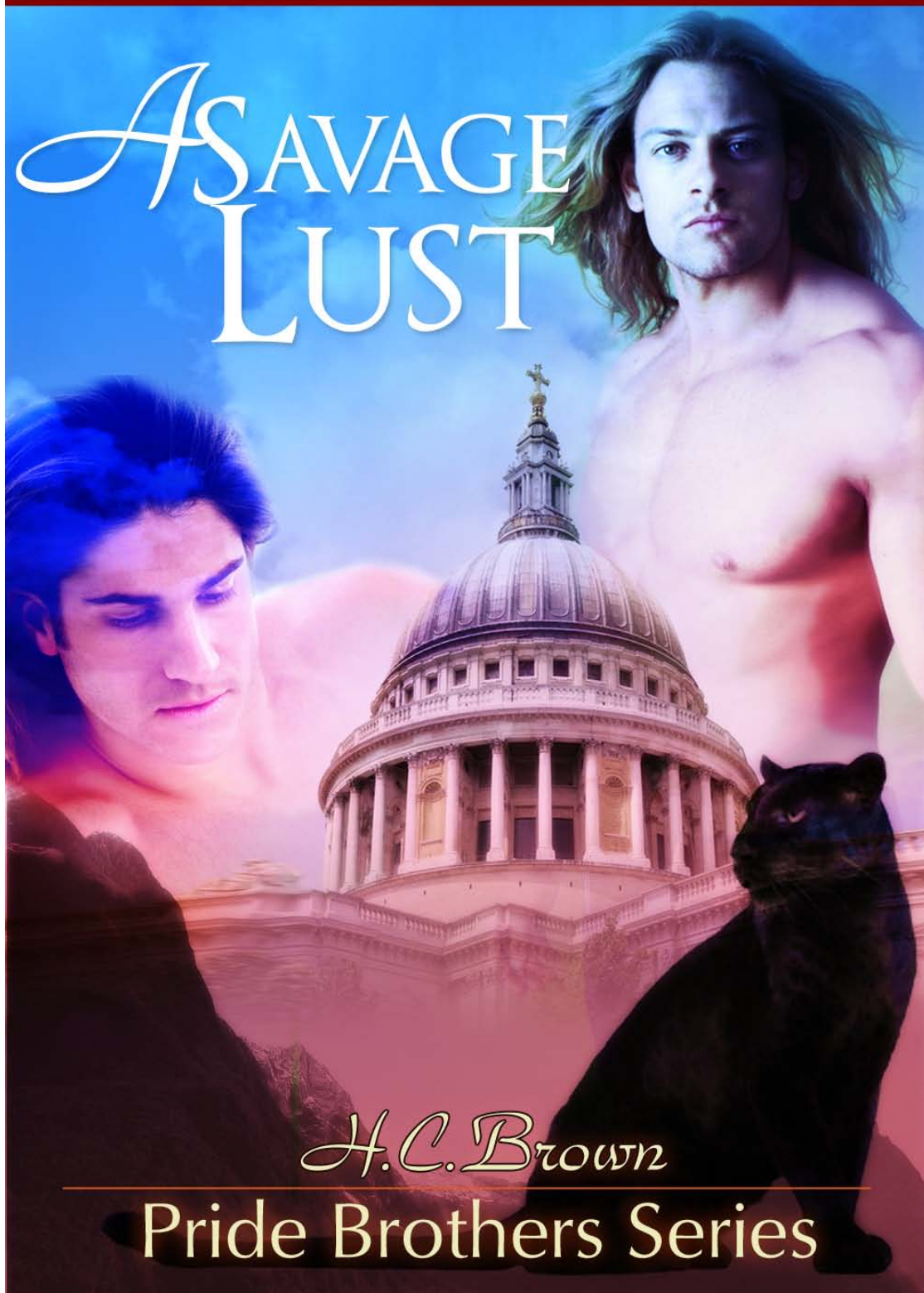


Noble Romance Publishing

ASAVAGE LUST



H.C. Brown

Pride Brothers Series



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A Savage Lust

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Book Blurb

Prince Rio of Knight Watch's mission is to visit London, to retrieve the Lady's Book of Knowledge. He encounters Humans for the first time and his life freefalls into chaos. Torn between his love for a magnificent Fae male and an unusual Human female, he must complete his task or fall foul of Nox, King of the Faerie.

Prologue

Extract from the Great Book of the Prides.

Personal Entry by King Blaise of Knight Watch:

There is unrest throughout the realms. The Lady's Book of Knowledge is missing from the Royal Library, stolen during the festival of Arious. The Knight Watch has searched relentlessly without success. It grieves me one of our own has performed this foul deed. I pray the Lady guide my hand to retrieve this most holy relic.

Chapter One

Other World.

Rio ran his hand down Tanz's back. Damp, peach fuzz skin slid tantalizingly beneath Rio's fingertips. He smiled into the darkness. This evening, he had taken Tanz's ass four times, and listened to his groans of delight each time he took him in his mouth. Tanz's essence still coated Rio's tongue. He longed to immerse himself completely in the man's taste and smell and never come up for air.

In the twilight, Rio could see Tanz clearly. He reached out to touch the damp, moonlit curls pressed against Tanz's blushed cheeks. Rio ran his fingers down across Tanz's pointed chin then up to trace the line of his swollen lips. Overpowered by the need to kiss him, to feel his passion, Rio groaned. He ached to bury himself deep inside Tanz's smoldering heat, just one more time, before daylight. Bending his head to nuzzle Tanz under one tall, pointed ear, Rio breathed in his unique, earthy scent. He wished Tanz would open his eyes; those sultry jade orbs could melt an iceberg and bring Rio to his knees. Tanz had become his weakness. *Lady's blood, I'm infatuated with a faerie.*

Rio sighed and turned onto his back. Pride females would never leave him wanting and he had two waiting at home. Tanz chose that moment to roll over, exposing his full, magnificent length. Rio's heart quickened. Tanz's pale, opalescent skin caught in a beam of moonlight and shimmered. Rio reached out, traced a path across his broad chest, and circled each flat nipple before he rested his palm over Tanz's substantial prick. He enjoyed this far too much; this Fae male had taken him to a level

he had not experienced before. No, none of his male or female lovers had incited such intense lust in him.

The King of the Faerie's voice echoed in his head. He groaned; trust Nox to disturb a night of bliss.

"I know you're awake. King Blaise has requested you return to Dryad without delay. There's been a robbery; someone has stolen the Lady's Book of Knowledge from the Royal Library. Blaise is convinced the Druiks or the Humans are to blame; he has already begun investigations in Druik Void I'm leaving for the Human realm now."

Rio grunted his assent; a request from his king required an immediate response, the fact he was his brother notwithstanding. He shook Tanz gently but he slept in that delightfully exhausted way that only came from a night of erotic euphoria. Pressing a kiss to Tanz's forehead, Rio lingered to memorize the man's unique features. His heart twisted in regret; he had forged a deep connection with Tanz over the past year and wanted it to continue. But a relationship between them could never work; Fae and Pride males were literally worlds apart. Each time he left Tanz, it became harder to forget the delicious faerie. He wished Tanz would wake, so he could explain his abrupt departure. He had no idea when, if ever, he would be invited back to Other World.

* * * * *

Feltich Castle, Dryad

"I'm fully aware of the danger but I've little choice. The Druiks are behind this; you mark my words."

"Yes, no doubt, but sending a Pride brother into the Human realm . . . gods, Blaise, we may never get him back," replied Dare.

Rio squared his shoulders and stepped silently into the king's solar. His brother, King Blaise of Knight Watch, paced up and down, his boots silent on the thick, red rug.

Another of his seven brothers, Dare, leaned casually against the wall beside the fireplace, his arms folded across his chest.

"Is Nox with you?" Blaise turned his head and waved Rio to his side, his eyes wide with expectation.

"No, he left for the Human realm."

Rio lifted his shoulder in a small shrug at Blaise's dismissive snort; he knew the King of the Faerie left to quell unrest in a Human village called London. Nox had described the place in detail, in the hope Rio would use his new skills to follow him.

"I know where he is but I've no idea how to contact him. I suggest you contact Other World; Allure the Fair will get a message to Nox."

Rio looked from one grim face to the other; an outsider would believe them to be triplets, although two years separated each of them.

"Do you really believe the Druiks have stolen the Lady's Book of Knowledge? How could that possibly happen? Nox himself cast the spell to close the Five Gates to the Druiks."

"I *know* they took it but don't know how. The Druiks swore to get even with us after we defeated them in Druik Void. They've technology; mayhap they contrived some way around Nox's spell, although I doubt it." Blaise sighed deeply, ran both hands through his long black hair, and gazed at the ceiling as if to gain divine intervention.

After pouring a goblet of the spicy wine, Miza, Rio took his cup and sat on the edge of the sofa. "Mayhap we have a spy? Rams work in the Druik laboratory and the Druiks have the knowledge to alter them to resemble a Pride member. Nox couldn't prevent a Ram from using the Gates; unfortunately, we aren't at war with them."

"Rams are little better than cattle; do you really believe they'd have the brains or the guts to walk into the Royal Library and steal a treasured relic?" Dare snorted and pushed off the wall.

Rio sipped his wine, conscious of the swell of anger in the room. "What makes you think the book is in the Human realm?"

"We slipped through the Gate to Druik Void last eve and captured a Ram when he left the Druik experimental laboratory complex. He works in the new director's office, and after a little persuasion, he informed me they were using the book as proof of our existence. The Human realm is the only known realm that doesn't know of the Prides. If the Druiks align with the Humans, their advanced technology would be a substantial threat to us and the Fae," said Blaise. He began to pace again.

Rio waited until Blaise had stopped then held his gaze. "And you intend to send *who* to the Human realm?"

When both his brothers turned and stared at him, Rio took a deep breath and let it whistle out between his teeth. "Me? Now wait a minute, you can't *possibly* think I can search an entire realm alone?"

The way Blaise lifted his chin and stared at him for a long moment sent his stomach into freefall. "You're the only one of us who has the magyck to cross into the Human realm and back. You've the skill to change your appearance with glamor and can track an ant through a haystack. Your training with Nox these past two years won't be in vain. I've arranged for Dare's mate to instruct you in the ways of Humans first thing in the morning. You'll leave in two days."

* * * * *

Jill twirled a lock of red hair around her finger then dipped the silver-tipped quill in a pot of black ink. She sketched a car, a truck, and an aircraft on a piece of white paper then chewed on the end of the pen, deciding what else to draw. Hearing voices in the hallway, she lifted her head.

"Hey, so we're going to try to prepare Rio for life in London; fat chance if, you ask me. Mind you, if he gets there and back it might mean we can go home." Beth's cheery voice echoed in the deathly quiet room. She chuckled and pulled out a chair, joining Jill at the table. "Although, I wouldn't want go back; my home is here now."

Jill glanced toward her mate and son. "So is mine; I wouldn't leave Dare and Flame for a trillion dollars."

"Do you mind the constant protection?" Beth whispered.

Raising her gaze, she grinned at Dare; her delicious mate gave her a slow smile in return. Heat flooded her body but then he always made her feel that way. Their son, Flame, lay sleeping on his shoulder with a thumb in his mouth and his hair sticking up in an abundance of bright burgundy curls.

Beth's mates, Thryll and Zandor, lounged in nearby chairs, speaking in hushed tones. Zandor stretched his long legs and gazed briefly at Beth before returning to his conversation.

"No, I *love* having him around all the time. Dare's such a great father; when he went to fight the Druiks, I missed him terribly. Now that's when the real protection started; I was guarded by the king's guards every minute of the day."

"Yeah, well I love mine around too, but surely they trust us alone with Rio, don't they?"

Zandor got up slowly, shaking his mane of amber hair, and walked toward them. He stood behind Beth and massaged her shoulders. "It's Rio we don't trust, little one, or any unmated male. Our presence enforces our claim on you; it's what we do, Beth." Zandor kissed Beth with passion before returning to his seat.

Jill lowered her gaze and pushed the papers into a pile. She glanced up into Beth's face; her cheeks were glowing a deep crimson. "Just keep reminding yourself they're cats and can hear a needle drop a mile away."

Dare looked at her and narrowed his amethyst gaze and she smiled at him before turning her attention back to Beth. "You're lucky having two males so devoted to you. Although," Jill hastily added, "Dare has the stamina of two."

Rio stepped into the room looking dark and dangerous. The intensity of this male unnerved her. Jill clenched her hands together to disguise the tremble and forced a smile. Her face grew hot at the appraising glance he gave her before he inclined his head to his brothers and Thryll. Dressed in black leather that hugged his body like a

second skin, he slinked across the room toward them. He resembled her mate, Dare, right down to the amethyst eyes, although he wore his hair shorter; it hung just past his shoulders like black water. But that was where the resemblance ended. Dare exuded warmth and gentleness concealing the strength within, but Rio, well *he* wore a sign round his neck that said: Danger, approach with extreme caution.

Rio sat at the table and gave her a predatory smile. Jill lowered her gaze, flustered. He rested his chin on his linked fingers and stared at her with a faint expression of amusement. *Stop it; you know you're intimidating me.*

"Eh hem." Beth cleared her throat, bringing Rio's gaze toward her.

"It's cold this time of the year in London," she said. "It's coming up to Christmas, a religious holiday. There'll be decorations in the streets and lots of men in red suits saying, 'Ho, Ho, Ho'. You'll have to lose the earring and the gold armbands; you might get away with the braids." She gestured toward the elaborate gold ear adornment, and the three gold beaded braids hanging from his right temple.

"I'll not remove my warrior braids," he replied, a challenge in his eyes.

"Oh well, it *is* London. You might get away with it . . . I guess," Beth mumbled.

Smoothing back her long, auburn curls, Jill laid the drawings in a line on the table. She explained each one in detail, until Rio's impatience became evident and he began to drum his fingers on the table.

"You need to know these things, Rio. Life here in Dryad is like the medieval period in the Human realm. You live here in a time that reflects the Human world a thousand years ago. People don't live in castles and ride to battle on a horse carrying a sword anymore. There are millions of people in London, of many different races, and there are gangs of armed males who attack people . . . to steal their shoes, for God's sake! It's *not* a safe place. The buildings are different, the technology is nothing you've seen before, and it won't hurt to spend a little time familiarizing yourself with what you can expect."

"If they are as you are, Jill of Knight Watch, they're not so different . . . and *I* have magyck." He shrugged dismissively.

"And the females, Rio, they don't offer themselves . . . well not unless they're hookers. They expect to be romanced a bit before sex," Beth exclaimed, her cheeks becoming bright pink.

Rio's deep, rumbling growl brought the three males to the table to defend their mates. Undaunted, Rio lifted his chin toward the angry males, and his eyes flashed them an amber warning. Beth trembled, glad of Dare's closeness. Rio glared at Zandor and gestured toward Beth.

"Your mate oversteps her mark; I'll not be lectured on how to behave with a female. However, I would be interested in what kind of female is called a 'hooker'."

"Women who sell their bodies for sex." Beth sighed.

"I'm familiar with harlots, Beth. I'm not a cub, as you can see," he said with a wolfish grin.

Collecting the drawings, Jill pushed them into a pile and mumbled under her breath. "You'll need to change your name."

"I will not," he said, banging a clenched fist on the table.

"Yes, you will," Dare replied leaning across the table and glaring at his brother. "And you'll speak to my mate with respect."

"Have I not been the epitome of respect, brother? I'm *here*, sitting at a table, under threat of death from my own kin, and suffering the ramblings of once Human *females*, for the Lady's sake."

Jill poked her head around Dare's massive form.

"Would you consider Rio Knight?"

"If I must."

"And you can't use your magyck in front of Humans . . . and you can't morph."

Jill relaxed with Dare's reassuring hand on her shoulder. Rio rolled up his eyes, pushed the chair out from the table, and stood. Inclining his head toward his brothers and Thryll, he then bowed to the females.

"Thank you; your tuition has been most . . . enlightening."

Jill leaned back into Dare's embrace and watched Rio stride confidently from the room.

"The ungrateful bastard."

Chapter Two

London

Nox rolled his shoulders and stretched out his midnight wings, allowing the silver tips to brush the ceiling. A news report on the flat screen TV had brought him out of a slumber.

"Tonight on Behind the News: More reports on mysterious alternate universes. Professor Linberg will explain the String Theory. Our reporter, Jim Sutton, interviews Aria d'Lion on her latest book, Shape-shifters Are Among Us, the long awaited sequel to The Fairy in My Garden."

Nox pulled *The Fairy in My Garden* from the shelf and turned it over to examine the photograph of a young woman with elfin features. He slammed the hardback onto the bookcase, turned, and glared at the TV.

"Treasonous bitch. If you're Fae, Aria d'Lion, I'll kill you myself."

* * * * *

Aria wiggled in her seat, a bead of perspiration trickled between her breasts. The lights from the TV studio were hotter than hell. The chat in the Green Room with the producer of Behind the News did little to allay the fear welling up and making her sick to her stomach.

Make-up artists hastily applied powder to Jim Sutton's glistening forehead and someone counted down the ad break.

"We're back with Aria d'Lion, author of *The Fairy in My Garden*, and just released this week, *Shape-shifters Are Among Us*. Now, Aria, you had us all checking over our shoulders with the last novel; what can we expect from *Shape-shifters Are Among Us*?"

Aria lifted her chin and frowned. "My books are based on fact, Jim. I have in my possession an ancient document that tells of alternate universes and the people who live in them."

"Will you allow this find to be validated by the museum?"

"Not at this time."

"So you'd have us all believe faeries are real and so are shape-shifters, and we just need to take your word for it." He grinned, pulling a face at the camera.

Aria stiffened and glared at him.

"Yes, the Fae live in Other World but many live here. They use glamor to disguise themselves. They're not tiny; in fact, many of the males are seven foot tall."

"So I read in your last novel, but the shape-shifters, can they really change a human into one of them, like vampires do?" he said teasingly.

"Yes, if they enter our world no woman will be safe from their evil blood sucking. We must use our technology to find the Gates and destroy them."

"So the Gates allow people to jump from one parallel universe to the next?"

"Yes."

"Well I guess we all have to make up our own mind." Jim turned toward the camera and smiled. "Aria will be appearing at a book signing in Hobbs and Sons tomorrow morning at ten. Thank you, Aria."

"Thank you, Jim."

* * * * *

Aldis gripped his cap to prevent anyone from noticing the slight tremble of his hands. Aria had performed admirably and as yet, not a Fae or Knight Watch warrior in sight. Not a bad effort for a changeling, stolen from the dying body of a faerie some

twenty years ago and surgically changed. He sighed; he had become quite fond of Aria, a name her mother gasped in her dying breath. Aria, child of Barric of Pride Lyonesse. He had, foolishly perhaps, kept her name, but then without the telltale fangs and pointed ears, she passed as Human as he did.

Aldis, born as a Ram with horns and pointed ears, happily served the Druiks. He relished the chance to *become* Druik. His looks notwithstanding, as a Ram, he could move throughout the Gates unchallenged. Stealing the Lady's book of Knowledge on a Pride feast day had proved incredibly easy, and had only required a simple disguise. He smiled when Aria stepped from the TV studio, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

"I think we did it this time, Aldis; I'm sure they'll believe us now."

He took her coat from a peg on the wall and held it out for her.

"Yes, it's time they understood the threat that is coming closer by the day. You've done well, Aria."

"Then will you take me home? I would so like to meet my family." She turned and looked up at him, her green eyes filled with innocence.

He patted her shoulder.

"All in good time, my dear. We still have much work to do."

Aldis pushed his cap on his head and nudged her gently toward the exit. So many questions; the hypnosis and drugs were wearing off again. The plan to discredit the Fae and Knight Watch would be moot unless they showed themselves in the Human realm. As soon as King Blaise discovered his precious book missing, the Druiks long-range plans would come to fruition. The shape-shifters would wreak havoc and the trillion or so Humans would join the Druiks and wipe them out. That would teach the self-righteous bastards for sticking their noses in Druik business. King Blaise's recent victory in the battle at Druik Void had put the genetic research back ten years with the murder of the Druiks top research doctor, Pic. This was a fine plan to get even and wipe them all out, shape-shifters and Faerie alike.

* * * * *

Dryad

Rio shrugged into the thick, wool blend overcoat, walked into the courtyard and drew a Circle of Light into the air. Picking up his bags, he took a deep breath, drew his glamor around him, and stepped through the enchanted Gate into the Human realm of London. A blast of cold air hit him in the face, bringing with it a stink of immeasurable proportions. *Gods, didn't these people wash?*

Rio placed his bags on the ground, wrapped his thick, woolen overcoat around him, and fumbled with the buttons. Yes, there on the wall, a lightning bolt painted in red, the exit point and the sign attached to the wall 'Bright Street.' He sunk his freezing fingers into a pair of leather gloves, picked up his bags and marched purposely toward the road. An unfamiliar roaring sound echoed from the end of the alley and he stopped and leaned against the terracotta brick wall. *That noise must be the transport vehicles.*

He poked his head around the corner and froze, heart pounding. Jill had neglected to mention there were so many of these noisy smoke-breathing abominations. He slumped against the wall, deciding how to proceed. The Humans rushed past, hundreds of them spilling out from an underground passage like ants, all marching madly in the same direction. They took little notice of the transport vehicles, with some Humans weaving through them with little heed to the danger, dashing from one side of the road to the next.

A short, round female wearing a bright orange coat with matching hat walked slowly toward him. He flattened against the wall and watched her incredulously. She gazed intently at the shop window, until a heavily muscled beast held on a long rope pulled her onward. The beast grunted and constantly shook its head, drooling great white globules of spit.

What in the Lady's name is that?

Rio pressed his back against the red bricks in the hope the Human and her snorting protector would pass him unnoticed. No such luck; the grunting, drooling

beast lifted its massive head, glared at him and snorted. Rio stepped deeper into the ally but it growled fiercely and its red-rimmed eyes turned devilish in its squashed ugly face. The brute, its shoulders thick with muscle, pawed at the ground, claws tearing at the sidewalk. With one bound, it dragged its owner away from the shop window and lunged toward him.

Rio bunched his shoulders against the attack. The growling, slobbering fiend leapt and knocked the bags from his hand, spilling their contents in the dirt. He cursed; sheer panic took over and with no thought to Beth's warning, he repelled the creature with magyck so it shot up the alley at speed. The beast gave a demon howl and dragged the old female behind him in the dirt. They flew through the air before crashing into a row of overflowing garbage cans.

"Stop, stop," she cried, her hands clutching tight around the rope as she trailed face down through the stinking refuse, flapping like a rag doll in the beast's wake.

Rio shuddered in disgust and pushed his belongings back into his bags. *How can Humans let the old female out alone? Gods, she must be over two hundred.*

He grimaced. She sat on the ground nonplussed, pulling fish bones from her hair, while her beast sorted blissfully through the trash. *Poor old thing; she must be senile.*

She looked up and gave him a grin filled with uneven yellow teeth.

"Sorry about Dutch; he doesn't know his own strength. I spend most of my time being dragged after him," she explained, getting up and brushing the dirt from her dress.

Rio stood motionless, eyeing the foul breathed beast with suspicion. He tried to pull his mouth into some semblance of a smile. "Are you injured?"

"No, no I'll be fine." She stood slowly and picked at the muck on her coat nonchalantly.

Well, you look as if you might expire any moment.

Picking up her dirt-smudged, battered hat, he slapped it against his leg then pushed it on her head. Her legs buckled under the pressure and he had to grasp her arm to support her.

"If the beast causes you injury, why do you continue to use him for protection?"

"Protection?" She snorted. "Dutch would more likely lick you to death."

Rio lifted a brow. "I don't think a female of your age should be allowed out alone."

She straightened her hat and rounded on him.

"I'll have you know I'm on the good side of forty. Now get out of my way."

Rio sighed. Poor thing had lost her mind, he mused, watching her gather up her beast and disappear into the crowd milling at the end of the alley. Drawing a deep breath, he stepped into the street. Humans surged around him; their thick unwashed scents accosted his nose and made his cat roar with disgust. He elbowed his way through the unwashed masses; very few noticed him at all, although he stood above the majority.

Gripping the handles of his bags, he pushed on through the crowd. If any Human challenged him, they'd easily defeat him. There were so many of them crammed into this street alone. How many more enemies watched from the glass towers that shot up like ice sentries each side of the street?

He glanced up. Only a patch of sky peeked through the buildings and that a depressing gray. Multicolored paper littered the sidewalk, caught in drifts of black, streaked snow. He fought to breathe, his chest hurt and his eyes ran each time he inhaled. The air swirled around him, heavy with an evil, pungent scent. He lifted his head and searched for the sign Nox had described. Not fifty paces away was a bright, yellow sign: Bridge Hotel. The King of the Faerie would be expecting him.

Rio stood before the building and watched a Human enter through a spinning, glass gate. He copied him, stepped into the small space, and waited. Nothing happened until another man stepped into the space opposite; the door spun and pushed him back into the street. Rio ground his teeth and rushed at the door. It spun, and he tumbled out into the foyer of the hotel. Staggering to his feet, he took a deep breath of the reasonably clean, warm air and placed his bags on the thick, red rug. His gaze drifted around warily. A great flight of stairs spiraled away before him, flanked with a high cream

wall, decorated with bunches of gold fruit. A young male came forward and attempted to take the bags. Rio growled angrily. "You think to steal my shoes, whelp?"

"No, sir; I was taking your bags to the check in. Do you have a booking? What name shall I say?" The whelp's eyes widened and he stepped back.

"I'm here to see Nox."

Rio picked up his bags, squared his shoulders, and followed the boy to a long desk. A balding man wearing a pair of glasses resting on the end of his nose looked up at him expectantly.

"This is Mister Nox's visitor," said the whelp.

"Ah, yes, you're expected, penthouse apartment," the man replied and waved a hand toward a hallway on his left.

Rio growled and turned to the whelp. "Take me to him."

* * * * *

Nox chuckled with surprise, hearing Allure the Fair's voice in his head. His lover always managed to pick the most inconvenient time to use their mind link. It was as if he knew the exact moment Nox began to seduce one of the females. Nox missed him, but someone had to stay in Other World to run things in his absence. His friend's voice echoed in his head.

"Rio is on his way. I'm impressed. He used the Circle of Light with the skill of a Fae," said Allure the Fair.

So, Rio had decided to attempt the Circle of Light transfer and had arrived safely in London. He had the skill, alas, but not the confidence. Nox shrugged. That would come. He broke the link and tried to focus on the matter at hand — his two beautiful companions.

Relaxing back on the blue silk sheets, he rested his head on Belle's soft skin. A midnight-haired faerie, she had peach colored breasts which pressed caressingly against his cheek. He groaned. Chloe, with hair the color of ripe corn, ran her tongue up

the length of his shaft. Soft warmth brushed his cheek and he turned his head to capture a rose pink nipple between his teeth, inhaling her warm, erotic scent. Moaning, he suckled the hard tip. Belle buried her fingers in his hair and pulled him closer, her body undulating beneath his shoulders.

Chloe took him deep in her mouth and sucked just hard enough to tighten his balls. His ass muscles tensed as her wet fingers caressed his passage. Her teeth ran down his length in glorious torment. *Gods, she is so good at this.*

He pushed up his hips as fire spiraled from his balls and collected in his belly. Reaching for Belle, he crushed her mouth in a kiss and shuddered to completion. Damn, they are good, he mused. Chloe sucked him gently, extending his climax before she slid up his body to claim a kiss. He enjoyed the contentment of being with these females, his now for over a year. In truth, he cared for them dearly, as did his lover, Allure the Fair. Sighing in contentment, he closed his mouth over Chloe's eager lips; if only they were his true mates, his life would be complete.

Nox's head jerked up and he cursed when the phone rang.

"What?"

"Mister Nox," said the concierge apologetically. "You have a visitor; he's on the way."

"Okay, when he arrives we're not to be disturbed."

"Right you are, sir."

* * * * *

Rio followed the young male, Jim, into a steel room. He ground his teeth when a door slid closed, trapping them within its foul smelling interior. Jim punched a glowing button by the door and the box swayed beneath Rio's feet. He cursed and watched the young male closely; this strange room with ear-destroying music caused the other man no panic. Rio raised himself to his full height and remained perfectly still when the door slid open.

"This way, sir; this floor is for the exclusive use of Mister Nox."

He followed Jim from the small room, down a hallway with a red carpet to a splendid polished wood door. Jim knocked, stepped back, and held out his hand, palm up. Rio inclined his head to thank him when the door opened; Nox, wearing only a pair of black silk pants, pushed a piece of paper into Jim's hand and smiled broadly.

