s lips curved in a smile. “Yes, we should so they can dry off, but what are we going to wear in the meantime?”

*How about nothing at all?* “If we look hard enough, we might



find some blankets,” he said instead, suppressing dangerous images. “I believe the shelter is equipped also for unpredictable events like this.” In the bedroom, after a brief search he found a couple of blankets and some towels, handing Ylianor one of each. “Where would you like to change, milady?” he asked with a slightly mocking tone.

“In front of the fire, milord.” She smiled in an equally playful mood. “So at least I won’t catch a cold.”

“Very well, I’ll take the bedroom then.” Returning to the room, he was careful not to close the door and Ylianor was either too wet or too cold to care, so he had the chance to admire her naked back with the enticing round ass wriggling free from its drenched confinement. Stripped naked, she rubbed her skin dry, then wrapped the blanket around it.

Having enjoyed the last of the show, Duncan returned to the fireplace. “Feeling better?”

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Her breath caught in her throat as she turned around to answer. Like the first time she had seen him, he gave the impression of being too big for the available space, his magnificent body more attractive than ever with the long black strands dripping tiny streaks of water on a bare chest that displayed an impressive set of muscles before narrowing to the waist, wrapped by the blanket. She also could not help feeling his heat, but even if temptation to touch him seemed irresistible, she knew better. “Much.” Then she turned to face the fire, so she would not have to look at him.

Dropping down on a comfortable carpet, she pretended to stare at the high flames, particularly when he sat right next to her, although she did not need her eyes to feel the powerful

energy or the scorching desire trapped in his body, screaming for release. Ironic as it seemed, it was the second time fate had created a sensual opportunity, trapping her in a secluded cabin, alone with a man women dreamed about, and if Sarah Jennings had been in her place, there would have been no trace of a blanket anywhere on her body, Ylianor mused, repressing a giggle.

The prince turned to look at her. "Is there something funny you'd like to share?"

"Well, this whole situation is funny. Here I am with a person I thought I'd never see again for the rest of my life, forced to spend another night together." The hint of a smile curved her lips. "I guess, when you're back in a girl's life, you make sure she notices it...even if she'd rather have nothing to do with you." She made it sound like an afterthought, though her stomach crunched painfully at the obvious lie.

He regarded her coolly, then called her bluff. "My dear, you're not a prisoner, you know. You're free to leave whenever you want."

"Right!" She quipped hotly. "As if I'd ride out in the middle of a storm."

He chuckled. "I meant when the weather calms down, but I'd be surprised if you did. It must've taken a lot of guts—"

"I'd call it stupidity."

His eyes flashed in disaccord. "Whatever it was, it mustn't have been easy to return to Black Rose after how my family treated you, especially considering nothing ties you to the place."

"Nothing...except the past." Ruefully, Ylianor let out a deep breath, her thoughts running to Prince Charles and his soothing love.

"Aren't I a part of that past?" His eyes searched her face before he continued. "Judging from what David told me, you

used to like me.” He grinned mischievously. “And people tell me I’m a likable fellow now more than ever.”

“You don’t need to play games with me.” Ylianor scolded annoyed. “You’ve always had my complete attention then and now, even if I’m not sure I want you back in my life.”

“Why not? Was it better without me?” Suddenly, the black eyes clouded. “Or do you perceive me as a threat?”

Gaze still locked on the prince, Ylianor only wanted to drown in him, forgetting about stupid questions, too dizzy by now from hunger and cold. His nearness did not help matters either, the acute awareness of his body pressing at her side making her legs weak with the unbearable need to feel his arms around her and his warm lips pressing—

With an effort, she pulled her gaze and mind away from temptation. “Yes, I do, probably something to do with our childhood.”

He smiled apologetically. “Since I can’t remember, maybe you ought to fill me in.”

Ylianor’s lips curved bitterly. “I’m sure you don’t need my share of bad memories. It’s better if you stick to the pleasant ones in which I don’t appear.”

Duncan’s head bent on his knees as if he were trying hard to resist some impulse or simply taking his mind off whatever was gnawing at him. She had noticed, of course, could not help noticing it as a matter of fact, his energy speaking louder than any word.

“I’m sorry.” Raising his head, he looked at her apologetically. “I don’t know you or what your life has been like. I shouldn’t have asked.”

Ylianor’s heart went out to him. “No, forgive me. I shouldn’t have answered like that. I’m glad for the opportunity to do something with my life, really. I’d have wandered aimlessly in

search of..." She shrugged as her voice trailed off. "Something," she added eventually, before a stray thought hit her, spreading an amused smile on her face. "And it's not as bad as it seems. We've been friends before, so I don't see why we can't be again." She turned to him, but her confidence vanished upon realizing how much she wanted to touch him. *Yeah, sure as if I could ever be friends with someone who turns my stomach upside down simply by looking at him!* Her heart was racing, her thighs tingled and a strange throb between her legs did not make things any easier.

"I'm not sure I can think of you as a friend," was his cold reply.

*Of course not. What a stupid fool to think even—*

"Damn!" Grabbing her shoulders, he cursed again. "I might regret this for the rest of my life, but the gods know I want more, much more."

Closing his mouth on hers, Prince Caldwell took their conversation to a completely different level, drawing her closer while his tongue carefully explored the warm opening, making her head spin and her body heat out of control. The intoxicating feeling became more intense when he pushed her down on the carpet, lying on top of her. Tossing the blanket aside, Duncan caressed the soft skin, teasing the nipples, until his mouth left hers to start a tantalizing descent, nibbling, kissing and tasting along the way while his long strands tickled her flesh. Arching her back, Ylianor pulled him closer so he stroked the moistness between her legs, gently and seductively. The fire inside raged furiously, together with the dull hammering she thought she could not endure a second longer, particularly when his tongue circled one hard nipple. Shocked, Ylianor felt shivers of pleasure radiating from her breast as he deepened the kiss, drawing the tight bud fully in his mouth and sucking it hard. Even his teeth lightly grazing the skin felt pleasurable, so she pressed his head

against it, wanting him to swallow her whole. But he had no trouble switching to the other hardened tip, demanding his lavish attention, complying generously, licking and lapping avidly, until he decided it was time to resume his sensual journey.

Stretching luxuriously, she tensed her legs, feeling the wetness dripping all the way down to her asshole, until the raw sensation of his hot mouth closing right around the painful pounding was simply too intense to breathe and Ylianor stopped moving altogether. Body taut in anticipation, her swollen clit drowned in his unbearable sucks that teased, stroked, rubbed, until her mind went blank with wave after exquisite wave coursing through her every fiber, similar to shivers, only at a much deeper and blissful level, as repeated coils overwhelmed her like an unstoppable tide. Unable to withstand the unexpected pleasure, she opened her mouth wide to let the scream escape her lungs, its loudness rising and falling with the intensity of the throes melting her body into liquid fire.

Obviously startled, Duncan stopped sucking, but afraid he would end it there, she swung her hips enticingly, her body begging him to continue and he could not resist the invitation. "Have you been with a man before?" He whispered softly in her ear after tearing his mouth away from her cunt.

Even though her senses were reeling, she caught his question. "Never."

Prince Caldwell had a moment's hesitation as if debating whether to take her, but quickly made up his mind. "This might hurt a bit." His warning reached her ear before his kiss took her breath away.

He tasted different now, a bitter, stinging yet oddly familiar flavor lining his mouth and drenching his tongue. She knew it was hers and feeling it on him only excited her more as she dared push her tongue for some tentative explorations of her

own. Lost in his taste, and hers, Ylianor arched her back one more time, her legs spread out, the dull throb back again, as she felt a part of him pushing to get inside. And the second he broke through whatever barrier had seemed to hamper him, the searing pain froze her despite his warning.

Duncan had stopped, too. “Do you want me to pull out?” Concerned, his black eyes pools of tenderness drowned her.

To be honest, the pain had already lessened and she did not want to spoil his fun. “No, but kiss me hard.”

“I’ll do my best.” He grinned as his mouth claimed her lips again.

She drowned in him, almost forgetting everything else. His movements were not very pleasant now, but she focused on his tongue ravishing her cavity until she felt his peak. Then finally, he was still.

## Chapter Six

"Good morning, Prince." Ylianor's chirpy voice greeted cheerfully the moment he opened his eyes.

Yawning and stretching, he watched her elegant moves around the shelter, her slender body going back and forth from the kitchen.

"It's the eleventh hour and I'm starving. Luckily, I found some tea and gingerbread, so I fixed breakfast." She flashed a mischievous smile. "After last night, I think we need to replenish our energy."

Now that she mentioned it, he was hungry, too, having skipped breakfast, lunch and dinner altogether last night. *All the storm's fault*. Feeling lazy, his gaze traveled out the window where the overcast weather promised nothing good, but at least it had stopped raining. *We better get out of here fast before I do any more damage*. Then he wondered how the horses were holding up.

"Fuzeon and Starlet are fine. I went to check on them five minutes ago. They spent the night safe and dry."

A quick stretch, then Prince Caldwell got out of bed and retrieved his clothes, now fully dried, and put them on. "That's good news."

When he sat at the table, she brought the tea and the

gingerbread, filling his cup first. "Careful, it's hot," she warned, sitting next to him. Then nibbling on a piece of bread, she glanced at the gray sky outside, a look of concern clouding her eyes.

Duncan followed her gaze. "Yeah, we should leave right after breakfast."

"Do you have the power to read minds?" But she did not sound at all surprised. "I was just thinking that."

"Actually, I thought you did. I was thinking of the horses when you mentioned them."

She smiled. "Perhaps we're just in tune with each other's thoughts."

He nodded in agreement, even if the idea made him uncomfortable. "Yeah." And his tone did not elicit further elaborations on the subject.

As if understanding his reticence, Ylianor did not insist. In silence, they finished breakfast, although he would have liked to know how she had lived her first time, if he had hurt her a lot or if it had been endurable and enjoyable anyway. Yet, he could not wait to leave the place, not trusting his body's craving to repeat the experience, her warm body too tempting if only he allowed himself to look at it closely. No, better leave and in a hurry, too, after having cleaned up the shelter as rules required travelers to do.

Following his example, Ylianor cleared the space in which they had slept. "There's blood on these blankets. What should I do?"

Busy at the fireplace, he turned around. "Let's take them to Black Rose. I'll have them cleaned and brought back here."

"All right." After folding them neatly, she neared him. "If you're almost done there, I'll get the horses." At his nod of agreement, she left.



One last look around and they left Lake Lilly, Prince Caldwell insisting on a brisk pace for he wanted to reach Black Rose sooner, rather than later, pretending he had pressing business waiting for him. In reality, all he wanted was to stop thinking about the consequences of his actions or, better yet, the intriguing witch riding at his side.

Needless to say, he still could not believe how deeply she attracted him in spite of her class, his aristocratic tastes and her gender. Yes, if he had to be honest, he had grown weary of women, particularly when they played silly games with his intelligence after a passionate night. Even more infuriating, he had noticed they had the bad habit of considering sex not as a mere sharing of body parts and fluids, rather of emotions, something he was not prepared to do, not now anyway and not for a woman.

He shrugged. Perhaps this was all besides the point. His life simply did not need more complications than it already had, not now anyway. In addition, Ylianor's shady heritage did not help matters and even if he was sure they shared no blood relation whatsoever, gossips were often more convincing than the truth itself. Still, it did not stop him from picturing her naked body with its high breasts, long legs and firm buttocks, which were definitely something to explore further. Yes, he had to admit he wanted her like few people before in his life, still amazed at how much he had liked her in bed, especially after her unexpected reaction to pleasure. So he could no longer suppress the erotic flashes of Ylianor's tantalizing body sprawled on the carpet, tensing her muscles before her explosive release or her sweet surrender when he took her. *But it's nothing compared to what I'm gonna do to that magnificent ass of hers next time.* And simply thinking about it made his cock stir faster until with a groan, he managed to block the images, knowing that if it were

up to him, he would have turned the horses around and taken her back to the shelter.

“Perhaps it’s best if I go to the village.” Her voice cut through his thoughts, breaking the long silence. “It might not be a good idea to return together.”

Not having planned that far ahead, Duncan focused on the road, which he had ignored until now, and saw the turnpike dividing the path between Black Rose and the village. “Yes, I guess you’re right.”

Without saying goodbye, Ylianor took the lead and he watched Starlet pass Fuzeon to take the left turn while he continued straight.

A worried David was waiting for him at the stables. “Where have you been since yesterday? I was about to come look for you.”

“I went riding and the storm caught me, so I spent the night in Lake Lilly’s shelter.”

“Alone?”

Annoyed, Prince Caldwell waved his hand nervously. “Of course, who should’ve been with me?”

“Ylianor has been missing since last night, too.”

“She had some errands to run in the village. If the storm caught her, she must’ve spent the night over. Don’t worry. She’ll be back soon.”

“I thought I saw you leave together...” David started to argue, but his voice quickly trailed off as if he realized it was none of his business.

Getting off Fuzeon, Prince Caldwell handed David his bridles. “We did because I wanted to see the mare, but at the turnpike our paths separated.” He patted Fuzeon affectionately, glancing inside the stables. “Is Chris here?” He tried to locate a tangible sign of what he felt was a certainty. Then before David had a

chance to answer, he caught sight of a familiar horse. "Isn't that Black?"

"Yes, Lord Templeton arrived early this morning. He's with your mother and sister in the breakfast room."

At the words, Duncan hurried away, heart pounding and stomach tight in anticipation, his mind already picturing blue-gray eyes ready to spark at his sight and light the beautiful face. Without a doubt, Christopher Templeton was one of the most attractive men the prince knew. Blond and clear-eyed, an angelic face with regular features and an aristocratic nose, the nineteen-years-old appealed to a wide variety of people, women, too, captivated by his fair skin, together with his tall, lean and graceful frame. Too bad Duncan knew his friend tried his best to ignore the female persuasion, being rude usually his favorite tactic, but sometimes he just had to suffer through them and nothing beat the sight of him with Elizabeth, which was all the more reason to hurry and head to the front door.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm so glad you're here." Lady Caldwell repeated to a bored Chris for the tenth time.

"And I'm glad, too, Lady Caldwell, though I wish you knew where Duncan is."

"That bad boy left yesterday with a storm coming and the gods only know if and where he found a shelter."

"I wonder why he'd be so reckless."

"Because Mother made him angry," Elizabeth explained.

"Elizabeth, hush! You shouldn't burden our guest with our family quarrels."

"But, Mother, Chris is Duncan's best friend, almost like a brother, so who better than him to make your son come to his

senses?”

Suddenly interested, Chris brightened. “What happened?”

Sophia Caldwell’s hesitation lasted a fraction of a second before plunging into the story. “Well...it seems my son had the bad taste of employing a woman as a stable keeper and of course, we aren’t very happy about it.”

“Mother, if Chris is to help Duncan, he must know the truth.” She turned to him, eyes alight with barely suppressed emotions. “You see, this woman is the daughter of my father’s mistress, a servant he had the misfortune of...fancying.” She frowned as if recollecting something. “I think you may have known her, too. She used to play with Duncan when they were still children.”

*Yliantor Meyer! How could I forget?* “Vaguely.”

“Anyway, when Father died, Mother banished this...creature from the house. Now Duncan has brought her back.”

Chris turned to Lady Caldwell. “You really banished her?”

“Of course, I did.” Sophia spat. “To have to suffer her presence after Charles died would’ve been intolerable.”

“So it happened after your mate died in...” He creased his forehead in an effort to remember dates.

“About ten years ago,” Elizabeth supplied.

“And you’ve had no contact with her in all this time?”

“None whatsoever.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Not even Duncan?”

Elizabeth shrugged. “If he had, he made no mention of it. But I really don’t think so.”

“Then how did he find her?” *And more importantly, how did he manage to remember her?*

“We...” Elizabeth faltered and looked at her mother. “We don’t know.”

“I’m not interested in how he found her.” Lady Caldwell scoffed. “I want him to kick her out again.”

Elizabeth shook her head sadly. “Unfortunately, he offered her the position her father once held as stable keeper.”

“Yeah, I remember her father worked here.” Using a cautious tone, he pretended memories were returning to him.

“Yes, well...” Elizabeth looked uncomfortable as if debating whether to include more information or not. Then she made up her mind. “Actually, there are gossips going around about her origins. Malicious lies, for sure, but—”

“My mate is not that creature’s father.” Sophia Caldwell almost shouted.

“Mother, calm down!” Elizabeth turned to look at Chris apologetically. “Please, forgive her. It’s still a touchy subject for her and she tends to get very upset about it.”

“Of course, I understand.”

“Naturally, we know she’s no blood relation.” Elizabeth’s tone was firm as if wanting to dispel any residual doubts. “It’s ridiculous even to think it, but people can be very cruel sometimes, especially if they can talk bad about someone.”

“That servant had the baby when pledged to John Meyer, our stable keeper,” Sophia explained in a gentler tone. “Charles never pledged to her and as you well know, Lord Templeton, that’s essential before you can have any children.”

Chris nodded in agreement.

“John Meyer is her father.” Elizabeth set the record straight once and for all. “Or rather was. He died just recently.”

Chris frowned skeptically. “And this made Duncan want to replace him with his daughter?”

“I don’t think—”

“It has nothing to do with John’s death.” Lady Caldwell was quick to end her daughter’s sentence. “That woman, just like her mother, is a witch and she used witchcraft to seduce and enslave Duncan into bringing her back here. That’s exactly how her

mother worked her way into my poor mate's heart."

"Come now, Mother, they're just women." Elizabeth tried to argue persuasively. "That's all. Can you really see Duncan fall prey to witchcraft?" She looked steadily at Chris. "Maybe you can find out why he insists on keeping her on the premises."

He shrugged annoyed. "If I ever get to see him."

"He'll be back. Don't worry." Elizabeth smiled apologetically. "By the way, are you planning to stay long?"

*Not if I'm stuck with you.* "I'm afraid not." He tried to sound as polite as possible. "The leader has summoned us, so we should meet him as soon as possible."

Elizabeth's eyes flashed. "Is that why you came?"

He nodded. "Yes, to pick up Duncan and go to the Hall."

"So you'll be leaving soon?"

"Well—"

"We're not leaving immediately, Lizzy. Don't worry." Duncan cut in as he entered the room, obviously catching the last part of the conversation. Then he turned to his guest, flashing a most attractive smile. "Welcome to Black Rose, Chris."

Swinging in his direction, young Templeton returned the smile with all the gladness he could muster. "There you are, naughty Duncan. So you wanted to try out a storm for a change?" He searched his face in amusement.

"I guess I underestimated the weather and the storm caught up with me around Lake Lilly. Luckily, Father had provided a shelter so I didn't get too wet."

Lady Caldwell gave him a skeptical look. "And that's where you spent the night?"

"Yes, Mother, nothing to worry about." His black eyes flashed in Chris's direction. "Care to discuss travel plans in my office?"

*Thought you'd never ask.* "That's what I'm here for." Grinning broadly, Chris moved to reach Duncan, waiting at the

door, but remembering his manners, he turned around to sweep Elizabeth and Lady Caldwell with one glance. "If you'll excuse me ladies, I'll see you later."

Together, they left the breakfast room, heading down the hall. Stopping in front of his office, Duncan opened the door, making way for Chris to pass through before following him inside. He was about to close the door when, in a swift move, Chris turned around and pinned him to that same door just as his avid mouth closed on Duncan's, his tongue sweeping the hot space to get the full taste of him. "Hello, lover." His husky whisper found the prince's ear after he had managed to tear away from the more tempting lips. "Missed me?"

## Chapter Seven

That sex was very important on Sendar became evident to boys and girls since their adolescent years if they went through the process known as the phase. To the learned minds, it served the purpose of sexual education, a pleasurable way to familiarize with one's body and to release unbearable tensions. To those falling prey to the uncontrollable impulse, it was pure fun and great sex with a close friend of the same gender and age. Many viewed it as a rite of passage into adulthood, although not everyone experienced it. Debates still raged as to why some did while others did not, but no clear answer had emerged beyond the simple fact boys had it more than girls did.

Whatever triggered the phase, it usually did not last beyond a certain age. Just as mysteriously as it started, the sudden urge would disappear, often leaving nothing behind except pleasant memories. Such an abrupt ending was usually painless for people accustomed to separate sex from love, but if someone made the fatal mistake...well, as a rule, passions that transcended the bed did not have a savory reputation on Sendar. They tended to upset the general balance of things by ruining the phase, not to mention most other adult relationships, particularly in its path to a healthy pledge.

But life had the bad habit of escaping rigid definitions or



controls as both Chris and Duncan had found out during their extremely atypical phase. Actually, their passionate and intense relation defied rationality and conventions even before sex complicated matters, making it impossible for mere words to describe the intricate emotional tangle between them. Ever since their first meeting, it had been obvious they could never be just friends, despite sex starting at a later stage, as was inevitable it would. No, physical intimacy only added to the connection, renewing their bond each and every time. Simply being in the same room together built up their sexual tension, which hit them like blows to the stomach, until it was impossible to keep their hands off each other. And apparently, the process never stopped, only increased to vertiginous heights that seemed contrary to Sendar's standards. After their first experience had inflamed every available sense, they spent endless nights and torrid days exploring every bit of flesh, touching, tasting, sucking, giving and receiving pleasure in an unexplainable escalation, which pulled them together to forge what already existed between them, their unique bond, making it stronger than ever. So how to explain a link deeper than skin that went beyond any normal phase, beyond conventions, beyond sex itself, no matter how much energy they devoted to it?

\* \* \* \*

Uncaring about rules in general, Chris had fallen in love with Duncan the first time he had seen him, their meeting forever carved in his mind as living proof time could stand still.

All my father's fault anyway, for wanting to send me, his third and youngest son, to the Caldwell's to broaden my horizons, or so he claimed. *Clinging to his two brothers, eight-years-old Chris*

*had wanted to tell James Templeton it was a useless attempt for his convictions would never change no matter how far he went, but his young age had prevented any serious argument. Still, he was old enough to know what he wanted from life and women were definitely not on the list, in spite of what his father said or did.*

*Alas, nothing stopped the tragic—or rather blessed, as he came to see it later—chain of events. Exiled from his home, Fair Haven, little Chris had set out on a long journey, for which he had no taste or choice either, cursing the Caldwell's at every step, along with anyone even remotely connected to them, until destiny had caught up with him at Black Rose's last bend.*

*Twisting around the many hills leading up to the estate, he first heard a boy's happy shout. "Ready or not, here I come." Another curve and he glimpsed the back of him, dark head lit by Stella's rays. "It's no good running, Ylianor." The boy kept yelling at a little girl. "I'll catch you." He seemed all set to go while Chris approached the last bend, but curiously something stopped him and he looked over his shoulder one second before Chris came into full view on the other side of the hill.*

*With a heart pounding so fast it could've dropped out at any moment, Chris had stared at the piercing black eyes transfixed, unmoving, unable to talk, think, breathe or do much else besides recognizing the dark-haired boy, though he had never set eyes on him before in his life. And that the other boy knew him, too, Chris read it clearly in the inquisitive gaze. So it happened, impossibility becoming reality as the unconscious tried to shed light on age-old connections that obviously neither had ever forgotten, though they seemed incomprehensible at present.*

*Quickly discarding his mount, young Templeton ran the rest of the way to reach the intriguing boy who did not seem so eager to meet him after all. With a start, he had run in the opposite*

*direction, headed toward the house, but looking back as if to make sure Chris did not abandon the chase, coming to a full stop only when he wanted to be caught. Grasping his new friend's shoulders, young Templeton had smiled brightly. "Hi, I'm Chris. What's your name?"*

*"I'm Duncan." The black gaze had searched his face as if looking for an answer until, finding one to his liking, he continued smoothly. "Want to play?"*

*"Sure, but not with girls."*

*"What girls?" The innocent question had made Chris feel like they were alone in the world.*

*"I saw a girl before..." Young Templeton had begun tentatively, eyes briefly roaming around, suddenly unsure he had seen right.*

*"Ylianor? Oh, don't mind her." The dark boy had smiled brightly.*

*And looking at the incredibly handsome face with the long hair hanging on the shoulders, Chris had sealed his destiny forever, Duncan quickly becoming the center of his life, his friend, brother, soul mate, but mostly his only lover.*

\* \* \* \*

When the phase began for the prince, he could not but make Chris his mate, even if a couple of years younger than him, powerless against the blond angel's overwhelming physical attraction that literally consumed his throbbing desire like a fire. All within standards, everyone assured repeatedly, but Duncan had known better from the start. The intense feelings Chris unleashed effortlessly with his mere presence, even before any cock-wrenching phase, had been an inescapable fact that clearly marked the difference and made their uncontrollable sexual

desire last far beyond any reasonable expectation.

*Is it right or fair?* The prince had wondered, thinking of his father's experience, which had taught him to be wary of deep-rooted passions. And when hard cold reasoning had regained a measure of control, Duncan, despite his aching heart, had felt forced to break the connection.

"I want to experience other things, women mostly." He had tried justifying his choice in the face of Chris's fierce objections and breaking heart.

But leaving his ex-lover no choice on either counts, they separated, Prince Caldwell soon learning how bitter his freedom tasted, particularly when discovering the issue to be more complicated than he had believed. Women were fine, for a one-night stand, annoying and boring if the affair prolonged. They came with strings attached, preventing Duncan from replicating the carefree sex and easy-going attitude he enjoyed with Chris. In addition, jealousy and possessive threats were traits he had neither the time nor the inclination to endure.

His estrangement from the blond angel lasted two years. At first, Duncan had tried to maintain at least the friendship, but seeing Chris inevitably led to hot sex, plunging them right back into old patterns the prince had vowed to break. Not trusting himself, he enforced a physical distance from his former lover, avoiding not only sex with Chris, but Chris altogether.

And knowing the decision broke young Templeton's heart only worsened his own craving, the huge void eating his stomach a clear sign he had not outgrown the phase either in spite of his twenty-one years. No, his heartache was all too real and painfully raw as he tossed night after sleepless night, missing his blond angel more than he cared to admit and not only in a sexual sense. *But how to breach what has become an unbearably cold distance and confess how much I love my dazzling angel without*

*fear of the inevitable consequences?*

Lost in thought, the prince remembered when Arthur Fairchild, a friend of Charles Caldwell and leader of the High Council, had invited him to Rhapsen Hall for a celebration. Although such occasions were frequent, this was the first for which Duncan received a formal invitation and it would have been inappropriate to turn it down. Not really looking forward to it, the prince had gone, accompanied by his inseparable David, arriving at dusk at the famed Hall.

Lord Fairchild had stood in front of the entrance. "Welcome, my dear prince. I trust you had a pleasant journey."

"I did and I thank you for the invitation."

The leader's eyes had blazed. "It was my pleasure and duty." Probably catching Duncan's puzzled look, he had been quick to add. "Go change, if you must, then reach us in the blue dining room where everyone is." He gestured to a woman at his side. "Lillian will show you to your quarters."

Duncan had followed her to an upstairs bedroom with a cozy fire to light and warm the atmosphere, but had not lingered. After a quick change, he had returned downstairs, his stomach tight with anticipation.

Men of all ages milled around, some streaming in and out of the dining room, others carrying food or drinks, all chatting with amused smirks on their faces. Perhaps Prince Caldwell knew only a third of the guests, though he hardly noticed, prey as he was of a nagging feeling someone waited for him inside the filled room, which was impossible for he had told no one he would be there.

Heart pounding frantically, he was about to get through the door when a young man stopped him. "Duncan, how nice to see you here. How have you been?"

He shrugged. "Fine, I guess and..." The words died in his

throat the moment Chris captured his gaze, blue-gray eyes staring straight at him from across the room. In a rush of uncontrollable excitement, Duncan's mouth went dry as he heard a piece of heart pounding in his ears while the rest plummeted with a heavy thud to his stomach.

Unable to tear his gaze away, he felt the world fade and time turn back to his childhood, at the exact moment he had first laid eyes on his beautiful angel and the flood of long denied emotions was simply too powerful to ignore as they threatened the thin control he tried to maintain.

But it was already too late. Sudden awareness of how much he had missed his blond beauty for the past two years crashed down on Duncan along with every wasted attempt to avoid thinking about him or pretending the world was the same without him.

*How foolish to believe, even for one second, my heart could've forgotten him.* Noticing he looked more beautiful and desirable than ever, the prince hungered only to touch him and make love until he was too exhausted to think straight.

*But what if he doesn't want me anymore?* Cold reasoning warned as he remembered how bitter the separation had been, memory taunting him with their last hateful meeting, each bent on hurting the other with a vengeance the prince had regretted soon afterward. Yet, searching his beloved's face, he could find no trace of rejection in those blue-gray eyes that were still fixed on him—or more correctly, eating him up—while the sensual body was moving closer. “Hello, lover.” The blond angel's husky voice had breathed, reaching him with a naughty twinkle lighting his face. “Missed me?”

“I can't even begin to tell you how much.”

“I knew you would.” Chris's smile of satisfaction brightened his face. Then grabbing his hand, he pulled the prince out of the

room. "Come. Let's go somewhere more private. How about your room?"

Leading him upstairs, Duncan was not surprised to notice many wistful glances in Chris's direction, his blond angel inevitably attracting attention, apparently now more than ever. Some even attempted to stop him, in spite of his evident lack of interest, Chris having eyes only for Duncan. As in a daze, the prince vaguely remembered reaching his room and closing the world outside.

They did not talk much that night, too concerned in reconnecting at a purely physical level to waste precious time on useless words, which could never adequately describe how Chris filled his senses like no woman had been able to do, satisfying his craving for kisses, touches, strokes, rubs, sucks, slides, shoves, penetrations, releases. The familiar tastes and smells made Duncan feel at home...and not a moment too soon, he realized, gripping the firm cock that had caused so much pleasure in the past. In rapture, he pressed a warm palm on the long stem, twitching under his skillful touch as if it recognized its true master, before reaching the shiny head first with his tongue, then wrapping his mouth around it and sucking it deep inside.

With a swift plunge, Chris pushed into his yielding opening, the erection straining in the tight confines, as it demanded more space. The prince's lips ran all the way down to the base, his wet flickers on every bumpy vein increasing its size to great proportions, rubbing the soft skin lovingly and lavishly while the blond angel groaned under every lap.

At the same time, his fingers slipped to the perineum, tracing the distance between Chris's balls and his ass, the tender hole opening up the second he circled its edges.

"Oh, lover, I'd almost forgotten how good it feels with you." The blond angel's mumble was a sure sign he did not know

whether he liked the play on his ass more than the one on his cock.

“Liar.” Duncan challenged. “As if I didn’t know this is all you thought about.”

Chris grinned. “Maybe it’s not such a great idea to get back with someone who knows me so well.” Clutching the prince’s hard shaft, he stroked it forcefully. “Or has such a great big piece of scrumptious flesh.”

Duncan squeezed Chris’s rigid thickness harder. “If that’s the way you want to play it, come and get it.” Amused, he lay on his back.

“Thought you’d never ask.” Moving elegantly, the blond angel covered Prince Caldwell, head raised over the tip of the prince’s erection, his cock aimed at the warm mouth underneath.

The game became definitely more interesting as Duncan resumed his ass tease, fingers rimming the borders in tighter circles before shoving inside, while his mouth drew in the whole of Chris’s hard bulge in repeated sucks that brought the tip close to his throat. At the same time, the blond angel’s mouth worked miracles on his avid organ, his insuperable skills a trait he had sorely missed throughout the entire two years of unexciting separation. That his blond angel loved cocks was no surprise as was the discovery he had perfected the art of sucking to a point Duncan did not think he could resist another sharp intake into the fiery cavity, squeezed by the avid lips and bathed in the tongue’s lavish laps.

“Stop, Angel.” He had to beg eventually, holding Chris by the blond silky strands. “You’ve gotten too good over the past years—”

“And you’re driving my ass crazy.” Chris retorted, moving to straddle Duncan. “Now all it wants is to feel your cock slam into it.” At these words, his narrow hole came down on the tip of the



erection, screwing itself firmly on it.

The impact took the prince's breath away, his shaft inching inside the accommodating flesh that had no trouble fitting his entire length and thickness. Drowning in familiar territory, Prince Caldwell raised his hips, shoving deeper into the yielding hole, opening it wide to his own necessities, setting the pace for their frenzied dance. Matching every upward thrust with a downward push, Chris adapted to Duncan's tempo and even when the prince increased it, he shifted to allow the cock to slide in and out at a faster pace.

But Duncan wanted to possess him in every position, hardly satisfied until he had tasted his blond lover's surrender in more ways than one. With a leg flip, he turned Chris on his back, then pressed him face down on the bed as his stone-like rigidity slipped again inside the hot hole to pump it even harder than before.

The new position allowed for greater leeway so Duncan plunged headfirst into the accommodating flesh that sucked him deeper inside with every shove. And Chris's ass responded beautifully, rising up whenever the prince pushed down, coming together in the delicious slamming that also rubbed the blond angel's throbbing cock on the mattress.

His muscles already quivering in anticipation of the release soon to come, Chris accelerated. "I don't think I can resist much longer."

Duncan stopped altogether. "Oh no, I forbid you to come until I say so." With a twinge of regret, he pulled out of the starving ass, then, slipping a hand under the blond angel's stomach, flipped him on his back before cradling the long legs to his chest.

Having understood what Duncan wanted, Chris raised his ass until it was right in front of the greedy cock, which slid inside

effortlessly, the hole's dimension more than adequately fitting the large thickness.

The dance resumed, but this time the prince could not resist his blond angel's enchanting ass squeeze that seemed to beg for the hot dense fluid to fill it. Bending his head on the upraised erection, which Chris was jerking off, Duncan wrapped his lips around the bulging head and it was the end for both as his mouth received the jets down to his throat just as he flooded the ass with his own hot semen.

Their senses inflamed by the explosion, they did not waste any time to rest, but picked up right where they left off, starting on a new exciting journey that lasted less than before as their resistance grew thinner the more the connection deepened, making their previous sexual experiences mere child's play.

Only when dawn broke after repeated comes, did they find it necessary to talk, lying spent on a carpet in front of the fireplace, Chris's head leaning on Duncan's chest. "By the gods, I missed you so fucking much." The blond angel caressed the prince lovingly. "I was so angry with you, I wished more than once I'd never see you again in my life, but am I glad no god cared to listen or I'd have missed this glorious night." His gaze sparkled mischievously as if already reliving the incredible sex.

"I'm sorry, but I thought I needed the space to know women better and perhaps make my mother happy by pledging to one. I had to break away because..." Duncan sighed. "I love you." He spelled out clearly, relieved he could finally utter the words that had lain on his heart heavy as stone until awareness had lifted the weight altogether. "Even if I tried denying it for so long." Long hair flying around, the prince shook his head. "But it was no use. You're all I think about, Angel, the one thought before I close eyes and the first when I open them again." He tousled the blond hair. "And this power you have over me allowed for no other

distraction but you, no one to take your place, no matter how hard I convinced myself that, if I didn't see you, I'd have a better chance of finding the right woman."

"So what stopped you?"

Gazing at the fire, Prince Caldwell thought the question over. "You, I guess. Or perhaps I was looking for you in every woman I met. And I met quite a few."

The blue-gray eyes flashed maliciously. "I know. People love to gossip so they kept me up to date about your...experiments. It hurt every time I heard of a new affair, but then I'd rejoice when it didn't work out."

"So it was really you." Amused, Duncan faked a punch at Chris's arm. "You bastard!"

The blond angel caught his fist and kissed it. "I love you, Duncan. I told you before, but you didn't believe me then. I hope tonight I've proven the depth of my feelings once and for all."

*As if I needed proof.* "I know you love me, but that wasn't the point of the separation. Haven't you tried women during this time?"

Chris almost jumped away from the prince. "No! You, more than anyone, should know I'm not interested in them. Ever since I can remember, I've only liked men and after you left me, I wanted to fuck as many as I could, working my way through every social level and age." The blue-gray eyes flashed smugly. "I've had sex with the lowest servant up to the highest lord of the land and everything in between. I know practically every man here tonight and have slept with at least half of them." Moving closer, Chris fixed his gaze on Duncan's face. "And the saddest thing is I don't give a damn about any of them. The more men I fucked, the more I wanted you and the more I felt empty inside."

Duncan wrapped his arms around him tightly. "It seems incredible. We were kids when it all started and now—"

“So we’ve grown.” Chris snuggled in the embrace. “And it hasn’t changed a goddamn thing for me. Today I don’t feel any different about you than I did back then.” Pulling back a little, he caressed the long hair. “No, I’m lying.” His lips brushed the prince’s, tongue tracing the contours and sliding persuasively inside. “I love you a whole lot more than I ever did.”

Duncan returned the kiss. “But the phase...it’s supposed to be temporary.”

“That’s what they want you to believe. In case you haven’t noticed, we’re different—always have been, always will be—and our feelings are so unique they’ll never just disappear, no matter how hard we try.” He grinned. “You belong to me, lover. That’s all there is to it and the sooner you accept it, the better off we’ll be.”

Duncan pushed a solitary strand away from his face. “Maybe you’re right and I’ve been a fool.”

With a finger under his chin, the angel tilted Duncan’s face. “Luckily, not entirely or you wouldn’t be here tonight.”

The prince grinned. “Don’t flatter yourself. I stayed only out of curiosity to know how you worked from the lowest servant to the highest lord.”

Chris’s eyes glittered. “With skillful cock sucking, you can reach the top so I went all the way to the leader himself.”

“Arthur Fairchild?” Duncan repeated to make sure he had understood correctly.

The blond head nodded smugly. “The one and only.”

“I’m impressed. What about his mate?”

“She’s a nice quiet lady who doesn’t care much about Arthur’s dealings. Just proves pledges don’t have to get in the way of satisfying sex.” He shifted to lie back down. “And that’s what he wants me to have day in and day out.”

“He must be very fond of you.”

Chris shrugged as if he did not care either way. "So he says."

Knowing how touchy his angel could be on certain topics, Duncan hesitated a moment before asking the next question. "And you? How do you feel about him?"

Rolling up again, Chris faced the prince, caressing his naked chest. "I told you. You are my heart's desire despite all my attempts to erase you from it." Chris's lips curled in a snarl. "Hardly surprising it never worked, if you consider I loved you from the first moment I laid eyes on you."

"What an honor!" Then after a moment's pause, Duncan continued. "To be honest, I felt the same, although I've tried to fight against it, thinking it would get in the way of my family obligations."

Chris shrugged, rolling on his back again to stare at the ceiling. "Lucky for me, I don't much care about dumb traditions. I have two brothers to carry on the family name or whatever else needs to be passed on so I'm sure by now my father's accepted the fact I might never pledge."

"That's easy for you to say, but I'm the only male in my family, if you remember."

"So what?" Turning on a side, he trapped Duncan's gaze. "As I said, a pledge, or anything else for that matter, won't get in the way of our love. Go ahead and look for your mate, just..." His voice almost broke. "Don't shut me out again." The blue-gray eyes clouded. "Please, spare me another agony."

"I'm sorry." He breathed deeply, reaching out to assuage, if only partially, the empty sad hole he felt eating his soul. "And just for the record, I suffered, too, so I have no intention of going through it again. Believe me."

"Then don't. We can have our fun like old times, which won't prevent you from doing whatever else you need to do, including fucking as many women as you like." He pulled a little away from

Duncan's embrace. "I know that's what I'm planning to do." And a huge smile lit his face.

Duncan could not help return the infectious grin. "Women will be delighted to know you changed your mind."

"I meant men." The blond angel immediately rectified.

"So you'll never know what you're missing."

Chris shrugged. "Told you, not interested."

"But what if I asked you to share one with me?" He challenged.

The blond angel was silent for a moment. "Wouldn't know about that."

The prince toppled him to press his back to the floor. "Come on." Playfully, he bit Chris's neck. "It'd be great fun if we're together."

"What if I repeat I'm not interested?"

"How can you say it if you've never tried it? Besides, you wouldn't have to do anything with her. I'd be there, remember?"

Unconvinced, Chris turned his gaze away. "We'll see," was his noncommittal reply, but the prince did not take it as a final answer, working through the exciting times that followed their reunion to make him change his mind.

In the end, convincing his blond angel turned out easier than expected, though Duncan had no doubt it was only to please him. But he did not care, not at first anyway. Hooking up with Chris again had seemed to cure the strange void that had tormented him during the two years estrangement, a dull thud he had blamed on his blond lover's absence.

Slipping back effortlessly into old happy habits though, the ache had not disappeared, only dimmed to a nagging thought at the back of his mind, which had prompted the prince to create more than one promiscuous occasion with Chris's half-hearted participation, even if his comments left room for hope. "Not

exactly the best experience, but not even the worst either.” He had stated once the woman left.

“Think you might get used to it?”

Chris frowned, not answering immediately. “I’m not sure. You and I have so much more fun together than we ever will with any woman.”

“Maybe we haven’t found the right one.”

“Do you think she exists?” Chris scoffed, sounding doubtful.

*Oh yes, Angel, she’s out there somewhere and I’ll find her wherever she’s hiding, even if I have to search every land. But when I’ll find her, I’ll go even further and make you like her, too.*

## Chapter Eight

"So did you miss me?" Chris asked again.  
Hours after meeting in the breakfast room, the lovers rested naked and satisfied on the couch, their flaming desire finally quenched, drinking distilled cider in front of the fire.

"More than I can say," Duncan assured, taking a sip from his glass.

"Though you managed to keep busy."

Duncan grinned. "More than I can say."

"Even if with Isabella it didn't work out?"

Prince Caldwell nodded, hardly surprised at young Templeton's insight. "My dear angel, I don't see the point in talking when you already know everything." No, not much escaped Chris's inquisitive blue-gray eyes, though he often he pretended otherwise. More appropriately, Duncan had the feeling his blond angel had developed the unsettling ability of reading his mind. "Isabella was a disappointingly boring ass, in and out of bed. Her body as cold as ice, I was never sure she liked me at all. Women..." He scoffed annoyed. "I don't think I'll ever be able to understand them."

"That's why I don't even try, lover."

"Oh, but they can be incredibly intriguing, if they want to."



“Again, I find no fascination in either their bodies or their minds.” Sitting up straight, Chris took Prince Caldwell’s face in his hands. “Especially if they make you look like you do today.”

“Why? How do I look?”

The blond angel studied his face. “Like you slept right under that goddamn storm.” He stopped to analyze something more. “Or more appropriately, you look as nervous as when I saw you that night at Arthur’s.”

The prince’s heart fell to his stomach. “And how do you know it’s about a woman?”

Chris’s slow smile curved his lips. “That was easy to guess.” He brushed his lips on Duncan’s. “Come on. Tell me about her and what happened last night.”

Once more, the angel’s bewildering insight went straight to the heart of the matter, though Ylianor was something the prince was not willing to discuss, not now anyway. “There’s not much to tell besides the ride, the storm, the shelter—”

“And the fuck.” Young Templeton completed, releasing Duncan’s face.

The prince took another sip and looked at the fire. *Will I ever manage to lie to my angel?* “All right, what exactly do you want to know about her?”

