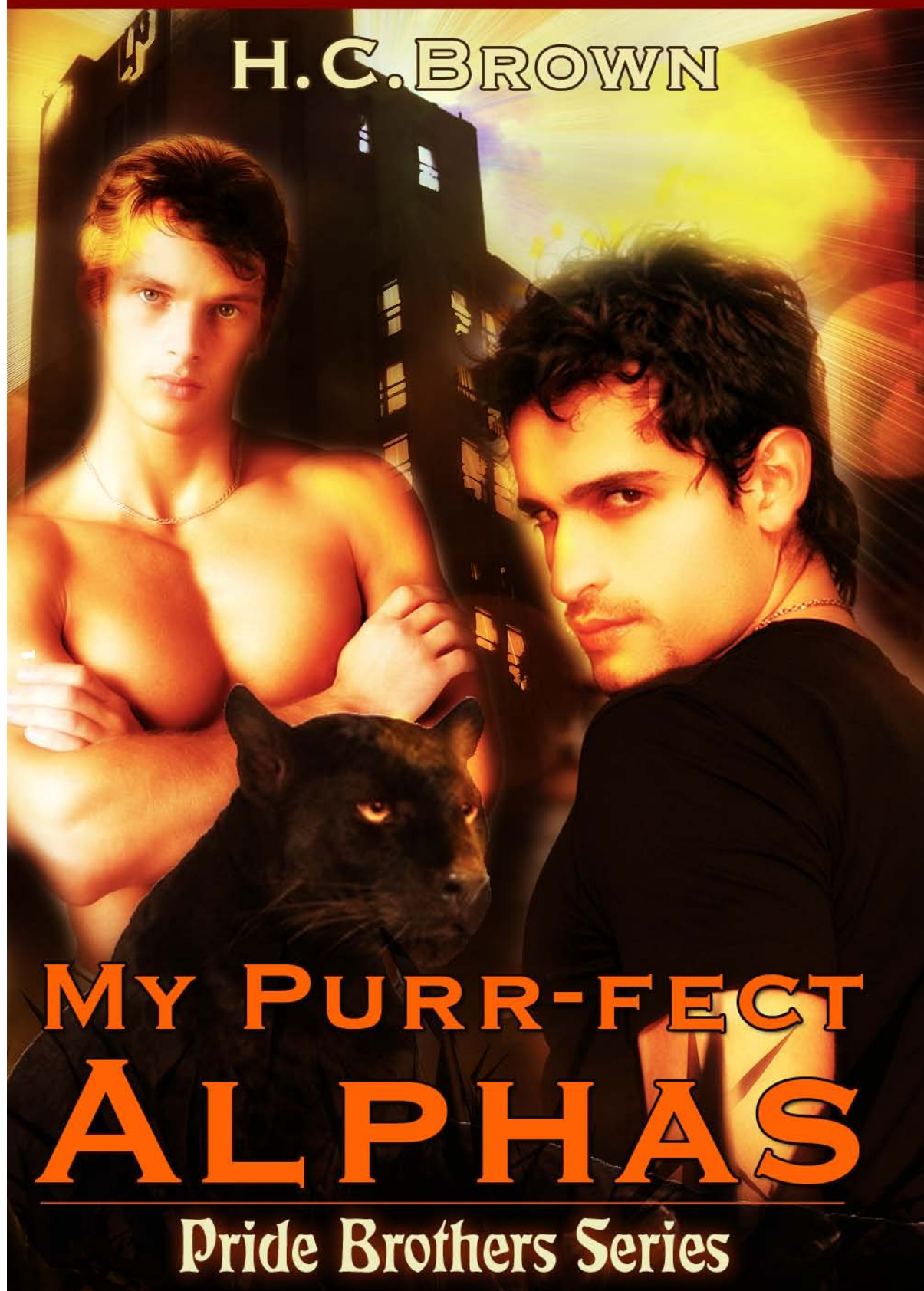


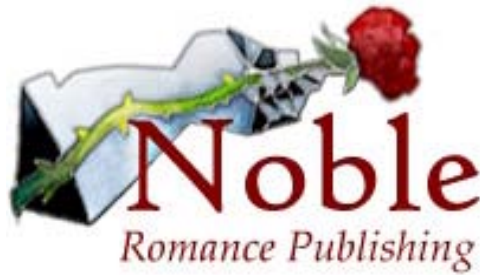
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H.C. BROWN



MY PURR-FECT ALPHAS

Pride Brothers Series



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My Purr-fect Alphas
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Book Blurb

Dr. Elizabeth Clark's life is turned upside down when she is kidnapped by the Druiks, and taken to Druik Void, located in a future realm. Caged like an animal in a laboratory filled with humanoid specimens from other dimensions, she endures experimental surgery. Seduced by Zandor and Thryll, two very sexy shape-shifters trapped with her, she is persuaded to escape. Will Beth survive the frantic journey to the Gate and safety? Or will she fall prey to the insatiable shifters?

Preface

Excerpt from THE GREAT BOOK OF THE PRIDES - personal entry by
King Blaise of Knight Watch, Eighth King of Dryad.
First Treaty of Trust.

My reign as Eighth King of Dryad began the day my dear father was murdered at the hand of Passiot, a demon lord from the Underworld. It is true that demons continue in our realms; the Bratach remain in Lyoness but these demons are under the control of the witch, Morfran, and cause the Prides little concern. My mate, Daii, the Spell Weaver, delivered me a son, Ryees. He will bring pure magyck to the lands of the Five Gates. In him, the Lady combined all that is good in both Fae and Pride. To represent us all, his eyes, deep pools of opalescence, are glittering swirls of violet, green, blue, and silver. His birth and the recognition of his greatness by the good King Nox of the Faerie brought about the first Treaty of Trust. From this day forth, both Faerie and Pride will fight as one for peace.

Chapter One

"You cannot do this to me. You don't understand. I *must* morph; inside me there are two souls. It is imperative that you allow the cat to materialize or it will claw its way out."

A deep, desperate, voice bellowed behind her. Beth winced at the loud noise and rolled onto her side, forcing open her eyelids, which were still heavy from the drugs. Through tiny slits, she caught a glimpse of her surroundings, but the overhead light blinded her. She shut her eyes tightly to stop the room from spinning.

Slower, Beth. The room still shifted, forcing her to roll into a ball and clutch her stomach. *Oh, God, please let the nausea stop.* Neon lights above dissolved into a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors. Cold from the tiled floor seeped into her body. She tried to lift her head, but her stomach rolled again, sending the acrid taste of bile up the back of her throat. *No, lie still.*

Bright colors sharpened and formed a metallic web. A cruel silver cage surrounded her. *I'm back in the laboratory; what have they done to me this time?*

Aluminum-topped benches swam into view, rising like silver sentries along the walls. She shielded her eyes from the bright strip-lighting and watched a procession of masked men dressed in starched lab coats drift by as if unaware of her presence. *How strange to be no more than a lab rat.* She recognized this hell for what it was and recalled in vivid detail her experimental work at the Research Institute.

Perhaps this is God's justice. The normal low hum from the technicians and their equipment had escalated into a piercingly indistinguishable madness. She pressed her hands to her ears to muffle the relentless noise. What did they want from her? Why was she here?

Why have I stopped fighting? I've become as complacent with my capture as a lazy lab rat. She clamped a hand over her mouth and retched violently, the rank smell of the unwashed so vile that vomit spilled into her mouth. The concentrated scents from the other inmates burnt her ultra-sensitive nostrils.

Looking down the rows of silver cages, she saw each contained a specimen of a diverse Humanoid. Some sported fascinating brilliant white fangs like vampires, while others had horns of different shapes and sizes. In the cage to her left huddled a beautiful pale-faced girl with black gossamer wings. To her right, the owner of the persistent, loud, angry, male voice that had disturbed her drugged dreams.

Dear God what have they done to me? She remembered having surgery and reached for the dull pain in her shoulder. Slowly, anxiously, she prodded the tender area. Sweat coated her face. Her shaking fingers located a small, painful scar. No stitches, the surface felt wax-like. *They've closed the wound with a laser.* She pushed against the cold floor, desperately fighting the drug haze. It took some moments before she managed to raise herself and slump against the bars.

The doctor moved toward her cage. Finally, she lifted her head. Her ears rang with the incessant noise but her sight had an unexpected clarity. His burnt-umber eyes gazed down at her over a white paper mask. Her tormenter.

Previously, the Human doctor had spoken in an unfamiliar language; this afternoon she understood every excruciatingly loud word he uttered. A sudden flare of anger rushed through her. *Why on earth had he continued to babble streams of unintelligible gibberish to her when he spoke English?*

"You're our choice as a sample of your race. It would be better if you relax and accept your fate. There's no escape from the Druik Void," said the doctor, directing his attention to the loud, angry male on her right.

"You would do well not to displease me, Druik scum. Release my cat or I'll escape this cage and tear out your neck."

Beth flinched at the harshness of his tone and backed away.

"Back down, cat, or I'll arrange another taste of the prod. You're nothing here. I'll keep you for as long as it pleases me and do to you as I wish. You'll soon learn to comply; they all do. Your circumstances would improve considerably if you'd agreed to my wishes."

The cage bars shook violently.

"Never. I'll tear apart any female you place with me. Do you think that I possess compassion, Pic? You'll die slowly when my brothers arrive, and arrive they will."

The doctor, Pic, leaned toward the cage and grinned. "Only a fool would pit the hapless troops of a mythical goddess against the Druik's weaponry. I know what you are, cat. I'll enjoy watching your training."

Beth turned to view the new inmate, his cage only an arm span away. He stood naked, his back rippling with fury, his massively muscled arms held above his head as he shook the cage. The laboratory fell silent as if a great storm raged. All faces turned toward this creature whose anger thundered so violently. Beth expected lightning to shoot from his fingertips at any moment.

She shivered at the slow, deep growl he gave as the doctor turned and walked from view. Beth gripped the bars, watching her fellow prisoner's awesome beauty. Sweat flowed in rivulets between rock hard muscles bunched across his broad shoulders. She licked her lips, her gaze following a single droplet's hypnotic trail. It wet a tantalizing path to his slim waist and disappeared between the cleft in his impressively muscled ass. His legs were long, and taut muscle slid delightfully beneath skin the color of warm honey with every delectable movement.

His hair hung in a long, shaggy mane and glowed in every shade of amber. The russet, fire, and sunburst streaks danced like flames in the overhead lights. He turned aggressively to follow the retreating back of his captor and her stomach twisted. His profile resembled a Michelangelo statue, chiseled yet darkly angelic. The lights in the laboratory dimmed, followed by the now-familiar whoosh of the food dispensers. Once again, he shook the cage violently, his language colorfully graphic.

She pressed her cheek against the cold bars and groaned. *Dear God, that cage won't hold him; he's going to break out of there and kill us all.*

His attention shifted to her as if he read her thoughts. His wild, amber eyes met her gaze and his lips drew back, displaying long, white fangs as he hissed. Her entire body shuddered at the uncontrollable rage reflected in eyes that danced with streaks of liquid fire. His nose wrinkled and he growled in frustration before lowering his voice to a murmur, but Beth caught every word.

"What is this place?"

In fear for her life, Beth backed away until cold bars dug into her back. This man was dangerous with a capital 'D'. She trembled, her eyes opening so wide they hurt. She tried to reply but only managed a gasp.

He dropped his head as if defeated and took a deep, shuddering breath. Hair streaked with molten gold cascaded over his shoulders and covered his face, sticking in wet strands to his cheeks.

"Don't fear me. My anger is for those who hold us against our will," he purred as he slowly raised his head. His soft, sensuous voice fell over her in a strangely calming rumble.

"I don't really know where we *are* but it's obvious they're not letting us out any time soon. I believe we're a collection of different species for an experiment of sorts."

"There are many enemies here, Human." His gaze drifted around the room. He stilled and sniffed the air. "Would seem only we have an alliance." He looked toward the girl with wings. "Mayhap it's only us and that Fae female. The others, by the stink that clings to their bodies, are Rams of one herd or another. Have you seen any other Pride brothers?"

"Pride brothers?"

"Other males that look like me." He rolled his eyes as if she should recognize what he was.

"No."

"Wonderful." He turned and sank to the floor in one fluid movement. Once he sat down, he crossed his long legs, straightened his spine, and faced her. Large hands with long, strong fingers rested on his knees.

Beth watched him in fascination. You're a doctor, she reminded herself, gazing at the massive cock that nestled between his legs.

"Human." He tapped on the bars to get her attention.

Heat crept into her cheeks as she slowly lifted her gaze to look at his delectably sinful face.

"You have not seen a Pride male before, have you?" He raised one perfect brow and sighed.

Beth blinked in disbelief; his eyes were slowly turning from molten amber to pools of amethyst velvet.

"No, I haven't seen anything like you in my life."

"I see." He gazed at her from under the shade of sienna lashes for some moments as if assessing which way to proceed. "You appear to have lost your spirit, Human. What have these beasts done to you?"

Sighing, she rested her head against the cage.

"I think I've given up trying to fight. What's the point; we can't escape, can we? I'm not really sure what they've done to me. I think they've enhanced my hearing, sight and smell. I know they've performed other procedures but I haven't noticed any other physical changes. Have they changed you as well?"

"Aye, I believe they have. They want my child seed to blend with these animals." He angrily waved his hand in the direction of the Rams. "I'll not comply with their demands; they will have to kill me, which will be extremely difficult," he growled, his hands balling into fists.

His sudden change of demeanor frightened her and she decided to make idle conversation to calm him. "Where are you from?"

"Dryad, it's within the Five Gates. I assume that you are from the realm of Scotland?"

"No, I'm Australian."

"I know not of that realm. I only know of the portal in Scotland. Over the years, many Humans have stumbled mistakenly into our realms from there. They make passage through the Morfran Stones. I assumed that you were one of those, all of whom know of the Prides. You'd notice my Pride brothers as we're like Humans only bigger and we have the teeth of a cat," he replied softly, speaking to her as if she were a small child. "I'm not Human. I'm Arious Pride. The Prides are families, and we are all both man and cat. I am Zandor of Knight Watch." He inclined his head as if making a formal introduction.

Beth wet her lips. His eyes were hypnotic and the strong, musky scent that poured from his naked body made her nipples ache. *His sweat must be an aphrodisiac.* She drew a breath, holding it in to savor his scent. Breathe, she told herself, as his gaze wandered boldly across her body. Her cheeks burned and she reached to pull down the hem of the hospital gown. The short smock hardly covered her nakedness and gaped open at the back. Drawing a deep breath, she smiled at him. *That's better keep talking, calm him down.*

"I'm Beth. Doctor Elizabeth Clark."

"How long have you been here, Beth, and how did they capture you?"

"I think I've been here for ten days. They kidnapped me on my way home from work, bundled me into a car and drugged me. I awoke here and thought aliens had abducted me."

"I'm not familiar with the term *car* or from which realm *aliens* come from, Beth," he said, frowning. "There is nothing of either name in my realm." He looked at her and a small smile curled his lips. "My story is similar, although I have an excuse for my capture. I had been drinking for two days." He grinned wolfishly. "I didn't even smell the scum until they threw a net over me when I left the tavern. They forced me into a strange looking wagon that travelled as fast as the wind, but I wasn't too drunk to realize Druiks had taken me."

"You knew about these people?"

"Yes, but I had no idea they took prisoners for breeding."

"The others held in this laboratory are strange too, but I assumed the Druiks are Human, aren't they? This is the only place they've held me and I haven't seen any others like you."

"Human, no, mayhap they appear so to you. In truth, their females have three breasts and are masculine in manner. Methinks, if they had their way, the males would bear their spawn. And spawn they are, as they bear four to six at one birthing."

"You must be joking."

"No, unfortunately I do not jest." Zandor shook his head. " *Doctor* is a Human term for healer, is it not? Why do they torment us, Beth?"

His eyes had changed, softer now as his gaze stopped at the purple scar on her neck. She instinctively lifted her hand to touch it. He turned his head to reveal a similar lump on his shoulder.

Beth shrugged. "Yes, I'm a healer. At first, I thought they wanted me for my government's secrets. I work in a lab much like this one. I couldn't understand a word they said so I tried to remain calm and silent. I didn't know what else to do. You heard what the doctor said . . . the reason why we're prisoners. We're the gene pool for a master race."

"Gene pool? You speak in riddles. Why do they prevent my morphing? Don't they understand my cat is part of me?" His eyes lost their softness and again blazed with amber fire.

Zandor watched the Human female's eyes widen to deep pools of cobalt blue. *She obviously has trouble grasping reality. No surprise, really, seeing they had only returned her unconscious less than an hour ago.* His lips curled up at the corners with the memory of crouching to view her as she lay so still on the cold floor. *What a delightful female. Not skinny but pleasantly rounded with long, sun-kissed legs, small feet and painted toes.* The white gown covering little of her bounty had fallen open to display a softly rounded bottom and delectable bare pussy. The urge to reach through the bars, lift the material, and examine her hopefully full breasts had nearly overwhelmed him. He had ground his teeth to force down his frustration.

Relief had surged through him when she awoke.