"Come in, put your bags down anywhere; you're staying with me. Take a seat. We've much to discuss," he said and waved a hand toward a plush dark blue sofa.

Rio walked into the room, thankful for the warmth coming from a roaring fire. He dropped his bags to the floor, pulled off his coat and sat. His gaze drifted to two naked faeries lounging on a large bed beyond a pair of white doors. Inclining his head, he glanced at Nox, who took the seat opposite and handed him a goblet.

"You brought the girls?"

"Aye, would you expect me to do the Knight Watch's bidding without any female company? I can't take my pleasure with Human females, can I?"

Rio nodded thoughtfully; *it would* be hard not to touch a Human female for fear of binding them to you for life.

"What if they're discovered?"

"They will retract their wings, so unless a Human comes close they won't be noticed."

Rio turned to look at the two ethereal beauties. His time studying with Nox had given him an upfront and personal experience with the Fae, both male and female. He returned their smiles with a grin.

"They *are* rare beauties."

"Yes, they are, but they won't help us find the missing book," said Nox, dismissing the girls with a wave of his hand.

Rio sipped his wine and gazed at Nox over the rim of the goblet. "Do you have any information?"

"Tanz is here, he knows the area. He's checking out the author of a book, *A Fairy in My Garden*, and trying to find a lead on the Lady's book."

Rio spun the stem of the gold goblet between his fingers. One of Nox's own, he noticed. A slight tremor of sexual heat rippled through his body.

"Tanz is here?"

Nox noticed his excitement at once and grinned.

"Aye, I thought that might interest you," he replied with a wink.

Yes, that does interest me, more than you will ever know.

Rio shrugged and tried desperately to push the image of Tanz's moonlit, tousled hair and damp, sculptured body from his mind.

"So what did he find? I gather the Fae are a myth here."

"They have no idea, really; the book only followed a lineup of various other fictions about us. Most of it only makes the myth idea stronger, but the author came close on one or two occasions. Too close. She has written some very disturbing facts about the Fae and her new book is about the Prides. Tanz found her easily; her book is a best seller, and she has become quite a celebrity. Humans enjoy reading about shape-shifters, but if this author has true knowledge . . . well, she may have the book or be close to someone who has it."

"Your suggestions?"

Nox pushed a book across the table. Rio flipped it over to reveal a photograph of the author. The female resembled a wood nymph. Her dark green, almond-shaped eyes and cropped, moonbeam curls gave the impression of a female of about fifteen summers.

"This is the one who betrays us . . . a wood nymph? She's but a child."

"Mayhap, but to be certain you will get close to her. You may be assured she's at least eighteen summers. She lives close by and I believe she works for the local newspaper." He smiled at Rio's blank expression. "That's what the Humans call a proclamation of news. With a little more information and the Rio charm you'll have her eating out of your hand."

Rio rolled his eyes. "I'm told Human females require romance, a slow seduction. They have no lust for sex as do our Pride females."

"Some do, but you will see when we go to meet Tanz, that's not always the case. And I have arranged for you to fuck one, if that's your choice. Don't worry; if she doesn't please you, Tanz has a room in a hotel across the street from the club."

Chapter Three

Rio grasped the sleeve of Nox's coat and shuddered. He would never get used to 'jumping' as Nox described the dematerialization of body in order to travel from one place and materialize in another. Nox chuckled, and Rio glanced up at him. Nox's glamor had covered not only his pointed ears but had given him a substantial haircut. Normally, he wore his sheet of black silk to his waist and it waved in constant motion. Now, his hair brushed his shoulders and his Human-shaped ear sported a diamond stud.

"Take a few deep breaths. Jumping won't kill you, but the foul air might."

Rio wrapped his glamor around him, concentrating on his ears and fangs. The rest would have to do. He glanced up at the two brick walls framing the alley. Soot covered the once elegant façade, and the ground below their feet had the usual array of discarded rubbish. He followed Nox along the sidewalk and they stopped in front of a brightly decorated building displaying the words, 'Girls, Girls, Girls' on a sign made from a multitude of colored lights.

"Tanz will be here shortly. This is a safe place for us to meet. He isn't mature enough to jump yet, so we meet here. There are many unusual Humans in places such as this, so we blend in nicely."

Rio swallowed hard at the mention of Tanz. Gods, the very thought of seeing him again sent a surge of need straight to his balls. His determination to remain celibate during his first time in Other World had failed as soon as he laid eyes on him. A young faerie of a hundred summers taught him the meaning of pleasure. He craved him so much it disturbed him.

Nox's words when he first arrived in Other World repeated in Rio's head.

"I know you like females, Rio, but I can't understand why you refuse my females. They like you," said Nox.

Rio had looked at a stunning buttercup haired female and sighed. *"I'm always worried I might break them; they look so fragile."*

Nox had tipped his head back laughed loudly and then winked. *"You won't break Tanz."*

Rio drew a steadying breath as the image of Tanz's soft, jade eyes bore into his mind.

Nox stopped suddenly and turned, disturbing Rio's thoughts. He pulled a pile of paper from his pocket and thrust it into Rio's hand.

"Here, this is called, 'money' or 'pounds'. They use it like gold to pay for things. It's customary to give money to those who serve us. The notes have denominations on them. If you buy something they will say how many pounds. Give them one more than they ask and say 'keep the change.' If you don't, they give you a lot of useless coins. If you run out, I keep more in my room. Just take what you need."

Rio pushed the paper into his pocket and followed Nox into a long, dark room filled with smoke and heavy with the scent of sex. They walked through a cluster of Human males sitting around tables, drinking and making one hell of a noise. Rio's mouth dropped open; not five paces away, bare-breasted females cavorted on a brightly lit stage. Rio's entire body geared for a night of sexual abandon as Nox led the way through the dingy room, taking a booth toward the back.

"This is one of the establishments the Fae can frequent without attracting too much attention. With luck, Tanz will be here shortly with news of our spy," said Nox, taking a seat.

Rio forgot Tanz existed, as his gaze drifted hungrily from one female to the other. Lady's blood, they had the biggest breasts he had ever seen. How did they stay so pert and round? His cock stood to attention, insisting he grab one of the females, any one would do, and take her right now. Nox leaned across the table and touched his arm with his gloved hand, dragging his attention away from the dancers.

"You may not touch them, even if they sit on your lap and grind their naked breasts into you."

"How do you stand coming to a place like this? I'll be hard for a week."

"That's why my girls are with me. In case you've forgotten, I can't touch a Human female or they will be bonded to me for life. Trust me, these Humans may tantalize but you would hardly want one for life . . . or would you?" Nox said and leaned back in his chair, watching the dancers intently.

Rio licked his lips and his gaze followed the slight bounce of the waitress's massive breasts as she sauntered toward them. He groaned, watching her bend over and place two glasses of beer on the table.

"If I cross the veil tonight it'll be with a smile on my face."

"Belle and Chloe will temper your lust." Nox snorted.

"They belong to you."

"They're not my mates, Rio." Nox shrugged "They're free to fuck whom they chose, but if you prefer . . . I'm free," he said as a slow smile crossed his face.

Rio swiveled in his seat to get a better look at a cavorting female.

"Much as I'd like that, I seem to have this fascination with large breasts tonight."

* * * * *

Tanz saw Rio grinning like an ape at the topless Human females the moment he walked into the club. Heart pounding, he stopped to take a deep breath. He'd missed Rio and wanted to be with him while he visited London. His heart had ached in disappointment the second Nox informed him of his plan to have him bed a Human harlot. He wanted to have him in *his* bed tonight and he would be more than happy to share him with a female, but a Fae, not a damn Human.

He approached the table and Rio looked up. Tanz's knees practically gave way at his frank, sensual gaze. Smiling, he slipped onto the bench beside him. The slide of Rio's

warm hand along his thigh made his heart miss a beat. Covering his hand, he leaned toward him. Rio's breath brushed hot against his cheek.

"I've missed you, Tanz; maybe we can get together soon," Rio said huskily.

"I'd like that; I live in the hotel across the street, not far from where you're staying."

"You'll be working together. Tanz will show you around. Tanz, we're staying at the other end of this road. Now what have you got for me?" Nox said, leaning back in his seat.

Tanz took a shiny packet out of his pocket and offered it to Nox, who shook his head. Tanz removed a flat, foil-covered stick from the packet, unwrapped it, and waved a long, buff-colored strip at Rio.

"This is chewing gum. That female you have to get close to eats it all the time. You don't swallow it, just chew it, and then spit it out when the flavor is gone."

He watched as Rio pushed it into his mouth and chewed. Grinning at Rio's comical expression of disgust, Tanz turned back to Nox.

"She takes lunch at one at the Night Owl. It's a tavern, stays open all the time. The workers at the Star, the newspaper she works for, frequent it. You'll have to go there and make sure she notices you."

"Yeah, just point me in the right direction," replied Rio, his gaze moving around the room.

"Background on the female, Aria?" Nox asked, drumming his fingers on the table.

Tanz rolled his shoulders. His arm brushed against Rio, sending a rush of heat straight to his groin.

"Well, she has an uncle who goes by the name of Aldis. He's a big brute and smells like a Ram. I wouldn't be surprised if he's been altered by the Druiks. He's always around her, unless she's at work or having lunch. I've asked around. She doesn't have many friends outside of work. I got close to one of the females she works with and with glamor was able to discover quite a lot of information.

Aria lives with her uncle in a small house in Balham, and has no male visitors at all. The female I spoke to thought this unusual, as Aria supposedly likes males, is beautiful and of age at twenty summers. The place where they live is not prosperous; in truth, it's a dump. Now, the unusual thing is, her uncle published the books. The fact she wrote these books is another strange thing, as at the newspaper her job is writing up the birth notices. This isn't the sort of work a successful author would be doing."

"Well, then, Rio, you must get close to her. Take it slow and gain her confidence. Then with luck, she'll reveal all about the book. When you get it we'll dispose of the pair of thieving bastards," said Nox with a frown.

Rio shifted his gaze to Nox and shrugged. "I'm not really sure how to romance a Human, but both my brothers managed."

"I've arranged for some on-the-job training." Nox laughed and waved at a man standing by the stage.

Tanz leaned toward Rio and whispered close to his ear. "That female sauntering toward you is a harlot; if you want, I'll wait here to make sure you find your way back to Nox's hotel."

"Yeah thanks, I doubt this will take too long." Rio grinned, his gaze resting on the buxom blond wiggling toward him.

She leaned over and gave him a wide grin. "My name is Spice. Come with me and I'll show you a *real* good time."

* * * * *

Rio followed the ripe ass up a small flight of stairs at the back of the club and into a small room at the end of a dark corridor. He looked around; the room smelled of sex and dead flowers. The bed sat in the middle of the room, bare but for a sheet. An open door led to a small bathroom. He smiled, allowing Spice to undress him and throw his clothes over the back of the only chair in the room. He kicked off his boots and stepped willingly out of his pants.

"Well, you are a big boy. Fuck, I should charge extra for riding that." She scoffed, pushed him down on the bed and flopped down beside him. "I've been paid for a straight fuck, so don't try anything else. You can suck my tits but that's all."

He rolled on top of her, completely at a loss for words. *She's just like the harlots at home; surely Nox doesn't expect me to seduce her?*

Rio placed a hand over one erect, round breast and found it strange under his palm. He bent his head, licked across one rosy nipple and then suckled. He turned to the other and noticed a thin white scar around the areola. Shocked a female could be so injured he lifted his head and looked at her. She laid perfectly still, her dark, ringed eyes fixed on the ceiling. He frowned. "Who cut your breast?"

"The doctor, silly; that's the scar from the implants. Cost me seven thousand, they did. Do you like them?" She giggled.

"Uh huh."

Rio shifted his weight and his cock pushed against her thigh.

"Have you brought anything with you?" Spice said and pushed her hands hard against his chest.

Rio gazed at her flushed cheeks. He could smell her arousal beneath the cheap perfume.

"Just me, honey."

She smiled up at him, rolled over, and reached for the nightstand.

"Here," she said, passing him a small, square foil package. "You *do* know what to do with this, don't you?"

Rio frowned. *Why would she want him to eat gum? Mayhap it's a Human custom.* He braced himself on one elbow and took the package, rubbing it between thumb and finger.

"I know what to do with it, but I'd much prefer to eat *you*."

"And after you will want to fuck me right?" Spice snorted.

Rio smiled and brushed her mouth with his lips. "Oh yes, many times."

"Then open the bloody packet!"

Rio sighed and rolled onto his back. He tore open the foil packet and pushed the contents into his mouth. It tasted awful and made his eyes water. He turned to see Spice staring at him with big, round eyes.

"Dear God, what the bloody hell are you doing?" she asked.

Rio choked and spat the evil tasting slime into his hand. "I'm sorry, but if eating this is a requirement, I'm afraid I'll have to decline."

He pushed his legs over the edge of the bed and sat staring at the wall. His stomach began to roll and lurch. Gods, he was going to be sick. He rushed to the bathroom and heaved his dinner into the toilet. He straightened, waving slightly with nausea, staggered to the sink and splashed his face with cold water.

"You okay in there?"

"Ah huh."

"Well that little joke backfired, didn't it? Come here and lie down for a bit."

He pushed both hands through his hair and stood staring at his reflection in the mirror. If Nox found out about this, he would never live it down. He dried his face, walked slowly into the bedroom, and sat on the edge of the bed.

"What was that? I've never tasted anything so disgusting."

Spice's mouth turned up in a sweet smile, her sienna eyes full of mischief.

"Licorice-flavored condoms. I must say I wasn't expecting *you* to taste one." She giggled.

"Ah huh."

Rio gave her a reluctant smile. Rolling to his side, he watched Spice sort through the drawers of her nightstand. She turned back, displaying a pair of leather cuffs chained together, hanging on a finger with a bright red nail.

"Do you wanna play?" she said with a wide grin

"Play *what*, exactly?"

She rubbed the cuffs over her full breasts in small circles and licked her bottom lip seductively.

"I cuff you and make you feel really good . . . *really good*, Rio."

"Ah huh."

"Well?"

A slow smile lifted his lips. "Okay."

Spice moved salaciously to the end of the bed and secured both his hands to the bed rail. She lifted his foot and her rosy tongue flicked out to lick the sole. He tipped his head back and moaned, enjoying the slide of her tongue between each toe. She sucked his big toe into her hot, wet mouth and deep, erotic sensations shot straight to his cock in a blood rush, leaving him light headed. She crawled onto the bed and he tensed while she ran her tongue slowly, so slowly, up one leg and then the other. His thigh muscles bunched against the hot moist flame of her breath brushing his balls. He lifted his hips, begging for more, but she pulled away and he heard a low chuckle.

"Suffer, just a little, Rio."

He wanted to reach out, to touch her, taste her. She crawled up his body; her hard nipples brushed his skin, sending bolts of pleasure to his loins. He growled and lifted his mouth to kiss her. Her lips were soft and oh so feminine. He sucked in her scent and choked. Lady's blood, she tasted of males. Many males. He dropped his glamor, and his fangs pierced her lip.

Spice made a funny grunting sound and head-butted him right across the bridge of the nose. He gagged at the torrent of blood gushing down his face and into his mouth. His eyes blurred and searing pain shot into his head. *What the hell?*

"Where's your wallet? Tell me or I'll rip off your balls." She growled close to his ear.

Rio clenched his muscles and the chains on the cuffs burst, sending silver links shooting off in every direction. He tried to focus as he leapt from the bed.

"Shit, okay big boy, I'm outta here," Spice said from far away.

Rio staggered toward her voice and heard the door open. He staggered back to the bed, sat back down and vomited.

Chapter Four

Tanz watched the harlot leave. She had looked around furtively, pulled on her jacket, and ducked out a side door. Nox had left him with instructions to *take care* of Rio before he left. Not that he would have left without speaking to him anyway. They had things to discuss and Tanz wanted answers. Rio had left Other World without as much as a *goodbye*, leaving his clothes behind and responding to his king's summons instantly. Of course, he understood a prince of Knight Watch would have priorities, but Tanz believed *he* had become important to Rio. Tanz shook his head thoughtfully and snorted. Not that Rio took *any* of his sexual partners seriously when his destiny decreed he search for the scent of his true mate. *What a lot of rot; hell the way he looks at me just has to be love.*

He waited, waving off the advances of the Human harlots. Rio should have left the room by now unless

Tanz got up from the table and walked swiftly through the nightclub. He took the stairs two at a time and reached out his mind for Rio. The corridor at the top of the stairs smelt of sweat and cigarette smoke. He walked past numerous doors bathed in shadows and evenly spaced between the two orange wall lights. Glad of his faerie sight, he moved swiftly along the hallway. He sensed Rio in a room at the end of the passage; the door to the room hung slightly ajar. He drew a deep breath, flung it back and stepped inside. He gasped when he saw Rio sitting naked on the edge of a bed cradling his bloodied face.

"What in the Lady's name happened to you?"

* * * * *

Rio lifted his head and tried to focus on Tanz's face.

"Bloody harlot head-butted me while my hands were tied. Get me out of here, will you? If Nox hears about this it'll get straight back to Blaise."

Tanz removed the cuffs, sat beside him, and laid a warm hand across his shoulders. Rio wished he could inhale Tanz's unique scent and taste his ripe, sinful lips. But not tonight. Rio's head ached and blood dripped in a constant stream from his broken nose.

"I can't jump, but I'll help you get cleaned up and we'll go to my place," Tanz replied and gently pushed the hair from Rio's face.

Rio opened his eyes as wide as possible and looked Tanz in the eye.

"You can jump if we combine our powers; you *really* don't want anyone to see me like this, do you?"

"No, I don't. I'll get your clothes and we'll give it a try. Leave me to weave the magyck. Just channel your powers into me, like we practiced."

Rio smiled, even though doing so hurt like hell and made his eyes water. "I'd like to *channel* more than my powers into you, Tanz. Yeah, a whole lot more."

"We need to talk about that," he replied, grasping Rio's arm. "Okay I'm ready."

Rio slipped his arm around Tanz's waist and concentrated. They jumped, the room folded in on itself, and his stomach gave a sickening roll. The next second, they landed in a dimly lit bedroom before a roaring fire.

"Come with me; I'll help you wash," Tanz said, leading him into a glistening, white tiled bathroom.

He squinted at the brilliant light, but stood motionless while Tanz ran the shower. Tanz rested a wet hand on his back and pushed him inside the wide glass cubicle. Warm water flooded his eyes and ran over his shoulders in a soothing caress. Tanz's hot body pressed against his back, his arms encircled Rio and stroked his chest. His touch sent a shot of pure delight darting through him. Rio leaned back into Tanz's hard bulk and relaxed while Tanz soaped him generously. Tanz massaged silky bubbles across Rio's pecks and down to circle his stomach, then his soapy palm cupped Rio's balls. Rio groaned in pleasure. At once, blood shot straight to his cock. Tanz's warm fingers moved across his buttocks and slid in soapy delight between the cleft in his ass to circle his passage.

"You know I can't fuck you, much as I wish I could. If I as much as look down I get disorientated."

Tanz's burning tongue licked Rio's ear. He took his earlobe between his teeth and bit gently.

"Nox said I was to look after you and I will. Now turn around and let me take a look at your nose," he replied, pulling Rio to face him.

Rio drew a deep breath and held it while Tanz bathed his face in white magyck. The spell did not mend his broken nose but he could see clearly and the awful buzzing in his ears ceased. He opened his eyes to see Tanz's green smoldering orbs a breath away. He groaned, cupped his angelic face in both hands, lowered his mouth, and kissed him hard. Gods, he tasted like fresh air and sunshine. Rio plunged his tongue inside the instant Tanz opened his mouth for him. Tanz drew Rio's probing tongue into his hot mouth and sucked, and Rio's knees buckled. Cool white tiles hit his back. Tanz took his weight and pressed him hard against the wall. Hot water tumbled from the shower flowing over them and filling the cubicle with steam. Tanz's fingers slid up his back and into his wet hair, his sharp nails grazing his scalp. Rio shivered with anticipation. He pulled him closer and twisted against him until his cock met Tanz's ridged flesh. He rubbed against him, riding the flames of desire, licking his balls and spinning into his belly. He lifted his head and gasped a great lungful of damp air, his broken nose blocked and useless.

"I thought you wanted to talk?"

"Later. We'll *talk* later." Tanz growled. He turned off the water, dragged Rio from the shower, and picked up a tub of lube from the bench.

In the dark bedroom, red flames danced across the walls from a flickering fire in the grate. The heat in the room warmed Rio's wet flesh and he stood with dripping hair before a blaze of pinecones, piled above glowing logs. He curled his toes in the thick white rug spread before the hearth and turned into Tanz's arms. He met Tanz's embrace with a scorching kiss and pressed his body against his length. Hell, he had missed him and the slide of his sleek, wet skin was true bliss.

Rio broke the kiss, rested his head on Tanz's smooth brow and looked into his jade eyes. "I want you."

Pulling Tanz hard against him, he lowered his mouth again to savor his unique taste. He groaned into Tanz's mouth, the blistering heat from his hard, smooth body searing his chilled skin. His heart pounded while their tongues tangled again in a familiar dance. He wanted to be closer, to bury himself within Tanz's heat and never let go. Straining against him, he rubbed his aching cock against Tanz's belly with urgency only he could placate.

Tanz pulled away from Rio's hot, desperate mouth and slid down the solid length of him. Kneeling before him, he leaned forward to nuzzle against Rio's massive cock and ran his tongue up his ridged shaft. He tasted of soap and his chilled flesh rose in goose bumps down his thighs with every pass of his tongue. Groaning in delight, he took a firm grip of Rio's thighs. Rio's long fingers sunk into his hair and urged him toward his bobbing length. He looked up to see a challenge in Rio's eyes. Tanz opened his mouth and took him in. He moaned at the velvet slide across his lips, the musky taste of Rio's pre-cum on his tongue. Sliding his fingers into Rio's ass cheeks, he took him in deep and sucked hard. He loved the small noise Rio made as he grazed his teeth along his shaft and slowly circled the tip with his tongue. Pride males in full arousal poured a heavy aphrodisiac scent from their bodies, and Tanz drank it in, swimming gloriously in the intense arousal it created. He enjoyed the voracious infatuation he had with Rio and never wanted it to stop. Rio began to pump his mouth in a slow, delectable slide. Tanz moaned. Every move coated his tongue with Rio's delicious scent.

The sight of Rio standing over him, a picture of sculptured perfection, made his cock pulsate. Gods, he could go just looking at him. Pulling back to drag his tongue up the shaft, he closed his teeth around the flange and teased the tip with his tongue. He slid one hand between Rio's open legs and cupped his balls, moving his finger in circles on the sensitive skin behind. The hairs on Rio's legs brushed against his cheek when he pulled back to lick and suck each puckered sac.

"Gods, Tanz, you're killing me." Rio gasped, twisting his fingers in his hair.

Tanz chuckled at the tremors going through Rio. He took his thick, velvet length deep into his mouth and sucked hard. The warm, musky scent of Rio concentrated, drowning him in bliss, then Rio moved his hips to push deeper into his mouth. Tanz rolled with his thrusts, his mouth stretched fully to accommodate Rio's bulk. He gripped Rio's thighs and held him while he climaxed. Rio called out his name and shuddered to conclusion, filling his mouth with long spurts of salty liquid heat. Tanz suckled; he wanted to keep him there forever. He pulled him closer, enjoying every delicious drop.

Rio's legs gave way and he slid from Tanz's mouth and slumped to the floor, rolling onto the rug. He smiled into the darkness and waited. Tanz crawled up his body and licked a path up his stomach to nibble at his flat nipples. Looking up into Tanz's face, he cupped the back of his head and pulled him down to the rug, closing his mouth over his swollen lips in a long, hot kiss.

Tanz pulled away and Rio watched him unscrew a jar of lube. Tanz turned back and smiled.

"Lie on your back and draw up your knees," said Tanz, waving fingers thick with lube.

Rio narrowed his eyes. "No! I'm not being fucked on my back like a female."

Immediately, he regretted his choice of words. Rio pushed down the deep feeling of guilt and sat up slowly. *Gods, why did he have to spoil things? Now look at him, his lips have turned down, and his eyes look as if I've beaten him.*

"Come to bed, Tanz, please. I'll make it up to you, *I promise.*"

Tanz rose slowly and walked, head erect, into the bathroom, returning shortly with a towel. Rio took the offered towel from his outstretched hand and rubbed his hair dry.

"We need to talk, Rio; I can't live like this." Tanz walked to the bed, threw back the covers, and slipped between the sheets. He lay with his head resting on his hands, his cock jutting out against his peach-colored, hairless skin.

Rio groaned; how many nights had he lain awake imagining him just like that.

He threw the towel on the bed, picked up the pot of lube, and set it on the nightstand. His nose would feel much better in the morning and he would need it within easy reach. He climbed onto the bed, lay on his side and rested one hand flat on Tanz's chest.

"Okay talk."

"You left me without saying goodbye. I don't like being *used* like a harlot. I want more, Rio. I know the Knight Watch allows for males to pair, so if you've any love for me at all you'll take me back to Dryad with you"

Rio ran a hand through his hair. Hell, an ultimatum. Just what he needed on top of a broken nose. He rubbed his hand slowly up and down Tanz's hairless, golden chest.

"Those that have paired have a female in common. If I find my mate, she may not want you as well, Tanz, then what? I can hurt you now just by refusing your advances; you know when I find her she'll override everything we've had together. I *will* choose her over you, only because it's the Lady's way. We are all pre-destined to find our mates and to breed, to continue our race; I can't produce a cub with you, Tanz, no matter how much I care for you."

"I *want* to take the chance. You may never find your mate and we're good together. There's a possibility your mate *will* take me as well. I *could* please her, mayhap even *love* her; it's not as if I haven't satisfied plenty of faeries."

Rio shrugged and handed Tanz the towel. He turned and grabbed the pot of lube from the nightstand and coated his cock.

"Roll on your side."

Gathering Tanz close to his body, he reached around to coat his semi-hard prick with a dollop of lube. He closed his fist around Tanz's shaft and pumped slowly, bringing his thumb up and over the tip.

"You know if I find my mate and she accepts you. I would bite you and bond you to me for life."

"Would you inject me with your venom?"

Rio chuckled; Tanz's hot cock was growing rapidly under his touch.

"Oh *yeah*, my cat would claim you and I'd fill you with my seed. You'll stay hard for a week, begging me to take you any way I chose."

Tanz tried to take a breath. "Isn't that forbidden?"

"No as long as I want you for *life*. My brother, Zandor, bit Thryll to seal their joining, but they had Beth."

Tanz panted under Rio's masterful caress; he knew just what he craved. His cock bobbed and Rio gripped hard around the base, drawing his fingernails up the underside, tormenting the throbbing vein. Tanz groaned in ecstasy with every pump of his hands. Rio applied just the right pressure, using the rough pad of his thumb to torment the sensitive slit and send scorching waves of lust into his balls. The hard tip of Rio's lubricated cock pressed between the cleft in his ass. The tantalizing feel of Rio's shaft brushing against his passage made him want him deep inside, where he belonged. Rio suckled and teased his ear, licking up to the pointed tip and nibbling down to the lobe. Tanz shivered in sheer pleasure. He cried out in delight with each graze of the sharp tips of Rio's fangs down his neck and across his shoulder.

"You make me so hot; I'm going to blow all over your back," Rio groaned, his hot breath brushing Tanz's cheek.

Tanz rolled his hips, sliding through Rio's grip with every thrust. Flames licked from his ass to sac. He called out Rio's name and shattered, spilling a stream of white cum into the towel. He trembled against Rio, who pulled him closer, slipping tantalizingly between the crack of his ass and spilling in hot streams over his back.

"I love you Rio."

"I know."

* * * * *

Rio lay awake, one arm draped around Tanz. His head ached and the constant throbbing of his nose made him queasy. He rolled onto his back and stared into the glowing embers in the grate. Tanz *loved* him. The thought alone made him want to run far away. Females had said the same to him many times during an affair and as soon as the words had left their lips, he had left. *Love* . . . what did it feel like? Not lust, no . . . the way his brothers looked at their mates in that special way . . . the connection they had must be *love*. When he looked at Tanz before, he wanted him, but he could walk away . . . he had. He had taken two Pride females to his bed the night he left Tanz, without a second thought for the nubile male faerie. Now, though, there was something different. His heart glowed at the sound of Tanz's name; to want him, like this, went against the rules . . . *Lady's blood, what am I going to do?*

He rolled off the bed and stalked to the window. Gods, did these people live in perpetual gloom? He turned and glanced at the clock on the mantle. 4:00 AM. He had to leave. He crept into the bathroom and showered. His clothes still lay scattered across the tiles where Tanz had dropped them. He dressed swiftly and stood by the bed. Indecision stopped his immediate retreat. He looked down at Tanz, his friend, his lover, curled on his side, his tousled moonlit curls framing his face. He owed him an explanation.