“Well, a name and description would do for starters, but...” He stopped as if hit by a stray thought and raised a hand. “No, wait! Don’t tell me. Let me guess. If Lady Isabella’s out of the picture, no other candidates in sight except—”

\* \* \* \*

An icy cold shiver ran down Chris’s back as the dots connected in his head. “It must be...Ylianor.” *So the bitch has returned and fully armed, too.* However much time had passed, he

remembered her from childhood as the only real threat in the competition for Duncan's love, if not the only one who had dared challenge him openly, losing obviously. . . *Or had she?*

Startled, Prince Caldwell sat up straight. "How do you know about her? You've only been here for a few hours—"

"In case you haven't noticed, it's your mother's only topic. She's obsessed by it and asked me to do something to avoid a repetition of your father's history, but it seems I'm already too late. So what's the idea of bringing her back here and fucking with her, too?"

The prince shrugged, deciding to ignore the provocation. "She just lost her father and her job so I wanted to help her, especially since she sheltered and nurtured me when I lost my way back from Isabella."

"How could you get lost so close to Black Rose? I mean, you know the way from here to Harbor Town blindfold."

The prince shrugged. "I don't know. I just happened to lose my bearings until I stumbled into the village. And when she opened the door, I had no idea who she was." A smirk crossed his face. "Still don't for that matter." Shifting position, he took another sip. "Funny thing is I don't remember her at all, Angel. My memory has blanks where she should be. David assured she was a childhood friend, but for the life of me, I can't see her in any memory."

*No wonder.* "But I bet she must've taken great pains to remind you."

"Actually, she didn't. I learned about her story from David only after I returned to Black Rose."

"And now that you know, why did you go ahead with your plans?"

Duncan's black eyes flashed annoyed. "I told you. I felt sorry for her."

Chris regarded him coldly. “Apparently, enough to screw her, too.”

“Hey, she’s still a servant—”

“Don’t bother lying, lover. I smelled her all over you.”

With a defeated look, Duncan raised an eyebrow. “Jealous?”

“Of a sorry creature like that?” Chris scoffed.

“She’s anything but sorry. Believe me. In fact, she’s different, very different from any other woman, not to mention incredibly beautiful.”

“But still a servant.” Chris’s lips twisted in a bitter snarl. “I’m surprised. I thought you didn’t care for inferiors and here you go not just having sex with one and wanting to hide it, but caring for her, too, too.” At Duncan’s attempt to protest, he covered his mouth with a hand. “There must be something else entirely that has nothing to do with her level or her appearance for that matter No, you probably wouldn’t have looked at her twice if you didn’t think she was worth something beyond a heated fuck.” His tongue traced the edges of the prince’s lips. “Maybe all that talk about her being your father’s illegitimate—”

“No, she’s not!” Duncan pushed him back. “You know as well as I do it’s impossible to have children outside the pledge

Young Templeton lay back down. “Whatever it is, I’m sure you’ll soon get bored, just like with all the other women.” Making it sound as if it were an inconsequential thing did not change the fact she was the most dangerous threat and not because she was a woman, a category certainly not worth his worries or jealousy, but because she had returned to challenge his place. And in the face of Duncan’s unwillingness to share any intimate details or admit even to himself something was definitely out of place, Chris itched to know more, but held his peace, afraid to let the matter blow out of proportion. “So when are we leaving?”

“To...”

“Come on. Don’t tell me you forgot this, too?” Grinning mischievously, he picked up his glass to sip the fiery liquid. “Arthur wants to see us at the Hall.”

“Another one of his gatherings? I don’t know if I’m up to it.”

“No. I think it’s something serious this time, although he wouldn’t tell me much.”

“It must be important then, if you couldn’t get him to talk.”

Chris turned the glass in his hands. “I don’t have any special power to convince people to talk when they don’t want to.”

“Come now. Arthur is so much in love with you, he practically eats out of your hand.”

Chris shrugged. Arthur’s infatuation was no secret, but he did not care for it, in spite of his long stays at the Council Hall, his love reserved for Duncan alone, a fact the elderly leader seemed to accept without apparent strain. “You know how much I care for it.”

“Evidently, not enough to find out what he wants from us.”

Chris scoffed. “All I know, he wants to see us.”

“All right, then we can leave in a few days.”

“Why not now?” Chris pushed, wanting to get Duncan as far away from Ylianor as possible.

“You know I’m getting ready to read my father’s will, but the lawyer wishes to discuss a few details beforehand so he’ll come here either tomorrow or the day after.”

Chris hung his head in mock despair. “Then I’ll have to endure your sister’s company far longer than I anticipated.”

“Hey, don’t I count for anything, Angel?” Duncan’s lips closed on Chris’s for a furious kiss that left him breathless. “Will it be so bad?”

Raising his gaze, he flashed a smile. “I’ll survive, I guess. But will she? I feel sorry for Elizabeth. It’s almost pathetic the way she

throws herself at me as if I could ever be interested.” Chris grinned. “Actually, on second thought, it would make my father happy.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” The voice sounded mockingly shocked.

“Why not? Imagine if I pledged to her, you and I could live together legally.”

“Poor Lizzy. I would talk her out of it, you know. Call me romantic, but I still believe love or at least physical attraction should be part of a pledge.”

“Oh, lover, you’re outdated. Pledges have nothing to do with love. They’re merely a vow to have children. Elizabeth would be happy and I’d get what I want.”

“Me?”

“Exactly.” Reaching over, his tongue traced Duncan’s lips before pushing through to taste his full, inebriating flavor. The kiss deepened as the prince responded with equal passion, both lost in the sensual feelings until Chris managed to pull away. “Well, don’t worry. As I said, I’m not interested so I’m not going to pop the question any time soon.” He stretched luxuriously. “Too hungry to think straight anyway.” Scrambling to his feet, he went to pick up his clothes. “And I can’t wait to put something in my stomach beside your delicious fluids.”

Prince Caldwell did not move. “I think I’ll skip lunch. I’m not very hungry.”

Sending him a penetrating glance, Chris pretended indifference. “Suit yourself, lover. I know you want to punish me by leaving me at your sister’s mercy, but your plan’s going to fail. I won’t let anything spoil our time together.” Grinning broadly, he pulled on his pants.

“Come on. I didn’t mean that. I’m just not hungry. That’s all.”

Slipping on his shirt, he grinned widely. “I knew I had an effect on people. I just didn’t realize how bad it was.” He finished

dressing and was ready to leave. "All right, I'll see you later." He bent down to kiss Duncan sweetly, then was about to turn when a stray thought stopped him. "By the way, have I told you lately how much I love you?" He whispered in the prince's ear while lightly stroking the silky black hair.

Duncan shook his head, a wide smile curving his lips. "Not in so many words, Angel, if memory serves me right."

Chris loved hearing Duncan's low and throaty angel, which sounded more evil than good. "Well...I could begin right now with the first of a long list—"

"You certainly can, but lunch won't wait that long."

"Time's forever an enemy." Chris mocked. Then tearing himself from Duncan, he left.

\* \* \* \*

Returning to Black Rose, Ylianor had found David waiting for her. "About time you got back, missy." He had scoffed tartly. "Isn't it customary to tell someone where you go? We've been worried about you."

She got off the mare. "I'm sorry, but I told the prince I needed to pick up some things from the village. Didn't he inform you?"

"He might have, had he been here. Instead, he went missing last night...just like you." David eyed Ylianor suspiciously as if expecting she would betray herself. That he thought she and Duncan had spent the night together was obvious, his instinct probably alert to anything he would consider a threat to his master, and she had no doubt he waited for her reactions to confirm his suspicions.

"Really? How strange. I guess he was caught in the storm..." She returned his look, telling him she would not fall for such

blatant tricks. “Just like I was.”

Defeated, David looked away so she turned her attention to the stables, catching sight of a new horse. “We have guests?”

David nodded slowly. “Yes, Lord Christopher Templeton is here on a visit.” He sounded none too happy about it, if not downright annoyed.

The name was enough to make her blood cold. “How nice...well, I think I’ll get to work. I’ve wasted enough time already.”

As if suddenly worried about her conditions, David’s voice softened. “Would you like some breakfast?”

*Who could eat after such news?* Unavoidably, she felt her stomach as heavy as stone. “No, thank you. I’ve eaten at the village.” Hoping it did not sound like the lie it was, she took Starlet inside the stable.

Once David left, Ylianor tried her best to keep busy in order to avoid thinking, but to no avail. Painful memories surfaced unbidden to remind her of what she would rather forget until she had no choice but to return where it all started, traveling back in time to a fine summer day of so long ago, to the love that had been hers and the blinding hate that took it all away.

*Duncan and Ylianor were chasing one another down Black Rose’s hilly slopes, carefree and happy as only children can be. It was hot, maybe too much under Stella’s brightness, but she had not minded, too ecstatic to have the prince all to herself for a change, without odious interferences from jealous mothers or petty sisters.*

*So she did not notice the odd quietness deafening her ears until it was too late. By then nature had gone dead still and an eerie silence had covered the land. Frightened, Ylianor had stopped and turned in time to catch sight of a black ominous*

*figure, coming around the bend at a fast moving pace.*

*And the fact he looked like an angel only scared her out of her wits as alarmed shivers ran down her back. No, the angel disguise did not fool her one bit for she had the power to see through it and uncover the black-hearted demon it disguised, which spread its shadow across the land, even attempting to dim Stella's rays.*

*Dismayed, Ylianor glanced at her handsome prince, feeling sure he would protect her, but one look at him and she realized he was completely unaware of the approaching danger, running after her as if nothing was happening. Then something stopped him on his tracks and everything changed forever as Duncan turned to look behind his shoulder.*

Having witnessed the incredible experience, memory played it back in slow motion, frame by agonizing frame, still unexplainably fresh after all this time. Incredible as it seemed, Ylianor was sure Duncan had felt Chris's presence a fraction of a second before their eyes ever met.

Time had stood still while they stared at one another and Ylianor saw them discover a prior connection so strong it was virtually impossible to unlink. Destined to be as one in the spiritual realm, the two souls had met again, under different names, shapes and circumstances, for one more journey together in the material dimension, their paths inextricably entwined since the beginning of time. When exactly they had forged their bond seemed impossible to tell and even if the conscious level had no recollection of the previous lifetimes, their souls called out in recognition and full acceptance of their destiny.

The experience had touched Chris profoundly, magically turning his black vortex into shiny light so bright Ylianor had to



cover her eyes. When she could look again, to her amazement, the demon had vanished, defeated by the angel, a true representative of its category this time. Incredulous, she remembered rubbing her eyes, afraid the luminescence played tricks, but the image had not changed. And the effect was permanent, Ylianor soon learned, watching Chris become pure light every time he was with Duncan, shining brighter than Stella itself, mesmerizing the young prince to the point of completely forgetting about her.

As a mere seven-years-old, it had been impossible for Ylianor to catch the full implications or the subtleties connected to a power beyond her comprehension. Needless to say, one so young could not understand the complex energy flow she had observed at the time, though it made her aware of the special ability she alone seemed to possess of seeing people as bodies of light, rather than flesh. What she perceived from their shifting colors was not just the aura surrounding the physical shell or its emotional state, but also the buried essence, the raw soul, which allowed her the rare privilege of witnessing the beginning of a love so strong it took the place she considered hers in Duncan's heart. And even now, years after that bright summer day, she still blazed with the same hate and rage she had used against the blond impostor, folding it neatly in a ball and throwing it at him, hoping it would disintegrate him.

Back then the false angel had not even cringed. Perceiving the avalanche about to engulf him, he had blocked it with a fiery wall that burned her anger, along with the rest of her soul, and would have incinerated her on the spot had he not more compelling matters to entice his attention. So he had dismissed her threat as an inconsequential child's play and flown to Duncan's side.

Betrayed and hurt, Ylianor had not realized at the time it was the beginning of the end, not only of her prince, but of Charles

Caldwell and Black Rose, too, her entire world soon to vanish forever in the blink of an eye. What she had managed to salvage, her heart's integrity, was now again at risk since the prince crashed back into her life, undoing with a single touch what it had taken her painful years to bear. And knowing he loved another, something she had no power to change however much she could fight against it, only entangled the existing ties between them, which seemed as undeniable as those linking him to Chris. But such was Duncan Caldwell's appeal, the man she had discovered she still loved as passionately as in the past, despite all her attempts to erase him from her heart, already resolved to accept whatever offer he was willing to make, even if it meant getting her old rival in the bargain.

Just as she reached this conclusion, she felt the prince approaching and it did not surprise her one bit. Turning around, unable to contain her bursting love, she beamed radiantly. "Hello, stranger."

"Hello, Princess." He returned her infectious smile, black eyes blazing. "I was wondering whether you made it back."

Once again, the endearing term made her catch her breath. "Of course, I made it back," she retorted hastily to hide her feelings. "It's not a great journey from the village...except when you get lost."

"Hey, that might've turned out to be one of the best misfortunes to date."

Unsurprisingly, as he got closer, she smelt Chris's scent all over him, despite the soft breeze carrying the pungent smell of the sea. "Not if it makes you skip lunch, too." She looked around at the deserted place.

Duncan shrugged. "Don't feel much hunger, at least not for food."

Her senses tensed at the mere thought. "Hungry for

something else?"

\* \* \* \*

She looked inviting, beautiful and desirable in spite—or maybe because—of his hot sex with Chris. In fact, it had been the sight of her from his office window to draw him out, heart racing with the odd tension even his blond angel could not help noticing. Now her green eyes alight and full of temptation, were telling him to go on. *So why should I resist?* "Yes, I have a taste for a green-eyed princess. Do you happen to know if there are any available?"

"Hem...let me think." She frowned in mocked concentration. Perhaps you should look inside the stables..." Her voice trailed off as she walked to the cooler interior.

The second they stepped inside, he was all over her, his mouth and hands unable to get enough while carrying her upstairs. Quickly removing all bits of clothing, he let his mouth traveled up and down her body, stopping for a brief visit to her breasts, the hard nipples begging for his wet kiss. With a growl, Prince Caldwell satisfied them, licking and sucking until they seemed even harder than before. On resuming his tantalizing journey, he teased her stomach with playful bites while she arched her back to meet his lips. He loved to feel her muscles taut from ache and desire, craving for a closer probing, which he was only too willing to grant, longing to fill his senses with her taste again. In an excruciatingly slow motion, Duncan dipped his tongue on her hairy mound, tasting, sucking, nibbling and stroking the tender folds, the hard tip insinuating in every crevice until it hit the swollen clit. Feeling her tremble and shiver, he recalled her body had a language of its own so he doubled his efforts on the throbbing knot, sucking it noisily while his tongue

covered it in avid laps, helped also by her thrashing that brought the tempting piece of flesh closer to his mouth with each move.

She squirmed in frustration. "Please, no more tortures. I can't take it anymore."

Raising his head, he grinned broadly. "You're in luck. I happen to feel very good today," he breathed huskily, stroking the swollen bud with drenched fingers.

At the words, Ylianor tensed every bit of flesh, offering it for his sole taking. And the prince took full advantage of the opportunity, his lips enfolding the sensitive spot again, sucking hard until he felt her go still for a second, then convulse in rhythmic throes as if consecutive waves gripped her body.

This time he was ready for the scream, which again made him feel powerful and totally in control as his cock hardened painfully, throbbing from the need to possess Ylianor completely. And even if she could not satisfy him like the other night, she had other very interesting holes he could not wait to explore.

"Turn around," he ordered when her contractions abated. "I want you to lie on your stomach."

She did not comply immediately and he felt her tense just as he caught the glimpse of a question hovering in the heart stopping green eyes.

"You're probably still sore from last night so we'll try something new now," he explained in a gentler tone.

"Will it hurt?" Her voice trembled slightly.

Recalling his first time with Chris, he could not but be truthful. "Well, initially it might, but if you conquer the pain, the reward will be...unspeakable." His hand traveled lightly on her body to ease the tension, soon lost in her skin's silky texture, but Ylianor could not seem to relax. "Do you trust me?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice, Princess." Running to her breasts,

he tested their firmness, stroking the raised nipples between thumb and forefinger to increase her desire. “But when your master orders—”

“Since when are you my master?” Perplexed, Ylianor raised her head.

Duncan bent down, his lips brushing her ear. “Since always. You belong to me, Princess, and that’s what I felt when I laid my eyes on you, even if I had no idea who you were. All I knew was you were my slave.” His tongue played in her ear. “Do you acknowledge me as your rightful owner?”

Tracing the edges of her ear, he kept caressing her silky flesh to arouse her desire to a fever pitch and distract her attention from the question. As if mesmerized by his sensual web, Ylianor simply nodded her acceptance.

The prince shook his head. “No, you’re not getting off that easily. I want a verbal answer. Do you recognize me as your master? And are you my slave to have and use whenever I please?”

“I...” She shifted, probably wanting to get away from Duncan’s entrapment, but he did not give her any space. Somehow her answer was too important so he pressed his full weight on her until she opened her mouth to speak. “Yes, I am.”

“Then turn around and I’ll show you what pleasure is.”

When she finally complied, he could not help but catch his breath at the incredible sight. “By the gods, you have a magnificent ass, one that begs to be possessed.”

Since Ylianor wriggled it as if to show her appreciation at the comment, Prince Caldwell did not waste more time, both hands clutching the firm buttocks, loving their consistency and tense feel. Naturally, the prize hidden between them was the main attraction so his fingers trailed to convince it to yield to his ardent courtship. Wetting them, he rimmed the edge, careful not

to slip inside, tantalizingly tracing its boundaries, before replacing the nimble fingers with his tongue, the wet laps stimulating the tight hole to relax its opening and give in to his seduction. Rhythmically circling it, this time he also slid inside to test its desire, steadily increasing the pressure until Ylianor's swaying confirmed what the yielding flesh had already told him, no, begged him to be more precise. His shaft as hard as stone, Duncan complied immediately, nudging the bulging head and calibrating the pressure to gain admission in the least painful way possible. One push and the thick cock penetrated through the tight opening.

Ylianor went still altogether, tensing spasmodically. "No, wait. You're hurting me."

He stopped moving. "Do you feel pain or just a burning sensation?"

"I think... more a burning sensation."

"All right, I won't push further, but you breathe deeply and relax."

"I wish I could." She spat ironically.

Grinning, he bent on her. "Here, I'll help you." Slipping a hand under her stomach, he touched between her legs, teasingly playing with the dripping wet soft flesh while brushing forcefully the tender clit. Just a few strokes and Ylianor could not lay still, her ass pushing up on its own despite the hungry cock waiting for a better fit. And even if Prince Caldwell did not move, every swaying made his erection penetrate deeper until nothing remained out except the balls. Confined in the tight ass squeeze, Duncan groaned with pleasure, wanting only to drown in her erotic enchantment, matching thrust to blissful thrust, increasing the heat level to the point of no return. *Hurry, Princess. I don't think I can resist much longer, but I'd hate to leave you behind.*

As if she read his mind, Ylianor accelerated and feeling her

climax about to come, he intensified his own shoves until the scream pierced the air. Caught in the waves wrecking her body, Duncan could not hold back any longer, but when pleasure shot through his every fiber, Ylianor grabbed his mind and plunged it straight into hers.

Dumbfounded, not knowing whether it was a hallucination or simply an illusion, the prince felt thrown in a world where people's bodies had no substance, defined only by colored light patterns that shifted rapidly to match some kind of mood, he guessed, following their sequences with increasing fascination. And even if he knew he was trapped somewhere inside Ylianor, he could not help feeling he rightfully belonged there.

The sensation was extremely disturbing, perhaps more because of the latter awareness than the former oddness. Either way, he tried pulling back, to return to a shred of reality, still perceivable from the sound of her scream shattering the silence into a million pieces, but only when it faded, did Ylianor release him, just as suddenly as she had captured him.

Exhausted as if something had drained his life's energy, Duncan rolled off the woman, unable to do anything except plunge into a dark, dreamless sleep that blissfully took him away once and for all.

\* \* \* \*

Opening her eyes, Ylianor saw Duncan regain consciousness, obviously he, too, a victim of the same bottomless void that had overtaken her. Turning his dark head to the small window at the side of the bed, one look at Stella's setting rays and he scrambled to his feet. "I have to go." His mumble almost got lost in his haste to get dressed and leave in a hurry.

Still dazed, yet unsurprised by his reaction, Ylianor watched

him go while letting the memory of what had happened sink in slowly. Clearly, Duncan had the gift like his father before him and now that sex had awakened it, she could not suppress the thrill of pleasure running down her spine at the recollection of the intimate mind sharing she had known only when Charles had been alive. Even if a child at the time, she remembered the incredible warmth spreading through her body simply by hearing his deep voice inside her head, filling her thoughts and heart like no one else after him. But now a whole new, maybe even better, world opened before her since Duncan's penetration of both body and mind had unleashed a powerful connection all his own.

Stretching luxuriously, she tried to summon enough energy to get up, failing miserably. Weak and trembling, she realized that the terrible ache in her stomach was hunger, the morning gingerbread a long forgotten memory, so with the last of her strength, she managed to get dressed and reach the kitchen.

"There you are, pet." Anne greeted her. "I was worried you were going to skip dinner, too. It's not good for you."

Ylianor looked around the empty kitchen with the central table full of food. "I wasn't hungry at lunch."

"But you do hard work out there and you must eat to keep up your strength. And the prince doesn't like his women too thin."

"The prince?" Ylianor felt her face become hot. "What does he have to do with anything?"

"He's the master, isn't he?"

Ylianor sighed. *And don't I know it.*

"So he pretty much gets to decide things around here, including how his women should look." Anne shook her head philosophically. "Come on, pet, sit down." Having concluded, she pulled out a chair.

"Is everything ready for the masters' dinner?" Mrs. Merryweather inquired, bursting in the kitchen. "They also have



a guest and you know how Lady Caldwell gets—”

“Yes, don’t worry, Alicia.” Anne cut her off. “They’ll be satisfied.” Just as she finished talking, people streamed in, randomly sitting around the table and when they had all settled, Anne opened the dances. “All right, people, let’s eat.” And she brought more platters to the table.

“Has anybody seen the prince this evening?” David asked before taking his plate.

“Why, what happened to him?” A cute maid wondered aloud, a perplexed expression shadowing her pretty brown eyes.

“Don’t you know?” Sarah looked at her as if she were living on a different planet. At the girl’s shake in denial, she continued. “No one’s seen him since this morning. Don’t you all think he’s been acting strangely of late?” She glanced at the faces around the table in between bites. “First, he disappeared for an entire night, then today he skipped lunch and vanished the whole afternoon, without anyone being able to find him.”

Ylianor stared at her plate, pretending to concentrate on the food.

“Yes, it’s not like him to disappear like that,” David added. “Do you know anything about it, Ylianor?”

She blinked as if unsure he was asking her. “Me? No, I don’t. I worked all day long before I fell asleep in the afternoon.”

“That’s because you didn’t eat anything, pet.” Anne’s worried scowl said more than her words did.

Regardless of other topics, Sarah plunged on with her tale. “The funny thing is even his friend didn’t know where he was.”

The butler nodded. “Lord Templeton looked for him everywhere, then had to take a walk alone with Lady Elizabeth.”

Many snickered with knowing grins, but only Sarah felt it her duty to comment. “It’s plain to see he can’t stand the sight of her. I guess he’s still in the phase.”

“He can’t be,” a waiter objected. “He’s too old for it.”

Sarah’s eyes flashed. “Actually, he’s just nineteen. Maybe it’s nearing the end. Too bad he’s so good-looking, I’d have a go at him if he consented.”

Reginald, the butler, clenched his fists. “Sarah! Please, watch your tongue.”

“Well, she’s right in a way.” Martin, Chris’s valet, came to her defense. “He’s not attracted to the female persuasion. That’s for sure. But he does see many men instead.”

“As if nobody noticed.” Sarah scoffed.

“Even if we did, there’s no need to comment on it.” Reginald insisted.

A bell rang and Sarah looked at a small control panel. “The master is alive and back in action. For sure, he took a bath.”

“Yes and I had better go.” David rose from the table and hurried away.

Sarah sighed wishfully. “I wish he were calling me.”

“It’s not your duty, missy.” Alicia Merryweather’s malicious gaze fixed on the girl. “Sometimes I think you’re impossible.”

“I just want what most other households have, a willing master who has fun with his staff. Don’t you agree, Ylianor?”

Ylianor shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I wouldn’t know about that, especially since I don’t know him that well.”

“The problem is that he never seems available.” Then finishing up her meal, Sarah got up.

The butler cleared his throat. “There are others available if you just stopped thinking of him alone.”

Sarah looked at him for a moment as if evaluating him. “I may do it eventually.” Then she scrambled away before Reginald could add anything further.

\* \* \* \*

At David's entrance, the prince standing in front of the fire, wrapped in a towel.

"Prince, where have you been all afternoon?" David examined him with a concerned look. "It's the twenty-fourth hour and we looked for you everywhere since lunchtime."

"We?"

"Lord Templeton, your sister, Reginald and I. We combed the house without finding you. They wanted to take a walk on the cliffs, but Lord Templeton insisted you go along. In the end, they had to go by themselves."

Duncan suppressed a grin at the thought of Chris and Elizabeth on a romantic stroll over the cliffs. "I'm sorry. I fell asleep under a tree outside and woke up just a few minutes ago."

"Outside?"

"Yes, I was taking a walk, then felt tired and—" Duncan stopped abruptly. *Why am I justifying my behavior to David?* "Anyway, since I have a few minutes before dinner, I want to know what the local gossip is."

"You mean between us?"

Duncan nodded. He often used David as his ears to keep track of the latest news and now more than ever, he needed to know about Ylianor, even if he was strangely reluctant to ask a direct question.

After a momentary pause, the valet shrugged. The usual, I guess. Sarah still pines for you—"

"The girl still hopes?"

"I think she'll never lose hope despite Reginald's attempts to steer her in his direction. She rather prefers younger types—"

"How to blame her?"

"For that matter, tonight she even went as far as considering Lord Templeton as a possible—"

"That'll be the day," Duncan mused sarcastically.

"That's what we all told her."

"And...what about Ylianor?"

As if knowing where Duncan had been heading all along, David paused, giving the prince the impression he did not want to make it look like he was expecting the question. "Well..." He cleared his throat. "She hasn't been around much so it's difficult to say. For the time being, only Anne seems to be happy she's back."

"They know each other well?"

"Yes, sir. When Ylianor's mother died, Anne took care of her. Not surprisingly, I must add, since she was Mary Jane's best friend and since then she's developed a strong affection for her daughter." David shrugged. "As for the others, they have barely seen her. The men seem interested, judging from some looks I caught around the table. After all, you cannot help noticing her."

"And you, David?" Picking up his nervousness at the turn of the conversation, the prince searched his face. "How do you feel about her?"

"To be honest—"

"That's exactly what I want you to be."

David took a deep breath. "All right, Prince, but first tell me what you plan to do with her."

Prince Caldwell grinned, breaching their distance. "Technically, I asked first." Slapping the man on his back, he raised an eyebrow. "Come on, David. We've never had any secrets between us, so why start now?"

David sighed, evidently making a decision. "I like her..." He sighed. "A lot. She has an air about her..." He stopped to search the words. "It's odd actually. She doesn't really look like you physically, but there are some details that cannot help but remind me of you, like her hair, the way she smiles or even how

she moves. And the likeness is so uncanny, it's disheartening. But at the same time, she frightens me."

"Why?"

"She seems to have some kind of...power."

Still upset and confused about the earlier experience, the prince tried to make his voice sound as neutral as possible.

"What sort of power?"

"I don't know. Someone might call it witchcraft, but I can't honestly say that's what it is."

Duncan nodded slowly. "I also think she has power, which only complicates matters, making it impossible to plan anything, not until I understand what it is exactly."

Taking advantage of their open attitude, David pressed further. "But she attracts you, sexually I mean."

Duncan smiled ruefully. "Indeed, she does, but again, I wonder if it's her or her power."

"Well, whether it is, don't forget her mother might've had the same hold on your father."

"You think so?"

"That's what many say. And if it's true your father was under a spell from Mary Jane, then Ylianor might cast one on you, too."

"Now, David, let's be sensible. Have you heard of other families with a tradition of witches hunting them down?"

David shook his head.

"So why should they bother only my family? What's so special about us to attract them above anyone else?"

David could not answer, nor did Duncan expect a serious reply. Ever since running out of Ylianor's room, he had replayed that afternoon in his head repeatedly, without being able to find a plausible or rational explanation to what had happened. Indeed, there was power involved, but he could not identify it nor tell if it was good or evil. Only one thing for sure, it complicated

everything.

Regretfully, he felt more than attracted to the green-eyed witch, almost obsessed with an odd craving churning his stomach. *Is she using sex to imprison me, too? Is that what drove her into my bed?* Certainly not a taste for gossip since the rest of the household knew nothing of this new development. *Does she just like sex?* Hardly a possibility, he excluded, for one who yesterday was still a virgin. Maybe she just liked him a lot, though their times together had been few so far. *So what?* If he recalled his reaction to Chris, it had taken even less than that to know he was in love with him.

He shook his head. Perhaps as he had just told David, he first ought to know what kind of magic she wielded before deciding on a course of action, even if he could not shake the nagging feeling he had found what he had sought ever since getting back with Chris.

With a sigh, he returned to the present and to David's eager hazel eyes, waiting for instructions. "Thanks, it'll be all for now." Then getting ready for dinner, he tried thinking of something else entirely while getting ready for dinner, yet his mind fixed on the same thought, regardless of his efforts to push it to a side. *But if I found her, why did it have to be Ylianor?*

His blond angel and the rest of the Caldwell family were in the dining room, biding time with drinks and appetizers. Chris looked particularly handsome in a blue suit, which exalted his blond complexion and blue-gray eyes. He also looked bored, as usual when in the company of women, Duncan thought, going to his rescue.

"Look who's here." Chris's sarcastic tone could not disguise the brilliance in his eyes the second he caught sight of him. "What happened today?"

With a sigh of relief, Elizabeth threw herself in his arms. "Yes, we searched all over for you, but couldn't find you anywhere."

Duncan returned her embrace. "I'm sorry, Lizzy. I fell asleep outside and woke up only an hour ago." His eyes searched for Chris. "I guess last night was more tiring than I realized."

*Sure, lover, too much fucking around can get at you*, the blue-gray eyes seemed to tell him. *Don't you know that?*

Moving closer to young Templeton, Duncan grinned as if he had actually heard the objection, rather than imagining it. "I trust you had a pleasant time even without my company." Sounding deceptively uninterested, he paid back Chris with his same sarcasm.

"You bastard!" Chris muttered under his breath so that only Duncan could hear.

"We sure did! Chris and I went for a walk on the cliffs." Elizabeth's smug face said more than her words ever could. "It was beautiful out there, wasn't it, Chris? The sea was in tempest and the air was so nice."

"Yes, nature was really inviting."

*Inviting my angel to throw Lizzy off the cliff.* At the conclusion, Duncan suppressed a grin. As if guessing what the prince was thinking, Chris sent him a furious look.

"Come on, boys." Lady Caldwell cut in. "Duncan, I'm glad you're back, but now it's time to eat."

"Tomorrow we might go for a ride, if the weather holds up," Elizabeth suggested after they had all settled around the table. "What do you think, Chris?"

The blond angel shifted uncomfortably, turning to look at Prince Caldwell. "I don't know. Planning to disappear again, Duncan, or will you allow us the privilege of your company?"

The prince grinned widely. "I can be all yours, except if the lawyer comes."

“Tomorrow?” Elizabeth cried dismayed.

“Actually, Lizzy, I don’t know when he’ll be here, but even if he shows up tomorrow, I’m sure he won’t mind waiting until we’re done with our ride.”

Elizabeth clapped her hands happily. “Then it’s settled. We’ll meet around the thirteenth hour and go for a ride. Praline needs the exercise. I haven’t taken her out for a while.”

“It’s not good to keep the horses so still. I’ll ask Ylianor to keep them trained.”

“I don’t want that . . . creature near my horse.” Lady Caldwell’s hostile tone informed coldly.

“Neither do I.” Elizabeth pitched in after exchanging a glance with Sophia.

“Mother, why do you have to be so difficult? It would be good for the horses.”

“I don’t care. I don’t want her near my horse or my house, for that matter.”

With an angry scowl, Duncan dropped the subject, pretending to concentrate on the vegetable soup. It seemed useless to start another argument, which would only make everyone upset and resolve nothing. So he resorted to innocuous subjects, drowning tension in describing architectural plans for Black Rose’s renovation, until he noticed his angel’s mute request for privacy.

Then Chris gave voice to his need. “Can I have a drink, Duncan? Something stiff to pick me up. It’s been . . .” He eyed Elizabeth significantly. “A very hard day.”

The prince agreed readily. “Of course, I can surely find something to your taste in my office and we can bring it back here for Mother and—”

“No, thank you, dear. I’m quite tired and want to retire.” Pushing her chair back, she got up to leave the table. “I hope you’ll excuse me, Lord Templeton . . .”



"Of course, Lady Caldwell." Chris got up, too.

"Have a good night and I'll see you tomorrow." Sophia headed to the door, stopping to kiss Duncan lightly on the cheek. "Good night, son, I'll see you tomorrow." Then she moved to the door, but turned around before reaching it. "Oh, Elizabeth, would you mind joining me upstairs? I need to talk to you."

With a disappointed look, Elizabeth got up. "Yes, Mother, I'm coming." Head lowered, she dutifully followed her, sending one last glance at both Duncan and Chris. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow and don't forget our date." Her gaze lingered on the blond angel, then she was gone, the echo of her good night following her.

"She's a real torment." Chris spat as they entered the office. "And I'm not going to forgive you that easily for what you did today."

"What did I do?"

"Don't play games with me, lover." Chris cornered him next to the fireplace, his breath tickling Duncan's ear. "You know damn well what you did and leaving me alone with your sister was one of the most despicable things you ever did...besides breaking up with me, I mean. Had I found you when we got back from those fucking cliffs, I'd have personally strangled you."

"I'm sorry." This time the prince did not hide his grin. "But weren't you interested in asking a certain question?"

The blond angel moved back, dropping into one of the leather armchairs. "Are you kidding? She's just too boring and plain. Frankly, if she holds no attraction for regular men, imagine what a turn off she is for me." Sitting up straighter, his blue-gray eyes flashed. "But enough talking of her. Where were you fucking around?"

Hardly surprised at his intuition, Duncan moved to a cabinet, pretending he had not heard the question. Taking out two glasses

and an amber bottle, he poured the distilled cider and sat on the couch, in front of the fire. "Can't you guess?" He challenged at last, handing Chris one of them.

The blond angel's nasty snarl twisted his lips. "I don't need guessing. I know you were with her." He sipped his drink before continuing. "She must really be something different if she hasn't bored you yet. She's...what?" He creased his forehead. "The third woman you've fucked twice in a row." Turning the glass around, he added bitterly. "Certainly the only one you've run to after being with me."

Duncan did not reply, his gaze fixed on the flames.

"Should I start worrying?" was the inevitable conclusion.

"Worrying about what? Even if I wanted, I couldn't do anything with her."

"Except consume her to death."

"You don't seem to mind the treatment."

"I dare hope we're different!" Chris spat.

The prince regarded him coolly. "How different?"

The blond angel was on top of him, pinning him to the couch. "Are you joking or being serious?"

Duncan shrugged. "A little of both." Twisting around, he slipped from under Chris's hold, lying next to him. "I'm sorry, Angel. I can't give you any straight answers now." *Not with that damned mind sharing tormenting me ever since I woke up in her fucking bed.* He shook his head in frustration. "I'm quite confused about it myself."

"What's there to be confused?" The blue-gray eyes flashed in anger. "We share a bond, a tie, have you forgotten?"

Duncan grabbed Chris's worried face between his hands. "Relax. This has nothing to do with you and of course, I haven't forgotten about us." The tip of his tongue traced the tempting lips, briefly darting into the warm cavity. "I feel our connection

every time I see you and touch you.” Absentmindedly, he started caressing Chris, one hand running down his back. “But the funny thing is I feel one with her, too.”

“The same kind of connection?”

“Of course not. It’s different, but just like yours, I can’t ignore it.”

“Are you sure it isn’t witchcraft as your mother suggests?”

Duncan let go of Chris, his gaze swinging back to the fire. In need of something to do with his hands, he grabbed the glass and sipped the amber liquid before answering. “I wonder...” He began, stopping immediately to look at young Templeton as if making up his mind before his mouth took possession of the blond angel’s lips, tongue pushing inside to sweep the wet cavity and fill his senses with his lover’s taste. “Fuck her, Angel.” His breath came short after he managed to pull away. “All I wonder now is how to take you upstairs and fuck you until I’m too exhausted to think about this magic or whatever else is happening to me.”

A wide grin spread on Chris’s lips, the mischievous twinkle lighting up his beautiful face. “Thought you’d never ask.” Getting up, he stretched out a hand to help him rise.

With a sigh, Prince Caldwell grabbed the hand firmly, then led him to the dark hall, disappearing together upstairs.

## Chapter Nine

The semi-circular room at the tower's upper level had the prince's distinctive mark. Separated into two sections by a couple of low steps, the side closest to the door had a large fireplace with a couple of comfortable couches while a wide table and chairs on the opposite end completed the furnishings. The sleeping half of the room displayed a huge bed, nestled between two glass doors facing one another that led to different balconies, one overlooking Black Rose's green valleys while the other on the magnificent sea. Blue carpets everywhere contributed to the room's cozy look in spite of its considerable size, a place Duncan had always loved and catered to his own taste. But its sight brought no comfort to his agitated state when he awoke the next morning.

Annoyed, Prince Caldwell turned around in the huge bed, his gaze falling on the angel sleeping on his stomach, blond hair scattered on the shoulders, body relaxed for once, without the usual tenseness that coursed through his limbs. Resisting the urge to touch him, Duncan watched his back's steady rise and fall, wanting to wake him up to start their passionate night all over again, even if it was too early, at least judging from the pale light gleams, filtering through thick gray clouds.

Already in a foul mood for the night's endless tossing and

turning, he cursed under his breath. Despite Chris and sex, Ylianor—or rather her strange intimacy—had continued intruding as his mind sifted through options in search of a logical course of action. In the end, the best solution seemed a direct one, a frank talk and though there were no guarantees it would work, he scribbled on a piece of paper. “Meet me at the thirty-sixth hour in my room. I need to talk to you. D.” Folding the slip of paper, he placed it in his pocket, glad he had taken some sort of action, wherever that would lead him.

“Good morning, lover.” Chris’s sleepy voice cut through his thoughts.

Duncan returned to bed and kissed him warmly. “Good morning, Angel.” Chris turned on a side, revealing a hard cock, jutting up proudly and the prince could not resist grabbing it. “Were you dreaming of anybody in particular?” He teased, rhythmically folding the skin over the bulging head, then down to the bottom.

Chris grinned playfully. “No one in particular, just someone who can set me on fire with a simple touch.”

Feeling the shaft getting harder, Duncan increased the seductive slide. “Then it must be Arthur.” He teased.

Chris sat up straighter, giving the prince more leeway. “Sure, we have great sex, but nothing comparable to how you make me feel, lover.”

Duncan smiled mischievously. “You mean nothing comparable to this?” His mouth closed on the tip of the erection, his lips sliding in one sweep down to the balls.

Young Templeton gasped, his cock twitching in pleasure inside the wet cavity, enfolding it tightly, and Duncan’s shaft reacted immediately, so he stroked it forcefully while sliding his tongue down to Chris’s narrow hole that opened completely to accommodate his probing. Still tender from the other night’s

repeated use, the flesh wrapped around the hard tongue tip, but Prince Caldwell's need to stick something bigger made him flip his blond angel around and shove his huge shaft through the taut opening with a single thrust. And it was like plunging into liquid fire—a sensation Chris alone seemed able to give him—the burning flames feeling as real as if Duncan actually fell into a real fire that inevitably sucked the throbbing cock dry. This time was no exception, for the prince could never resist the fiery pressure, flooding his blond angel with convulsive jets the second before Chris's own contractions squeezed all the fluid out of him.

"That's exactly what I meant." Rolling away from the stickiness clinging to the sheets, young Templeton trapped the prince, kissing him fiercely. "How can I ever dream of anyone else? Lover, you set me on fire constantly and that's what keeps me alive." Eyes fixed on Duncan's face, the blond angel pressed his point. "And if sometimes I need some cooling down..." He shrugged nonchalantly. "Then Arthur, John, Michael or whoever the heck he may be comes in handy."

Duncan's hand traveled lightly on his bare back. No one better than him could understand his need because as a couple, they valued freedom over exclusivity, always eager to be together, yet never disdaining different partners. *At least that's how we played it so far.* "But you like Arthur more than others." A sly smile curved his lips. "Maybe because he's the most powerful man of our lands," he teased, well knowing his blond lover cared nothing for titles or levels, yet feeling attached to the leader much more than he dared acknowledge, even to himself.

Chris stirred. "Powerful? Arthur never struck me as having much power."

Even if he had never thought about it, the prince felt he was right. "But he must or he wouldn't be leader of the High Council."

The blond angel's forehead creased. "Do you really think the High Council is a place of power? I thought it just represented the Districts. And through all the years I've spent there, nothing gave me the feeling they were anything but normal people, most of them there to have a good time, rather than rule or whatever they should be doing."

"I don't know for sure, but I've got a feeling it is, even if no one talks about it."

"Then both our fathers must've had this power, too, or they wouldn't have been members of this council, right?"

"Probably." Suddenly aware of the passing time, Duncan shifted to get up, regretting he could not dwell more on the subject. "Come on. We have a date and it's best if we get ready before my sister starts looking for us everywhere."

Rolling on a side, Chris stretched luxuriously. "The more I stay here, the more your sister's all over me." He stretched again, obviously wanting to postpone the date if at all possible. "It's a pity she hasn't gone through the phase."

"You know not everyone has it and girls less than boys." Getting out of bed, he looked around for his clothes. "I'm sure she'll meet the right man who will make it up to her." But in spite of his convincing tone, he did not feel so sure.

"Only if she's very...no, extremely lucky." Chris grinned, finally setting foot out of the bed to pick up his clothes from the floor. "And what about Ylianor?"

Duncan tensed at the question, but pretended the subject did not touch him closely. "What about her?"

The blond angel sent him a piercing glance to indicate the even tone did not fool him. "Come on. You know what I mean. Did she have a phase? Was she a virgin or—"

"She was."

"Then it must not have been much fun."

Duncan remained silent since there was no need to get to an argument over something still incomprehensible and very disturbing, focusing on getting dressed instead.

Turning around and catching sight of the prince's attire, the blond angel called out softly. "Hey, if you dress like that, I won't let you get away from this bed."

Duncan grinned at the striking contrast between Chris's fair complexion, highlighted by a sky blue suit, and his own dark red look, then threw him a pillow. "I'd be more than willing to repeat our earlier performance if we didn't have to keep a date." He moved to the door. "Come on. Let's go."

Heading to the breakfast room, the butler stopped them at the bottom of the stairs. "Prince, the lawyer has just sent this note." He handed Prince Caldwell a piece of paper.