Her frightened, almond-shaped eyes, the color of a summer sky, now looked up at him full of questions. His gaze followed the fall of midnight hair framing her face and tumbling down her back in a silk shawl hugging her bottom. Not a breathtaking beauty but very pleasing indeed; her flushed cheeks and full sensuous lips were enticing. She would be a joy to kiss. *It only took my glamor and a few words to gain her trust, foolish female.* Glad of the bars between them, he sighed. *Gods, look at her, so soft, so Human, oblivious to the danger.* In his aggravated state, he could easily rape and kill her. *She knows nothing of the unique sexual power I can and will wield over her.*

He smiled, certain in the knowledge his scent had already made her intoxicated. Her eyes smoldered and her body displayed all the signs of feminine arousal. *Yes, look at her reacting as any Human female would to a Pride male. If we were not prisoners, I would train her gently to submit willingly to my every fantasy.* He bit the inside of his cheek as his cock began to swell. They *were* prisoners and these thoughts must wait; he must free his cat or they had little chance of escape.

Her gaze still rested on his erection. He watched the wet trail of her pink tongue across her bottom lip. Inhaling, he caught the rich fragrance of her desire; he stifled a groan as her unique scent enticed, tormented, and flew to his groin in a throbbing stab. *By the gods, madness has descended upon me.* He dragged his gaze away from the delectably hard, peaked nipples straining the fabric covering her breasts and looked at her flushed face.

"I believe they've already made improvements to our bodies. They want to change us so we produce a super race of children." She shifted slightly, revealing a long expanse of golden thigh. "I can't believe I'm asking this question. Zandor, but what exactly do you mean by morphing? Do I understand you're a shape shifter?"

He smiled at her discomfort.

"Aye, Beth, I told you. Pride males are man and cat. The Druik placed a device under my skin to prevent morphing—my ability to shift into a cat. I heard them speak while they prepared to insert it. They don't know of my ability to hear an ant in a nest, a hundred paces away. I believe we have all received a language chip; I'm

not familiar with this term. I did not understand their language at first, but now I do. It's a strange magyck they weave."

"What do you know about these Druiks? If they use language chips—devices to allow us to understand their language—they've very advanced technology."

Yes, this topic will cool my desire, clever female. He shook his head in an effort to clear his carnal thoughts before continuing.

"All these prisoners are from realms making up a very small portion of the whole reality. In fact, the dimensions split into millions of realms. Scotland, for instance, and all the lands controlled by Humans are but one realm. Each has its own time and degree of knowledge, or technology, as you call it. This, the realm of Druik Void, is one of the most advanced and one of the most despised. My realm and those of the Rams and the Fae do not seek advanced technology as we have magyck."

"Magyck?" said Beth and twisted the end of the white hospital robe around her fingers nervously, her gaze intense.

"Aye, but the Prides are limited; some have more than others but all have the necessities of life: fire, light. Indeed, methinks our ability to morph is the greatest magyck of all." *Look at her, she trembles under my gaze. I must win her trust if I have any hope of securing her help.*

"So how do we escape? How can I get back to my home?"

Beth watched him push the silken hair from his remarkable face and rub the lump on his neck.

"Would you be able to remove this device?" His eyes smoldered as he lifted his gaze to her face.

She nodded. "Yes, if I had a sharp knife, it wouldn't be a problem."

"Then we will need to be alone. I assume we're in close proximity because they plan to pair us. If they want us to mate, they'll have to leave us alone together, eventually. We must wait it out. It will be difficult to act complacent but we've no other choice. You must do whatever they ask of you, as I will. In the meantime, I'll work on the doctor, Pic." He grinned, stretched languidly, and leaned his wide back

against the cold metal bars. He appeared remarkably relaxed and seemed totally unconcerned with his nakedness in her presence.

"I would say they have tampered with your scent as it inflames me to passion. I know mine draws you to me, as even now I can smell your arousal. They have left me this close to you, so I will go into a mating frenzy. I will make them understand if I do, I'll most likely kill you. They wouldn't want you damaged. If they fall for my ruse, I may be able to negotiate for some sort of sexual release. My guess is, the doctor will want me to service a Druik female or mayhap a male. In any case, I will then be able to negotiate some time alone with you."

Beth shivered, suddenly very afraid. "You sit there naked and grinning. Are you a fool? What do you have that's so special?"

"I'm a cat. Scents and urges control my body. We Pride males are highly prized for our unique sexual prowess. We carry no disease, not ever, and our child seed is controlled. It won't release until we complete the mating ritual with our bond mate. We may, before we bond, have sex freely and very often without the females fearing an unwanted cub. These Druik scum have no such stamina and lack imagination. Indeed, their females and paired couples often enter our realm to seek a night of passion." He raised a brow at Beth's sharp intake of breath. "Don't look so shocked; we don't need love to enjoy sex." He grinned.

"How will all of that help us escape this dreadful place?"

"Tis well known Pic enjoys males, even though he often shares them with his wife, so my offer will be a night alone with you for anything *he* desires. Then you'll remove my chip, Beth, and I'll morph and kill them. It's our only hope for escape." Zandor grinned and winked at her.

Beth swallowed hard. "You'd have sex with that despicable man to get out of here?"

"You would too. Be honest, Beth; how bad can it be? For me, it'll be enjoyable. All sex is pleasurable for me, the rougher the better. I'll look forward to it." Zandor grinned.

Beth ran her hand down the bars of her cage.

"Do you think your cat can break out of this cage?"

"Aye, my cat is a hundred times more powerful than I am, Elizabeth." His voice extended her name to a sensual purr.

Beth chewed her lip as she sifted through his story. If his tale was not a complicated fabrication and he told the truth, the facts were amazing. *Could he really be a shape shifter? Had she really entered an alternate universe? If so, what hope did she have of finding her way home?* She closed her eyes and seriously considered she may have lost her mind. Zandor could be a figment of her subconscious, her distressed mind's effort to buffer her from the horrors of this place. She inhaled, and her body tingled. No, she wasn't imagining his hypnotic scent or how it affected her.

Beth studied his huge muscled body. She could see him clearly in the half-light, watching her intently. *He's very sure of himself, lying back as if he were home on the sofa. Could she trust him? Perhaps he intended to use her to help him escape and then leave her behind.* She shuddered. The orderlies would be dead and she would starve to death trapped in this stinking cage.

"Do you know the way out of this realm? What guarantees do I have you won't leave me behind? How do I know when you morph, your cat won't tear me into shreds?" The questions tumbled from her lips.

He said nothing and just sat and listened to her, glancing up occasionally, between bites from the hunk of meat from the meal dispenser. After he finished chewing, he took a long drink of water and placed the plastic bottle on the floor beside him.

She swallowed, trying to curb her impatience as she waited for his reply.

"I 'm surprised that you don't trust me. Indeed, my glamor should have placated you enough by now. I'll *try* to find the Gate that leads you home but in truth, I cannot give you any guarantees, Human. Only the Fae pass into your realm and back without restriction. I could easily kill you, this is true. Indeed, it's to your advantage I am a man of my word. I'll take you and mayhap the faerie if she'll come with us, although I've no use for her."

"N-no use?"

He smiled again, making her stomach flutter to her core. A rush of warmth flooded her body.

"No. I'd most likely break her and the wings would be a definite problem. I know a Pride brother who has one for a mate, but she can retract her wings. Then again, she's stronger, being only half Fae. Her father is a Pride male."

Beth rolled up her eyes. *Could this man ever get his mind off the subject?* "Do you consider every woman you meet a potential sex partner?"

This time he laughed. His gaze searched the ceiling as his chest rumbled.

"It's what we do."

"How do you know that they haven't changed you so that you can impregnate every female you sleep with? Don't you think they'll use your insatiable need against you?"

"I fuck with whoever *I* choose, not at Pic's whim. The Druiks can't control my child seed; only the venom from my true mate releases it. I'd think it's highly improbable for the Druiks to achieve such a potion." He grimaced and his eyes narrowed.

Beth sighed and glanced at the high-tech workstations. *Heaven help us, you have no idea what these people are capable of.* The individual microcomputers, servicing their every need, were incredible. They delivered food and beverage into the cages by plastic tubes. How did the Druiks program these computers so nourishment arrived long before the thought of hunger or thirst formed in her mind? This laboratory appeared to be a thousand years ahead of the government labs where she worked and *they* were extremely high-tech. *Yes, God help us, the Druiks do have the technology to release Zandor's child seed.*

Chapter Two

"Oh, God, let it stop."

Five days had passed since they took the winged creature from its cage. Beth pressed her palms to her ears and shut her eyes tight. She knew they were the screams of the faerie. *What were these bastards doing to the small, elfin creature?* If the brutality didn't stop soon, she would go insane. She gritted her teeth and tried to block out the image of an ashen face and wide, terrified eyes as they took her away.

The lab filled with the Rams' excited grunts, punctuated by loud sexual taunts and descriptions. Orderlies marched between the cages and hosed them down like dogs. Beth rolled up into a ball and stared into Zandor's cage. Earlier that morning two guards had taken him before breakfast. The moment he returned, she felt strangely relieved, and waited impatiently to ask him about the faerie. He ate his meat with gusto. Obviously, neither whatever happened to him during his absence, nor the disturbing faerie's screams, had not affected his appetite.

Beth began to hum and covered her ears again, rocking back and forth. She opened her eyes at the noise of Zandor rattling the bars on his cage. He reached out to touch her, his face grim. Beth edged forward and extended her arm, seeking his comfort. His long, brown fingers closed over her hand. A slight tremor ran through her at his warm touch. Sighing, she relaxed from the simple pleasure of his thumb rubbing over the back of her hand in a tender, circular motion. A surge of foreign emotions flooded her and the fear slowly subsided. A connection had formed between them, a strange and scary bond.

Leaning against the bars, she sighed as he lifted his deep, amethyst orbs and gazed deeply into her eyes. A blanket of heavy, musky scent fell upon her and when he smiled, his comfort and protection surrounded her.

"Try to calm down, Beth. It sounds loud to our sensitive hearing, but it's normal for faeries to scream in ecstasy. She's being mated." He scratched the dark beard growing on his chin.

"You know this?"

"Aye, they told her she was matched to a young Ram. She spoke to me frequently while you were asleep." Zandor smiled a crooked smile and squeezed her hand.

"She spoke to you? Why didn't she speak to me?"

"Humans don't believe in Faeries, didn't you know that?" Zandor chuckled, shaking his head.

Beth withdrew her hand so fast she banged her knuckles on the bars. She noticed him flinch as if she had struck him.

"I hurt my hand and you flinch. What's happening to you?"

"Your scent creates a connection between us, Human. I feel your pain."

Zandor shrugged and jumped to his feet. His body moved like liquid as he paced up and down the length of the cage. His head turned sharply toward her; his eyes had changed to liquid amber. "The scent of my cat calms the fear that trembles your body. He wants to mate you, to bite your neck and drink your sweet blood. He doesn't understand you're a lie, a fabrication of my true mate." He spat and curled his fingers into fists.

Beth swallowed hard. His anger stung. She followed his every step as he paced, turning her head back and forth as if watching a tennis match. She found it difficult to understand his attitude, a spoilt bad boy, she decided. No doubt, he usually did what he pleased, when he pleased. Place a wild man in a cage and reason predicted he would lose his mind.

The door opened and an orderly walked toward them. At once Zandor let out a long hiss and lunged forward.

She jumped, shrinking back against the bars of her cage in surprise.

"I need to speak to Pic. This female's scent will drive me to suicide. If your master requires my continued participation in his experiment, he should address my needs. He must give me a female or he will find me disemboweled on the 'morrow, by my own hand." Zandor growled.

The orderly inclined his head slightly. "I'll forward your request." He turned to unlock Beth's cage.

The laboratory assistant grasped her arm firmly and led her away. Beth glanced at Zandor. His expression softened when their eyes met. She strained her neck to watch him and almost tripped as the orderly led her away. Zandor stood again, gripping the cage door, his tawny head bowed. The orderly shook her hard and tightened his hold. His close proximity allowed her to detect a strong smell of antiseptic, so concentrated it burnt her nostrils.

This area of the complex was new. Her knees trembled as she looked furtively up and down the maze of white corridors. She glanced around in confusion; every hallway looked exactly the same, the colored lines painted on the floor the only difference between them. They turned a corner and she sighed with relief. The

operating theater she dreaded lay in a walkway with a blue line; a green line ran down the center of this one. They stopped in front of a shiny security door. Beth barely recognized her defeated, wide-eyed reflection. The orderly swiped a card in a reader on the wall and the metal door slid open silently. They stepped through and it shut behind them with a soft thud.

Beth glanced cautiously around and caught her breath. In this room, the machines hummed with advanced technology, but she recognized the suspended holographic images. DNA twisted and twirled in complex formulas. *An advanced genetic research lab.*

Technicians stood, surrounded by colored images that floated in mid air, working as part of a virtual computer actually within the computer-generated images. They moved and adjusted complex sequences of DNA strands, using a verbal interface with the displays.

Across the room, before a large window, three men in white coats stood together, their attention glued on something of interest on the other side. *So this is where Pic hangs out.* They took little notice of her as the orderly ushered her down a flight of steps, opened a plain white door and pushed her through.

Beth stood frozen to the spot, her attention focused on a king-sized bed with tall metal head and foot boards. No blankets, just one silk sheet scattered with royal blue satin cushions. Biting her lip, she glanced around then looked up. The doctors were observing her through a window set high on one wall. *Why?* She recalled Zandor's words and shuddered. *God help me if a Ram comes through that door.*

She listened, but only silence surrounded her. She drew a deep breath and studied her new location in more detail. This room appeared very different from the rest of the complex. It was a modern bedroom. Shading her eyes from the sheet of sunlight that flooded through large, open glass doors, she trailed her fingers along a linen sofa, set before a heavy, natural stone fireplace. *Food.* She ran to gorge herself on the bowls of fruit, nuts, and pastries laid out on a table against the wall. Her mouth full of Danish, she lifted and sniffed a crystal decanter filled with crimson liquid, poured a generous amount into a glass and gulped it down. *If it looks like wine and smells like wine, it must be wine.* The rich, spicy liquid exploded on her tongue, ran

down her throat and heated her stomach. She selected another pastry, licked off the icing and took a large bite. *Heaven.*

Beth walked slowly toward the glass doors to peer through at the tropical foliage growing in wild abundance. She stopped in the doorway and listened to the sounds of a rainforest. A steady trickle of water fell into a pond close by. The chatter of crickets and the wonderful sound of birdsong surrounded her. She inhaled deeply once, then again, to fill her lungs with the pristine fresh air. Stepping forward, she moaned in delight at the soft, springy grass between her toes. The sparkle of water beyond beckoned her further and she stepped through the ferns and into paradise.

The rainforest lay within a boundary of sheer rock rising up against a deep azure sky. She laughed at the King Parrots, a familiar, comforting sight as they argued high above in the date palms. Their colored feathers brightened the fronds like bouquets of flowers as they hung by their claws to gorge on the ripe fruit. Lizards painted the rocks with iridescence as they lounged around a small rock pool. They sat, like painted gargoyles, swift-tongued assassins for the dragonflies hovering and darting above the water.

Beth welcomed the warmth of the sun on her body and sat on a ledge to dangle her feet in the pond. She tipped back her head to watch water tumble from the rock face. It glistened as it passed between the mossy boulders and fell in a constant trickle. A cool breeze rustled the palm trees; she turned her head and froze. A naked man lay stretched out on a massive boulder, only a few feet away. His face broke into a grin at her astonishment.

Beth took a deep breath to steady her nerves. This man had cat-like fangs. Another Pride male. He rose gracefully and swaggered toward her. She trembled, looking around furtively for escape. He stood well over six-foot-five, with a body of burnished muscle. He moved closer and tossed a ponytail of angelic hair over one shoulder. The bunch of long, cherubic curls were drawn back at the nape and curled around elegant, pointed ears.

A wave of panic gripped her, but when he drew near and fixed his attention on her with a sultry gaze, she relaxed. *He doesn't look too threatening and at least he's not a Ram.* She bit her lip, aroused by the mist of sweat glistening across his glorious,

sun-kissed skin. She noticed he had precisely the same muscle bulk as Zandor. White scars traced his right arm and numerous battle scars on his torso added intrigue to his magnificence. She licked her lips. *This man is all male.*

She trembled when he stopped a breath away, lifted his head, and sniffed the air, mouth open as if to taste her scent. He flashed a brilliant smile and indigo twilight eyes, beneath long tawny lashes, considered her with a touch of amusement.

"Well, Elizabeth?" His deep, sultry voice extended each syllable in her name.

Beth jumped up and glared at this naked perfection.

"Well, what? Who are you and how do you know my name?"

"You want to touch me, don't you? Come now, sweetness, don't be shy." He inclined his head regally at her and held out his hand in encouragement.

Beth stared into his hooded eyes and he began to emit hypnotic sandalwood pheromones, making her knees turn to jelly. *He's doing that thing Zandor does with his scent.* She looked up at him and smiled, drawn to him with a ferocious intensity, as if he were her lover. *Good Lord, what's going on? I'm a doctor and I'm twenty-five years old. I'm not a gullible virgin and I should not feel like this. Should I?*

"Your skin is like peaches and cream," he said, reaching out and trailing one finger down her cheek.

She resisted the temptation to turn and suck his finger into her mouth. She groaned with need when he pulled her against his hard chest and his large, warm hands splayed across her back. Her intention to object to his touch had dissolved with incredible speed. Sighing, she drew in more of his delectable scent. She wanted this man, in bed, or on the ground, right now.

"I'm Thryll of Lonza," he purred in her ear.

"What's happening to me?"

"You need me, Elizabeth; does not my scent entice you? Haven't you searched for one such as me all your life?"

"Well, I . . ."

She gasped when he chuckled and the hospital gown fell from her shoulders. She couldn't make her mouth form the words of protest as he stripped the garment

from her body. She felt intoxicated and her entire body trembled with craven desire for this stranger.