He sat on the edge of the bed and shook Tanz gently. Tanz's jade eyes flickered open and he gave him a slow, sultry smile.

"You're insatiable." He purred.

"I've got to leave . . . now. I've things to discuss with Nox. I'll come back at ten and you can show me where to meet the Human."

Rio slid off the bed.

"I *know*, I shouldn't have said I love you . . . stupid mistake." Tanz sat up and turned on the bedside light. "Now I guess you'll be taking off again."

Rio stared at the empty wall above Tanz's head and frowned. "I think I'm incapable of love. My father told us when we were cubs, the Lady reserved true love for our mates. We couldn't fall in love with any other before, to ensure we would continue to seek our intended match. Zandor fell in love with Thryll *after* he had mated Beth, not before."

Tanz scrubbed both hands over his face and looked up into Rio's smoldering amethyst gaze. His heart ached every time he looked at Rio's magnificent, dark angel visage. He craved to sink his fingers into the mantle of black silk falling like water down his broad back. What could he possibly say to make him stay? He drew a deep breath and rolled his shoulders.

"You're *not* the first Pride male I've had, Rio. I know about the Lady's 'curse.' You like being with me and if the fact I said I love you is a problem . . . hell . . . I won't say it again. Zandor shared his females with Thryll, so why don't we do the same and when your mate turns up, we'll take things from there. If you don't want that . . . then finish this now . . . and don't worry, I won't follow you around like a lovesick female . . . I *do* have other friends, you know."

Rio shot him a glare as he shrugged on his coat. "Was that a threat? Didn't your *numerous* Pride male lovers ever tell you *not* to threaten a Knight Watch prince?"

"I'd never threaten you, Rio, but that *was* an ultimatum. Fae are gentle folk but we're known to fight for what we want . . . and I want *you* . . . even if I *do* have to share."

Rio inclined his head. Gods, what a mess.

"I'll think on your *ultimatum*, but know this: I'll not look favorably on you giving your ass to other males."

"I would accept those terms with pleasure." Tanz grinned.

Rio growled and buttoned up his coat. "As I said, I'll think on it."

"I'm sure you will."

Rio ran a hand through his hair and hardened his gaze; Tanz had no idea what the arrangement he suggested would mean. "Mayhap it *would* be best to finish this now, a clean break, as you suggested."

He caught his breath at the absolute rejection in Tanz's eyes, the set of his jaw.
Lady help me; what am I to do?

"As you wish," Tanz replied and shrugged nonchalantly but his eyes showed his deep sorrow

"Sleep on it and we'll speak in the morning. At ten, you said . . . I'll be waiting for your answer."

Rio let his gaze settle on Tanz's delectable naked flesh for a few more seconds before he turned on his heel and left. He hurried down the dimly lit staircase and pushed out of the main doors of the hotel. He shuddered; an icy chill hit his sore nose, sending needles of pain into his head. He stood for a moment to get his bearings; the club's flashing sign was out but clearly visible across the road. Nox's hotel would be in that direction, he decided, and strode out into the darkness.

Sleet began to fall, catching the orange glow from the overhead lights flickering along each side of the street and falling to the ground like fireflies. Rio stepped around a group of young males, walking arms linked and weaving drunkenly along the sidewalk. They called out to him, but he ignored their slurred insults and kept moving. He passed the ally where he had arrived earlier and walked purposely toward the hotel and into the spinning glass door.

Happy for the warmth, he walked across the foyer to the square box. The desk clerk barely looked up from his newspaper. Nox had called the box an 'elevator'; Rio pushed the button. The doors slid open, he walked inside confidently and pressed the button marked PH and waited for the box to open outside Nox's room. As he arrived, Nox's door opened and Chloe poked her head out.

"Oh, there you are, Rio. Nox said you were coming." She screwed up her perfect button nose. "What happened to your face?"

Rio raised a brow and cursed at the pain it caused. "Never you mind; where's Nox, and can you find me something to eat?"

Chloe waved a hand toward the large, open doors leading to Nox's bedroom and disappeared down the hall. Her pink, sheer silk nightgown streamed out behind her, brushing the floor. Rio knocked on the door and turned the brass doorknob at Nox's response, flinging the door wide. Nox slipped a black robe over his naked body and grinned at Rio.

"So the Human didn't work out then?"

Rio walked inside and shook his head. "No, she didn't, but she's the least of my problems. May be speak in private?"

Nox's eyes flashed. He waved a hand at the doors and they shut slowly, then he sat on the edge of the bed and indicated Rio sit beside him.

The air in the room tasted of sex and the rich, musky scent of Nox would sooth the most ragged nerves. Rio wished he could inhale through his nose as he savored the mingled scents across his tongue. Belle lay curled up asleep under a pile of blankets, her black, glossy hair spread out like a shawl across the blue, silk pillow. Her long, ebony lashes brushed rosy cheeks and her lips pouted, full and thoroughly kissed.

"I'll be able to help with your nose; magyck can stop bleeding and remove the bruising, but I can't mend broken bones." He sent a blast of white magyck across Rio's face.

"Thanks, but my main problem is Tanz."

"I guessed that; he loves you. I know this is a problem for you but it's not the first time this has happened, you know. Fae and Pride males are well suited and there have been matches for paired males with a Pride female."

Rio ran both hands through his hair and sighed deeply. "It won't work, as soon as I find my mate, I'll forget he exists. I don't *want* to hurt him, but there's nothing I can do. You *know* that, don't you? My cat will override any feelings I have for him and concentrate on the female . . . it's our way."

"Why can't this be the Lady's way? Mayhap Tanz is *supposed* to be with you. Have you even considered that possibility? How do you feel about him? I know it's not the love you seek but I've seen the way you look at him, Rio."

"I'm *addicted* to him, this I know. When we're apart, I dream about him. I've not considered any other male since we met. Females . . . ? Yes, I've taken many to my bed."

"What was his ultimatum?" Nox asked softly.

Rio stared into the dying embers in the hearth and sighed. "He wants to come back to Dryad with me and share females until I find my mate. He hopes she'll take him as well . . . she won't . . . I just know it . . . then it'll be worse because *I won't care* if I break his heart . . . will I?"

"Tanz has had many partners in the past eighty years; he's never declared his love to any other. It was as if the earth trembled when you met, as if you're destined to be together. I can't tell you what to do, Rio, but we'll both live a very long time and we must grab what happiness we can find along the way."

Rio lifted his head when a light scratching came at the door. Nox answered and Chloe stepped inside.

"I have food for you, Rio."

Rio got slowly to his feet and headed for the door. His stomach growled in anticipation of food.

Nox spoke softly in his head. "*Take her to bed, seek comfort from her body. Don't worry about Tanz; he's not going anywhere. We need to concentrate on finding the Lady's book.*"

"See you in the morning." Nox called after him.

Chapter Five

Rio awoke, still buried deep inside Chloe's heat. She lay sprawled on top of him. Her lips brushed his neck and the silk of her buttercup hair tumbled across his bare chest. Her pussy encircled his shaft, hot, wet, and ready. He lifted his hips and her

mouth curled up at the corners in silent welcome. He drove into her, enjoying the tight wet slide, and grasped the rounded mounds of her pearly white ass. He licked a path up her neck and she pushed her hands against his chest to sit up, allowing her hair to tumble down each side of her face. He groaned at the sight of her full breasts hovering tantalizingly above his mouth. Her blue spotted wings unfolded in a rush of cool air. She fluttered them, sending an exquisite vibration straight to his shaft. He rocked into her and she rode him, twisting this way and that to enhance every thrust. She focused on him, her eyes like deep blue pools, and licked her bottom lip. Rio smiled at her and mentally thanked Nox. No wonder he kept this beauty close.

He lifted his chin to capture her pert nipple between his teeth, drew it into his mouth and suckled. She sighed and her channel began to wave around him. He lifted his gaze to her flushed face. Gods, this faerie could climax. He ran his hands up her back and released her nipple with a slight popping sound. He drew her down, closed his mouth over her soft, succulent lips, and drove into her with force. Wet heat surrounded him. He purred in ecstasy, enjoying the flutter of her wings, each movement sending waves of vibrating delight up his shaft. Heat spiraled in his balls and his sac tightened. He thrust his tongue into her hot mouth and lifted his hips to grind in hard. White spots danced before his eyes and he exploded deep within her heat. Yes, Chloe had proved a great comfort.

He wrapped his arms around her, pinning her to his chest. She bent to kiss him lightly on the mouth, her lips hot and moist.

"Thank you," she said as she slipped from his grasp and bent to pick up her nightgown from beside the bed.

Rio put his hands behind his head and enjoyed the delicious sight of her wet, bare pussy. He liked that Fae were bare from the neck down, nothing hidden, everything on view. He thought of Tanz and his gut twisted; he must make a decision. He watched Chloe pull on her nightgown and turn to go.

"I appreciate what you did for me last night," he said.

"I'm glad I made you forget your troubles for a while; mayhap you will invite me to share Tanz with you. Nox wouldn't mind; we're not bonded."

Rio gave her a slow smile. "That would certainly be an experience."

She smiled and let herself out the door. Rio sighed. Perhaps Tanz's suggestion would work. If they shared faeries, mayhap Tanz would find one to bond with and all would be well. He must thank Nox; faerie females were certainly *not* fragile. He grinned at the sweet memory of fucking Chloe most of the night, threw off the bedcovers, and headed for the shower.

* * * * *

Nox stood frozen before the flat screen TV, his hand gripped tightly around the mug of steaming coffee in his hand. A live feed from a helicopter hovering over St. Paul's Cathedral spread across the introduction for the mid-morning news. Tanz stood naked, one hand wrapped around the spire, his gold-tipped, white wings open for all to see. The news showed a split screen shot of Tanz landing on the massive dome. The commentator had named him 'the Angel of Christmas'.

He turned when Rio walked into the room. "You do realize, for a Fae, deliberate exposure to Humans is a death sentence?"

"Under certain circumstances, I would agree. What is this magyck that allows you to see so far away?"

Nox shrugged and turned back to the TV.

"A Human device. Why do you think Tanz has exposed himself to Humans, when he knows I'll execute him? Why do you think he wants to die?"

"I hope you don't think I had anything to do with this?" Rio replied and stared at the screen, his lips forming a thin line.

"Mayhap his ultimatum. Did you promise to give him an answer this morning?"

"What time is it?" Rio asked, spinning around to look at the clock on the mantel.

"Hell, I said I'd give him my answer by ten and it's almost midday."

Nox turned and glared at him. "It's obvious he'd rather die than live without you, Rio. I'll go and get him and try to convince the millions of people watching it's a hoax."

"You intend to kill him?" Rio replied, running both hands through his hair.

"That depends . . . on you, Rio. You were sent here to find the Lady's book and all our lives depend on you resolving this problem. If Tanz is a distraction . . . well"

"Please, for the Lady's sake, don't execute him for loving me. I'll find the girl and do what's necessary I'll sort things out with Tanz; you have my word."

Nox folded his arms across his chest and frowned. "He must be punished, Rio; you've both put our mission in jeopardy."

"There must be a way to resolve this. Will you be able to glamor everyone who saw him?"

"No, of course not, but illusions are common here. I'll glamor a few witnesses on the scene so they believe they saw the hoax set up and the rest will follow. Humans are like sheep; convince one to jump over an imaginary log and they all jump."

* * * * *

Rio forced down his breakfast with Chloe and watched the TV. The scene around the cathedral still played continuously on the flat screen. He sighed with relief; Tanz had vanished from the domed roof. He listened with interest while the commentator described the elaborate hoax. He knew of Tanz's return from the raised voices coming from Nox's bedroom. He rose slowly from the table and stood in the center of the room, listening intently. The door swung open and Nox waved him inside. He strode into the room and the door shut behind him with a bang. His gaze drifted from Nox's dark-as-thunder expression to Tanz's trembling form. Tanz knelt before his king, his head bowed in disgrace, naked and wingless. Nox stood over him with black liquid eyes. Immense power radiated from him, as if he held the balance between heaven and earth. His hip-length hair waved erratically around his shoulders, crackling with power.

"Well, what excuse do you offer for me to spare your life? Or would you prefer I send you to the Underworld? I'm sure you'll find a demon to suit you."

Tanz lifted his head and Rio caught his breath. A deep purple welt ran across one cheek; it matched the one cut across his chest.

"Do with me as you please, Sire. I am unworthy of life and I betrayed my race. I welcome death," Tanz replied.

Nox sent a green lash of magyck and it wrapped around Tanz, cutting a deep wedge in his back.

"You anger me to the point of madness," he said, raising his chin and glaring at Rio. "You'd sacrifice us all for this Pride male? You're prepared to forfeit not only your own life, but that of your family? You know they'll destroy themselves with the shame of your deeds."

Rio bunched his hands into fists at his sides. Tanz did not utter a word with each cut of green magyck into his skin. Wishing he could take his place, he turned his head and looked at Nox. "This is my fault; it's me you should be whipping."

"Let him answer, prince of Knight Watch, for *you* will be explaining your part in this travesty to King Blaise. We came here to *prevent* the Humans from getting proof of our existence by retrieving the Lady's book. *Not* to put on a show to prove the lies in Aria d' Lion's damn novel."

Rio opened his hands and held them out, palms up. He had never seen Nox so angry, not even in the heat of battle. He drew a deep breath and met Nox's now emerald gaze.

"If you'll show us leniency for our stupidity, I *promise* I'll seduce this female in the next few days and retrieve the Lady's book. It would do no good to punish Tanz for my ignorance of his feelings. I'm prepared to accept any punishment you or my king decides."

"Answer me, Tanz." Nox growled.

"I will gladly give up my life . . . for him . . . I'm sorry, Rio," Tanz replied and turned to look at Rio. One silver tear ran slowly down his cheek.

"Your weakness insults all the years of training I've wasted on you. You will return to Other World and serve Allure the Fair, for as long as it pleases me. And *you*" Nox bellowed, turning his furious gaze on Rio. "Will dress in the clothes I left in your room and accompany me to the Night Owl. In case it slipped your mind, you've a Human to seduce."

Tanz looked up at him and smiled weakly and Rio's heart ached. Wanting only to reach out and sooth his pain, he stilled, not showing his weakness. His heart clenched at each sob Tanz shuddered. Tanz's jade eyes burned into him with love and Rio stepped forward but Nox waved a hand and Tanz vanished. Rio covered his face with both hands to quell the deep feeling of loss sweeping through him, shattering, destroying. He wanted to scream and attack Nox for the injustice. Dear Lady, the blame was *his*; how could She turn her back on Tanz, on love?

"Now, Rio, or we'll miss the female." Nox ordered, his voice like a whip across Rio's heart.

He dropped his hands at his sides and lifted his chin. Up to this point, Nox had treated him as an equal. "Will I ever see him again?"

Nox glared at him and shook his head slowly. His heart sank.

"I make no promises I can't keep. I promised Blaise I'd assist you in recovering the book. It won't help Tanz if you make me break my word. We'll not speak of that traitor again, Rio . . . not in this world."

Rio turned on his heel and returned to his room with a heavy heart. What a fool he was to deny Tanz. Hell, he was the only good thing in his life. Dressing swiftly in the Human clothes, he found them quite comfortable, although a shirt of nettles would be a better penance. He knew Nox could be angry for centuries. Would he ever see Tanz again? He remembered the look on Tanz's face before Nox banished him. *Oh Tanz, I'm so sorry.*

Rio shrugged into the leather jacket and adjusted the gold beads on his warrior braids. Scooping up the pile of money Nox had left on the nightstand, he sighed and pushed the bundle into his pocket. He glanced into the mirror; his reflection showed a

tragic, sad male. Squaring his shoulders, he consciously softened his expression and strode from the room.

Chapter Seven

Nox pulled the flapping woolen overcoat around his body and stepped out into the snow. Icy tendrils of sleet cut across his cheeks, sending a shudder down his spine. The overnight snowdrifts banked each side of the sidewalk, grey from smog and melting in leaf-strewn rivers. How anyone could live in this Lady's forsaken realm, he had no idea.

He bowed his head and made his way slowly along the icy footpath. He glanced sideways at Rio; hell, what was he to do? The Pride male knew his orders; he had no right to complicate matters by breaking the heart of his most loyal subject. Now, because of the urgency of the matter, he had no other choice but to remove the temptation from Rio, step in, and take Tanz's place.

His heart began to race when Rio lifted his amethyst gaze, his lips set in a grim line. This Pride male was delicious; true, he had lusted over him and could have had him. Now the look Rio gave him bordered on hatred.

"Is it far?" Rio growled, falling into stride as the footpath widened.

"No. I arranged our accommodation so everything was in walking distance. I've a car at my disposal, one of those noisy transport vehicles," he said, waving absently toward the cars crawling along the road. "But it's really for you to use if you have the need. I refuse to travel confined in a tin can."

He gestured to an old shop façade, where a shingle depicting a large barn owl with enormous orange eyes swung in the wind. "There on the corner, the Night Owl. Aria d'Lion will arrive shortly. Think of some excuse to get close to her, let her inhale your scent. I hear a Pride male's scent is irresistible to Humans, so use it to your advantage, and if you can glamor her . . . well you know the rest."

"It won't be easy for me to convince her to take me to her home. I'm told Human females are as cold as fish," Rio replied, casting him a narrowed look.

Nox grinned; he could not help the euphoria that hit him. Rio, an alpha male, had doubts about his sexual appeal! "I'm sure you'll do just fine."

"Humph." Rio rubbed his nose and winced. "I'm not too sure; they're violent creatures."

* * * * *

Rio blinked at the relentless battering of sleet against his face and pushed his hands deeper into the pockets of his coat. He glanced at Nox; the King of the Faerie's glamor surrounded him completely, his usual long flowing hair now brushed his shoulders and not one drop of the icy rain touched it. The tall, pointed ears had vanished and the false black chin stubble blended against pink skin into a miraculous mirage. He turned to glance at his reflection in the shop window and smiled grimly. His glamor disguised his ears and fangs well enough, but his skin held its normal golden hue. Good enough to fool a Human for a while, but if he had to bed her . . . who knows what would happen?

Rio pushed open the heavy studded door to the Night Owl, ducking to step inside as a bell tinkled above his head. Warmth permeated with the delicious aromas of food filled the spacious old tavern. Females dressed in bright orange aprons moved between tables of noisy Humans, delivering great trays of food and beverages. One of these females waltzed toward them and smiled broadly at Nox.

"Well hello again; I've kept you a seat by the window, Humphrey."

Rio winced and watched the female bounce off, her fur-topped boots clattering on the sandstone tiles.

"Humphrey?"

"Uh huh." Nox grinned, began unbuttoning his coat and sauntered after her.

They removed their coats, sat, and endured the speech about helping themselves to the salad bar with the female bending low in front of Nox, to no doubt display her ample breasts. Rio allowed Nox to order, having scanned the menu, and finding no cow, pig, or anything recognizable to appease his appetite.

"What the hell are chips . . . ? They don't eat wood, do they?"

"Listen, Rio, chips are fried potatoes, steak is cow, pork is pig. And there is Aria d'Lion."

Lifting his gaze, Rio covertly examined the frail excuse for a female hovering at the door. The word *tiny* came to mind; hell, he might crush her to death if he tried to mount her. He watched as she removed her gloves, displaying long, fine-boned fingers. The coat slipped off her shoulders to reveal boyish hips, but the size of her breasts put any notion of her gender firmly toward female. He could not take his eyes off the full, pert, twin peaks pressing boldly against the soft pink blouse.

He met her iridescent emerald gaze. Her cheeks flushed against peach fuzz skin. Rio smiled slowly, taking in her full, luscious lips, upturned nose, and the mass of platinum curls that caressed her cheeks and tumbled to just below the collar of her blouse. Why would a female cut such amazing hair? He thought of Tanz's tangle of damp moonlit curls and his stomach gave a lurch. Lady's blood, this female had Fae tattooed all over her. He turned to Nox.

"It's a shame you have to kill her; she would almost pass as Fae. I must say the Druiks have outdone themselves if they have engineered this female."

"That will be your job, Rio. Get the book and dispose of the problem. Don't be fooled by her. I sense no magyck around her, so she's not using glamor. I can only assume without touching her that she's Human or a Druik counterfeit."

* * * * *

Aria caught her breath at the frank appraisal from the hunk sitting by the window. Hell, he was undressing her with his eyes. She fought the desire to walk

straight up to him, grab him by the shirtfront and kiss him. That would show him. She smiled at the waitress and took her usual seat in the corner. From here, she could steal an uninterrupted look at the two stunning men framed by the old oak window. Both were well over six feet tall, both dark— and what was sparkling in the hunk's long, silky midnight-colored hair? Hmm . . . warrior beads? Well he could certainly carry them off; from where she sat, he sure looked like a ball of muscle.

She took her empty plate and wove through the throng of lunchtime patrons to queue at the salad bar. A sharp pain hit her shins. She yelped, toppled backward, and her plate crashed to the floor, sending shards of porcelain bouncing across the sandstone tiles. Strong hands clasped her waist and she turned to look into deep amethyst eyes. The hunk pulled her against his hard body, his soft hair brushed her cheek, and she inhaled his potent aftershave.

"Oh!"

"It's okay; I've got you," he said, and smiled in a flash of white against full, kissable lips.

Heat from his hands burned through her blouse, the air sizzled, and she leaned into him to savor the thrill of his alpha-male physique. He stepped away and she looked up— way, *way* up— into the face of a dark angel. She had underestimated his height by a good eight inches and stood barely up to his chest.

"Thank you; how silly of me."

"My pleasure," he replied with a nod and turned back to his seat.

Aria stared at his retreat with a mixture of lust and regret. She craved a man like that; the very smell of him made her wet. *Lord, imagine him sliding between my legs . . . oh, yes.*

* * * * *

The following day, Rio attended the book signing. He stood with two books under one arm and waited in the queue to see Aria. His cat had whined in appreciation

at their first meeting, but Rio pushed down the request. His nose barely registered the foul Human smells let alone a subtle female allure. He gazed at her bent head, admiring her tousled hair, which glistened in the overhead strip lighting. She gripped a long feathered pen as she inscribed frivolous endearments in her books.

He stood watching her smile at each person, but her velvet eyes displayed a deep loneliness . . . a weakness, something he could use to get close. He leaned casually against the heavy wooden bookcase, blocking the passageway. His presence, he noted with some amusement, made the Humans leave through the other door. The bookstore's damp and musky odor filtered through his nose, so different from the fragrant ink, paper, and leather that infused the Royal Library in Feltich Castle. Although this shop, like the Night Owl, had wooden paneled walls and the leadlight windows added some homey charm to an otherwise foreign environment.

Their first chance meeting had gone as planned and with a little glamor she would be in his bed. He smiled, bringing a toothless grin from a cub hanging over the shoulder of a female standing in the line. Aria had reacted to him, trembling beneath his touch, and inhaling his scent, more than once. Yes, he knew attraction when he saw it, and she was ripe for the picking.

* * * * *

Aria rubbed her aching back, and then glanced at her watch. She had sat in this freezing bookstore for six hours straight with only a short break for lunch. Okay, she had signed over a hundred copies of her new novel but her face ached from smiling. She glanced up and blinked. There, at the end of the queue, stood that gorgeous man from the Night Owl. He stepped up to the table and handed her copies of each of her novels. She smiled, looking up, way up, and into those deep amethyst eyes set in a face she could just lick all over. Hell, she could lick that six foot seven ball of golden muscle from top to toe.

"Hello, and what name?"

He looked down at her, his full, delicious mouth lifting up one side in a crooked smile. She saw a flash of brilliant white teeth and then he spoke and his voice caressed her, like liquid honey.

"Rio."

Hell, she could just roll in his voice . . . naked. She signed both books with a flourish and rested her hand on the cover. She drew a breath and took a giant leap.

"I'm sure I've seen you somewhere; do we know each other?"

"No, but you fell into my arms at the Night Owl yesterday." Rio smiled, his eyes dancing with amusement.

Her cheeks heated and she looked away. "Oh, yes, thanks for that, Rio. I'm not usually so clumsy. I feel such a fool."

"It's not foolish to trip, and it was my pleasure to save you from injury."

She smiled and lifted her chin. "So, what made you buy my books? Are you interested in creatures from other realms?"

"If you have access to an ancient text, then I'm interested. I know what the scientists believe and I'm open to the fact there are alternative realms. I'm interested to find out what *you* know; just how much in these books is fact?"

Got your interest, have I, big boy?

"Everything, the faeries, the shape-shifters are fact and I can prove it. Mind you, most people think I'm crazy . . . but it pays the bills."

"You're not crazy," he said seriously.

Aria smiled warmly. "Thank you."

He moved closer and she instinctively leaned back in her chair. His heavy aftershave made her toes curl with lust. She handed him the books, and their fingers brushed. A shot of heat flowed up her arm.

"I bet you've sat here all day without a break. Would you like me to bring you a cup of coffee from the Night Owl?" he said with an intent gaze.

Aria smiled. Such a considerate man; perhaps she could push herself a little here. Dangle the hook and see if he would take her bait.

"That is such a kind thing to offer, Rio, but you're my last fan. To be honest, I'm dying for a coffee and something to eat."

Rio raised one perfect black brow and then flashed a predatory smile.

"Well then, would you honor me with your company for tea? That is what they call a meal at this time of the day, isn't it?"

"Yes, afternoon tea, but a pot of tea and scones are not what I crave right now. I think a burger, fries, and a large cup of coffee are looking good. How about you?"

She stood and stretched her remarkable body, pushing her delightfully full breasts out as she arched her back. When she shrugged into a heavy coat and slid her bag over one shoulder, he sucked in a deep breath. Gods, he wanted to know her scent—damn his broken nose. Recognizing a deep and delicious attraction to this female from touch alone baffled him, although his cat had already made up its mind. The beast purred its approval, urging him to taste her, to drink in her scent. She touched his arm, dragging him from his thoughts.

"Rio?"

"Sorry, I was miles away. You know, I've never tried a burger; they don't have them where I live."

He pushed the books under his arm and headed for the exit, then held the door open for her. She giggled and the sound was like a tinkling of bells.

"Not had a burger? Hell, Rio, have you been living on the moon?"

He followed her through the door and fell into step beside her as they walked to the Night Owl.

"Close."

The tavern hummed with low conversation, music drifted down from black boxes set high on the wall. While they waited for a table, Rio pondered on his visit to this realm. Human technology puzzled him. The people trapped in those magical flat boxes worried him at first, then the elevator—well he had conquered it soon enough and understood the practicality of climbing great heights with ease. Those phone

contraptions, which allowed Humans to speak to each other over long distances, had proved to be useful. The coffee machine was a personal favorite, as well as the shop in the hotel that sold chocolate and all those brightly colored candies. He would inform Blaise of all these wonders. In fact, apart from the embarrassment with the harlot, he quite enjoyed this Human London.

Aria leaned against him and touched his arm, putting his body on full alert.

"Have you ever had waffles and ice cream?" she said, her breath brushing his cheek as she whispered into his ear.

"No, can't say I have, but if they are a dish and you recommend them, I'll give them a try."

Her laugh made him smile and so did watching her walk away from him, toward the table, with a sexy swing to her hips. They removed their coats and sat staring at each other. Rio cleared his throat and glanced at the menu.

"I usually order meat and vegetables. To be honest, I haven't enjoyed anything I've eaten lately, unless you include chocolate."

"What do you eat at home?"

Hell, she has me backed into a corner already.

"Well, I have a very large family, so our table is filled with many different dishes, savory and sweet. So I enjoy a lot of variety. It's difficult because Hu — *you* use different words to describe food."

He paused, thinking madly about what to say next. She tapped her lips with her index finger as if evaluating his words, and then smiled sweetly.

"You know, you speak English very well. I wouldn't have known you were a tourist, apart from that slightly continental accent. I'll order for you, if you like?"

Rio drew a breath and held it; he had absolutely no idea what she was saying. Continental? Tourist? He nodded in agreement, letting his breath whistle out between his teeth.

"I think that would be very nice, Aria. Please order many dishes for me to try, and don't worry, I have many paper pounds to exchange for the food."