"Thank you, Reginald." After skimming it quickly, Duncan turned to Chris. "He's coming tomorrow afternoon, after lunchtime."

"Excellent! So we can leave right after." He slapped the prince's back. "Now let's hurry. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."

And he meant it, Duncan mused, watching him pile his plate high in the empty dining room while the prince took only a cup of herb tea.

Staring at the cup, Chris sat next to Duncan. "Maybe you've forgotten, but I'm not particularly keen on skinny lovers."

Prince Caldwell grinned. "I don't think I run the risk, not yet anyway. I'm not hungry these days."

The blue-gray eyes flashed. "But you have to keep up your strength, especially since we'll be traveling a lot in the coming days."

"Don't worry. I won't fail you."

"Are you boys done with breakfast?" Elizabeth's chirpy voice



cut in as she entered the room. "The weather isn't very promising, but it might hold for a couple of hours, so we should hurry."

"Relax, Elizabeth." Chris stopped her. "Sit down and have some tea. I've just started on my breakfast."

Her gaze ran to the prince. "But Duncan's already finished."

"Actually, he never started," the blond angel informed curtly.

"What's the matter, brother? You're not feeling well these days?"

Prince Caldwell sighed at the unwanted attention his appetite seemed to attract. "No, just not hungry, that's all."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I'm afraid Mother is right. Ever since you hired that...creature, you're acting differently as if you were under a spell."

"You, too, believe in that nonsense, Lizzy?" Barely controlling his voice, he took a deep breath. "It's pure insanity. Just because I'm not hungry doesn't mean there's witchcraft at work."

"What do you think, Chris?" Elizabeth turned to young Templeton for support. "Hasn't he been acting strange lately? Disappearing nights and days, not eating..."

Chris cleared his throat. "As a matter of fact—"

"You two stop it immediately and that's an order." The prince cut in. "Nothing's wrong with me except your noisy gossip."

"We're just worried," Elizabeth justified.

"Don't be, Lizzy, there's nothing to worry about. Believe me."

Exchanging glances with Elizabeth, the blond angel nodded. "All right, we'll keep quiet about it," he agreed, finishing his plate. Then after a last sip of tea, he got up. "I'm ready."

Duncan followed his example, glad to be off the hook. "Great, let's go."

So they left, headed for the stables.

\* \* \* \*

The morning's thick clouds had intensified, cutting off more light and air, everything feeling unnaturally still as its stone-like weight sat uneasily on both humans and animals. But weather hardly explained Ylianor's shivers of fear, running in crazy frenzy down her back. Rooted to the ground, she tried to put off the sensation of imminent danger, however much it persisted, even increased the moment she heard them.

"The stable seems empty." Elizabeth's voice rang out.

"Duncan, didn't you tell me you hired a new stable keeper?" An unfamiliar male voice, probably Chris's, pitched in sarcastically. "I'm anxious to know him."

Elizabeth obviously could not wait to set him straight. "It's a she, not a he."

"You hired a woman?" Ylianor heard the demon's biting tone. "Now this is a smart move. Is she better qualified? Please enlighten me. We're having problems with stable keepers at Fair Haven, too, so perhaps I could suggest a solution of this kind to my father. I'm sure he'll think it's a brilliant idea."

Feeling Chris's negative energy closing on her, Ylianor wondered how to protect herself and would have surely panicked if Fuzeon had not given her a nudge. *Thank you.* She caressed the soft muzzle. *Always ready to come to my rescue.*

Using the horse's strength, Ylianor approached the door, finally setting eyes on the three shapes moving her way, just as something deeply buried for years hit the surface and she could not help setting off a chain reaction. But it was not just her fault.

\* \* \* \*

Seeing Ylianor come out of the stables, Chris's heart fell to his stomach. All along, he had hoped she would be a fat, ugly woman that had conquered his lover's favors only thanks to her power. But the beautiful woman standing proud had nothing to fear aesthetically speaking and even more infuriating, time had accentuated her disconcerting resemblance to Duncan, not exactly in the physical sense—except maybe in the general build and colors—more in the familiar air, which he had learned to associate and love in the prince. Worst of all, he could not deny her connection to his lover, not again, not even to himself. There in plain view, Chris clearly saw it despite his rage, just as he had perceived it more than ten years before, together with her unbelievable power. Nothing like his, he recalled—though the disappointment at finding someone as aware and endowed already by his beloved's side had been great—but a threat nonetheless, judging from her burning wrath, the same he remembered from childhood. Yet, if back then a simple act of will had eliminated the old antagonist from Duncan's heart, now he was not sure it would be enough.

\* \* \* \*

Ylianor felt the demon's energy building up for the inevitable clash, but she was not the frightened child of bygone days. More in control of her power, she threw back her shoulders to show she had no fear and was ready for him. But it was a mistake, she realized, feeling him look for an ally, the most obvious one walking right next to him, Elizabeth and her bitter childhood memories of denied love sparking angry red lights. And Chris preyed shamefacedly on this fury to reinforce his attack, joining their forces and throwing their combined energy at Ylianor with the same intensity of an avalanche that would have disintegrated

her, had she not acted fast. Seeing the black mass rushing at her, Ylianor knew her own energy would not be enough to stop it, so she reached out to grab the closest positive force she could find.

The seizure was so violent she felt Duncan's shock and anger at being pulled right down to his stomach. With a surprised and deceived look, he turned to Ylianor, but fortunately chose not stop the power flowing between them, even if she was using it against his lover. And this threw off Chris, his uncertainty starting with Duncan's abduction, then growing with Prince Caldwell's betrayal until it stopped the avalanche mid-way while Elizabeth's disoriented look told Ylianor her gall-, too, had lost its momentum. And she was safe.

Under the heavily laden sky, time stood still for the four of them, everyone apparently rooted to the spot as if they had suddenly frozen. Only Ylianor seemed to be able to move in the ensuing trance, bringing Praline to Elizabeth, Black to Chris and Fuzeon to Duncan. Upon touching the prince's hand, she felt his jolt as the numbness wore off altogether. Even more surprised than before, his black eyes lingered on her face while his hand fumbled in his pocket, taking out a slip of paper that he handed her. She took it before mentally clapping to release time, then watched the three ride off, bewildered and utterly confused.

"What was that all about?" David came charging from the house just as the prince disappeared behind the bend. "What sort of evil witchcraft have you laid upon them?"

Ylianor quickly pocketed the piece of paper and turned around. "What are you talking about?"

"I saw everything from the kitchen. What have you done?"

She honestly did not know nor cared to explain, however questionable her actions seemed, especially in Duncan's regards. "Nothing, I assure you." She tried calming David. "They came to get their horses and I complied. That's it."

"You're lying." He accused, moving closer.

"What if I am?" Ylianor challenged. "What are you going to do about it?"

Obviously upset, David edged forward and again, she saw the angry black cloud heading her way. But this time, she knew exactly how to defuse it. "Care to show me what your real intentions are?" she continued, pressing him until she perceived his indignation turning into uncontrollable desire as he ripped off her clothes and squeezed the naked flesh in a frenzy.

Complying passively, Ylianor let go of her own negative energy, allowing him to lead her upstairs to the bedroom. As if in another trance, he removed the last of her clothes and sprawled on her, his hungry craving mounting with every kiss and rough touch as the hard cock dug in her stomach, demanding immediate release. Obediently, Ylianor spread her legs, surprised at being wetter than she thought, and he plunged inside, drowning to the hilt in her softness, unsurprisingly losing his rage in the process. Short, violent shoves drove his erratic tempo and greedy shaft until she felt him quiver, then snap.

As he rolled off her, she caught his mumbled apology. "I'm sorry,"

"No, you're not." Ylianor spat. "You don't care about me. You're just worried about the prince's reaction."

In the hard stare that followed, she read his fear of losing Duncan's confidence and he paled. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

Not really knowing why, she felt she owed him some sort of an explanation, although she had no idea if she was on the right track. "You were angry," she said in a gentler tone, "and I helped you feel more...positive."

He looked at her suspiciously. "Then you are a witch."

"Come on, David. It takes no witchcraft to seduce a man or

all women would be witches.”

“This never happened to me before.” David sighed, his gaze traveling over her naked body for the first time. “You really are very beautiful.” His soft tone and light touch unleashed a storm of shivers that creased her skin and made her go crazy in the strange mix of bother and pleasure. “You know, I can’t explain it, but you feel so much like—”

“Like him?” She beat him to the conclusion, hardly surprised at the comment. “Do you think we look alike?”

“Not physically, of course.” David sighed again. “This business of Prince Charles is really bewildering and I for one don’t give any credit to malicious gossip. Yet, there’s something about you...” He stopped to look more closely. “An air about you that makes me think of him.”

Ylianor remained silent for a while, searching his face to confirm what his lights had already revealed. “You love him, don’t you?” But she did not expect any reply.

David rolled on his back, hands behind his head to stare at the ceiling, his mouth firmly closed until, just as Ylianor was about to change the subject, he spoke in a rueful tone. “He’s all I have. I’ve dedicated my life to him, but he’s too much in love with...” He paused, obviously unsure if Ylianor knew about it.

She came to his rescue. “I know he loves Chris.”

Looking surprised, he raised an eyebrow. “He told you?”

“He doesn’t have to, David. I’ve known it from the start, ever since they met.”

He shook his head. “It’s the phase, right? I know they’re both too old for it, but—”

“No, David, I’m afraid the phase has little to do with their feelings.”

“Then I really don’t stand a chance.” He breathed heavily.

His look of disappoint touched her deeper than she cared to

admit. "Come on, David. I'm sure you'll find someone else to love."

David shook his head dejectedly. "I could never love anyone else. I mean, I can like someone else, but love is completely different."

"You can love more than one person at a time."

"Never!" He spat fiercely. "It's simply impossible. As for Prince Caldwell, you said it yourself, he's loved Christopher Templeton since childhood and no one else has even come close to his heart in all this time."

"I guess he's found the right one, David." And her tone sounded like a mixture of sadness and longing.

As if reading clearly into her intentions, he pinned her to the bed, weighing on her chest. "And what about you? Have you found the special one, yet?"

*Of course, I have, if only he didn't love another.* "I haven't been looking for one, nor have people lined up to be next to me lately."

"That's because many are afraid of you. You're too different for their simple tastes."

A challenging smile curved her lips. "Does that include you, David?"

"I could get used to you." Then brushing his lips against hers, he stroked her breasts.

With a sigh of pleasure, Ylianor arched her back to give him more flesh to caress, knowing he would be gentler this time. The fury forgotten, his slow caresses won her over, making her desire spin when he bent to flick his tongue on the hard nipples begging for attention. He sucked avidly, taking each small breast in his mouth and lapping it leisurely. Ylianor moved and thrashed, pushing her hips against his hardening cock and swaying to make him feel the intensity of her cunt's aching need. He resisted

the open invitation, his tongue busy tracing her sensual curves, but when his fingers slipped through her legs, gliding on the dripping wetness, he had no further qualms.

She let him take her, opening up to his demanding shaft thrusting his way with long, forceful shoves completely unlike the earlier frenzy, matching his tempo with a sensual hip movement that brushed her clit against his crotch each time he pushed down. Lost in the erotic dance, her trap squeezed his throbbing thickness more forcefully as their rhythm increased until intense heat waves drowned her in rapid, consecutive contractions that made her spin out of control without emitting a sound. Not because she did not like it, but because, unlike Duncan, he seemed unable to go beyond the physical plane, his raw soul feeling as cold and impenetrable as ice, giving her the impression there was more than one secret he wanted to protect from the world.

When it was all over, David studied her face, his hand gently tracing its contours. "Feeling better?"

She had no time to reply. A crash first made the sky tremble, then flooded the land as water poured from every dense cloud amassed on the horizon. Thunder and lightning accompanied the storm, bringing new life to the dull grayness above, thanks to the menacing sights and sounds.

Scrambling to his feet, David quickly dressed. "Are all the horses inside?"

Ylianor nodded, getting dressed as well. "Yes, but I'll go check on them."

"I'll come, too, before I return to the house. The gods only know how damaging these thunderstorms can be."

Together, they raced downstairs, but having stopped in the back to look on Starlet, she saw from the corner of her eye, David reach the door in time to take the riders wet horses before



they ran to the safety of the house.

"I'll take care of them." Ylianor offered, reaching David.  
"You can get back to the house, too."

He hesitated before going, unwilling it seemed to leave her there alone. "Aren't you coming for lunch?"

"I'm not hungry, thank you. I'll see you later."

"Anne isn't going to like it."

"Just tell her I'm too busy to eat." She squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. "Don't worry." She placed a gentle kiss on his cheek. "I'll be fine."

He nodded, not completely convinced, but Ylianor turned her back and left, her mind already busy with more impelling tasks.

\* \* \* \*

A thick downpour spoiled the rest of the day, forcing everyone to stay indoors. And if that had not been enough, a heavily tensed undercurrent charged Black Rose's atmosphere to a point that Duncan, Chris and Elizabeth carefully avoided each other, still confused by the morning's events. After their...exchange with Ylianor, they had ridden for only an hour before the storm had made them turn back and spend the remainder of the afternoon in a foul mood.

Not wanting to see anyone, Elizabeth paced the tight confines of her room in angry, restless steps, the memory of what had happened earlier burning in her mind. But she knew hiding was hardly a solution. "Yes?" She stopped in front of the door after hearing the knock.

"Lady Elizabeth." She heard Sarah's voice on the other side.

With a sigh, Elizabeth opened her door. "Yes? What is it?"

The maid shifted her feet nervously. "Your mother would like to see you."

*Exactly what I need, my mother breathing down my neck.* “Thank you, Sarah. I’ll be right with her.” Then following a quick check up on the large mirror on her wall, she headed to her mother’s room.

Lady Caldwell was waiting for her. “My dear, what happened to you today? The servants told me you remained in your room the whole day.”

“It’s raining, Mother.” Elizabeth glanced at the storm still in full progress outside the window. “Didn’t you notice?”

“Of course, dear, but that’s hardly an excuse to remain locked up in your room.” Sophia Caldwell sent her a penetrating glance, then motioned for her to take a seat. “But let’s start at the beginning. Didn’t you go out riding this morning?”

“We did, but the rain caught us after only half an hour. I’ve never seen so much water pouring altogether from the sky. And it hasn’t stopped since.” She sighed wearily, glancing outside again.

Her mother shifted position. “No, it hasn’t. I’ve been thinking things haven’t been the same since Duncan brought that thing back.”

“Because of the storm?” Unsure whether her mother would blame Ylianor for that, too, Elizabeth stared at Sophia perplexed.

Lady Caldwell shrugged. “The storm is just nature’s way of telling us things aren’t right. And since she comes from a long line of witches, I wouldn’t put it past her to have provoked it. I mean, after the way she weaseled her way back here and with Duncan catering to her every whim as if he didn’t have a mind of his own, nothing would surprise me.”

“Come on, Mother. Do you really believe my brother to be under a spell?”

“I know he is, my dear. I remember these symptoms all too well, having gone through them with your father.”

Suddenly curious to know more, Elizabeth leaned closer. “It

started like this?"

"Well, not quite, but I knew the girl was trouble the moment I set eyes on her."

"But how could Father fall for that woman?"

Sophia sighed deeply. "They are not ordinary women, but witches who manipulate men."

The explanation sounded far-fetched to Elizabeth. True, she had little experience with men, yet it seemed improbable one could command them like horses or like her mother claimed some women could do. But if they actually existed, she would have loved to learn their secrets in the hope they might work on Chris, too. "Do you think it works on any man or—"

"Honey, what do you want to know?" Her mother cut in, obviously not fooled by her uninterested tone.

Shifting her feet nervously, Elizabeth glanced at the floor, rather than look at Lady Caldwell. "Nothing, Mother, just wondering aloud."

"Always thinking about Lord Templeton, aren't you?" Sophia reached out to brush her cheek. "I told you, it's too early. You have to be patient with him. Eventually, he'll outgrow his phase and be free to notice you."

"You keep saying this, but I don't believe it anymore." Elizabeth scoffed angrily, choking on a burst of the morning's rage. In retrospect, what had triggered the violence—comparable only to what she had felt when her mother had kicked out the odious creature from Black Rose—had been the shock of finding that same creature turned into a beautiful woman. She knew she had envied her, if only for a moment, wishing nature had been fairer in distributing her gifts, though she would have forgiven this obvious injustice had she not caught Chris staring at Yliantor with... *Hate? Desire? Lust? Fascination? Respect? All of these and more.* An open appraisal laced with a

sensual craving that had crushed all her hopes, especially since the beautiful blue-gray eyes had never looked at her in quite the same way. And it had made her furious. "He's not interested in me, so why should things change?"

"Just give it time, honey. You'll see."

"And I don't understand why he keeps hanging around Duncan. I mean, my brother's too old to be still in the phase." And she could not help feeling bitter at the unfairness of the situation.

"He's simply being friendly, Elizabeth, nothing to worry about. You see, whatever else you do in life, your phase partner will always remain special, a friend above all other friends. He or she becomes an important part of your life, whatever direction you choose to take afterward."

"Then why didn't I have a phase?" Elizabeth spat, feeling even bitterer at this thought.

Lady Caldwell had no simple answer to offer. "I honestly don't know, dear. I can still remember mine, the joy and wonder of exploring new horizons with my special girlfriend. A phase is a great time that remains impressed in your memory forever." Caressing Elizabeth's long hair, she stopped talking as if reliving her experience. "I had hoped you'd live it, too, but..." Her voice trailed off since Elizabeth had not. "Anyway, it's not unusual, you know." She sounded as if she wanted to make it up to her daughter. "A lot of times girls don't have a phase." She sighed heavily. "I'm just sorry you didn't."

"But boys never seem to skip it, right, Mother?"

"Boys are different, Elizabeth."

A knock at the door disturbed them. "Yes, who is it?" Sophia called out.

"It's Mrs. Merryweather, Lady Caldwell. I wanted to inform you dinner's ready."

"Come in, please."

Alicia entered the room, stopping in front of the two women.

"Thank you," Sophia continued. "We'll be down in a moment. How are things with the staff?"

Mrs. Merryweather cleared her throat. "There seems to be a certain strain among them, even if it's hard to define. I'm not sure I like what is happening."

"Is it that creature's fault?" Sophia inquired, a malicious gleam crossing her gaze.

As everyone in Black Rose knew perfectly well whom Lady Caldwell meant, Alicia had no trouble replying. "To be honest, milady, I'm not sure. I haven't seen much of her around."

Looking extremely surprised, Lady Caldwell's eyes widened considerably. "Isn't she hanging around the house and my son, to be more specific, casting her wicked spells on him?"

Mrs. Merryweather shook her head. "She spends most of her time secluded in the stables. She hardly even joins us during mealtimes, often skipping lunch or breakfast altogether."

Elizabeth shifted nervously. "Does she talk a lot?"

"Hardly said two words in a row since she's been here. She only answers when spoken to, otherwise she eats in silence and leaves as soon as she's finished. Only the cook has some sort of hold over her, but that's understandable. It seems Anne was great friends with the girl's mother and has known her since childhood."

Puzzled by the words, but mostly by the behavior described, Elizabeth sent a furtive glance to her mother, trying to determine if they affected her, too. But no doubts, however fleeting, clouded Lady Caldwell's convinced gaze and firm beliefs, which stood their ground despite any evidence to the contrary.

"Still, I'm sure life was better before she came." Lady Caldwell's mellifluous tone insisted on her point.

“Well...” Alicia’s voice trailed off as if she was trying to remember how exactly it had been. “She does put a bit of strain on the men, particularly on David.”

“My son’s personal valet?”

Mrs. Merryweather nodded. “Yes, his eyes never leave her.”

Sophia shook her head. “Not a good sign, but if my son wants her here, I guess we can’t do anything about it.”

“It’ll be harder now, Mother, when he leaves with Chris,” Elizabeth reminded.

Lady Caldwell turned a pair of flashing eyes on her face. “Well, if something happened to her in the meantime, he could never blame us.” Swinging her gaze back on the housekeeper, she added, “Right, Alicia?” in a malicious tone.

Wondering if she had heard correctly, Elizabeth jumped in. “Mother, what are you saying?”

“I guess not, milady,” Mrs. Merryweather answered instead, her tone even as if she had understood perfectly and agreed with the suggestion. “Working with horses can be very dangerous, especially for a woman, and accidents can happen any time. And she skips her meals too often to keep up her strength...” Even if she did not finish, the scenario she painted was unmistakable.

“Mother—”

“Hush, Elizabeth.” Sophia’s bright eyes burned with repressed excitement. “Mrs. Merryweather and I are just talking. That’s all.” She turned back to Alicia. “When my son leaves, we’ll have plenty of time to get to know this...young lady better, right?”

The housekeeper nodded. “I’m sure we’ll find more than one opportunity, Lady Caldwell,”

“Good!” Satisfied, Sophia nodded vigorously. “Thank you, Alicia. That’ll be all. We’ll be down soon.”

“Yes, milady.” Bending her head slightly, the buxom woman

retreated to the door, then left Elizabeth shocked and bewildered, wondering if her mother would really dare hurt Ylianor and if so, *What am I going to do about it?*

## Chapter Ten

Nursing a bottle of distilled cider to bide his time until the thirty-sixth hour, Prince Caldwell was only too glad to have escaped dinner and its sorry atmosphere, his estrangement from Chris a heavy cloud he had not managed to dispel despite the long day. Now more than ever, he needed to understand and since only the dastardly woman could help him, he waited anxiously for her arrival.

Gazing at the fire, listening to the sound of rain beating on the roof mixed with the sea's angry waves crashing on the cliffs, the prince thought and drank, not necessarily in that order, reviewing the events of the last few days, wondering how she could have managed to get into him so fast, so intimately, so deeply.

For lack of explanations, none that made sense anyway, he took another generous sip directly from the bottle, the liquid burning its way down to drown all thoughts, making him feel light-headed as if in a trance and it would have suited him just fine in the end if a knock did not make him jump to open the door.

Wearing a faded and worn blue dress, Ylianor's body seemed more desirable than ever, the old fabric wrapping sensually around every tempting curve despite its many years. *Damn!* He



could not help cursing enraged, briefly wondering why he would have rather taken her to his bed than to a couch. But even if his cock was twitching in agreement, the priority was quite another, so he gestured in the fireplace's general direction while stepping aside to let her in. Before sitting next to her, Duncan reached for the bottle again, just to keep his hands occupied and offered it to Ylianor.

She cleared her throat. "No, thank you. If we need to talk—"

"Damn right we do." He spat, sounding angrier than he wished. "What in the gods name happened yesterday and today?" He demanded, plopping down on the couch.

Ylianor's green eyes stared directly into his. "You have the gift."

"Gift? What gift?"

"Call it power if you will, it's a special ability, a talent to do something ordinary people can't."

"So you and I have the same—"

"Oh, no. I think in our world there are as many powers as there are people, only few have them or know they do, which is basically the same thing. I can't determine for sure what your particular talent is, it's too early for that, but I can tell you what mine is because I've known of it since my earliest years." She paused as if to collect her thoughts, then began slowly. "My special perception allows me to see, or rather feel, living things as forms of energy, picturing not just their physical shape, rather their... let's call it immaterial body by using what I call the gift." She shifted to settle in another position. "When I look at you, for example, I see more than just your body..." Her voice trailed off as random images flashed in his mind—and hers, too, he realized with a shock—of what his body was capable of doing. Ylianor nodded slowly to confirm his impression, then resumed her explanation. "I see your energy, too, in the form of many

brilliant lights that change colors according to your moods. For instance, when you're with Chris, your light is completely different than when you are...let's say with Elizabeth."

Amazed she could read something so private, he sat up straighter. "What do you know of Chris?"

"I know what I see." Her tone tried to reassure him she was not a threat. "You are lovers, friends and soul mates, sharing a bond stronger than love, sex or time, something so deep it's practically impossible to break."

"Is it that obvious?"

Ylianor breathed deeply. "To me it is. To others..." She shrugged. "I don't know. I used to think everyone saw things the way I did until I realized most people rely on their eyes alone, rather than their perceptions, so they only skim the surface and never get to the real essence of things."

Unbidden, the memory of the unexplainable lights rushed to the fore. "All right, this explains what I saw..." He creased his forehead in an effort to define exactly his sensation. "No, felt after we had sex, but what happened today seems completely unrelated—"

"Actually, it was—"

"Wait." He stopped her, raising a hand. "Something tells me you're going to pull Chris into this so before you go on, let me set some things straight. Whatever you did today has opened a rift between me and the..." He paused, wondering if he could be so open and frank with a woman he had only known since a few days before. Yet, her impressively intimate knowledge and his need to let the truth out in the open outweighed any conventional concern, requiring him to speak the words he had wrestled with for the better part of two years. "The man I love, Chris," he added just to be sure she understood. "And I won't allow it to happen ever again, neither now nor in the future, no matter how

sensible your explanations may sound.” His tone did not admit any justification, none whatsoever to a behavior he found intolerable to say the least. “Now tell me honestly. What you did today was a form of jealous revenge or what?”

Ylianor sighed. “Perhaps I should start at the beginning, since you don’t seem to remember it at all.” Clearing her throat, she plunged into a past that now did not seem as distant as it had just a few days before. “You have to understand who I am and where I come from before anything of what happened today makes sense. I cannot deny I’ve been extremely jealous of Chris in the past, especially when he first turned up in your life...our lives I suppose. Do you remember that summer day?”

*Can I ever forget it?* As the images filled his head—Chris appearing at the bend just as his stomach had contracted in a tight knot of anticipation, the shiny blond head a sight forever impressed in his mind—Duncan nodded slowly.

“I thought you would, even if you don’t remember me in that picture.”

“You were there, too?”

“Aye, I was there, standing next to you, waiting to continue our game. As soon as I saw him, I knew he wanted you for himself and it made me furious. You were mine, I thought, the handsome prince that belonged to me alone, so I couldn’t allow him to take you away.”

As if the force of her pain had hit him, Duncan felt its unbearable weight pressing on his heart, too. Something far deeper transpired from Ylianor’s words, he realized with a jolt, something that would inevitably alter the balance. “Because you were in love—”

“Still am.” As the words left her lips, Ylianor blushed violently. “I’ve loved you since I was a little girl and you were chasing me around Black Rose, before he ever came to claim

you. Seeing you again, I knew the feeling hadn't changed one bit and that's also when I realized you might've the gift, though you gave no outward sign of it. But I was sure you had it and I was so desperate, I'd have used whatever means to make you aware of it...including sex." She shook her head in frustration. "But please don't judge me too harshly. Another part of me is literally terrified of the consequences and insisted I have nothing to do with you, even if you make me feel alive again, for the first time in years." Hanging her head, she averted her gaze as if afraid to read a negative verdict in his eyes.

Flattered more than he cared to admit, Duncan did not feel like dwelling on it, regretting he had brought it up at all. To buy time, he got a glass and filled it with the amber liquid. "And how does that work into the energy flow, the lights and all?"

She waited until he returned to the couch. "I think it's all connected somehow to what happened before that fateful summer day." Sounding relieved he did not press the earlier point, she plunged ahead. "With Father—" She stopped abruptly and blushed again. "Hem...I meant your father. We were so close that simply thinking of him would link our minds." Leaning back on the couch, she closed her eyes for a moment. Then opening them up again, she stared at the flames flickering in the fireplace. "You know, I've denied these memories for so long, I thought I'd forgotten them, but..." She shook her head. "It's enough to remember his name and it all comes back to me."

"You were close?" The prince played nervously with the glass, bothered by the thought, yet curious at the same time.

"More than close. We had a special relationship because he could read my mind and share my feelings without uttering a word. He made me feel loved and wanted, his love flowing like energy waves, rather than mere sounds. He was in my head all the time and I was in his as a part of him. I felt the safest,

warmest, most loved child in the world and it was simply...wonderful.”

The warmth of the memory made her body glow and Duncan could almost see the waves of pleasure running through it.

“That’s why I thought he was my father. Our connection was too intimate for me to believe otherwise.”

Shifting uncomfortably, Duncan admitted to a twinge of jealousy upon hearing of his father’s closeness with this...he did not even know how to define her. Not a blood relation for sure, yet not a stranger either, at least considering his father’s peculiar behavior. As he recalled, Prince Charles had not lavished affections on either of his rightful children, obviously saving it all for Ylianor, like he had just learned from her lips. And this awareness upset him more than he cared to admit.

“Of course, now I know better.” She had been quick to point it out as if reading his mind. “It would have been impossible for him to be my father and there’s no blood relation between us. Still, the bond was there, though I can’t explain why and neither could Prince Charles. Naturally, it all ended with his death.”

“It must’ve been particularly painful for you.” And Duncan’s heart went out to her despite the dull anger.

“It was horrible! I was in the room with him and I actually perceived death take him away from me. I remember feeling powerless, overwhelmed by this force, but also furious it dared take him away.”

“So where did you steal the energy to help you deal that time?” Duncan teased, beginning to understand her mechanism.

Ylianor smiled at the pun. “From the horses. Having no language, they communicate much the same way I used to with your father. They share emotions with energy waves that anyone receptive enough can pick up. In that particular occasion, Fuzeon came to my rescue, offering his support and strength.”

“That’s why you have a privileged relationship with him.”

She nodded, an amused twinkle lighting her eyes while she brushed his arm. “But not to worry. Fuzeon loves you above anyone else, even if he keeps an open space for me in case I should need it.” A smile crossed her lips. “Actually, it’s funny. Now that I think of it, at the time I didn’t know the first thing about energy, but Fuzeon did so he taught me how I could use it when I needed extra support, which of course, doesn’t excuse what I did today. And even if you might not believe me, I only reacted in self-defense.”

“I’m listening,” Prince Caldwell assured noncommittally, folding his arms over his chest.

“Your sister and Chris were so mad I feared they’d kill me.”

“You mean they’re both powerful enough to—”

“On no, my prince, your sister has no gift of her own. The only powerful one, more so than anyone I’ve ever met in my life, is Chris. And since he wanted to be sure to get me, he was going to use Elizabeth’s rage to boost his own destructive force. That’s why I seized your energy, even if I was wrong in doing it. But I wasn’t thinking clearly. I acted on pure instinct alone, reaching out like I used to do with your father and you were there, a convenient energy source that I had no qualms in stealing, as you cleverly put it.”

“You made me feel violated and deceived like an intruder had taken a piece of me away.”

“I know and I’m sorry, but you could’ve easily stopped me.”

The prince turned his gaze to the fire, the memory of his responsibility still weighing on him. “Yes, I know. After the initial shock, I could’ve pulled back easily, but when I felt how scared you were, I didn’t want to abandon you.”

“So you stood by me...in spite of Chris.”

Duncan became even more uncomfortable, forced to admit

he had betrayed his blond angel. At dinner, when their gazes had crossed, he had read his lover's unspoken accusations, but mostly his pain, and had felt guilty to the bone. "And I'll never forgive myself for it."

"I wouldn't be so hard." Ylianor ran to his defense. "You chose to support the weaker side."

He looked at her skeptically. "Funny, I can't see you as the weaker side, not after today. Wheeling and dealing your way into my father's heart, then between me and my lover—"

"Please, my prince, wait." Her hand flew again to his arm in a reassuring gesture. "Let me finish explaining before any hasty judgments."

He nodded in spite of himself, unwilling to close the door on someone that was turning out to be more intriguing than he had expected.

Ylianor paused again, gazing at the fire. "When you came looking for me at the village—"

"I was lost, remember?"

"No, you weren't. I'm sure everything happens for a reason—"

"Do you really believe that?"

A warm smile spread on her face. "Oh yes, nothing happens by chance. Believe me. Life's not a series of random events, rather a complicated pattern, a master plan where things occur for a specific reason, though we may not see it. And people often miss it altogether, too busy concentrating on inconsequential details of day-to-day routine to notice the greater picture underlying it all."

"While you can see it?" He teased sarcastically.

"I see beyond the obvious." Spoken without any pride, her tone left no doubt she was telling a truth. "That's why I know you didn't lose your way by accident."

An ironic smile curved his lips. "So what's the greater picture here?"

Ylianor regarded him coolly as if wondering whether to speak her mind until she made a decision. "Even if you might not be aware of it, you need to reconnect our severed link, the one Chris had broken that summer day."

"Why?"

She shrugged, doubt clouding her green eyes. "Well, I'm not sure exactly. All I can tell you is that, when I saw you standing on my doorsteps, a part of me knew I could get back the special relationship I had shared with your father." The green eyes flashed. "Actually, you were the only one who could fill his shoes."

"Because I'm my father's son?" He challenged. "Or because you loved me?" Merciless, he plowed ahead. "And used the sex to tie me, hands and feet?"

Ylianor shook her head violently. "No, you got it all wrong. I think we were on the verge of opening our own channel when we were kids, before Chris came I mean. And that made me insanely jealous—" She stopped as if realizing something for the first time. "Please understand, this is not what I feel now." She placed a hand on his chest. "I was just a kid then and didn't know the first thing about energy, but it didn't stop me from attacking Chris with my every power the moment I saw him come toward you."

"How did he react?"

A bitter smile crossed her face. "Oh, he couldn't care less about my pitiful efforts. He moved energy like a kid moves a pebble and buried me under a fiery mass without even glancing at me. It was like I was inconsequential, so he dismissed me like an annoying insect. No, I never stood a chance against him, especially when he proved he could make me become invisible



to your eyes.”

“You think he’s the reason I don’t remember you?”

“I can’t tell for sure, but he probably made sure you wouldn’t.”

“So Chris has—”

“Oh, he has great power,” she confirmed with a note of healthy respect. “And one I’m learning not to mess with.”

“Sometimes, it feels like there’s a dark side to him, which could lead him into...questionable actions if left alone.”

“Only you can control that. I know because I saw it when he came here the first time. He was destructively angry, so evil I can still feel the earth caving in around him. The contrast between his angelic face and the blackness inside made it even more striking and scary.” Duncan saw a shiver running down her arm as if she were reliving it. “But when he saw you, everything changed. All of a sudden, he became the brightest star I’ve ever seen with a light so intense it blinded me. I was amazed. Usually, people’s lights don’t change very much from one mood to the next, but Chris turned from black to white in a matter of seconds.”

“He changed from black to white when he saw me?” The prince repeated, wanting to be sure he understood correctly.

“Yes, you made it happen for reasons I can’t understand myself. But it seems evident you alone can reach him in his darkest corners and make him different.”

To be honest, these thoughts had crossed Duncan’s mind, though he had never given them much weight. “Does he have your gift?”

Ylianor shook her head. “Not mine. He has some special gift of his own, much more powerful than mine ever will be because it’s fueled by fire itself. But in one thing I feel we’re similar, at least from what I could judge today. Like me, he’s grown both in awareness and management of his incredible power, learning

how to wield it in the most destructive way possible, which makes him a very dangerous enemy.”

Sensations and half-forgotten wonderings fell into place as he recognized the truth of what she was saying. “Yes, my angel’s pure fire and today he burns hotter than ever.” And there was no disguising the pride in his voice.

She nodded in agreement. “I’m sure his energy could burn just about anything he wished and he’s aware of it, too, has been ever since he was a child.”

“Like you?” And Prince Caldwell wondered why he felt suddenly trapped in a fantastic power struggle that would have seemed unreal just a few days before, so far away from the material reality he had taken for granted all his life.

“I guess so, even if it was your lover’s jealous attack that made me aware I was different.”

“Chris isn’t jealous.”

Ylianor shrugged. “Not of your body, surely, but when it comes to your heart or energy, I wouldn’t be so sure.”

Squeezing her hand, he resisted the strong temptation to brush her lips with his. “Of my energy, too?”

She cleared her throat again, slightly embarrassed as if she had read his intention. “And of your sex.” The images of their first night together flooded Duncan’s head. “Especially if it turns out to be the fastest way to unleash your gift, connecting you to me.”

“That would explain yesterday’s experience and what you’re doing just now.”

“You mean the images?”

Duncan nodded. *And not just that*, he wanted to add, still wondering how he could have perceived some of her feelings so clearly, but kept the thought to himself until her voice filled his head.

*I can send you thoughts and feelings, too, my prince, if only you allow me.*

Shocked, Duncan trained his gaze on her as if wanting to make sure she had not moved her mouth. *Then it's true you can read my mind?*

*I told you before. You have the same gift as your father. We can communicate without talking.* She was inside him, he realized amazed, feeling her presence everywhere. To make matters worse, she was also stroking his face, unleashing what he had tried to keep at bay during the entire conversation, carefully avoiding even casual touches, knowing it would lead in an entirely different direction, one that would end all explanations. But the sensation felt too good to stop, particularly when she shared the flickering lights again, and Prince Caldwell drowned in a magical mist of sparkling colors. "Is that how you normally see things?" His voice softened as he gazed at her intently.

"Welcome to my world." Leaning back on the couch, she continued in a husky tone. "One made of lights...feelings..." He perceived her body's hungry awakening, in erotic recollection of what it could get from him, together with the dull throbbing between her legs, which made his cock stir into stiff appraisal.

Probably living the same sensations, her mind reached Duncan, her entire being demanding his undivided attention, leaving him no choice but to accept the invitation. Seemingly effortlessly, she pulled him into her desire, a heat so intense it aroused him to a feverish pitch without a single touch. *Of course, you have to feel it physically to understand.* Her silky voice prodded huskily as her hand stretched forward.

Intercepting her intentions, he moved faster, his hand already insinuating beneath the old blue dress to travel up a smooth leg, when a knock stopped further advances. *I guess it's not surprising he should come now.* No, hardly surprised, the prince

got up to reach the door, wondering at the same time if he had unconsciously summoned him.

*You probably did.*

“Lover.” Standing on the threshold, Chris’s voice was almost shaking. “I need to talk to you.”

With a curt nod, Duncan stepped aside to let him through, uncaring about the consequences.

Catching sight of the wrong person, Chris’s eyes turned icy cold. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Not at all, Angel.” Prince Caldwell drew him closer to the couch. “We were just about to get started, but three’s more fun than two.”

Before the blond angel had the chance to complain, Duncan kissed him deep and hard, his tongue challenging, pressing to overcome his surprise, yet demanding at the same time his complete surrender. Together, they had explored sex with a variety of partners, but regardless of what gender was in their bed, the prince had never allowed Chris to kiss him, afraid it would show the depth of his feelings. Now he needed no disguise, free to be himself for the first time, so he increased the pressure to make Chris overcome his initial surprise, wanting only to turn the wet invasion into an exciting new game. And his blond angel responded beautifully, aroused beyond expectations, his body tense, cock hard pressing on Duncan’s stomach in spite of Ylianor’s presence.

“You weren’t kidding, lover.” Young Templeton grinned, pulling slightly back. “You really want to do it now.” The blue-gray eyes flashed in excitement. “But what about her?” Chris did not even look at Ylianor.

“She knows all about us, so there’s no need to worry.” Duncan, too, had eyes only for Chris. “And she’s at our complete service.” He breathed in his ear, his voice thick with desire to

overcome his lover's objection to the person, rather than the situation. "Come on, Angel. We've shared women before and it'll be no different this time." Then he gripped the stiff bulge, still concealed by the clothes, and slid it seductively.

Even if his looks told otherwise, Chris did not comment, choosing to play the game despite the guest for his cock's needs seemed to outweigh any argument, so they kept kissing in front of Ylianor. Now firmly grasping the naked skin, Prince Caldwell teased his blond angel's hard length, throbbing and twitching from pleasure, until, feeling Ylianor's growing excitement reach critical levels, he knew it was the perfect time to plunge her into his world, full of growing desires in anxious wait of an explosive release.

\* \* \* \*

At the sight of the two men, one standing, the other on his knees, Ylianor had no time to think. Caught in Duncan's erotic web, she savored the erection dancing in front of her nose, teasing the tender foreskin, darting her tongue over the entire stem, each crevice and bump avidly lapped along the way. However incredible, the connection worked between them, she realized when the first hard suck made her almost gag as if she actually had her mouth full. But it was simply a preliminary lesson, which Duncan quickly transformed in an oral practice by placing her in the same position he had occupied in front of Chris's proud shaft. *Now open wide and suck.*

Pulled from imagination into reality, she stared not at one, but at the two huge cocks demanding imperiously her wet attention, which she lacked the experience to give if it had not been for Prince Caldwell's apt instructions. *Come on, Princess, they need your mouth, so stick them in and swallow.* And to

make his point clearer, he grabbed her head and pushed it on Chris's bulging tip. With the prince taking charge, Ylianor had no choice but to comply and her mouth wrapped obediently on the hungry shaft, her tongue darting out to explore its long length while her lips traveled to the bottom.

*Now suck hard.* Following the command, he pushed her head again to make Chris enter deeper, so she drew it in, fitting as much as she could, until it gagged her. Choking and coughing, Ylianor pulled back, but the prince's firm hold did not allow her to get too far.

*Use your tongue to avoid choking.* At the words, she felt a twinge of sympathy that made her double her efforts despite the dangers.

Beginning to get more familiar, Ylianor dipped on the tip of the erection, feeling it twitch every time her tongue wrapped around its bulging head, licking the bumpy surface and teasing the tantalizing foreskin, until it became flaming hot. And what gave her more pleasure than anything else was reading young Templeton's pleasure, both in his blindingly bright colors as in the stiff shaft that seemed unwilling to leave her mouth, however inexperienced it may have felt. More than that, she realized his quivering every time Duncan pushed her head forward was in fact a sign he was about to lose control and it made her wetter than she thought possible.

Having her same perception, Prince Caldwell increased the tempo, pushing her head faster on the long stem in a rhythmical fashion that would surely bring the demon to a point of no return. As if to accelerate the process, Duncan bent on Chris's ear. "Go ahead and choke her, Angel." She clearly heard.

At those words, the first jet reached her throat and like the prince had threatened, she gagged on the fluid, shooting out of the convulsing shaft in a seemingly inexhaustible supply, its

bittersweet taste filling her senses.

Prince Caldwell grinned in satisfaction. "Great come, Angel, but don't relax because we have many other ways to play our game." All the while, he held Ylianor's head firmly on his lover's crotch. "And keep sucking, Princess," he ordered. "I want him as hard as he was before."

Not having any choice in the matter, she curled her tongue around the shriveled length, managing to enfold it completely for the first seconds. But it soon grew again, especially as Duncan's lips flew to the demon's mouth to draw him in a passionately sensual kiss while she continued lavishing attentions on what by now she could no longer hold entirely in her wet cavity. This time though, the prince's intentions were quite different and after he managed to pull back from his lover, he carried Ylianor to the bed, shedding her clothes along the way while his tongue replaced Chris's shaft. At the same time, his fingers traced a possessive trail to her buttocks, demanding total surrender. *You were good, but we want more.* Reaching the bed, he placed her on all fours. *And throw out your ass.*

Ylianor complied readily, her body by now transformed into a tight knot of nerves, wanting only to explode.

Turning to Chris, the prince grinned widely. "It's all yours." Still teasing seductively the firm butt, his fingers played with the narrow hole, tracing its edges and dipping occasionally to provoke a desire Ylianor already felt on her own. "And hurry. It's waiting for you."