"Come bathe with me; I can smell Zandor on you," he insisted as he led her toward the pond.

"You know Zandor?"

"Very well." He sighed and stopped at the edge of the pool. He turned toward her, cradled her head in his large palm and pressed his lips against her ear. "They watch us. Hush and all will be well." He whispered softly then traced her earlobe with his tongue. He lifted her into his arms and strode into the deep pond.

The cold water did nothing to cool her passion. She wanted him; she craved him. *Has he cast an erotic spell over me? Did she care? No.*

He bent his head to kiss her.

Hungry for his embrace, she opened her mouth to taste him. His luscious, full lips slid across her own. She twisted against his superb body, wanting more, sucking in his probing, masterful tongue. Delicious, hot, and spicy. His lips drew a silken caress over hers. She moaned and pressed against him, drawn like a moth to the flame, and released a shuddering breath when he pulled her closer, grinding his hard body against her entire length. His hands slid down her back in a move so filled with passion, it was as if he caressed her intimate heat. Waves of pleasure surged through her core. *Oh . . . my . . . God.* His mouth closed over hers again, drawing her into a sexual vise. She mewled. Deep, carnal sensations rippled through her, so intense, so fantastic, his kiss alone drew her to orgasm. *What are you doing, Beth?* She untangled herself from his grip and gasped. *Oh, this is not good.* His deep blue eyes had changed to molten amber and he looked down at her with ferocious intensity. She pushed her hands hard against his chest. Under her palms, a tremor rushed through his body, his heart pounded against her fingers.

"Thryll, are you okay?"

"This is not possible." He reached out to touch her face, rough fingers so tender in a sweet caress. A low growl rumbled from deep in his chest and he shook his head slowly. His head jerked up toward the glass doors to the bedroom. "You've sent me my bond mate. What depraved joke is this? This is not in our agreement,

Pic." He bellowed and stormed out of the pond. The water swirled and great waves crashed against her legs in his wake.

Beth waded from the pond, grabbed up her hospital gown, and threw it over her nakedness. A deep voice boomed loudly over an intercom.

"My terms were *any* females of my choice. If this one is your bond mate, it's an unfortunate inconvenience. However, if you continue to meet our agreement, I'll allow you to take her with you when you leave."

"I'll not allow Zandor to mate with her, Pic; she's mine, given to me by the Goddess Boda. I want her all night." Thryll lifted his chin defiantly, his hands balled into fists at his side.

"She lives in close proximity to Zandor, but he's caged. I'll agree only if you keep to our bargain."

"Grrr." Thryll turned swiftly and glared at her.

Beth pushed down the desperate need to run. She took a step backward when he began to walk toward her very slowly.

"They show their usual cruelty. Don't fear me, Beth; come and I'll explain everything." His voice sounded strained, tired. He reached for her hand and led her along a leafy pathway, deep into the rainforest.

They walked until they reached the rock wall. Her body still trembling, she followed Thryll along a narrow pathway. After a few steps he stopped, cleared leaves from a rock, and indicated for her to sit. She sat in silence and watched him glance around slowly, sniffing the air before he sat beside her.

"I doubt they can overhear our conversation this far from the complex. Do you understand why I refused you in the pond?"

Beth looked into his eyes. They were deep blue again now. His brow wrinkled in a frown.

"Yes, I think I do. Zandor maintains they've altered my scent to make him believe I'm his mate. They most likely did the same thing to you. He mentioned he might kill me if we mated; is that why you stopped?"

"I was going to make love to you, sweetness." Thryll's eyes narrowed. "Mating was the furthest thing from my mind and I might add impossible, since they sealed

my fangs. In case your Human mind cannot distinguish the difference, I will explain. When we mate, we bite, inject venom, and drink blood. It's intensely erotic and sends the female into a rapture that lasts four days. The females call this insatiable need Moon Fire."

Beth rolled her eyes. *Good Lord, he's as bad as Zandor; do these men ever think about anything but sex?* "Right then, so why would the same scent attract both you and Zandor?"

Thryll smiled and shook his head ruefully.

"Well?" asked Beth impatiently.

"It's not possible; it would cause males to fight to the death, unless . . ."

Beth jumped to her feet and stood over him.

"Come on, Thryll, spill it. What the hell is going on here?"

She gasped when Thryll slipped his arms around her waist, pulling her onto his lap and cradling her to him. His scent encircled her like a warm blanket. His hand rubbed deliciously up and down her back. She moaned, melting against him.

"Zandor and I have been friends for many years. We like to share our females. Mayhap the Goddess has given us you for that reason." He chuckled and his hot breath tickled her ear. "This would make fine sense, seeing as She sent me here to rescue both of you."

"You don't make a whole lot of sense, Thryll. Who could give me to two men? I'm a grown woman and I make up my own mind who takes me to bed. If you think I'm prepared to take on both of you . . . together . . . well . . . I . . ."

Thryll tried desperately to cover the chuckle and took her mouth. She softened again under the caress of his tongue. Her mouth's sweet flavor enraptured him but he longed to taste her wetness, to bury his tongue in her pussy, to suck on her hard pearl and make her burn with desire for his touch. His cat recognized the scent of her arousal and made an indisputable claim. The frenzied need to bite her burned with an uncontrollable passion. If she belonged to both of them, it would be perfect. They often discussed this fantasy. *What would it be like to bite together, to share a female in Moon Fire? The passion, the ecstasy with a bond mate made exclusively for their*

joint pleasure. By the Lady, what a gift! His heart rejoiced but a moment later he frowned, remembering they were prisoners.

"Don't they share females in your culture?" he asked.

He smiled when she opened her eyes, heavy as if she had risen from a deep sleep. His glamor and scent had molded her to his will. He could take her now and she would not fight.

"Yes, but I'm not sure if *I* could participate in something like that."

"Elizabeth, does Zandor's scent enthrall you as mine does?"

"Yes. I think yours may be stronger, but then he's never k-kissed me," she stammered.

"Then it must be so. You belong to both of us. It's inconceivable to believe that one scent could entice two males unless the Goddess deemed it. Zandor is wrong; no Druik could tamper with your scent. The Lady has power over all things and would never permit a mere mortal to corrupt Her choice. I'm surprised Zandor would even consider such a travesty. No, Sweetness, you belong to both of us, of this I'm sure. We must make a plan to escape this place."

Beth snuggled into his chest. His scent surrounded her, filling her with need. She wanted this stranger in every carnal way. Why did she feel like this? The desire to taste his lips overwhelmed her. How strange to long so desperately for his kiss. She moaned, wanting to feel him deep inside. *Sweet Jesus, Beth, pull yourself together.* She drew away from him.

"Zandor has had a device implanted that prevents him from morphing. He believes if we're alone, I'll have the chance to remove it. He'll morph into his cat and break out of the cage."

"You can remove the device?"

"If I can obtain a sharp knife, it's a simple procedure. What have they put on your fangs?"

"A cover of sorts. I also wear the device to prevent morphing. My agreement for freedom for Zandor and me is to placate the females before they mate with the Rams. The Faeries are affected long-term by our scent and it makes it easier for them.

I don't enjoy doing this; the knowledge that these fragile creatures are mated to Rams infuriates me.

I 'm a prisoner here, as you are, Beth, although my life here is easier than yours. I live well and enjoy the sex. I came here willingly, after they captured Zandor. My plan has always been to free him from this madness. I know now, they want his child seed for their project. He's a Knight Watch warrior, one of the immortals. If I don't rescue him soon, there will be war. If you need a knife, I'll get one. They don't cage me. I can negotiate with one of the females to let me slip into the laboratory at night. They only observe me when I'm having sex. It would seem they like to watch." He chuckled.

"Just one minute. Did you say that Zandor is an immortal? You mean, like a vampire?"

"No, a vampire is one of the living dead." Thryll shook his head and smiled ruefully. "Zandor is one of the Chosen. The Knight Watch king, Blaise, is the Goddess Boda's champion and was given the power to grant immortality on all he believes worthy or, in Zandor's case, in danger of dying young."

Well, that makes a lot of sense. Not. "You're saying a man, who is really a cat, can grant immortality?"

Thryll lifted her chin and looked into her eyes.

"Yes, and I understand, to a Human, this revelation makes as much sense as having two Pride brothers as mates."

"Yeah, I guess; anyway, let *me* look in your mouth."

He opened his mouth obediently and she peered at his teeth. Their condition astounded her. They were perfect, no wear or cavities. Thin, white, extremely sharp fangs replaced the normal eyeteeth. A thin plastic film coated them from point to gum.

"That's only a plastic cover. It can be cut off with a scalpel. I'll be able to remove that and the device in your back at the same time. It'll leave an open wound, though. Can you find the device they use to seal wounds? Some kind of laser, I'd imagine."

"The term laser is foreign to me as is plastic, but I trust you, Elizabeth." He inclined his head thoughtfully. "When you remove the device and the plastic *you* must trust me."

She shivered at the touch of Thryll's hand slipping to the back of her head.

He drew her against his hard body and kissed her deeply. Scorching tendrils of desire shot through her, removing all doubt of his intentions. She returned his kiss with a passion that surprised her and slipped her hands into his silken tresses to pull him closer. He surrounded her; his scent joined the warmth of his body to caress her skin. She pressed hard against him while his strong hands stroked her back and cupped the back of her head to hold her still. He deepened the kiss and she tasted his unique scent. The scrape of his fangs across her bottom lip sent ripples of desire from nipples to toes. She moaned. The heat from his body burned her tender skin. She craved him.

"Elizabeth, listen to me." He lifted his head and gazed into her eyes. "Pic expects me to fuck you in every way. He asked that I tie you, spank you, and make you beg. I want you, but when I take you in the room, they'll watch. You may reject me, but gods, Elizabeth, I can't let you go."

"I want you, too, but I can't believe I'm agreeing to this; I don't know you and yet"

She gasped when Thryll's mouth crushed her lips with a kiss, which dispelled any doubts. She nestled close to his body while he carried her back to the bedroom. Glancing up, she noticed three doctors with a handful of orderlies observing them from a window set high in the wall. The soft bed sank under her back and she looked up into Thryll's indigo twilight eyes.

"Do you want me to make love to you, take you high then catch you when you fall?" he whispered close to her ear.

How could anyone refuse that? She laughed and nodded.

"It excites you to know they watch, this I can see. His eyes sparkled as he gazed down at her. "But soon you'll forget they exist." He turned and removed some items from the dresser.

First, he placed a black leather strap on the table. Beth's stomach rolled in anticipation. Next, he took out a blindfold and two leather cuffs with long ropes attached. She clenched her teeth, knowing she should not be doing this, but her body wanted Thryll's touch, craved his scent like a drug. She cried out when he covered her eyes with a blindfold, only relaxing at the touch of his kiss lingering tenderly on her cheek.

"Trust me, Elizabeth," he said, touching her back. The bed sank under his weight and deft hands removed her hospital gown.

The cool air hit her hot skin, heightening her senses. He cuffed her wrists and lifted her arms above her head. Her stomach rolled with excitement. She could hear him move around as he attached the ropes from her hands to the end of the bed. Silence surrounded her and blood pumped loudly in her ears. She trembled in an electric anticipation.

"What are you going to do to me?"

Locked in her personal darkness, she had no idea what delight was to come. The pull of the cuffs and the smell of leather enticed, exhilarated. Heat flooded her cheeks with the realization she lay bare and fully exposed in front of not one stranger, but many. The thought expanded quickly into a frenzied greed, an exquisite euphoria.

"I'm going to make you beg, sweetness," he purred, his breath hot against her cheek.

The bed dipped and Thryll's scent washed over her; he tormented her to madness by only using his mouth to caress. Passion roared through her at the tantalizing path his blistering tongue licked across her mouth as he teased the bottom lip. Wriggling, she gasped at the delight of his fangs dragging against her skin. His tongue cut a wet path down her neck and continued in a hot delicious glide between her breasts. Hearing his groan, she arched her back and pushed her aching breasts toward him, silently begging him to lick each hard point.

"You like my tongue tasting your beautiful nipples?" He chuckled and sent a cool stream of air flowing in erotic torture over them each in turn.

Bucking at the electric sensation, she writhed in pleasure, tugging at the bonds that held her so tightly.

"You are wanton." He growled, spun her easily onto her stomach and pushed a cushion under her hips.

The bed lifted. *Where has he gone now?* Beth thrashed in frustration, her thighs slick with moisture, dripping from her pussy.

"Don't stop; don't leave me."

The swish of a strap cut the silence. She jumped at the unfamiliar sting across her buttocks. Thryll's warm hand rubbed and soothed the hurt, his experienced fingers stroked, caressing her from pussy to ass. She caught her breath and lifted her sore buttocks in anticipation of his cool hand. Her reward came swiftly with the slide of his fingers. They tantalized, promised.

"You are so damn hot." He groaned as the lash fell four more times.

She writhed, engulfed in the pleasure pain. It welled up, sending licks of flame through her core; just a little more and she would fall over the edge.

"So close, sweetness, and I haven't even started," he teased and rolled her gently onto her back.

The ropes tightened, her arms now pulled up hard against her ears, thrusting her breasts toward him.

"Oh, my God."

He lay between her legs and Beth jerked with anticipation, wanting more of him. Overjoyed to feel his tongue diving into her pussy and swirling her nub, she could not breathe and her heart fluttered with the intense sensation of him sucking her pearl.

"Oh, that's so good," she gasped.

Shaking with pleasure, she lifted her hips to meet his mouth, so hot in this intimate kiss, his tongue teased, his teeth nibbled. His heady scent flowed over her, inciting a ferocious need. She gasped; her legs trembled as an orgasm started low in her belly and shot down her legs in electric ecstasy. She screamed out, her body shaking in rapture under his large hands.

"Come for me, sweetness." He pinned her hips and sucked relentlessly.

Oh, God, how can I survive this intense pleasure? Hearing him rumble deep in his chest, she writhed beneath his hands. His soft curls caressed her thighs; his large hands grasped her hips tightly. She bucked and twisted, but he held her fast while he feasted, lapping at her most intimate juices.

Thryll stood back to admire her body, so round and without a trace of hair. *What magic did these Humans use to achieve this most desirable state?* He lifted the strap and saw her buttocks tense from the first blow; she amazed him with her lack of fear. He would make it good for her and she would never forget their first time, he decided, as he caressed her plump, rosy buttocks.

Determined to keep control, even though her scent had driven his cat to madness, he chewed on his bottom lip. Even now, it demanded he bite and claim her for his mate. Six lashes brought her so close to climax. He smiled and caressed her now bright red bottom. His cock ached and he fought the temptation to bury it deep in her tight little ass. That pleasure must wait, for now he would keep it simple.

Turning her again, he groaned at her passionate cry and licked his way up her body; she tasted so good, a mix of sweet and sour. Her full, porcelain breasts topped with brown nipples, so hard they begged him to suck them. He lingered over each one and sucked until she moaned. His eyes focused on her neck, so soft, so white; the vein stood out and throbbed with warm, sweet blood. He needed to bite and paused to inhale a deep breath. Biting hard on the inside of his cheek, he groaned as her scent infused deeper into him. He growled, and his cat snarled in his head.

'Mine, bite her, take her, claim her.'

He reached up, removed her blindfold and bent to take her mouth.

"Look at me, Beth."

Beth focused on his face. She gasped. His irises were now gold with a strange wildness. Moaning, she tasted the musky scent of her own juices in his kiss, so deep, so possessive. Her gaze strayed to the window and met the audience's intent stare. The thought of them gave her a naughty but delightful spark. Thryll lifted his head and looked deeply into her eyes; his large, warm hands cupped her face.

"Look at me, only me," he whispered. "Have you ever been fucked with your knees pressed against your head?"

"N-no."

"So sweet." He chuckled and kissed the tip of her nose.

She watched his face, so intent, so demanding. He dropped his hands to her legs and caressed them with surprising tenderness from thigh to toes. Shaking with anticipation, she panted, waiting for his strong hands to lift her legs high in the air and pin them back to her ears. In one swift, delightful movement, he plunged deep inside. She gasped at his size and marveled at the way her pussy stretched to accommodate him. She knew only bliss; no one had ever been this deep inside her; he filled her so deliciously, so completely.

"Mine, sweetness, all mine. We're a perfect fit," he said in a deep, sexual purr.

She moaned and he smiled down at her, withdrawing completely before diving back inside, sliding in and out with devastating precision. Each thrust slammed against the entrance to her womb, spiraling her into erotic bliss. She tugged at her bonds; the sensation balled into an uncontrollable mass, too much to bear. She began to pant and beg, pleading with him for release.

"You need more, sweetness?" he drawled as he ground his hips against her. His movements scorched her nerve endings to an incredible need for release.

She pulled hard at her bonds. "*Please*, I'm going to explode; it's too much."

"You want me to stop?" He stilled all movement and dropped her legs.

"No."

She almost screamed in frustration and wrapped her legs around his damp body. He chuckled and slid over her, resting his head on her forehead.

"Mayhap you need two males to satisfy you." He grinned, slipped from her and rolled off the bed.

Beth could not prevent the aggravated moan as she bucked on the bed. "You can't leave me like this, *please*, Thryll."

"No?" He looked down at her in amusement and raised a brow.

Her face grew hot. *How can he look at me like that? I must be acting like a slut.*

"Roll over and show me that sweet ass," he drawled.