Aria grinned. Lord, was he for real? True, he was fantastic looking. No . . . *sinful* looking, and he had a gentle manner for such a big man, but what the hell? He could read, could hold an intelligent conversation, but was lost in a restaurant! She picked up the menu and when the waitress returned, she ordered burgers, fries, onion rings, milkshakes, coffee waffles, and ice cream with maple syrup. As the meals arrived, she chuckled at his expression of delight and encouraged him to try everything. Watching him eat and order more food saw the afternoon stretch into evening. When they finally stepped outside into the freezing night, snowflakes brushed her cheek and dusted Rio's hair.

"May I escort you home, Aria," he said, taking her hand.

She looked up into his eyes and wished this afternoon could go on forever. She wanted to say yes, but knew Aldis would lose his mind if she turned up with a man in tow. She indicated to the line of taxis a few yards away. "You can walk me to the taxi rank."

His warm fingers brushed her cheek and she trembled.

"I want to see you again. I believe there is a special connection between us. I would like to get to know you, Aria," he said, bending to brush her lips with a gentle kiss.

"I've had a lovely time with you Rio." *Thank you, God.*

"Would you consider having lunch with me tomorrow?" he said, touching her hair.

"Yes, I'd like that."

"Would you like me to pick you up? If you give me your address I will be there at say, twelve thirty."

You are just too smooth. What sort of a fool do you think I am to give you, a complete stranger, my address? In any case, Aldis would probably shoot you.

She shook her head firmly "No, that's fine; I'll meet you at the restaurant."

"I'm staying at the Bridge Hotel, Knight Street; it has a fine restaurant. It's also a public place where, I'm sure, you'll feel safe with me. Are you sure, you wouldn't like me to send my car to pick you up?"

Aria nodded and gave him her best professional smile. *I'm not going to let you think I'm that easy.*

"No, thank you Rio, I'll meet you in the hotel foyer tomorrow at one."

Rio took her hand and brushed his warm lips over her knuckles. The air crackled around them, humming with sexual electricity. He walked to a taxi, opened the door and stood to one side.

"At one tomorrow, Aria," he purred, looking deeply into her eyes.

Aria slid inside and turned to watch him saunter down the road, admiring his wide shoulders and slim waist, she sighed. *Hell he looks just as good walking away.*

* * * * *

The following day, Aria ran into the kitchen of her small, two-bedroom home. Balling her hands into fists, she pressed them into her waist and glared at Aldis.

"No, no, no. Not a snowflake's chance in hell."

"It's not safe, Aria. Wait until your medication arrives and then I'll escort you."

She picked up a saucepan and banged it on the kitchen bench.

"I don't need medication; there's nothing wrong with me. I went to the doctor's for a full check up for my work's insurance. The doctor said I'm in perfect health. I won't take any more pills and you can't make me. And, if I decide to go to lunch with a man, I *will*. I'm twenty years old and that's old enough to have a man in my life."

He lifted his hand and glared at her, his face red with fury. She stepped back, saucepan in hand. Not far enough. He swung, and pain shot through her jaw. The metallic taste of blood flowed into her mouth. Lifting the heavy pan in defense, she struck out. The thick metal hit home and her hand vibrated with pain. She slumped

against the wall, the room moving in and out of focus. Aldis folded over, hitting the floor with a sickening thud.

"Oh my God!"

She stumbled to the sink to splash cold water on her face, and then glanced over her shoulder at the crumpled heap on the floor. She must get away. Leaning heavily against the wall, heart thundering, she crept unsteadily out of the kitchen and into her bedroom. She glanced into the mirror and cursed; she would be meeting Rio with a red welt across one cheek.

Dragging a suitcase from under her small bed, she took a deep, steadying breath then emptied her small cupboard and nightstand. Her meager possessions barely filled the single suitcase. She pulled on her coat and headed for the door. *Damn him.* She turned and headed back into the kitchen. He lay in a pool of crimson blood, moaning streams of abuse. She stepped over his heaving body and marched into his bedroom, dragged a small box from under the bed and flipped open the lid.

Aria gazed down at the neat bundles of notes, royalties from her books. Aldis always insisted on her cashing the checks and giving him the money for safekeeping. She opened his nightstand, removed a pair of socks, and stuffed them full of notes, but left a nice pile in the bottom of the box. *I'll not be greedy and selfish like him.*

She tied the top of the socks into knots and pushed them inside her handbag, then picked up her suitcase and headed for the door. The wind hit her cheek with a lash of icy pain and tears stung the back of her eyes as she made her way to hail a taxi at the end of the street.

* * * * *

Rio stood at the window of the Bridge Hotel, watching the sleet pound the traffic. The strange, noisy vehicles intrigued him, especially the long metal things swishing back and forth across the windows against the continuing burden of ice. The Humans streamed by seemingly unconcerned, many holding multicolored mushrooms

over their heads. One of these strange adornments turned inside out, showing its metal bones. He chuckled. Only fools would carry such a lightning rod in a storm.

Aria stepped out of a taxi; she carried a heavy square bag and another hanging by a strap over one shoulder. His stomach cramped, her distress hitting him like a brick to the gut. Rushing to the spinning glass door, he met her as she stepped into the foyer. Anger surged through him; inside, his cat screamed at the sight of her bruised cheek. He walked toward her and snatched the bag from her hand, pushing down his rage.

"Aria"

"Hey, Rio," she replied and looked up at him with large, sad eyes. "Do you think I could get a room here, just for the night?"

He ignored her question and pressed his fingertips to the bruise on her cheek.

"Who struck you? Give me his name, Aria."

"Really, it's none of your business."

Rio growled and she reacted instantly by stepping away from him. He poured his glamor over her. *Trust me*. Then he reached out and took her arm.

"It's okay, *I'm sorry*. The thought of someone hurting you . . . it makes me angry."

"Thank you for your concern but I'm okay. Right now, I need a room; I had to leave my home. It's not a problem; I'll go and look for a flat tomorrow."

Rio took her hand and led her toward the desk. Her ice-cold fingers closed around his hand and his cat purred. He leaned casually against the carved wooden counter and smiled at the clerk.

"I want to speak to Mister Nox."

The clerk handed him a telephone and he listened to Nox speaking miraculously from inside the device.

"What?"

"It's me, Rio."

"Yeah, so why use the phone when you have a perfectly good mind to send me a message."

Rio glanced down at Aria, who had moved closer and was looking up at him with big, round eyes.

"Aria's here and she's injured. I need to organize a room for her for awhile; can you arrange something?"

"Sure, you're really something, Rio." He chuckled. "I can't wait to hear how you arranged this. Give the phone to the hotel clerk."

Rio signaled the clerk and waited. He rested his arm around Aria's slim shoulders and she nestled against his side. This small reaction caused an overwhelming shudder of response in him. He glanced down at her. So tiny . . . Anger welled up; who dared to lay a hand on her? He would find out who hit her if it took all night. The clerk returned with a room key and pushed it across the table to Aria.

"Room 899. Mister Nox has approved a three-month stay with all expenses, Miss d' Lion. I hope you'll enjoy your stay."

Rio turned her around and led her down the hallway.

"Come, I'll show you how to work the elevator."

"Did he say a three month stay? I can't afford to stay here that long, Rio." She stammered as the elevator doors shut.

Rio grinned and pulled her closer, pouring his glamor over her to sooth her distress.

"Nox will pay for everything, so stay as long as you like."

"Why would he do that? He doesn't know me. Who is this Nox person? Is he a friend of yours?" she replied, lifting her head to stare into his eyes.

The elevator stopped with a bump and the doors slid open on the eighth floor. Rio stepped back to allow her to pass.

"Yes, a good friend. He knows your books, Aria. Don't worry; Nox can afford to pay for everything you need. He's most generous, and would be hurt if you refused his kindness."

Aria bit her bottom lip. The closeness of this amazing man made her stomach flutter. Hell, he smelled like sin – decadent, dangerous, delicious sin. For some reason, she trusted him. Maybe it was those deep, amethyst eyes. Damn, were they for real? She gazed up at him as they reached the door to her room. Perhaps if she played the damsel in distress she may just land this hunk. Funny, the way her bruised face had caused such a reaction. He seemed genuinely angry someone had hit her. It was not as if she really *knew* him; hell, they had only met yesterday.

Her hand trembled as she pressed the key card into the slot. The door clicked open, she walked inside, and stopped in awe. A luxurious suite spread out before her. A thick, midnight blue carpet covered the floor. Against the far wall, an open fireplace spread warmth with a roaring fire. Large sofas, a dining table, and double doors leading to a private bedroom completed a room fit for a king.

"Oh, Rio this is too much. I can't expect Mister Nox to pay for all this."

She turned to see him sauntering into the bedroom and placing her suitcase on the massive bed. Her stomach gave a nervous flip but she drew a deep breath and followed him, hovering at the door. He turned and grinned at her.

"You'll be safe here, Aria. Now, you must be starving, would you like to go down to the restaurant or would you be more comfortable if we eat here?"

Aria inclined her head. *Go down to the restaurant or stay here and have you all to myself . . . hmm?*

"Would you mind if we stayed here?"

"I'll order a variety of dishes, wine and coffee," he replied and went to the phone beside the bed and ordered room service.

* * * * *

Sitting as close as possible, Rio watched Aria eat. This close, she resembled a porcelain doll, as if each feature of her beautiful face had been crafted by an artist. He would gain great pleasure taking her to his bed; to slide his hands over her peach fuzz

skin would be a delight. Reaching up, he touched a curl caressing her cheek. She turned at once to smile at him. They're being together seemed the most natural thing in the world. He remembered Blaise's orders, to kill this unique creature, and his stomach tumbled into free fall.

His cat roared its disgust at the idea. He glanced away, knowing instinctively his eyes had changed. The cat liked Aria; in fact, his constant urgings for him to lick her all over were becoming monotonous. Gods, if he could morph, his nose would repair in a second. But his cats roar *would* draw attention in such an establishment, and there were benefits to losing his sense of smell; he did not have to endure the Human stink.

Rio refilled their glasses with the fine Pinot Noir and lifted the ruby red liquid to his lips. The rich, aromatic flavor coated his tongue. He leaned back in his chair and smiled at Aria. "Tell me about the book you claim gives details about shape-shifters and faeries."

She pushed away from the table and grinned at him happily.

"It's here; I brought it with me. I'll show you," she said, bounding into the bedroom and opening her bag.

She returned, plunked the ancient leather bound book on the table and pushed it toward him. He winced. His fingers caressed the gold lettering, the worn spine and drifted across the yellowing parchment leaves. A tingle of awareness ran up his arm and he sent a silent prayer to the Lady.

"Open it; it's a story about a goddess who married her cat. His name was Arious and he turned all the cats in his kingdom into shape-shifters. It tells of the Fae and how they move between realms . . . that's what they call dimensions. And, about the powerful magyck the Fae have . . . and it says the King of the Faerie can bind a Human to him for life! It's full of information. Spooky stuff, but look how old it is . . . it must be true."

Hardly able to take a breath in the presence of such a relic, he stared at the book for a long time, wondering how she managed to translate the ancient text. For only Pride and Fae could read the Lady's primordial transcripts.

He lifted his gaze to her flushed excited face. Hell, there was no way he could destroy her; she had no idea what she had done. Letting the breath out in a wheeze, he shook his head.

"How did you come by the book, Aria?"

"My uncle . . . well he isn't really my uncle. Aldis brought it to me; he said he couldn't read it, the print was funny or something, but I read it easily."

Rio examined her face, peach fuzz skin, large almond shaped emerald eyes, a button nose, and moonbeam curls spelt faerie in any realm. Without doubt, Fae blood ran in her veins, this was the only conclusion, *if* she could indeed read the text. The lack of pointed ears could easily be the work of a Druik knife.

"Tell me about your family. This Aldis, is he the scum that struck you?"

She cast her eyes down and her cheeks flushed.

Rio dropped his voice to a whisper, pouring more glamor over her.

"Aria, you know you can trust me." He touched her cheek, then she nodded, keeping her eyes fixed in her hands. "Tell me what happened."

"It's not the first time he's hit me. He owns me, Rio," she said, lifting her chin. "He said I must pay back a family debt. The books about the shape-shifters are part of it; he wants to expose them to the world. Let everyone know of the danger these beings pose to us. When this is accomplished, he promised he'd let me meet my parents."

"Who are?"

"I don't even have a name; I don't know anyone from my home except Aldis. He's always promised if I did as he said, he would take me home. This time, he was angry because I arranged to meet you. You see, he wants me for himself."

Rio growled, fighting his cat for control. "Did he *touch* you against your will?"

He watched her downcast gaze, her hands gripping the cloth of her skirt and knew the answer. He lifted her chin and brushed her lips with his thumb.

"He'll never touch you again, honey."

She touched his face and tilted her head to brush his lips. A warm glow flowed through him with such a soft gentle kiss. Her lips fluttered like angel's wings across his

mouth, her sweet breath laced with wine. He stilled as if she were a wild creature and one wrong move would send her scampering away.

Aria pressed her mouth to Rio's full lips, inhaled his fragrance and a rush of need hit her like a train. He remained as still as a statue. She pulled back and gazed into his eyes. "I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to presume"

He stroked his hands up her arms and cupped her face. The rough pads of his thumbs caressed her lips and his eyes glowed with passion.

"Oh, honey, you don't *know* how much I *want* to kiss you," he purred

Breathing heavily, she slid off the chair and straddled him. His eyes widened and she laughed. "Well, kiss me, because I want you too, Rio."

Her face burned, cupped in his large hands, and his mouth closed over hers, sliding, devouring. Lust ran through her, igniting every feral instinct, racing out of control with every swipe of his delicious tongue. Needing to be closer, Aria rocked against him, bringing a groan from Rio's lips.

Rio dropped his hands to stroke her breasts; his cat roared with delight. He moaned, pushing back his cat to gain control. *No, I will not take a female I've glamored, no matter how much I want to. She has no idea of her true emotions; I'll not damage her further.*

He pushed his mind to contact Nox. *"Phone me before I do something I'll regret. Room 899."*

He lifted his head when the telephone rang. "You'd better get that, Aria."

She slid from his lap, her lips swollen from his kiss and her cheeks flushed with desire. His cock ached with need. He watched her face drop with disappointment as she listened to the call. She placed the phone on the receiver and lifted her chin.

"That was Mister Nox; he said you're needed immediately."

Rio stood slowly, went to her, and kissed her gently, rubbing his hands up her arms.

"I'm sorry, duty calls. I suggest you order room service for dinner and get some rest. I'll see you in the morning."

"Would you like to have b-breakfast with m-me?" she stammered.

"Here?"

"I hate to eat alone," she replied, her cheeks red.

He smiled and ran a finger along her jaw. "I'd like that, Aria."

"What about Mister Nox?" Aria tipped her head toward the phone.

"He won't bother us in the morning . . . I promise"

Aria stood by the door and watched him saunter to the elevator. Holy cow, he made her hot. She touched her breasts, pinching the hard nipples, aching with need. Heading to the bedroom, she dragged her bathrobe from the suitcase and went into the sumptuous bathroom to run a tub. The vanity held bottles of luxury toiletries; she picked up a large orange bottle of bubble bath, sniffed it, surprised when it had no smell, and poured half of it into the massive marble hot tub. Bubbles grew in a mass of white foam. Grinning, she stripped off and slid into decadent delight.

Warm suds tingled against her flesh as she sank into the hot water. She collected handfuls of the rich foam and coated her breasts, moving the suds around until the nipples peeked out hard and demanding. Pussy wet with need, she slid her fingers in a long caress to her apex and searched her folds to circle her aching clit. She closed her other hand around her breast, finger and thumb pinching the nipple. Her mind flooded with images of Rio, his scent, his deep, ravishing kisses. The heat spiraled in her belly — and the telephone rang.

Cursing, she turned her head toward the irritating noise. *What is it with these damn phones?* The phone sat within easy reach of the tub and she grabbed it, hands dripping with suds.

"Yes."

"Miss d' Lion, I have your father here in the lobby; would you like me to send him up to your room?"

Aria swallowed, but her throat constricted with shock. "Who?"

"He said Aldis told him where to find you. He said he came to finalize your debt."

Her mind swam with indecision. Her father, here, after all these years. She drew a steadying breath.

"Send him up."

She dried herself quickly then pulled on her robe. The long dressing gown covered her from head to foot and brushed the carpet as she walked. Running a hand through her unruly curls, she headed into the sitting room as a knock sounded on the door.

Chapter Nine

Rio stepped into the cold shower. Freezing needles cut into his flesh, removing the savage lust thumping through his body. He heard the bathroom door open and Nox's voice through the thundering icy torture.

"If she stirs you so, why don't you spend the rest of the afternoon with me and the girls? Chloe can't stop talking about her night with you. If I was a jealous faerie I might have wanted to kill you." He chuckled, leaning casually against the doorframe, naked to the waist and wearing black silk pajama bottoms. "You know you can't keep denying the affection we have for each other, Rio. Why don't you allow me to show you how much I care for you?"

Stepping out of the shower, he caught the towel Nox flung at him and wrapped it around his waist. Rio met the appraising look Nox gave him with a smile. Hell, this was not the first time Nox had offered him a night of passion, and not the first time he had considered just that. He had to admit a deep attachment for the King of the Faerie—the thought of sliding against his honey colored skin—gods! Being so close to his awe-inspiring magnificence made the temptation painful.

"I admit I care for you, Nox, and it's true I've lusted after you. Much as I would like to have you — and trust me, the thought has crossed my mind several times — I regretfully must decline. I plan to wait until I can have Tanz."

"You've not given a promise to anyone, Rio. I know you care for Tanz and I respect that, but you *do* know he's sharing a bed with Allure?" He flexed his massive biceps, stretching gold, shimmering skin across taut, defined muscle.

Rio ground his teeth. "Tanz promised me he'd not give his ass to any other male."

"If you agreed to his ultimatum, and we both know how *that* worked out. It's likely he's found another favorite by now. Rio, he's lived a long time and his needs are as great as mine. I *know* you care for me, Rio, and you have declined my advances out of respect for Allure's feelings. You've a lot to learn about the Fae; we give our love unselfishly. I have no mate *and* until I do, I'll share by love with whom *I* choose," he replied and folded his arms across his bare chest defensively. His hair crackled, sending tiny blue sparks into the midnight silk waving around his hips.

Knowing this stance to be one of acute annoyance, Rio dropped the towel and inclined his head. *What the hell . . . he's correct; Tanz made me no promise. And, if he's sharing Allure's bed, I mean little to him. Nothing has changed . . . and I may never see him again.*

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to be disrespectful. I'm not sure what's wrong with me; my cat has been pushing me in every direction."

He sighed with relief when Nox unfolded his arms, dropped his emerald gaze to Rio's cock, and slowly back up to meet his eyes. He stood still and watched a slow smile cross Nox's full lips. The faerie's look of seductive hunger sent a shiver down his spine, filling his shaft until it stood out with want.

"Just you and me, Rio. I want all of you . . . complete surrender," Nox said and stepped forward, cupping Rio's face.

He fell into Nox's sultry eyes and saw flames licking in the emerald depths. A tremor skittered down his body. "I'm an alpha; it's natural for me to be dominant."

"Complete surrender . . . is natural . . . when you're with me . . . alpha," Nox said, running his tongue up Rio's neck and biting his earlobe.

Rio relaxed, unable to prevent his mind from filling with images of Tanz. *My dearest Tanz, one day you will know . . . it's you, not Nox, I crave.*

Nox covered his mouth, his kiss rumbling through his senses like thunder. Lightning flashed behind his eyes at every thrust of his tongue; each nibble of his lips brought a surge of uncontrolled passion. Nox dropped his warm hands from Rio's face. Knees weak with the thrill of his kiss, Rio fell against him. His body thrummed with Nox's dominant power and for once in his life, he trembled with emotion . . . or was it fear?

He followed Nox into his spacious bedroom and his belly quaked with a strange euphoria. Unable to concentrate, he dragged in deep breaths. Nox took control of the situation by ordering him to stand before the roaring fire. He watched Nox disrobe, spread a towel on the leather chair and place a jar of aphrodisiac lube within reach. The faerie's body glowed in the firelight, tall and massive; his cock stuck out from his body like a giant steel phallus. Lady's blood, he had never seen anything that big before. He swallowed hard. Nox sat in the wide, padded leather chair and beckoned him.

"Straddle me, kneel on the arms, and grasp the back of the chair." He ordered.

Rio bit his lip; his knees pushed into the soft leather arms of the chair, spread so wide, his ass caught the warmth from the fire. Nox caressed his buttocks and kissed a tantalizing path up the inside of one thigh and then the other. Heat rushed through him as Nox licked a wet path to his balls and then suckled his tight sac. Open and exposed, he dropped his head to watch Nox's bobbing head. He gasped. Nox looked up at him with demon's eyes, black and empty. Then Nox dropped two needle sharp fangs and Rio flinched in panic. Nox ducked between his legs to sink his teeth into the soft spot behind his balls. *Faeries do not have fangs. Oh dear Lady, I'm going to die in bliss.*

Rio shook as flames of exquisite feral need rocked his body. Nox took him deep inside his hot, wet, mouth. Fixing his eyes on Nox, Rio rocked to the rhythm of his expert sucking. Hell, just how far could he take his cock down his throat? Nox reached

for the lube and massaged the tantalizing salve around Rio's hole, then over his balls. The bite flamed, driving him into a euphoric dream. The room moved in and out of focus as Nox caressed and then pushed oiled fingers deep into his ass. Nox plunged his fingers repeatedly inside, all the while scraping his teeth up and down Rio's shaft. Rio gripped the back of the chair, panting with delight. Groaning in sheer bliss, he tipped his head back and gave into the pleasure. His legs trembled, and he pumped himself into Nox's willing throat.

Nox sunk his fangs into the base of his shaft, branding him with hot, supernatural lust. Rio's eyes rolled up in delirium. Trembling from head to foot, he tried to pull himself back to reality. Nox gripped his thighs tightly and pulled his legs out from under him. Wide open, Rio straddled Nox, suspended above his massive cock. Soft leather pressed under his thighs, his legs stretched to their limit, and his toes dug into the soft rug.

Nox found his mouth, and he sighed. He tasted his own essence as their tongues danced. Nox bit his bottom lip and pinched his flat nipples and he groaned in pleasure. Delirious, Rio rested his head on Nox's firm shoulder, as he rubbed the head of his massive shaft against his ass.

"I've never taken anything that big."

"If it doesn't fit, I'll force it. Later, I'll swallow you down and use my fist. Do you know what it's like to have two up your ass at once, Rio?" Nox groaned, grasping Rio's hips and pushing the head of his massive cock into him, in one hot, delicious slide.

"Oh yeah, open for me, Rio . . . burn for me." Nox panted, holding Rio steady while he impaled him.

So hot. Rio dug his fingers into the back of the chair, head spinning as Nox's shaft burned a sizzling path deep inside. Nox lifted his hips repeatedly to drive into his stretched ass, spreading him wider with every delightful thrust. Gasping for air, Rio clung to him, his own cock filling with blood at every delectable pass of his pleasure spot.

"Kiss me," Nox demanded. "Give yourself to me . . . complete surrender."

Lifting his head, Rio closed his mouth over Nox's lips; the King of the Faerie groaned into his mouth and increased the pace. Rio's body tingled as Nox's magyck thrummed through his body with each sublime thrust, his vision turning a kaleidoscope of colors. Nox shuddered to conclusion. Long, hot spurts shot inside him, throwing him into a spiral of pleasure. He broke the kiss and bit his lip hard to prevent screaming Tanz's name with his own fervid release.

* * * * *

Aria opened the door with the intention of peering cautiously through the gap when it flew open with such force it knocked her down. She pushed up from the floor and sat staring into Aldis's red, swollen face. He slammed the door behind him and stood over her, fists clenched.

"So, you little whore, have you opened your legs for him yet?"

Scrambling away on her hands and knees, she screamed. He lunged at her, grabbed a handful of hair, and dragged her around to face him. Her robe fell open and Aldis grabbed her exposed breast, squeezing the nipple cruelly. She battered him with her fists. "Get away from me; don't touch me."

"You belong to me, bitch." He screeched, sending a stinging slap across her face.

Aria fell back, tasting blood on her lips, tears flowing down her cheeks. He drove forward, crushing her to the floor, sending her breath out in a whoosh. Gasping for air, she screamed at the top of her lungs but this did nothing to stop him. His large, pudgy hand closed around her neck and squeezed. The room went in and out of focus. She fought, desperate and terrified, to take a breath, then his ribcage rolled across her, squashing her under his immense weight. She dragged air in through her bloodied nose and caught the strong smell of whiskey and sweat. He squeezed tighter and the pain sent her into freefall. Her sight blurred. Suddenly aware of his stinking heavy body between her legs, pinning her to the ground, she pulled desperately at his hand. *One breath, just give me one breath.*

Her ears rang like a million bees buzzing inside her head and blocked out the sound of his rasping, foul breath. She dug her nails into his thick, fleshy cheeks as her sight began to go black around the edges. *I'm going to die.*

The door exploded into a thousand pieces and Rio burst into the room. Aldis's hand left her neck and Aria sucked in painful gulps of air. Rio lifted Aldis with one hand and flung him effortlessly against the wall. The wood paneling cracked like a gunshot under Aldis's weight and he slid to a crumpled heap on the floor. She could hear Rio growling and then he swung around to look down at her. Gasping for breath, she looked up into his eyes, not soft amethyst now, but a burning amber. Her body shook uncontrollably; she tried to look away but her gaze fixed on Rio. Naked to the waist, wearing only a pair of jeans, his entire body flexed in rage. He roared and lifted Aldis high in the air to bring him down with a sickening crunch across one knee. She froze, uncomprehending the shocking scene playing out before her. Rio tossed the body across the room, like a cat playing with a mouse. She gagged at the spray of blood shooting from Aldis's mouth and she rolled back on the floor, sinking into glorious darkness.

Nox stepped through the broken door in time to see Rio pounce toward the Ram's body, morphing in midair into a black leopard. Turning quickly, he repaired the door and stepped back, flinching with disgust. The massive cat lowered its head to rip out Aldis's throat. Blood splattered the walls and flowed across the carpet in a sticky, crimson tide. The big cat swung its head around and went to Aria, dripping its victim's blood beside her inert body. The cat tipped back its head, opened its mouth and let out a triumphant roar then flopped down to lay at her side. This loss of control could only mean one thing; Rio's cat had bonded with the traitor. *Lady's blood, as if I haven't enough problems right now.*

"Rio, you'd better take control or I'm going to get Blaise. I'm going to have enough trouble clearing up this mess. I don't think Blaise will be too happy you killed the Ram; he can't interrogate a corpse."

The air shimmered and Rio stood slowly, shaking his head. His senses were on full alert and he could smell every scent in the room. Intoxicated by killing the Ram, the glory of the kill, and the smell of blood, he lifted his head to savor the feminine scent he had searched for all his life. Spinning around, he fell to his knees beside Aria. He groaned and reached out to cover her crumpled, naked body with the robe. Touching her bruised face, he pressed his fingers to her throat. No pulse. He swore under his breath. He had broken his promise to her and Aldis had hurt her again. *Lady she's an innocent, it's my fault, I didn't protect her . . . please . . . I beg you . . . help her.*

Rio saw her draw a ragged breath before her chest began to rise and fall in normal rhythm. He bent down to kiss her cheek and her feminine scent flooded his senses. His cat sighed. "*Mine*" His stomach clenched and tears stung the backs of his eyes.

"Rio, listen to me. Take her into the bedroom, put her on the bed. I'll clean up this mess and send him back to Druik Void . . . they'll get the message. I'll have to wait here and glamor anyone who comes to the door," Nox said.

Rio opened his mouth then stopped when Nox held up a hand to silence him.

"I'll send you upstairs. Get dressed and I'll let you know when to come back. Don't worry about Aria; she's only fainted." He walked over to the flat screen TV and turned up the volume. "I'll convince them the volume is stuck on full. Hurry now; put her to bed."

Rio collected Aria up in his arms, the scent of her filling him with the Lady's magyck. He could see her clearly for the first time and a wealth of love, passion, and desire welled up inside him. Sitting beside her on the bed his fingers brushed curls damp with tears clinging to her bruised cheek. He thought of Tanz and smiled; he loved him too, and finding Aria had not changed that. They would be together, the three of them. Nox stepped into the room and he lifted his gaze; he could hear someone banging on the door and raised voices in the hall.

"Don't glamor her; she belongs to me. I'll explain everything to her and bring her and the book to Dryad in the morning."