"By the gods, she has a magnificent ass." Young Templeton blurted the words almost reluctantly. "Has it ever been taken?"

"Just once," Duncan replied as Chris reached him, "but it's certainly worth the ride."

Leaving the demon to adjust his position, the prince slipped beneath Ylianor and his mouth closed on the hard swell between

her legs. At the hot wet suck enfolding the throbbing knot screaming for release, she gasped in pleasure, every sensation doubling with the force of Duncan's connection as he licked furiously the sensitive spot, brushing, stroking, while his fingers pushed in and out of her wet slit. And her body could not resist his erotic provocation, not when he made her feel both sides of the process, her mouth filled with her taste, her fingers sticky with the same fluid dripping in his mouth. She tensed, ready for the waves about to hit so hard that—

*Not yet, Princess.* His order did not stop his tantalizing game. *My lover has to take you first.*

*But I can't stand it anymore.*

*Hush! You're his now. Just trust me. It'll be worth the wait.*

Behind her, Chris was still admiring the round, firm bottom, as if unable to tear his gaze away despite Duncan's fingers flicking in and out of the tempting hole. "Oh, it's just too good to be true." His cock slid down the cleft and shoving forcefully once the tip reached the narrow entrance.

With a hard intake of air, Ylianor flesh tightened as the thickness penetrate in one single push, the searing pain freezing her, though she did not breathe a word, not wanting to give the odious demon more pleasure than he already was feeling for hurting her. Yes, she had no doubt he would use any means possible to punish her, especially now that Duncan was experimenting with a new game.

*Relax. It'll pass soon. I promise.* Prince Caldwell whispered in her head, obviously feeling the burning sensation, too. His hands reached out to stop Chris's movements. "She's practically a virgin," the game master reminded. "If you take it more gently, it'll still be fun, only it'll last longer, too. Trust me."

So the pressure ease as Chris came to a complete halt. Duncan's tongue and fingers resumed their tantalizing play,



exploring every wet fold, stroking and sucking the swollen clit, tracing the slippery slit's edges with increasing urgency before sliding forcefully inside. That he was pressing her to go beyond the pain was obvious, but what made the difference was Chris, pushing her head down on the prince's erect shaft.

Duncan's shock of pleasure inflamed her again, overcoming the unpleasant sensation by focusing on the hard cock's demands instead, sliding her lips to its base while swaying to the throbbing ache that urged her to press down on his mouth, brushing rhythmically, before thrusting back her ass to meet Chris's shoves. When young Templeton accelerated the tempo, her ass widened to fit more of him inside and heat grew to a point she could not contain it any longer. Everything seemed to be on fire—from her full mouth, fighting against Duncan's hungry thickness, to her ass, now a wide-open channel where their skins rubbed faster together, to her cunt, ravaged by the prince's steady attentions—until nothing made sense anymore and her mouth had to let go of its guest. Head falling on the bed in the throes of the most violent and repeated contractions she had ever felt, the scream that inevitably followed only increased the waves, literally rippling her apart.

Looking surprised, Chris stopped altogether. "What...what was that?"

Duncan came to his rescue. "Don't worry. Just keep pumping." Then he shifted position to get his cock inside the fiery pussy.

Feeling the second shaft drown in her moistness, Ylianor raised her back slightly, her flesh wrapping even tighter around the two erections filling both holes at the same time. Together, they moved as one, pumping her steadily in a frenzied rhythm that might have lasted longer if Prince Caldwell's tongue had not claimed her mouth, making her climax again, her scream lost

inside his throat. This time though, the ripples of pleasure squeezed convulsively and she felt neither could resist any longer. With a loud gasp and almost together, the two lovers came as well, their bodies twitching inside her.

Knowing she had to move fast if she wanted to establish a connection beyond sex, Ylianor pulled both men into her mind, in an attempt to drown them in her immaterial being, after having experienced the physical one. Lights, sounds, tastes, all blended into a single unity, drawing the three separate essences together as if they were one and had been so for the longest time. And even if the sensation lasted but a mere second thanks to Chris's fierce resistance, not to mention sheer hatred, it was enough to make him shiver...this time without pleasure, Ylianor noticed with satisfaction, before collapsing on Duncan exhausted.

\* \* \* \*

Spent and bewildered, Chris fell on a side, lying still and in silence. Yes, Duncan had brought women in their bed before, but nothing comparable to the unexpected chemistry of this particularly erotic game, raising it to a higher level. And this made him all the more mad. *Damn, why did it have to be her?* Up until then, Chris had gone along with his lover's fantasies just to please him, never really enjoying it since the prince had not allowed their feelings to show. To have them displayed so openly in front of Ylianor had come as a shock at first, then as an exciting novelty, particularly imagining her reactions. Perhaps that had made all the difference, turning the experience into something unique despite his fierce hostility to the person herself. *Or maybe she just has a magnificent ass, something the other women didn't.* And it was not simply a matter of shape, he

had to admit ruefully, still feeling it tightly wrapped around his hungry cock, moving seductively to squeeze him more, until he had to stop thinking about it if he did not want to start everything over. "You really enjoyed playing the game master, didn't you, lover?"

The prince shifted slightly. "Much more than that. I had imagined it would be incredible, but I never dreamed it could be this good." Stroking Ylianor's back absent-mindedly, he watched the shivers creasing the silky skin, but when she did not stir, he stopped.

"She's asleep," Chris confirmed. "She can't handle the amount of energy needed for these games."

Carefully picking up the body, Duncan placed it under the covers, then motioned Chris to return to the red rug in front of the fire. Distilled cider bottle out again, Prince Caldwell filled both their glasses.

After a long sip, Chris trapped Duncan's gaze. "So you are serious about her?"

"What do you mean by serious? The kid has a long way to go, but she's great as far as sex goes, so we could use her for our games for the time being."

He shook his head. "Lover, I know you too well and you're not fooling me one bit. You've never been interested in fucking women more than once or twice, even less when it came to sharing them with me."

The prince scoffed. "So I like her. Do you find it so hard to accept it?"

Chris regarded him coolly for a second. "No, I'm just wondering if you're speaking the truth or if she isn't manipulating you into believing it."

The black eyes flashed in suppressed anger. "She's not manipulating me."

“Are you sure? Whose idea was it to play this game?”

“Mine.”

“Really? Didn’t she influence you? What was happening just before I knocked?”

“We were just talking and that’s when I got the idea she’d be perfect to use in bed with you.”

“Come on. The girl has too much power to be just a sex toy.”

“Don’t give me another power lecture.” Duncan snarled threatening. “I think I’ve listened and seen enough for one day.” He swallowed a generous sip with one draw. “And the more I learn about it, the more I get mad thinking about what you did.”

“What I did?” Now it was Chris’s turn to feel angry. “What lies has that bitch been telling you?”

“For one thing that you cut me off from her when we were just kids.”

“And you believe her?”

Prince Caldwell’s gaze trailed to the fireplace. “I wouldn’t have if I hadn’t felt the...she calls it energy, I think it’s power.”

“And since when are you interested in energy or power for that matter?” Chris challenged.

The black gaze swung back in his direction. “Since the moment I felt what it can do, in both a negative and a positive sense. She...” His voice trailed off and Chris waited patiently for him to resume, feeling him grapple with unfamiliar matters. “I don’t know how she did it, but she talked to me without opening her mouth or breathing the words. I couldn’t believe it!” He paused as if to remember the sensation. “I felt her inside my head, like she was a part of me, not a separate entity at all, but someone who belongs to me.” However hard he tried, the prince could not keep a possessive tone out of his voice. “And it made for quite a different erotic game tonight since I ordered her what to do and how to move without having to say it out loud, sharing

everything with her, not just the thoughts. Feelings, too, I perceived them like they were my own, rather than hers.”

Startled, Chris decided to play it cool. “Well, that’s power for you.”

“I guess so.” Prince Caldwell nodded. “And you knew all about it, didn’t you?” The question seemed natural enough, but the deceptively smooth tone held more than one accusation.

Chris closed his eyes, weary with fatigue all at once. Duncan had begun feeling different ever since the cursed woman had returned in his life, her power obviously as strong as when he had first encountered her. And her beauty had only worsened matters, the damn attraction his lover felt for women—though only the gods knew why—inevitably leading to a new kind of sex, which had obviously made Duncan aware of his own potentials, awakening what Chris had not been able to, despite their numerous fucks. It was enough to make him mad, no furious, although he had known all along he alone—and the damn bitch unfortunately—had power and knew how to wield it. Never before or since meeting Ylianor, had Chris found someone as aware or dangerous on his path, at least until today. Feeling her seize the prince’s energy, Chris had had no choice but to stop, bewildered at the sudden shift of power that had placed him in the weaker position. And to think it came from his lover...well, that hurt most of all, even if it was not Duncan’s fault since he knew nothing of such matters. *I guess it’s time to clear the air, if I don’t want to risk losing the one person I truly love.* Staring at the fire in concentration, he collected his thoughts. “All right, let’s talk about energy, something you seem to have in abundance, too, judging from your reaction today.”

Prince Caldwell reached out to touch his arm. “Angel, believe me, I didn’t mean to hurt you or—”

“I know. You didn’t know the first thing about it, so I can

hardly blame you. The bitch, instead—”

“She says you were going to kill her.”

An ugly smile twisted Chris’s lips. “She shouldn’t give me more ideas than I already have, regarding her fate. But not to worry, unlike you, we’ve both known about power from the start, which made her all the more dangerous.” He stretched luxuriously, his long arms reaching in the air before returning down to wrap around his knees. “I wasn’t sure at first she and I were...different yet alike. As a child, I knew I wasn’t like the others and not only because I hated girls. I could do things that—” Chris stopped abruptly, thinking back on those early times, the intoxicating feeling of power coursing through his blood and drowning every other sense. “Well, no need to explain. What’s important, however farfetched it may sound, is my belief you wouldn’t have loved me without those powers.” Raising a hand, he stopped Duncan’s denial. “Lover, the moment I saw you, I knew you were special. And how could someone like you ever fall for someone like me if I didn’t have some special trait of my own?”

“I never—”

“That’s what I thought when I was eight-years-old.”

Duncan shifted position. “I wasn’t even aware of it until today, so I can assure I love you because of who you are, not of what you can or cannot do, however powerful it turns out to be.”

“It still doesn’t change the fact you seem to attract people with unique abilities or she wouldn’t have been at your side from early on.”

Duncan smiled apologetically. “I guess being unaware is not an excuse.” Reaching over, he tousled the blond hair in a reassuring gesture. “So since we’re all learning there’s more to us than skin value, we could use Ylianor’s knowledge for she seems to know a lot about it.”

"I've learned enough already, particularly during that early time. Imagine how angry I was when I first came to Black Rose and her, the only other gifted person I've known until today. That's why I drove her as far away from you as possible, though apparently not far enough."

"She believes our recent meeting was no accident

Chris shrugged. "She's probably right. You obviously needed her to awaken your power."

Duncan moved closer, taking Chris's face in his palms. "To be honest, I couldn't care less about having power if the price is to have someone or something come between us." His lips brushed Chris's mouth. "Just one word and I'll get rid of her again."

Chris sighed. Like old times, victory seemed his for the taking, thus making it all the more frustrating he was not a child anymore. Even without a specific understanding of such matters, he knew he did not have enough power to defeat the female enemy who had changed his lover forever. Yes, because power changed people—*Who better than I could testify to this?*—and it would be extremely selfish to deny Duncan his chance to explore his incredible potential. "You know what really gets me?" Raising his head, he could not avoid kissing the price. "She reminds me of you. Maybe it's the long dark hair or the shape of the eyes..." His voice trailed off as he recalled the painful air of familiarity that had hit him at the stables. "I can't quite put my finger on it, but there's something that connects her to you."

Sitting back on his heels, Duncan sipped his drink. "Funny you should mention it, Angel. David said the same thing."

"Then I guess it's more obvious than I thought."

"Is that why she deserves punishment?" With an effort, the prince kept his voice deceptively even.

Chris breathed deeply. "I'm still thinking like a child, right?"

"Is it a question or a statement?" Duncan reached out to squeeze Chris's hands. "You have nothing to fear. Your space is quite safe for no woman, or man for that matter, will ever come between us."

"You mean, not like she managed to do today?"

The prince grabbed his glass again. "What happened today was the angry reaction of two hotheads."

"That's easy for you to say. You've changed already and something about this new game of yours tells me she may become a permanent addition."

"Like I said if you don't want her, just say so."

Again, Chris did not feel like uttering the words. Reaching out to his lover, he put his head on the prince's chest. "I love you and you alone. I think..." He sighed heavily, unwilling to speak the words, but feeling compelled to do so just the same. "She made you aware of your power, which is a good thing in itself, though don't know where this will lead us, all of us I mean. All I can say is I might learn to like her, even if right now I don't feel like sharing anything with her, certainly not you."

Duncan stroked the silky hair. "Well, no need to worry. I want to be with you today as much as ever before, no matter how many women may take my fancy. But this one feels different, especially since she knows about energy flow. And yours, however powerful it is, needs training. You proved it today when you were about to lose control."

"I wasn't." Chris spat angrily, raising his head. "If she hadn't—"

"Provoked you, I know." The prince cut in sarcastically.

Duncan's condescending tone made Chris sit up straight. "All right, she may be useful—"

"In more ways than one." A mischievous twinkle brightened the black eyes.



Chris grinned. "Will she let us use her?"

"Oh, she will. She'll accept anything as long as I'm involved. You see, she promised to be my slave, in bed I mean, and I'll hold her to that vow."

A bitter smile curved Chris's lips as he searched Duncan's face. "So she's already that much in love?"

The prince did not comment.

"Well," Chris continued, "not because I don't trust women, but they first pretend to agree to your conditions, then change the rules without even informing you. In the end, they drain all your energy and give nothing in return."

Duncan fixed his gaze on Chris. "I don't see why you worry about what women do in a steady relationship since all we're planning is to have sex and eventually, learn about power."

"If she'll remain tied to you."

"What do you mean?"

Chris turned the glass in his hands. "Not to contradict you, but she seems a resourceful girl, one who could easily find a job elsewhere or who knows..." He shrugged nonchalantly. "Even pledge."

"Naah, who'd take her?"

"Your David for one."

"David?" Wide-eyed, Duncan looked and sounded surprised. "Why do you think he'd be interested?"

"He seemed embarrassed today when we got back under the rain. I bet he was keeping company to your girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend and she's free to have sex with whoever she likes, but I don't think she'd ever pledge to him."

"Why not? It's exactly what her mother did. Tied to your father's bed, she pledged to the stable keeper for appearance's sakes. And in case you haven't noticed, family patterns tend to repeat themselves."

“That was different.”

“You sure, lover?” Chris provoked.

Stretching, Duncan yawned loudly. “No.” His tone sounded regretful. “And right now, I’m too tired to care. Come on, let’s go to sleep.”

Chris glanced at the sleeping form under the covers. “What about her?”

“The bed’s big enough for the three of us.”

“To sleep with a woman?” Chris exclaimed, half-joking, half-mad. “Thought I’d never see the day.”

“Hey, there’s a first time for everything, so shut up and get in here.” Duncan closed the conversation, sliding in beside Ylianor and making room for him on the opposite side. And Chris had no other choice but to slip under the covers, his ass pressing against the prince’s crotch, while a woman slept at his lover’s side.

## Chapter Eleven

"Prince Duncan will be down in a moment," David assured, looking directly at the young lawyer seated between Lady Caldwell and Elizabeth.

Mark Hamill nodded vigorously, hoping the prince would not be long. Sophia Caldwell was a nice lady, but like many women, she tended to be a bit overbearing when it came to crucial matters like testaments. And Prince Charles's will was extremely important to her, just as it would have been for any mother, perhaps more if she came to learn of its finer details. Maybe it was the reason Prince Charles had chosen him to carry out the delicate affair, trusting on his capacity to bend the rules in more ways than one.

"I hope my son will be ready." Sophia sighed loudly. "He's not been himself lately."

"Don't worry, Mother." Elizabeth's eyes flashed. "I'm sure he's just tired. That's all."

Mark glanced outside, praying again for the prince's arrival. The sound of soft rain, mixed with the angry sea waves, lulled the senses as he stared at the overwhelming grayness, blending sky and sea like they had no distinguishable boundary between them.

"Do you think he's ready?" Lady Caldwell pressed her point.

Mark cleared his throat. "I'm sure he is more than

adequately prepared for it.” The lie slipped out smoothly for he knew in his heart the news he was about to reveal would be no easy matter to handle. Still, the reading of a will represented a symbolic rite of passage for noblemen, the formal gateway to adulthood and responsibility. *So what better way to test its effectiveness?*

“Yes, but did my mate—”

“Good morning.” A cheerful voice stopped Sophia’s next objection.

“Good morning.” Another voice pitched in, as two handsome men entered the room.

Mark raised his gaze and smiled, glad to see the prince together with an attractive blond stranger. “Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning, brother.” Elizabeth chirped in.

The prince went to his mother and pecked her cheek lightly. “Good morning, Mother.”

“Good morning, son. I hope you’re feeling better than you did yesterday. Your foul mood was unbearable.”

The prince grinned. “Yes, Mother. Today I’m feeling great.” And Mark had no doubt he was speaking the truth, not after catching the knowing glance he exchanged with his friend.

“I’m glad you made him see reason, Chris.” Elizabeth joked.

“I can be very persuasive if I want to.” The blond man exchanged another mischievous glance with the prince who was moving to the lawyer.

“Sorry I’m late.” He apologized. “We had some rough weather lately...”

“I know.” Mark nodded in understanding. “It wasn’t easy to come all the way here, even if Harbor Town is just a few miles away.”

“Can I introduce you to my friend?” The prince gestured the blond stranger to reach them. “Chris, this is the lawyer I was

telling you about, Mark Hamill.” He swung his gaze back to Mark. “This is my very dear friend, Christopher Templeton.”

“Ah, the son of our vice-leader, I presume.”

“The one and only.” Amused, Chris shook the outstretched hand in a firm grasp while his eyes blatantly appraised Mark.

A bit uncomfortable, the lawyer was quick to take his hand back, the young man too sensually disturbing for his tastes. “It’s a pleasure, sir.” The words were not yet out of his mouth that his gaze had already swung back to the prince with a mute plea for privacy, which he was quick to catch.

“All right, Mark, if you follow me, I think we’d be more comfortable in my office.”

“Yes, sir.” Mark agreed readily, already following the prince out the door.

Duncan Caldwell swept the room. “I’ll see you later,” he told everyone, even if his gaze stopped only on the blond man.

Now seated in front of the prince, Mark’s eyes traveled over his attractive features while wondering how to breach what was a difficult subject at best. Even though he had long outgrown his phase, the lawyer still liked men more than women and the prince’s handsome face was anything but indifferent to him, not to mention his natural elegance and style, similar to his father’s. “I’m sorry if I came at a bad time.” Mark began, not really knowing where to start.

“Oh no.” The prince played with a red cardboard slip lying on his desk, richly engraved by an emblem Mark thought he recognized as belonging to the lady in charge of Blandry’s District. “We’ve had some...rough times lately, but nothing serious. Besides, I’m to leave for Rockyhorn tomorrow, finally.”

“Alone?” Mark asked to buy more time.

“Only with my friend, Lord Templeton.” And his gaze seemed lost in midair as if he were already imagining the trip.

"Then I'm glad I came today." Mark shifted on the chair. "We have to decide on a definite date in which to read your father's will."

"In about a month, I should be back from the High Council and we could arrange it then." The prince leaned across the desk. "But don't tell me you came all the way here just to set a date we could've easily fixed through a messenger."

Mark cleared his throat. "It's true, Prince, but..." His voice trailed off uncomfortably.

The black eyes flashed. "Is there a problem with my father's will?"

"I wouldn't call it exactly...a problem, sir." Mark was quick to reassure. "There's an unexpected addition to the usual provisions that concern the family, which I'm afraid you might not approve."

The prince sat up straight. "What do you mean?"

Mark took a deep breath. "Your father decided to add a new clause, which is...questionable at best. I did not approve of it, but had no choice in the matter."

"Is this clause legal?"

"There are no precedents, but as far as I could research, I can't honestly say it's illegal." Mark was clearly upset for his heartfelt loyalty to Prince Charles clashed with what he knew would place the family in a difficult position. He had strenuously argued with the deceased prince against it, begging him to consider his family's reactions, but to no avail. More than that, Charles had asked Mark to support the clause, especially against his son's certain disapproval, so in the end, the lawyer had promised. Now torn between loyalty and traditions, he stared at Duncan Caldwell not knowing how to argue Charles's point successfully.

Duncan Caldwell took a deep breath, leaning back on the

chair with a resigned look. "You know, I suspected my father would give us a hard time, even after his death," he mused as if reading Mark's doubts. "But whatever it is, we'll handle it, right, Mark?"

The question seemed rhetorical, so the lawyer simply nodded in agreement.

"Now what provision did my father include?"

Mark cleared his throat. "In the will, Charles Caldwell formally adopts a certain Ylianor Meyer, a stranger to the family as I understand, making her his legal daughter, and legitimate heir since she'll have formal right to carry the Caldwell name."

The black eyes were wide in shock. "He adopts her?"

"Yes, sir, an unusual procedure, I'm aware, but—"

"Did he think she was his daughter?"

"Well, sir, I never understood it myself. Your father had no grounds for claiming she was, no blood relation he assured more than once, but insisted she felt like his own, so he needed to provide for her along with the rest of his children. He used those exact words to my surprise and amazement, not to mention objections." Shifting his gaze, he paused to let the memory of the animated discussion seep in, then turned to look at the prince again. "With this adoption, your father bequeaths a house in Harbor Town that the city council hasn't used lately."

"And it's legal?" Duncan Caldwell repeated, still looking dumbfounded.

"Even if no one, to my knowledge, has used adoption before and class barriers are strict, there are no bans or laws against it so yes, it's legal."

\* \* \* \*

Duncan sat stunned and incredulous. It was one thing to say or

feel certain things, quite another to have them publicly declared in an official act.

Mark continued as if trying to cover up Duncan's evident bafflement. "The good news, Prince, is that only me, and now you, know of this clause. True, I promised Charles Caldwell I'd uphold it even to your face, but just seeing your first reaction, I feel I was right all along in advising against it." He took a deep breath. "Since we're the only ones to know, I could discreetly remove it from the will without anyone ever finding out."

"Alter the will?" Duncan was even more shocked. "You mean cheat?"

Mark shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Well, not exactly. Technically, your father was not feeling well the last few days of his life, I mean when he drew the will. We could easily infer his faculties failed him when he asked for this provision."

*However sick he felt, he loved her till the end.* And he wondered if he dared betray Charles's wishes with such outright defiance. "In your legal opinion, could my father understand what he was doing?" He stared at the eager face and bright intelligent brown eyes in front of him, looking for an honest answer.

Mark paused, evidently to think over the implications of the question. "I don't suppose you'd accept a lie." He blurted at last.

A wry smile curved Duncan's lips. "It's between you and me, right? So why lie? I want to know where I stand, fair and square, but I also need to know what my father's true wishes were. As I told you before, I expected some problems with his will." *Though never something like this and with a woman I just shared with my lover.*

"Fair enough, Prince. Your father knew exactly what he was doing, right up to the end. And he anticipated the family's opposition, even if he felt it was too important to let the issue



slide. He trusted I'd explain his reasons, but just to be on the safe side..." He reached in his pocket and took a closed envelope. "He wrote this and asked me to give it to you prior to the will's reading."

Duncan took the letter, without opening it, and imagined to feel his father's energy burning through the paper.

"Now, Prince, the choice is yours. If you decide to honor the clause, this Ylianor woman will officially become a Caldwell and you'll have a new addition to the family. If you don't, then no one will suffer except this Ylianor who, in any case, will never know of this provision."

"Cleverly put." Duncan half-smiled. "I admire your logic, which gives me an easy way out. Too bad it doesn't also give me the easy conscience to carry out either decision."

"I can't answer for the conscience, sir, but I can say that if the will is really a passage into adulthood, then never has it been truer than in your case." Mark got up to leave. "I'll wait for confirmation of the exact date. In your message, you can simply write yes, if you want me to leave the clause, or no, if you don't want it. I'll understand and adjust the will to your instructions."

The prince nodded and watched him leave, his mind already debating his options. Actually, *Fuck!* Then, *Damn her!* was all he could concentrate on, regretting the moment he had set eyes on the green-eyed impostor that seemed to have a rare talent in upsetting his life in the most surprising and unexpected ways. And even if he could have forgiven her claims, maybe in time even dismissed them as mere hallucinations or child's fantasies, here was his father endorsing these same wild speculations in a public document no less! *As if things weren't complicated enough on their own.* And he thought back on the sex, but mostly on the sensation of reading her thoughts and feelings as if they were his own. Maybe Chris was right all along and she had

manipulated him, using last night to tie the knot—an invisible one as yet, but one just the same, he realized as all the amazement at the novelty of sharing minds and bodies quickly fled.

The conniving bitch, as John Meyer had called her with good reason, had probably known all along what his father had planned. *How could she not since she shared everything with him? And if he loved her as much as he claims, could he have kept it a secret from her? Impossible!* Duncan's conclusion conveniently ignored the fact Ylianor was a mere nine-years-old at the time. *Then again, you don't get to be a convincing bitch at eighteen if you had no previous experience.* And convinced him she had, at least until the other night, the memory of her pliant body and the masterful blowjob done under his complete charge still arousing him today.

Turning the envelope slowly in his hands, he tossed it aside, severely tempted to burn it in the fireplace. *Why should I bother with my father's feelings, when mine lie in a pitiful heap?* No, he did not want to read Charles's malicious lies or the devious way in which he would try to convince his son to pass an impostor as a Caldwell. *As if she could ever be one of us!* He spat enraged.

Afraid his anger would get the better of him, the prince took several deep breaths to calm down, gazing at the rain still pouring heavily outside. But the weather was no comfort. In fact it only worsened his mood, he decided, turning away from the window and back to the desk where the letter waited for him, calling him as if it were his deceased father himself. Duncan would have honestly preferred to throw it away, but decency, along with an inevitable twinge of curiosity, won in the end. After all, Charles was reaching out to him, from the grave or another dimension made no difference to the prince, and it was not in Duncan's nature to turn him down, regardless of the

consequences.

“Dear son.” The letter began in a firm handwriting. “I know you’re probably upset by what the lawyer just told you. It is not an easy task, I understand, asking you to support my controversial clause in front of the rest of the family. That’s why I want to take this time to explain my reasons and, in the process, tell you a little about myself.

I have tried to live by the rules, loving my family—and you, my boy, in particular—with all my heart. You have made me very proud and I know you have an important future ahead. Perhaps my only regret in how I treated you is a certain coldness that has prevented me from showing you all the love, pride and affection I feel for you. I sincerely apologize if I hurt you in any way, but I’m not looking for forgiveness. My nature did not allow for sweeping displays, rather the contrary. I usually kept feelings bottled up inside, exercising an unnecessarily rigid control that hurt me and my loved ones, until someone showed me how to express them without fear. And if in the end I tried to make up for my earlier shortcomings, at least with you, I must confess that with your sister, Elizabeth, I could never quite achieve the same result, even if you have to believe me I loved and cared deeply for you both. But nothing is ever casual in life, not even when it comes to regrets. To have them means I had the misfortune...or the blessing of knowing someone who unleashed feelings I didn’t even know existed, changing my life forever.

Are you in love, my son? I hope you’ve found your special him or her already, so you will understand what I’m about to say. Love is such a complicated emotion, which I had the privilege of knowing at least twice, though in very different circumstances, and one thing I learned is you cannot choose whom you love. Like a tempest, it hit me without warning or protection, leaving

me no possibility of recovery, not then, not ever. A part of me is ashamed of what I did, yet another lived so intensely, it didn't honestly care about what others thought or felt.

By now, you must've guessed, though it probably offends your aristocratic taste. But this is not why I'm writing this letter. As you know, the woman I loved gave birth to a wonderful child and even if there's no proof of paternity, this little girl feels like my own. I can't explain a physical impossibility, something that goes against natural laws, rules and conventions, but she belongs to the Caldwell just as surely as you do. Needless to say, when they took her mother away from me, I clung to this child more than I should've in my right mind, but I guess it was inevitable, considering the uniqueness of our bond. Thanks to her, I discovered a new form of communicating, not just through mere words, rather with an unexplainable meeting of the minds. Unlike you or Elizabeth, she could hear my thoughts, read my mind and share my feelings. This, more than anything else, convinced me she belonged to me or better yet, she was a part of me.

Now I ask your support in helping someone surely mistreated since my death. Because of her power, commoners have probably accused her of witchcraft, if not worse. She may not be a blood relative, but for sure, she used to be your friend during childhood and even if she may have disappeared from Black Rose altogether, searching in your heart today, I know you'll find traces of that friendship in the happy memories you must keep buried inside. Sometimes, love takes on unusual disguises and if you had the chance to meet again, the two of you could learn a lot from each other like when you were kids. Find her, wherever she may hide, and help her get what is hers by right and by love.

But this is not an order, simply a plea. If you don't feel it's right, simply throw this letter into the fire, leave it at the flame's

mercy that will silence it and my pained heart forever. As for the will's clause, too, you can easily dismiss it for only the lawyer and now you know of it. In any case, I know you to be a fair man and that's why I love you, son, whatever decision you make, though I trust you'll honor my word, doing right by me and by her, because you are my beloved son, now and forever.

Your loving father, Charles."

Indescribable pain shot through every raw piece of flesh, cutting off his breath, rushing blood to his ears, almost making him double over with a knot twisting his stomach into a pulp, until cold and furious rage drowned everything. *How dare he plea to me, the offended party? Telling me of his love affairs and bastard child while taunting me with a sense of responsibility he never had?*

His first impulse was to follow Charles's exact instructions and burn the letter until not even the cinders remained, in an attempt to erase those words forever not just from the paper, but from his mind. He was the son and heir, yet all his father could think about was that impostor, a conniving thief of affections that would even get a reward out of it. If his mother and sister heard of this, they might never recover their senses, especially since they had seen the witch's web from the start. *Something I hadn't, trapped like I am in her fucking enchantment in spite of their warnings and of what has already happened.* At the first breath of cool logic, he shook his head. *It's no use being angry with Father when I'm following his footsteps.*

Breathing deeply, the pain lessened and the rage cleared. Pouring a glass of distilled cider, he drank it all down in one gulp, then filled it again, taking only a little sip this time while gazing intently at the high flames. The liquid scorched his throat and stomach, numbing the senses for a brief spell, although it

could not stop his thoughts from spinning.

Perhaps, he reasoned, he was not being fair. True, his father seemed positive Ylianor knew nothing of the clause despite their mind reading and all, but even if she had, she was not planning to stick around to collect her dues, at least judging from her reluctance to return to Black Rose. But her good faith notwithstanding like the feelings she had shared—only full of love, not material interests—he could not possibly let a stranger win over his loyalty to the family.

*Don't fool yourself.* The insidious voice sneered. *You're just like your father for she feels more familiar to you than Elizabeth does or ever did.*

*Witch's enchantments.* His mind spelled the words slowly, wanting to dismiss the disturbing notion she belonged to him.

*Could be, but does it make her capable of coldly planning it all?*

At this point, he was not sure of anything except the need to forget the entire matter or better yet, the woman herself.

"Excuse me, sir." David's knock and voice called him from the hall. "May I come in?"

"Yes, David." When he entered, Duncan got up and turned to the window. "What is it?"

"Sir, I wanted to know if you're leaving tomorrow as planned with Lord Templeton."

"Tomorrow?" Duncan had completely forgotten about his trip or the enjoyable sensation it had given him just an hour ago at the thought of being alone with Chris on the road, away from the rest of the world. "Yes, I guess so." Then sensing something was wrong, he turned around to look intently at David. "Why do you ask?"

David shrugged uneasily. "Nothing."

But the prince would not let it rest, his tone demanding an

answer. "What is it?"

"Well, there's been some talk...some ugly talk among the servants."

"Regarding?"

David took a deep breath. "Ylianor."

Hardly surprised to hear her name, the prince sat back at his desk, resigned to have the damn woman torment him until the end. "What have you heard?"

"I'm not exactly sure of the details, but it seems your mother is planning something against her as soon as you turn your back—"

"What sort of...thing?" Duncan interrupted, his senses suddenly alert.

David shrugged. "I'm not sure, but I have the funny feeling it's related to what happened to Ylianor's mother."

Incredulous, the prince leaned forward. "My mother had something to do with Mary Jane's death?"

"Just rumors, sir. I wasn't here when it happened, so it's just hearsay. What's true is that she died during one of your father's absences from Black Rose."

*It would serve her right!* Ready to dismiss the thought as one of David's fantasies, Duncan was about to change topic when something apropos family patterns repeating themselves stopped him cold. Despite his earlier fury, an icy hand gripped his stomach at the thought of losing Ylianor and suddenly, it did not seem like a farfetched possibility anymore. Besides Chris's mention and his own murderous thoughts, now David, too, was bringing up the same subject. Somehow, the reference did not seem casual or unrelated, especially if coupled with his father's words, regarding Mary Jane being taken away. And he was beginning to believe Ylianor's intuition that coincidences did not exist, just master plans that could snap a person's life before he

had the chance to vent all his rage on her. And by the gods, if she had to die, it was his privilege—and his alone—in light of all the misery she was putting him through. “I plan to be away for a while.”

“I know, Prince. That’s why I brought it up.”

Remembering what Chris had told him, his lips curved in a malicious snarl. “Naturally, you wouldn’t have any ulterior motive for it, right?”

David’s face turned red.

*So my angel was right after all.*

“I’m sorry, milord. Please, believe me. I never meant to...” He shrugged uncomfortably. “I don’t know what came over me...I...she promised not to tell—”

“Rest assured, David, she didn’t breathe a word. Besides, I already told you, she doesn’t belong to me and I’m glad there’s someone looking out for her.” Even before the words left his mouth, he realized he truly meant them as the idea of losing her caused a fresh wave of icy desolation. “I guess it’s best if I bring her along like you suggest.”

“Yes, sir, it wouldn’t be a bad idea, not at all.”

*So she wins again.* “All right, tell her to be ready tomorrow at dawn.”

David bowed slightly. “Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m not doing her a favor.” *Particularly considering the company she’ll be keeping.* Already imagining Chris’s fierce and furious reactions, the prince could not honestly blame him, knowing he would take it like a second betrayal. *As if I wanted her along.* He sneered. *Or had the power to stop any of this from happening.*



## Chapter Twelve

Prince Caldwell stirred, hearing the unfamiliar voice behind the door. “Prince Caldwell, it’s time to wake up.”

The previous night had been a bad ending to a worse day, so it was no wonder he still felt as sour as after reading the accursed letter. “Yes...” He mumbled from the bed. “Who is it?”

“It’s Martin, sir, Lord Templeton’s servant. He’s waiting for you.”

*Great, just the last man I want to see today.* Avoiding his blond angel had not been easy, but he had managed to keep his distance without informing him of the change in their travel plans, even going as far as leaving him to his sister’s mercy right after dinner. Not that he had felt any remorse, his annoyance having reached by then vertiginous heights thanks to his mother’s unwitting confirmation of David’s suspicions. “I’ll be right out.” Duncan yelled at the door, wondering where David was.

He quickly dressed, grabbed the sack of clothes he had prepared the night before, then left the bedroom, catching sight of Chris on the lower level, looking quite satisfied with himself.

“Good morning, lover.”

“What’s good about it?” Duncan growled tightly, his mood definitely worse than he had thought at first.

“No one kept you company last night?” Chris taunted. “Too

bad. If you hadn't abandoned me at your sister's mercy, we could've had a wonderful evening together. Luckily, I found Joe who was more than willing to comfort me."

"Who's Joe?"

"A new houseboy your butler is training...quite adequately, I might add. He seems very eager to learn, even if in different fields." The blond angel grinned smugly, his blue-gray eyes sparkling.

"You're insatiable." Amused, Duncan could not resist a half smile. "How old is he?"

Chris shrugged. "Didn't bother to ask, but old enough, anyway."

While talking, they had crossed the main hall, exiting the house and heading to the stables enveloped by a brisk morning air, made more pungent by the overcast sky, which hid Stella's rays behind black, heavy clouds. In the distance, Duncan saw Ylianor, leaning intimately against David, and it only worsened his mood. Apparently, last night everyone seemed to have entertained company, as Chris had so elegantly put it, except him and even if he had sought loneliness, perhaps he had been wrong to sleep in a cold bed, considering the burst of fresh, hot rage at the mere notion of having to be in close quarters with the bitch.

"Good morning, sirs." David's cheerful tone grated his nerves. "Here's your breakfast and lunch." He handed wrapped packages to both Chris and Duncan. "And here are your horses." He handed them Fuzeon and Black's bridles. "Fit and ready to leave at your command."

"We're also ready," the blond angel confirmed brightly, getting on his horse.

As Duncan mounted Fuzeon, he could not help overhearing David talking to Ylianor. "I've packed your lunch together with a few of my pants, a jacket and a couple of shirts." Immediately

following his words, he handed her a knapsack. "It's colder where you're going, so at least you'll have something to wear. When you get back, we'll need to provide for some clothes since you have none."

"Don't worry, David." She stroked his cheek softly. "I'll be fine with or without clothes." And the green eyes flashed mischievously as she took the knapsack and got on Starlet.

Unable to tear his gaze away, Duncan watched her get on her horse. *I've been so busy taking her clothes off, I hardly noticed she hadn't any to spare.*

"Hey, lover, what's she doing?" Chris demanded angrily. "I thought we were going alone. Arthur wants to see us, not her."

"It's a safety measure." Not giving time for the words to sink in, Duncan rode off without waiting for the other two.

"Hey, wait!" The blond angel yelled as he raced to follow, eventually catching up with the prince. "What safety measures?"

Not wanting to answer, Duncan pretended he had not heard and pushed Fuzeon at a harder pace.

"You can't keep this up for the whole damn trip," Chris continued, sounding less aggressive. "Talk to me, please. Something's terribly wrong, has been ever since she came back into your life, and you can't deny it. She's nothing but a servant, yet you can't seem to do without her lately as if she were your best friend, a longtime lover or a member of your family." He spat, his anger rising again. "And I forgive you for having forced her down my throat once, but why should I baby sit her through our trip, which was ours alone if I recall? At least give me some sensible explanation before I decide to change road and get to Arthur on my own." He threatened finally when Prince Caldwell continued in his silence.

"Hey, I'm not happy about it either, but I don't want to have her on my conscience. It seems my mother's planning some sort

of revenge like she may have done when the girl's mother died during one of my father's trips. Since David overheard some disturbing rumors, he asked me to bring her along, to keep her safe from harm."

"Since when is David deciding things at Black Rose?"

"He isn't." The prince heaved. "It's partly your fault, too. Something about what you said about family patterns repeating themselves got me thinking so—"

"So now it's my fault?" Chris edged closer. "Then tell me why I get the distinct feeling you can't stand the sight of her. The other night you were in the sharing mood, even trying to convince me to accept a more permanent solution with the bitch, today you can't even look at her. Still you insist on saving her worthless hide. Why? What happened? Not that I wouldn't rather have it this way." He was quick to add. "I can definitely react better to her if you hate her, though this change of heart is a bit...confusing, wouldn't you agree?"

This time Duncan did not reply.

"All right, you can also disagree, if you'd like."

Again, no answer.

"All right, since you're not in the sharing mood today, let's play a little guessing game." Creasing his forehead in an obvious attempt to fit the dots together, the blond angel remained silent as their pace increased steadily, neither bothering to check if Ylianor was following at all. "I got it!" He swung blue-gray eyes bright in understanding on his lover. "Whatever's eating you must be related to the lawyer's visit. In fact, now that I think of it, your mood changed dramatically after he left."

"He had nothing to say. He wanted to arrange dates—"

"No, I'm not letting you off the hook so easily nor am I your mother who'll believe any bullshit just because it comes from your lips. No, your father must've disposed something in his will

that you can't accept, right? And considering how you're acting..." His voice trailed off as his eyes widened in disbelief. "Whatever it is, and nothing that goes by traditions I'm sure, must have to do with her, a complete stranger mentioned in Prince Charles's will."

At these words, Duncan collapsed as the truth, pressing on his chest and throat demanded a full release. "Mentioned? I wish he'd only mentioned her instead of being an egotistical fool, thinking only of himself, even after dead."

With a surprisingly gentle tone, Chris breathed the words slowly as if afraid they would revive painful memories. "What does he say about her?"

"He publicly recognizes Ylianor as a Caldwell by..." The painfully hot lump in his throat forced him to swallow twice before he could speak again. "Get this, adopting her! Can you believe it? In an official document, my father adopts a complete stranger, even going as far as implying she might share his blood."

"Does he say she does? I mean, is she really his daughter?"

"No, she isn't." The prince sneered, offended at the mere thought. "And he has no proof of it either, but an adoption is like telling the world he thinks she is. More than that, he also provides for her future as if she were a regular heir, leaving her a house I didn't even know existed." Taking a deep breath, he tried calming down. "Fuck! All he cares about is that bitch and not one word about Elizabeth, his rightful daughter. And my mother...she's going to be furious, to say the least."

"Is it legal?" Chris continued his probing in a strangely even tone as if trying to contain his soon to explode rage.

"Mark says it is, though unusual."

"Who exactly knows of this clause? Does she?"

Duncan sighed deeply. "Apparently, only the lawyer and

I...and now you. As for her..." Prince Caldwell shrugged. "I can't believe she knows nothing about it. As a damn aura reader or whatever the fuck it is, she read my father's thoughts, so she must surely know of it. And I guess my mother was right all along. A conniving bitch, that's what she is!"

Chris fell silent, his gaze searching Duncan's drawn face as if it communicated far more than his words had. "But there's more, isn't there?"

Duncan had not planned to tell him about the letter, but now it all came out, rolling with the force of an unstoppable avalanche. "My father had the nerve to write me a letter, begging for my help in recognizing the bitch as a Caldwell, but leaving me the choice to keep or remove his damned clause."

"So what's the problem? You could discreetly delete it from the will and no one would know about it except perhaps the bitch, but she doesn't count, right?"

Duncan nodded slowly. "My father said I could and so did the lawyer. Without the clause, there'd be no adoption, no inheritance, no nothing." He shrugged. "As if that would solve everything." He spat bitterly.

The blue-gray eyes flashed in complete understanding. "If it's that simple to dismiss a dead man's claim, what's really bothering you? The fact that she gets a piece of the Caldwell cake or that she got your father's love?"

Upon hearing the question, Prince Caldwell wanted to explode. Words utterly failed him, drowned in a sea of rage and humiliation that coiled into a fiery ball and pushed to the surface in a violent thrust. Blinded by its sheer intensity, his mind already bent on destroying the main cause of all this pain, he was ready to lash out when he felt Chris restrain him firmly, silently asking to surrender his lead. In a daze, the prince complied, meekly following the blond angel to a shelter just off the main road.