Beth rolled. The ropes twisted and pulled her arms up tight. Her face caught in the damp sheets. A sudden rush of panic overwhelmed her before his hand gently pulled the matted hair from her cheek and turned her face to the side. The edge of the bed dipped as he adjusted the ropes, then he slapped her once on the ass and the deeply satisfying sting vibrated to her core. His hot, wet flesh pressed against her tingling buttocks. His arms went around her and he pulled her to her knees, stuffed blue silk cushions under her hips, and lifted her ass high in the air.

She mewed.

"So beautiful. Open your legs and show us your tight little ass," he commanded as he slipped off the bed again.

Time seemed to stop. She tried to turn but could not see him. *Why had he left her open and exposed for so long?* A cool breeze from the open doors brushed against her soaked pussy. She waited, listening to him move around the room. His breath brushed her cheek and heat radiated from his body, caressing her bare skin for the briefest second. One, two, three, four, five, six, smacks. She gasped, erotic sensations shooting into her core. Oil dripped cold against her skin then his hot oiled fingers stroked a circle around her ass and probed inside. She mewed again, wanting more, and pushed herself against his hand.

"You burn for me, sweetness. This is good, as it should be for mates."

"Please, Thryll."

"You need me, sweetness?" he said, teasingly caressing the deep cleft between her ass cheeks.

"Yes, please, I can't stand any more, *please*, Thryll."

"She begs." He chuckled and answered her plea by pressing the head of his cock against her ass.

"Oh. My. God." She groaned.

Her ass stung from the unfamiliar pressure as he pushed through the tight ring. Pain, sharp and hot, cut like a knife. "Too big. Oh, it won't fit."

"Relax, sweetness, only pleasure will come."

His hands caressed her hips and he moved forward inch by inch. White spots danced in front of her eyes. Her legs trembled as he slid inside so slowly, the heat

from his cock, so delicious. The pain changed into rolls of exquisite pleasure as he filled her completely. The deep caress from his massive cock sent waves of intense stimulation coursing through her body. She gasped, stretched to the limit.

He paused, stroked her back and murmured soft words of encouragement. She tried desperately to voice her desires, to urge him deeper. She wanted this, this complete domination over her. She wanted him to control every delicious tremor.

"You're so beautiful. Hunger for me, sweetness. Feel me, know me. I'm yours."

Without giving her a chance to catch her breath, he grasped her hips tightly and slammed hard against her. He growled deep in his chest and before she had time to object he withdrew and plunged, withdrew and plunged. She called out his name, begging him for more. Their bodies smacked together as the tempo increased. He drove into her hard, filling and stretching her to the limit. The scream of her ferocious need echoed off the walls as she burned. The flames licked her pussy and gripped her clit in unmerciful delight, building higher until she tumbled into rapture.

She sighed when his cock quivered and he filled her, his hot seed spilling deep inside. Hot spurts pumped out mercilessly, relentless in his release, and sent her into another uncontrollable orgasmic spiral. She jerked uncontrollably as she came, shuddering violently, hardly able to take a breath. He slipped from her body, the bonds vanished, and he cocooned her inside his embrace. The smooth skin of his chest felt wet against her cheek; his scent caressed the rosy glow that flowed in endless waves of delight from head to toe.

"Thryll . . . I"

"Hush. Rest. Enjoy," he crooned, stroking her hair and kissing her cheek tenderly.

Chapter Three

Zandor paced up and down his cage. *Where is she?* The lab sat in twilight, lights dimmed for sleep. She had been missing all afternoon. Tugging at his tangled

locks, he ran his fingers through the knots. He needed to bathe, wash his hair and shave—his body stank.

The ruse of an argument with Beth had not urged the Druik doctor to speak to him. He despised Pic, knew him as a man set in his convictions. Information from the other inmates revealed he enjoyed watching the mating of his 'patients'. Zandor planned to use this perversion to gain a night with Beth. Why had Pic not answered his request?

The door to the lab slipped open. Zandor lifted his head and stood motionless. The usual short, burly orderly made his way toward him, waved a card over the lock on his cage and aimed a silver weapon at his chest.

"Pic will see you now. Don't give me any trouble, cat, or I'll fry your heart."

Walking at a snail's pace, the orderly led the way to Pic's office.

Straight ahead, red line. Stop at elevator, third floor, turn right, first door. The directions flashed through his mind. Standing obediently by the entrance, he smothered a smile. *I could break this fool's neck before his next breath. Pathetic, weak Druik scum.* He had thought about murder countless times but unless he could get through the security doors, the act would be pointless. He knew it would only be a matter of time before he enjoyed the feel of this weakling's neck under his hands.

Zandor strolled into the familiar office and stood before the functional metal desk piled with folders and the strange flickering box. He glanced at Pic, expecting the orderly to secure him, naked, to the chair, as usual. He waited for the doctor to fire questions about his sexual preferences, like he had the last five times. The creepy little man would sit and stare at him, pretending to write notes. Zandor smiled; maybe this time Pic would proposition him. Hell, he knew when a man craved his body and Pic wore a sign around his neck saying, 'I want your ass'.

Pic rose from behind the desk and dismissed the orderly, leaving them alone. Zandor drew a breath. *Stupid man.* He crossed his arms, lifted his chin, and waited for the doctor to speak.

"So you want some time alone with the Human?"

"I want a night with her, away from your gaze, Pic."

"What do you offer, cat?" Pic walked toward him and wrinkled his nose.

Zandor chuckled. *My rank scent bothering you?*

Uncrossing his arms, he held them out, palms up, at his sides. "Anything your twisted mind can desire, Pic."

"You would submit willingly to me?" Pic licked his lips and his hand slipped unconsciously to his genitals.

Zandor raised a brow. "Just you, Pic? That's not much of a challenge."

He drew himself up to his full height when Pic walked slowly around him and rested a hand on the small of his back.

The doctor's hot palm slid down to stroke his ass. Zandor sensed his hesitation. Holding himself perfectly still, he clenched his ass muscles, knowing instinctively what Pic wanted. Zandor turned his head and watched him closely. The Druik dripped sweat, and his cock made a tent in his pants.

Pic traced his fingers across Zandor's belly and his breathing became ragged.

Zandor met his gaze. *Oh, yeah, he wants me real bad.* The pathetic Druik moved to stand in front of him, his beady black eyes bright with anticipation.

"I plan to share you with my wife." He struggled to get the words out as his fat fist closed tightly around Zandor's semi-hard cock.

"You would trust me in this state with your wife? Not that I have a problem with the concept, but I don't want to be killed if I damage her."

"I like you wild, out of control." He slid his palm up and down Zandor's growing hardness.

Zandor growled then tried to suppress a smile when the small man jumped.

"Okay, then, if you agree to my terms."

"You may have one night undisturbed. I give you my word."

Zandor snorted. He had little choice but to hope the Druik would stick to his side of the bargain. He had entertained many couples. In truth, there was nothing sexual, he had *not* tried, at least once. He enjoyed taking a male, riding him hard, although this one would hardly be worth the effort.

Pic licked his lips and fell to his knees in front of him. Zandor smiled briefly at the ceiling and groaned with pleasure at the rotund man's tongue, lapping at his balls and licking the length of his shaft.

Pic gazed up at his face, as if he were a god to worship, opened his mouth and took him in deep.

Zandor stifled a chuckle and leaned over, placing his hands on the desk, and spreading his legs slightly. *So easily trapped.* He grinned and watched the man suck reverently on his cock.

He closed his eyes and fantasized it was Beth's sweet lips surrounding him and sucking him deep. Rocking his hips, he pushed his length down Pic's searing throat, groaning when Pic's fingers dug spitefully into his thighs to gain purchase. Pic's hot mouth slipped up and down his length, sucking hard.

Zandor bit the inside of his cheek; the good doctor had obviously done this many times before. His sac tightened, delicious tremors of delight ran into his balls and he spilled. Pic sucked and swallowed, as if savoring every drop.

Enjoy that do you?

The doctor's eyes went misty as he staggered to his feet; then he reached for Zandor's hair, to pull him into a kiss.

Zandor pulled away, shaking his head. "I won't kiss a man, Pic. It's not what we do."

"I'm sorry, I should've known." Pic nodded sheepishly.

Sorry? Thought Zandor, who is this? Not the Pic he knew.

"Okay, where do we do this thing? You don't expect me to fuck your wife on the desk do you?"

"No, of course not, but first you must wash and shave. My wife is very vulnerable to a Pride male's scent. She likes to be in control. You must promise me that you will not use your glamor on her. The last time we played with a Pride male she was incoherent for a week." Pic's voice trembled with excitement.

Zandor grinned broadly. "I believe you will owe me two favors after this, Pic."

"I'm sure we can come to an arrangement that'll satisfy us both." Pic's excited little piggy eyes flashed. "The bathroom is through there and put on the robe." He waved Zandor toward an open doorway.

Zandor searched the cupboards, finding a cutthroat razor above the sink, deathly sharp; it cut through his beard effortlessly. *Beth could use this.* He slipped the

blade into the pocket of a robe hanging on a peg behind the door. A quick rummage through the drawers unearthed a small bottle with the label, 'Hand Sanitizer' and a packet of sterile wound coverings. He pushed them all in with the razor and stepped into the shower.

The water poured out deliciously hot and tumbled over his body. He scrubbed his skin with the soap and washed his hair. When he stepped out of the shower, Pic was leaning casually against the sink. The Druik watched him rub the water from his body. He took the brush Pic handed him and scraped it through his hair. Zandor slipped on the robe and Pic gestured for him to follow.

"This way; my wife will be inside our dungeon. I hope you're not averse to a spanking?" He opened the far door of his office and stood back.

The room appeared as sterile as the rest of the complex. A steel-legged bench with a black leather cushion sat in the center. Zandor raised one brow when he noticed the manacles attached to each side and a matching set high on the far wall. He lifted his gaze to Pic's wife, who stood in one corner, naked except for black leather boots. Her breasts disappointed him. Three, and not one of them was more than a handful. His eyes drifted to the tangled orange pubic hair dusting her pussy. *Ah, a natural redhead. Quite lovely for a Druik but her skin's as bloodless as a vampire, and her eyes, vicious orbs of heartless iridescent jade.* She was holding a long leather whip. He snorted, his skin tingling with anticipation. *On the other hand, I may just enjoy this.*

"I believe you know Thryll of Lonza?" Her voice was as thin as her whip.

Zandor chuckled. So, this female was one of the many Druiks his friend entertained.

"Intimately."

"Good. He's here, you know. I had the pleasure of viewing him in action, today. His room was the main topic of conversation. I hope you are as good a lover as he is, Zandor. I know you fuck males. Tell me, are you the passive or the dominant?" She lifted her chin and flicked the whip against his thigh.

He grinned. "Both" *Sounds like he came to rescue me and got himself caught.*

"I like to be in charge, cat. Go and face the wall."

Zandor shrugged and complied. He enjoyed the lash. Slipping off the robe, he laid it carefully in the corner, conscious of her intake of breath. *Yes, darling, I could break you in half.* He raised both arms to allow her to tighten the manacles around his wrists. She pulled the straps up to the limit, stretching him out onto the balls of his feet. He chuckled, despite the way the wall pressed uncomfortably cold against his chest and cock, and braced himself.

She swung the whip; it cracked through the air and landed across his back with a sharp sting. Appreciating her expertise with the lash, he moaned in pleasure as she cut tantalizing grooves from his shoulders to his knees. Turning his head, he gazed at her shadow dancing across the wall, a grotesque demon, taking him straight to Hell. His cock swelled and jumped each time her hands soothed the pain. He groaned, enjoying the warm oil she poured over him and the touch of her soft palms caressing his back and legs.

She paused over the burn on his buttocks and the heat of her breath brushed his skin. His knees trembled in anticipation.

"I should be paying you for this, Pic."

"Oh, you'll pay, cat," Pic replied hoarsely.

He gasped and bit the inside of his cheek at the pleasure of her wet tongue, a throbbing caress drawn in a wet line along the sting of each mark. The touch of her oily fingers massaging his burning ass and slipping into his passage nearly made him spill.

Arms weak, he moaned when she let him down and led him to the bench.

"Lay on your back, knees up," she commanded.

Climbing easily onto the bench, he held his arms up for the restraints. He turned his head and winked at Pic. The doctor leaned naked against the wall. Zandor's eyes drifted down to Pic's medium-sized cock. It jutted from his body, the head flushed and purple. Pic's face held a sheen of sweat and he breathed heavily. Zandor's nostrils flared at the thick, earthy scent filling the room.

He relaxed as Pic's wife tied him to the bench and slipped his feet into footholds that kept his knees up and ass open to the world. His heart raced in expectation. *Gods, I love these kinky females.* He purred, relishing the slide of the oil

she poured down the open cleft of his ass. Her expert fingers circled his passage and dipped inside to coat him with fragrant lubrication.

He watched her bend and lick his balls, her hot tongue tracing a path up his shaft to the tip where she hungrily savored the drop of pre-cum. Hissing, he pushed up his hips.

She blew across the sensitive tip, making him buck so wildly, he almost broke the straps securing him to the bench. His gaze wandered to Pic. The ugly man watched his wife hungrily, his hand stroking his cock. He blushed scarlet when he met Zandor's gaze.

What do you plan to do, little man? Zandor mused, enjoying the female's mouth on his cock. Whimpering in disappointment, he watched her move to his side, drag her long nails over his chest and squeeze his nipples.

A thrill shot straight to his balls in flames of lust.

She bent over to lick across his lips and he lifted his head to kiss her, straining against the straps. He tasted toothpaste as her mouth closed over his and her tongue pushed between his teeth. His fangs fascinated her and she curled her tongue around each one in turn. Her small, cool breasts brushed his chest. Loving the helplessness, he groaned.

Pic ran his tongue down the inside of his thighs and kissed a trail from knee to groin. Zandor's buttocks tightened.

"I need you, cat; I want to ride you to damnation," Pic crooned and pressed his lips to Zandor's groin.

Hot breath bathed Zandor's cock as Pic lavished an open mouth kiss to the sensitive spot behind his balls.

Zandor quivered and pulled against the straps, mindless with desire.

Pic's tongue lashed and sucked the soft skin.

Zandor rolled his hips and moaned in ecstasy at the intense sensation. Before he lost all control, he bit down hard on the inside of his cheek and returned the female's kiss, enjoying the erotic dual sensations.

He gasped in surprise when Pic's cock impaled his ass and drove in deep until his damp heat pressed against Zandor's buttocks.

The little Druik swirled his hips and clamped his sweaty hands on his open thighs.

Zandor's fists clenched as Pic stroked his thighs and thrust deeper, their bodies smacking together.

Pic slammed into him again and again, brushing unmercifully against his pleasure spot, making him groan in rapture. His cock grew to bursting; it throbbed and jerked against his stomach.

"Don't blow yet, cat, lay still, I haven't finished fucking you," Pic ordered.

Zandor growled and arched his back. The torment of denied climax shot through his balls.

Zandor sucked on the peppermint tongue thrust in his mouth and wished he could pull Pic's wife closer, but she drew away, her eyes half-closed. He swore in frustration. She bent over him to lick a tantalizing wet trail down his stomach. Her hand closed around his cock and teased. He trembled with desire when she turned and looked at him before ducking her head between his thighs.

"Yes, gods, yes."

He pulled against his bonds, watching his aching shaft slip into her juicy mouth.

Her teeth grazed down the length and heat shot into his balls with incredible delight. He pumped up his hips to increase the pleasure as she sucked him in time to Pic's deep, hot thrusts.

The scent of her arousal hit him. Zandor gritted his teeth. *Gods, I need more.*

"Harder, Pic, you won't break me."

He laughed at the doctor's labored breathing.

The doctor glared back at him, took a firm grip on his hips and fucked him so hard the table began to shake.

Biting his lip, Zandor tasted blood as Pic's cock shuddered deep inside him and the doctor came in long, hot spurts, crying out Zandor's name as if he were his lover. Zandor laughed then gasped as his own climax spiraled. He bucked, pushing his shaft deep into the female's mouth as he spilled. He lay back, boneless, replete, glad.

Pic's wife swallowed and sucked down his seed.

He raised his head and watched her move away and wipe her chin.

"Not bad." She turned, kissed her husband, and strode from the room without a backward glance.

"I wish I had the stamina of a Pride male," Pic said, running a hand up Zandor's leg with a strange glint in his eye. "I desire you, Zandor, and would have you many times tonight if it were possible."

Zandor laughed. "That was different. I didn't exert any energy whatsoever."

"Just how many times a night can you fuck?" Pic replied, laying a hand on Zandor's chest.

Zandor sighed; Pic's infatuation had become intolerable. What could he do?

"It depends on the situation. I hear, during Moon Fire, a male may mate four times an hour, over four days."

"I want to taste you again." Pic's eyes widened and his hand slipped down to rest on Zandor's cock. "If I had my way, I would keep you like this, open and ready to fuck. Then, perhaps, share you with Peterson, the orderly; he's very well endowed. You'd love it. Would you like me to call him?"

Zandor took a deep breath. *What response would placate this half-life?*

"It's not going to happen. When it comes to males, I'm exclusive, one male at a time, so no deal."

Zandor watched Pic's flustered reaction closely. Yes, he decided, he could control this Druik easily enough. He would agree, now, to anything he wanted, but he promised himself, the next time they met, he would break Pic's pathetic neck. Pic's eyes searched his face and the doctor's warm hand closed around his shaft. He swallowed bile. It would remain flaccid; the thrill had long since vanished.

Pic moved to the end of the table.

Zandor ground his teeth but gasped as Pic's experienced fingers pressed against his ass, dipped inside, and massaged his pleasure spot. The blood rushed into his cock with such force it made his head spin.