Nox narrowed his eyes and snorted in anger. Rio suddenly found himself in the middle of his hotel room. He dressed quickly then glanced around and impulsively decided to pack his clothes and send them back to Feltich Castle. He smiled at the thought of mating Aria and pushed his clothes into the thick leather bags. Well, he *would* mate Aria, as soon as he could explain the situation. Confident she would accept him as her mate, he pushed his bags through the Circle of Light. Yes, tonight, he would sink his fangs into her soft peach fuzz skin and she would transform overnight. He would take her home and then find Tanz.

Chapter Ten

Aria awoke and looked into Rio's soft, velvet eyes. Her hand lay encircled in his large golden fingers. "Rio, I'm not sure whether to run away or thank you."

"Thank me, honey; the brute was trying to kill you. How do you feel?"

She tensed, aware of her nakedness beneath the bathrobe. He smiled sweetly and bent to brush his mouth across her lips. She relaxed, his delightful scent seeping into her senses. She brought her hand up to touch her nose and winced at the pain.

"I can breathe okay, and I can smell your aftershave. I was sure he'd broken my nose. I can't believe what you did; it was as if you were a different person, like Jekyll and Hyde."

"I'm not sure who Jekyll and Hyde is, but yes, there *are* two sides to me. We've much to discuss, Aria. First, though, be honest and tell me if you like me."

"I hardly know you, Rio, but yes I like you, I like you a lot."

"That's good, because I'm falling head over heels in love with you, honey," he said and bent to kiss her.

Aria slid into his arms and opened her lips to taste him as he plundered her mouth. He said he loved her, how crazy was that? She pushed her fingers into his silky hair to pull him closer. Their lips molded together and her heart gave a jolt. The sensation of falling into an erotic abyss grew with every stroke of his tongue. Then he groaned into her mouth and she tumbled deeply into an all-consuming need. She wanted him with a passion, needed to be closer, to drink in his delicious scent, to taste his golden skin. Nothing mattered anymore but Rio. When he brushed her nipples with his fingers, she arched her back, needing more, wanting his hands all over her naked body.

He pulled away and she complained then looked into his sultry eyes. He smiled and her heart gave a silly little lurch. Touching his face, she sighed.

"You make me feel very special, Rio. Stay with me tonight."

* * * * *

Rio grinned down at her. *After I've bitten you, love will shine in your eyes for me.*

"Well that's a start. I'm not planning to leave you alone tonight, Aria, but you need to know the truth about me before I take you to my bed."

"Are you a serial killer or something? Hell, that would be just my luck."

Rio pulled her close against his body and relaxed against the head board.

"No, but I've killed both man and beast. I'll start from the beginning. That book you have is a precious relic belonging to my people. I'm a Knight Watch prince, one of the shape-shifters mentioned in the book. Nox is the King of the Faerie."

"So you expect me to believe you can shape-shift into a cat . . . right? And, I'm to consider the millionaire living in the penthouse is the King of the Faerie? He's a man . . . people have seen him. No, I don't believe you, Rio; this is ridiculous. Shape-shifters are demons."

Rio dropped his glamor and turned to her. "Look at my true self, am I a hideous creature, a demon to fear?"

When she ran her fingers up his pointed ears, a rush of emotion went through him. Smiling, he showed her his fangs and watched her eyes widen into jade pools of shock. Her body stiffened under his touch and he sighed and rubbed her arm slowly.

"You're my chosen mate, given to me by the Lady Boda. She wrote the book Aldis took from the Royal library."

"Your *mate*? Do you mean you want to *marry* me?"

"Aye, we were destined to be together, Aria. I believe Aldis kidnapped you as a baby from the Fae and used you in an attempt to bring war between the lands of the Five Gates and the Druiks. The Knight Watch and Fae have defeated the Druiks many times and they seek a weapon to use against us. I believe the plan to use you was devised many years ago. They raised you as a Druik and poisoned your mind against us. They used your novels in an attempt to gain the support of the Humans. With the Humans on their side, the Druiks would have revealed Druik Void and shared their technology. With this knowledge they could destroy or enslave the people of the Five Gates and Other World, the land of the Fae."

"Oh my God . . . then it's true?"

Rio ran a finger down her cheek.

"Yes, honey, it's true."

"Now you've discovered I'm involved in this . . . conspiracy, and Aldis is dead . . . he is dead, isn't he? Why should I believe you, when you say you want me for your wife?"

He moved slowly, lifted her chin and her eyes went wild.

"My orders were to kill you but I don't kill females, Aria. I also believe you were an innocent in Aldis's plans. I want to mark you as my own, honey, and take you home. I'll find your family and if not, I've a huge one to share."

"Are you saying you're planning to drink my blood then bind me for life to Nox, or turn me into a vampire? You forget I've read the book, Rio," Aria replied, her voice shaky.

"My fangs are merely used to inject venom into you, to change you into a Pride female. It's said to be the most wonderful sensation and once changed you'll experience four days of our blissful joining. You'll grow fangs and ears like mine and have the need to bite me."

"Bite you? Good Lord, this just gets better by the second." She spat.

"This isn't something to fear, honey. I've looked for you all my life."

"So that part is true then, the drinking blood and changing? Anything else, Rio?"

He nodded slowly and pushed his fingers into her moonbeam curls. She trembled under his touch and he sighed, devastated. "In truth, I *am* a cat, a black leopard. I can morph at will, but this shouldn't worry you."

"Ah huh . . . not worry me . . . so when you fancy a midnight snack, will I be on the menu?"

Rio bit back a laugh. "No, we don't feast on our own kind. You'll have a cat too; once transformed it will live inside you. Most are quiet creatures; mine only interferes when he desires a female or needs to hunt. I'll teach you how to control your cat, Aria, so you have nothing to fear. I'll take you with me to Dryad – it's a beautiful island – and we'll live in Feltich Castle. Trust your heart and I'll show you paradise."

"You said your cat needs to find females; will you leave me to sleep with other women?"

Leaning in toward her, he kissed her nose and then her cheeks.

"Once we're mated, I'll never desire another female. Although, I believe you may be destined for two males."

Aria pushed her hands against his chest and glared at him. Okay, he *had* told her the truth and now, God help her, she believed him. Nobody could possibly make that story up spontaneously. She inclined her head. Damn the man was some sort of gorgeous . . . imagine being sandwiched between two like him. The thought, alone, made her pussy wet with desire. She saw Rio's nostrils flare and knew instinctively he had caught the scent of her arousal.

"Ah . . . the thought of two males excites you. This pleases me. For now, I'm afraid you only have me to quench your desire," he drawled, bending to kiss her.

The room tilted as he drew her close and when he pushed her bathrobe from her shoulders, she trembled with need. Under his skillful touch, her skin pebbled. He stroked then kissed her neck, her breasts. Inhaling his potent scent, she ran her hands over his shoulders, feeling the flex of his muscles under his shirt, then he bent to kiss each nipple in tormenting slowness. Her breath came in short pants with each pass of his tongue, a hot moist flame across her aching peaks. Moisture pooled in her pussy while he suckled her, sending waves of bliss washing over each hard bud. Needing to feel his skin, she pushed her fingers under his shirt; his flesh burned against her palms. He returned his attention to her mouth, sliding his full lips across hers and making her burn for him. She strained against him, demanding more when he chuckled against her lips and pulled away.

Rio pulled his shirt over his head, discarded his boots and jeans while watching her appreciative gaze travel over his body. Holding her gaze, he slid onto the bed and took her mouth in a blistering kiss. His hand flattened against the small of her back holding her close. She returned the kiss, her sharp nails scoring tracks across his bare shoulders. He groaned, drinking in her sweetness. His tongue claimed her mouth, then returned to feast on her honey tipped breasts. She tasted so sweet and he loved the small noise she made when he ran his fangs across her nipples. A deep purr rumbled through his chest. Gods, he needed to taste her, run his tongue through her folds, and drink the nectar from her pussy. He pushed her down onto the bed and kissed a path down her belly. Stopping at her apex, he ran his tongue over his lips in anticipation. She moved her legs to reveal a peach fuzz pussy, glossy, flushed pink with need. He lifted his head and gazed into her confused eyes. "I'm going to love you; don't be afraid of me, honey."

He locked his gaze on her face and brushed his mouth across her pussy, purring. Then Lady be praised, she opened her legs to allow him to feast on her soaking folds.

His tongue found her nub, hard and wanting; he circled it and heard her breath catch. Under his mouth, her body burned, trembled. He drew her clit between his lips and suckled, rushing her to climax. The room shifted, her scent raced through his blood, threatening his control. He crawled up her body, trembling with his own need, and lay between her legs, licking a path up her neck. His cat begged him to bite her.

No it's not time yet.

Clutching her hips, he pushed the throbbing head of his cock against her quivering pussy. He smiled when she grasped his shoulders, her eyes deep, sultry, pools of moss passion.

"Lift your legs for me, honey."

Biting the inside of his cheek, he pushed forward. Gods, she was so tight. Her fingernails dug into his skin and her eyes widened. He ground his teeth and slid into bliss. Dear Lady, her body held him in a velvet vice. He moved and her tightness caressed him to the point of instant gratification. Nothing had felt like this before. He drove into her liquid heat and spiraled out of control. His cat roared and he fell forward, grinding into her, relishing her tight pulsating quim. He slid over her, damp skin on velvet, her hard nipples pressing delightfully into his chest. Hell, he could not get enough of her. He thrust deeper in to her silken glove, and she took all of him in writhing passion. Another climax claimed her; Rio heard her mew and her core tightened around his shaft. Shivery pulses of delight pushed him over the edge and he emptied his load in pulsating spurts. Leaning forward, he kissed a path up her throat, found the throbbing pulse and sank in his fangs.

Rio's world erupted, visions, and lights of every hue burned his eyes. Blood, sweet as summer wine, flooded across his tongue. His venom sacs contracted, pumping his essence directly into her veins. He lifted his head to gaze at his mate; she lay so still, but her heart pounded against his chest. Rolling off her, he gathered her to his side. He would have her many times this night and wait for the paradise to come in her bite.

Firelight sent patterns across the walls and Rio dozed, until she stirred and slid her small body on top of him, her smile reflecting in the shaft of moonlight piercing the

gloom through a crack in the drapes. His shaft rose in anticipation as her scent surrounded him. She kissed him with passion and he lifted her hips and positioned her to take him deep inside her soaking heat. He gripped her small waist and rolled up to meet her every stroke, pinching her hard nipples. She leaned back, grinding her damp body to climax. Watching her beautiful, nubile body move in the glow of the firelight, he continued to buck into her then she fell forward and her mouth closed over his neck. Her teeth closed around his jugular. He called out Aria's name and thanked the Lady. She sucked on his neck and he drove into her until they both shuddered to climax.

Rio smiled into the darkness, and drew her closer. Her bite was not what Dare had described to him as an erotic experience; indeed, when she sank her fangs into his neck pain shot through him. Mayhap, she had bitten too soon and her fangs had not fully extended. No matter, her potent scent had engulfed him and sent his cat into rapture. She lifted her beautiful face and her hand slid across his chest.

"I wish we could stay like this forever, until the end of time," she whispered. Her hand left his chest and slid up to encircle his bicep.

A thrill went right to his heart. Rio cupped her chin; her eyes were so close, even in the twilight he could see the pupils dilate in the circle of emerald. His gaze traveled down to her hungry, full mouth, swollen from his kiss. He dragged his eyes back to look at her. Gods, he wanted to have her again. No not yet, she needed to rest; her heart still pounded against his chest and her soft, delicate skin was flushed pink and wet with sweat.

"I want to show you Dryad from the top of the mountain and run with you on the golden sand. I want to see you swell with my cubs and be beside me every time I wake."

His cat purred in agreement. She slid up his body and brushed his mouth with her lips. He closed his arms around her and she rested her head on his shoulder, lapping at the bite she had inflicted. Her breathing slowed and he knew she had fallen asleep. Rio closed his eyes; by the morning, his venom will have finished her transformation. Gods, he could not wait to see her as a Pride female.

Rio's dream centered on Tanz and he woke with a deep feeling of sadness. Would he ever see him again? He nuzzled Aria, and she sighed and cuddled closer to his side, one arm flung across his chest. He gazed at her perfect elfin features; in so many ways she reminded him of Tanz. Those green almond eyes and her peach fuzz skin so reminiscent of the faerie he loved . . . yes, he knew now, he loved Tanz.

He reached to push the moonlight curls from the top of her ear and froze. His fingers traced the rounded tip and his heart began to palpitate in panic.

"Aria, honey, wake up. Let me look at you."

"Have I changed, Rio?" she replied, stretched, and opened her jewel-like eyes. Her mouth turned up in a smile . . . a *Human* smile.

"No."

"But you've bitten me . . . why haven't I changed? And, why are you looking at me like that?" she said, moving away and covering her nakedness with the crumpled sheet.

Rio leapt from the bed, strode to the mirror, and examined his neck carefully. A bruised and bloody bite marked his neck. Not two sharp fangs, but a complete row of teeth—Human teeth. He rested his head on the mirror. Dear Lady, she was still Human. It only took a few hours for a Pride male's venom to work . . . gods, how could he have made such an error? His cat whined, denying any mistake. He looked at her again; gods, her scent made him instantly hard and he loved her with a desperate passion. His cat wanted her and he had nothing to guide him but a female's scent . . . had the Lady denied his claim? Unbearable pain stabbed his heart; he trembled, and fell against the wall.

"Rio, for God's sake, what's wrong with you?"

He rolled his shoulders and turned to look at her beautiful, troubled face. Gods, she was so perfect. Swallowing hard, he met her gaze. "I'm sorry Aria, this was a terrible mistake. I shouldn't have bitten you."

"You said you *loved* me, what do you mean *a mistake*?" she replied, her fingers kneading the sheet at her breast.

"I took you when, in truth, I love another. I've disobeyed our Lady's command and she's punished me. My venom is Her gift and should've changed you, but you remain Human. I must return home. You must forget I exist, Aria, or my king will send someone to execute you. Deny all you know about shape-shifters and the Fae . . . save your life."

He watched Aria's fingers bunch up in the crumpled sheets, her beautiful eyes flooding with tears. Her skin had turned stark white and her bottom lip protruded like a scolded infant. He wanted to scoop her into his arms and comfort her, to be with her forever.

"W-who do you l-love, Rio; I've the r-right to know." Her delicate body shuddered with sobs; tears ran unrestrained down her pale cheeks.

Rio rubbed both hands over his face. How could this be happening? He *loved* her, there was no doubt. He *wanted* to be with her. How could he survive without her, without Tanz? *Arious, I beg you, speak to your mate. Tell her I love them both and will have no other.*

He waited for an answer to this plea to his god. He looked at Aria but she remained as Human as before.

"I've love in my heart for Tanz, a Fae male, and I believed we were all to be together."

"I w-would be glad of half of your l-love, Rio. I b-beg you to reconsider l-leaving. P-perhaps if you b-bite me again?"

Rio shook his head and reached for his clothes. He dressed quickly, trying to block out Aria's heart rendering sobs. He must leave now, before his will crumpled and he went to her. He pulled the bundle of money from his pocket and placed it on the nightstand. He lifted the Lady's book with reverence and pushed it into his pocket.

"Y-you're paying me off like a . . . c-cheap s-slut? Oh . . . how c-could you d-do this to me . . . l-love you . . . you . . . f-fool."

"I *do* love you. I bit you because I've never loved any other female, Aria, and I *want* to be with you . . . but it's not going to happen. I'm forbidden to take a Human

through the Gate. If I arrived with you like this, the guard would slaughter you. I won't let that happen, Aria."

"S-stay, p-please, it w-will be o-okay," she sobbed, wiping the tears from her cheeks with the edge of the sheet.

"I don't belong in this world. Even if I could take you to Dryad, it wouldn't be fair when I find my true mate I'd leave you . . . and you don't deserve that. The Lady has deemed we're not suited so I must continue my search. It's my duty as a Knight Watch prince to seek my true mate and I've no control over the Lady's decision. I ask your forgiveness, Aria . . . *please* . . . it was never my intention to hurt you. I can't live with your hatred."

"I c-could never h-hate you. This is a t-terrible mistake. I k-know I'm yours, Rio, and I w-will never forget you. If you must leave t-take my love with you and k-know I'll wait f-forever," she replied, wiping the back of her hand over her red-rimmed eyes.

Rio took a deep breath and turned to look at her for the last time. Regret stabbed through him. He burned her image into his memory and drank in her intoxicating scent. He would remember her pain every day of his miserable life. He must do his duty and take the book back to Blaise. Then, he would push her into a special place in his mind together with his memory of Tanz. He would take this punishment with his head held high and behave like a Knight Watch prince. He cast the spell to open the Circle of Light and stepped through without looking back.

Chapter Eleven

Aria sobbed and stared at the empty place where Rio last stood. Hunger rolled in her belly but she remained in the bed, hoping he would return to her. Hours had gone by and the weak winter sun had already slipped from view, turning the empty room to shadowy twilight. She moaned, a part of her dying with every second without him. How could this be happening? This pain could not possibly be from a one-night stand. She needed him and the scent of him on the sheets was driving her crazy. Lust

thrummed through her entire body; her heart hurt as if a thousand arrows had embedded in her brain. Her soaking pussy throbbed with need.

"You're wrong, Rio," she screamed into the stillness. "I can hear the cat in my head . . . I've heard its voice before. I didn't tell you because I thought I was going mad . . . I need you, ple-a-se come back . . . ple-a-ese." She rolled into a ball as pain and lust racked her body.

"Dear God help me."

* * * * *

Rio ignored the friendly greetings from the servants and took the steps two at a time to the king's solar, the euphoria he usually enjoyed returning to Feltich Castle subdued with the grief of leaving Aria. Gods, Aria, how deeply had he cut her? How he wished he could go back and to hell with the Knight Watch, the Lady and the Fae.

He paused at the heavy mahogany door to Blaise's solar and nodded to the guard. Knocking twice, he turned the heavy copper doorknob and entered. Laughter met his ears and the sound of a child's giggle. He stopped, heart aching, and watched Blaise tickle his son. Now that Aria was lost to him, he realized he would never enjoy that simple pleasure. Blaise greeted him with a smile. Rio's throat closed and he coughed.

"You don't look so good, Rio," said Blaise, handing his son, Ryees, to Daii.

Rio remained silent until Queen Daii left the room. He pulled the Lady's book from his pocket and held it out to Blaise. "This book has cost me more than you'll ever know, Sire"

"Sit down Rio. What's happened? You look like death."

Rio scrubbed both hands over his face. Lady's blood, he felt like crying. He took a deep breath to steady his nerves. "The Lady has denied my choice of mate . . . I left her with the Humans. I've lost two most valued people, Blaise. First, Nox banished Tanz, and now I've lost my precious Aria. She was the traitor you sought, though I do believe

she knew nothing of the plot behind the theft of the Lady's book. She was used by a Ram under the influence of the Druiks to write the books. In all this, she's an innocent."

He watched Blaise digest this information. His brother's brow furrowed and he turned the Lady's book over in his hand. He slowly caressed the embossed leather cover with his fingertips.

"No, the Lady would not deny a brave warrior his mate."

"She has. I bit Aria and during the night she should have changed, Blaise . . . why didn't she change? This morning she was still Human. What else am I to think when I know in my heart she's my mate?"

"Have you killed without reason? Denied the Lady or Arious your love?"

Rio laughed, short and hard. "Not until this morning, when my prayer was denied, have I questioned my love for the Lady. . . . And then, in truth . . . no . . . not even then. I left because it was the Lady's choice to deny me the love of Aria and Tanz. I came home like a good, obedient servant, to do my duty, although I died with each step I took away from Aria. I feel pain, Blaise, as if my soul has been dashed upon a rock and splintered into a million pieces."

"You answer your own question. The Lady has not denied you, Rio. There's been a mistake . . . or . . . interference by the Druiks, mayhap. I will summon Nox and we'll sort something out. There'll be a way to resolve this Rio, you have my word."

Rio pushed his face into his hands. A mistake . . . his beautiful Aria . . . a *mistake*? The warmth and love from Tanz he'd turned his back on . . . yes that was a mistake. He would never concede Aria was a mistake; gods, he loved her so much it hurt. His mind raced and he tumbled into dark, bottomless despair. Here he would stay until he died.

"Rio . . . Rio . . . come now, speak to me. I gave my word as your brother and your king."

Pain surged through his heart; he lifted his gaze to look into Blaise's troubled face. He loved his brothers, his home—his life . . . but now . . . no . . . without Aria, he wanted to leave them all . . . to die.

"I need to bathe and then seek the Master of Arms; methinks a hard workout is the best remedy for melancholy."

"I insist you eat first, Rio; I will see you at breakfast."

He stood slowly and inclined his head to Blaise before striding to the door.

* * * * *

Rio ignored his squire's request to wear casual clothes and dressed in all black to complement his mood. He barked at the young squire bending to collect his discarded garments. "Leave them and wait outside."

The black tunic he wore lay crumpled on the floor by his feet, infused with Aria's sweet scent. He inhaled deeply; her rich, feminine fragrance brought him to his knees. Grasping the tunic in both hands, he pushed it into his face. Pain, deep, burning, seared through him, stealing his breath. He swayed, as if felled by the sharp blade of a sword. Unshed tears stung the back of his eyes. He shuddered; nothing had ever brought him to tears. *Dear Lady, why do you punish me? If she is not my mate, why must I grieve her?*

Wind blew the heavy blue velvet drapes and the cool morning air, brushed his face in a gentle caress. He shook his head and staggered to his feet, looking at the tunic clutched in his hand. *This is your answer? You touch my face, as a mother would, then deny me my one true love. No, I'll not live without her, nor will I serve an unmerciful god.*

* * * * *

In the great hall, Zandor clutched the wriggling form of Flame close to his chest, while Dare collected his high chair. His nephew opened his large, amethyst eyes and stared up at him innocently, clutching handfuls of his hair. Zandor winced and the little face burst into a radiant smile. Who could resist that? He grinned back at him and thought of his own cub, due in only a few weeks. Whom would he resemble? Nox had

promised all their cubs would be a blend of the three of them. Would he have dark hair like Beth, or white curls like Thryll? Or, mayhap his own shades of amber?

He lifted his gaze to watch Beth waddle into the great hall; yes, she had begun to waddle under the girth of pregnancy. He turned to look at Thryll, who paused in his conversation with Hawke to gaze lovingly at their mate. They were both besotted by Beth *and* overprotective, but what male would not want to protect her? She positively glowed with beauty.

The doors to the great hall flung open and Rio burst through, breaking the morning calm. It was as if he carried a great storm around him; the air sizzled with his magyck. When Rio stopped mid-stride and smiled at Beth, Zandor exchanged a glance with Thryll and raised a brow. He heard Thryll growl the second Rio slid closer and saw the flash of black and white; Thryll had morphed. The snow leopard leapt across the table, spilling laden serving plates in all directions. Flame stiffened in his arms and wailed. He pushed the cub into Dare's hands and turned, fists clenched, toward his brother.

* * * * *

Rio'd grinned the moment he saw Beth, so round and succulent, standing alone in the great hall. He'd moved slowly toward her, as a cat would stalk its prey, conscious of her mates not twenty paces away. He'd inhaled her scent, filled with the ripeness of pregnancy and slipped a hand around her long neck. He'd moved in closer and cupped one full, succulent breast. The smile froze on her lips and she pushed hard against his chest. Bending his head, he lowered his mouth slowly to hers. Under his hands, she trembled. When he kissed, her, the cub inside her kicked him through the thin layer of extended flesh on her huge belly.

"I won't hurt you, Beth."

Raising his head to the roar of Thryll's snow leopard, he chuckled and held out a hand. The snarling cat hit the wall of magyck with a sickening thud and lay motionless.

In his arms, Beth made a squeaking sound and landed a stinging slap on his cheek. He glanced down at her and grinned. "Thank you, Elizabeth, its best you go and hide now."

The perimeter of the great hall filled with guards; the females and children ran for cover. Rio rolled his shoulders and turned his gaze on Zandor. The rage on his brother's face would intimidate a veteran warrior. Rio grinned and slowly licked his lips.

"You know, Zandor, sharing a female is a *very* good idea. I've fantasized about taking your luscious mate to my bed, sucking those full, succulent breasts. Why don't you let me take her upstairs for a while?"

"Do you have a death wish?" Zandor barely moved, only his fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. "For, if you *do*, brother, I'm happy to grant it."

Rio sauntered to the table and selected a leg of chicken from a spilled platter. He ate it slowly, resting one hip on the edge of the table. Thryll had regained consciousness and morphed back; he exchanged a look of sheer panic with Zandor. Rio grinned at him and inclined his head. "I've just asked Zandor if he'd share Beth. You wouldn't mind would you, Thryll? You know, you and me, we could share. I wouldn't ask you to whip me like he does, but the two of us and Beth . . . well, that would be something."

"Go to hell," said Thryll, stepping forward.

"I'm already there, whelp, now go sit down like a good little cub."

"Coward." Zandor stepped forward and growled deep in his throat.

Rio clutched his heart. "Oh Zandor . . . a coward? Me? You strike me to the core, brother dearest."

"Any male who hides behind magyck is a coward," said Zandor between his teeth.

A murmur of assent rumbled around the room. Knight Watch warriors had filtered into the hall, although the king was absent. Rio lifted one shoulder in a small shrug and threw the chicken bone onto the table.

"I'm sure Nox would be interested to hear your views on magyck. However, I think I saved Thryll from serious injury. Should I have morphed, *my* cat would have eaten him for breakfast."

The crowd in the hall opened to admit Blaise and his brother, Hawke; they strode toward Rio and stood glaring at the three angry males.

"Stand down; that's an order," bellowed Hawke, stepping between them, his arms outstretched.

Turning his gaze on his tall, blond brother, Rio narrowed his eyes. "Hawke, what a surprise. Have you come to defend the castle against a Rio uprising – that is your job, isn't it, dear brother?"

"By all the stars in heaven, I would rather die than see my brothers fight in anger," said Blaise.

Rio scowled and lifted a finger to point at Zandor. "He won't fight, Blaise, and in truth, I've given him plenty of excuses to kill me."

"I don't need a damn excuse, Rio. I don't fight in the presence of females and cubs. But you're a fool if you think we we'll let this go. You touched our mate, fondled her breasts, and kissed her. I've the right to run you through with my sword."

"Then why are you standing there . . . frightened you might lose? I know how to kill you, Zandor, and you know it. Who's the coward now?"

Blaise grabbed Zandor's shoulder. "Take it outside, battle armor and short swords. Guards, escort my brothers and Prince Thryll to the courtyard."

He led the excited crowd through the great hall and into the cool morning. Guards surrounded Rio and Thryll, standing in the early morning mist. Blaise stood, arms folded across his chest, watching as squires darted forward to fit Rio and Thryll with leather breastplates. With Zandor shaking with rage on one side and Hawke grinning like a chimpanzee on the other, he drew a deep breath, sent a brief prayer to the Lady, and gave the order for the fight to begin

* * * * *

Rio tossed his head and laughed at Thryll's determined expression. His brother's lover appeared ethereal; pure white mist swirled around his legs and reached in spiraling tendrils to spray his long, angelic curls with diamonds. *Look at him, a warrior defending his mate.* Thryll would not beat him; immortal or not. He had not one chance in hell to beat an Arious Pride alpha. Rio twirled his sword and began the dance, the circling where opponents weigh up the shortfalls of each other. He knew Thryll well enough; they had fought side by side in many battles, trained together until their hands had blistered. Rio sidestepped the first angry strike; if he had lifted his sword then, he would have decapitated Thryll with his first blow.

"You know, Thryll, your anger gives me the advantage. I like you and don't really want to make an example of your stupidity."

Stepping back, he lifted his sword to deflect Thryll's massive two-handed blow. The swords clashed; rippling power flowed into Rio's hand. He pushed back, sending Thryll reeling. The fool wanted to kill him and ran toward him again, sword raised, his face a determined facade. Their swords locked in a scream of metal. They pushed together in a battle of strength, so close Rio caught the brush of Thryll's breath on his cheek.

"You low life pig, get your own mate." Thryll cursed, his eyes black with fury.

Rio grinned, lifted his left hand and punched Thryll hard on the nose. "Sorry."

He dropped his sword. Thryll's eyes rolled in his head and he fell back in an ungainly heap. The crowd gave a cheer and he looked over to Blaise and winked. "Next."

Beth pushed her way through the crowd and ran to Thryll. The guards carried him from the courtyard. Blood ran in rivulets from his nose across his angelic face, staining the neck of his white tunic. She laid a hand on his shoulder and touched his

nose; thankfully, the break had already repaired. He startled her by opening his eyes and cursing like a demon.