\* \* \* \*

As the door shut behind them, Ylianor had no choice but to wait alone outside. She needed no great power to know something was terribly wrong, though she could not determine exactly what despite having studied the two men's bright auras throughout the journey. Definitely not promising colors, she had thought, watching them shift in rapid succession, surprisingly red in Duncan's case, matched by Chris's cooler blue as if he wanted to contain his lover's rage. And considering their intensity, she did not find it odd for Prince Caldwell to turn his emotions into a powerful weapon, at least not as much as Chris's unexpected and puzzling protection. Not to save her skin, for sure, but whatever his reasons, she would even have to be grateful to His Presumptuousness, Ylianor thought bitterly, taking the horses they had carelessly abandoned in front of the shelter.

Looking around for something to satisfy their necessities, she caught the sound of gentle waves, which guided her to a narrow river nearby, with Fuzeon, Black and Starlet trailing right behind. Sitting on its low banks, Ylianor listened to the soft murmurs, completely absorbed by the blue liquid, glistening at every wave as if littered with golden bits of straw, until a harsh tug pulled her mind away. Jumbled images played in front of her, rushing apparently from nowhere, but as she focused on the details, she realized she was inside the cabin, watching their bodies attacking each other, mouths and tongues violently clashing, muscles tense, cocks hard and ready for the explosive release. Experiencing their hunger and insatiable craving, she felt a wave of fiery desire awaken her flesh, too, at the same instant Duncan invited her to join them. The call lasted only a second, just the time for his mind to realize what it was doing and brutally cut off

the connection, throwing Ylianor back to stare at the water, body on fire, mind in turmoil.

*Serves me right, I guess, for showing him what he's capable of.* She spat frustrated, shedding her clothes to dive in the cold stream, hoping it would cool down the furious throbbing between her legs. Crawling vigorously to avoid freezing, her firm muscles worked hard, pumping blood and energy to move the limbs through the dense water and she thanked Prince Charles again, for having insisted she learn to swim. And the sensation still felt blissful, her senses completely taken to the point of losing track of time, only vaguely aware of Stella's increased brightness, finally free from the encumbering clouds that had tried to shield—

*Where the fuck are you? And where are the horses? Get your ass here! Now! We've wasted enough time already.* Duncan's imperious tone crashed in her mind, bringing her back to reality.

*I'm in the river and the horses are here with me.* Not that he deserved an answer, she mused, not after the way he had treated her. Still, she did not dare disobey him. *I'll be right there.* Already swimming to shore, Ylianor climbed out, naked and wet, then seeing them coming down the hill, she began dressing without any hurry, her movements slow and deliberately seductive. Of course, Chris ignored her, but Duncan, however hard he tried, could not tear his gaze away from her tantalizing curves. Suppressing a grin, Ylianor shivered in triumph at her power to affect him despite his anger or whatever else was eating him. As a reaction, but mostly to spite her, Duncan reached out to kiss Chris, a hard passionately wet affair, before mounting on Fuzeon.

"Love you, too." The demon's lips curved in a sardonic smile, as if he knew exactly why the prince had done it.

"Never as much as I do." And this time, Prince Caldwell was



completely truthful.

When Ylianor reached for Starlet, she could feel Duncan's eyes glued on the wet clothes clinging like a second skin, designing every curve to perfection. Nothing left to imagination, just in case he needed a reminder of what he already knew her inside and out, she mused, realizing with a thrill of pleasure that, even though sexually exhausted, simply seeing her body had turned him on again. Satisfied by her little payback, she mounted on Starlet and followed them to resume their journey.

\* \* \* \*

They stopped for the night at another shelter further north, having sped through hills and valleys where the vegetation was turning gold by the approaching midsummer, ushered by the unusual rainfalls that had plagued the area. After the initial stop, they had kept a steady pace—Chris and Duncan ahead, Ylianor close behind—without slowing down, not even to eat, carefully skirting the edges of the few villages they encountered along the way in order to make travel faster. Pushing their strength to the limit, they managed to cover a good distance, a usual run for the lovers, but Duncan was amazed Ylianor had kept up so well, never complaining or taking a pause.

"You're going to kill her." Chris had warned once, sounding concerned by the pace they were keeping.

"She needs to earn her safety." Implacable, the prince had shrugged coldly, still recalling his intense desire on seeing the wet clothes clinging to every curve, the bitch moving seductively on purpose the moment she had felt his gaze on her. But even that awareness had not eased his arousal or erased the satisfied smug on her lips. *Can she manipulate me so easily?* At least he hoped she had suffered through every single mile.

Upon reaching the cabin, Duncan left the horses to Ylianor, quickly going inside, followed by young Templeton, to get a fire started.

Chris called out from the kitchen. "The usual stuff here. Want a nice bean soup for a change, lover?"

"We don't have much choice, Angel." Duncan turned to the voice, then shifting back to the starting fire, he saw Ylianor. "Bring whatever you find over here." Turning his gaze, he ignored her completely. "We'll cook it on the fire."

When the blond angel emerged from the kitchen, he brought a pail, which Duncan placed over the fire, then sat in front of it, leaning against the couch and embroiling the prince in the Hall's juicy gossip, his husky tone overlapping the fire's crackle. "...and Arthur really couldn't stand him," was the conclusion after half an hour's worth of chatter. "He had him removed from the Hall, banning him from setting foot in it again. Trent tried to talk some leniency into Arthur, but didn't get very far." He shrugged. "Hardly surprising, seeing what Arthur thinks of Trent anyway." He sneered.

Duncan grinned. "Or you, for that matter. I know you can't stand the sight of him."

"Can you blame me? Ever since I made the Hall my second home, he's been nagging me about how long I stay, how many lovers I have, how many of this and that. I think he's just an envious and jealous son of a bitch. That's why he can't stand me either, but at least the feeling's mutual."

Duncan took a sip of cider, which the shelters always carried in plentiful supply. "Jealous of what?"

Chris turned to face the prince. "Of you, for instance."

Duncan pushed back a few loose strands of hair. "How can he? He probably just saw me a couple of times."

"Trust me, they were more than enough for him to wish you'd

fuck him, rather than me.”

“As I recall, he’s not that bad looking so he shouldn’t have any problems finding available cocks.”

The blond angel heaved, reaching out for his own glass. “That’s not the point. I think he wants what I have, particularly when it comes to my men. Take Arthur, for instance. Trent always gets a weird look whenever Arthur and I are together, which reek of jealousy from miles away.”

“And Arthur tolerates it?” Prince Caldwell wondered, stirring the logs to increase the fire.

Chris shrugged. “We never talked about it, but I don’t think he cares either way, too busy with his other concerns.” He swallowed a generous swill. “He’s getting old.” A twinge of sadness veiled his voice. “Still himself, of course, but he gave me the impression he was losing it somehow.”

Leaning back on the couch, the prince cleared his throat. “Do you think that’s why he summoned us?”

The blond angel stared at the flames as if he could find an answer in their burning midst. “I told you. I don’t know why.” Furtively, he glanced at a side where Ylianor had remained motionless and silent throughout the entire conversation. “What I do know is we shouldn’t take the witch along. Why didn’t we leave her in the stream?” Annoyed, the blue-gray eyes blazed while he spoke of Ylianor as if she were not there.

Caught off guard, Duncan did not know what to answer. The thought had crossed his mind, too, but an unexplainable instinct had made him reach out for her, in spite of his fury. As the cabin incident had clearly proven, he had not resisted the impulse to call her when he was having sex with Chris, save to pull back in horror the second he had realized what he was doing.

Chris insisted aggressively. “I mean, if safety’s the issue, she could’ve just stayed over there until our return. I doubt your

mother would've tracked her there. So why is she here?" His lips curled in a cruel snarl, he went on mercilessly. "More importantly, do we have to share our food and bed with her? If her main task is to look after our horses, shouldn't she spend the night with them, too?"

"I'll sleep with the horses. No problem!" Ylianor was quick to flare up, even if the angel had not solicited her opinion. "They're certainly more understanding than either of you oafs." And she followed her words by heading for the door.

"Only animals could understand the likes of you." Chris retorted.

"No, wait." The prince got up and moved in her direction.

"Why are you stopping her, lover?"

"She should at least eat something."

Ylianor smiled coldly. "Don't worry. I'm not hungry and if I were later, I still have today's lunch."

"Yes, which darling David prepared with his own loving hands." Chris snapped. "Too bad he doesn't know how to use them for more... pleasurable tasks."

"I guess you've had some first-hand experience yourself!" Ylianor spat maliciously. "Why? Wasn't the master good enough that you had to try the servant, too?"

With an angry flash in the blue-gray eyes, the blond angel got up to face her, his gaze cold with fury. "I don't care for lackeys when I got the top." He scoffed haughtily, his tone rising along with the tension. "And unlike you, dearie, I can tell how a person is in bed just by looking at him, so it's only your fault he doesn't satisfy you like..." His glance swung to Duncan briefly. "Like someone else does."

"You're wrong." Ylianor's eyes blazed. "I'm quite satisfied with him, especially since he makes me forget a sorry ass like you, so full of yourself to think anyone would jump to the chance

of sharing your bed. Well, sorry to disappoint you, but I neither wanted nor cared to be with you in or out of bed.”

A cold smile curved the blond angel’s lips. “As if I’d have ever wanted anyone as inexperienced as you to touch me, let alone have sex with.” He scorned. “So you could’ve stayed in David’s bed and saved us the trouble of having to protect you, though why would anyone bother with your worthless hide is beyond me.”

“Because it could come...handy sometimes.” It was Prince Caldwell’s turn to snarl coldly, annoyed by the images of her dripping, wet body returned to arouse him. “And since we’re stuck together, we might as well use the time to our advantage and...pleasure.”

At these words, Ylianor backed away and left the cabin without adding a word. Stunned, Duncan saw her ass swing seductively to the door, but when he stepped forward to stop her, Chris placed a restraining hand on his arm. “Let her go, and good riddance.” Turning to the entrance, he raised his voice. “She’s just a trouble-maker anyhow, something we don’t need among us.” Then he slammed the door shut.

“But she hasn’t even eaten—”

“Who cares! If she’s hungry, she has today’s lunch.”

Letting his angel convince him was easy, especially when he pressed his warm palm on Duncan’s stirring cock, anxious to relieve the sexual tension that had been steadily building in spite—or because—of their anger. But the images of her tantalizing curves kept torturing him despite young Templeton’s expert hands, fiery mouth and yielding ass until he had to call her. *Princess, please join us.* He breathed, craving her soft breasts, the wet cunt and the intimate contact.

She heard it, he was sure of it, their minds touching briefly before she slammed the connection shut, hurting him more than

he cared to admit and leaving him unsatisfied—perhaps for the first time in his life—in Chris’s arms.

## Chapter Thirteen

Something woke him early the following morning with a sense of urgency that made him scramble out of bed and run outside naked, in time to see Ylianor, all packed and ready to leave. “Stop!” His voice boomed.

Without even turning to acknowledge his presence, Ylianor continued to get Starlet ready. “Goodbye, Prince Caldwell. Have a nice life, you and that rat that keeps you company.”

“I said stop.” He did not shout this time, but an undercurrent of power pervaded his voice. “And you have to obey your master’s orders.” He took a step forward. “Because you are merely a slave.”

Ylianor hesitated, turning to look at him. “I’m not a slave.”

“For all purposes, you gave up your freedom to me, remember?”

“Those were just words...”

But he had reached her and pulled her away from the mare. Just touching her brought a fresh wave of a desire obviously not quenched either by Chris’s loving or the night’s sleep. “No, they weren’t and you know it.” Trying hard to control the impulse to take her there in the open—down on the ground to drown in her sweetness—he suppressed the exciting images. “You belong to me, however much I hate the idea at the moment, and you

recognized this bond by surrendering completely to me.” He raised her chin with a finger, gazing deeply in the green eyes. “Now it’s time to pay your dues, so take Starlet back to her friends, then come inside.”

He returned to the threshold where he watched Ylianor comply with his order.

“Lover, what’s going on?” A still sleepy Chris stepped behind him. Then catching sight of the princess heading toward them, he became fully awake. “Don’t tell me you asked her to come back.”

“I did,” Prince Caldwell confirmed quietly, turning to go inside the shelter.

“But why?” Chris chased him, the blue-gray eyes flashing in disaccord. “We could’ve gotten rid of her once and for all—”

“Actually, you had your chance to get rid of me, but didn’t take it,” Ylianor reminded.

Clearly taken aback, the angel stared wide-eyed. “What?”

Ylianor lowered her head. “And now I also have to thank you.”

Exchanging a questioning glance with Duncan, Chris remained speechless for a second, obviously not expecting such answer. “You’re thanking me? For what?”

“For using your power to protect me against Duncan’s rage.”

At a loss, the blond angel looked at Prince Caldwell for help.

Duncan cleared his throat. “She may be right. I was kind of...mad yesterday.”

“Ha, that doesn’t even begin to describe it, lover.”

“That’s why you used your power to calm him,” the princess explained, “and shield me in the process.”

“That wasn’t power, dearie.” An ugly smile crossed Chris’s lips. “It’s called fucking, an art that still escapes you.”

She threw back her shoulders in defiance, green eyes aglow.



“But I’m obviously a fast learner since your lover keeps pulling me into your sex life, whether I want it or not—”

“He’s just the victim of your enchantment.” Chris spat, his tone angrier. “With you around, there isn’t going to be any privacy from now on.”

“I was invited.” Ylianor looked at Duncan earnestly. “Otherwise, I don’t go barging into people’s intimate moments, as Chris seems so good at doing.”

“I don’t believe he invited you, not the way he feels about you lately.” The blond angel challenged.

She scoffed. “Sorry to disappoint you, darling, but he did it, not just once, twice.”

“I don’t believe you,” Chris repeated, turning to Duncan as well.

Prince Caldwell cleared his throat. “Hem...I’m afraid I did, but when I realized what I was doing, I shut her out.”

“Not the second time, remember? I was so fed up with you, with both of you, I slammed the connection shut right in your face.”

Chris’s hurt look cut deep into the prince’s heart. “Lover, there’s something seriously wrong with you. Perhaps you need to get your priorities straight, then make a public announcement of what they are because I’m really confused now. First, you convince me to share this woman...with a passable result, I hate to admit. Then you’re so angry you almost kill her, and I’m still wondering why I didn’t let you. Now you turn the tables again, so now we should all kiss and be friends?” The blue-gray eyes blazed, as they swung perplexed from Duncan to Ylianor. “What is it you really want?”

Prince Caldwell looked at Chris before moving to Ylianor. “I’d like to waive my hand...” He gazed deep into her incredibly green eyes, his voice growing huskier as he got closer. “And

disintegrate her into a million pieces.” His hand covered her face, pretending to remove it from her neck. “But I also want to fuck her until she cries for mercy.” His hand lightly brushed her breasts. “Ripping off her clothes.” His voice and breath were getting hoarse. “And tearing her apart with one shove.” His gaze caught hers and held it. “I’m still the master, remember?”

At those words, his mouth closed on hers as his tongue forced an entry, savoring a moment he had longed for a whole day and night while quickly stripping her naked and enjoying the feel of shivers creasing her flesh in rapid successions, skin rising to meet his touch, begging for rougher handling. Instead of satisfying the request, he pressed on her shoulder, forcing her on her knees. *Now open wide and suck.*

Obediently, Ylianor’s mouth closed on his aroused bulge, already taut with anticipation, just as Chris reached him from behind. Tilting slightly, he received the blond angel’s hungry, wet kiss, their tongues wrapping deliciously around one another, sparking both their desires to a raging fire. Firmly grabbing Chris’s erection, he slid the skin seductively, loving the feel of the rod getting hotter by the minute, while shoving his cock, trapped in Ylianor’s warm cavity, in a steady rhythm to fit more inside the tight space and overcome her tongue’s resistance. And the game was just starting.

Leaning heavily on Duncan’s back, Chris’s breath tickled his ear. “Lover, my cock’s on fire with the need to have you. I want you so bad, I don’t think I can resist a second longer.”

The prince grinned, trying to close the foreskin on top of the bulging head, an impossible task now that it had grown so hard. “I’m all yours, Angel.” Then grabbing Ylianor, he dropped her on the bed. *You keep sucking.* His commanding tone dictated as he settled over her on all fours.

Her tongue wrapped around his inflamed organ, drawing it in

deeply despite her inexperience as if she wanted to swallow him. Suppressing a groan, Duncan watched her head bobbing upward to reach the long length, attempting to fit it down her throat, all the while playing with his balls, too, just as Chris aimed his stone-like thickness at his ass. One shove and he was inside, the narrow hole relaxing to let his blond angel settle deeper, the flesh sucking and squeezing it in a tight embrace, which threatened never to let go. But young Templeton did not seem to mind his captivity, his shaft pumping fast, met by Duncan's seductive ass sways, thrusting back to match every shove in a continuous tempo. Shaft smothered by Ylianor's wet cavity, ass burning from Chris's tenacious thrusts, Prince Caldwell would have gladly continued until the inevitable explosive conclusion, concentrating only on his and Chris's pleasure without touching Ylianor at all—a part of him still bent on a sort of payback for her presumed faults—but when the erotic dance stepped up, he could not resist opening his mind.

In a flash, he let her have it all and she fed on his pleasure as if Chris was screwing her ass instead of his. However bewildering, the prince could actually feel her satisfaction—at being filled, ravaged, scorched, pumped, fucked by such a masterful cock—which in turn increased his own pleasure before returning to amplify Ylianor's like looking in several mirrors at once, their sensations bouncing on every shiny surface to reflect ad infinitum. *Damn you for making me want you in spite of everything.* He cursed in her head. *Turn around and fast before I change my mind.*

Without hesitations, she complied immediately, fitting her body so that her tempting mound was completely at his cock's mercy. And he had no pity, plunging in forcefully, his desire to make her pay somehow getting the best of him. But he needed not worry because Ylianor was wetter than he thought possible,

her dripping moistness drowning his erection in a sticky sea of honeydew.

Moved by his angel's hard shoves, he pumped faster, too, often caught in the rebound that slammed him deeper in the yielding cunt, opening it wider. Surprisingly, however rough his treatment, Ylianor did not complain, arching her back and swaying in perfect rhythm with both Chris and him, fitting more inside with each double thrust until she accelerated to a blazing climax. Her scream sucked Duncan to the hilt and Chris, too, judging from the violent push in his ass, but it was not until her second peak—quickly matched by their explosive release—that she kidnapped their minds.

Jumbled sensations whirled together, making it hard to discern who was feeling what, until they blurred into a dark knot of pain pressing on his chest, its weight almost suffocating. He tried to lift it, but only Ylianor's sudden burst of tears released the black mass into the air, making it vanish in a fitful cry that wrecked her body.

Falling on top of her, Duncan pulled her against him—face buried in his chest, body trembling from the convulsive sobs. Gently caressing her head, he made soft cooing sounds to convince her to stop until she finally did. “What is it, Princess?” Then feeling guilty, he pressed his lips to her ear. “Did I hurt you?”

Ylianor sniffled. “No you didn't, even if that was your intention.”

*I'm sorry.*

*Don't be sorry. Tell me what I've done to deserve this.*

Duncan remained silent, not ready to share his deep hurt, not now anyway. Instead, he rolled off her and went to revive the embers into a brilliant fire. When he returned, neither Ylianor nor Chris had stirred from their positions, both still looking

inviting, the princess in particular, black hair scattered on the pillow, not quite satisfied, judging from the tenseness, the nipples hardening under his gaze, legs slightly apart.

Reaching the bed, his hand closed on her breast, thumb rhythmically stroking the hard bud, and he watched as pleasure traveled to the rest of the body, her throbbing desire accentuated by the hips swaying in a peculiar movement that belonged to her alone and drove him crazy. Then his mouth replaced the hand play, making her sigh at the wet touch of his tongue and squirm to have more. Perfectly understanding her needs, he trailed a tantalizing path downward, her flat stomach leading him all the way to the hot spot waiting for its intimate kiss. Just one hard suck with the tongue circling around the swell and her body shook convulsively, hips swinging frantically up and down, making it all the more tempting for his already hard cock, twitching in shivery anticipation.

*Take me. I want you to fill me... completely.*

*Then turn around*, he ordered, his shaft hardening at the sight of the magnificent buttocks. *And don't forget we're not alone.* And his gaze ran to Chris, nursing a healthy erection while watching his sexy play.

Obediently, she reached over and grasped his blond angel's thick bulge, her mouth wrapping around it the same instant Duncan began pushing. The narrow hole did not want to give in at first, but knowing how to coax its surrender, his fingers slipped under her belly to stroke the dripping wetness, gliding in their sensual trace of the moist folds, seductively circling the edge of her slit before claiming it for his own. At this latest urging, her ass opened up, sucking his cock inch by inch with an exciting move that raised her hips before plunging them back down to rub on his hand. On the opposite end, he followed her head's bobbing at the same rhythm over young Templeton's

erection, helped also by Chris's firm direction, pushing and holding it down for a tighter fit. Enthralled by the sight, the prince moved faster, her ass finally yielding completely to his thick demands, pumping harder the more he saw of Chris's cock swallowed, wondering at the same time how long he could resist. But it was a useless question. When the blue-gray eyes flashed at him the second before he saw the yellowish fluid running down Ylianor's cheeks, he could not hold back any longer, especially because her convulsive waves of pleasure squeezed him dry.

Unexpectedly, he felt Chris grab their minds, relinquishing for once his tight emotional control, to flood them with pieces of himself, a combination of light and darkness, shiny particles fused with black ones hitting him on all sides. Prince Caldwell had no doubt it revealed his blond angel in its naked essence right down to the core and although it lasted only a few instants, it was the first, and so far the only time, young Templeton had shared his nature, keeping nothing back. Never before had Chris given him access to his most intimate sphere, one Duncan knew he jealously guarded even with him, so the incredible gift brought a great surge of love that leapt out to embrace his blond angel in whatever form he was.

The effort was the final act of his already dwindling energy. Completely drained, Duncan watched Chris and Ylianor collapse fast asleep. In a daze, he managed to cover them against the cold before crawling between them, feeling at home for the first time in his life. And that night, sleep was no problem.

## Chapter Fourteen

Chris's stirrings woke Prince Caldwell, a hard cock pressing on his back always a nice wake up call, but the blond angel was still too asleep to take advantage of the situation. Luckily, Duncan had an alternative and she was huddling by the last embers, obviously trying to warm herself. *What are you doing?*

*I'm cold.*

*That's no way to get warm. Come here.* As she walked to the bed, he recognized one of David's shirts. "To make the treatment work, you have to be naked."

She complied immediately, slipping off the covering cloth with a graceful gesture that raised her breasts, then slid beneath the covers, with her buttocks pressing on his groin. Wanting to feel her as close as possible, Duncan covered her entire length, surprised her curves fitted into his perfectly like he had always dreamed to find in his ideal woman. "There." He slipped his arms around her for extra heat. "Now you'll be feeling warm all over."

"All I'm feeling is shivery," Ylianor replied, shaking in his hold, goose bumps rippling on her skin as the sensation of heat battled with the cold.

Almost cruelly, he added to the sensation by running a hand on the creased skin, its uneven texture rising to his touch and

increasing the velocity at which it was traveling on her flesh.

*Please don't.* She moaned as if trapped between pleasure and annoyance.

*Why not?* He whispered back, thoroughly enjoying her discomfort. *Your body's simply incredible and its reactions—*

"I thought you were only interested in the perfect fit."

Surprised, Duncan stopped. "You can read me that easily?"

"I only have access to what you decide to let me know. Other parts of you are completely off limits so to speak. Mind reading doesn't mean I steal your thoughts or feelings, quite the contrary. There are sharp barriers between us, which neither you nor I can cross without the others express permission, so you choose if and when to let me in, sharing only what you feel like sharing, nothing more."

"That's comforting news." He relaxed a bit. "At least I can keep a secret." *And yes, there are things I'm not in the mood of sharing.* He added mentally without hesitations, intercepting a funny look in the green gaze. *Like how to make your body crazy.* Breathing heavily, he bit her neck to increase the annoying goose bumps that made her squirm uncontrollably.

"Getting started without me, lover?" The still sleepy voice interrupted them.

"Not at all, I was only getting her ready for you."

Immediately alert, Chris turned to press his hard cock on the prince's back. "So let's have some fun."

What glorious time, Duncan later recalled, spent in sweet exploration of their bodies, thrusting in every available hole, giving and receiving delicious pleasure to greedy flesh that seemed insatiable despite their many erotic dances. Nothing banned, Prince Caldwell's skilled direction took charge of their fantasies, even turning them into a training ground with his blond angel teaching the princess the masterful act of cock sucking, his



tongue lavishly lapping Duncan's erection with slow, forceful movements in front of the wide-eyed green gaze, before swallowing it whole down to the throat. And that was just the beginning for the thick shafts made many more imperious demands, though strangely, it never seemed only a question of physical satisfaction, rather a balanced blending of bodies and souls. *But is it? Or am I just too caught up in the novelty of it all to think straight?*

Later he had to admit he had trouble resuming their travel, unable to shake off the memory of the velvety sensuality they had shared in the shelter, together with a strange new ache pervaded his limbs.

"Energy is everything, even if you've only been aware of it recently." Ylianor was quick to point out.

Duncan nodded in understanding, admiring his lover's blond hair sparkling under Stella's blinding rays while lying on his back next to the shores of a lake where they had stopped for lunch.

Her voice continued softly. "Chris, on the other hand—"

"I've always known about it," young Templeton confirmed smugly.

"No kidding!" She snapped. "And if you've used it to your advantage since—"

"Yes, since childhood, but only because I knew I was different from the others."

Ylianor's gaze widened as if she had suddenly understood something that had escaped her until now. "That's why you hated me with a passion! You sensed something similar in me, too!"

Chris exchanged glances with the prince before nodding slowly. "I never expected to find someone equally aware, especially since I'd never met anyone in all of my eight-years who knew what power was or who could qualify as a threat. And the

fact you were right next to what I wanted most, made you all the more dangerous because I believed only one of us could win the race to Duncan's heart."

"Congratulations, then." Ylianor's bitter retort left no doubts to how she felt about it. "You won first prize."

"Hey, you two, aren't you taking all this too much for granted?" Duncan cut in. "I mean, do you get to decide what I want and don't want or do I have a choice in the matter?" He mocked, looking first into the green eyes, then into the blue-gray ones.

"Of course, you do and so far you've chosen me." The blond angel leaned on him to place a passionate kiss on his lips. "But you've proven I'm not as powerful as I thought." His gaze fixed on Ylianor. "I believed I had gotten rid of you and your competition forever." A grim smile curved his lips. "Yet, here you are."

"No thanks to you." She spat ironically. "Your power's so strong and bright, it's only a matter of luck it didn't work that time, not entirely anyway." She shrugged. "But you couldn't stop it, I guess, not even if you wanted to because it shines like Stella itself." Ylianor shook her head sadly. "And that made it all the more necessary for you to keep returning to your primary source in order to replenish what you exhaust so carelessly."

Now extremely interested, Duncan leaned closer. "What do you mean, Princess?"

Her green eyes flashed. "You recharge Chris's power, even if you've never been aware of it, because you alone have that kind of power. Nobody else in this world could ever supply him with the incredible amount of energy he needs to replace what he so freely spreads around."

"Is this a coded way to say he screws around a lot?" Prince Caldwell teased, ruffling the blond hair.

Ylianor grinned. “Not so coded, but it only confirms how truly special your relationship is, beyond sex, love or friendship.”

Duncan shifted, uncomfortable with the idea of being just an energy refill. “Chris may need me, but what do I get out of it? In terms of energy, I mean.”

Ylianor creased her forehead. “You, my prince, may be even more powerful than both of us combined. I think—but it’s just an assumption—that you and Chris are mirror images. If one burns too fast because he can’t stop spreading precious energy around, the other’s forced to save it because he seems unable to release it except to special people.”

“His aristocratic taste,” Chris mused ironically.

“Exactly.” After a deep breath, she continued. “My prince, the problem with you is you don’t let just anyone in, even if you couldn’t possibly hold all that energy inside without ever releasing it. So you need a receiver to tap into it and as far as I can see, you’ve allowed only Chris this privilege.”

“And you, Princess.”

Ylianor blushed violently.

“Do I recharge you, too?”

She shook her head. “I’m not sure. Whatever gift I have, it’s different from either of yours because I need a specific channel.”

“But your channel doesn’t necessarily include sex, am I right?” Chris enquired.

“How do you know, Angel?”

“What you told me about your father sharing thoughts with her means there was a channel there, too, without any sex involved,” Chris commented. “And if that weren’t enough, just look at her reaction with David.”

Ylianor nodded. “You’re right. With Prince Charles, the connection came naturally. It was there from the start. Nothing prompted it, at least nothing I can remember. With David,

instead, all my attempts at silent communication utterly failed.”

Chris went on relentlessly. “Still, you’re thinking of pledging to him.”

She bowed her head, blushing violently for the second time.

*Pledge to David?* “What are you talking about, Angel?”

“Tell him, Ylianor.” Chris coaxed with a knowing smile.

“I’d rather not...” She sighed deeply before turning to look at Prince Caldwell squarely in the eyes. “But if you must know, it’s about my future. If your mother really wants to hurt me, I couldn’t keep the job, which means I’d either have to leave the area, like was my intention before I met you, or pledge. I may have thought of David as a candidate, but he’s hard to understand, not fully...open about his life, as if he has secrets to hide. Not to mention the fact he lives in Black Rose, which would still leave me at your mother’s mercy. And he doesn’t love me, even if I guess we’re even on that count since I certainly don’t love him either.”

Young Templeton grinned. “At least you both love the same person.”

Prince Caldwell leaned against a tree. “What do you mean?”

“That they both love you.” The blue-gray eyes flashed in amusement.

“How...” Ylianor started, but closed her mouth, averting her eyes embarrassed.

“It’s plain to see, dearie, simply from the way you look at him, not to mention the way you hang on his every word.”

That Chris had an instinct to pick up on people’s buried emotions was nothing new to Duncan, so he could pretend he had not heard about Ylianor, but the other twist caught him off guard. “I never noticed that David—

“Come on, lover. That he loves you is as obvious as with your girlfriend here.” Turning to Ylianor, Chris’s lips curved in an

ironic snarl. "But he'd settle for you, I'm sure." He gave her a hard stare. "You look enough like him to make a passable replacement."

*Why is he so damn perceptive?* The thought flashed in the prince's mind and he looked at Ylianor sympathetically.

"Not just looks, it may also be a question of social level," She added wearily.

"And you'd want to settle for that?" Despite his wildly beating heart, Duncan tried to sound as if it would be indifferent to him.

"I could offer you a third option and check if they need someone at Fair Haven." Chris sat up straight. "What do you say?"

Ylianor shifted position uncomfortably. "Are you sure you'd want me that close to you?"

*As a matter of fact, I have a fourth option, but I'll be damned if I share it with you.* Naturally, Duncan kept the thought to himself.

The blond angel shrugged. "I'm hardly ever there anyway and it would be far enough from Duncan for my tastes." The tone was purposefully light, yet the prince had the feeling he meant it seriously.

Probably having the same impression, Ylianor reached out to touch Duncan, her head pressing on his chest. "Then it's best I consume my prince while I have the chance."

"Hey, dearie, he was my lover first." Chris retorted teasingly. "Go find your own."

"Actually, I found two." The green eyes caressed each in turn. "And never could I've been luckier than having two more handsome men, especially when they make love." Her face reddened and Duncan saw the same images in his mind, too. "You're beautiful together."

"You like watching us?" Looking genuinely surprised, Chris

sounded incredulous.

The princess nodded. "Sex is beautiful, no matter who does it, especially when it's playful, fun, pleasurable and bonding like ours is."

"Yeah, completely unlike having sex with a woman," Chris mused cruelly.

"Well, women have the bad tendency of mistaking sex for love," Prince Caldwell commented ruefully, remembering previous disastrous experiences.

"All right, so we're not perfect." Ylianor rushed to defend her gender. "But only because we have to put up with the likes of you beasts."

Chris ducked to grab her, probably to teach her a lesson in good manners, but she was quicker and moved closer to the lake's banks, laughing excitedly. "Anyone care for a swim?" And her gaze shifted to the blue water.

Without waiting for a reply, she stripped naked and with a cry of joy, dived inside while Duncan and Chris watched her backside slide into the lake. Mesmerized by the round, firm buttocks, the prince could not tear his gaze away until they disappeared underwater. "She does have a magnificent ass."

"It's nothing compared to yours," was Chris's wry comment.

The prince turned to look at him. "Don't give me that. I know you too well to say you've never acted like this with a woman before."

"Only because I've never spent so much time with one."

Duncan shook his head. "No, you don't fool me one bit. I can tell she does something to you, too, in spite of your sneering remarks and haughty attitude."

"I think what's true of David applies to me, too."

"Wrong again. What you did last night, the...how can I define it? It felt like you opened yourself completely for the first time in

your life, something you've never done with me before. Despite all the spreading around she talked about, I know you keep the core well hidden from everyone, sometimes even from me. But last night, she managed to bring it forth and it was truly incredible to feel it."

"Don't remind me." Chris shrugged as if wanting to belittle the experience. "That was just her way of playing tricks on us."

"Somehow, I don't think so." He peered closely into the blue-gray eyes. "Are you sure she isn't opening a connection with you, too?"

"A woman? Never!"

"You're being cynical as usual. Maybe some cold water will do you good." Then he moved to get up.

But the blond angel did not follow, hesitating to ask the question hovering in the blue-gray gaze. "You know, assuming what she said was true, what do you get from her? I mean, apparently we need each other for the reasons she explained. And she needs you because she can't open a channel with just anyone. But why do you need her? I never heard you complain about missing someone who talked in your head."

"Only because I never said so, doesn't mean I didn't miss something and I didn't tell you because I thought I was looking for a woman, not...this power stuff. And after all her explanations, I guess I need her as a receiver—"

"I don't understand. I was enough for the better part of twenty years!" Chris challenged hotly. "Why should you need her now?"

"You forget, she was at my side long before you came."

"Yeah, but you survived without her for a long time after, if I recall correctly."

Duncan shook his head. "Perhaps it's just a question of growing up and needing more." He removed a long strand from

his face. "Whatever it may be, something tells me we'll find out soon enough." He tousled the thick strands of blond hair before getting up. "Race you to the lake. Last one in pays penalty."

And he made them both pay before resuming on a journey they had sorely neglected in the pursuit of unexpected self-discoveries, which, however needed, would inevitably complicate matters to a point he already dreaded to know. *But do I have a choice?* And knowing he did not, he waited for his lovers to mount their horses, then rode off swiftly, bent on getting to Rockyhorn before anything else spoiled the tentative balance they had reached so painfully.



## Chapter Fifteen

As the days passed, the countryside changed the further north they went. Keeping their brisk pace, they changed from the Silcamore District, a farmland full of vegetation and settlements, to Rockyhorn, a less inhabited mountainous region as the name suggested. Colors shifted, high trees with golden leaves replacing flat green fields with the weather becoming progressively colder as they approached the high peaks that surrounded the Hall.

And knowing it was a difficult region, Arthur had made sure the Shelter System was at its best, so no traveler would suffer from it, Duncan thought, raising his gaze to the mountains, looming in the distance. Luckily spirits had remained high, even though something in Chris's attitude worried him. Nothing he could put his finger on, yet he felt vaguely unease whenever he perceived the blond angel's enthusiasm as not quite genuine.

On the surface, he seemed to have accepted Ylianor and their arrangement, but deep down, something was eating him, though the prince had no idea what it was. Eventually, he feared Chris's real nature would get the best of him, then...Duncan did not know exactly what to expect, having grown to learn and love his angel's unpredictability.

Sighing deeply, he tightened his knees around Fuzeon.

Whatever it would be, he was sure it would be anything but pleasant, however much he might anticipate it.

“What do you say, lover? Time to stop for the day?”

Prince Caldwell glanced at the blond angel, his heart falling to his stomach at the sight of his beauty, made even more startling by the fading light, and he wondered why Chris still made him feel that way, in spite of their long-standing affair. Aching for his touch, he agreed readily. “Of course. There should be a shelter right around the bend.”

And together they hurried to reach it.

\* \* \* \*

That night, Ylianor huddled by the fire, right after dinner. “It’s very cold around here. I hope it doesn’t get any worse or I won’t have anything appropriate to wear.”

The prince hugged her close. “You practically don’t have any at all, right? Those you’re wearing are David’s.”

She shivered slightly in his embrace. “It’s been a long time since anyone provided for my wardrobe. I’ve mostly lived on cast offs from my father and the little that remained of my mother’s dresses.”

“Is that why you always wear pants?” Chris inquired.

“If my mother were alive, I’d probably wear more skirts. As it is...” Her voice trailed off ruefully.

“That’s all right, Princess. I rather prefer you without clothes altogether.” He grinned, gently biting her neck. “When we get back to Black Rose, we’ll think of your wardrobe.”

Ylianor nodded.

“Lover, don’t fall for that.” The blond angel’s cold voice made Duncan sit straighter.

“Fall for what?”

Looking annoyed, Chris's blue-gray eyes flashed in contempt. "In case you haven't noticed, women love to play victims of circumstances."

"That's not fair, Angel. I only excuse this kind of talk because you don't know women at all."

"Nor do I care to know them, for that matter." A look of intense dislike crossed his eyes at the sight of Ylianor.

The prince felt the shivers increase as Ylianor opened her mouth to reply. "Don't worry. The feeling is mutual. And with your prejudices, you'd never learn anything useful about us anyway."

A malicious grin broke on his lips. "Well, perhaps this...gift of mine makes me despise women." The words sounded cruel. "Can the expert confirm it?"

The room turned icy all of a sudden and deathly quiet. A shiver ran down Ylianor's back, but not because of the cold. Confused, she looked at Chris, noticing his light was becoming progressively darker. *Why? What have I done?*

Perplexed at his sudden and unprovoked change, she felt a vague sense of fear just as Duncan left her side to sit next to the demon. "Come on, Angel. Do you honestly think a power influences your tastes to the extent of making you resent an entire gender?"

"Why not? After all, we don't know anything about it except what the expert here has told us and mine is a legitimate doubt that—"

"It might." Ylianor shifted nervously.

"Then perhaps it's time I found out why the two are related, my gift and my hate for your gender." His eyes blazed with a new flame.

Point of fact, they had never discussed what exactly Chris's power was, but Ylianor had no doubt it could be nothing good,

particularly judging from the black cloud hanging on him. She glanced over at Duncan who, though perplexed, was not taking sides. “Now?” Even if unsure of what he was planning, she felt desperate to buy more time. “In front of Duncan?”

Chris shrugged, his gaze never wavering from Ylianor. “My lover needs to know, too, and this is as good a time as any.”

“Stop it!” Duncan ordered tightly as if fearing something was very wrong.

But young Templeton did not take heed. With one elegant jump, he grabbed Ylianor by the shoulders, holding her captive. “No, I won’t.” The blue-gray gaze fixed on the prince, his hand ran down her long hair and Ylianor felt like the defenseless prey caught by the merciless predator that would first play with her, then rip her to bits. “You want her to share our life,” Chris continued evenly without looking at her, his touch almost seductive if fear had not paralyzed her senses. “Well, to my point of view, she’s done enough spying on us as it is.” His touch deepened, trembling from repressed rage. “By the gods, she’s also managed to make me reveal what I always keep concealed! And it would’ve been perfectly all right if I’d done it with you alone, lover, but having her witness it, too...” The hand closed around her neck, tightening his hold, and Ylianor wondered if he would snap it with one single blow. But he did not. “I’ve been quite patient with you.” Chris shifted his gaze to her. “You can’t deny it. Now it’s time I show you what you and your snooping attitude are in for and who knows? You might even learn more about your blasted power theories.”

Though tense, Ylianor threw back her shoulders, wanting to show she was not afraid of him. “I think I know enough already, thank you.”

But it was no use fooling him. He had smelled her fear no doubt and she could tell he was getting so much pleasure out of

it, he would make sure his fun lasted a long time.

Grinning coldly, Chris took out a pocketknife, then went to the fireplace to heat up the blade over the flames.

Obviously seeing what Chris was holding, Duncan moved. "Angel, what are you doing?"

The demon shrugged nonchalantly. "Nothing, just a simple lesson." He checked the knife, then placed it back on the fire. "Don't worry."

At the last words, Ylianor felt some strange energy flow from the demon to the prince, something powerful that fell on Duncan as if it were a fine web to hold him captive. She wanted to help him get out of it, but young Templeton was already on top of her, pinning her to the ground and waving the scalding blade in front of her face. "You see, dearie, my gift is to hurt people." His voice was coldly detached as if it were another person speaking. "I get this urge to cause someone intense pain and I can't even begin to tell you how much pleasure I get from cutting a person bit by tiny bit." Lowering the blade, he trailed it on her flesh. "Piece by little piece." Hypnotically, his voice abated any attempt at resistance. "Just like this." Without further ado, he knifed her thigh.

Searing hot pain burned her, then blood spilled on her pants. As if in a drugged trance, Ylianor watched while Chris took them off, together with her shirt, to stare in rapture at the cut. Then he made another incision next to it, tracing with his finger the mingling blood from the two wounds.

"Angel..."

She heard Duncan's voice as if it came from another world.

"I think we understand now, so you can stop—"

"No, you don't." Chris cut him off with one more vicious slash, this time on Ylianor's arm. "Believe me. I've tried telling you countless times before." His attention shifted all to the prince, his gaze fixed on the black eyes, pleading for something

Ylianor knew Duncan must have denied in the past, while the blade kept working, slicing through her soft flesh. “You never wanted to know what I need to do in order to survive. This is what I do, what I’ve been doing ever since we started our phase, and it’s nothing over which I seem to have any choice or control. When I get this craving—and I get it a lot—I can’t rest until I carve someone to pieces.”

“But then you heal them back.” Ylianor supplied, suddenly aware of what the demon’s power was all about.

“I do more than that, dearie.” Contemptuously, he sliced another straight, bloody red line down her arm. “I erase their memory, too, once I’ve healed them. The mechanism is very simple.” Again, he focused on Prince Caldwell alone, interested only to have his complete attention, as the blade seemed to move by itself on Ylianor’s battered flesh. “After I’ve selected a victim, I may or may not fuck it—that all depends on how needy I am—but for sure I cut its delicious body to a pulp and only when my bloodlust has been satisfied, do I heal them and erase the memory of what happened.” A bitter grin curved his lips. “And the fool loves it! First, he’s just a whimpering coward, begging for mercy and crying over the slightest pain.” Probably want to prove his point on Ylianor, too, he dug deeper, but she did not give him the satisfaction despite the sharp laceration penetrating her mind. “Then, after I erase his memory, he thinks it’s the best sex of his pitiful life.”

“But with Duncan, it’s different.” Ylianor wanted him to talk, hoping it would slow down his cutting.