"Gods, Pic, you're a man on a mission."

"I have a treat for you, Zandor, a toy I designed," said Pic, his voice low and thick as, with a grin, he held up a massive black phallus.

Zandor pulled at his bonds. "What the hell is that?" His traitorous cock bucked in anticipation. "You must be joking?"

"My wife can take it all. It doesn't vibrate; it sends little shock waves." Pic smiled as he oiled the monster.

Pic's hot, wet mouth closed over his rampant cock. Zandor tried to relax. The swirling monster teased against his hole as Pic sucked him deep. His whole body tensed in eagerness as his willing ass opened wide to accept the intruder. The shocks waved deep inside and he gave himself up to the darkness. *I shouldn't be enjoying this.*

Pic had skill, he decided, as the man took him up again and refused to let him peak, squeezing the base of his cock, hard, to prevent his climax. He squirmed and lifted his head to glare at him. "Damn you."

The Druik scum lifted his head from his shaft and smiled. Zandor shut his eyes. Immediately the doctor began to drive the phallus deeper at every thrust. Zandor crossed the line between heaven and hell this time, and loved it. His entire body began to shudder and he opened his eyes to see Pic's radiant face.

"How's that feel? You've taken it all. I want to see your eyes. Look at me Zandor, come for me," he crooned.

Pic stood between Zandor's legs and bent to swallow his cock.

Zandor's ears rang. *Bring me off, you Druik scum.* Stemming the wave of revulsion for the little man, he bit down on his bottom lip, locking eyes with the doctor. His balls pulled up tight as Pic sucked him harder; his climax came fast and erupted like a volcano. He winced. Sharp pain shot through his balls as they drained dry.

"Thank the Lady."

He moaned while Pic continued to pump the phallus, sending tremors wracking through his body. He sighed in relief when Pic finally slipped it from his ass. He lay back, exhausted. Pic wiped him down. *Dear gods, my brain is going to*

burst. Zandor shook his head regretfully; he had enjoyed this experience far too much.

"You plan to untie me sometime soon, Pic?"

Pic jumped to comply.

I can use this adoration.

"I want a shower and the robe. I enjoyed this, Pic, but I don't give up anything for nothing. I want out of the bloody cage; I am not an animal. Then, maybe, we can make another date, just you and me again," he said and gave him a wink.

"You may have a shower and the robe. In the morning, I will arrange different accommodation and a night with the Human as promised. We'll talk again soon." Pic pulled on a bathrobe and led Zandor back to the bathroom.

"You would really like a one-on-one with me? Just the thought makes me hard," Pic said, allowing his robe to fall open as he watched Zandor shower.

Zandor grinned toward the wall before he turned and lazily soaped his genitals. "Every fantasy has its price, Pic. You know, if you let Thryll, the Human, and me leave, we could make a permanent arrangement. Would you like to share a Pride female with me, Pic? On the other hand, mayhap you can have me as your very own sex slave. I've a place with everything you need, in the hills of Dryad."

"You tempt me beyond belief, Zandor. You would allow me to visit you anytime?" Pic's eyes danced and he licked his lips, one hand closed around his now-hard cock.

Gullible, stupid, puny little Druik, mused Zandor as he relaxed his well soaped body against the tiles and let the stream of hot water rinse off the suds.

"Yeah . . . but not if you're planning to jerk off in front of me"

He bit his tongue to stop laughing at Pic's apologetic shrug and took the towel he offered, finished drying himself and put on his robe. Leaning casually against the doorframe, he waited while Pic called for the orderly to escort him back to his cage. Zandor pushed his hands into the pockets of the robe, his stolen items clutched in his hands. The laboratory sat in darkness, silent but for the snores of the Rams. Beth had not returned to her cage. Zandor turned to the orderly.

"Where's the female?"

"She's entertaining the staff. Don't worry; you'll get your turn later." He grinned, turned away and stalked from the room.

Zandor ground his teeth, his mind flashing images of Beth spread out beneath a Ram. He shuddered, shook his head and curled up exhausted on the bench. *Thryll has trailed me here and entertained the doctors. He is a prisoner too. Now there are four of us to escape.* He glanced toward the empty cage that had held the faerie and shook his head. *Maybe only three.*

Chapter Four

When Beth awoke, Thryll's arms were no longer around her. She lay within the warm sheets and gazed out of the open doors. A deep feeling of loss flooded her entire being. Why did she feel this way? Surely one night of bliss could not possibly make her fall head over heels in love? *No, this can't be possible.*

Outside the window, moonlight bathed the rainforest. The rustle of wind in the tops of the palm trees and the sounds of frogs and crickets disturbed the silence. Sitting up slowly, she glanced around the room. Thryll was standing by the door, speaking in hushed tones. She sighed and fell back into the pillows.

He turned and shot her a brilliant smile. He looked so hot. His black leather pants clung to his thighs like a second skin; the matching sleeveless jerkin enhanced his broad, well-defined shoulders and thin waist. She wanted to run her fingers through his glorious platinum hair, damp and wavy as if he had just stepped from the shower. A rush of fear and exhilaration hit her.

"Sweetness, you look so lost." He purred and sauntered toward her.

Beth took a deep breath and pushed the matted hair off her face. "I feel different. For some strange reason, when you were not here beside me, I felt as if you'd died. The remnants of a dream, I guess."

Thryll sat beside her and pulled her into his arms. She trembled and hummed with pleasure when his kiss branded her, sucking all doubts from her body. His scent and the sweet smell of leather ignited her passion.

"No, dearest one, my cat's imprinted on you, my scent has claimed you," he whispered against her lips. "You'll feel a deep loss whenever I'm away from you." He lifted his head and grinned at her.

Her jaw dropped and she pulled her teeth together with a snap. "So I *am* your mate? Does this mean I must stay here with you forever? I can never return home?"

Her entire body swooned as Thryll kissed her again.

"Do you truly believe you could leave me, Elizabeth?" His voice extended her name to a deep, rumbling growl.

The thought she may never see him again sent an ache straight to her heart.

"This is so unreal. Strange as it may seem, I don't think I *could* leave you. Will Zandor be upset, now we're mates? You mentioned before that *he* may be my mate too?"

"I'm in thrall with you, sweetness, but I truly believe you need us both." Thryll traced a finger down her cheek, her neck and circled her erect nipple. He lifted his eyes to her face. "You must kiss him, lay with him and if you feel as you do with me then it is so."

"You want me to sleep with him. How can I possibly do that after last night?"

"You'll only be attracted to him if my assertion is true." Thryll smiled sweetly as his fingers circled her breasts. "It's not cheating, Beth; to share is the most beautiful union of all. You'll have both of us, forever. Once mated, we'll never leave you or want for other females. Does the concept frighten you, Elizabeth?"

Beth shook her head. She glanced around the room. How could this be happening, here in this strange prison?

"No, I'm not frightened and for some reason, I trust you. This is very strange for me, Thryll. I'm not saying I'm a blushing virgin, but you're like no man I've ever known. We did things I've never done before *and* with an audience. Now, it seems I might be destined to stay with the two of you, shared by you for life. I'm just not sure how I feel about that. To be perfectly honest, I'm becoming more confused by the second."

"How so?"

Beth took a deep breath and studied her clasped hands. How could she form the words when his eyes made her melt? One look into his pools of seductive persuasion and she would follow him naked through fire. "If we have this arrangement between the three of us, how does it work? Do we live together? Will you take turns to sleep with me on different nights or will we all sleep together in the same bed? How do I know that you won't both have your fun for a while and dump me?"

"You'd belong to us and we'd be bonded to you." Thryll lifted her chin. "Pride males respect their mates, care for them. Our arrangement will be to your wishes after your Moon Fire. You should know, precious one, that both of us will bite you at the same precise moment. As I mentioned before, we only bite our mates and it is a most desirable experience. You will bite us often during your Moon Fire and all males welcome that; indeed they crave it."

"So as I wish? You'll promise that?"

"Aye, as I'll promise to have no other female for all eternity as will Zandor," said Thryll, brushing her lips with his thumb.

She trembled. His eyes had changed from blue to gold and back in a flash.

A rush of questions flooded Beth's head. It all seemed too good to be true.

"When we break out of this place where shall we go? Will your people accept our arrangement?"

"We are cats, Beth." Thryll chuckled and pulled her to his chest. "Doesn't a lion have a Pride of females? Many of my Pride brothers have more than one mate, but unlike a wild cat, we are bound to our true mates for life. Now come, the shower here is hot and they've sent clothes for you. It would seem you're to entertain Zandor on the morrow. This will work well with our plan. This eve, I've gained access to the laboratory, although my promise of a night of passion with the technician will be a lie. A key to open the locks will arrive with our dinner," he whispered close to her ear.

Thryll followed her into the shower and joined her under the hot water. Her legs turned to jelly and she leaned into him while he soaped her entire body and washed her hair. She moaned as his teasing hands made soap spirals over her

breasts and slipped in delicious torment between her thighs. She complained when he turned her to face the cold tiles and pulled her against his lusciously hot body. She shivered when his fangs grazed her shoulders and his fingers snaked around her to caress both breasts, pinching her nipples delectably.

"I want to bite you, Elizabeth; my cat needs to taste your blood. It's a difficult impulse to deny. Without this 'plastic', I would damage you beyond repair. Can you imagine the intense joy of being bitten by two males at once?" he purred in her ear.

Bowing her body, she reached up to grasp his hair as his knee slipped between her legs to open them wide, the head of his massive cock brushing her ass.

"One bite is like a thousand climaxes, sweetness, and two like dying of pleasure," he crooned as his cock slid deep inside her pussy.

Beth buried her fingers in his wet hair as he lifted her hips and pounded deep inside. Heat flooded over her from the shower and within, sending ripples of deep pleasure to her core. She climaxed quickly and tumbled out of control as she rushed into another.

"Oh, Thryll, dear God, you're so good at this."

He growled.

Her laugh turned into a mew of delight as his fangs scraped her back and his fingers dug into the cheeks of her bottom. Her pussy tightened. Sizzling flames of bliss licked up her belly as he drove into her, impaling her deeply, sending her into another spiral of a long, powerful release. He trembled against her back. Intense pleasure soared through her and his hot seed spurted inside her, bathing her womb.

While he washed her again, she slumped against the tiles. Afterward, he dried and dressed her as if she were an infant. The selection of variously sized clothes in his 'robe amazed her. She paraded in front of the mirror, elated to wear a pair of comfortable blue pants, a ruby shirt, and soft leather pull-on ankle boots.

Her legs wobbled by the time he led her to the sofa. An assortment of dishes spread out on the coffee table filled the room with tempting aromas. He tasted each dish first and then began to feed her. Her heart pounded; after every bite, he licked her lips, such an erotic gesture, so intense.

The lights went out as they finished a goblet of thick, heady red wine.

Thryll grinned. She could see him perfectly in the darkness, an enhancement she enjoyed. "I'd love you again, Beth, but I need you to be alert." He leaned toward her, his warm hand cupping her face. "I've no knowledge of technology; you must find our way to escape."

"Me?"

"Aye, the devices in the lab contain maps and information. We cannot escape this place if we don't know which way to go. We have all night, Beth. I have confidence you will find what we need."

While they waited, Thryll described the realm he called Dryad. He lived with Zandor in Feltich Castle, the family home of the Knight Watch. They apparently shared what sounded like an apartment within the castle. They had separate bedrooms, but it was usual for them to share willing females, often keeping them engaged for weeks at a time. Beth felt a pang of jealousy when he discussed a few of their conquests.

Dryad sounded like a desert island, surrounded by long, white beaches, with temperate weather all year round. She pictured the green hills as he described the abundance of flowers, and the trees heavy with fruit. She questioned him about the magyck Zandor had mentioned. His replies were honest and he showed her how he could make fire by just pointing at the logs in the grate. He explained there was much for her to learn and he would reveal all when they were safely in Dryad. He mentioned, cautiously, he could control others to his will by using his 'glamor', adding hastily that, for some reason, it didn't work with the Druik men.

"Did you use that on me, that glamor thing?"

Thryll glanced away for a second then indigo twilight eyes scanned her face and his large, golden hands slipped around her waist. Her heart raced.

"In truth, I believed you to be another poor female destined for the Rams. Yes, you were under my influence until I tasted your scent. You did smell pleasing to me, but Zandor's scent was heavy and obscured your own natural odor. Our kiss revealed all, Beth. Humans would call it 'love at first sight'. It was a great shock to me. Indeed, I've searched many years for you. You must know the Lady blesses

Pride males with only one mate for life and our quest is to find her. It matters not if she is faerie, Human or wood nymph, however; I believe the Lady matches us well."

* * * * *

"Come. The female waits for me in the lab." He stood slowly and pulled her to her feet. He took a flat plastic card from the table and handed it to her. "I'll use my glamor to convince her we're engaged in a night of passion. She gave me this key to open my door. I'm to pass it through that device on the wall. Wait a few minutes and follow me up the stairs," he said as he led her to the door.

Beth held the card to the reader and the door clicked open. She watched Thryll's face change; his eyes glowed deep amber as he stepped into the lab. Holding the door ajar, she listened. Her enhanced hearing picked up every word from the top of the stairs.

"The Human sleeps; she may wake and inform Pic, if I fuck you beside her," he purred. "Here will be fine and I promise I won't break the desk."

She heard the tear of fabric and a female gasp.

"You'll be still now and realize your fantasy," Beth heard him whisper.

When Thryll fell silent, Beth slipped from the room and bolted up the stairs. She pressed her body against the wall and moved toward him. He stood beside a naked woman spread out on top of a desk; strewn fragments of her clothes littered the floor. She lay still, her eyes glazed and unfocused.

"She'll be entranced until I release her. Hurry now; look for the information." Thryll beckoned Beth forward. "I'll search for the instruments you'll need to remove the device in my back." He turned away.

Beth approached the workstations; they were neat without the usual trappings of a normal workplace, hi-tech with the instantly recognizable virtual keyboard. She waved the plastic card across the beam on the card reader and waited. A holographic screen popped up in mid-air. She could read the strange hieroglyphic script. She grinned; the language chip they'd installed was proving to be a very useful item. Seating herself before the display, she typed in 'blue prints'. A list

emerged not only of the complex but also of the entire realm. The computer prompted her to add the information to her remote device. Beth blinked and began to search the desk drawers.

In a holder in the bottom drawer, she discovered a very small device with a screen and an earpiece. She lifted it out, placed it on the desk and pressed download on the display. In seconds, the screen flashed a message, 'download complete.' She played with the buttons on the small device and grinned when the maps flashed across the screen.

She looked around for Thryll, heard the faint noises of drawers sliding backward and forward as he searched the next room. He was thorough, she realized, when she heard cupboard doors open and click shut. She returned to the keyboard and typed 'Zandor of Knight Watch'. A file opened up with his photograph. She gasped as she read the notes. She quickly typed her own name, entered 'Thryll of Lonza' and waited. Her heart pounded as her mind digested the information filling the screen. She shut down the computer and slipped the device containing the maps into her pocket.

Moments later, Thryll stepped into the room, his face like thunder. Her heart dropped. She stumbled as he grasped her by the arm and dragged her into a dark room. She glanced around; a split-screen monitor revealed the extent of the camera surveillance. All the rooms used for mating held a camera with a motion sensor. They'd recorded every movement, every intimate act.

"See here, they have our likeness, our souls forever in their grasp." A slight tremor shook his voice as he pointed to a screen replaying their most intimate moments.

"It's okay; it's not what you think. In my realm, this is a common practice. They can't take our souls, Thryll; I promise. Let me see if I can erase the video."

Beth knelt on the floor and easily accessed the data. She shook her head in dismay at the size of the file and deleted every one of the four or so hundred. This would upset Pic. She smiled.

"There, they're all destroyed. I've discovered a lot of information about us and the maps we need are on this device. Did you find a knife?"

"I found this." Thryll smiled and lifted a small metal container from the counter, flipped open the lid to reveal a well-stocked medical box.

Great.

Beth grinned up at him and began to search through the medical supplies, selecting two stitch removers, sealed in foil and very sharp. She also removed a wad of cotton, a small bottle of antiseptic and some wound dressings.

"The bathroom here has light; can you do this now?" he asked anxiously.

"If I cut your back, it will hurt like hell. You may go into shock with the blood loss. I'll do the teeth first, okay?"

He nodded in silent agreement. She smiled in encouragement and took his hand.

He led her into the brilliant light of the laboratory worker's bathroom. The room stunk of bleach, floor and walls completely covered in sterile-looking white tiles. Aluminum doors hid the toilets and a line of sparkling sinks stood against one wall. Beth went to a sink, pumped the soap dispenser, and scrubbed her hands.

"My cat is a snow leopard." Thryll sat on the floor, placed the medical box next to him and tipped back his head to rest it against the wall. He smiled at her brilliantly. "When you remove the device, I'll morph, so step back and give him room. Don't fear him, he loves you." He closed his eyes and opened his mouth.

Beth tried to process this information but common sense would not allow it. She went to work on his mouth. The plastic fang cover split easily but drew blood as she lifted it from his gums. Thryll shook his head at her worry and pointed to his back. He turned and removed his jerkin. Beth doused her hands and the area with the antiseptic and cut into the purple scar. The skin around the laser burn had hardened, forcing her to cut deep to reach the device.

"Get it out." Thryll hissed as her fingers probed the incision but he remained as still as a statue.

Keep him distracted, she decided, as she began to cut the device free.