"That low life skunk. Help me up; I'll not lay here like a maiden bleeding on her first fuck," he said, turning to his squire.

"Thryll . . . please."

She touched his arm, his muscles tensed under her fingers, then he noticed her standing beside him and his eyes became soft wells of indigo twilight.

"I swore to protect you and our cub and that . . . that" He motioned toward Rio.

Beth snuggled into him as his arm closed around her shoulder. "I think something has happened to Rio. There was so much sorrow in his eyes when he kissed me. Something is terribly wrong, Thryll. I think he wants Zandor to kill him."

"What?" He turned her around and stared down at her with a look of incredulity.

Reaching up to wipe the blood from his face, she nodded. "I know tragedy when I see it and although he's acting like this is a joke, he kissed me to make you both angry. He chose you two, because you're both immortal. I don't remember him ever using magyck in the castle before today. Think about it, Thryll; have you ever known him to be disrespectful? Aloof—yes, but with his powers and living in Other World most of the time, why wouldn't he be a little distant?"

She watched Thryll digest this information. He scratched his chin.

"I heard last night he turned down a Fae male and the poor thing tried to kill himself. Mayhap that's what's bothering him . . . but to want to die over that . . . ? Hell, Rio loves life."

Beth jumped at the sound of swords clashing. She turned in Thryll's arms, and he led her to the courtyard. The crowd parted to allow them through. Beth grasped Thryll's arm and he pulled her close. The mixed scents in the courtyard accosted her nose, her cat issued a warning, and a small growling sound rolled from her chest. Excitement and fear distorted the heavy male scent around her and she pressed close to Thryll to inhale his calming fragrance.

Her heart lurched with every whine of metal and when the crowd parted, she began to shake. Zandor's face was a mask of concentration, his eyes molten gold, as he swung his heavy sword, parrying every bone-shattering blow Rio threw at him. Rio's blade slashed a red ribbon across Zandor's shoulder. She shrieked then watched in wonder as the wound healed, leaving only a gash in his leather tunic.

They spun, lunged, and collided in a deadly dance, muscles bulging, grunting as they butted together, swords crossed. They came apart and charged each other like two stags; metal flashed and sparked with every lethal strike. She saw Rio grin; they had pressed so close to the fight now that Thryll tried to pull her away. She gasped. Rio's eyes were not amber; gods, he was not using his cat's strength or anger against Zandor. She bit her bottom lip. If Zandor killed his own brother, he would live an eternity of regret — she had to stop the fight.

She spun from Thryll's arms and pushed through the crowd to where Blaise stood, arms folded across his chest. Nox now stood beside him, his black hair crackling with magyck. Both men watched the fight with grim expressions. She grabbed Blaise's arm and they stopped talking. "Please stop the fight . . . this isn't right."

"Beth, calm yourself, remember your cub," Blaise replied, placing a hand over hers.

"I think Rio wants to die; he picked on my mates because he knew he couldn't hurt them. Please . . . stop the fight before Zandor kills him."

"I think it would be unwise for you to involve yourself in this matter," Nox said, inclining his head. "Rio may get it into his mind you want him as well . . . this would *not* be wise."

Beth felt her anger rise and dragged her hand from Blaise's arm. Thryll stood behind her and the smell of his scent bolstered her courage.

"Oh for fuck's sake, get a life. Can't you see what's happening here? Look, I know you're both high and mighty kings and all that, but how can you just stand here and watch two people try to kill each other? Do the merciful king thing and stop the God damn fight!"

Thryll practically dragged her through the crowd and into the great hall. He pushed her into an alcove and she swore then melted into his arms. He gathered her to his hard chest and kissed her with passion. Oh hell, he knew just how to settle her down when she was angry. Unable to resist his kisses, she sank her hands into his hair to pull him closer. Groaning, she pressed her full belly against him. He lifted his head to gaze into her eyes.

"You are wanton, Elizabeth, and so very brave. Zandor will be so proud . . . ha . . . taking on both kings," he said and bent to take her mouth.

* * * * *

Blaise folded his arms across his chest and inclined his head toward Nox. "I'm not sure what to do with him." He flinched as Zandor cut a wedge in Rio's leather tunic. "If I let this go on, one or another of Beth's mates will kill him."

"Why not make him immortal?" Nox shrugged.

Blaise tipped his head to issue orders to his squire. The young male ran toward the Master at Arms with his message. He turned back to Nox and raised a brow. "Immortality won't cure what ails him, nor any healer. He believes he holds the Lady's wrath." He held up a hand to quell Nox's reply. "I've *told* him this is not Her way but he believes She prevented Aria's transformation. He insists Aria is his true mate and he's in love with her."

"And Tanz as well, I hear; mayhap I was too hard on them. Gods, Blaise, to back down now would show weakness. In truth, I hate punishing those who love and respect me. I've a deep fondness for both Rio and Tanz."

Rio dropped his sword to the ground and strode toward them, head held high, his arms bruised and bleeding. Sweat ran in rivulets down his face to mix with dust and blood from a cut under one eye, his lips in a thin line to complete the picture of abject misery. Blaise nodded sharply at him. Rio stopped and inclined his head in respect before moving off toward the great hall.

"His eyes Lady's blood, he's a man in mourning," said Nox, shaking his head.

"Yes, methinks he's lost the will to live. What to do . . . what to do?"

"I'll send Tanz to see the female. Mayhap she's under the Druiks influence . . . not a spell . . . no . . . a potion, perhaps? He can cast a cleansing spell, and then at least we'll know the truth of the matter," Nox replied thoughtfully.

Blaise frowned and rubbed his chin. "You mentioned she resembles Fae more than Pride. We discussed her at the Five Gates meeting. Do you remember when my father was king? Some twenty summers ago when the Rams waged a war against Lyoness?"

"Vividly. Many of that Pride were slaughtered while they slept. Some fifty Pride males and twenty females," replied Nox with remorse.

"Aye, all were accounted for but Lia, the Fae mate of Barric. She was heavy with her first cub, a female, at the time of the attack. They found Barric decapitated, sword in hand. I was fifteen summers but I recall their joining; she was a stunning beauty with hair like my mate, Daii."

"Yes, she had hair the color of moonbeams. Gods, Blaise you think Aria might be the cub?"

"There's a chance. If this is the case and Tanz can make her morph, her cat will return her body as Pride. My guess is if this is Lia's cub, the Druiks have used some way to prevent her hearing her cat. They used a device pushed under the skin with Zandor when they kidnapped him, but I believe that was a recent invention. Mayhap, if she has been in the Human realm for some years, they've used other means."

"I will return to Other World at once and instruct Tanz."

Blaise placed a hand on his shoulder. "If she *is* Rio's mate, likely she belongs to Tanz, as well. It would please the Lady if you forgave Tanz and gave him into my safe keeping."

Nox leveled his deep emerald gaze on Blaise's face; Blaise met his look with a frown. The power Nox exuded shimmered heavy in the air, as intense as the eye of a

hurricane. A frond of Nox's long hair brushed against Blaise's shoulder, charged with magyck and the skin on his arm pebbled. He held his breath until Nox nodded slowly.

"You *are* the Lady's Champion, and I know you speak for Her. She's not spoken to me for some time, Blaise, so I will grant you this request."

"I'm in your debt."

"So it would seem." Nox grinned, drew a Circle of Light in the air, and stepped through.

Chapter Twelve

Rio stood patiently still as his squire removed his clothes. He flicked a glance to Hawke, who stood leaning against the doorframe. His brother had found the fight an amusing distraction.

"So why don't you morph and stop acting like a cub; surely you're not enjoying those injuries. Then again, if it's pain you need I *could* arrange a session in the Play Room for you. I hear Zandor has a set of very fine leather whips."

Rio lifted one shoulder in a small shrug and headed for the bathroom. "I don't remember asking for sympathy, Hawke. Why don't you go and play with Nox. I *hear* he's looking for a new lover and he has this *thing* about males with long, blond curly hair."

"Well, *you* should know; I bet he's had your ass plenty of times. They say he's hung like a horse . . . now if that was true, I might enjoy the ride. I must say the last Fae male I had was quite an experience. They do this thing, you know . . . ?"

Rio put his hand up. "Yeah, I know all about that, but my squire is under age and I'd rather he find out what *it* is when he's old enough."

He looked over his shoulder to see his squire slipping out of the door, red faced, his arms loaded with dirty clothes. "Now look what you've done, Hawke; the poor cub will be frightened to be alone with me."

"You worry too much about the servants. Who cares what they think? Anyway, what I came by for is to ask you if you're planning to come to the next female scenting? I think it's time I found my mate," Hawke replied, following him into the bathroom.

Rio stepped into the steaming tub, the water hit his bruised, raw flesh and he winced at the sting. The thought of standing in a line while the females of the other Prides came forward one by one to be scented made his stomach lurch. Gods, he had found his mate, why would he, *could* he even imagine he might find another.

"No, I may return to Other World. I enjoy being with Nox . . . like you say, he's hung like a horse."

"Well, while you're there mayhap you can get me an invite to one of his famous orgies?"

Rio grinned despite his inner turmoil Yes, he had heard of Nox's orgies. "I'll see what I can do."

"Great, now morph for the Lady's sake; you look awful," replied Hawke and turned on his heel and sauntered away whistling.

Rio slipped down into the steaming water; no, he needed the pain to dull the ache in his heart. Tipping his head back against the marble tub, he closed his eyes and thought of Tanz and Aria. Their images floated like ghosts through his mind, so close. If he could just reach out and touch them, draw them into the now.

* * * * *

Tanz stood in the great hall, taking in the splendor of the ancient building. Never in his life had he seen such a romantic place. Heavy blocks of black granite rose up around him, their depressing darkness covered by magnificent wall hangings and paintings. Knight Watch princes argued over a game of cards or lounged contentedly, drinking Miza. Children darted around, playing in safe contentment, females sat conversing on silk sofas, all looked at ease here in Feltich Castle . . . until he noticed guards standing to attention beside every entrance.

Warm scents of hot bread and fancies wafted from a laden table, and the sweet perfume from the many bowls of exotic blooms standing in abundance throughout the hall. He waited, wings folded as Nox had insisted, until King Blaise lifted his head and beckoned him forward. When the great King of Knight Watch stood, a quiver of recognition went through him. This male so resembled Rio, but as he stepped closer a second male came to stand by Blaise's right hand. Tanz dragged in a breath to steady himself, believing he was looking at Rio's twin. Both huge males, Rio's brothers bore his striking dark angel features; both had hair falling like black water down their backs.

He swallowed hard. Prince Dare stepped forward with a smile, introduced himself, and welcomed him and turned to present him to King Blaise. Dare had amethyst eyes, so soft and his voice held a gentle tone. He had heard stories from Nox about, Blaise, the Lady's Champion, a fearless warrior who fought the gods of the Underworld to save his mate. The king turned to him, offering his arm in friendship. Tanz gripped his arm, trembling under his midnight blue gaze.

"Tanz, thank you for coming to Dryad at such short notice. I know Nox has given you orders but might I ask you a favor?"

"I am at your command, Sire."

"My brother, Rio, is suffering terminal melancholy. I believe your mission is to resolve this by seeking out Aria d'Lion; my wish is you speak to Rio before you leave. I think he'll find your visit comforting."

Tanz drew a deep breath, despair washing over him. How would he survive this injustice? How cruel to send him to save his lover's mate, so Rio would never want *him*. If she was, indeed, Rio's true mate, could he lie and say she was a Druik plant so Rio would turn back to him? Could he live watching his lover die a little each day without her? He watched King Blaise narrow his eyes and glance at Dare.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, of course, Sire. I'll do anything I can to help Rio."

"Good, my squire will take you to him."

Tanz bowed and followed the squire, resplendent in red silk, from the great hall. He marveled at the ancient castle as they moved through soft-lit corridors and up well-

worn sandstone staircases, twisting in spirals to a quiet floor above the great hall. Guards waited before a thick studded door, which opened to a wide hallway, the dark walls covered with a fine collection of arms. The squire led him down a red-carpeted passageway and stopped when a young male stepped out of an open doorway.

"A visitor for your master. Please announce, Tanz of Other World, by request of the king."

The young male turned to Tanz.

"My master is not well; he reclines in his bath and will not allow me to attend him. I fear your journey is wasted, sir."

Tanz smiled at the pair of troubled faces. "Rio is my friend; I'm here by the king's request to cheer him up. Go about your business; I will go in and see him. There is no need to announce me."

Turning the large copper handle on the door that led to Rio's quarters, he gave the boys a sharp nod and stepped inside, locking the door behind him. He glanced around the opulent sitting room and strolled through a doorway into a large, comfortable bedroom with a massive cushion-covered bed. Doors opened into a slate floored bathroom. In the center sat a tub made of white marble, big enough to fit six men. He caught sight of Rio's battered body and his voice caught in his throat, all thoughts of his mission fleeing. He went to him, sat on the edge of the tub, and reached out to push a lock of wet hair off his bloody face.

Rio sighed; he wanted to stay in this dream-like state, where he could almost touch Tanz and Aria. The touch on his face reminded him of his mother and his eyes flashed open at the thought. Dear Lady, now his sight was playing tricks on him! He scrubbed his hands over his face and inhaled. That scent could only be —Tanz.

He gazed up into his angelic face. His toes curled. "Tanz, gods, is it really you?"

"Yes, it's me, Rio. Blaise sent me to see you."

Rio pushed himself up, stepped from the tub, and dragged a towel around his hips. He reached for Tanz, but the other man stepped away, his eyes filled with sorrow.

"Rio, I've to go and look for Aria. To make sure she hasn't been bewitched or drugged. Nox and Blaise both believe she's your mate; I'm to go and instruct her how to change into her cat. Then she will change back into to a Pride female and you'll have your happy ever after," he said harshly.

Rio touched his cheek and Tanz stiffened. Regret stabbed through him. Hell, he had cut Tanz so deep he still bled. "I love you . . . I'm so sorry I've hurt you."

"Will you still love me when I bring Aria back to you? Or will you cast me aside again?"

The look of betrayal in Tanz's eyes broke his heart; he cupped his face and brushed his lips. "No, I'll never stop loving you, I *promise*."

Tanz looked up into eyes burning deep amber, cat's eyes. Placing his hands firmly on Rio's chest, he gently pushed him away. "What about Aria?"

"I love her too; without her I die a little every day. I need both of you. You must believe me, Tanz, *we* need her . . . you will see she belongs to both of us. "

Tanz fought the overpowering desire to fall into his arms and taste his lips, to love him. Under his hands, Rio's heart pounded and his chest heaved. "I want to believe you, but after all that's happened"

Rio dragged him into his strong arms and crushed his mouth; Tanz's hands went instinctively into Rio's damp hair, pulling him close. Their tongues stroked and he moaned, tasting Rio's rich scent. He pushed against the solid strength of him and tried to forget the pain in his heart. Rio licked a path down his neck, and needle sharp fangs sank into his neck. Tanz shuddered with emotion and cried out Rio's name. Heat flooded into his loins. His prince released his venom, sending waves of rapture right down to his toes. Rio's love poured over him, he fell into his mind, discovered the truth and the torture that consumed his lover. The room blurred and tears burned his eyes and streamed down his cheeks. Rio lifted his chin and looked at him intently.

"You belong to me now and you're never leaving me, Tanz . . . no, not ever again."

Rio held Tanz close. The faerie sobbed in his arms, trembling. Kissing a path along his jaw, he licked the tears from his cheeks and purred close to his ear. "I want you so much; come to bed with me."

"I would like that; I wish I could stay here." Tanz rested his head on Rio's shoulder.

"Nox gave me orders; I'm to leave immediately. I'm staying in his penthouse. My things are already there. Nox said Aria would most likely be in Moon Fire and suffering."

"Lady's blood, I've not thought of that probability. I must come with you; if this is true she'll need me."

"No! If this is a Druik trick, they won't be expecting me. Let *me* go, Rio. If she belongs to you, I'll bring her back . . . I promise."

"But if she's in Moon Fire she'll be in pain, she'll need my scent to placate her."

"I've magyck to deal with that and Nox assures me another bite will restore her Moon Fire almost immediately. We can scry her, Rio, to see what's happening," he said, reaching for the hand mirror on the vanity.

They sat on the bed and stared into the mirror. Rio concentrated on Aria and cast the scrying spell. The mirror became a mass of thunderclouds swirling, first one way and then the other before it cleared. The darkened room showed a lump on the bed, a heap of writhing, pitiful female. Aria's bone white face came into view. Rio touched the surface and moaned. Her eyes were closed and rimmed with dark circles; her bruised body looked so frail.

"She's still at Nox's hotel; I must go to her."

Tanz's hand clasped on his arm and he growled then turned to look into Tanz's emerald gaze.

"No, let me do this . . . for us. Give me the tunic you wore today; your scent will sooth her enough to listen to me."

Rio pressed his tunic into Tanz's hands. "I love her, Tanz."

"I know."

His gaze held Tanz's for a split second; his heart thundered. His lover slipped from the bed, made a Circle of Light, and stepped through.

Chapter Thirteen

Aria lifted her head to the rap on the door; those damn cleaners would not leave her alone. She screamed in frustration, dragging the sheet over her head. "Go away."

"I'm coming in." The male voice replied.

Drawing the sheet from her sweat-soaked body, she peered out as a shadow slipped into the room.

"Stay where you are . . . I've got a gun!"

She bristled with fear. The intruder replied with a soft chuckle. Lord, she could smell him, and his earthy scent sent a quiver straight to her belly.

"I know different, Aria. I'm Tanz, Rio sent me."

Aria sat bolt upright in bed, clutching the sheets to her naked breasts and staring into the shadows.

"That asshole left me! Lying, cheating bastard promised me the earth and then told me, '*Sorry, Aria, I made a mistake.*' He took my book when he left. Fucking pig, he's given me some sort of sex mad virus and . . . it hurts."

A tremble went through her the moment the man turned on a lamp. He looked like a faerie straight out of a children's novel. Long, almost white curls tumbled over his shoulders. He smiled and moss green almond eyes sparkled. He had high cheekbones and a turned up nose, and Lord, the most glorious dimples. He stood tall, with a sculptured body and muscles, the kind that moved under his clothes at every step. *So,*

this is the Fae male that Rio loves, my rival, the man he left me to be with. He had the fucking gall to send him—what for? To show him off?

"I'm guessing you're the faerie Rio loves? If so, where are your wings?"

"I have wings. Yes, Rio loves me but he loves you too. I'm here to help you transform, if you'll let me," he said, stepping closer and dropping a black tunic on the bed.

Pain racked her body the instant Rio's pungent scent flowed to her from the tunic. Her pussy began to weep with need; she gasped and crawled into a tight ball. "Take it away."

Tanz stepped forward, picked up Rio's tunic, and flung it on a chair. The darkened room stank; the entire suite reeked of sex, sweat, stale food, and rampantly aroused female. The room was frigid, the fire long gone, and yet her skin glistened with sweat. Overcome with compassion, he sat on the edge of the bed, taking in the bruises on her face and neck, and Rio's prominent bite. What had he done to her to damage her like this? Lady's blood, had he beaten her? Recalling the tenderness Rio had always shown him, he tried to dismiss this abhorrent possibility from his head. He needed to get her out of this room. Thank the gods he had finally conquered the ability to jump. Clearing his throat, he met her emerald gaze. "Where are your bags? You must leave this room and get cleaned up"

"And why do you think I'm prepared to trust you?" she replied, lifting the sheet to her chin.

Tanz sighed. "Well, I could *make* you agree to anything I want, but as you are in no condition to help yourself, I suggest you do what I say. On the other hand, do you *have* a Human you want me to call? Maybe *someone* will understand when you tell them you've been bitten by a shape-shifter, you hear voices, and you have an insatiable lust for sex."

"My bags over there," she replied, pointing to an open suitcase on the dresser.

Aware of her wrapping the sheet around her, he walked to the dresser, pushed the clothes and purse inside the case, and with a flick of his hand sent it to the penthouse. He turned to see her lift Rio's tunic and press it to her nose. He reached her just as she buckled in pain, scooped her into his arms, and jumped to the penthouse.

"What just happened? How did I get here?" Aria glanced around, her fingers tightening around his arm.

"You fainted; we're in my room. You'll be okay, you're safe with me. I must be honest, Aria, you don't smell so good, and how long has it been since you've eaten?"

"I had lunch with Rio," she said, her eyes filling with tears.

Pushing her into a chair, he strode into the bathroom and filled the tub, emptying the remnants of a favorite faerie bubble bath from a bottle on the vanity. Hell, her scent, even her sweat, had got to him. As soon as he'd picked her up, his cock began to strain against the material of his pants. When he held her in his arms a hum of deep magyck collided with his senses, making him want to throw her to the floor and take her.

He returned to the bedroom. She sat, eyes closed and head resting on the back of the chair. She looked so fragile sitting in the big armchair . . . so Fae

"Aria, can you manage to take a bath?"

He took her hand, rubbing it between his palms when her eyes opened and closed again. "Aria?"

"I can't walk . . . I'm sorry," she said, lifting her troubled gaze.

"I'll have to take this sheet off and get you into the bath. I will avert my gaze."

"Believe me, I'm past caring, Tanz," she said weakly, her head lolling back against the chair.

Swallowing hard, he lifted her again and carried her into the bathroom. He pulled the sheet from her delicate form and placed her gently into the suds. *Oh dear Lady, what has happened to her.* Dark bruises covered her back, turning purple and black across her ribs. He let go of her arm and she slipped under the water, too weak to hold herself up. He dashed forward, cursing, and dragged her to her knees; he hung her arms over the edge of the tub. "Hold on, just until I can get my boots off."

He ripped off his clothes and slipped into the tub, gathering her against his chest. Her head rested against his shoulder and she began to sob; tremors racked her body.

"Aria, I'm sorry to expose you to my nakedness but I'm frightened you might drown in here alone."

"I g-guess if y-you w-wanted to d-drown me, you h-had your c-chance."

Not knowing what to do, he began to wash her as if she were a child, beginning with her hands then slowly up each arm. Her rounded buttocks rested on his thighs, and he caught his breath; her skin, so soft, burned against his flesh. Each light caress of her fingers along his thighs brought a ferocious need, breaking down his control with every tender stroke. She finally stopped trembling and relaxed against him. He let go the breath he had been holding and cast the spell Nox had taught him, to sooth the pain of her Moon Fire. The reaction she gave was immediate, her body unfurled and she stretched her legs. She floated in the deep, fragrant water, her body so light against him, too thin but all Fae and yet this female by all accounts was born Pride. *You have a job to do; stop thinking about sex and get on with it.*

"Could you hear your cat before Rio bit you?"

"Not all the time. Aldis gave me pills; he said they were to stop the voices, that I had a mental condition. Since I've refused to take them, the voice has gotten worse, and in the past two days, she won't shut up. She tells me you're mine, she tells me Rio is mine—I think she's as confused as I am."

Tanz poured shampoo in his hand and began to massage her hair. She moved forward, allowing him room, one hand clasped tightly on the edge of the black marble tub.

"Hmm, do you recall anything unusual happening around the age of sixteen?"

He pulled her back to rinse her hair and she lay stretched out between his legs. Gods, her hair was brushing against his cock. Her breasts poked out of the water like two perfect icebergs, topped with cherry-red nipples. He lifted her and after soaping his hands, washed her neck and slowly allowed his hands to cup her breasts. Oh Lady, her

nipples hardened to twin peaks under his touch. She arched her back, her aroused body begging for more.

"The dentist . . . I woke up one morning . . . and my lip was . . . bleeding. Aldis took me . . . to a dentist. He said . . . my teeth were too sharp." She gasped, both hands gripping his thighs

Tanz continued to soap her breasts, swirling his fingers around her nipples. He moved to her flat belly, swirling the suds in small circles and then down between her legs. He heard her moan then she opened her legs for his probing fingers. Slipping his fingers into her pussy, he found her pulsing nub and circled it. Gods, she was so hot, so slippery with need. He pinched her nipple and she pushed against his hand in silent demand. He increased the pressure on her nub and circled her clit slowly. His teeth found her earlobe, he nibbled and sucked. She trembled against him as the first waves of climax claimed her.

"My . . . cat . . . wants . . . to bite . . . you." She gasped, writhing under his hands.

Grinding his teeth as his own need pulsed through his body like a hot flame, he stroked her gently and kissed her neck. "No, not yet. You've no fangs to mark me; you must change into the cat. When you morph, you will be Pride again. Morphing heals everything. You'll have fangs and pointed ears, and then I'll be able to take you to Rio.

She pulled away and began to cry into her hands, her back racked with sobs. He moaned in distress. "Talk to me, Aria, let me help you."

"He d-doesn't want m-me, and even if he d-did, I b-bet this was a test, to s-see if I'd fall into b-bed with you. Are y-you g-going to t-tell him how easy y-you got y-your h-hands on m-me"

"Oh gods, Aria, you're so beautiful I couldn't help myself. Rio would never do such a thing; it almost killed him to walk away from you. He loves *both* of us and hopes we'll all be together when you become Pride. I can't tell you how much he wanted to come to you. He carries your pain, Aria, as a mate separated from his female. I'm here to help you. The fact we have this attraction is good; it's more than either of us hoped."

"No, he said biting me was a mistake. He made it *perfectly* clear he didn't want me," she wailed.

Tanz stood, scooping her up with him, and stepped from the tub. His shaft pressed against her slim form, sending messages of impending doom to his brain, if he did not bed her at once. Biting down on the inside of his cheek, he reached for the towel and wrapped her, rubbing her dry.

"I'm attracted to you, Aria. I think with a little time we could build a good relationship. In truth, I'm drawn to you with a strange passion, but I admit I love Rio and have for a long time. He wants you and only *you* can calm his cat, so if *your* cat wants both of us, I think that's a good sign."

She turned to look at him then and the sorrow in her eyes made his heart flip. He cupped her face and brushed a kiss across her lips. "You know, the Fae have much less complicated lives . . . we love freely, unless we've chosen a mate for life, which I might add may take five or so hundred years. We, the males, control our child seed, so we can choose when to procreate. We recognize our life mates by falling deeply in love, although scent does have a little to do with it. Rio says we all smell very different and I guess as your arousal sends me crazy, I'm meant to be with you. I want to fall in love with you, Aria; will you give me the chance?"

"How do I know Rio didn't send you to use me like he did? Are you going disappear as soon as you've had enough too?"

"No, we'll take it slow, sweetness. I won't take you to my bed until we're both sure. I'm *not* going to hurt you, Aria. Who hurt you? Did Rio inflict those bruises?"

"No! He protected me . . . saved my life. It was Aldis, he tried to kill me . . . Rio killed him . . . I think."

Tanz breathed a sigh of relief, wrapped a towel around his waist, and flicked his dripping hair over one shoulder. "Aldis was the Ram? Okay, don't dwell on this now, you'll need to get to bed and rest. I'll light the fire in your room and order some food. Then we can talk some more."

He put one arm around Aria's waist and helped her into the bedroom. She slipped naked between the sheets and he cursed his failing willpower as her nipples peeked over the white sheet. "I'll get you a nightdress."

"Thank you, Tanz; I feel so much better now. You really are a nice guy."

Tanz threw some logs on the fire and blasted them with magyck until they glowed orange. *Nice guy, humph, if only she knew! If I had a jar of honey, I'd pour it all into every crevice of that nubile body and lick it off.*

Chapter Fourteen

Rio paced the courtyard; the warm afternoon sun and fragrant wildflowers growing the entire length of the stables did nothing to ease his mind. It was as if the sun no longer shone for him. He walked inside the gloomy stables, the smell of hay and horse greeting him as he wandered through the dancing dust motes and down the rows of roomy stalls to find his warhorse. The black stallion whinnied in greeting, and Rio stopped to rub the horse's velvet nose. He noticed his new squire, Tom, skulking in the doorway. This male served his mother as a scribe, was twenty summers and under Blaise's orders to stay close. Rio snorted; it angered him the cub he had trained for three years had run home to his father. Gods, as if he would intentionally corrupt the scrawny little nuisance. He could hear Blaise's words repeating in his head.

"You need help, Rio, not a cub. What if you were to fall?"

Hell, he had never fallen in his adult life and resented the ban on his returning to Other World until he was in better health. Agreed, the separation pain had buckled him a few times, and he was weak after refusing food the past four days but what he needed was information, not pity.