“That’s what I thought until a smart ass tells me I just recharge my energy as if our love meant nothing.” Chris was getting angry now as he slit another piece of flesh. “You see, lover, we don’t really love each other, just use our bodies for refills. Do you like this explanation to all we shared through the

years?" The biting knife tip stung Ylianor again. "Personally, it makes me furious."

"She might be wrong." Duncan argued reasonably. "No one has enough knowledge in this matter, so why should we believe her?"

*Please, my prince, make him stop. I don't think I can stand it much longer.* But Duncan apparently was still under Chris's enchantment for no answer came back to her.

"No, the question is another. What gives her the fucking right to barge into our lives and take them apart? Why did your father privilege her over his rightful heir?" Chris sliced another piece of skin and his blue-gray eyes pierced the black gaze. Unexpectedly, Ylianor felt Prince Caldwell's pain drowning him and silencing his sense of justice, even if he knew his lover was playing a trick to get his cooperation.

As if he knew exactly what had just happened, Chris smiled satisfied, cutting harder than before. "You see, dearie, until you came along, Duncan and I were very happy. All he had to worry about was finding a suitable mate, so he could have wonderful children while still fucking with me. The plan was perfect, wouldn't you agree, bitch?" Another slide and the blade bit her, but by now everything hurt so much, she found it hard to concentrate on the single slice. "As for me, I'd have kept...how did you put it?" He creased his forehead in mock concentration. "Spreading my energy around, returning to my lover when supplies ran low." He shook his head in forced amusement. "Silly me, I thought I wanted him because I loved him." Chris paused, looking at the blood covering Ylianor's legs and arms in an intricate network. "Then again, I guess the end result would've been the same." Then he resumed the knife work.

The cuts were small and evenly spaced, almost in a geometric pattern as young Templeton carved methodically to create his

design. And Duncan still did not give signs of breaking free from the demon's hold, which looked awfully like a bridge of hate and fascination Chris had hooked on Prince Caldwell to keep him paralyzed. *He's just feeding on your guilt now. Please, I beg you. Wake up!* She yelled, hoping to break through the honey thickness enveloping Duncan.

"This is what I offer to those foolish enough to want me in their bed." Chris was continuing his slow, hypnotic talk. "I simply love to watch them bleed, squirm or beg for their worthless hides." He stopped, before attacking the stomach. "It's quite fun, I assure you, especially seeing their terror." Again, he stopped to check in Ylianor's eyes. "Almost like yours, honey, though do try to look a little more frightened." He resumed his slow, meticulous incisions.

"Otherwise, it'll spoil your fun?" She managed to sneer contemptuously.

"The lady still has spunk." In spite of himself, the demon sounded impressed. "The only one I've never felt like slicing to pieces is my only love, no pardon me, my refill, Duncan. Well, to be honest, I may have thought about it, but love held me back. Now here's the bloody irony of it all." Ylianor felt the blade cut deeper, the vicious blow probably a result of Chris's increasingly angry state. "It starts with a bitch telling me love has nothing to do with my feelings. Imagine, I've been kidding myself all these years. So if my most heartfelt emotion is a lie, what about the rest of it? What can I trust?" Chris aimed at the arm again. "Luckily, as a consolation prize, I get the perfect victim, actually a two in one deal, someone who looks like my lover...no wait, I believe energy charger is more appropriate, but is also a woman. And how could I resist this delicious combination, especially if she insists in sticking her nose where it doesn't belong?"

Ylianor whimpered. Chris was not cutting only flesh, but her



soul, too, his darkness shutting off all light, its suffocating weight pressing on her chest to deplete her energy along with vital air. With the last of her strength, Ylianor tried to use Duncan to battle the darkness, but the prince seemed unreachable, the black cloud hovering over him, too. “Chris, I never meant to say your love is not real.” Her breath now came in rapid gulps. “I only mentioned the energy connection because I thought it made your love more special, not demean it, but I could be wrong.”

“What if you aren’t? Do you know what it comes down to? That I’ve lived a lie for nineteen fucking years.”

“What you feel isn’t a lie.” Ylianor cried out.

“Don’t tell me what I feel, bitch.” Chris sneered back. “I’ve always distrusted women and for good reasons it seems.” He took a deep breath, calming down a bit. “Perhaps I’m taking it out on the wrong person. It’s Duncan who wants you in his bed and forces me to share my precious energy with the likes of you. But guess what?” As he carved further, Ylianor lost all sense of her body to the point she could not tell what piece of flesh he was torturing. “They tell me I need his energy, so I better not harm him, which leaves you, dearie, to pay for all the consequences of his actions.”

“I don’t want to take him away from you.” Ylianor pleaded as Chris made another incision. “And I’m not going to tell anyone what I’ve learned about you.”

“Women notoriously can’t keep their mouths shut. No secret is safe with them.”

“Please, Chris, I beg you. Let me be.”

“All right. That’s enough.” Duncan’s firm tone told Ylianor the prince had regained control, overcoming the black cloud and honeyed web in which Chris had kept him trapped, his power obviously superior to the demon’s. “It’s time to heal her,” Duncan ordered quietly, expecting young Templeton’s full

cooperation.

The enchantment gone, Ylianor knew the demon had no choice other than obeying. “All right, lover, but I comply only for your sake. If it were up to me, I’d leave her to bleed to death.” Folding his pocketknife, after having cleaned the blade, he pocketed it away. Then he closed his eyes.

At first, Ylianor did not feel anything until a wave of freshness swept through her body, its cold breeze a balm to the burning tissues that inflamed her very soul. Like a cool shower after a heated day, it calmed the pain and alleviated the burning sensation. More soothing than ocean breeze, it blew over each wound, closing the flesh magically and returning it to its original state. Then an intense light traveled her entire length, banishing all darkness and blinding her in the process. Unable to resist, she had to shut her eyes while the power continued to spread its healing energy until, within seconds, it erased all traces of blood and cuts, just as if nothing had ever affected the skin, though it seemed centuries had passed since she was a piece of minced meat.

When she opened her eyes, Ylianor was back in the shelter, free of any marks, at least the visible ones. But of course, this was the demon’s last cruel trick. Instead of erasing her memory, like he assured he did, he had left it intact so she could relive the brutal experience a thousand times over.

Without another word, young Templeton got up and crawled into one of the beds, falling fast asleep. Too dazed to move, Ylianor turned to Duncan, wanting support, but he was gone, too, inside another bed. Alone, she huddled in front of the fire, accommodating herself as close as possible to the heat, invoking sleep as her only means of escape. And for once, the gods listened, allowing for darkness to fall mercifully on her wrecked senses.

## Chapter Sixteen

At the sight of the Hall's fabled red roofs, nestled between white snowy peaks and brown rocky slopes, the blend of colors, together with the optical play of different heights, was enough to take her breath away, making her forget, at least for a moment, the last days of travel. Just why she had stayed still escaped her, the temptation to leave after what Chris had done never quite pressing her into action in spite of her need to be free of the two men who had mistreated her so horribly. Yet, something prevented her so like a pebble drifting with the tide, she had meekly followed them, pretending indifference to either her fate or theirs. But it was just a show to avoid thinking about it, she knew it all too well as she dismissed the thought one more time, focusing instead on the imposing structure revealed at every step.

Shaped like a cross, its main body was a long and elegant building in sandstone that connected seven square towers, two at the end of each arm, and a round center one, the tallest and most ruined. The towers were in a darker stone, almost black, six stories high topped by bell shaped red roofs, the shade matching the one on the main building. Only the round tower's roof was in bad shape, half crumbled in many parts, so it did not particularly shine, though it took nothing away from the

impressive sight, Ylianor thought, and not just for its outward appearance. A great energy came from the Hall's stones, a form that was new to her, but ancient to the world.

Ylianor shook her head sadly, knowing no amount of energy, however powerful, could improve the awful mood Chris's rash show had forced on them. The days had dragged long and uneventful, intense silences and grim faced scowls, while the overcast sky with occasional drizzle worsened the already shaky atmosphere. And since no one either offered or required an explanation to the dreadful incident, Ylianor closed contacts with the two men, not speaking even when Duncan lent her his woolen sweaters, staying out of their way, particularly at night.

But she could not help noticing how bad the rift was on Duncan and Chris, not used to any serious argument coming between them since their reunion. Now forced to share daily life, yet avoiding intimate contact was pure torture, she could tell from their frantic light peaks. Often, one would turn to the other as was their habit, the need to rekindle their connection overriding any other consideration, immediately looking away embarrassed as if suddenly remembering what kept them at a distance. On reaching a shelter, despite all obvious attempts to steer clear from one another, they would bump into each other, their bodies eager to touch, but their minds rationally driving them apart. And in a way, she knew it was all her fault, the prince probably regretting his decision to bring a stranger into their special relationship while wondering if he could leave her at Rockhorn, under Lord Fairchild's personal care.

Prince Caldwell pointed at Rhapsen Hall's red roofs over a hill. "We're almost there."

"It seems empty." Having sped ahead, Chris gestured at Duncan to reach him. "Where's everybody?" Looking surprised, he made it sound like the Hall was usually full of people, coming

and going at all times.

An eerie silence hung on the place as if even its habitual inhabitants had abandoned it. Equally perplexed, Duncan shook his head, reaching Chris at the main entrance, where a white beard and candid haired old man stood proud and tall.

“Arthur, it’s a pleasure to know at least you remained.” Chris ran to him, obviously glad to see a familiar face. “It’s been a harrowing journey and Duncan messed it all up by bringing that woman along. We’re sorry, but—”

“Sorry, dear boy?” Arthur embraced the demon fondly. “I summoned her, too, because she’s essential for what I need from you. That’s why I told you to bring her.”

“You did?” Confused, Chris exchanged glances with the prince, coming up behind him. “Did Arthur tell you to bring her?”

“I didn’t receive any instructions.” Duncan looked as baffled as Chris.

“It wasn’t an instruction, boys, rather a thought I sent you,” Arthur explained ambiguously, as if testing their knowledge. But seeing the same bewildered expression on their faces, he waved a hand aimlessly in the midair. “Never mind.” He shook his head in resignation, then turned to reach Ylianor. “Welcome to the Hall, my dear. It’s wonderful to have you here, finally, after I’ve wanted to meet you for so long.” He looked at her intently. “I must admit, I was skeptical when Charles told me about you. I refused to believe him and we even had an argument over it.” Lord Fairchild chuckled probably at the memory. “However, the things he later told me, made me doubt our natural order. Now seeing you...” His eyes searched her face for any recognizable traits. “Well, Charles may have been right in considering you his daughter. There’s a familiar air about you that reminds me of him and...” He turned to look at Prince Caldwell. “Duncan,

don't you think so, too?"

Both Chris and Duncan looked at a loss, obviously taken aback by the leader's behavior and his warm...no enthusiastic reception and the attention Ylianor attracted. "She resembles him...slightly." Recovering his wits, Chris sounded annoyed at all the fuss. "Dear Arthur, you're looking at her as if you've never seen a woman before. I mean, what's so special about her, anyway?" He scorned. "How about a proper welcome to your friends, instead of concentrating on the stranger?" Sulking like a child, he shifted nervously. "And where's everyone? Why's the Hall so empty?"

"All in due time, my dear boy. You're my only guests today, so all my time is for you alone. Get inside." Arthur gestured at Duncan and Chris to enter. "And get settled." Then he folded Ylianor's hand around his elbow and walked slowly to the entrance, after gesturing a servant to take care of the horses. "Don't mind Chris's rash words, child. He needs you much more than he realizes, only he's too foolish to know it yet. And thank you for having awakened Duncan's power. I feel it coursing in him like a wild river in dire need of direction and training, but I'm sure that through your channel, he'll soon learn to control it."

Ylianor shook her head as her face grew hot. "I...I didn't...I mean I didn't know it was for that purpose, milord, and I fear we've used a...improper method."

"There are no suitable ways of doing it, but as long as it doesn't harm either of you, there's no rule against it being...pleasurable."

"That it was, milord. I assure you. But why did he have to wait for me? He has Chris who—"

"Just because one has power doesn't mean he can awaken what's asleep in another."

"But he's so powerful," Ylianor added bitterly, remembering just how much.

Lord Fairchild stopped to peer into her eyes, obviously reading more than she expected. "And you've tasted his darkness, too." Then he pulled her into a tight embrace.

"Milord, I tasted it long before this awful trip." Trying hard to control her shaking voice, she bit her lip. "We met as children and I saw his transformation from a black demon to a shiny angel the moment he caught sight of Duncan." Pulling away from his embrace, she shrugged. "But they don't seem to understand—"

"My dear girl, boys are such thickheads. They have trouble understanding even the obvious. You have no idea how difficult it was to get them back together."

"They can't live separate."

"Of course not. Their story is almost as old as time itself. They've traveled through many lifetimes together, changing genders and relations, yet being always as one. Their attraction is so strong it inevitably pulls them close, no matter who or where they are. Did they understand any of this?" He shook his head in disbelief. "Absolutely not!"

"Their love is frightening and the connection is even more powerful than either has realized so far."

"Their love is one of a kind and you're right about the connection, too. That's why I did everything I could to re-establish it when that hot head of a prince decided he could do without Chris." He shrugged. "As if anyone could do without that incredibly bright energy." From the lowered tone, she thought he probably meant it solely for his sake. Then he shook his head again, as if wanting to clear it from whatever thoughts filled it, and returned to her. "You're in a privileged position, my dear. They need you to explore their full potentials and to guide them

through this new path.”

She cleared her throat. “I don’t feel particularly honored or wanted at the moment.” She turned her gaze away, uncomfortable under Arthur’s scrutiny, although it did not stop the memory of the past few days from flooding her mind.

Lord Fairchild stopped again. “Child, I know what I’m saying is not an easy task, especially considering the energy you’ll have to curb—”

“His darkness overwhelms me, milord.” Ylianor spat bitterly.

“But you’ll find a way to tame it, I’m sure, because they’re your future much like you are theirs. You see, what I failed to mention before is you’re a part of their connection, the strongest link, having followed them for just as many lifetimes. Maybe this is your chance to prove to them your worth, not just in the here and now, but for all the past and possible future you might share.”

*What if I simply wanted to be free of them now and forever?* “I don’t know if I can survive another lifetime with them. Right now there’s no place for me between them and I don’t know there ever will be, considering how things are changing.”

Arthur’s wise eyes flashed. “So you feel it, too?”

Ylianor nodded. *How can I not?*

The leader sighed. “Now you know why you can’t leave them.”

“What if I don’t care?” She challenged angrily. “I mean, the way you put it, I’m more their prisoner than a...” *What? Friend? Lover? Slave?*

Lord Fairchild’s expression was sympathetic as if he were reading her mind. “You’re all that and much more, though they may not realize it yet. Would you really leave those boys to face the danger alone? This is your world, too, Ylianor, and you have a responsibility to it, above and beyond your personal problems,



especially now that I feel I'm growing too old for all this."

It was Ylianor's turn to stop and stare at him concerned. Arthur was not an old man, but he carried his years badly, probably due to the extra weight a leader had to sustain. "You do look very tired."

He shrugged, making it look like he did not care. "Only a bout of incurable old age, I'm afraid."

She peered at his wavering lights. "Old is not a matter of age. You're weary inside."

"I am, my child, but now that you're here, I feel better already."

"I'm glad, Lord Fairchild, but I wouldn't want to disappoint you. In spite of what you said, I don't think I'll be staying because—"

"Hey, you two, will you hurry up?" Chris's voice cut her off, shouting from the entrance.

"Yes, we're coming." Arthur picked up the pace. "Come on. The boys are getting impatient." Reaching the front door, the leader stopped on the threshold. "What accommodations would you prefer? A single bedroom or perhaps two or even three separate ones?"

Chris and Duncan exchanged glances, looking surprised at the bluntness of the question. As the first to recover, the demon cleared his throat. "My usual room won't do this time, given the...circumstances." He sighed heavily. "We'll take two adjoining bedrooms, one for Duncan and Ylianor, the other for me."

"Fine, then you'll be in the western tower." Arthur led them to the stairwell. "Go wash up, rest, recover from your journey, but mostly resolve your issues, no matter how impossible they seem to be. You have an important task ahead of you, which will require you to work together, so that's exactly what I expect from

you. Are we clear on this?" He eyed them slowly and in turn. "I'll give you however much time you need, but when I see you again, I want to feel your connection, not your unbalance." His gaze fixed on Chris, then Ylianor. "And I'm sorry if you don't like it, but there'll be no talks of leaving for you must stay together, however incomprehensible it might sound right now. I need the three of you to be as one, so get over your petty quarrels, which are inconsequential compared to your responsibilities."

He turned to leave, then stopped as if having a second thought. "If you need anything, Robert..." He glanced at the servant at his side. "Is at your disposal." Then he left.

"What did you tell him, bitch?" Chris snarled, grabbing her arm as if to drag her upstairs.

Duncan was quick to close his hand on Chris's, pressuring gently, but firmly, until he released his hold. "I believe Arthur told us to resolve our issues, not aggravate them."

"And I hardly said a word at all." Ylianor followed the prince upstairs. "He did most of the talking."

In silence, they climbed the stairs, following Robert into two adjoining bedrooms. "If you need me, just call." After pointing at a bell hanging on the wall, he was gone.

Chris immediately stepped into his room, closing the door and leaving Duncan alone with Ylianor. She ignored him and locked herself in the bathroom, pulling out clothes from her knapsack, undressing slowly in order to wear a fresh change. Sure, it was all very well for the leader to preach about duties and responsibilities when he did not have to be the third party to a love that transcended time and space. That she could never compete with Chris for a place in the prince's heart had been obvious from the start, but the situation had degenerated everyday more until she doubted she could hold on to it for much longer. Seeing Duncan daily, touching him, feeling his

body and mind so close, yet so far, was torture and bliss at the same time, a wicked game that had increased her love a thousand folds since leaving Black Rose. But that was just one half of the problem, her heart tightening painfully as flashes of Chris ran behind her eyes.

Of course, he had had no right to hurt her like that, leaving her memory intact, too, as an extra cruelty, yet she understood his need to reveal finally the extent of his power to his lover. And even if he could have chosen a less painful way—*But had it really been so?* To be honest, if she had not been so terrorized, the feel of his knife had seemed like a loving caress at times, almost a thrilling game, which to her shame, she would have been willing to repeat without the threatening circumstances—or one that did not involve her, she could not bring herself to hate him. Quite the contrary, like Arthur had observed, his brilliant light attracted her in spite of everything, its excitingly dangerous call making her feel alive and vibrantly full of energy.

Like Duncan, Chris had the power to reach into a place she had carefully shielded from the world to avoid more pain and heartache. Trapped in their sexual embrace, body inflamed by desire, Ylianor felt at home like she had always belonged with them, but even if Arthur had confirmed it, she knew it was a mere illusion, a trick of her deluded mind. She saw all too well, could not help seeing as a matter of fact, the difference between their love and their feelings for her, and the abyss sank any hope she might have cherished. *So how long can I endure it? How long before I'll want more, need more, ask for more and from both of them, not just one? No, better to leave now while I can still hope to put my heart together in one piece and Arthur be damned!*

\* \* \* \*

“Princess, are you all right?” Duncan’s voice called, knocking at the door.

“Do you care?” Her snappy remark echoed from behind the door.

“Come out here. I need to talk to you.”

“Leave me alone. I wish I had never met you.” When she opened the door, Duncan noticed the change of clothes. “I’m leaving,” she announced, carrying her knapsack.

“Leaving where?” Prince Caldwell raised a brow. “Arthur forbade any of us from—”

“Arthur doesn’t know, can’t even begin to imagine what it’s like to be with two despicable beings like you and Chris.”

“But what will you do?”

“Exactly what you wanted me to do.”

“Me?” Then he wondered if he had sent her his stray thoughts about leaving her at the Hall in the hope he could forget all about her.

“Yes, that same one. Well, we’re in a new District, far away from Silcamore and your mother, so I think I can survive on my own, even without the great leader’s help.”

“Stop!” He grabbed her arm. “It’s true. I toyed with the idea of leaving you here, but I wasn’t sure it was a good idea then and I’m damn sure it isn’t now.”

“Haven’t you been listening?” Ylianor spat angrily. “I couldn’t care less if you changed your mind! I’m leaving so let me go.”

She twisted her arm to free it, but he tightened his hold. “No, wait! I need to explain because I was wrong.”

*Your problem, not mine. Now let me go! I don’t want to see you ever again.* She screamed in his head, her voice so loud it was deafening.

“And I won’t allow you until you’ve heard me out. Then, and only then, you’ll be free to go.”

"I hate you—" Ylianor stated coldly, but something stopped her short. Without wanting to, Duncan felt the tight knot of pent-up emotions, pressing at the back of her throat until the sheer pressure of everything that had happened made it burst into uncontrollably violent sobs and tears, sliding down her cheeks like a river during a flood. Taking her into his arms, he cooed softly in her head. *Please, let me explain.*

"Am I interrupting?"

Standing at the door somber faced and beautiful, Duncan saw Chris, his gaze searching for an opening. "Ready to talk, Angel?"

Young Templeton nodded, stepping into the room. Ylianor was still sobbing, so Duncan carried her to the bed, gesturing at Chris to sit beside her while he settled on the floor. No one spoke as the prince collected his thoughts before plunging into murky waters, his deep voice filling the empty space they had unconsciously erected between them. "What has happened so far is my fault, as Chris pointed out. I obviously need to explain and...apologize." He paused, glancing at the two rapt gazes completely fixed on him. "And before I get any further, I want to make clear this has nothing to do with Arthur's request."

Chris shrugged. "He's not the one who has to suffer in this..." His voice trailed off as if he were looking for a word he could not find.

"You're right, Angel, but let's pretend he did not say anything about our...forced relationship. I'm sure there are greater responsibilities at stake, but we need to handle the smaller ones first. What I would like to do is to set things straight between us, regardless of what we decide to do later. If, and only if, we agree to stay together longer than we thought at first..." He glanced at both. "Well, that has to be our choice, not Arthur's."

"What are you proposing, lover?"

"To apologize for my failures for one thing, especially in your

regard, Princess.” His gaze caressed her face. “But let me start at the beginning or at least what I feel is the beginning.” He gazed at Chris. “And it all starts with our love, which is purely incredible because it’s not just the sex, as you already know.” Sitting on his knees, he reached up for his angel’s face, caressing its handsome features. “I love you like I’ve never loved anyone or anything before in my life and there’s no energy business that can make me mistake what I feel for you.” And his firm tone left no doubt in anyone’s mind. “It’s love, pure and simple, our own special magic, which keeps growing stronger with each passing day. All the time spent together just makes me want you more and more, and the sheer power of our attraction amazes me, especially since it never diminished, not even when I tried leaving you.” He shook his head bitterly. “The worst mistake of my life, I realize, but you know this already. I must’ve seemed mad back then, looking for you in every woman I met instead of accepting the fact that our link’s unique and in no other person will I find what you give me...time after blissful time.”

“Lover, I—”

Grabbing the angel’s face between his palms, he stopped any objections. “I love you, Christopher Templeton, third son of James Templeton, because you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, the most full of life, the brightest star that walked the land and the only one who’s understood me for a long time.” Releasing the beloved face after having kissed it, he sat back on his heels. “And power, dark or light, has nothing to do with it, never has.” He gazed deeply into the blue-gray eyes. “True, I knew about it, not in so many details, but enough to guess it’s one of the reasons why men of all ages can’t resist your charm. I understand it’s something you need to do and since there’s no harm done in the end, I guess it’s all right. This though, doesn’t excuse the way you had to show it to me, but we’ll talk about that

later.” Then he turned to Ylianor, tipping her face up, so he could gaze into her green eyes still full of tears. “As for you, it may be hard to believe, but when I saw you the first time at the village, I thought you belonged to me. I had no idea who you were, not even a clue to your name, yet without a doubt, you were mine. And if this is certainly no justification, it might explain the most despicable behavior of my life, one for which I must sincerely apologize.” Duncan kissed her cheek softly. “I had no right to do the things I did, never bothering with your feelings, only bent on using you in whatever way pleased me, to the point I consider you my slave. And I’m sorry I deceived you, offering you a job and a home when my real intention was to share you like a sex toy with Chris. I took your compliance for granted, but when I learned of David...” His voice trailed off in slight embarrassment. “I must admit I was jealous.” He shook his head. “And the channel you’ve opened between us has only worsened matters.” Grabbing her hands, he squeezed them tight. “I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, but I’m not sure I wanted this power or having someone speak in my mind, sharing my thoughts and feelings. No, I don’t know if I want you, Princess, or anybody else for that matter...” He glanced at Chris. “Perhaps not even my angel, inside my head, not when I’m already worried about my heart.”

“I told you, you share only what you decide to share. As for your heart, it’s plain to see you’ve given it away to someone who’ll never relinquish it.”

Duncan smiled. “Could be. Still, this is all too new for me and very confusing. In time, I’ll get used to it, I’m sure, but now it’s an unwanted gift, which might explain why I felt like punishing you by treating you more like a slave than a human being.” He sighed deeply. “With you, I broke every rule in my book and went against every principle I used to hold dear, a true master of

deceit, especially when it came to the other night.”

At his pause, a heavy silence fell in the room as they shifted uncomfortably, gripped by the memory of what had happened, until Duncan continued his hypnotic talk. “I cannot even begin to apologize, sweet princess. I let things slip the other night, putting you in danger and not even caring. I wanted to stop him—”

“No, you wanted revenge.” Ylianor spat. “But why? What have I done besides being the willing slave you wanted me to be?”

Prince Caldwell took a deep breath, deciding to make a clean slate of it. “No, you’ve been so much more and not just to me, something I’ve refused to acknowledge because...I just couldn’t.”

As if sensing his reluctance to go into details, Ylianor abstained from further questions, her eyes asking what her mouth obviously did not dare speak. But the prince had no qualms now to share the truth. Tilting her chin in the air, he placed a soft kiss on her lips, his tongue tracing their edges, before he sat back on his heels. “When you described the incredible relationship with my father, I only half believed you, feeling sure he could never love a stranger more than his rightful son and heir.” He gazed deeply into the green eyes. “Yes, I considered you a stranger, an impostor almost, certainly not important in my father’s life, but I was so damn wrong.” He breathed, calming his wildly beating heart. “And just when I’d convinced myself I was right, first came the cursed gift. I had no idea two people could be as close as if they were one entity alone. And this inevitably shifts the balance of a relationship, which is what must’ve happened to my father. As if it weren’t enough, the damn lawyer informs me my father’s will contains a clause written especially for you.”

“For me?” Ylianor stared wide-eyed.

Prince Caldwell nodded. “If I decide to honor it, you won’t



need to worry about changing Districts or mating someone you don't really like because Father wants to adopt you as his legal daughter, even providing for your own place to stay."

A stray tear slid down her cheek at the words. "Really? He wants to adopt me?"

"You'd become a Caldwell, my sister to all legal effects."

"Does he say I'm his daughter?"

"No, he doesn't, but it's indifferent to him because even if there's no blood relation, you feel like his own, which is exactly how I feel about you. So he's probably right and you belong to the Caldwell, for whatever mysterious reason."

"Is it legal?" Ylianor inquired.

"There are no regulations against it, but it's no common practice. As the official heir, I have the power to decide whether or not to honor this clause."

Silent for a while, the princess searched his face. "Is there more?"

Duncan sighed heavily at the thought of what his heart still could not accept. "Yes, there is. What made me angry wasn't the clause in itself, but the letter my father wrote to convince me of your rights and to declare his love for you." He stopped to silence the pain, throbbing in his stomach. "He loved you very much, Princess." The words thick in his throat, he had to swallow. "Much more than he ever loved Lizzy or me. This made me mad and being the thickhead I am, I took it out on you."

"Furious, I'd say."

Duncan grinned at Chris. "That's an understatement. I wanted to erase you from the face of Sendar. I wished you'd never existed. How did you dare take my father's love away from me? Those questions drove me crazy to the point I even tried using Chris's power to destroy you." He shook his head, the long strands flying all around. "As you see, I've got a long list of

apologies to make. I'm just glad I can make them in person because Chris stopped me from committing a fatal mistake."

The blue-gray eyes flashed. "I had to stop you, otherwise you'd have never lived with yourself."

"You were right, of course, but the rage was still there and you used it the other night to prevent me from helping Ylianor."

"I admit my behavior didn't particularly shine the other night—"

"I'd say it was one of your darkest moments." The prince cut him off bitterly. "And I don't know what was more despicable, if your bloody show or your merciless use of what I'd told you in confidence."

The blond angel shrugged. "So, lover, welcome to the world. We all use each other, one way or another, and our real motives don't always shine for their honesty."

"Perhaps not, but I want to be as honest as possible from now on. What happened the other night is as much my fault as Chris's and I take full responsibility for it. I allowed it, blinded by prejudice and vengeance. But I want things to change."

Ylianor eyed him suspiciously. "What are you proposing?"

A bitter smile crossed Prince Caldwell's lips. "I can't offer much right now. First, I need to look deep and hard in my heart to find out all the lies I fed myself for so long. What I do know is that you're a part of me, just like Chris." His gaze embraced both of them. "I don't think I could live without either of you, certainly not without our love, Angel." Then he turned to Ylianor. "As for us, I'm afraid you'll have to give me time to find out what I feel for you and adjust to our special bond. So you're free to go or stay, but I can't promise anything right now, Princess. I'm through making decisions that will affect others, too, without their express consent, so we must agree we want to stay together and give a try to making it work between us." His gaze swung to

the fiery blue-gray eyes. “And I acted carelessly with you, too, forcing you into this situation, which doesn’t justify last night, but perhaps explains some of it.”

\* \* \* \*

Chris cleared his throat. “Hem...I think I owe some apologies, too and not just for the other night. If I didn’t exactly live a lie, I did hide my dark nature, but only because I always saw you, lover, as my clean self. The other self, the evil one, I gladly left to the victims of my uncontrollable need, which I can’t stop until they lie in a bloody pulp, begging for mercy. Keeping those two sides apart has been my main concern for the past nineteen years and I actually thought I succeeded because, like I said, I love you too much to have ever felt the need to cut you up, although sometimes I’d fantasize about it—cutting, then healing without erasing your memory.” His gaze shifted into space. “It might seem evil, but it would’ve been my way of showing you who I really was. Of course, I never found the courage to put it into practice or tell you straight out about my dark side, too afraid to lose your love.” Chris shrugged, then glanced at Ylianor. “When you came along, it was like a dream come true. I could enact my fantasy without actually hurting my lover. And that’s what I did the other night.” Hanging his head, he took a deep breath, knowing he had to say it, even if he did not really feel it. “I’m sorry, Ylianor—”

“No, you aren’t,” she retorted hotly.

Throwing back his shoulders, Chris raised his chin in defiance. “You’re right. I’m not. If you want to know the truth, I think you deserved it for a number of reasons. First, you resemble him too fucking much. Second, it seems I have no choice but to share him with the likes of you, a woman no less,

and I've never had any sympathy for your gender." His gaze swung back to Prince Caldwell. "Now what you're suggesting is some kind of permanent solution while I don't particularly look forward to being so close to a woman who can read your mind and bring me out in the open whenever we have sex."

"It was your choice to show me your inner self." Ylianor justified.

"Choice? You pulled it out of me, remember?" Chris retorted hotly. "I couldn't care less about letting you know who I am. Unlike you, dearie, I like to choose my partners for myself, even if it's only to torture them, and you definitely don't fit my profile."

"Does this mean you don't want to have anything more to do with her?"

The room went deathly quiet as Chris toyed with the question, weighing his options. "Before I answer, lover, tell me honestly what's special about her, I mean beside all this energy business."

Duncan was silent for a moment, searching Ylianor's face, his gaze slipping to her figure before returning to look at Chris. "Strange as it sounds, her special meaning is connected to you. No one understands us like she does so for once, I'm free to show you exactly what I feel, even when we're having sex, in front of someone else. It might seem inconsequential, but I've never felt more at ease than with her in our bed and in a way, the same is true for you, too. With her, we can be our true selves finally." The prince bent on his neck and bit it before moving to his ear. "She can make us stronger, even add something to who and what we are." Lips brushing Chris's ear, he whispered, his hot breath tickling. "I know you object to women, but why don't you try to see her as a person first?" He grinned broadly. "It could make a surprising difference, Angel. Trust me."

Averting his gaze, Chris looked around the room. Duncan was not wrong, but the idea of accepting such an arrangement was

disturbing to say the least. To be intimate, and not just in a sexual way, had been the farthest thought from his mind, even if a part of him had to admit it was not as bad as he had feared. Showing his true self, for instance, had been liberating just like her surprising lack of fear to his heavy knife play, a defiant reaction none of his victims ever dared display before. And even more amazingly, he had felt the sadistic game had aroused her at times, the idea for sure, certainly not the deep, vicious cuts, rather the more superficial ones, the light slices he liked to inflict simply for the sake of watching the thin red bloodlines mingling to form a pattern. *Was it a trick of my imagination?* He had wondered often afterward, yet something told him she would be willing to try it again, in a more...playful mood obviously.

No, he could not honestly say he wanted it to end, strangely reluctant to let go of something that had proved to be more exciting than expected, curious, in spite of his reservations, to see where it could go. "There's just one last thing before I accept what you're proposing."

"I'm listening, Angel."

"Promise me we'll have time just for the two of us, to spend alone and away from her."

Prince Caldwell embraced Chris. "Of course. Our present arrangement is temporary, for traveling sake alone. When we get back to normal life, we'll have plenty of time to be together by ourselves."

His earnest look was Chris's capitulation. "All right, you convinced me. I'll be a part of this..." The second he stopped to search for the right comparison, a picture of a three-sided pyramid entered his mind. It looked like solid stone on the outside, yet a closer look revealed something hidden in its core. "Pyramid you're building."

"I believe the word you were looking for was triangle."

“No, lover, it wasn’t.”

\* \* \* \*

The bluestone pyramid popped in Ylianor’s mind, its apparent opaque surface a clever disguise to hide the million lights flashing inside. Confused, she turned to Duncan, but he beat her to the question. *Do you see it, too, Princess?*

*Yes, I do and so does Chris, I believe.*

*What is it?*

“In case you forgot, I prefer three-dimensional objects.” Chris joked, the hint of a smile curving his lips. “And that pyramid seems the fitting image for our situation. Don’t you think so?”

Both Duncan and Ylianor nodded in accordance.

The blond demon beamed. “So it’s settled.”

The passionate kiss that followed sealed their agreement, at least in Ylianor’s mind. She knew Prince Caldwell would want to know her opinion, too, but when he looked at her with a questioning gaze, she was at a loss. Nervously, Ylianor cleared her voice. “Hem...I’m not sure what you want me to say.” She swallowed hard for the words stuck in her throat already sounded hollow after all she had heard and seen between the two lovers. “That I love you, my prince, is no mystery.” She breathed huskily as her voice broke in fear of Chris’s biting remarks.

But Duncan tried to set her mind at ease by pulling her into his powerful embrace and cooing softly in her ear. “Don’t feel as if there’s no place in my heart for you. As I said, I need time to adjust to you and—”

“I know.” Pulling back, she glanced nervously at Chris. “And I’m not asking for anything, merely explaining why I let things slide.” She took a deep breath, relaxing when the demon’s cruel

tease did not follow, then looked straight into the startling black eyes. "Because of the fear of losing you and the hope you'd come to love me, I complied with all your whims, however outrageous. Remember you asked me if I wanted to be your slave?"

Duncan nodded.

"I agreed, completely, even beyond a purely sexual context."

"Just for the record, Princess, it's exactly what I wanted."

Recalling how he had managed to stop her flight from the shelter, Ylianor shrugged. "I know you did, but didn't care. For the same reason, I accepted Chris's bad manners—"

"Hey, I can be a gentleman when I want to." He cut her off annoyed.

"Too bad you never want to with me or we'd have never ended on the point of a knife." Ylianor quipped, then raised a hand to stop his objections. "I'm not saying it's your fault entirely. That night..." A shiver ran down her spine at the memory. "Like in Duncan's case, I allowed it to happen, so I'm partly to blame, too." She took a deep breath. "But it would be unfair to say our times together were all bad. When Chris has his good days, he makes it all worthwhile somehow and I've never had so much fun or felt more alive in all my life." Ylianor shook her head. "I guess what I'm trying to say is I can't give a definite answer, but I'm willing to give it another try, just to see what we can accomplish together."

"Fair enough, Princess." Amused, a twinkle brightened the dark eyes. "And since we all agree to make a go at this, I suggest we discuss the fun part of the game, shall we?"

Chris grinned. "I think we have the general idea."

"It's not enough. In spite of our feelings, even the negative ones, our bodies and minds crave one thing, and one alone—"

"Hey, mine—"

"Yours, too. Angel. I've seen you with other men, or women

for that matter, so you can't deny she does something to you and your cock." His hand closed on the demon's crotch to test his theory.

Chris blushed violently. "It's not her—"

"Hush. Whatever it is, it's been working beautifully between us and I want to make it better."

"How?" Ylianor wondered.

"From now on, we pledge to devote our bodies and minds to sex—no limits, no bans, no taboos, no nothing except the ones we choose." He looked at both as if in search of confirmation to his impression. "What I'm suggesting is we explore our pleasure in all its finer details as free and equal partners."

"Just pleasure, not pain?" Chris asked.

"Well..." Duncan looked at Ylianor and she heard his worried question. *What do you think?*

"I'm not sure it's safe, but if Duncan's in control, maybe—"

She hesitated a fraction of a second, a part of her burning with the same craving she had read in the demon's eyes. "We'll decide when and if the occasion arises. In any case, Angel, you have to promise you won't try it again, unless we all consent to it. Is that understood?"

Chris nodded. "Perfectly."

Satisfied, Prince Caldwell turned fiery black eyes on Ylianor. "And no more funny stuff from you either, about accepting things because you want to please me. Is that also clear?"

"Yes, sir." She teased with a broad smile.

"I'll ensure you both keep your words, at least in bed. Agreed?" The prince extended his hands toward them.

"Yes." Chris grabbed it and held on tightly.

But Ylianor held back. "By agreeing to this, do I get Prince Charles's inheritance?"

"What does that have to do with anything, Princess? At the



moment, it's not negotiable, just something I need to work out for myself."

Chris grinned mischievously, exchanging a glance with Duncan. "I believe this calls for a lesson. She obviously needs to know who's in charge."

"You're absolutely right." Flinging Ylianor back on the bed, Prince Caldwell pinned her down. "But I may just decide to give you what you want." At the husky words, he began removing her clothes. "If you're particularly good—"

"Oh I will," she promised, her mind already floating away under Duncan's sensual touch, sending little pleasure shivers on her sensitive skin. "I'll do anything if it makes you honor the will as Charles intended."

*Are you sure?* Teasing softly, his fingers now brushed her erect nipple, pinching and teasing to make them harder. *I might ask too much of you.*

*Try me. I may surprise you, master.* She challenged, her breath escaping in short gasps, catching in her throat the moment he bent to flick his tongue on the throbbing tip, begging for his lavish attention. Ylianor's flesh burned with uncontrollable desire as she surrendered completely to Duncan's and Chris's demands, her body opening up every available space to accommodate the hungry cocks that stood proudly.

Mouth ajar, she sucked the demon's thickness while Duncan pumped the dripping wet pussy until he asked her to turn around and invited his angel to fuck her ass as part of the game. She loved their sexes filling her, even if Duncan decided he would rather take Chris while the demon screwed her behind. In the end, it worked just the same, Prince Caldwell's hard shaft amplifying Chris's bounce and creating a new dance that made them rush to a quick release after Duncan shifted position to drown in her velvety wet slit.

But through it all, she never lost contact with either of their minds, leading them further into a dimension they were beginning to shape together and her first unexpected scream of pleasure opened a new channel between Chris and Duncan. In the space of a second, she translated their raw energy one inside the other, making them touch for the first time, the prince's powerful strength bathing in the demon's blinding light.

Completely stunned, both stopped moving altogether, though their cocks remained trapped one in her cunt, the other in her ass, but Ylianor did not give them time to hold on to the experience. Her new climax was a vortex in which she smothered both Chris and Duncan, her flesh tightening around their erections to squeeze them dry with convulsive contractions that somehow traveled up to the brain, too. Unable to resist, she felt the two male essences flow into one another just as their fluids mingled inside her body in explosive jets until they collapsed on the bed, energies depleted, bodies spent, yet minds alert and vibrantly alive like never before. In the ensuing silence, only one thought ran through their heads, but only Duncan gave it voice, however breathless and exhausted the incredible experience had left him. "Is this just sex?"

## Chapter Seventeen

“No, it’s not just sex.” Arthur looked at his guests, seated in the High Council’s assembly hall. “It’s a lot more, as you’re just beginning to discover.”

Chris sat straighter. “Then it’s true...I mean what Ylianor told us about energy and power?”

Lord Fairchild nodded. “Power and energy are as much a reality as the chair you sit on or the food you eat. Our ancestors called it the Virt, a term sadly obsolete since there’s no one left to train people in what could be perceived as magic arts. But there’s nothing supernatural about it, rather the contrary. It’s a personal ability to wield the same energy that makes up our lives, bending or using it according to the individual’s very personal capabilities. The higher class usually has more Virt because they’ve crossbred for generations, improving their original endowments, but these aren’t exclusive. I felt Virt in more than one commoner, which naturally, is beyond their comprehension and awareness. Not that noblemen are any different nowadays.” He chuckled, remembering the many cases he had witnessed. “As I said, we’ve lost the ancient ways, so most of them don’t know a thing about Virt, particularly their own.” He looked at Chris and Ylianor. “Cases like yours are rare. People seldom know of their power since early childhood.”

That he was in the presence of three very special people, the leader had no doubt and if two seemed extraordinary for having managed their talents far longer than anyone he knew, the third was equally exceptional, if not more, for having called to his side the only two possessed with an aware Virt at such an early age.

"You...knew all about it? About my...Virt, I mean?" After having struggled with the unfamiliar word, Chris stared in surprise at the leader.

Arthur nodded with a sly smile curving his lips. "Of course, my dear boy, it's my job to know."

The lovely blue-gray eyes flashed in protest. "But you never mentioned it."

"What was the point?" Lord Fairchild's gaze caressed the beloved face. "A leader's main responsibility is to recognize people's Virts, whether asleep or fully awakened. Yours, my dear boy, was never hard to miss, not even when you were a toddler." He smiled ruefully at the memory of the child with the shiny hair, running around the Hall, cursing again the cruel destiny that had decreed to make them meet at such mismatched ages. "And even if today it attracts a lot of people, it has nothing to do with them or with me for that matter." Arthur extended his glance to include the three young people seated in front of him. "You see, one thing to understand about energy is it's a flow that usually requires two or more people in order to work. In fact, for many, the second person is essential to awaken it." Then he returned his gaze on Chris. "Your fire, for instance, is never at its peak unless you're with Duncan." He turned to look at the prince. "He's the one who holds the key to your Virt—"

"And its control," was Ylianor's soft intervention.