"I found the files, the information they have on us. It says they removed a little of both your venoms and placed it in a slow-release device in my neck. It was to make me more receptive to your scents. That's what has enhanced my senses, not

their technology, thank God. Their advanced computer systems made it easy for one of their people to hack into my realm's medical records. They spent five years searching for a female whose scent contained the necessary ingredients to attract both of you. They found me as a perfect match. It was well planned, Thryll. However, that's not all—you and Zandor match physically and a fight between you would give them all the data they need for their research. They don't plan to try and take Zandor's child seed; they plan to make you both fight to the death."

"How so? We're close friends; it would be impossible to incite such a fight," he replied between his clenched teeth.

"They believe if you both think I'm your mate, you'll fight to the death to have me. They want to see just how powerful a Pride male is, in comparison to the mixed blood they've already produced. They can't risk their creation, so they plan to use their technology to log the results."

"You must give this information to Zandor on the morrow. If he accepts you as his mate, you must tell him what I said. That you're our fantasy. He'll understand."

Pulling the device clear, she turned to pick up a wad of cotton to stem the flow of blood. She pressed hard against the wound.

Thryll bled profusely, a long, crimson stream running down his back. He jumped to his feet and strode away. Opening her mouth to object, she remained silent when he began stripping off his pants. He dropped them to the floor and turned. A long low growl escaped his lips and his eyes changed to a deep gold. She trembled. The air around him shimmered and he shifted into a large, white cat with black spots. The snow leopard tipped its head back and roared, the sound echoing off the walls. It waved its head from side to side, its large, golden eyes never leaving her face. Beth's hands began to shake but otherwise she remained perfectly still.

The cat slunk toward her, a deep purr resonating in its throat. It brushed its massive head against her back before burying it between her legs. After a couple of seconds, it lifted its head and stared into her eyes. She reached forward and touched its head with a trembling hand. It leaned into her touch and its purr became

noticeably louder. She raised both hands and stroked the big cat's ears. It licked a path down her cheek with its rough tongue then turned away.

The air shimmered once again and Thryll appeared, his blue eyes troubled as if he expected her to reject him. He cupped her face, his eyes searching her expression.

She smiled. "You're the most gorgeous cat, so beautiful."

Thryll winced. "I could understand, strong, powerful but *beautiful* is not a term to describe a male."

Beth laughed.

"I'm happy you accept my cat, as we come together, we are one and the same." He brushed her lips with a kiss.

Beth suddenly remembered his wound.

"Turn around and allow me to dress the incision."

"Morphing heals our injuries." Thryll chuckled. "Worry no more, sweetness." He pulled her to her feet and bent to retrieve his clothes, handing them to her with a grin. "Mayhap it is better I'm naked when I awake the Druik female. She'll be more convinced." He chuckled again while leading her from the bathroom.

"Wait." She bent to wipe up the trail of blood-splatter across the white tiles. When she finished, she pushed the stitch cutters into her pocket with the antiseptic and passed the medical box to Thryll. "You must put this back where you found it."

She followed him into a lunchroom. White paint must be inexpensive, she told herself, noticing the depressingly white walls were the same as the rest of the complex. Sterile-looking metal tables were set in straight lines with chairs pushed in along each side. A coffee pot and odd-sized cups sat on a bench. She walked to examine a vending refrigerator humming in one corner with price tags of an unfamiliar currency. In the other corner, pushed hard against the wall, sat a pair of large aluminum garbage bins, blue plastic liners visible below the lids. She peered through the window to an uninteresting view of a flood-lit parking lot.

Waiting for Thryll to push the medical box back into a cupboard, she opened the door and checked outside. Empty.

The corridors remained deserted as they returned to the lab. Beth went to their room, hovered inside, and peeked through the tiny gap in the door. She watched as Thryll leaned over the woman and spoke to her softly. The girl's head moved and she threw her arms around his neck.

"I want you again." He growled. "Will you come to me, Caroline?"

"Yes, just send me a message like before and I'll meet you here."

Thryll helped her down from the table and slapped her bare ass. "Next time, we will play my way," he threatened.

She turned, giggled, and ran down a corridor.

* * * * *

Inside the bedroom, they sat on the sofa and sifted through the maps contained in the device. Thryll watched, enthralled, as Beth plotted an escape route and explained how to use the device she had mastered with ease. They could do no more now, not until the three of them were together.

Thryll took her hand and led her out into the moonlight. "This is much like my home. The air is clean and sweet and the moon so large you can almost touch it."

"What do you do for work? What is your job?"

Thryll turned her to face him. "We protect all who live between the Five Gates. The Lady has provided for the Prides since Arious created them to serve her. We have more gold than we could use in a thousand lifetimes."

"So you're in an army?"

"I ride with my brothers, the Knight Watch, when necessary. Although I'm not of their line. I'm a Knight Watch warrior by my ability as a warrior. My father is a Lonza, a leader, but not a prince. Tell me of your home."

"It sounds much like your own, although I guess your home is more like mine was a thousand years ago. I live alone; it's easier, as my work in the government is top secret. I have no living family. I am a doctor, a healer, but I work in research. My job is to find cures for biological warfare. In my world, they kill enemies by any means possible, and that includes using poison to wipe out whole armies, if

necessary. I've had a few lovers but I must admit I've not tried anything unusual before tonight."

"It's good that you've had many males; it'll make things easier for you."

"I haven't had *heaps* of lovers." Beth's head snapped toward him. "I've only had sex three times, and they were not what you would describe as *memorable encounters*."

Thryll chuckled deep in his chest. "Three? By the gods, you are practically a virgin. I think, mayhap, I was your first in at least one pleasure today."

"I guess so," she said, her cheeks red.

He reached for her, his long fingers completely enclosing her hand. He drew her through the glass doors and led her around the pond.

"It's not safe for you here with me at present. My cat has great power over me now he's free. If I as much as hold you close, he will insist I bite you and I'll not refuse. I need a little time to bring him under control. Although it pains me, I must insist you return to your cage. I can't bite you if you belong to Zandor, as well. It will be worth the wait, Elizabeth, this I vow."

"Okay. So, if I can get Zandor out what shall we do?" Beth touched his face. Thryll pressed the plastic key into her hand.

"Try this key; if it works you must bring him back here. I've clothes and food. We can easily escape from this area at night. I've never seen a security patrol after lights out. I believe they think us too subdued to try to escape."

"I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too, sweetness. Have no fear; if you're not back soon, I shall use my glamor on another Druik female and come and get you both. It was my plan to rescue Zandor, but until now, I had no idea how to use the key. Now, start screaming and bang on the door. You must convince the orderly you've had had enough of me for one evening."

Beth did as he instructed. "I've been beaten and raped, get me out of here," she screamed as the sleepy eyed orderly finally opened the door.

The orderly glared at Thryll as he lounged on the bed. He waved a hand at him dismissively, "Humans are so weak."

He watched the orderly drag her away, his heart aching.

Chapter Five

Beth walked in subdued silence beside the orderly. She noted the color of the line on the floor and each turn they took back to the lab. The passageways were silent but for the soft sound of their footfalls on the plastic-coated floor. She became more anxious and alone every step she took away from Thryll. She already missed his scent, as if she had left him to go on a long journey, never to return. She licked her lips to taste his lingering kiss, missing him desperately. She tried to shake herself out of the melancholy. *Thryll is nice, well, bloody fantastic really, but imprinted on me for life? Now that's something I need to come to terms with.* She frowned at the orderly's chuckle as they got closer to the laboratory doors. The familiar stench hit her face as the doors slid open.

"This is not your lucky day is it, sweetheart? The Doctor insisted you get acquainted with Zandor, just as soon as the other cat finished with you."

They stopped in front of Zandor's cage. The orderly opened the door, pushed her through, and shut the door swiftly behind her.

"If I didn't have to get up in the morning, I'd stay and watch," he chortled, and turned to go.

Beth stood perfectly still. Zandor lay naked, curled up on the bench, his back to her. He seemed unaware of her presence. She could hear his regular, slow breathing and smell his delightful scent mixed with the spicy aroma of sandalwood soap. Her breath caught as she noticed the thin red welts across his back and legs. She stepped forward with small steps and froze when he spoke.

"So it's not enough that you flaunt your body before our captors. You ask them to place you in my cage, to torment me. This has to be Pic's idea of a joke." He growled and rolled over to face her.

"I did no such thing. What happened to you?"

Trembling with fear, she pressed her back against the bars when Zandor sat up, rubbed the scar on his neck and got slowly to his feet. She gasped as he stepped

toward her and placed a hand on the bars on each side of her head. His scent washed over her and her knees began to shake; even his breath affected her. She had never been aware of a man like this, as if he were a potent drug and she a pathetic addict.

"They spoke the truth; Thryll *is* here." He sniffed her and glared down at her in disgust. "Was it with him you gave your performance? Indeed the entire complex is buzzing with your exploits."

Beth shook. How could she be so enamored and yet so terrified of this man?

"I was with Thryll. He came here to rescue *you*. He explained that he used his glamor on me at first and —"

"His *glamor*? Gods he must have lost his touch." Zandor snorted. "I suppose he told you later that he turned it off. Humans. You're so gullible and to think what I endured this eve, to spend some time alone with you. You *do* have the capacity to recall our plan, or did Thryll completely befuddle your brain?"

Beth placed both hands on his chest. The touch alone was electric. It sent waves of longing through her body. Her palms vibrated as his heart pounded strongly beneath the rock-hard muscle. His entire body rippled with anger and she had no idea how to placate him.

"Believe me, Zandor, it's not what it looks like. You have to listen to me for just a moment. I was able to remove his device. He got a key from a lab technician and I have maps of the entire complex and realm."

She reached inside her pocket and removed the plastic swipe card. She twisted her hand through the bars and ran it through the scanner. The door clicked open. She turned and smiled at Zandor.

"We only have a few hours before daylight. I need light to remove your device. They leave lights on in the bathrooms, so, if we can find one on this floor, I can do it now. Thryll has clothes and food in his room. We can escape tonight."

Zandor narrowed his amethyst eyes. "I have a knife." He took the cutthroat razor from the pocket of a robe and carefully held it out to her.

"Bring it with you. Where's a bathroom?"

She waited impatiently as Zandor slipped on the robe and held out his hand. Beth took it and followed him swiftly past the sleeping Rams. Heart racing, she ran beside him. He sniffed the air constantly as they fled down corridors. Suddenly he stopped and pushed open a door. The bright light blinded her as she followed him inside.

"Sit on the floor. I'm sorry, but this will hurt like hell."

She opened the antiseptic as Zandor pulled off the robe, spread it out on the tiles and sat down. Kneeling behind him, she smiled encouragingly when he turned his head to watch her remove the cover from the stitch remover. She doused his back in antiseptic and his muscles rippled at her touch.

"I'm sorry; I should've told you it would be cold."

"It was the smell that made me shudder." Zandor gave her one long, hard look over his shoulder. "You can inflict no worse pain than I've already suffered. Have no fear, Beth, I'll never cry out in pain."

Beth worked more quickly this time; Zandor's skin had not scarred. His device was positioned, fortunately, in exactly the same place as the other. Zandor remained silent, taking slow, even breaths.

"I was so worried doing this to Thryll. I thought he might bleed to death. It's fortunate he healed when he morphed."

"Worry not, Elizabeth, for I'll not bleed to death, even if the removal of this foul device does not allow me to morph. I am immortal," he purred.

Beth finally lifted the device free and threw it down a toilet. She turned, ready to press the wadding to the wound to stop the immediate flow of blood. It pooled bright crimson in the deep hole but the wound did not continue to bleed.

Zandor rose to his feet in one fluid movement and stepped away from her.

"So you cannot die?"

"I can be killed, Beth, by decapitation." Zandor turned toward her, his eyes changing to deep amber.

Beth scrambled to her feet and backed against the wall.

The air shimmered and a massive black leopard appeared. Trembling in fear, she put her hand to her mouth to stifle a scream. She had never before seen a cat

with a head so huge and eyes so wild. The cat remained motionless for some moments as its eyes examined her, its mouth open as it tasted the air. It moved slowly, step-by-step, closer and closer. She did cry out then. Tears ran down her cheeks and splashed onto her chest. The big cat stopped and tilted its head, the pupils of its eyes dilated. It pushed its great head under her right hand and nudged against her hip as if seeking recognition. Beth couldn't touch the great black head and covered her face with her hands. It turned, stalked away, and shimmered back into Zandor.

"You fear my cat? He'll never hurt you, Beth." He frowned but his eyes were filled with sadness. "Come now, show me the way to where they keep Thryll," he said, standing before her naked and divine.

"I knew he wouldn't kill me, but it was a shock. He is—I mean *you are*—so big. Oh, God, I don't know what to say." *Shit, look at his puppy dog eyes, I've really hurt him.* "Look Zandor, I think your cat is magnificent, he just scared me half to death. I wasn't expecting something that bloody big."

Zandor looked closely at the Human. She appeared close to collapse. *What had she endured with Thryll? Why would he, my best friend, lay with her when he knew she bathed in my scent?* He pushed his hair from his face with both hands and inhaled. Her scent was powerful, delightful, enticing. *Could it be true the Lady has sent her to me as my true mate?* His cat growled its assent and filled him with the need to bite her and claim her for his own. *No, this is not the place to bite, to claim her. I will wait . . . I must be sure.* He shuddered, thinking of the pleasure the doctors and orderlies would receive if they witnessed a female in Moon Fire. This, the most sacred rite of the Prides, had never been witnessed by any other than the female's bond mate. Four long days of insatiable passion . . . he craved it as all Pride males did. *No. Even if she were truly mine, I would not allow it to happen in this dreadful place.*

She looked at him strangely, as if confused. He smiled down at her and reached out to touch her cheek, to collect the salty tears that ran freely from her beautiful eyes. Was he responsible for this pain? She opened her mouth to as if to

speak but then snapped it shut. He brushed her lips with his finger. Her eyes were wet with tears.

"Speak, Elizabeth, or the night will pass and we'll still be entombed."

"I'm disappointed, sad. I mean, I wanted you to be attracted to my scent as I am to yours. Thryll said he believed I belonged to both of you, that I was the fantasy. I can see by your expression, he's mistaken." She began to cry again.

Zandor had no idea how to explain. He wanted to crush her in his arms and kiss her breath away. The powerful need to lick her skin, dive between her moist folds and taste her center was intense, but then he would bite her, and all would be lost. Mayhap Thryll was correct and she belonged to them both. An intriguing thought indeed, but time would tell. He took her hand and led her toward the door.

"I do like you, Beth. We can discuss this later when we are free of the restraints of this place. Now, please take me to Thryll."

He pulled at the door and froze. Footfalls echoed in the hallway followed by the sound of female voices. He spun around to search the room for a place to hide. He pressed a finger to his lips to silence Beth and pulled her into a utility cupboard.

The musty room stank of chemicals and damp mops. Her feet tangled in a pair of dirty coveralls hanging from a brown canvas backpack. Zandor lifted her before she tripped and placed her gently back on her feet. She gasped as a severe rush of panic hit her when Zandor quietly shut the door and trapped them inside. Darkness enveloped her and she needed desperately to get out.

"Close your eyes, Beth." He touched her face and lifted her chin. "Imagine we are outside beneath the stars," he purred and her body instantly relaxed.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she shook as Zandor's hard, naked body pushed close, his heat soaking through her clothes. Her entire body trembled as he confined her against the wall. His scent overpowered her and his hand slipped around her waist.

She moaned softly against his chest.

"Hush, little one," he whispered in her ear, his breath so hot on her neck.

The shrill voices of two excited women filled the bathroom. They discussed the trapping of another poor creature.

"He's the most beautiful man I've ever seen. That's if you can call him a man. I wonder if those massive black wings get in the way. Do you think they'll let us watch him in action?"

The other woman giggled as the toilets flushed in unison. Doors clicked shut, followed by the familiar sound of the rush of water hitting the stainless steel sinks. Beth pictured them as they paused to check their make-up and hair.

"The way he was looking at that faerie, I think he'll rival Thryll. I had to drag myself away from the monitor. I'll never forget the way she begged him and clung to his legs. I bet he'll fuck her stupid. I'm sure I'll be dreaming of *him* tonight." The second woman's voice trailed away as she followed her companion from the room.

Beth's heart raced with fear. She rested her head against Zandor's bare chest. *His* heart beat in a slow rhythm. She opened her eyes, glanced up into his face, surprised to see anger.

"Be calm, you're safe with me," he whispered, cupping her cheek and rubbing his thumb in small circles. "We must follow the scent of those females. If what they say is true, they may have captured Nox."

"Nox?"

"The King of the Faerie."

Beth's mind tried in vain to grasp such a creature. *Good Lord! Will I wake up and find this is just an amazing dream?* She dragged her eyes from Zandor's delectable face and nodded toward the large canvas bag on the hook behind him as he opened the door. She reached for the backpack. "Wait, we'll need this to carry supplies."