He gave the horse one last rub between the ears before striding out into the sunshine to lean against the rough sandstone wall and take a few deep breaths. The breeze brought the scent of honeysuckle from beyond the castle wall and at his feet red and black butterflies danced around a patch of lavender. He watched their wings

fluttering and his knees became weak in sweet memory. Lady's blood, what he would give for a night in Tanz's arms. Mayhap the faerie's presence, in his bed, would bring him peace. Could Tanz take away the pain of losing Aria? No, hell, he craved her, needed her, *loved* her. His stomach cramped again at the memory of her beautiful face. Her scent had infused his brain, driving him to madness.

Focusing on Tanz to steady himself, he remembered the heat of his body as he slid over his peach fuzz skin. The touch of Tanz's decadent mouth, full and wet, closing deliciously around his shaft, his earthy scent, the deep love in his eyes. He pushed off the wall and took a few unsteady steps toward the castle. When Tom rushed forward and took his arm, he brushed him away and turned on him, fists clenched. "Leave me before I push you through the Gate to oblivion."

Tom backed away then turned and ran toward the great hall. Rio grasped the doorframe for support and staggered into the cool darkness of the castle. The wide hallway led to the great hall and bustled with activity. He moved slowly toward the staircase to his quarters. As usual, the servants lowered their eyes. He knew they feared him, feared his magyck. He would scry Aria again and try to contact Tanz; he needed to see them, if only through a mirror.

He took the first two steps up the worn spiral staircase and a hand rested on his shoulder, stopping him. He stiffened and turned slowly, surprised to see Thryll standing behind him. "What do you want, whelp?"

"I think we should talk, Rio."

Rio raised a brow and glared at him. "I don't have anything to say to you. I'm not sorry for touching up your mate . . . unless you've decided to share her with me . . . or do you fancy a night with me yourself?"

"No . . . I think I may be able to give you some advice. It wasn't easy for Zandor when we found Beth. Look, I'm not going into details here but I know you need at least one of your mates. You look like hell, Rio."

"You think I don't know that, whelp? I'm dying from grief . . . don't you think that if there was a way to be with them I would? I'm forbidden to leave the castle until this is resolved. Tanz can't leave Aria alone, so what do you *suggest* I do?"

"I'll explain my plan, but not here, in your rooms," he said, moving up the stairs.

Thryll filled two goblets with Miza and pushed one into Rio's hand. He sat opposite him on the long, comfortable sofa. "Can you draw a Circle of Light to Nox's penthouse?"

"Yes, I can travel with ease to familiar destinations. Other places take very complex magyck and one mistake could send you dimensions apart."

Thryll leaned forward in his chair, clasping his hand around the stem of the silver goblet. "Would you trust me with your mate?"

"No." Rio snorted, his face distorted with disgust

"You will when I tell you I find I have no inclination to bed any other female. Since our mating with Elizabeth, not even the fairest female stirs my loins Zandor has requested a night alone with her, and in truth, bedding her while she is so full with our cub is a worry to me. So, I've a free night to watch your mate, if you wish, so that Tanz may be *here*, with you."

He watched Rio tip his head back and stare at the ceiling. Some minutes passed until he spoke.

"If you leave Zandor alone with Beth, he'll take her down to the Play Room. He's insatiable and has little compassion." He turned his gaze to Thryll and raised a brow.

"Would you trust him with the life of your unborn cub?"

Thryll chuckled and refilled his goblet from the jug on the table. "Yes, I *know* but he's gentle with Elizabeth. When we share her, she becomes exhausted. So this was my idea."

"You play with fire, Thryll, both with Zandor and me. I only sit here and listen to you because I've nothing else to do. You don't have an inkling what an alpha can do to a male such as you, do you? Don't you know *why* Blaise made you immortal?"

Thryll rolled his eyes and leaned back in the chair, twisting the stem of the goblet between his fingers. "Aye, I know, but *you* don't know *me* as well as you think you do, Rio. My strength is in my compassion, and in my knowledge that neither you, nor Zandor, will kill me. I've had quite a lot of experience dealing with alphas and trust me, living with Zandor isn't easy; he's more bear than cat."

"So why come to me offering to watch over my mate? You know she's in Moon Fire, so, don't you think that's rather stupid? I can't believe it, to be honest . . . the very thought of you within a breath of her makes my blood boil."

Taking a few steadying sips from the goblet, Thryll leveled his gaze on Rio's angry face. "I felt the same when you were kissing Elizabeth . . . all reason fled in a blind rage. You know, she's a very intelligent female. She knew you wanted Zandor to kill you and screamed at Blaise to stop the fight. I'm guessing you didn't know that. It was her suggestion I come to you. She insists I forgive you for touching her and I should do this for you, because you need help. Rio, Elizabeth understands the pain you and Aria are suffering as she went through much the same. Nox helped her through it. We didn't suffer at all because she'd already given us her venom and we had each other."

"I wouldn't normally discuss this, but she ran from us. I was a besotted fool when Zandor declared his love and bit me. We were lost in each other and neglected Elizabeth. By the time we found her she'd decided to leave us and go to Other World with Nox."

"So you had each other and turned your backs on Elizabeth . . . turned your back on the Lady's most precious gift . . . and you want me to trust you with *my* mate?" Rio scoffed.

"You're suffering; you need Tanz even if it's only for one night . . . let me do this for you, Rio."

"You know, *if* I agree to this and discover you've touched Aria . . . I'll *kill* you. I was only playing with you last time," Rio said, his eyes flashing to amber.

Thryll finished his drink and leveled his gaze on Rio. "I won't touch her, you have my word."

"When can you leave?" Rio gave him a slow smile, his eyes dancing.

"Tonight, after dinner. You should morph and eat, Rio, to keep up your strength. When Aria is returned you'll be responsible to satisfy her Moon Fire." He got to his feet and placed the goblet on the table. "I'll have the kitchen send you up a tray."

Chapter Fifteen

Tanz pushed Aria's moonbeam curls under the red woolen hat and grinned at her. After finishing a huge meal in the hotel restaurant, they decided on the spur of the moment to go and play in the snow. "Stand still, you minx."

He leaned to kiss the tip of her nose, then took her hand and led the way through the hotel foyer to the revolving glass door. Outside, a blustering, icy wind cut into his cheeks as he blinked away the heavy snowfall. The powdery white blanket had blown into huge drifts, causing the traffic on the road outside the hotel to crawl to an impatient halt. They giggled as they slipped and slid along the sidewalk, arm in arm, slowing occasionally to browse the colorful shop windows. All around them, beneath the damp, waving street decorations, the high street buzzed with activity. Humans bustled along, carrying great bags or pushing cubs piled with blankets inside small vehicles on wheels. They turned the corner and waded through knee-high drifts, following a backstreet that led to a park.

Tanz stopped as a wide expanse of untouched snow came into view. Snow never fell in Other World but he had seen snow before. Not like this, though, so pristine. He looked out across the sparkling parkland; the tall pines, holly and chestnut stood as if coated in sugar frosting. So like Other World's crystal mountains. The sight made his mouth water with the delicious memory of his mother's sugared plums and marzipan fondant.

Aria danced away, giggling, and bent to scoop up handfuls of snow and pack them into balls. He watched her curiously and then ducked, weaving away as she aimed the white missile at him. One splattered on the side of his head. He drew in a

deep, freezing breath and laughed. Steam rushed from his mouth in great white clouds, the sound of his mirth breaking the stillness. He lifted snow by magyck and hurled it; she ducked away, screaming with laughter. She moved low to the ground, showing her cat-like agility, aimed, and caught him full on the chest.

"Oh, so you think that's funny, do you."

She turned and ran up a mound and disappeared over the top, screeching with laughter. He gave chase. Topping the slippery rise, he looked around, grinning. She sprang out at him and he lost his balance. He grabbed for her and they fell, rolling over and over through the soft snow, wrapped in each other's arms. He landed at the bottom of the hill, on top of her, their faces nose to nose. Her body heaved beneath him, her breath hot on his cold cheeks. He looked into her eyes and a deep longing consumed him. "You *are* so beautiful. Gods Aria, I love you."

Bending his head, he took her willing mouth, hot and wet. She pushed her cold hands into his hair to pull him closer and nibbled on his bottom lip.

"I love you too," she said, kissing a path across his chin.

He lifted his head and gazed into her eyes, the pupils so dilated only a slither of green remained. Pushing away from her, he smiled at her moan of disappointment.

"I'm freezing. Let's go back to the hotel and have a nice hot bath. I think Nox left some Miza, it's a great wine . . . for romance."

Tanz pulled her to her feet and kissed her before taking her arm and pushing through the snow back to the hotel. He grinned at her. These past four days, Aria had learned a lot about the Fae and more importantly, about shape-shifters. Teaching her to control her cat, at first, caused problems and she still lacked the confidence to give in and morph. He knew she trusted him and they had grown closer every day. It had been difficult keeping his distance; he ached every minute they spent together. *No longer; tonight, she's mine.*

* * * * *

Aria lay back in the hot fragrant suds. The sight of Tanz, naked and juggling two bottles of Miza and wine goblets, would imprint in her memory forever. So would Rio.

She sighed. The men were worlds apart, and yet they loved each other. Rio, with his golden skin sliding like honey over bulky muscles, tall, moody . . . and Tanz, gentle, angelic with peach fuzz skin. She looked at him differently now. He poured the wine, his body a living sculpture, not bulky like Rio but bigger than most men, and hung like a horse. She smiled secretly behind her hand; they were both huge where it mattered.

"What are you giggling about?" Tanz asked as he slipped into the bath without making a ripple.

"I wasn't giggling; I was admiring your body."

"Hmm, and comparing me to Rio?" he said, handing her a goblet of wine.

She sipped the delicious, spiced wine and looked at him over the rim of the goblet.

"Yes, I guess I was. You are complete opposites, you know, dark and light, good and bad."

"Rio isn't bad. He's intense, loyal, and would give his life for you." He lifted her foot out of the water, poured wine over her toes and began to lick it off with long, sensual licks.

His tongue slipped between her toes and she shivered. "And you?"

"Fae are all gentle, unless our world is threatened, or those we love. I'm patient and trustworthy, Aria . . . and one hell of a lover."

He lifted her toward him and she slid onto his firm thighs while the bubbles in the tub danced around them. She gasped. His hands slid down to her hips and began small circular motions across her ass, sending a tremor through her. Her fingers pressed to his shoulders, slick and wet; his muscles moved under her palms with every teasing stroke. Moaning, she bowed against him then he took her mouth. Heat from his chest searing her peeked nipples. Lord, he tasted so good; the tang of Miza on his probing tongue, the wonderful earthy scent of his body, drove her up until she shuddered with ecstasy. Hell, this man could kiss; his tongue probed and caressed every inch of her

mouth, stroked her tongue. His mouth slid, nibbled and bit, his strong hands massaged her ass, her back, her neck. Against her pussy, his shaft slid in delicious torment with each roll of his hips. She wanted him so desperately inside her, to fill her, complete her.

He lifted her and the head of his cock pressed against her core. She cried out, the exquisite sensation like a hot flame licking over her. He lowered her, so very slowly, until he completely filled her. Then his hands were on her breasts, teasing the aching nipples as he rocked inside her. She whimpered at the combined intense pleasure and when he found her mouth again, she kissed him passionately. "Hell, I want to bite you."

"Soon, don't worry now, let me love you," he sighed, cupping the back of her head to bring her mouth down to his for a sizzling hot kiss.

Shivery sensations began to flutter up her legs and curl into her belly at each delightful thrust. The water in the tub splashed and spilled onto the floor, sending shimmering puddles of foam in all directions. He increased the pace and his thumb found and began to circle her nub.

"Come for me, princess." He groaned.

Tanz cupped her pussy in his hand and lifted his hips to grind deeper, as she writhed, liquid silver in his hands. So hot, her body molded to him, wet skin on skin, her nipples raking his chest. Her sinful mouth tasted like sunshine and opened his heart like a flower in the first days of spring. Love flowed through him, desperate and needy, with every thrust. His hands slipped to her hips, where he held her, impaled on his shaft until she trembled to climax. He wanted so much more. Grasping her around the waist, he stood, buried deep inside her. "Put your legs around my waist, princess."

Water flowed down their bodies during the short walk into the sitting room. He laid her on the rug in front of the fire. Lifting her hands up above her head, he secured them with one hand and feasted on her upturned breasts, rolling each hard peak across his tongue and sucking until she cried out in passion. Gods, she was so wet, her sizzling pussy clung to him like a velvet sheath. He let go of her hands and looked down at her, trailing his thumb over her full swollen lips. "Will you give me your ass, princess?"

He watched her eyes widen to emerald pools of surprise; a rose flush blushed her cheeks.

"I haven't tried that before," she panted.

Tanz smiled and lifted her legs onto his shoulders, his cock buried deep in her pussy.

"I'll make it so good for you."

He moved inside her slick heat and her core contracted around him, signaling another approaching climax. Moving back slightly, he slipped from her and rubbed the head of his cock from pussy to ass. He smiled at her groans of passion, so wet, he would not need lube to take her, and from this position, he could watch her face.

Leaning forward, he pushed his shaft through the tight ring of her star. He watched her startled expression, the curl of her fingers in the thick pile rug. So tight and so damn hot. He shuddered with the intensity of it. Grasping her hips, he tilted forward and took her in one delicious slide, her gasp of pleasure music to his ears. Black spots danced before his eyes; he tried to control a lust greater than both of them. Giving in to the hunger, he rode her until she screamed out his name in ecstasy, and shuddered to completion under his touch. A shimmer of jubilant pleasure shot through him, he drove into her tightness and rode out his own exultant release.

Tanz lay panting, his eyes squeezed shut. Lady's blood, no female had taken him so high, or drained him so completely. Her breath brushed his ear and under his cheek, her wet curls pressed against his skin. Pushing up on his elbows, he looked down into her eyes, wide with wonder. He smiled. Her fingers still gripped the rug. He bent to run his tongue over her lips and she moaned and lifted her hands, her fingers tangling in his hair.

"Heavens above, Tanz, I don't know what to say," she said, brushing a strand of hair from his face.

He grinned at her and kissed her nose. "How about, 'that was fantastic, Tanz, let's do it again.'"

"Maybe, *when* my heart stops pounding. Whew, I think I lost consciousness there for a while," she gasped, her eyes never leaving his face.

"Hmm, just imagine how good it will be, having Rio and me inside you at the same time."

"At the same time, you mean . . . ?" she replied, pressing her hands flat on his chest.

He grinned and began to press kisses along her jaw. "Ah huh, the ultimate delight for any female."

"Holy cow," she gasped and then began to giggle.

Tanz lifted his head and watched her in amusement. "So the thought doesn't upset you?"

"Hell no." She chuckled and pulled him down toward her, seeking his mouth.

* * * * *

Rio tipped his head and regarded Thryll closely; his neck bore a fresh bite, still open and gaping, the only injury an immortal could not heal.

"Ah, I see Beth had second thoughts about allowing you to spend the night with Aria."

"No, not at all," Thryll replied, fingering his neck gingerly.

Laughing, Rio slapped him on the back. "So the mosquitoes are particularly vicious in the west wing."

"No, Rio, she merely thought, if Aria saw I was marked, she wouldn't be worried," he said, looking away, bright points of color staining his cheeks.

"I think you're very brave, Thryll, because when she sees Aria, fur will fly. Females in cub are very unpredictable, and here we seem to be surrounded by them."

"So it would seem. I should go now; it's getting late," Thryll said, picking up a heavy coat and throwing it over his shoulder.

Rio smiled down at him and drew a Circle of Light in the air. "Remember, whatever happens, don't leave the room and don't morph. Tanz will be back before you know it."

* * * * *

Tanz leaped naked from the bed when the Circle of Light appeared in the middle of the room. Drawing his magyck, he aimed a warning flash of lightning at the intruder's head.

"Stand down, Tanz, Rio sent me," Thryll said, holding up both hands.

"And you would be?"

"Thryll of Knight Watch, mate of Elizabeth and Zandor."

Tanz grabbed his clothes and waved Thryll from the bedroom, closing the door softly behind him. He glared at Thryll and began to dress. "Speak."

"Rio needs you; he sent me to watch over Aria for a few hours. You can trust me Tanz . . . I am *not* interested in Aria."

Tanz pulled on his boots and walked around Thryll slowly; he could sense no magyck other than Pride in this male. "You don't look like a Knight Watch prince. How do I know this isn't a Druik trick?"

"Who but Rio or Nox could send me here? I don't have magyck. I'm Knight Watch by my bond with Zandor, by the grace of King Blaise."

Rubbing his eyes with the back of his hands, Tanz yawned. He looked harmless enough, his bite fresh, and Rio trusted him enough to send him.

"Okay, Aria is asleep. I doubt she'll wake before morning. They leave food outside the door before light; don't open the door until they leave. There is Miza and plenty of snack food over there on the table. If you need to sleep, pick a room"

"And if she wakes?"

Tanz smiled. "She won't, but if she does just tell her I've gone to see Rio and I'll be back soon. You won't be compromised; she's not in Moon Fire. I put a spell on her a few days ago."

He walked to the flat screen and turned it on with the remote, chuckling at Thryll's bemused expression. He demonstrated how to change channels and turn it off, then drew a Circle of Light and stepped through.

* * * * *

Rio stood in the middle of his sitting room, waiting for the pulse of magyck that came before a Circle of Light formed. His heart pounded in anticipation of seeing Tanz again. The bright light formed and he held his breath. Sparking with magyck, Tanz stepped into the room, light dancing over his unruly moonbeam curls and shimmering across his skin. Rio melted inside; the sight of his ethereal beauty brought a pang of longing. Tanz turned his gaze on him, with eyes deep enough to drown in, reflecting the turbulent colors of the Other World Sea.

"Rio." Tanz moaned and took a step toward him and then hesitated.

Rio's nostrils flared, smelling Aria's scent on him. Pain clenched his heart and he grabbed at his chest. Noticing the flash of fear in Tanz's eyes, he knew instinctively his eyes had changed. His cat flew into a protective fury and he drew a deep breath to push the anger down. "You've been with Aria; she's accepted you?"

"Yes, but right now, it's only you I want, Rio," said Tanz, stepping forward to cup Rio's face and crushing his mouth in a devastating branding.

Groaning, Rio opened his mouth and drank in the combined flavors. The pain in his chest eased with every delicious brush of Tanz's tongue. Wanting desperately to feel his skin, he dragged up his shirt to caress the smooth sleekness of his back. He twisted against him and pressed against his solid strength, needing to be closer, naked skin on damp, sweaty skin. His anger deserted him. Tanz walked him backward into the bedroom and opened his robe to kiss a path down his neck and nibble on his nipples.

Tearing at Tanz's clothes, he laughed. Buttons flew in all directions, pinging against the furniture. He stopped, panting, to admire Tanz's long, sculptured body as he bent to pull off his boots and remove his pants. Falling to his knees, he buried his face in Tanz's peach fuzz thighs, and inhaled Aria's scent, thick and fresh. He licked a path to his groin and sunk his fangs to the gums in the tender flesh. Under his hands, Tanz trembled. Blood, sweet as honey, filled his mouth and he swallowed, licked his lips, and took Tanz's length into his mouth. Gods, Aria's flavor, mixed with Tanz's earthy taste, was heaven. Inside, his cat purred in ecstasy.

Tanz slid his fingers into Rio's thick, silken hair and held on. Dangerously sharp fangs grazed his sensitive shaft, the sensation mind blowing and a little frightening. Hell, he had never seen Rio out of control, and right now, he was on the edge. Trembling as Rio took the helmet of his cock between his teeth and swirled the top, he recalled the look in Rio's eyes the second he caught Aria's scent on him. He saw the inner battle with his cat and it terrified him. Would Rio try to kill him if he wanted to share Aria?

Rio suddenly rose before him and threw him bodily face down onto the bed. He gasped, all the air rushing from his lungs. Rio crushed him under his weight, dragging his hands above his head and securing them to the bedpost with a leather strap. Turning his head to look at Rio's wild expression, he gulped in air. "Rio, please, don't do this."

Rio slid over him, spreading him, and tying his ankles wide apart. His rampant cock pressed into the bedclothes. Cold lube brushed against his ass and he flexed his muscles, waiting for the pain to come. Instead, Rio knelt on the bed beside him, bringing his glorious shaft close to his face. He saw the two small purple holes where Rio's cock joined his body and blinked in disbelief.

"I allowed Nox to have me, when I heard you've been giving your ass to Allure the Fair. He marked me with his *fangs*. I want to know why, if you *love* me like you say, you've not marked *me*?"

A pang of regret rushed through Tanz's body. Nox's mark, only given in love. Hell, now he had to share him with his king!

"Only Royal Fae have fangs, Rio. If Nox has marked you, you belong to him as surely as Aria belongs to you."

"No! I belong to you; I gave no mark, no promise, to Nox."

How could he possibly explain this?

"He'll control you, Rio; you won't be able to resist him. The mark will burn, driving you mad with lust for him."

"Interesting but not possible; I'm driven by the scent of my mate."

Tanz lifted his head to look into his face. "Have it your own way. Now, do you have a point in tying me up? Or does raping someone who loves you turn you on? Is Aria concealing the fact you beat her? Is this the side of you I was warned about?"

He shivered at Rio's harsh laugh, and looked up into deep pools of tragic amethyst. Regret stabbed through him. Rio's male beauty was like a great oak breaking in a storm.

"When I lost Aria I wanted to die and almost let my own brother kill me. How selfish is that, to pick an immortal to carry the sin of my death through eternity? And when Nox told me *you* were sharing Allure's bed, it destroyed me and I gave myself to him in complete surrender. I needed to feel his skin close to mine, taste his scent on my tongue. I gave him a part of my soul . . . I am glad of it and will treasure the memory of him deep inside me . . . forever.

Then you came back and refused my bed, filling my mind with the thoughts of you with Allure. Tonight, when you came here, bathed in my mate's juices, I wanted to tear you apart and lick you all over at the same time. I love Aria with a jealous passion, and love you so much it weakens me. I will never hurt either of you, but tonight *you* will give me *your* complete surrender, for by the Lady I'm going to take your soul."

Rio released his ankles enough to allow him to rise to his knees, and then strapped his thighs open. Tanz tried to relax. *Reason with him.* "You don't have to tie me; I'm yours, to do with as you will."

The bed dipped. Rio crawled onto the bed behind him and licked a path up his spine in tantalizing slowness. Tanz trembled with anticipation.

"Open your wings," Rio demanded, his breath hot against his neck.

Unfurling his wings, Tanz glanced over his shoulder into Rio's face just as Rio passed his tongue over his needle sharp fangs. He moaned then Rio leaned over him, his body a sizzling caress over his skin, and nibbled a path across his shoulder to the joining of his wings. Rio's fangs pierced the skin and sent a rush of venom into his flight muscle. He writhed, gasping in shock. Dear Lady, Rio had not lied about the venom's effect during sex. His vision blurred, a bolt of molten lava shot straight to his balls. He quivered, trying desperately not to collapse, then Rio's rough hands closed around his chest, found his nipples and pinched. The heat from Rio's skin burned his damp flesh; he pressed close, enclosing him in a cocoon of trust. Just as he relaxed into a wave of euphoria, the sharp points sank into the other wing muscle and he rode on a stream of fiery lust, white spots dancing before his eyes. "Gods, Rio."

Passion flooded his loins in long undulating waves. Rio grasped his hips and began to lick the cheeks of his ass. His cock twitched, dripping with need at every pass of Rio's scorching wet tongue. Rio grasped his shaft in his lubricated palm and began to pump him in long, even strokes.

"Give yourself to me, Tanz," said Rio, passing his thumb over the head of Tanz's cock.

So close to completion, Tanz cried out. The roughness of Rio's thumb moved up and over his throbbing shaft, driving him insane. He fell forward against his bound hands and gave in to the venom pumping through his veins, liquid fire consuming every fiber of his body. Bliss built higher in rolling tremors until he let go in agonizing relief, his cum shooting out in endless white ribbons, coating Rio's hand.

* * * * *

Rio sat back on his knees and gazed at Tanz. Sweat coated his body and his white translucent wings drooped down off the bed in complete submission. He stroked his back and under his fingers Tanz trembled, his skin pebbled and his face blushed with emotion. Crawling around him, he untied his hands, leaving the tight bands holding his kneeling legs wide apart. Rio pulled him up and Tanz swayed on his knees. He stared into his eyes and crushed his full, decadent lips, thrusting his tongue between his teeth, ravishing his mouth. Tanz kissed him back, and overjoyed, Rio moaned against his lips. Tanz's earthy scent played across his tongue; he tasted so fine. He sank his fingers into his long curls to hold him closer.

Breaking the kiss, he bent down, ignoring exhausted pleas from Tanz, and sank his fangs into the soft flesh at the base of his flaccid cock, gratified when it grew immediately from the injection of venom. He climbed up his body, tasting, savoring, and bit into one of Tanz's flat nipples, turning the muscle a rosy pink. Licking the bloody marks, he moved up his chest, kissed the throbbing vein in his throat, and nibbled around his chin.

"I can't take much more, Rio" Tanz gasped.

Rio swiped his tongue across Tanz's swollen lips and reached down to massage his tight balls. "Yes, you can; retract your wings."

Moving around him, he stroked Tanz across the buttocks. Gods, he looked so good, stretched wide open, just for him. Positioning himself between his legs, he pressed the head of his shaft against Tanz's tight, puckered star and lunged forward into dark delight. So tight . . . His head giddy with the sublime pressure, he drove deeper. Heat shimmered from Tanz's body and poured over Rio's balls as if he had fallen into the sun. Inch by delectable inch he pushed inside, then withdrew, and plunged in again. Under his grip, Tanz's entire body trembled, his breath coming in long, ragged gasps.

He withdrew completely from Tanz's quivering hole, reached for a pot on his nightstand, and lathered his shaft with an aphrodisiac lube. Bending, he rammed his fangs into Tanz ass cheek, injecting his venom deep into his trembling flesh. He would

take him so high he would never look at another male. Grasping Tanz's hips, he gazed down at his puckered star, glossy with lube, slightly open and begging for more. Roaring, he drove into his sizzling ass and rode him hard, feeling him shudder at every stroke. Tanz moaned and began to rock back to meet each thrust.

He laughed. "You like this, don't you?"

"Damn you, Rio." Tanz cursed, his fingers bunching in the sheet.

Rio slowed the pace and rocked against him, reaching around his slim waist to caress his ridged shaft. At his touch, Tanz began to shudder and cry out, spilling in long hot spurts over his hand. Rio chuckled and rolled his hips, pushing hard against Tanz's pleasure spot. Out of control, he grabbed Tanz's hips and thrust wildly. The aphrodisiac took hold and drove him to madness; the world split into a rainbow of colors as he fell over the edge.

He collapsed on top of Tanz, pinning him beneath him. They lay still, breathing in long gasps. He slid across Tanz's slick skin and licked the sweat from his neck.

"Promise you'll be mine . . . forever."

"I would have promised *before* you tied me up . . . I *love* you, Rio."

Rio bit down on the tender lobe of his ear.

"*Promise* me."

"I promise."

Chapter Sixteen

Thryll jerked awake at the knock on the door. He gazed around, disorientated, and then sat up on the sofa, rubbing his neck. Outside, darkness still pressed against the ice-covered windows. Tanz had mentioned that food arrived before daybreak; how quaint. Rising to his feet, he stretched, yawned, and threw a couple more logs on the fire, before heading for the bathroom. After using the toilet, he stopped in front of the vanity, washed his face, and gazed at his bleary eyes in the mirror.

"I'm starving." A female voice exclaimed from the doorway. "Has breakfast arrived?"

Thryll turned, towel in hand, and smiled. "Hello, I'm Thryll —"

"What?" She broke across his words. "Where's Tanz? Oh, don't tell me, he made a mistake and now you're here for your turn."

She took his breath away, standing naked, shimmering in the overhead lights. Thryll dropped the towel and held up his hands. "I don't want you, Aria. I'm just here to tell you, Tanz went back to Rio for —"

"Oh! Well fuck him . . . fuck both of them," she roared, her eyes turning to amber.

She turned and stomped out of the bathroom. Thryll followed, wishing Tanz would return. If he could get a word in, he would explain everything. He must try to calm her.

Remembering the food cooling in the hallway, he walked slowly to the door and swung it open. At his feet, a long tray covered with a white cloth gave off delicious aromas.

"You're hungry. I'll get the food, and we can talk while you eat."

He bent to lift the tray, heard a growl and cursed. Before he could react, a lioness leapt over his shoulder and bounded down the hall. He yelled at the top of his voice until the cat disappeared round a corner. "Aria, come back. Tanz will be back soon."