"How perfectly right you are, my dear girl." A sad note veiled Arthur's voice. Too often he had wished he could be the one to master his blond lover's fire, well knowing it was not his

privilege. *Alas, his Virt, the sheer power of those bright flames, burning every bit of my flesh, have ensnared me long before he was even aware of them and there's nothing either of us can do about it.*

"So we really have no choice in the matter." Annoyed, Duncan gestured nervously. "The way you make it sound, Chris and I have a mutual assistance treaty to deal with this energy business, not a real relationship at all."

Arthur smiled brightly. "Dear prince, you chose Chris long before you were born, before being aware of all this energy business as you call it. You two connected in a time long forgotten to share many lifetimes together and it was always a free choice on both sides, although often unconscious. "Irritated, Chris glanced at Ylianor. "If that's true, why couldn't I awaken his Virt?"

The leader shook his head. "There are no rational explanations to energy and power, much as there are none for emotions like love. Things happen because there are special connections, most born before time or space, which you ignore at a conscious level, only feel instinctively. So don't think you weren't good enough, rather the Elspeth women alone have the power to awaken the Caldwell's gift. Before they came along, Charles didn't know what energy meant and he certainly didn't go around sharing his thoughts with anyone else, much like his son." Arthur shook his head. "But don't worry, my dear boy, you have a powerful bond of your own with Duncan, from which you benefit more now that she awakened him."

Prince Caldwell leaned forward. "So there are no set rules about when and how Virt can become active."

Lord Fairchild nodded. "Exactly. It's an entirely personal affair that depends largely on the Virt itself and the person carrying it." His gaze fixed on the prince. "As I said, a leader's

responsibility is to monitor energy flows, making sure they never get out of control.”

Duncan fixed his gaze on Arthur. “Then I guess the leader uses the High Council to help him with this delicate task, right?”

“Yes, that’s why it’s very important for its members to have power of some sort. Your father, Duncan, was an excellent energy reserve, just like you. In fact, his seat is waiting for you to fill it, a responsibility sons usually take on after reading their father’s will.”

The prince bowed his head slightly. “It will be an honor.”

“Yes it will and a responsibility, too, particularly considering your Virt’s greater than your father’s ever was.”

“Why?” Prince Caldwell inquired.

Arthur smiled warmly. “Because, unlike Charles, you don’t give it away to just anyone, only to carefully chosen people, so it’s sheer concentration makes it more powerful. And you’re extremely selective, Prince, I couldn’t help noticing it in your...” He creased his forehead to search for an appropriate word. “Let’s call it pledge search. I knew you weren’t just looking for a suitable mate, rather for someone worthy to receive your energy, besides your love I mean, but apparently, you never found the right one, even if women are particularly attracted to you.”

“With his looks, who wouldn’t?” Chris teased, shaking his head in amusement, yet avoiding a direct glance at Prince Caldwell.

“And his energy, too.” Lord Fairchild was quick to add. “So they try to reach you, but you shut your doors tightly, opening it only to Chris. But this must change.” His tone became very serious. “My dear prince, you have too much energy to channel it through a single person alone, no matter how powerful he may be.” Glancing over to where Chris was sitting, the leader noticed Duncan immediately looking away, but he needed no

explanations to guess at how disturbingly close their last experience must have been. When the three had walked in the conference room, Arthur had perceived the odd shyness between the lovers, knowing they could not handle touching their true selves, either within or without apparently, the leader mused, watching their strange seating arrangements at opposite ends from each other, with Ylianor dividing them. "I've been worried about you, Duncan, particularly when you broke up with the only one who had access to it at the time. That's why I had to arrange for you two to get back together—"

"Arrange?" Duncan and Chris asked together surprised, exchanging glances in spite of their embarrassment. "What are you talking about?"

"The event I organized the night you reunited was only for the two of you," Arthur explained.

Chris flared. "You mean, all those people, the party, everything was just for us?"

"Yes, for both your Virts are unique, but can become dangerous if left alone—"

"Then why don't you train them, rather than relying on homemade methods?" Prince Caldwell challenged annoyed.

The leader grinned at the expression. "Maybe you're right, Duncan, we should, but homemade remedies are all I have since our traditions never contemplated any form of training, not in these arts anyway. And were I to start on such a program, I wouldn't know where to find apt trainers for no one knows enough of these things to tell others about them. Besides, some Virts are so uncontrollable and dangerous, I'm not sure any amount of training could curb them." His gaze swung to young Templeton. "Like yours, my dear boy."

Chris blushed violently. "You mean...you knew about...the other side, too?"

Lord Fairchild nodded. "I've always known."

"Then, since you seem to know so much, please explain it properly." Chris raised his chin defiantly, the blue-gray eyes brimming with suppressed fire.

Lord Fairchild chuckled. "You know, through the years, I've kept careful watch over you, not just for personal reasons, but also because I wanted to study up close a Virt I'd heard only from ancient traditions, which is the rare ability to combine both positive and negative energy. And though you come from a very powerful family, no one else to my knowledge can blend these two opposite forces as easily and effortlessly as you can. I haven't told anyone about your special talent and even your father ignores the full extent of your—"

"He never cared for me." Chris spat bitterly. "He only thinks of Steve. I might as well have never existed."

"Don't be so categorical, dear boy. Your father is a valued member of the Council, its vice-leader for that matter, not to mention a close friend of mine. He's also very gifted and pledging to someone equally powerful, he believed the firstborn would inherit all the family's Virt. Too bad that wasn't the case for both your brothers are excellent men with little or no Virt at all, even if he insists your eldest, Steve, should inherit the High Council's seat—"

"He can have it! I don't particularly care for it and you know it."

Arthur shook his head. "You should. Remember, you have the power and the responsibility."

"Tell that to my father." Chris sneered resentfully.

His gaze fixed on the blue-gray eyes, Arthur tried pulling his young lover into their dimension. "James Templeton is a good man and I don't mean to justify him, but he's found it very difficult to deal with a son like you. You see, even if he has a



similar Virt, he could never express it to its full potential because he lacked the proper connection, at least from a certain point on..." His voice trailed off, engulfed by memories of their beginning—his, James and Charles—friends and enemies for life, their paths inextricably connected in ways he had never foreseen. With a sigh, he returned to the present. "Anyway, what he feels now, and perhaps fears, is the fact you're different from his other sons and he has trouble accepting it."

"I'm bad, I know." Dejectedly, Chris lowered his gaze. "Only with Duncan, I seem to redeem myself."

Arthur shook his head. "No, don't blame yourself for using your Virt and causing suffering on others. All your so-called victims are in search of a painful experience, even if they might not be aware of it. Their only perception is that you give them something unique and even if they forget the details, the general feeling lingers on long after the experience is over. That's why they want you."

"So my good looks have nothing to do with it?" The fiery boy mused.

The leader's heart plunged to his stomach, but he silenced its painful throbbing. "I'd be a liar if I said they didn't." He smiled ruefully. "As with Duncan, it's a combination of both that makes the two of you so appealing and dangerous at the same time."

"Not dangerous enough it seems." Chris joked with a half-serious tone, looking at Ylianor, "to keep everyone out of our relationship."

"Ylianor is another matter entirely, my dear boy, one over which I had no control." He turned to Prince Caldwell. "When your father started talking about a Mary Jane Elspeth, I told him to leave her alone, thinking she'd steal his energy like everyone else he felt attracted to. I didn't take it seriously, not at first, but not even when he could not tear himself away from her." Lord

Fairchild reached Ylianor. "Your mother was quite beautiful from what I remember.

"You knew her, milord."

"Not exactly. I only saw her once, but I could never forget it." Arthur caressed Ylianor's cheek. "But the first times Charles talked about her, I didn't immediately realize it was the same woman I'd seen at Black Rose. So I dismissed the whole incident as a sexual affair just like many others Charles entertained. Things took a different turn when I became aware he could talk to the woman without speaking, sharing thoughts and feelings. Well, I'll be damned, I thought, happy that Charles had finally found the one to awaken his Virt. But it wasn't until he informed me she was pregnant that I began taking serious notice of the situation. From the start, he confided he had the strange notion the child might be his, which was impossible under any circumstance. And since Mary Jane had pledged to John Meyer, Charles's claim seemed even more absurd, but not as much as his new link to the little girl, which, to all extent, was stronger than the one he shared with her mother. At that point, I could no longer ignore the possibility of a relation, certainly not of in blood, though I was at a loss to say what it could be. Are you his child?" The leader studied Ylianor's face for a while as if it could answer him. "I still don't know. The only certainty is you have powerful gifts of your own and like Chris, you discovered them early in life, not surprisingly when growing up with Duncan."

The prince shook his head in frustration. "But I can't remember her in my early years and we lost sight of each other for the better part of ten years." His black eyes flashed in amusement. "Did you also arrange for me to be lost so I could connect with her again?" Sarcastic, his voice sounded edgy as if he felt deceived.

"Prince Caldwell, please, don't feel betrayed—"

“Point of fact, I feel manipulated by this energy business, the Virt thing, her, you or whatever you represent.” Duncan spat, his tone angrier than the occasion required.

“No, please believe me. It’s part of my job—”

“It seems you haven’t done your job properly, Lord Fairchild,” the prince retorted, “if someone like Ylianor escaped your notice.”

Arthur sighed heavily. “Were it only that easy to determine what’s important among the million lights and sounds I hear.” He stopped, probably sounding incomprehensible to the other three. Shaking his head, the leader locked gaze with Duncan. “Quite right, Prince, it was a responsibility I failed in a way, though luckily, it hasn’t been too damaging so far. Quite the contrary, it’s helped establish a new connection, which in your case was severely lacking. Again, like for Chris, I believe you forged the ties with Ylianor in another time and space, the same ones that pulled you together in this life, too, despite your...” Arthur glanced at Chris briefly, who turned his gaze away as if ashamed, then swung back to Duncan. “Herm, memory loss. And I had nothing to do with your meeting again, rather you found her when you needed a new outlet.”

The blue-gray gaze fixed steadily on Lord Fairchild. “But why use sex to awaken his gift?”

The leader grinned. “Sex is a powerful exchange of energy, a deep sharing at all levels where physical intimacy often leads to mind bondage faster than any other method.”

“A training ground so to speak?” Duncan mused to no one in particular, but with the black eyes flashing in understanding.

“Exactly, Prince. It can and should be that, too.” Lord Fairchild glanced fondly at Chris, the ghost of a smile creasing his lips. “It’s a pity very few people realize what they’re really doing during sex.”

Chris grinned ironic. "I think we're well aware of what we do in bed."

"Only since Ylianor came along." Arthur chided. "Her gift is unique, too, aura tracing not a very common trait among our people. And like you, Duncan, she's selective about her channels. Am I correct, child?"

Ylianor nodded. "Yes, milord, I've shared it only with Duncan and his father."

Extremely curious about a gift he had heard from traditions alone, Lord Fairchild bent on her. "Tell me about aura perception."

"I see their inner light more clearly than their physical being."

"So you can trace their passage through time and space."

Ylianor shrugged, a look of confusion clouding her green eyes as if she had never thought of using it for quite that purpose. "Perhaps...if I practiced."

"Yes, of course, practice is the key to true understanding and you'll have plenty of time to train while you go about your task."

Duncan raised a skeptical brow. "Our task?"

The leader nodded gravely. "Someone has put our precious way of life in danger, its natural flow I daresay, by stealing something of value from the Nephis Valley."

"What's there to steal in the pledge's sacred valley?" Duncan stared at Arthur. "I've never been there, but they tell me there's not much worth stealing."

Arthur shrugged, unwilling to reveal all the information he had gathered. "I suggest you three go there, find out exactly what is missing and who took it. Then retrieve it and return it to its assigned place." His commanding tone left no doubt he was giving a direct order. "It's a vital mission for our survival that will take all your combined skills and energy, which is why you have

to stick together no matter what.” After stressing its importance, he looked at them, searching for an answer.

Speaking as leader of the High Council, he knew they could not ignore his call, so he was satisfied when Duncan, Chris and Ylianor bowed their heads in acceptance. “As I said earlier, you’ll need to work together as a team. Your different yet complementary Virts will prove to be invaluable for only your unity will be able to face and defeat the dangers ahead. Duncan...” He turned to fix his gaze on Prince Caldwell. “You’ll be their leader, the mind of the group. Ylianor is its spirit and Chris...” His heart crushed painfully as he gazed at the blond beauty who would soon leave him alone again. “He’s the body, the fiery energy directed by a sound mind and an aware conscience. Is everything clear?”

Duncan looked at Chris first, then at Ylianor, as if asking for agreement. “It is, milord,” he announced gravely for all.

“Good! Then get ready to leave immediately. Time is not your friend and the faster you move, the easier you’ll accomplish your task.”

## Chapter Eighteen

On their ride to the Jeruashi Mountains, gateway to their final destination, the Nephis Valley, Chris kept his distance from Duncan, avoiding direct eye contact, shaken by the information received or by their intimate sharing, he did not know nor cared to find out.

"All right you two, it's time to talk." Ylianor broke through his brooding, maneuvering Starlet between Fuzeon and Black.

Chris shrugged. "Arthur explained everything. What's left to say?"

"I meant what happened before the lecture." Ylianor's mouth curved in annoyance. "Lord Fairchild asked for our help as a team, but we can't work together if you two won't even look at each other."

Neither replied.

With a loud sigh, Ylianor breathed deeply. "All right, let's talk hierarchies. If Duncan is our leader, as Arthur said, do you think, Chris, it's appropriate you should treat him like this?"

Chris stole a glance in Prince Caldwell's direction, but did not answer.

Ylianor insisted. "Come on, Chris. Aren't you tired of playing games? Didn't we agree to be open and honest about our feelings?"

This time Chris nodded slowly.

"Then it's time we grow up and face our issues as adults, not act as children. If we are to accomplish anything, communication should circulate freely among us." She looked first at Chris, then at Duncan. "Which is exactly what you're not doing." Irrked by their repeated silence, she tried very hard to stay calm. "Maybe, I'm going at it all wrong. Maybe you've never really known each other, in spite of all you've shared together." She took a deep breath. "So the first step is for you two to get properly acquainted."

"More than we already are?" Chris sneered ironically.

"It's obvious you aren't enough."

A nasty smile crossed his lips. "Look, dearie, we've done things to embarrass a beginner like yourself."

Ylianor blushed violently. "You could've had sex standing upside down for all I care, but it hasn't taught you how to meet soul to soul. I connected you like that because you wanted a way to reach one another without speaking. I'm sure you and Duncan, even if you don't share thoughts, exchange some kind of coded signal."

At those words, Chris gave her his full attention, noticing Duncan getting interested, too.

The prince opened his mouth for the first time since leaving the Hall. "If we do, how can we recognize it? Where do we begin?"

"Well..." She frowned as if unsure of how to go about it until a flash of understanding lit her green eyes. "Think back at the first time you laid eyes on each other, that summer day at Black Rose. Do you remember it?" They both nodded vigorously. "Why did you realize it was special right when it happened?"

"Did we?" Chris wondered, already slipping in a daze.

"Of course, you did." Ylianor's voice grew more hypnotic.

"That's when you chose to travel life together. For you, Chris, it was a revelation, your aura changing from dark to light at the blink of an eye. Remember?"

*How could I forget?*

*"This boy must be the demon's child." Chris remembered James Templeton telling his mother. "You must send him away for a while."*

*"He's just a child." Lady Templeton had argued. "He doesn't know what he's doing."*

*His father had looked at him, the last of three Templeton sons, and for sure the one he loved less, too taken by Steve to notice him except if he did something wrong. "You're wrong, Claire. I can read it in his eyes. He knows all too well he shouldn't be doing those things, yet he continues to do them." His father's gaze had burned him to the spot. "It's as if he's trying every way he can to defy me."*

*Anguished, his mother had gestured aimlessly. "He's just a child."*

*But his father had no desire to listen. "Let's send him over to Charles. Maybe he can help him and his son can only be a good influence on this wicked boy."*

*"Charles Caldwell?" His mother's shocked voice had startled him. "But Black Rose is very far from here. Why punish me by sending my child so far away?"*

*James had tried to calm her down. "Dear Claire, can't you see he's taken a dangerous path? If we send him to the Caldwell's, he'll have the company of a boy slightly older than him who, according to his father's praise, could straighten up Chris and perhaps make something of him. Don't you want him to have a better future, Claire? If we send him there, it's only for his good."*

*Liar! You just don't want me around. That had been Chris's*



*desolate conclusion, a conviction he carried into the present. Rejected, hurt and furious, he had traveled the long journey to Black Rose until he was about to turn round its stable. If I can't touch Father, I'll destroy this hateful place. And he would have unleashed his rage, had not the disturbing notion someone was waiting for him stopped him cold.*

*Stunned, Chris felt the dark-haired boy expecting him, fully prepared to face his fury and keep it at bay. As if in a trance, he remembered turning the bend and seeing the most incredible black gaze fixed on him as if it had heard him arrive over the sea's loud crashing waves.*

“You were waiting for me, lover!”

In the years to come, Duncan had confessed no one had told him about Chris's planned visit. Prince Charles was at the beginning of his illness, already confined in his room, and even if he received James's message, he had not thought of informing his son. So rationally, the black haired prince should not have expected him or known the exact moment of his arrival. Yet, he did. Even more amazing, Chris could swear he had heard Duncan calling him brother, claiming him as his own, and it had made all the difference.

The second Chris became aware Duncan could, and always had, anticipated his every move, he felt the dark prince inside him—no embarrassment this time at their energy's intimate touch—accepting the new presence, surrendering completely to it as their essences coalesced into one. And he was finally inside the safest place he had ever known.

\* \* \* \*

Wrapping around Chris's fiery essence, Duncan had reached his

lover's same conclusion, aware at last that, on the bright summer day in Black Rose, he had claimed the blond angel as his own to track him down wherever he might be. "You send me a..." He searched for the right word, one that would make sense in the real world anyway. "Wave and I've learned to decode it somehow."

"Your Virt allowed you to recognize the kindred soul the first time and all the following ones." Ylianor explained. "Now concentrate on the wave. Do you see it?"

Closing his eyes, the prince left all control over the horse to Ylianor, then focused on the wave. Seeing it for the first time, it resembled a bridge that connected their separate selves and shone whenever one of the two sent the signal, as they were beginning to call it. To be honest, it seemed they never turned it off, the connection always flashing brightly, although some of the impulses from Chris tended to float away. Nothing new, Duncan realized, finally seeing how his blond angel spread his irresistible attraction around the world.

It looked all so incredible, yet so real, Prince Caldwell could not hold back the rush of emotions, drowning his senses, pumping through his blood, going to his head and filling his heart, flooding the bridge with its violent intensity until Chris broke into tears, releasing the angry child's bitterness he had carried since that far away summer day. Crying his heart out, the blond angel slumped on Black just as Duncan's quiet strength wrapped tightly around him like a comforting blanket and held him in his embrace. Time stopped as the odd trio continued on its journey, the prince focusing on his blond, beautiful lover who had crossed the bridge to fill his space completely until nothing remained, not even the awareness of how long they had stayed one inside the other or how they had come to a shelter deep into the mountains.

And it was the beginning of a new perception, which grew slowly as they traveled further in the region where high white peaks surrounded green valleys with rich pinewood forests climbing on the slopes until low clouds hid them from view. The narrow canyons were also frequent passageways that forced them to go single file through threatening rocky walls closing on every side, impenetrable even to light. Other times, they had to walk the horses on dangerous paths, bordering sheer drops into oblivion, a misplaced foot leading to sure death at the bottom of a sharp fall. Daylight became scarce the higher they went, the peaks cutting off most of the brightness.

Day in and day out, they followed the road's twists and turns, first climbing on top of snowy tops, soon to descend into green valleys, luckily filled with many shelters in which they collapsed exhausted after having traveled long stretches. Fire kept them warm at nights, particularly if fatigue prevented more pleasurable, and intimate, ways to heat their icy bodies. But the end was everyday nearer and sheer will alone was responsible for much of their survival in spite of the heavy strain.

\* \* \* \*

"These mountains are going to kill me, lover. It's been days, too fucking many, when I've been too tired to give you even a goodnight kiss." Sounding like a disappointed child, Chris bit his lower lip, probably to stop it from trembling. "And what about our training? I was just beginning to get the hang of it, looking forward to finding new channels between us."

"You'd just love to find them, wouldn't you?" Duncan grinned in his direction. "Imagine what you and I could do with non-verbal communication."

“Oh, I’ve got quite a few ideas, which I haven’t been able to test because of this damn traveling. Just give me the chance—”

“I sure will.” Prince Caldwell gazed in the distance. “Particularly now that we’re getting closer to the Nephis Valley.”

*And not a moment too soon.* Looking at the extended grassland that would lead them to the desert, relief ran down Ylianor’s back at the thought they had passed perhaps the hardest part of the journey.

Duncan followed her gaze to the green expanse of vegetation, which looked much like a sea. *Do you like the steppe, Princess?*

Scenery and climate had changed the moment they had crossed into the hot plateau with pinewood replaced by short green plants crowding the fields, which resembled nothing of what Ylianor had grown used to, particularly in Black Rose. And by the gods, she felt the difference acutely, like a dull pain in her stomach, missing the sharp cliffs and thundering sea underneath, relaying life’s primordial energy.

Her gaze drawn by the panorama in spite of her misgivings, she threw back her shoulders. *It’s fascinating, but I wouldn’t trade it with Black Rose.*

*You miss the sea?*

Ylianor merely nodded.

*We’ll return home soon, Princess. Don’t worry.*

*I’m not. The longer the journey, the sweeter the return.* She smiled warmly to emphasize her thought.

*Is that how you felt when I asked you to come back to Black Rose?*

Ylianor was silent for a while as if meditating on the answer. *It felt like I’d been exiled, even if, in defiance to your mother’s orders, I’d come to Black Rose every once in a while, just to steal a glance.*

*You cheat.*

She stuck her tongue out. *It was a matter of survival.*

The prince grinned. *I bet it was. You're lucky you know Black Rose much better than my mother ever will, so she never caught you.*

*My luck would've run out eventually.* Bitterness laced her voice as a bad memory crossed her mind. Not wanting to share it with the prince, she suppressed it, preferring to continue with their easy tone. *I guess it was lucky for me, you came along when you did.*

As if remembering Arthur's words, he had to wonder. *Luck or...destiny?*

She cocked her head, studying him for a second. *Considering that without me you'd have never discovered your true potentials, I'd say it was a matter of destiny and—*

"What about this training, lover?"

"I was just getting to it, Angel."

"What would you want us to do?" Ylianor inquired.

"I would like to know if you can reach Chris."

"Directly?" The mere thought shocked her, the bad experience of the past screaming against it. "I don't know...will he let me?"

Duncan turned to the demon. "Why shouldn't he?"

Ylianor looked at Chris, too.

He grinned widely. "I'm not going to bite."

"It's not your bite I fear, rather..." She stopped confused.

"Princess, if you don't share information, we won't get anywhere. Remember what you told us? Ours is a three-sided team, but so far only two of them are connected."

"I know, but...I'm scared," she blurted, terror now mounting like an unstoppable wave.

"Of Chris? Why?"

"Well, to begin with, he doesn't want me to come close to

him.”

Chris protested loudly. “I don’t—”

“That’s what you told us at Rockyhorn.” Ylianor contradicted. “Remember?”

“I was angry then,” the demon justified.

“But your feelings haven’t really changed. And your light is blinding enough as it is. Even if you were to want me, I don’t think I could stand it.”

Duncan cut in, obviously to speed up matters. “All right, Angel, promise you won’t hurt her, not intentionally anyway.”

Chris frowned, a funny look crossing his face. “I promise.”

The black eyes swung in her direction. “Now you can try reaching Chris while I’ll monitor you. If anything should go wrong, I’ll help you.”

Ylianor nodded, still unsure about the entire experiment. She remembered all too well how Chris’s heated flare effectively denied access, although the prince was right to insist to tighten their link on every side. And he was there to help her, his strong, dark, soothing energy a presence she could not ignore. Closing her eyes, she saw the bright fire wavering in the distance, its erotic dance almost taunting her to try it. That it was not meant for her was an understatement, she knew it even before she leapt, her cool energy cringing, already scorched despite the distance. But before terror took a hold, she shut her mind to all thoughts, emptied her soul, then jumped straight into the flames.

\* \* \* \* \*

The scream of pain reached Duncan’s mind before his ears. Maneuvering Fuzeon to stop Starlet, he caught Ylianor as she slumped on the horse’s back, then with Chris’s aid, he laid her on the warm ground.

"I swear I didn't touch her!" The blond angel let go of the limp body. "Believe me. I didn't do anything."

The prince sighed heavily, his energy already fast at work to awaken her and cool her burning spirit. He had witnessed it all, though he had not expected her to move so fast or leap straight into the flames. "I know. I was there, too." On his knees, he caressed her pale face concerned. "But you burned her just the same. As she feared, your light's too bright for her."

Staring at Ylianor's still frame, Chris frowned. "Must be her problem because you seem all right with it."

Wearily, Duncan shook his head. "Don't play dumb. It really doesn't suit you, especially since you know she doesn't have my kind of Virt. As she guessed, and Arthur confirmed, I alone can handle that irresistible fire of yours." He turned to send a dazzling smile to his angel. "Now pass me the water." Focusing on Ylianor again, he stretched out his hand to grab what Chris gave him, then sprinkled some drops on her face until she regained consciousness. Raising her head gently and pushing back the long strands of hair, he cradled it on his chest. "How do you feel?"

She coughed as if her system was having trouble setting back in motion. "Dizzy, thank you. I must've fainted."

The blond angel nodded vigorously. "You sure did."

With the prince's help, Ylianor sat up and drank the water he offered her. "We're close to a shelter." Not trusting her strength, he held her tightly. "It's just a few miles away, so we'll stop there for the night. I think we've had enough training and traveling for one day." Straightening up, he stretched a hand to Ylianor to pull her up. "If you're too dizzy, you can ride with me, Princess."

She shook her head defiantly. "I think I can manage." But her bluff crumbled miserably the second Duncan let her go and she had to grab him back to keep from falling.

*You ride with me and that's an order.* Without further arguments, he pulled her up behind him, feeling her relief as she leaned on his back for support while surrendering the last of her energy. *I'm sorry, Princess. I didn't realize he could be so dangerous for you.*

*I told you, he doesn't want me. He has to accept me before he gives me access to his inner self. And even then...* She shrugged helplessly. *I don't know. Maybe the only way we can establish a link is through you since his light doesn't seem to affect you.*

Duncan felt a shiver as he touched the burning power riding at his side. *You're wrong. I'm a victim of his attraction like everyone else, if not more.* A rush of excitement coursed through his blood as images of his angel's naked body flashed through his mind.

She slapped his back affectionately. *You know what I mean! And you're just lucky he hasn't played his scary games with you.* He felt her shiver at the memory. *Anyway, we could devise a way of being together through you.*

*Yes, but we'll think of it tomorrow. Now you need to rest and that's another order.* Duncan's energy slowly spread through Ylianor and he felt her drown in his intimate embrace, his strength soothing and repairing her wounds to the point that when they reached the shelter, she was fast asleep.

"The experiment was a bit of a failure." Chris followed the prince who carried Ylianor's unconscious body to a bed. "I didn't think I still had that effect on her."

"You didn't?" Duncan moved away from the bedroom to scout for something to drink. "Come on. How do you think you've managed to keep women away?" Nervously, he grabbed a bottle and two glasses.

Reaching the prince now sprawled in front of the fireplace, Chris sat beside him, a nasty smile curving his lips. "You think



that's what happened? I struck your princess down because she's a woman?"

Duncan filled the glasses, handing one to the blond angel. "Not intentionally, but you're even more choosy than me on who you let in—"

"Damn right I am!" Chris turned with a pained expression in his gaze. "I've always allowed only you to touch me that deep inside. How can I let a stranger—"

"After all we've been through, do you still consider her a stranger?"

Chris kept silent, slowly turning the glass in his hands, obviously ill at ease with the turn of the conversation.

The prince sipped his drink, then set the glass down with a nervous gesture, annoyed with Chris's attitude. "Come on. Talk to me. How can she be a stranger after what we shared and share everyday more?"

"I never allowed it. She took the liberty, the first time without even asking."

"All right, she did, but she apologized." To calm down, Duncan picked up his glass again. "But now we're doing all this for us—"

"No, that's where you're wrong." The blond angel jumped. "First, we did it because you wanted it, then because Arthur ordered it. And your little charade of asking for my consent while Arthur breathed down our necks didn't seem like a convincing effort to understand my reasons, rather a fumbled attempt to make me stay in a situation where I feel trapped. And now you expect me to share you with her—not just your body, but our life, our love, our time, too—without complaining, because I agreed to it halfway through our journey? Fuck you, lover! I want our alone time back and don't tell me the traveling prevents it."

Feeling his control slipping, Duncan sighed. "I won't, but like

it or not, she's becoming a part of us and that's what's really eating you, isn't it? Sure, you didn't want a woman to come so close, but what you didn't expect was that you might actually like it."

"I don't!" Chris's temper flared.

"Don't play games with me." Prince Caldwell snarled, his voice becoming hoarse. "I know you far too well to mistake certain signs like looking at her when you think no one's watching or your reactions in bed, everyday more surprising I might add."

"She pisses me off the way she looks so fucking much like you!" Frustrated, young Templeton spat. "And I couldn't stand it I ever wanted her over you." The words barely out of his mouth, he attacked the prince's lips with an angry growl that threatened to swallow him whole.

Duncan reacted immediately, his tongue fighting for control, and battling silently in a fierce fight neither wanted to lose. And when Prince Caldwell overcame his resistance, breaking through the warm cavity to sweep it like a conqueror, Chris's hands flew to his crotch, working fast to free the imprisoned cock, then enfold it in his mouth the moment the tip of the erection slipped out. Groaning with pleasure, the prince pushed further inside, letting his angel have it all, the capacious cavity fitting him to the balls, sucking greedily to have more of it, bringing him close to the edge, the tongue rubbing forcefully on the long stem before wrapping tightly around the bulging head.

At the same time, Duncan opened Chris's fly, the magnificent cock standing in proud attention and demanding immediate action, which Prince Caldwell was only too glad to provide. His lips sliding to the base, he took it all inside while rubbing the sensitive spot between the balls and the asshole. Young Templeton flung his legs wide open to invite further explorations

and the prince did not disappoint him, his fingers tracing the tender hole he felt throbbing from desire.

In part, Chris was right. Since Ylianor had joined them, they had had less time together, whether it was to play their games or simply to talk between themselves. And he had missed it, too, he realized, inhaling deeply of his angel's scent, wetting his fingers to plunge them into the yielding ass eagerly waiting for his big shaft to possess it completely, then tasting him directly as his tongue replaced his touch to tease him to the spasm.

"Take me." The angel begged as if reading his mind. "Stick it in now and fuck me until I can't stand straight anymore."

"Thought you'd never ask." The prince grinned, taking Chris's pants off in a single sweep and making him turn on his back. Admiring the firm buttocks pushing out, Duncan could not suppress a shiver of pure pleasure, at the thought it was his for the taking, before slipping into the tight fit that squeezed him lovingly.

Pumping hard, the sensations only increased as they moved around the cabin in a passionately erotic dance—standing up, lying down, stretching out, on all fours or on their knees, any combination suited them—until the inevitable end with Chris sprawled on a table, legs leaning against Duncan's chest.

Probably their favorite position or simply the final act of something so pleasurable it was impossible to keep holding back. Either way, when the prince, engulfing Chris's erect shaft, gagged on its powerful bursts of bittersweet fluid shooting down his throat, his own cock lost all restraints. With one last shove, all the heat, the passion, the hunger, the desire coalesced in a single point right beneath the exit hole, pushing the liquid out in convulsively repeated throws that shattered his system while filling his lover's ass.

"Now that's what I call fucking." Chris grinned, sliding down

the table into Duncan's arms. "And it has nothing to do with her or with what we've been doing lately."

"I know." Prince Caldwell tightened his embrace around the warm body. "But it's all this damn traveling. We're stuck together and we can't very well send her off to sleep in the stables."

"Why not?" The blond angel teased, raising an eyebrow. "I'm sure she wouldn't mind, seeing how much she loves horses."

Duncan bit his neck. "Come on. Be serious. You'd only make the situation more tense than it already is at times. And to be honest, I wouldn't have the heart to do it." His hand strayed on the shiny blond head, his fingers running through the thick strands. "We've been acting selfishly around her, hiding nothing of our love or sex, often openly disregarding her in bed, too. We're always kissing..." Bending his head, he brushed his lips on his lover's. "Touching..." His fingers deepened the caress, running to Chris's groin. "Making love in front of her, even if we're not on a bed. And yet she says nothing of it, not a complaint, not a single request for a kiss, not even a cry for attention. My mind's so concentrated on you, I hardly notice her during the day and only when we reach a shelter do I remember she exists." Again, his lips closed on the angel's, his tongue tracing the soft edges before breaking an entry to claim the warm cavity. "But it's not what we agreed to do." Pulling away from the passionate kiss, he settled back. "And you're not doing yourself a favor by denying her access." He rolled on a side, pressing his weight on an elbow. "Have you considered the fact if something were to happen to me now, you and Ylianor would be the only ones who could help me?"

Chris shifted nervously. "I may not have thought of it, but you know how hard it is for me."

Duncan's heart went out to his lover. "I know and I don't want to force your hand, just tell me there's hope for change."

Chris sighed deeply. "All right, I'll tell you what happened today. When she jumped, I deliberately stood still, avoiding any reaction in spite of my instincts and the danger signals that reminded me of the first time she flew at me in anger. I'd have accepted her..." He creased his forehead as if in an effort to remember. "At least I think. What I know is I controlled my yearning to burn the living daylight out of her."

"And you did..." Duncan's voice sounded purposefully dubious.

Chris grinned. "She's alive, isn't she?" He sneered. "But I wouldn't count it as a victory if I were you. What I'm trying to say is I tried changing, honest, and I didn't want it to end this way."

The prince searched his face for a long moment. "I believe you." Leaning to kiss his doubts away, Duncan lingered on the soft lips, too good for a short spell, until he managed to pull away.

Looking sorry it was over, Chris reached for the glass and gulped down some of the amber liquid. "And I'm tired of hearing all this smoky talk about something no one really understands. I don't believe in energy. I believe in emotions." Staring at the flames leaping high, he clutched his glass. "I love you." And the blue-gray eyes shone with a feeling so strong, it went straight into Prince Caldwell's heart. "That's all I'm prepared to believe in, lover."

Duncan embraced him tightly, his lips flying to the warm mouth, ready to start loving again. Barriers were falling too fast anyway, driven out by new levels of awareness, complicating their existence, true, yet bonding them tighter than ever before. And the hunger for the other only grew with the process, Duncan realized as he wrapped around his blond lover, body, mind and spirit melting with Chris's, the bliss so intense he almost missed the moment their souls joined. But not quite, Prince Caldwell

knew, getting to his angel's shiny core that blazed like a tall fire, its sparks and flames falling on the prince without either burning or blinding him despite its intense heat. The bursting flames had wavered in anticipation just as Duncan imagined opening his arms and enfolding them all, instantly becoming one with it, cooling around it with his own strength. And the joining came easier this time, maybe the sex speeding it up or just their experience fine tuning their awareness. Either way, they slipped away from the conscious realm to reach a different dimension where time and space had no meaning.

"I love you." Duncan heard Chris say, although it did not seem like a sound, the voice strained as if trying to define feelings that escaped verbal syntax. "I don't know if it's the right word, but I can't think of anything more appropriate."

The prince tightened his hold around the immaterial being. "We don't need words, Angel." And though he truly meant it, there was one last thing he had to say to Chris's bewildered face when the experience was over. "Still having doubts about the energy business?"

## Chapter Nineteen

"We should try repeating the experiment," Duncan suggested the following day, his black gaze caressing Ylianor's rested face.

The demon grinned with a mischievous gleam. "I'd like to repeat the night part of it."

Duncan grinned. "As much as I'd like it, too, I don't think we have time to stop. I was thinking more along the line of non-verbal communication. If you and Ylianor can't establish a connection on your own, I could act as the go-between. What do you say, Princess?"

She shrugged, pretending indifference. "If your energy comes between us, I could jump in without getting burned."

"All right, let's try it." Prince Caldwell turned to the demon. "Now relax and reach out for me while I do the same."

The blond beauty straightened. "All right, you're the master."

Ylianor watched their energy mingle, then drift away in another dimension, a pang crunching her stomach. But it was a waste of her energy even to feel slighted. *No place for me or anyone else between them, no matter what Arthur thinks.* Looking at the beautiful empty shells riding by her side, she realized accepting this simple notion was proving the hardest thing in her life for she was deeply hurt every time Chris's biting

remarks accused her of intruding, yet moved beyond words when watching their erotic dances that, more than anything else, revealed the depth of their connection. And she was a fool to believe either could ever accept her as a part of—

*Princess, join us.* Duncan's voice startled her and she was suddenly in their presence, Prince Caldwell shielding the demon's fire so that only a few isolated sparks escaped the dark embrace.

*Come on.* The voice urged huskily. *Don't be afraid. He's not going to hurt you, not this time.* Then he opened his soothing embrace to enfold her, too.

A great surge of emotions, mixed with disbelief they would actually allow her into their sacred circle, swelled the tears she had not cried for days into a painful knot pressing at the back of her throat.

*No. No tears. Come closer instead. Be with us.*

But Ylianor held back. *I...you're so beautiful together, you couldn't possibly want me.*

*You showed us the connections and how to use them, but they'd be meaningless without you.* He squeezed the light and a spark signaled Chris understood. Then he coiled around Ylianor, crushing her between him and Chris, and she felt possessed just like when they made love to her.

He chuckled. *No, it's much more than that.* He tightened his hold. *None of my wild sex with Chris prepared me to feel my lovers as close as they are right now. Come. One thing left to do.*

Ylianor knew exactly what he meant. It was her turn to show no fear and surrender to them, embracing the darkness with its fiery core, plunging straight into their dimension to share the hot passion—or however they cared to call it—rippling their surface. Then they were one.



\* \* \* \*

After their incredible experience, they had to stop for days, each having to come to term with their worst nightmares, intense mind merging fulfilling their souls while bodies demanded their share, too, keeping them tied to the bed to continue the connection on more physical levels. Oddly enough, their journey seemed at an end, perhaps due to the awakening of a new self that allowed them to analyze old patterns.

And nothing haunted Chris more than his neglected childhood, bitter memories he had never dared bring back, not even to himself, with their heavy load of angry considerations that had poisoned him for years. "My father never liked me," he confessed candidly one night, gazing intently at the fire around which they had gathered. "He always preferred my brothers, Steve in particular. It seemed nothing I did could please him."

The prince tousled his head. "Come on. I doubt your father did things deliberately to hurt you. He was probably over protective and strict in his ways, but only for your own good."

Chris shook his head. "You'll never get over your bad habit of justifying people, will you?"

A wide grin lit Duncan's face. "Never! It's my most endearing trait."

Chris stretched out to clasp his lover's hand. "You have much better qualities. Believe me." He shrugged. "Anyway, I'm not saying you're wrong, but I felt like all my father's love and support went to them, bitterness and anger reserved to me alone on the rare occasions he noticed I existed. That's how much he cared for me."

"You're exaggerating." Duncan's soft tone tried to make him see reason. "Your father noticed what you did or he would've never sent you to me."

“Sure, but he never packed his beloved Steve off or Bran, for that matter.” A fresh wave of rage washed over Chris. “With me though, he didn’t hesitate one moment.”

Wrapping his arms around him from behind, Prince Caldwell cradled his head against his chest. “Still, I can’t blame him. If it wasn’t for him, we might’ve never met.”

He leaned against the powerful frame. “That’s beside the point. Don’t you get it? He hated me enough to send me as far away from him as he could. That’s how I see it. The fact I met you is no consolation, not for his behavior anyway, acting as if he didn’t give a damn about me.” In silence for a brief pause, Chris contemplated the high flames lighting and warming the room, the red licks spreading a soft glow that seemed perfectly attuned to his mood. “Many times I’ve fantasized about cutting up people in front of him.” His tone grew husky. “Just to get his attention or any kind of reaction, hoping he’d feel bad about how I’d turned out. Mostly, I like to imagine the look of horror slowly spreading on his face the second he realizes I’m carving someone to pieces. Other times, I wish he were in the victim’s place.” He sighed deeply, wondering why he was letting it all out and in front of Ylianor nonetheless. “Am I cruel?”

Duncan’s touch warmed his chest. “I think it’s a reaction. You feel slighted, in need of revenge and punishment, so that’s the best way you know of doing it.”

“No reactions, just pure hatred.”

“I think you never hated your father, Angel. Quite the contrary instead, you love him a lot.”

Like a knife ripping his soul apart, the words cut right through his heart and Chris bowed his head as if deep in thought, but in reality, to control the burning sensation that was rapidly rising to the surface. Helpless in its wake, he let it invade every corner, feeling hotter and more constricted than ever, ready to

burst and lash out at the cause of his pain.

"He could become dangerous." He heard Ylianor's warning as if it came from another world.

"I know, Princess. I'm here for him."

At those words, Chris felt Duncan inside him, his beloved reassuring touch enough to soothe his raging spirit, dimming the fire to its embers. "Maybe you're right, lover." And his voice broke from the intense emotion. "After this assignment is over, I'll have a talk with my father, a man-to-man talk such as we've never had." He tried a confident smile, but it came out wrong, his lips twisting in a bitter snarl instead. "I need to tell him who I am, if I find out in the meantime, and ask for his..." *Forgiveness? Love? Respect?* Chris was not sure any of these would satisfy him, but it would have been a start. "He's my father, so he should accept me for what I am, shouldn't he?"

Prince Caldwell squeezed his shoulder. "I'm sure he will. I've been telling you to do it for years."

Chris shrugged. "I guess I wasn't ready. Now thanks to both of you, I feel a different energy, which can help me deal with my father, too."

Ylianor opened her mouth for the first time that evening. "What about your mother?"

Chris sent her a penetrating look. "Interesting you should ask. I'd have gladly cut her up more than a few times, even if she adores me. But I always felt she was too protective of me, wanting more of my love than I was willing to give."

Ylianor's eyes glittered in understanding. "So her love was not welcomed."

Chris nodded vigorously. "Absolutely not! I've often thought my father would've loved me if she hadn't always interfered. I allowed her to defend me on more than one occasion in front of him and I still regret it. Now that I think of it..." Creasing his

forehead in an effort to remember, some old scenes between his father and mother over him played in his mind. “The more she did it, the more Father picked on me. What she could not understand was that her protection ended up harming me, especially since ours is a very competitive family.” He sighed. “I can’t say I hate her, she’s my mother after all, but I wish she’d acted differently when I was a kid.”

Ylianor kept a neutral gaze on the fire. “Could this explain your feelings for women?”