Zandor grasped Beth's hand firmly and pulled her from the cupboard. She waited, still as a statue, while he scooped up the white robe from the bathroom floor. He best cover himself, the female was becoming besotted. *Look how she stares at me with big, confused eyes. She belongs to me.* His cat roared in his head and mentally agreed with his assessment of Beth. She was beyond enticing. Her scent called to him, rich, potent. It tortured his will. She made him needy, unsure of himself in a

way he never thought possible. He always took his pleasure wherever he chose, indulging in every imaginable fantasy. He chanced another look into her deep, cobalt pools. Beth. Elizabeth. His mind sung her name. *By the gods, she holds my strings. One more tiny pull and I'll claim her, brand her for my own, and damn the consequences.*

He fought the desire to comfort her again and threw open the door. The dimly lit corridors were silent. He lifted his head and sniffed the air. The females' scent would be easy to follow. He assumed they were leaving the complex, so he would follow the weaker scent, their earlier path. *By the gods, if they captured Nox, the realms will declare war against the Druiks. Nox is a deeply sensual being but gentle, not someone Pic would lust after – or would he?* He clearly remembered the awe he experienced as a young warrior, when he fought beside the great King of the Faerie. Nox created spells on the run and wielded the power of a thousand of his kind. *How in the Lady's name did the Druiks capture him? It's just not possible.*

His mind pictured Nox. He couldn't conceive any way the Druiks could have imprisoned the faerie. Nox was in the prime of his life at five hundred years old, and even devoid of his magic he could cut a man down with a single blow. Why was he here? He did not relish war; indeed Nox ruled the land of the Fae with a ferocious compassion. The Knight Watch considered him a good friend. In truth, the Fae army and the Knight Watch had become fierce allies these past hundred years.

They crept in silent stealth along the corridors, and stopped abruptly at any sound. Beth felt strangely secure with Zandor's hand wrapped around her own. The plastic card gave them access to all areas. They stopped before a door with the sign 'Danger New Acquisitions' written in large red letters. Beth waved the card through the scanner at Zandor's insistence. The door opened slowly and Zandor peeked inside and gasped. He placed a hand on her shoulder and turned his head toward her slowly.

"The faerie is dead. She lies within. Will you be able to look on her without screaming?"

Beth swallowed and squared her shoulders. She became a doctor less than two years ago, at Melbourne Medical University. During her training, she'd worked in the hospital emergency room many times. How bad could this be? She nodded once sharply, and kept her eyes on his face. Drawing a deep breath, she raised her chin as Zandor squeezed her shoulder gently, took her hand, and drew her with him through the doorway. The thing which caught Beth's immediate attention hung like a bat at one end of the cage. She stopped in captivated fascination and covered her mouth with her hand.

She gaped in awe at the masculine beauty of a naked, winged man. Double wings of diaphanous midnight, tipped with silver, spread out each side of him. She froze as her senses feasted on skin the color of a ripe peach. His massive body was sculpted, every muscle defined. Hair black and glossy as a raven's wing hung down to his waist. His dark angel features were magnificent, striking, although marred by his tragic expression. He lifted his head as Zandor approached, his iridescent green, almond-shaped eyes flowing with tears. Beth bit her lip, her gaze transfixed on him.

"Nox," called Zandor softly.

"I killed her, killed my own sister. Oh, dear Lady, what have I done?" Nox shook his head and held his hands out to the sides. Tears spilled unrestrained down his cheeks.

Beth looked down at the pathetic body of the faerie. She lay on her side at Nox's feet, her long hair a river of black silk across the floor. Her angelic face was battered and bruised. Death-haunted, tragic jade eyes stared into nothingness. Dried blood caked around the sides of her upturned mouth. Her limbs, like the broken legs of a spider, hung white and bloodless. She lay in a pool of blood that seeped into her once magnificent wings, now torn and ripped into shreds. Beth could see from the strange angle of her head, her neck was broken.

Zandor took the plastic card from Beth's clammy fingers and opened the cage.

"What happened to her, Nox?"

"I came here to save her." Nox shrugged his perfect shoulders and narrowed his eyes. "I made a bargain with them, allowed them to capture me. I told them I would cooperate if they gave her back to me. I was too late. They induced her season

and gave her to a Ram. She begged me to kill her, Zandor. She was in so much pain. The Ram's seed had already torn her apart. They took my magic, bound me in silver so I couldn't help her. She cries no more. The Druiks will pay with their lives." All emotion had drained from his voice by the time he uttered the last blunt words.

"We've come to help you escape; are there any other Fae here?" demanded Zandor.

"No, all that came before have perished. The Knight Watch must join me and deal with these murderers. How came you to be captured?"

"They came into my realm and drugged me when I was out drinking. We must get to Thryll and escape before these bastards wake up."

Zandor took Beth's trembling fingers and threaded them through his own.

A deep sadness flowed over him as he watched Nox fold the faerie's tattered wings and cradle his sister's body in his arms. He pushed open the cage when Nox nodded solemnly and followed his lead through the door.

While Beth stopped to pull out the device, Zandor draped an arm across her shoulder and poured his glamor over her, trying to calm her as she searched the maps. He was relieved when she quickly explained the way back to Thryll's room. Under his touch, she trembled, but she appeared to be far stronger than other Human females he knew. He understood her sorrow and awe in the presence of Nox. Indeed, she showed intelligence and held a deep compassion for all things. A virtue he found most pleasing.

They followed her directions without speaking. The complex sat in silence and they passed no one as they crept swiftly along the hallways and past the laboratories.

* * * * *

The door clicked open and Beth and Zandor slipped inside. Thryll's sigh of relief caught in his throat when Nox stepped into the room. The King of the Faerie,

holding his sister close, walked toward the open doorway and gazed up into the sky before turning to face him. The sorrow in his eyes was almost too painful to witness.

"I'll take Quilla home and seek out King Blaise of Knight Watch. We'll raise an army and crush these beasts. Go west and hide in the caves at the top of the mountain which rises above the forest. Food and water abounds and you'll not want for anything. Wait in safety until we return. Now, one other favor, good Prince of Knight Watch, will you remove the silver from my wrists? They prevent my use of magic."

Thryll stepped forward and opened his arms to take the fragile, broken burden from Nox. Coldness seeped into him from her body, filling him with regret. He did not know Quilla but she looked so young, less than a hundred years old, he assumed. He cringed at the sight of Zandor taking a razor from the pocket of his robe and pushing it beneath the silver bands surrounding Nox's wrist. The King of the Faerie did not flinch as Zandor cut swiftly through one silver band and then the other. He bled profusely but stepped away when Beth offered assistance.

"I'm a doctor; let me help you, Nox."

"No." Nox shook his head and blew softly on the cuts. The deep gashes healed almost immediately.

"I know you won't speak to me because I'm Human," said Beth, annoyed. "I'm so sorry about your sister. I knew her. She was in the cage next to mine and I wish I could have saved her. She wouldn't speak to me, either, but I think she found some comfort in my voice. You should know as a king, almost all Human children believe in faeries and so do I."

Thryll stepped close to Nox when he failed to reply and laid his sister in his arms. Nox looked down at her broken body and walked toward the door. Before leaving, he stopped, turned, and leveled his gaze on Beth. Thryll moved to her side.

"It matters not to me what Humans believe, but know this: Faeries protect all children. The Human race causes the problem. They are corrupt, prejudiced and deny our existence. It's well you join the Prides, Elizabeth; one such as you will be a valuable asset. I grant you this gift." He inclined his head then stepped outside into

the moonlight. Bathed by the pale cool light, he spread his magnificent wings and soared into the star-filled sky.

"What was that all about?" Beth said, gazing into the distance.

"You'll find out soon enough," replied Zandor.

Thryll selected clothes for their journey, folded a small pile for each of them and pushed them into cushion covers. He walked to Zandor, his arm extended in greeting.

"You lay with my mate?" Zandor gripped his arm and pulled him close, his voice a low growl close to his ear, so low only he could hear it.

Thryll slapped his friend on the back "*Our* mate, and you'll soon see the truth of my words."

"Then we'll see the truth of Nox's gift." Zandor's gaze flickered toward Beth.

Thryll turned and hugged Beth close to him, brushing her lips in a light kiss. "You've been crying. Did this brute hurt you, sweetness?"

No, I'm okay. Can we hurry and leave this place?" Beth sighed and buried her face in his chest."

"Of course. Will you push some food into the cushion cover while Zandor dresses? I'll explain our escape plan to him."

Thryll threw a pair of leather pants and a jerkin to Zandor. He offered him three different sized pairs of boots, watching while Zandor dressed quickly.

"You have an escape plan?"

Thryll grinned at his friend. "No, but her map will get us out of the complex. We have no horses and the nearest Gate is about one month's walk away, maybe more. The towns are some distance apart, but the rivers are many, so we'll not thirst. I'd guess the Druiks will expect us to head for the nearest Gate, not the caves."

"How far away is this mountain?"

Thryll went over to Beth. She scanned the small screen and held it up to him. He returned to Zandor. "Maybe three days if we can find suitable transport. Do they have horses here? I noticed when they arrested me that they travel in large silver spheres. Do you think mayhap Beth may know how to use them?"

"Methinks her time is set somewhere between our time and here, so it's possible." Zandor shrugged, watching Beth closely. "She's spoken to me of technology but believes the Druiks are far more advanced than Humans. Now, tell me, why do you really believe she is ours?" He threw one pair of boots across the room, selected another pair, pulled them on and stood, stamping his feet.

"I *know* she's mine, but she yearns for you also. How do *you* feel? Is she the one for you?"

"Mayhap." Zandor looked intently at Beth and smiled. "It angered me you had her first. When we're away from this prison, I'll make my decision." He reached for a bundle of clothes and shoved them inside the backpack.

Chapter Six

Only the sound of their breath accompanied them as they slipped silently through the complex. The corridor lights were out and Beth stumbled in the darkness until Thryll took her arm firmly and pushed her before him. Zandor led the way, carrying the backpack. The men moved so quietly, the only footsteps Beth heard were her own. Walking between the two huge males, disorientated and oblivious to direction, she frequently ran into Zandor's back when he stopped to sniff the air. The force sent her back into Thryll's brick wall of a body and pushed the air from her lungs.

"Beth." Zandor turned and glared down at her before muttering softly. "Mayhap it's better you follow Thryll. We make more noise than a herd of cows."

"Methinks our Human lacks the grace of a gazelle, but she begs so sweetly for fulfillment." Thryll chuckled, his voice low, soft, and sexy.

Beth's face grew hot when Zandor rolled his eyes and continued to walk along the passageway, stopping impatiently at the next section to ask her for directions. Beth fumbled with the map device, distracted by the men's hot breath on her neck and their scent filling her nostrils as they peered over her shoulders. The colored lines along each floor made the map easy to navigate. Both men knew by scent or sound if anyone lurked in the hallways. One hard body would crush her

against a wall while the other removed the offending Druik. She failed to witness any violence and assumed they used a large amount of glamor on her during their escape.

She wrapped her arms around her chest and held her breath during the ride in the elevator to the ground floor. Thryll, confused by her instructions, pressed every button on the control panel and the elevator stopped at each floor with a groan. Certain that someone would hear and come to investigate, Thryll and Zandor pushed her behind them and crouched as if to attack each time the doors opened. Her breath came out in a rush when the doors finally slid open on the ground floor to reveal an empty foyer. Thryll and Zandor slipped cautiously through the glass doors into a parking lot shrouded beneath the complex while she waited anxiously for their signal.

Muted light bathed the parking lot, with the exception of a ten foot high barred fence running the length of the complex, which was illuminated by floodlights. Wheel-less, silver vehicles were lined up in rows in the shadows. They appeared almost identical . . . silver spheres with one continuous black-tinted window wrapped around the entire car.

Beth followed Zandor through the shadows. A line of unusual blue-silver dune buggies sat within the protection of the iron barrier across the exit. The silver finish on the center of the massive black wheels sparkled in the floodlights. In one corner, a brightly lit guard's hut, with windows all around, glowed in the darkness. It spilled light across the gate and clearly contained a single, uniformed guard, who sat with his back to them.

"Do you know how to use the wheel-less travel device?" Zandor murmured close beside her.

"No, but the dune buggies look familiar." Beth pointed to the line of large wheeled vehicles similar to ones she'd used on the beach back home. "I bet they use them to move around the complex. I would need a few minutes to see how they work. The gate will be a problem."

"When I arrived," interrupted Thryll. "They escorted me through this gate. I noticed the guard only had to speak and it opened." He inclined his head toward

Beth and frowned." You must try to convince him to say the necessary command. We could kill him but that won't help us."

"You want *me* to convince him?"

"A Pride female would use her body to seduce the guard," Thryll urged, taking her by the shoulders.

Beth shook her head fervently. "I couldn't seduce a fly."

Thryll looked at Zandor and she turned in his arms just in time to see him shrug.

"Zandor isn't too sure about you, Beth. Why don't you convince him that you *are* his mate? Seduce him, sweetness, or lose him." Thryll encouraged.

"This is madness, Thryll; we don't have time for this."

"If you can't seduce *him* what hope do you have with the guard?"

Beth turned to face Zandor. Her heart raced; she usually communicated easily with men but found her mind completely blank. Zandor's stony expression didn't help. He stood there, arms folded defensively across his chest, obviously angry. She looked between the two men. Thryll burned within her, warm as the summer sun, while Zandor's raw sexual hunger rolled over her like a winter storm. She still hurt from his previous rejection, but in truth, she wanted him — desperately. When he rolled his eyes at Thryll, a shudder of annoyance rippled through her. *Oh, boy, does he underestimate me.*

Beth locked her gaze on his amethyst orbs and slowly licked her bottom lip. His eyes flickered and she noticed a subtle change in his expression. *That got your attention, big boy.* She tipped her head back and ran her trembling hands through her hair, curling a dark strand around one finger. She watched his eyes follow her fingers as she moved them, slowly, seductively down to the front of her shirt to caress the gap between her breasts. Locking eyes with him, she used her best sultry tone. "I want you, Zandor."

"You don't know what you want." Zandor stepped forward, challenging her to prove him wrong.

Hell, he stood so close the heat of his body burned through her shirt, his breath a silky caress against her cheek.

"I am not gentle like Thryll." Zandor moved in slowly.

One hand slipped around her waist and drew her hard against him. His potent scent engulfed her; his hard body molded to her entire length. His fingers sank in her hair to caress the back of her neck, so gentle a touch. Her knees began to buckle.

He inclined his head to kiss her and she melted against him, lifting her chin to meet his mouth as it slid across her lips, so soft, so delicious. She drew in his scent, hungry for more, and pressed against his strength. When he moaned, her body dissolved, wrapped within a strange, wonderful cocoon. She opened her mouth to breathe in more of his essence and his tongue slid inside. Giving in to the desire, she sucked on the probing, spicy tongue, which caressed her mouth in long gentle strokes.

She threw her arms around his neck and sank her fingers into the silken mass of amber hair framing his face. She loved the way he devoured her. Her hands fisted in his hair to drag him closer and she kissed him back with passion, sucking and biting his tongue, his lips. This felt so right. He belonged to her. Her body shaped to his. *God, he's so hard, so muscular.* She needed to draw him closer, to take him inside herself. The hint of leather from his clothes made her head spin deliciously. Swooning, she pushed her hips forward when his erection, massive and long, rubbed hard against her body. She heard a rumble deep in his chest. *Dear God, was that a purr?*

Beth trembled as his kiss deepened and branded her with a frightening possession. His large hands slipped down her back, cupped her bottom, and lifted her up into his arms. Her pussy quivered. Moaning, she lifted her legs to wrap them around his waist and heard his appreciative groan against her lips. A fire burned deep within her, a need only he could extinguish, so hot, so delicious. She wanted him closer, needed him inside her, desperately, *now, right now.*

"Don't stop, don't ever stop, *please*, Zandor, I need you."

She heard a growl and Thryll began to chuckle softly behind them.

"It's about time. Put her down, Zandor, or do you plan to mate her here?"

"No," said Zandor and lifted his head; his eyes were molten gold and his lips drawn back over his fangs. "Take her, quickly," he growled to Thryll.

"Come here, sweetness," said Thryll, pulling her toward him and carrying her a few feet away.

She fought hard against him. She wanted, she needed to be with Zandor. Thryll's warm fingers cupped her face and she looked into eyes smoldering with passion. She calmed as he kissed her gently, deeply and set her away at arm's length.

"Now, will you go and seduce the guard?"

Beth turned to look at Zandor; he held his lips in a grim line and waved her forward. Walking hesitantly toward the guard's hut, she formed a plan of seduction. *I can do this, no problem. I've seduced two Pride males, haven't I? And this is just one lonely guard . . . with a gun.* She stopped and glanced over her shoulder. Although shrouded in darkness, she could clearly see Thryll leaning back nonchalantly against a wide concrete pillar, watching her progress. Zandor stood stiffly beside him, his hands bunched into fists at his sides.

They were there for her, ready to kill the guard, if necessary. She certainly didn't want a death on her hands. Drawing a deep breath to relax, she put a swing in her hips; this brought a low whistle from one of her men. She reached the stairs to the guardhouse and paused to undo the buttons of her shirt. The cool night air brushed against her skin as she popped the small buttons, almost to her midriff. Her nipples peaked. Tossing her hair over her shoulder, she folded back the collar of the shirt to emphasize the fullness of her breasts. She took a deep breath, pushed open the guard's door, and stepped inside into the light.

The awful smell from within hit her like a train. Her heart sank as a large Ram male looked up at her. He looked enormous. She shuddered uncontrollably at the sight of his face. So ugly, more like a pig than a man, with his horns cut short and partly covered by a mass of black, coarse hair sticking out in all directions. Thick red lips stretched over pointed teeth and thick dog-like fangs in more of a grimace than a smile. The putrid Ram jumped out of his seat and rounded the desk toward her. Beth froze, her back against the wall.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" he said, sniffing the air and grunting approval, his piggy black eyes set on her cleavage.

Beth plastered a sweet smile on her lips and jutted her breasts forward provocatively. "My friend wants to borrow a dune buggy and go visit her boyfriend. Do you think we can do a deal for the hire?"