Hell, what was he to do? His orders were to remain in the room and not leave for fear of recognition. Should he follow? If he ventured outside in this formidable realm, would he find his way back? Pushing the tray onto the table, he wedged the door open with a chair and ran down the hall. He found a flight of stairs running up and made his way to the roof, taking the steps three at a time. No, not this way, he decided, lifting his nose to catch her scent. Turning, he ran back down and moved slowly across the small lobby, noting the dark opening to a stairwell. He crept forward cautiously, sniffing the air. Yes, she had come this way.

Leaping down each flight, he cringed at the sound of screaming echoing up the dark abyss. The noise continued until he reached the foyer. Charging into the open, he

froze. Humans carrying brooms and buckets pressed against the opposite wall; one female lay near his feet, whimpering in terror. The lioness paced up and down the plush red carpet, snarling and waving her head from left to right. He watched in horror while a Human male darted across the room and threw open a window then ducked for cover behind a chair.

"Aria, *no*."

Too late. The cat bounded toward the opening and in one magnificent jump, leaped through the gaping window into the darkness. All eyes turned toward him. Thryll shrank back into the dimly lit stairwell, spun around, and fled up the stairs back to the room.

* * * * *

Rio traced a hand down Tanz's arm, nuzzled his ear and buried his nose into his damp hair to inhale his unique scent. He smiled, satisfied at last the faerie belonged to him forever. Running his tongue over the bite on his shoulder, he purred in contented triumph with the knowledge he had pushed his lover to the limit, taking him repeatedly until they slid into a sweat soaked delirium. He should let Tanz sleep. Now, all he needed was Aria, his sweet beautiful mate, to share their bed.

"Rio," Tanz said sleepily and stretched languidly against him.

"I'm here, waiting to feel you quiver under me again."

"I must go back to Aria; if she wakes and sees Thryll"

Rio grasped Tanz's cock; it bucked and swelled under his touch. Rolling Tanz onto his back, he surveyed the bites covering his body with an odd sense of pride. He bent to brush a kiss across his lips and then slipped down his body to take him in his mouth. Gods, he loved the sound Tanz made while he sucked him and the little shudder each time he ran his fangs up his swollen shaft. His hand cupped Tanz's sac, his fingers trailed up to his puckered star, still slippery from lube, and pushed inside. He groaned with every slide of Tanz's velvet skin across his tongue and the blistering

heat surrounding his pumping fingers. When Tanz's fingers twisted in his hair, he increased the pace, until Tanz cried out his name in a shuddering scream and emptied his hot, salty load over his tongue.

He lifted his head and gazed into Tanz's sultry jade eyes. "I miss her too, desperately. I want her here with us right now. I am soothed in the knowledge that under your spell she's not suffering. It's better to let her sleep. You can go to her *after* we've bathed and eaten. It's barely daybreak, and you know, in London it's night until mid morning."

"I'm worried about her, she's fragile—no, not in body," he said as Rio rolled his eyes. "She's fragile in her trust, Rio. She's not sure about you. She craves you but insists you don't want her. I think if she wakes without me and sees another Pride male, hell, Rio, she'll think we used her for sex."

Rio frowned. "Hell, I hope not . . . but in truth, my scent on you won't help either. You really need to wash. I'll have a tray brought up. Another few minutes won't hurt."

* * * * *

Tanz stepped through the Circle of Light into his bedroom at the hotel. Immediately, Thryll ran from the sitting room, his face ashen.

"Aria has escaped!"

"What? When? What happened?"

"She woke while I was in the bathroom; she lost her mind and morphed . . ."

He grabbed Thryll's shoulders and gave him a shake. "Aria *morphed*, hell, where did she go? How did she get out of the room?"

"I went to collect the food and she ran out the door . . . I searched for her . . . found her downstairs . . . she jumped out the window. The Humans were screaming as if they'd never seen a cat before; I think they want to kill her."

Running a hand through his hair, Tanz walked toward the window and stared out into the grey fog. "How long ago?"

"An hour or so," he replied, his face twisted with anxiety. "She headed north, from what I could tell."

Toward the park, and snow had fallen overnight; they could track her.

"I'll need Rio. We'll go back to Feltich Castle, and it's your job to inform Blaise that Rio has left Dryad. Tell Blaise to inform Nox; we may need his help."

* * * * *

Rio pulled on his boots and dragged on his long, black cloak. Too bad if the Humans saw him. Anger welled up inside him and his cat roared to be free. Turning his head, he growled at the sight of Thryll striding into the room. "It would be better for your health, whelp, to keep your distance from me."

"I came to inform you that Nox will travel to the Human realm shortly and you may contact him in the usual way, if you need help," Thryll said, standing his ground.

"Answer one question, what Pride is she?"

"Lyonesse, with a coat of burnished copper," said Thryll, his eyes dancing with amusement. "This is the first time a princess from Lyonesse has been given to Arious Pride. Gods, Rio, Lyonesse with Fae blood, *fire and ice*; she will be a challenge even for *you*." He chuckled.

Turning away, Rio grunted in disgust.

"She belongs to both of us," said Tanz, pulling on an oversized thick jacket. "Aria was given to us *because* of her blood lines."

Rio pushed his dagger into the sheath at his back. "Enough of this prattle, Tanz; draw the circle to take us straight to the park."

* * * * *

Icy wind drove snowflakes into the bare skin of Tanz's cheeks; he stood downwind, to allow Rio to scent Aria. Cold seeped through his clothes while a blizzard

buffered his ridged body and obliterated any tracks. In the distance, sirens wailed and his stomach became jittery. The Human militia carried weapons that fired hot lead pellets. If they cornered Aria, it was not beyond reason that they would shoot her. He waited until Rio beckoned him forward. Hell, his eyes were amber, his jaw set, battle ready; if he changed now, all would be lost.

"Try to control your cat, Rio. Those sirens are the militia. If they find Aria before we do they will kill her."

"This place is so putrid with odors it's difficult to track her. I think we need to move west, toward the forest. Her cat will instinctively seek cover, and I'm guessing the snow will be undisturbed in the shelter of the trees," said Rio. He pulled up the hood of his cloak and smiled grimly. "We'll find her; *trust* in the Lady to guide our way."

The arctic wind did little to improve Rio's temper as they trudged knee-deep in the freezing snow. Tanz spoke to him softly, as if he were a cub. "Are you pleased she is a lioness?"

"Any cat will please me, but in truth, she *will* be difficult to live with, demanding, jealous. Although," he said, turning to give Tanz a small smile, "I hear they're insatiable."

Laying a hand on Rio's arm, Tanz moved closer. Rio was regaining control "I want the first cub to be yours; I hope she gives you a fine son."

"Our son, he will be *our* son . . . or daughter," Rio replied, closing his hand over Tanz's arm. "I would hope you'll never withhold your seed from our mate, Tanz."

Tanz frowned. If he fathered Aria's first child, the cub would be a faerie, and if male, definitely *not* a Knight Watch prince. He squeezed Rio's arm and stopped to pull him around to face him. "Aria is more Fae than Pride, Rio; my cubs will be faeries . . . with wings. Arious decrees you produce Pride cubs."

"Not so," said Rio, pushing on through the driving snow. "Nox will grant me a wish that our seed be joined, to create Pride cubs."

"I can't agree to that, Rio I *want* a Fae child."

"I think I'd like that too," said Rio, touching his cheek. "So, it's agreed, we let the Lady decide, in the knowledge that Pride or Fae our cubs will be loved and protected."

Rio stopped walking and gazed into the distance, the perimeter of the forest, a dark blot against the pristine landscape. There, deep in the blackened woods, against the velvet shadows, he saw a flash of chestnut – Aria. The sirens wailed, closer this time, and Rio could make out flashing lights moving slowly on a road in the distance.

"I think I see her. Run, the Humans are getting closer."

Not caring if Tanz could keep up, Rio bounded through the snow, using every ounce of his cat's skill and speed. Reaching the edge of the woods, he slowed and tipped back his head to drink in the crisp woodland scents. Yes, she was close. Over there, not five paces away, embedded in the snowy pathway, her footprints led toward a mistletoe-covered thicket. Moving forward slowly, he skirted around the dense brown bushes, and then he saw her. He stopped and swung around to signal Tanz to remain silent. He crouched, some paces away. The lioness swung around, baring her teeth in a rumbling, warning growl. Gods, she was beautiful; golden fur stretched over powerful muscles. A big cat to match his own, so much raw power in one magnificent creature – and she belonged to him.

Aria fought her cat to morph; the beast hummed with excitement and wanted only to kill and eat the first warm-blooded creature they encountered. The scent of Rio flooded through her and she could see him through a strange, amber haze. Then Rio began to purr, and she understood him. '*Mine*' she purred in reply and her cat began to shimmer around her.

Cold shot through her as if a bucket of freezing water had tipped over her. Good grief, she was naked and lying in the snow! So cold, her teeth chattered as she looked around wildly for Rio. "Rio?"

Behind her, the snow crunched with every step he made toward her. Pushing up, she tried to rise, just as a group of police crashed through the bushes and surrounded them.

"What have we here then? Got yourself a girl to rape, 'ave you?" A police officer waved his gun at Rio. "Step away from the girl."

Rio stepped over her and placed one leather boot on each side of her head. The warmth from Rio's body surrounded her. Enclosed beneath his long, leather cloak, Aria pulled her knees under her body and crawled up his back, into his heat. She inhaled, dragging his scent deep into her lungs. She purred and her cat rolled in his essence, delirious to be close to her mate.

"I said, step away from the girl," said the police officer. "Hand her over and we'll take you down to the station for a nice little talk."

"She belongs to me," growled Rio, his entire body vibrating with anger against her cold skin.

Fury so molten, so intense, roared through Rio and inside his head the cat howled its distress. Trapped, his instinct was to morph and tear the Humans to pieces. Rio snorted in anger, exhaling a cloud of white mist. As a man, he could protect Aria with his body, take any punishment necessary to keep her safe. Drawing his magyck, he hesitated. Humans were unpredictable and likely to discharge their weapons indiscriminately. If he repelled them, there would not be enough time to escape through a Circle of Light. The need to protect his mate paramount, he tensed, growling a warning. One of the Human militia stepped forward, pointing a metal fire stick at his heart. All eyes were upon the frail body shivering at his back. *How dare they stare at her nakedness that way?*

Trying hard to keep control of his cat, he spread his arms wide in an effort to convince the men he was not a threat. At his back, Aria trembled against him, making small mewling noises, her icy fingers moving tentatively around his waist. The sound of her deep distress drove stakes into his heart. He wanted to draw her close and kiss her

fear away. He purred deep in his chest, to sooth her. Thank the Lady she had come to him without hesitation.

Evaluating the five armed Humans, he met the eyes of each of them. Without the fire sticks, defeating them would be easy, no more than a training exercise. He knew by personal experience the destruction the Human weapons inflicted on a body. Similar fire sticks had pushed hot metal into Nox to put him down in the battle against the Druiks, and Nox was immortal. A Knight Watch prince would not survive five of them at close range and what of Aria, naked and defenseless at his back? His eyes flitted around the woodlands. *Where the hell is Tanz?*

The militia moved forward and Rio dropped his glamor and bared his fangs with a hiss. "She belongs to me, Human, stay back."

"What the hell are you?" The Human leader spat as they all dropped into fighting stance and aimed their weapons.

Inside his head, his cat whined, wanting to spring free. Placing his hand protectively over Aria's freezing fingers, he fell back into his only recourse. The first line of defense when completely outnumbered —negotiation.

"You think she would cling to me if she feared me? She stands beside me as my mate, without restraint. Go on your way; this has nothing to do with you."

"Likely story. Let her go and if it's true she can tell us herself," replied the Human, his fire stick unnervingly steady in his hand.

The snow behind the group of blue militia shimmered and the trees distorted in black contrasting shapes. As zebra shadows fell across the trampled snow, Nox appeared, with Tanz at his side. Lady's blood, Nox looked magnificent, dressed in black, his long, leather coat brushing the snow, his midnight hair sizzling with magyck. Inside his head, Nox's voice came clear and loud.

"Hold, Rio; don't move. Let me deal with this."

Rio drew in a cold, steadying breath, relieved. Aria grasped his shoulders, lifted her legs up to encircle his hips and her freezing naked body nestled hard against the contours of his back. He could fight like this; she weighed practically nothing. Pulling

his cloak tightly around his body to keep her warm, he whispered to her. "Hold tight, honey, things might get rough."

Beyond the line of trees, Rio glimpsed a flash of gold then the weak winter sun streaked across Allure the Fair's wings. The faerie stood perched in the top of a grand old oak tree and lifted his hand in greeting. Hell, what if the Humans saw him? His attention moved to Tanz, who'd shifted silently into place. The three Fae males formed an arc, mimicking the militia's position around him.

"Can I be of any assistance," said Nox. "I know this man; I'm sure you're making a dreadful mistake."

Only one of the Humans looked over his shoulder, as the effect of Faerie glamor poured over them. Rio chuckled, watching their weapons drop, disappearing into the snow at their feet. They froze where they stood, staring into space, their faces blank.

"Take them home, Tanz; I'll clean up this unfortunate mess." Nox ordered as Allure fluttered down to stand next to him.

Rio inclined his head "Thank you, Nox. Allure, I'm in your debt."

"You've found a lost Fae child; Aria has a family in Other World. Pay the debt by sharing part of your lives with the Fae. Allow me to train your cubs in magyck, and join you to watch your Fae cubs take their first flight. And I've so much more to teach *you*, Rio," replied Nox with a wink.

"It will be my pleasure."

Grinning, Rio watched as Tanz drew a Circle of Light, and then followed him to Other World.

Chapter Seventeen

Aria buried her face into Rio's vast back, clinging to his shoulders, aware her fingernails had scored his flesh. Trembling, she tightened her grip and sank her nails deep to gain purchase, convinced they would die. Rio's purr radiated through her body and his scent surrounded her but neither would disperse her terror. She drew in his

aroma, then hearing Tanz's soft voice beyond the thick, suffocating leather, she whimpered, sure he, too, was facing certain death. When Rio's voice boomed through his chest, she clung tighter, waiting for the bullets to tear into her.

"Methinks I have a wood nymph with very long nails under my cloak." Rio chuckled.

"Aria," said Tanz soothingly. "You can let go now. You're safe in Other World. This is where we live, Aria, our home."

Drawing in another gulp of Rio's exquisite scent, she released her grip and slid to the ground. Her legs gave out and she crumpled. Strong hands caught her before she reached the floor.

"Lady's blood." Tanz cursed, pulling her close to his body.

She glanced furtively around the opulent sitting room and remained in his embrace while Rio checked her for injury. He brushed her temple with a kiss and she turned her head to smile up at him. "I'm okay; just a bit shaky."

"I'm so proud of you, Aria; you acted as a true Pride female in the face of danger. For an unmated female to trust me to for protection as you did is an honor. One that I don't deserve, for treating you so badly. Will you ever forgive me?" said Rio, removing his tunic and offering it to her to cover her nakedness.

Aria stood on jelly legs and allowed Tanz to push the tunic over her head and then he closed his arms around her protectively. She turned her gaze to Rio. He stood so still, his eyes ringed with dark circles, his expression drawn and deeply troubled. Both his shoulders bore bloody marks from her nails, and his body, good Lord, he was covered with purple bruises. Her heart broke, knowing he had suffered. She looked up at Tanz; he gave her a very slight nod and kissed the tip of her nose. Turning in Tanz's arms, she leveled her gaze on Rio. "When you left me, I told you that I'd wait forever. I *love* you, Rio; you both fill my heart and soul. I forgive you but if you leave me again, I won't survive. I'll jump off the nearest cliff rather than live without both of you."

Her heart almost stopped at Rio's hurt expression. He fell to his knees in front of her and buried his face in her belly, his hands pulling her to him with surprising tenderness. He lifted his head and looked at her, his eyes wet with tears.

"I couldn't live without you, Aria; every day I awoke it was as if the sun didn't shine for me anymore. I lost my faith, my purpose for living. Take my promise, Aria, and I will love you for all eternity, having no other female for all time."

Heart soaring, she pulled Rio to his feet and wrapped her arms around him. "I will."

Aria melted into Rio's kiss, so soft, his tongue a gentle caress against her own. Pressing her palms against his trembling flesh, she sighed. He inclined his head to kiss down her neck and she moaned the moment he buried his fangs in her jugular, filling her with his exquisite heat. Light danced before her eyes and she saw fragments of Rio's life flashing across her mind. Her cat purred and a profoundly intense love flowed through her. Rio's love, as deep and infinite as the cosmos. Quivering with pleasure, she mewed. He lifted his head, brushed her mouth, and looked into her eyes.

"Mine forever," he said so softly it was almost a whisper against her lips.

"Yes."

"You know, you should really morph, Rio; you look dreadful," said Tanz, his voice breaking the spell.

"My cat may frighten our mate. Maybe later, when she's a little stronger," said Rio, his gaze locked on Aria's face.

Aria grinned. "I've shown you mine, now show me yours."

"Very well, stand back." Rio moved away, ripping off his clothes and giving her a slow, sultry smile.

Her breath caught at the sight of him, first gloriously naked, then as a massive black leopard. When he morphed and Rio stood there again, strong and perfect in every way, her heart sang with joy. "You are *incredible*; what do you think our cubs will be?"

"Leopards, it is by Arious's design. You will have Fae cubs as well, by the Lady's choice."

Her hand reached for Tanz, who stood quietly as if waiting to be included. Looking into his face, she stood on tip toes and brushed a kiss across his lips.

"I love you too, Tanz. Will you give me your promise?"

"Yes, I promise, sweet Aria, I will have no other female for all time," he replied, lifting her into the air and swinging her around.

A knock on the door interrupted their celebration. Aria looked across the polished wooden floor to the doorway, catching a glimpse of the unknown world awaiting her outside the long bay windows. Far in the distance, mountains rose up like pillars of diamonds against a magenta sky. Surrounding the house, a valley of mysterious shadows spread far into the distance, bathed by the soft light of two orange moons. Deep green variegated foliage surrounded each panorama, so beautiful – good Lord, they were inside a gigantic tree! Her gaze traveled around the room, taking in the carved natural beauty, each piece of furniture a tactile delight. Rio stepped back into the room, followed by a massive faerie, his hair flowing around his hips like an angry sea. She held her breath.

"Aria, may I present Nox, King of the Faerie," said Rio, taking her hand and bringing her forward to meet him.

"Welcome home, Aria," said Nox. "I see you have morphed into a most beautiful female. How interesting you have Fae, not Pride ears. I am here because Tanz has denied my offer to blend all your offspring. It's something most ménage families prefer, each child to carry characteristics of all parents. Both your mates want both Fae and Pride cubs; is that your wish, Aria? I have special powers, given by the Lady to bless this union and grant you this gift if you choose."

Aria lifted her chin. "If my mates want both Pride and Fae cubs, then that is also my wish."

Nox laid a hand on her head and shiver traveled through her body.

"There, it is done," he said with a wink at Rio.

"Hey, hold on a minute," said Tanz, glaring at Nox. "*What* have you done?"

"Rio was concerned that this union might cause arguments between the gods. Arious would without doubt argue that one of his Knight Watch princes must have the first-born. So, I asked Blaise to intervene on my behalf, him having the Lady's ear, so to speak. Rio's declaration that you would both love and protect either race swayed the Lady's decision. Also, you've both agreed to live part of the time here. Aria will have twins and each set will contain a Faerie and a Pride."

Aria swallowed hard. "Twins." Her heart missed a beat. She looked up into her mates' beaming faces and she hoped they planned to help changing diapers. "I'm very small; don't you think it might be a problem, you know . . . getting them out?"

"She's grown up in the Human world," said Nox, shuddering.

"Oh, yes of course, she wouldn't know, would she?" said Tanz, grinning like the Cheshire cat.

Thinking she might faint, Aria grabbed the back of a finely carved wooden chair. "Know what?"

"You will probably conceive during Moon Fire; the cubs will come in nine weeks. You don't have to squeeze them out, Aria, like a Human. It's easy. Your belly will open up like a pea pod and we'll be there to collect the cubs. No pain, you'll be back to normal minutes later, and most females want sex straight away to celebrate . . . It's beautiful," said Tanz confidently.

Aria's head swam, her knees went weak and the floor came up—fast.

* * * * *

Rio lounged back in the bubbling tub, watching Aria's eyes flutter open. A pang of guilt shot through him. The glamor required, after she had fainted, was only supposed to calm her, not put her into a deep sleep for four hours. He doubted she would remember much of her conversation with Nox. He convinced himself that allowing her to enjoy Moon Fire without the knowledge of giving birth nine weeks later was worth it.

Gods, she looked so beautiful lying back in Tanz's muscled arms, their matching peach fuzz skin glowing in the warm water. He wanted to trace her beautiful pointed ears with the tip of his tongue and lick the droplets of water running down her body. He washed her in the massive tub, hoping the water would revive her. His cock stiffened just looking at her beautiful floating twin globes, tipped with cherry nipples, just waiting for his devotion. As he soaped her, she responded to his caress; her female arousal still burned in his nose. He smiled; his bite had successfully reignited her Moon Fire.

Aria gave him a slow, sultry smile and he grinned at Tanz. Holding his breath, he watched the tip of her moist, pink tongue slide across her bottom lip. His cat roared and he plunged forward, in a great wave of water, to take her mouth. Under his lips, her sigh threw his cat into frenzy and the moment her tongue snaked into his mouth, he lost control.

She giggled under his lips and he dragged himself away. He inclined his head and looked at her.

"What is it with you two and baths? Any chance we can finish this in bed?" Aria chuckled, her hands pressing flat against Rio's chest.

Rio's breath caught in his throat then he glanced down to see Tanz's long fingers pinching her nipples into hard, twin peaks. *Lady's blood, it will be difficult to keep control sharing her with Tanz.*

His mouth watered at the thought of having two peach fuzz bodies to taste and slide over, but he must encourage Aria to bite him as soon as possible. He reached out to trace a ringer down Tanz's flushed cheek. *To hell with it, tonight I'll have them both . . . many times.*

* * * * *

Aria giggled. Rio grunted something unintelligible and slid her onto his lap, his mouth fixed firmly on her own, their tongues moving in a slow, erotic dance. Pushing

her fingers through his silky hair to pull him closer, she drank in the potent taste of him. Need shot through her body at each stroke of his tongue, with each caress of his fingers across her buttocks. Different this time, her head swam and her cheeks ached at her cat's urging to bite. She pulled away, trying to take a breath, and looked into Rio's deep amethyst eyes. "Something's wrong; I feel different. Last time when we made love and I wanted to bite you, my face didn't hurt. Every time my cat says to bite, I get pain in my cheeks."

"Oh, honey," he said, cupping her face. "The drugs suppressed your cat and more importantly your venom. The sacs are in your cheeks. They've never filled before. It's much like when teeth first break the surface, at first there is a little pain. I can make it better; you must trust me."

"We'll help you for your first time and the warm bath will relax you," said Tanz, coming to kneel behind her, his hands cupping her breasts.

Tanz smiled at Rio and poured his glamor over Aria. He watched, heart pounding, while Rio grasped Aria's hips and lifted her, lowering her deliciously slowly onto his thick shaft. Pinching her nipples as she writhed in pleasure, Tanz bit tenderly on her earlobe and gazed into Rio's eyes, waiting for the signal to take her ass. The water in the tub rolled in waves around him as Rio lifted his hips and drove into her. Tanz moved away and reached for the jar of lube. His cock ached. He watched, trembling with desire, and coated his throbbing shaft with the cool salve Rio pulled her down against his chest, and her delectable pink ass cheeks lifted out of the shallow water. His mouth went dry as he watched Rio's long fingers part her to display her puckered star. Moving forward on his knees, trembling with anticipation, he grabbed his shaft and stroked it gently against her ass.

In all his hundred years of living, nothing had excited him like this. Biting his bottom lip to keep control of his raging passion, he pushed forward, sinking into hot delight. Gods, so tight, and the heat of her sizzled straight down his legs, sending flames of lust into his balls. He kissed her back, her neck. Her moans of bliss threatened

to break his fragile control. Snaking his hands around her trembling body, he grasped Rio's shoulders for purchase, and pushed in to the hilt. His breath caught as Rio's shaft moved against his length with only a thin layer of skin between them. Enjoying Rio's slow, even rhythm, he pushed in at every down stroke, reveling at the silken pass of Rio's cock against his aching shaft.

The room shifted. Aria clung to Rio; passion clawed at her, demanding release. Pressed deliciously between two rock hard walls of muscle, she purred her enjoyment. Stretched to the limit, her entire body shimmered with euphoria with each piston stroke, every devastating plunge shooting her forward into uncontrollable delirium. Intense delight consumed her entire being and from somewhere far away her lover's voices crooned encouragement in her ears.

Rio's potent scent drove her into a frenzied mania; it oozed from his breath, his hair, with every stroke of his cock deep inside her. Her cat urged her to bite again, while her nose pushed against his damp flesh, inhaling his scent. She licked a path across the throbbing vein in his neck, his skin a salty tang against her tongue.

"Please, Aria . . . please . . . bite me." Rio purred, close to her ear.

Moving as if in a dream, Aria opened her mouth, her fangs dropped and she grazed them across Rio's throat. Her cheeks throbbed and a bittersweet taste filled her mouth. She lunged, sinking her fangs into Rio's sweet flesh. Blood, hot with a distinct floral flavor, filled her mouth and her venom sacs pumped relentlessly. Under her, Rio stilled and Tanz took control, driving deep inside her with exquisite torment. She drank deeply; the combined sensations of Rio's quivering artery against her tongue and Tanz's deep penetrating thrusts in her burning ass spiraled into a tantalizing erotic rush. She lifted her head and bit down again, savoring Rio's blood and pushing her venom deep in a satisfying charge. When he moved, joining Tanz with every deep soul destroying thrust, she lifted her head and screamed her climax, bringing them both with her in a joined shuddering conclusion.

* * * * *

Rio woke three days later in a soft bed beneath a tangle of limbs and smiled into the darkness. His beautiful Aria had proved to be an aggressive, rampant female, who took great pleasure in watching him pleasure Tanz or vice versa. Touching his neck with his fingertips, he sighed. Moon Fire was better than he could have imagined; not in his wildest dreams would he have expected to receive so many bites. He pushed the hair off Tanz's face and watched his full lips curl at the corners. His neck bore the bites of both he and Aria. Bending to lick a path across Tanz's mouth, he caught his breath; Aria's small hand had closed possessively around his length.

"I'm awake," she whispered, trailing a path of sweet kisses down his back.

"Mmm, so am I," said Tanz, opening one brilliant jade eye. "But I don't have the opportunity to morph like you two. Hell, I feel like I've been in a battle . . . well not a battle . . . exactly," he murmured with a slow smile.

Rio pulled them both close and kissed Tanz and then Aria with slow deliberation.

"I do believe our sweet mate has concluded her Moon Fire. How do you feel, honey?"

"In love," she said, reaching across Rio's chest to cover Tanz's hand. "I love you both so much I think I'll burst."

"I love you both too," said Tanz, lifting his head to look at Rio.

Rio squeezed them. "You must know I'll love you both, forever."

"I really enjoyed Moon Fire," said Tanz, running his fingers up Aria's body.

"Will you both want me, now it's over?" said Aria with a sigh.

Chuckling, Rio lifted her chin and brushed his lips across her mouth. "Gods, Aria, those three days were just to get to know each other. A little boost the Lady gives a female, to make sure she enjoys every aspect of her mate. A time when a female marks her mates, bonding them to her forever. Your scent will always drive me to madness, honey. Look at me. After three days of bliss, I'm anxious to have you."

"And you, Tanz?" she replied, stroking Rio's ridged shaft in long, even strokes.

"Hell, yes, all day, every day of our lives, until I drop dead with exhaustion," he chortled.

Rio gazed out of the window, across the valley as dawn broke, illuminating the wonders of Other World. He sent a prayer of thanks to the Lady for her gift and sighed in contentment.

"What are you thinking," said Aria, pushing up on her elbow.

"Yes, do tell and I hope it doesn't involve that giant phallus again." Tanz chuckled, making a great show of rubbing his ass.

Rio grinned and pulled them close. "That my dream has come true. You're mine . . . both of you . . . all . . . *mine*."

~The End~

About the Author

H. C. Brown lives in Queensland, Australia where she enjoys walking along the long, white sandy beaches.

She loves to read and finds peace in painting waterfalls and fairies. Her passion is writing, which she does most days. She finds that variety is the spice of life and her stories run the gamut, from a murder mystery series to historical, paranormal and time travel – all with a healthy dose of spice.

She married her very own alpha male and he is her love and inspiration. Learn more about H. C. Brown by visiting her [Web site](#).

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