*Damn her!* Watching her silhouette lit by the red flames—the long dark hair glowing, face partly hidden by the heavy strands, chin digging on her knees, eyes averted to the fire—Chris wanted to hold her in spite of his ferocious resistance. Am I getting a soft spot like Duncan suspects? *And what if she’s getting to me?*

Irritated, he shook his head to free it from dangerous thoughts. No, better keep his mind focused on his family problems, rather than create new ones. “Ever since I can recall, I’ve liked only men.” And even if it sounded more defiant than he intended, he did not change tone. “I love their bodies, their sex, their elegant, straight lines so much more exciting than any woman’s treacherous curve. But it’s not only a question of appearance. Like their linear structure, men are straightforward, rational, logical and to the point where women...” He hesitated a fraction of a second, then decided to let her have it all, no discounts, no comforting lies, nothing but his uncensored thoughts. “They’re petty, jealous and devious, without an original thought of their own, yet capable of talking for hours on end about nothing. Under whatever circumstance, I can’t find a single thing I like about them, not physically and certainly not mentally, unappealing in and out of bed despite Duncan’s attempts to convince me of the contrary. They lack in...passion, cold and

calculating creatures, which they are, always trying to turn everything to their advantage, sex and love included.”

The onslaught left everyone speechless for a second, the embarrassed silence broken only by the wood crackling under the fire’s assault. But Chris did not feel sorry, not one single bit, or concerned about Ylianor’s feelings.

Duncan clearing his throat was the first to speak again. “If you hate them this much, why haven’t you ever thought of cutting up a woman?”

“Well, the thought hit me once, as we all recall.” But when Chris’s tasteless humor resulted in another stunned silence, he coughed as if to empty his throat of the nasty words. “I’m sorry, Ylianor, it was a bad joke—”

“Terrible, I’d say.” She averted icy cold eyes from him.

“You’re right, it was.” Chris shifted nervously. “I feel I haven’t apologized enough for my conduct, so please forgive me. I didn’t know what I was doing.”

Ylianor shook her head. “You knew exactly what you were doing, but now I understand, I was just another woman standing in the way of love, whether it was your father’s or Duncan’s it makes no difference. Since you couldn’t hurt either them or your mother, I was the next best replacement, the same hateful creature you had already driven away from your lover’s side, so you didn’t even need to feel guilty.”

A nasty smile crossed Chris’s lips. “As I recall, dearie, you attacked first.”

Ylianor blushed. “You looked dangerous enough, so full of black rage, I thought you would destroy us all, Black Rose included. But I could’ve never hurt you and you knew it.” Her gaze accused him. “You were too sure of your Virt to fear mine.” She shook her head. “No, what happened was worse in a way because you were so taken by Duncan, you blinded me out of

carelessness, not because I was a threat.”

Still puzzled at her reaction after all those years, Chris sat up straight. “Yes, but why didn’t you fight back? If your prince was so important to you, why did you let me win so easily?”

Raising her head defiantly, the green eyes flashed hotly. “What would’ve been the point? I could never beat your fire, no matter how much energy I’d throw at you.” She took a deep breath, obviously in an effort to calm down. “Besides, fighting never got me anywhere,” she added on a sadder tone. “I fought to keep my place next to Prince Charles, but death took him away. I fought to keep Duncan, but you took him away. I fought to keep Black Rose, but Lady Caldwell took it away.” She turned her gaze back to the fire as if ashamed they could read the pain that was dripping from her words.

“Maybe you just didn’t fight hard enough,” Chris offered.

A light spread on her face. “Maybe that explains why I punished myself for having lost everything as if it were my fault.”

“What do you mean, Princess?”

Ylianor shrugged. “Nothing, my prince, nothing of importance. Like a silly girl, I thought I deserved to suffer because I was wicked, the witch’s daughter as they called me, and inadequate, not worthy of love, not even the one I gave for granted. Somehow, your mother made me feel like I stole your father’s affection for how could he, a great, wonderful prince, love a lowlife like me anyway? At one point, I even convinced myself I’d imagined our mind sharing as if it had been a fantasy.” Slowly, her gaze swung to Duncan. “Losing you was just a detail in the greater picture, like my father’s scorn. How could I blame him for his despicable treatment? After all, he hadn’t wanted me.” A sad smile crossed her lips. “Well, you may both think me mad, but it was the only way to survive until you, Chris, made me open my eyes to what I’d allowed myself to become.”

Fire crackled and the smoky whiffs blurred Ylianor's pale features as Duncan handed her a glass of amber liquid. She took it and sipped it slowly while neither man talked, waiting for her to continue.

After a generous sip, she looked directly at Chris. "The night you cut me up, I wanted you to do it, to show Duncan what I was really like, hoping the wounds would finally expose the mess I was inside. So I have to thank you, Chris." Her gaze never wavered. "You opened my eyes, showed me what a fool I'd been all these years, a pitiful, whimpering child who never took charge of her life, always delegating to others in hope of an impossible exchange of feelings. If I'm good, he'll love me more. That was my best told lie." Ylianor swallowed another generous sip. "Well, I'm through with that!" She paused to raise the glass for a toast. "And here's to you, Chris, for helping me start on a different path."

Duncan caressed her long hair, running his fingers through her thick strands. "A self-awareness journey?" But his teasing tone was unable to hide his deep concern to Chris's attentive ears.

"Mostly, yes. I know now I can't ask of others what I can't give myself. How can someone love and respect me, if I'm the first to hate and mistreat myself? But I'll learn to accept who I am, so the rest of the world can finally do the same."

Chris mockingly wiped his brow from invisible sweat. "Wow, you've got quite a task ahead of you."

"And not an easy one either," Prince Caldwell commented wryly as he reached in his breast pocket. "However, I want to give you the support of someone who loved you very much, in spite of what you might've thought." He stopped, hands in the pocket, his dark eyes searching Ylianor's face. "I've debated hard whether to let you read this letter, but now I think you

deserve it, if only to reinforce your faith in yourself.”

She took the envelope from Duncan’s hand. “What is it?”

“It’s a letter Father wrote to me...to us, actually, before dying.”

Ylianor unfolded it carefully as if afraid to tear the fragile paper and began reading aloud.

\* \* \* \*

At first, words sounded slurred as if they were crowding her eyes, but soon she was not reading anymore and Prince Charles’s voice filled the room as Duncan felt her mind reach for him to listen to his father telling how much he loved them. Head bowed, Duncan could almost see him, sitting in a corner by the fire, the familiar tone asking him to honor the will in its entirety.

When the voice went silent, a lonely tear rolled down Ylianor’s cheek. “Thank you.” She whispered huskily, handing back the letter. “I hadn’t realized—”

“No, thank you, Princess.” Duncan cut her off, holding her hand tightly and refusing to let it go. “I hadn’t heard his voice for so long.”

Chris looked confused. “Your father’s voice? What do you mean?”

“The princess read the letter as if she were my father, using the same voice and tone I remember from childhood.” He pocketed the letter before squeezing Chris’s shoulder affectionately.

She sighed. “I suppressed the memory because it hurt too much, but the emotions in that letter brought it all back.”

“As if you ever really forgot.” Shifting position, Duncan looked at no one in particular. “Unlike either of you, I’ve no excuse. True, my father, as you heard from his lips, was not too



outspoken in his affections, but I remember he was always there whenever I needed him, ready to give precious advice or a word of consolation.” He paused to recall specific incidents. “Everything considered, mine was a happy childhood—“

“You can’t say that for sure since you don’t remember pieces of it.” And Ylianor glanced at Chris.

Duncan followed her gaze and spotted a funny look on the beautiful face. Well, it would probably remain a mystery, but it suddenly did not seem so important anymore. “Even so, I know I had loving parents, adoring sisters...” He grinned at the princess. “At least from what they tell me, not to mention a special friend at an early age, though nothing beats my life today with two exciting lovers,” he added mischievously, opening his arms to invite Ylianor and Chris in his embrace, which both accepted without hesitations. “Even if they just tried justifying their terrible tempers with pitiful stories.” He joked over their heads, bending to kiss one, then the other.

Laughing wholeheartedly, the blond angel snuggled closer. “All this talk has given me a certain appetite for—”

“Nothing to do with food, I suppose?” Duncan grinned while he fondled both seductively.

“I guess not, if it’s the same appetite we’re all feeling.” And Ylianor turned to kiss the prince.

As usual, Duncan directed them, using the princess as the go-between, knowing it excited the angel to have such control over her. She surrendered immediately to his touch, her legs spreading wide apart, her mouth opening to receive first one, then the other hungry cock, while his hand roamed her flesh to spark more desire. The prince loved to feel her skin crease under his touch, her blood turning into liquid fire and heating every sensitive spot—her entire body it seemed—just as she raised their excitement to a fever pitch.

The blond angel never waited around too much, his rigid shaft demanding more than just a mouth as Duncan knew well. And like most times, he headed straight for her ass, raising her legs to bring the narrow entrance right in front of the tip of his erection, then shoving inside roughly

Standing at the opposite side of the bed, his cock warmly trapped in her yielding mouth, the prince watched his angel shoving between the tight buttocks, his elegant movements pumping harder as she swayed her hips seductively, her ass screwing more tightly around the stone-like thickness. But wanting to feel both, he ordered his angel to open her legs, then leaning over her sprawled frame, his tongue flicked right below the hairy mound in search of its hidden treasure.

Ylianor moaned, her swings shifting to let him reach his destination faster while apparently sucking more cock into her ass. When his tongue hit the swollen bud, she arched her back, slamming her butt against Chris's crotch, surrendering more flesh to Duncan's furious sucks, strokes licks and laps. His fingers traveled to the slit, pushing inside her dripping wetness in time to feel the swells wrecking her body, her scream of pleasure filling his ears, mind, soul. And it was a signal neither he nor Chris could resist, accelerating their pumping to a frenzy as she came more times either cared to count, taking them away from reality the second they ejaculated.

Their plane of existence shifted rapidly, bringing them beyond known time and space, leaving behind the ordinary problems they had struggled to overcome just moments before. But it was a matter of perspective, Prince Caldwell realized, glimpsing the many lifetimes he had shared with them, this one in particular feeling like a new beginning, rather than the end of a long journey whose final aim was to break their chains and set

them free forever. *Right, but is freedom what we're really after?  
Or are we simply looking for a new form of slavery?*

Then the last thought dimmed and he collapsed exhausted on his two lovers.

## Chapter Twenty

The brief pause over, Duncan, Chris and Ylianor resumed their journey to the Nephis Valley, which was every day closer if only they could survive the last part of a trip that seemed to go beyond time and space, progressing almost on the same track as their self-discovery. Yet, they held on despite the Wadirum Desert that proved to be harder than they had imagined at first with its steeply rising temperatures during the day and equally abrupt falls at night. Seemingly never ending, its brownish sand occupied a vast landscape, dotted by several rocky cliffs eroded by time and wind. The horizon had no perceivable boundary, giving the illusion land and sky were one. Lack of rain did not help either, the lifeless expanse stretching for miles on end contributed to the feeling of desolation, as if they were the only living souls in the world, amplifying the contrast with the steppe's abundance of plants and animals.

Undeniably though, it had a wild beauty all its own, particularly evident in the tall, odd-looking stone columns. Shifting colors, blended in a variety of hues according to the slant of Stella's rays, gave each rocky peak a changing shade in an ever-adjusting panorama that was impressive beyond words.

To Ylianor, it seemed almost as if their shapes, not just their color, varied as well. A trick of the light, she realized, watching

them for hours on end, detecting other forms beneath the apparent ones, perhaps dating before the erosions.

The sandy ground also fascinated her with its intense hues, shifting from salmon rose to bright yellow and everything in between, its texture—whether grainy or floury—begging for a barefoot walk...hers, of course, because the horses were suffering enough as it was and not only because of the uneven ground.

Blinding light and intense heat made travel impossible during Stella's zenith, the eighteenth hour, limiting it to discontinued stretches before the fourteenth or after the twenty-second hour, pushing until they could not distinguish where they were. Spending the mid-day pause in a protective shelter, they rested, too tired and hot to do anything except be glad they could escape the sweltering incandescence or the freezing cold. The only consolation was that everyday brought them closer to their destination, the landscape changing imperceptibly at first, but more radically, the further south they went. Limestone replaced sand and the first plants timidly appeared over the horizon until one day, life greeted them at the desert's edge.

*We might just have made it!* Ylianor could not help thinking as she gazed at the rapidly changing environment that would lead them directly into the sacred valley. Then she turned to look at the gorgeous men riding by her side. "Have either of you ever been there?"

"A typical female question." Chris sneered. "Do we look like pledged men?"

"Yes, you do." She spat. "You're pledged to each other."

"I wish." And Chris sent a wistful look in Duncan's direction.

She shifted position. "I realize yours isn't a traditional pledge, but maybe you attended one."

Firmly gripping the reins, Duncan looked at her. "I know it's customary for the mates to bring one or two people along, either friends or relatives, but no one ever asked us."

The demon grinned widely. "We probably didn't give the impression of believing in it."

"What happens there exactly?"

"Again, a stupid question." An annoyed scowl distorted Chris's beautiful face. "How should we know?"

"Come on, Angel." Duncan's deep voice scolded gently.

One thing Ylianor had learned quickly was the demon had his good and bad days, even now they had cleared many issues among them and put the basis for real change in their old patterns. Chris felt like a new man when he was in the right mood, an exceptional partner brimming with the pure joy of being alive and wanting to use every opportunity to have fun in whatever dashing fantasy took his fancy. She almost loved him then, his sardonic yet playful attitude capturing her heart and crushing it in spite of his every shortcoming. At those times, Ylianor nearly believed he could get along with her, even like her in his own very personal way, but they never lasted long enough for her to know for sure. A bad night's rest, or any such futile excuse, would make old Chris resurface, with his sarcastic and biting comebacks, all designed to hurt her. Quite understandable, especially since his patience was wearing thinner than usual thanks to the tiring journey through the desert, but not fair she had to pay for his irritation by being the butt of his biting remarks.

Duncan's eyes flashed in understanding. "We're all tired. Still, it's no excuse to be nasty." He turned to Ylianor. "I know when they get there, couples and their groups rest in two separate shelters, traditionally devoted one for the man, the other for the woman. The ceremony takes place the following day in front of

everyone and the couple chooses a family name, either his or hers. At the end, they spend the night and the next day in one of the shelters while the group waits in the other.” He creased his forehead as if trying to remember more details, then shrugged. “That’s basically it.”

“So how are we going to go about our task, my prince?”

“I wouldn’t make any plans yet, Princess. Let’s see how we feel when we get there.”

“I think we should honor traditions.” The hint of a smile crossed the demon’s lips. “Ylianor should take one shelter while we take the other. If we follow the ritual, we might have a better chance to discover what’s missing.”

“I totally agree!” Exasperated by his nagging attitude, Ylianor wanted privacy for a change. “I don’t think I could stand spending the night with you anyway,” she added coldly, hoping to hurt him at least a fraction of what he was capable of doing to her. “Or with you either.” Her gaze swung to the prince, even if it was not entirely true. “Yes, some rest from you two will only do me a whole lot of good.”

“Tired of us already?” Duncan mocked. “I thought you adored us.”

“There are limits to adoration as well.” A sweetly ironic smile curved Ylianor’s lips. “Besides, I’m sure you’ll survive the night without me.”

“We’ll keep so busy there won’t be any time to worry about survival.” And Chris’s malicious gleam told her exactly how he planned to spend the night alone with Duncan.

*Damn you!* She could not help thinking, averting her eyes so he would not see how easily he affected her, turning every slight comment into another weapon against her. *And damn them both for being too attractive for my own good.* Again, she cursed, unable to tear her gaze off the two incredible men at her side in

spite of her annoyance with them

Fuzeon came closer and Duncan pointed at a mountain chain looming not too far ahead, indicating a narrow slit among the seemingly impenetrable rocky walls. "See over there, Princess?"

Not really knowing what she was supposed to look at, she nodded.

"That's the entrance to the Nephis Valley."

"Which one? I can't see anything except a..." She squinted her eyes. "It looks like a crack in the rocks."

Duncan nodded. "Exactly. Nature has hidden the entrance and no one imagines a narrow slit in the mountain walls leads to it."

Itching to see the fabled place, she urged Starlet forward, soon standing in front of the low rocky opening, oddly resembling a woman's cleft, which, once penetrated, gave access to a narrow passage that widened into a clearing after a few steps. Stretching in the distance, a long, seemingly endless canyon cut through high mountains. Running water had probably dug the long rift eons before, the ancient river working better than an architect to create a fracture through bedrock that had gone deeper with each passing era. Now tall stonewalls flanked a narrow climbing path, its twists and turns winding like a spiraling coil soon lost to the eye.

Once inside, Prince Caldwell glanced at the two shelters in the large clearing, flanking on opposite sides the tight, twisting passage as if to mark its beginning. "We'll spend the night here and tomorrow we'll go to the valley."

*My prince, I'll take the left-hand one.*

*Are you sure you want to be alone?* His deep voice echoed huskily in her head.

*Yes, just as you need your space with Chris. He's giving off too much steam, lately, not used to being with a woman for so*



*long, I guess.*

*So you noticed, too?*

His ironic tone made Ylianor almost smile. *It was kind of hard to miss.*

Duncan sighed. *I hate to see his nasty moods, especially if he takes them out on you.* He shook his head, long hair flying around his shoulders, and Ylianor's breath caught in her throat. *Are you sure this isn't another punishment?* The black eyes flashed, lips curved in a challenging smile.

Feeling her resolve weaken, she breathed the words before she had time to change her mind. *Yes, I'm sure. I need my space, too. Don't worry. I'll be fine or I'll send a voice if I need anything.*

With a resigned look, Duncan nodded. *All right, you know where to find me.* He took the right-hand path, trailed by Chris. *And have sweet dreams.* His voice whispered sensually after he had already disappeared inside the shelter.

\* \* \* \*

"I didn't think this journey would be so difficult, lover." The blond angel complained that night, finally alone with his prince.

"It's not the journey. It's the company."

Chris took a sip of the amber liquid from his glass. "Come on. Give me a little credit for my effort. I've behaved well enough so far, all things considered."

"And you have to give her credit for opening a new channel between us, Angel."

"Yes, I'm grateful." Chris granted annoyed. "Really, I am, but after years of keeping my distance from women, you cannot expect me to see one every single day and be happy about it. So please, don't spoil tonight by talking about her." He stretched

and reached Duncan's groin, his hand playfully teasing the cock beneath the clothes. "Besides, she needs her alone space just as bad as we do, if not more."

"How do you know?" His surprise justified, the prince wondered whether Chris had started reading minds, too.

The blond angel's touch deepened in an obvious attempt to raise his interest. "That's easy. If I hadn't read it in her body, it would've been enough to analyze her history, which, apart from the first nine years, she spent alone and unwanted. Having learned to accept solitude, she must be fed up with our presence."

Prince Caldwell cocked his head, watching the blond angel stretched out on his stomach, mouth dangerously close to his crotch where the constant teasing was undeniably having an effect. "Do I detect a note of sympathy?"

Chris grabbed the cock through the clothes without attempting to free it. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not an uncaring monster. Who, better than me, can relate to those feelings? And I can tell you that, however bad they might've been, she was getting used to them, even happy I dare add, if you'd never knocked on her door."

The prince stopped his hand from fondling his already aroused cock. "Are you saying I did her no favor by bringing her along?"

Chris raised his gaze slowly, the blue-gray eyes sparkling in the semi-darkness. "You did her no favor the moment you got back into her life. She was ready to accept a fairly uncomplicated existence, but there you go, upsetting all her neat plans. That would've made me furious."

Duncan released Chris's hands. "I thought I gave her a way out."

The blond angel straightened up to face him. "No. As you've

pointed out before, you were just being selfish, thinking only about yourself.” He shrugged noncommittally. “You saw her, you wanted her and you took her. End of the story.”

The prince shook his head. “If only she weren’t so damn attractive in and out of bed, all this might’ve never happened. And with her who could be...” He stopped not wanting to think of the words, much less say them. “Irony isn’t it?” He shrugged in fake amusement. “You know how long I’ve looked for a woman like her.”

“Yes, I know.” Chris’s tone sounded strangely gentler. “No one’s happier than I am that you finally found her, but this set of circumstances is a bit too tight for me.” Lying back down, he placed his head on Duncan’s chest. “I’m just glad to be alone with you tonight, your last night as a free man.”

Duncan tensed. “What are you talking about?”

A wide grin lit the angel’s face. “Just getting in the spirit, lover.” He mocked, turning on his stomach again, his mouth straying close to Duncan’s hungry shaft.

But this time, he did not intend to resist to the angel’s magnetic attraction. “Then I suggest you do your best to make me enjoy my last free hours.” His hand on Chris’s neck, he pushed the blond head over the tip of his erection.

Unfastening his pants, the angel’s lips closed around the erect cock with a growl of satisfaction and Duncan drowned in the sweet moistness enveloping his demanding organ. With hard sucks, Chris pulled him deeper inside, his mouth seemingly boundless despite the throat constriction, which the prince itched to try. But the blond angel knew him too well to let his thick shaft choke him. Wrapping his tongue tightly around the bulging head, Duncan felt him bring the tip near the plunge, holding it steady when he pushed to outwit his defense. His cock swayed, hitting a cheek, then the roof of Chris’s mouth before it

returned on its original track, the intention to reach the angel's stomach very strong, even if prevented again by the tongue's forceful licks that pushed it back. They played for hours at this favorite game of theirs, neither surrendering to the opponent, both wanting to conquer the other, to subject him to his superior skills, until Chris's nimble fingers raised the stakes.

Tracing the edge of the narrow asshole wriggling beneath him, young Templeton stuck his fingers deep into it, one forceful slide that reminded Duncan how much his butt craved Chris's cock. Shifting his attention to the anal region, the prince felt his desire spiraling as the angel rubbed the sensitive skin between balls and ass, his fingers stroking their way to the tight entrance, rimming the tender edge a fraction of a second before plunging into the burning flesh that craved nothing more except something thick to fill it.

"All right," Duncan muttered, flipping Chris on his back, "you convinced me." With steady hands, he took his lover's pants off, admiring the straight organ jutting proudly in the air, hard as stone already, though it did not seem to mind a lavish wet kiss that sucked it into Prince Caldwell's open cavity for a passionate treatment of licks and laps. Not that it needed anything, Duncan thought once more, gripping the hardness with a firm hand, then slid the skin up and down the long stem, but he liked to check just the same, his stomach taut with anticipation of what was to follow.

Straddling Chris, he came down on him, as the angel adjusted the tip of his erection to take his butt. At the first impact, the bulging head slid into the yielding flesh, the tight ass walls squeezing their prize while it penetrated inch by inch, until it disappeared all inside. The movements only increased Duncan's pleasure, the swaying hips slamming against his ass to create more room sent shivers down his spine and the prince

responded thrust to delicious thrust. And as happened frequently of late, his pleasure was not purely physical.

Chris's throaty voice halted his flight. "If we don't change something, I'm gonna spill my soul in your ass, right here and now."

"Fine, then I'll make it so you can resist a while longer." Unscrewing the wonderful cock, Duncan propped his angel on all fours, admiring for a second the helpless position, buttocks spread out, narrow hole in full view, shaft hanging down from its own weight. "Magnificent view." Stroking and slapping the firm roundness, he shoved inside all the way to the hilt, swallowed by the greedy flesh that seemed to want more. And it was the end of them, fluids ejected faster than lightning after only a few rapid pumps.

With eager tongues, they nursed their respective shafts back to their magnificent hardness, beginning new fiery dances, the erotic thrusts bringing them again, and again over the edge, their souls magically entwined through it all, making each repeated explosion more powerful than the one before, until energy failed them completely.

\* \* \* \*

Ylianor sighed, looking at the uphill climb unwinding through the high rocky walls, barely wide enough to go single file, and feeling traces of those who had undertaken it in the past. "I think this is a spiritual journey."

Seventy-two hours, two full days, had passed since their arrival, exhaustion taking its toll along with the need for a regenerating time alone, even if she had missed them more than she cared to admit. Watching the dark and blond heads walking up the narrow path had crunched her heart painfully, although

their absence had also made her stronger in a way. And it had worked miracles on them, too, the demon even going as far as embracing her tightly when they had met again. "Couples are required to let go of their past life before joining in the future one as clean spirits," she continued, speaking of the vague auras she perceived still clinging to the place.

"Then no one's better qualified than we are." Chris teased. "It seems we haven't done anything besides interpret the past to decide what our future will be."

"So let's go and meet it." Prince Caldwell strode forward, followed single file by Ylianor and the demon.

After a few twists and turns, the passage widened, allowing them to walk side by side, Duncan moving between Chris and Ylianor. Seemingly endless, the journey felt unreal as if they were abandoning one dimension to enter into another, probably because the limited horizon visible was unlike anything she had experienced before.

Closing in on both sides, the high bedrock walls reached the sky, not entirely straight, but curving the upper edge, thus creating the illusion they were going through a tunnel with little light to guide their steps. Stella's rays would be gone soon anyway, the high peaks effectively cutting much of them off during the day, allowing only scarce light to filter through and reflect on the rocky ground before bouncing off to the walls. The air felt warmer and thicker due to the heat trapped in the stone folds without any means to escape. Running water was the only sound that broke the silence and though there was no visible sign of it, Ylianor felt it run in two parallel canyons, dug inside the hard bedrock, flanking their path at a higher height almost as if the liquid, after retreating from the main road, had created an alternative route. She loved the smell of the place, too, musty, hot, yet filled with a spice of its own, which was neither plant nor

animal, its acrid odor filling her nostrils to slide down to her throat.

Suddenly, the rift tightened again and they had to proceed single file once more while light faded fast. Looking up, Ylianor wondered if they would reach their destination in time, but the thought died as the path came to an abrupt halt in front of an apparently impenetrable stony wall. On close examination, they discovered that, just like the entrance, here, too, there was an extremely small crevice in between the solid rocks, which required they bend and twist in order to squeeze through it. Thus they stepped into another world.

On the other side of the cleft, mountains enclosed an exquisite green valley, guarding it like a precious gem with their snowy peaks and rigid walls. The breathtaking view left Ylianor speechless while her gaze traveled around to fix as many details as possible. Now she could see the water, running inside open stone channels within the mountain's walls, which circled the perimeter, then fell in a smooth cascade into a small pond at the plateau's eastern edge. And the contrast between the white snows above and the glittering green would have kept her gaze glued, had there not been something else demanding her attention, almost imperiously if she had to define the sense of urgency pervading her.

Responding to the pull, she glanced in the cascade's direction until she saw a brilliant light flashing relentlessly, its million lights flickering like they were a million people's auras combined into one and gone completely crazy, unbalanced by its contrasting moods.

\* \* \* \*

Startled at the noise, Duncan looked at the strange structure

standing in front of the cascade, emanating an odd humming that came from its depths and drowned every other sound. *Do you hear it, Princess?*

*What?*

*The humming.*

*No, but I see the lights.*

He peered at the structure, but it was completely in the dark now that Stella had definitely set. *What lights?*

*Here, I'll show them to you.*

Suddenly, a million colors flashed in his mind, blinding him before he could adjust to their intensity. *They're beautiful.*

*Aye, they are.*

*But I think we should concentrate on the structure.* He pointed at it.

*What structure?* She fixed her eyes on the general direction he indicated, then shook her head in frustration. *I'm afraid the lights blind me to everything else.*

Duncan ginned in spite of the situation. *Now it's my turn to help you see.* Amused, he pictured the structure in its wholeness, then sent it to her.

*Now I see it.* Breathing heavily, her voice sounded faint amidst the intense humming.

So far, the structure was proving to be more complex than he had expected, sending them different signals as if it read their diverse Virts. *So what is Chris seeing?*

Glancing behind his shoulder, he discovered his lover had turned into blazing fire, obviously reacting to the same vibes Ylianor perceived, and melted with the shiny lights, becoming one with them.

*He's beautiful.* Duncan heard Ylianor's awed remark as she followed the blond angel's flight into his energy form.

*Couldn't agree more, Princess,* he confirmed with an ironic



smile, wishing he had time to probe her feelings. *But let's concentrate on the structure.*

She blushed at the scold and returned to the task at hand. *It feels like it's the valley's guardian.* She breathed at last. *But the lights...*

She paused as if to analyze them better. *I think they are some sort of energy field, a protection against intruders.*

*I guess he considers only you an intruder, because I keep seeing the structure as it is without any hindrance.*

She smiled. *Like Chris, it must prefer men, but if you want my help, you must tell him to shut it off.*

*He's already working on it.* And his senses mixed with Chris's as he blended in the light and found its source inside the pond. Drawing on the prince's Virt, he uncovered the metallic object hidden at the bottom of the pool, his fiery darts flicking over it until they managed to turn it off somehow.

When he perceived the plateau had plunged into darkness for Ylianor, Prince Caldwell concentrated on the structure again, an odd-looking pyramid that seemed out of their world, yet strangely familiar in its resemblance to the image the three of them had seen at the Hall. Built on a triangular foundation, the structure was composed of many smaller three-sided pyramids, fastened together, or maybe framed one inside the other, in a tower leading to the sky. Each pyramid was unique, made of different materials and colors, some of stone, impenetrable to light, others more transparent, almost glass-like.

*It's beautiful.* Ylianor's admiration for the elegant form penetrated through the continuing humming. *It reminds me of the pyramid Chris thought about, remember?*

He nodded in agreement. *The one he used to describe our relationship, right?*

*Yes, the triangular pyramid.* The image flashed in her mind,

then affected Duncan, too. *Maybe this place was already calling us. How many pyramids does it contain?*

Prince Caldwell tried counting, but there were too many of them. *A lot, I'd say.* He took a step forward. *Come. Let's get closer.* The structure felt alive, beckoning them with its power, though he could not detect exactly what it was. "All right, let's spread out and try to discover its secrets," Duncan suggested aloud so that also Chris, returned to his human form, could hear.

Seating in front of the pyramid, he positioned his lovers on opposite sides to surround the base. Then Duncan opened his arms and grabbed their hands, nodding at them to do the same. Obeying, Chris and Ylianor completed the circle, effectively imprisoning the structure. When they touched hands, their minds joined as well and the pyramids suddenly lit up again—not like before, rather in a different way, each one coming alive with a light of its own. Colors ranged from intense white to dark blues and greens, yellows, reds, oranges, all mixed in a kaleidoscope of shades, free of ominous flashes or blinding effects. Using only his mind, the prince ordered to close ranks and blend in with the single pyramids.

Quick and curious, Chris's brilliant energy ran up and down the entire structure, not lingering on any piece, rather focusing on the whole. Something felt out of place, but, when Duncan asked him to explain, he could not say what.

Prince Caldwell examined each piece singularly as the humming increased to the point he noticed a missing note that gave the melody an odd off-key sound. *But where does it come from?*

Ylianor, instead, felt the structure as a composition with a big hole in the middle as if it had lost its most important piece. *Its heart is missing!*

Under her watchful gaze, the angel's fiery sparks narrowed

on a precise spot of the structure, positioned near the top, where a small space, almost invisible to the naked eye, seemed void.

*Chris has found something, my prince.*

Duncan, too, focused on the spot. *And that's where the missing note comes from.*

*Another pyramid must've been there.*

*Yes, and it must've been a special one, Princess. Why don't you see if you can find the traces of what it was?*

He felt her concentrate on the open space, isolating it from its surrounding in order to read the faint signs still available, until an image formed in her mind, clear and sharp.

*Do you see it, my prince?*

*I do.* He saw a three-sided pyramid, apparently made of solid material, yet with a round shape inside it. *A pyramid with a sphere inside? Is there a similar one in the structure?*

Together, they went through each single piece to determine whether a duplicate existed, but could not find anything similar to their picture. From the transparent to the solid looking ones, no pyramid hid a core or a sphere for that matter. *That's probably why someone took it, but who would go to all the trouble of removing it? And how could it be done?*

*Let me see if I can focus on some energy traces of the very recent past.*

His mind's eyes trained on Chris's acrobatics on the structure, he wondered how it had survived the loss of its heart.

*I don't know, my prince, but that's why I believe it happened a short time ago. The missing pyramid's pattern is still fresh, a clear sign it had been there until recently.* She reported, already exploring the broader area of the Nephis Valley.

Following her search, Prince Caldwell saw the traditional spot where couples stood for the pledge, one on either end of the long side, with a third person in between, but their energy

residue revealed nothing to Ylianor. Moving further back, however, another place attracted her attention, drawing Duncan's, too, until she picked up a familiar aura, someone she had come to know intimately in the past few days.

*I can't believe it!* Duncan exclaimed surprised as he caught Ylianor's image. *What was David doing here?*

*I don't know, but he wasn't alone.* At the words, a dark haired woman with high cheekbones and hard sculptured features entered Duncan's head.

*Cecilia Hurst.* He breathed, even more amazed. *That's Cecilia Hurst.*

*She took the object with David's help.*

*How could they?* The prince wondered, not sure he really wanted to know.

*One or both of them must've the Virt to move objects. Now I understand what I detected in David, but couldn't quite put my finger on.*

*So he has a gift, too.*

*He must, otherwise this Cecilia wouldn't have brought him along.*

The logic seemed inescapable. *I guess we'll ask them soon enough.* Suddenly exhausted, he felt the strain of their effort. *I think we found out all we could tonight, so I suggest we leave.*

*If you can tear your lover away from his new toy.* She smiled sarcastic at young Templeton's blazing flights around the structure.

He grinned, feeling extremely proud of his fiery angel, then squeezed the bright energy touching his soul. "He'll come," he assured, speaking the words for Chris's sake. "He's as tired as we are and can't wait to get to a bed."

"Hardly surprising." Ylianor chuckled. "He'd never leave a bed if it were up to him."

Laughing, he cocked his head. “How right you are.” Then he squeezed her hand tightly, his dark energy overflowing to strengthen her dwindling reserves. She nodded, a grateful smile lighting her beautiful face as she shook her head to regain awareness. Chris, too, returned to his usual attractive self, woke up from their trance-like state just as Duncan released their control over the structure and peace fell in his head, the hum that had never stopped mercifully dimmed into silence. Soon after, the structure reactivated its protective energy field, which he perceived only from Ylianor’s blinding reflexes.

Stretching upward, he moved to get away, but his stiff muscles made it hard to take the first step, his sore limbs screaming for mercy. Without even noticing it, they had stayed fixed in the same position for hours, night having come and gone, replaced by a crisp, clear dawn.

In a daze, they retraced their steps back, too tired to notice nature’s explosion of life that greeted the new day with sounds and sights worthy of the most gifted painter, hurrying instead along the downhill path, soon coming to the wide clearing with the shelters. Without adding another word, they went to Ylianor’s cabin, barely managing to reach a bed before collapsing fast asleep.

\* \* \* \*

They slept for an entire day and night, waking up with the most voracious emptiness of their lives. The shelter had different selections of dried food to satisfy small and large appetites, but when they did, they discovered it was not food they craved. No, what they wanted—had always wanted it seemed—was sex, sex and more sex as if an uncontrollable urge had taken their bodies hostage. They hungered for kisses, caresses, touches, strokes,

brushes, rubs, licks, laps, sucks, shoves, thrusts, any and all ways to have sex in every combination feasible with their minds focusing on nothing except positions, penetrations, fucks, screws.

Gone all inhibitions, Chris's desires ran wild, unsettling his usual self-assured nature until he doubted his lifetime convictions as the craving for Ylianor spiraled to a spasmodic level, wanting her with a fiery intensity that would have shocked him, had he not been under this odd spell. Resisting the urge to have her in ways his rational side had strenuously opposed seemed his only strategy at first, but when it failed, it left him with an unbearable ache only the damned woman could quench.

So when Duncan was pumping the wet cunt of her sprawled frame with legs circling Prince Caldwell's waist to take his cock deeper, Chris could not resist temptation any longer. After plunging his demanding shaft in her yielding mouth, he watched his lover's screwing until he could not bear the overwhelming need to taste her—something he had refused to do not just with Ylianor, but with any woman, never having kissed one, not even by mistake, nor stroked the tantalizingly silky skin, solely interested in the two available holes, mouth and ass. Everything else, including the pussy, was superfluous to his way of thinking so never had he felt any particular inclination to explore Ylianor beyond the satisfying pumping of either or both of her cavities. But none of these reminders could stop him from slipping out of her warm mouth as if someone else controlled his body, replacing the thick shaft with his tongue.

Shocked, Ylianor had flung her eyes open, her questioning green gaze staring at him and again, he could not prevent the husky whisper escaping his lips. "The gods help me, I want to taste you all over." Then he had taken her mouth forcefully, like a conqueror on an expedition to claim the land as his own. His

tongue ravished the sweet opening, which Ylianor surrendered immediately to his avid attentions, while his teeth bruised her soft lips as he went farther than mere kisses. In a frenzy, he wanted to swallow her, so he sucked her tongue all the way to his throat, grazing it with his teeth, holding it prisoner to allow him to sweep her at ease. Surprisingly, he loved her taste and wanted to drown in it, filling his senses with it in the hope it would never wash away. And the more he drank, the wider she opened as if sensing he would accept nothing but total compliance with his demands, whatever they would turn out to be.

Well, he had several in mind, even if they all began and ended with Ylianor. Like a man possessed, Chris managed to pull away from her mouth only to start on a sensually delightful journey down her body, mouth and tongue teasing, nibbling, sucking, stroking and brushing the same flesh he had wanted to carve only days before. Not stopping to dwell on the irrationality of it all, he reached her breasts, usually the trait he most despised about women, and found them irresistible, the soft mounds beckoning his lavish kiss, the hard nipples erect at the mere flicker of his tongue. But he was not satisfied with bland caresses, so his teeth bit the buds abandoned in his mouth. She jumped as if in pain, but said nothing, stretching instead to offer him even more skin to abuse.

Not wanting to take advantage of the invitation, not yet anyway, he continued the journey down her flat stomach, stopping just above the hairy mound to watch fascinated his lover's slippery cock disappear into her dripping wet slit. Raising his gaze, he met Duncan's sardonic look, an ironic smile curving his lips.

"Feel the need to explore more of her, Angel?"

Almost without realizing it, Chris nodded.

The prince's rigid shaft slipped out of the sticky trap. "No

problem. I'll find another warm hole to stick it in."

"Let me help you." Chris grinned, grabbing Ylianor's hips to raise them for Duncan's convenience, spreading her buttocks apart until the narrow hole was at his complete disposal.

The prince grinned back. "You really make it hard to resist, Angel." He teased, aiming the erection at the tight entrance.

Chris bent his head. "Wait, lover. Let me check if you're wet enough." His mouth closing on the stone-like hardness, he tasted Ylianor for the first time, her pungent flavor expanding from his mouth to his nose until all he could smell was her. Yet, it did not disgust him as he had feared, rather the acrid aftertaste excited him more than he dared admit. With luscious laps, he cleaned his lover's shaft of all her traces, sucking it hard to make sure he had missed nothing, then gripped it firmly and guided it between Ylianor's buttocks. He would have gone and slammed it through without pity when the urge overtook him once more, and he had to brush his tongue on the throbbing hole, thrusting inside after rimming its edges carefully.

Again, just burying his tongue, nose and mouth in her aroused him to a spasm and he almost came when he finally shoved Duncan's cock into the tender hole. She remained completely still, maybe not ready to receive the thickness, even if Prince Caldwell did not force his entrance. Instead, he pushed Chris's head on the wide-open cunt, crushing his nose into her wet folds. "Taste her, Angel," he ordered, refusing to let him go.

So he licked and lapped, then stroked, brushed, sucked, explored each soft fold, drinking avidly her sticky fluid, slipping inside the velvety slit after tracing its borders, getting more drunk on her taste and smell.

Incredible women could be so exciting, he thought in the rare flashes of sanity. And if anyone had told him he would have actually liked to kiss one intimately, he would have scoffed



incredulously at such madness. Instead, he could not tear himself away from the drenched, widespread pussy, completely under his control.

And when he found the hard, throbbing knot above the trap, it was his undoing. At the first flicker, Ylianor moaned loudly, then moved against Duncan to accelerate the prince's pumping. At the same time, she managed to reach Chris's cock and closed her mouth around it while keeping the steady rhythm he controlled with his tongue alone. If he brushed harder, she would step up the tempo or slow it in case he did not suck as forcefully. But of course, excitement demanded a faster pace, so he wrapped his tongue around the swollen clit, pulling it in his mouth until he felt her quiver, her muscles tightening in anticipation, as Duncan slammed harder into her ass.

Then it all happened together, her swellings thrashing her body like she were prey to the sea's angry waves, the prince taking the cock from her ass to stick it into his mouth and coming with powerful jets that filled it to a choking point. Intoxicated by his lover's taste combined with Ylianor's, Chris could not hold his shaft's explosive reaction as it shoved violently one last time in her pampering mouth, which, after having sucked it to the hilt, had to swallow his hot fluid convulsively released in blissful spurts.

And it was only the beginning of the longest crave he had ever experienced for a woman. In the endless days and nights that followed, he wanted her every time with increasing passion. Whenever their tongues touched, fire erupted, forcing him to jump on her, clawing and rolling one on top of the other, unable to end the kiss. Chris even used his fiery energy to play with Ylianor's body, without hurting, just sparking exciting darts on her most sensitive spots. His lust, combined with her heated

response, amazed even Duncan, obviously not used to seeing her tremble, in pleasure for a change, under Chris's touch—mouth, hands or energy seemed indifferent.

Thus the atmosphere in the shelter grew hotter with each passing day, time and space losing meaning as they drowned in the burning need for sexual intimacy. And nothing else mattered except sex morning, mid-day and night, their minds' and bodies' only reality, interrupted solely by food or sleep when exhaustion overtook them. How long the sexual spree lasted, they could not recall later, but it was enough to wake up one day without feeling the hunger to make them pack their things in a hurry and run away as fast as possible.

"If we don't leave now, we never will." Duncan uttered the warning while rushing them out the door before the impulse had the time to return.

Leaving the Nephis Valley, disoriented by the discoveries, but mostly by its side effects, they set out on a new journey, questions crowding their minds in disorderly tumbles. *Why would David help steal the heart of an innocuous pyramid that bonded people for life? Did he have the Virt for such magic? Or was he just an accessory, lending only his comforting presence while another did the dirty work? And where had they hidden the missing heart? Would they return it to its rightful place when Duncan and his lovers managed to track them down?* But more importantly. . . "Who's Cecilia Hurst?"

## About the Author

Born 1965 in Rome, Italy, I grew up in Lagos, Nigeria, then moved to Atlanta, GA, to complete my studies. In Rome, I graduated in Political Science and now work in the import/export business.

I have always loved writing and started in college by working with Emory University's magazine *The Phoenix*. Since then, I have been writing and publishing in both Italian and English, specializing in gay M/M erotica in various genres, mostly fantasy, sci-fi and paranormal, sometimes trespassing into the contemporary. Recently, I was published by eXtasy Books.

*To Seduce a Soul Mate*

*Bloody Passion*

*Spying the Alcove*

*Roman Seduction*

*Sacrificial Sex*

*Divinitas*

*Trespassing All Hallows Eve.*

Coming in 2010, other 3 episodes of the Virtus Saga:

- May 15<sup>th</sup> - Book 2, *The Game*,
- July 15<sup>th</sup> – Book 3, *The Festival*,
- Sep. 15<sup>th</sup> – Book 4, *The Fitting*.

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