"What do you have in mind?" The Ram traced a gnarled talon down the gap between her breasts. "You smell as if you're in need of my expert attention." He chuckled.

Beth swallowed and tried to stop her knees from trembling. "I *am* in desperate need, as you can tell. T-the very thought of you makes me w-wet."

"You didn't need an excuse to come and get laid, pretty lady."

Beth cringed as a gnarled hand cupped her ass. "Well, yes, I do. She's my cover; we told my husband I was sleeping over at her house tonight."

"Druik males may have brains but they don't know how to use their cocks to please a female. This I understand. You need more than one male to satisfy your needs." The Ram chuckled and his talons dug hard into her ass cheek.

Beth's mind flashed to Zandor and Thryll and a smile crossed her lips. "Yes, I do need two males."

"Then what else do you require from me to clinch this deal?"

"If she can borrow a dune buggy, will you open the gate and leave it open until she returns? I'll stay here and we can have some fun. She'll only be an hour."

"Nobody comes and goes at this time of night, so go and tell your friend she can have until dawn." The Ram grinned from ear to ear. A long drip of saliva escaped his mouth and dripped off his chin. "That'll give *us* plenty of time." He chuckled.

Bile filled her mouth and she stepped away. "Sounds good; open the gate and I'll go and tell her."

"Oh, no, my pretty, you may call to her through the window. I'm not stupid enough to unlock the gate and watch you run away. A deal is a deal. I'll just lock the door so we won't be disturbed." The Ram moved back to his desk and spoke softly into the control panel.

The lock on the door clicked and Beth panicked. She dashed to the window, fumbled with the catch and pushed it wide open. She gasped a sigh of relief as the tall steel gate groaned and began to move. Sticking her head out of the window, she enunciated her words carefully. "Take the dune buggies through the gate; I've decided to stay here to have some fun with the Ram. Don't worry, we won't be disturbed, he's locked the door. See you at dawn."

Thryll swore a little too loudly and ran after Zandor to the row of dune buggies. Beth giggled nervously as she watched them roll two swiftly through the gate, pushing them with apparent ease. Trembling in fear, her heart pounded as they disappeared around the side of the complex and into darkness. The chair behind her squeaked and she froze, the Ram's repulsive odor proceeding him.

"Show me what I'm getting; peel those clothes off nice and easy," he grunted.

Beth turned to face him. The high set window appeared to be wide enough to climb through but there would still be a substantial drop to the ground. Should she risk it? Hang from the window ledge, and jump?

Glancing over at the Ram, she swallowed hard; he would grab her if she tried to escape. She needed to distract him. Her mind began to sift through images of strippers she'd seen in movies. How they moved to titillate their customers. She plastered a seductive look on her face and swayed her hips a little. *Oh, that got his attention.* She leaned forward and cupped her breasts; sheer panic made her movements uncoordinated. *Jeeze, I'm more like a drunken hula dancer.* The Ram didn't seem to notice; his eyes followed her every move as he leaned back in his chair and drooled contentedly.

"Why don't I show you what you're getting?" he said, licking his lips.

Oh, dear Lord! Horrified, she pressed her back against the wall as the Ram pulled his shirt over his head and dropped his pants with a grin. *Oh, my, he is a hairy one and as big as a horse.* Her mind reeled in terror. *If I don't get out of here soon, this beast will rape me.*

"Come here, little white skin," crooned the Ram. He leaned back in the chair and opened his arms.

"Not until I'm sure my friend is safely through the gate."

Beth gave him a genuine smile. He looked very funny sitting there drooling with an erection as big as Texas. She pushed her head out of the window and sighed with relief when she saw Zandor below.

"Jump," he whispered, opening his arms wide.

Beth never thought of herself as agile; in fact, downright clumsy would be a more fitting description. She clasped the window frame and scrambled up, grazing her knees on the rough brick wall. Behind her, the Ram bellowed, stood up from his chair, tripped over his pants, and fell heavily, sprawling on the floor.

"Come back here you little slut." The ram swore loudly and began to crawl toward her on all fours.

She screamed loudly, panicked and slipped down to the floor. Trying to avoid the sharp talons groping for her legs, she kicked out each time the Ram lunged forward. Her fingers fumbled for purchase and she began to climb again. Lungs bursting with effort, she finally found purchase with her feet on the thin window ledge. Her trembling fingers closed around the window frame and she stopped, frozen in shock.

"Jump, little one." Zandor's voice broke through the haze of fear in her brain.

The floodlights in the parking lot danced before her eyes and without another thought, she threw herself from the window, tumbling awkwardly backward, but Zandor caught her, as if she were as light as a feather, and drew her to his chest.

"I have you, be calm, relax," he crooned and sprinted through the gate just as it began to close. She clung to his neck as he sprinted around the iron fence and under a dark overhang where Thryll stood with the dune buggies.

"I'll guess we've only seconds before he raises the alarm. See if you can make these work or we'll have to run," said Thryll anxiously.

"You did well, Beth," purred Zandor. He dropped her gently to her feet and stood so close she could still feel the heat from his body.

Beth turned to the dune buggies. They used similar modes of transport in the complex where she worked, though these were much bigger and made to carry two people. They each held a solar panel along the back of the frame and large metal saddlebags on both sides. Leaning over one, she searched for a key in the ignition,

and noticed a red button on the handlebar. *Here goes nothing.* She pressed it and the motor hummed into life. *So far so good.* She climbed into the seat and experimented with the controls.

"Okay, Thryll, jump on that one. Press the red button to start the engine. Right pedal is forward. When you want to stop, press the left pedal gently or you'll roll over. Let's go; we'll follow this road and bear left at the second intersection."

She glared at Zandor when his arms slipped around her waist, lifted her off the seat, and placed her behind Thryll. "You don't know how to drive one of these."

"Neither does Thryll, but we learn very quickly, precious one." He smiled a brilliant smile, slipped into the seat and stamped down on the accelerator, shooting past them into the darkness.

Chapter Seven

Beth slipped her arms around Thryll's waist and held her breath as they sped off into the night. She glanced ahead over his shoulder and the wind battered her face, bringing with it the smell of hay and the musty fragrance of freshly tilled soil. Dipping her head, she cuddled closer when his hair caught in the wind and whipped uncomfortably at her skin. She pressed her face into his back to overdose herself with his scent, so warm, so comforting.

She could make out every detail of the countryside flashing past. It appeared flat and barren; spread out under the star-filled sky. The outline of trees sped by as Thryll swerved unnervingly from one side of the highway to the other. The road ahead, however, was a black, unknown mass.

"This machine has lights. The yellow switch on the left. Turn them on, or we'll be killed."

A laugh reverberated through Thryll's chest "I can see clearly, sweetness. This buggy goes swiftly, if I can just keep the beast in a straight line." He chuckled.

Beth gritted her teeth and tightened her grip. Her stomach rolled unpleasantly as they skidded across the first intersection, missing Zandor's buggy by a hair's breadth. She clung onto Thryll for dear life and watched Zandor cruise up beside

them, the wind blowing his hair out in long, golden tendrils. His gaze danced with mischief and his grin flashed in the dark. Technology was addictive, she decided once he sped off again, in complete control as usual.

They'd traveled along the straight, flat road for a few minutes before the piercing wail of sirens broke the stillness of the night. Thryll swore and the buggy lurched forward as he punched down hard on the pedal.

Turning to see the wide, white beam of a colossal floodlight stream across the area surrounding the complex, Beth screeched. "They're coming."

She gaped at rows of men in black uniforms, dressed like a riot squad in helmets. Panic gripped her when they lined up on dune buggies outside the complex gate. They appeared almost ghost-like surrounded by the blue halo from the headlights. As the floodlight flashed toward them, she encouraged Thryll to drive his buggy off road and join Zandor behind a copse of trees.

Zandor leapt from the buggy and concealed it in a thick clump of bushes. He turned and lifted Beth from the seat as Thryll idled by. Within seconds, the roar of the Druik army shattered the silent night. Lights bobbed with each bump in the road, getting closer by the second. Taking Beth by the arm, he pushed her flat on the damp grass and covered her with his body.

"Lie still, Beth, and don't look up; the lights will pick out your pale face."

He stroked her hair, glad she nestled against him with complete trust. The Druiks roared past in formation, over fifty of the scum, each carrying rods of pain. The squad moved into the distance. Zandor drew a deep breath and rolled off Beth.

"Have they gone? Which road did they take?" She was whispering as if the Druiks could hear her.

"They went straight ahead at the intersection," said Thryll, gazing into the distance. "They must be moving fast; I can't see their lights anymore."

Zandor got to his feet and helped Thryll drag the buggies from the bush. He turned and looked at Beth. "We haven't got much time. If we turn left at the intersection, can we avoid them if they decide to turn back?"

He watched Beth fiddle with the map device, his gaze constantly drifting back to the road.

"Yes," she said triumphantly. "If we turn left at the intersection, the road passes through a valley. We should be hidden from the Druiks for a while. Long enough to get some distance between us at least."

Zandor nodded and lifted her onto the buggy. "Will we be heading toward the mountains?"

"Yes, and looking at the map there will be dense forest we can hide in if necessary, not far from the road," said Beth, slipping her arms around Thryll's waist.

She listened to them speak in hushed tones, making plans in case the Druiks trapped them. Thryll would take her to safety while Zandor fought them off. Beth had no time to object as they both took off again at great speed. They roared up the highway and slid the buggies left at the intersection.

This road dipped and cut through a valley. Beth breathed easier as they passed unseen into the countryside. She recalled from the map that the road continued through a town some twenty miles further down the road. However, they could miss inhabited areas completely if they turned off when they reached the edge of the forest and travelled cross-country. The thick vegetation which spread all the way to the foot of the mountain range would shield them.

She called to Thryll. "Turn left when you see the edge of the forest. We need to get off the main road."

They traveled on and as the adrenalin began to ebb, she fell exhausted against Thryll. Her head ached and every muscle in her arms cramped from gripping his waist. The next thing she knew, they were stopping and Zandor was whispering in her ear. She jumped, instantly alert.

"You're beyond exhaustion; we'll rest soon," he murmured and pushed a bottle of water to her lips. He slipped his hand up her shirt and rubbed her back in delicious, warm strokes.

She lifted her head, glad to feel the early morning sun on her face. They were beside the edge of the forest. Red cedars reached into a perfect blue sky and waved their lush green limbs as an invitation to enter.

"Thank you, but I'm fine."

She reached up to stroke his soft, gold-streaked hair. "I must check the map but I'm sure we can travel off road now. The caves must be over there." She pointed into the distance to a mountain range that dominated the entire horizon. "The buggies require sunlight to continue running. We must stop somewhere to recharge the batteries. It's only a matter of time before they stop working."

Zandor supported Beth against his body as she dragged the device from her pocket, turned it on and stared at the maps. *She hasn't the stamina of a Pride female. I'm surprised she can function in this state.*

He estimated their position and Thryll agreed they head west and follow the river. They travelled inland, through the rich emerald rainforest, the air fresh and clean. Zandor led the way along winding animal tracks covered with a thick coating of russet and sorrel leaves. Great trees surrounded them, their velvet zebra shadows concealing them in a protective embrace. They pushed deep into the undergrowth for about three hours before Zandor slowed to a stop, climbed from the buggy and stretched.

"I think we've lost the Druik patrol for the time being."

Handing Thryll the backpack, he offered Beth a turn on his buggy.

"Why? Do you plan to walk to the mountains?" Beth said, slipping from behind Thryll.

"No, I plan to run deep into the forest."

"You gave me your word. You said you would look after me; what's all this about?" she replied, sticking out her chin, her fists resting on her hips

He inclined his head to assess her panic. *She believes I will leave her and never return.* "You have Thryll to keep you safe."

He smiled reassuringly when she reached for him and gripped his arms, her small body shivering under his touch.

"Don't leave us, please, I need you. I need you both." Her nails dug into his flesh.

Zandor dipped his head, kissed her, and swept his tongue across her lips.

"I'll never leave you, little one. My cat needs to be free, to hunt, to run. I'll meet you later when you make camp."

He stepped away from her, sat on the leafy forest floor, pulled off his boots, and threw them to Thryll. Watching her face, he slowly removed his clothes and rolled them into a ball. He handed her the leather bundle and brushed her cheek with his fingertips. He turned away to run into the undergrowth, but before he disappeared he turned and gazed into her eyes.

"Soon"

Beth watched in awe at the sight of his black cat bounding away. She turned toward Thryll who looked at her through pools of indigo velvet. "What does he mean by 'soon'?"

"I do believe he intends to imprint on you, Elizabeth. It needs to happen before we mate; our combined scents will enhance the experience for you. It's not usually necessary in Pride females, but Humans have to experience transformation before the ritual is complete."

Beth inclined her head and began to ask more questions but Thryll turned away as if he refused to speak any more about the subject. *What's up with him?* She stood staring after Zandor as Thryll strode to his buggy and slipped into the seat. The engine hummed as he drove a short way ahead before stopping to wait for her. *He doesn't want to answer questions.* Hitting the ignition button, her mind suddenly raced at the implications his words suggested. *Transformation? He had said 'transformation', hadn't he? Into what? They've kept that part of the mating ritual secret. Why? It must be pretty bad if they didn't want to mention it, until it was too late.* Beth ground her teeth at their arrogance. *They are no better than drug dealers, first getting me hooked and then telling me the price.*

Beth had little choice but to start up the other buggy and follow Thryll.

The vehicles were easy to maneuver through the dense, tropical rainforest. Palms cast velvet shadows across their path, while tall, red gums, entwined with vines, formed a canopy to protect them from the rising sun. They climbed the rocky terracotta terrain, which bordered a wide, crystal-blue, meandering river. *What a spectacular view.* Delicate white, amethyst, and pink orchids clung to tree trunks in abundance. Ahead in the distance, a granite mountain range shot up like a row of sentries from the forest floor. From a deep fissure high above, a waterfall exploded in a rush of white foam into the river below.

Beth's anger decreased slightly; she relaxed and enjoyed the warm sunlight on her face. The breeze drifting from the river brought with it the mixed perfume of a thousand different flowers. In the forest, butterflies hovered over blooms of every size and description, their delicate wings painted in sapphire blue, gold, and deep scarlet edged with black. Parrots squawked, argued, and rose in great numbers, gliding from tree to tree in the lush emerald canopy above.

Beth had no difficulty determining where Zandor prowled. The undergrowth crackled as he chased his prey. His deep roar made flocks of birds soar into the brilliant azure sky and block out the sun. His powerful scent scattered a herd of wild-eyed deer, which jumped and swerved across their path in terror.

Beth shivered. She understood the need for wild cats to hunt. Indeed, the mere fact her mates morphed into cats fascinated her; however, her stomach turned at the thought of them killing animals and tearing them apart to eat. A disturbing memory flashed to mind of her own childhood pet, a ginger tom, who mutilated a bird in her tree house. She found the poor decapitated finch and it featured in her nightmares for years. She bit her lip as Thryll slowed to a standstill in a small clearing and threw her a wide grin.

One look at him and she found herself making excuses. Wild cats, jungle cats all had to eat meat, didn't they? They only took the weak or injured from the herd. *Probably doing the poor things a favor.* She shook her head in an effort to clear her thoughts. Just one glance made her heart race; his scent — *their* scents — made her delirious, hungry for them. *Is that enough, can I stay with them forever?* She sighed as he sauntered to her side and his scent wafted over her. Drawing in a deep breath,

she tried to fight the calm that descended so quickly on her. She must ask him about the transformation before it was too late.

Thryll watched Beth's chin rise in determination as she stepped away from him. She required information but he would not give it just yet. She must allow Zandor to imprint first. He stepped forward to enclose her in his arms and his inner cat tensed as her sweet scent filled his nostrils. The need to bite her grew more difficult to control and more overwhelming each time he touched her.

"You're tired, sweetness. Come with me and bathe; the river's edge is just through those trees. When we return, I'll find you some food and make a bed so you can rest."

"Yes, a swim would be wonderful. It's so hot here and we could lie out on the rocks to dry." Beth leaned into him and rested her head on his chest.

He took her hand and led her through the deep undergrowth; they followed the sound of rushing water. The river flowed swiftly at that point, but a wall of rocks close to a sandy bank shielded them from the main current.

Thryll's control slipped dangerously when she stood so innocently before him and slowly opened each small button of her shirt. *Gods, this is going to be difficult.* His cock was rock hard by the time the shirt slipped from her shoulders and her full, white breasts bounced free. He ground his teeth as she bent to pull off her long blue pants and exposed every contour of her sweet folds and tempting ass. He watched her step into the water and swallowed hard when she turned her head and smiled at him.

He dragged the clothes from his body and dived in, catching her deep in the water. A surge of uncontrollable lust shot through him as he pulled her close against his body. The soft skin of her back rubbed against his chest. His hands closed around her breasts, weighing, teasing. He loved the feel of her hard nipples between his fingers, the way she moaned deliciously when he squeezed a little too hard. Spinning her around to face him, he covered her mouth. Groaning with delight at her passionate response, he plunged his tongue between her teeth, bit and sucked on her bottom lip. Her scent overwhelmed him: cinnamon, apples, and female heat.

He pulled back to admire the flushed beauty of her face, her cobalt eyes, and the black tendrils of hair brushing her cheeks. Her nipples poked into his chest, begging him to torment them. He bent his head and savored one rose-pink bud and then the other. When she began to pant, he sucked hard and filled his mouth with her bounty.

Zandor's face flashed across his mind. *Gods, he couldn't spill inside her this time.* He roared in frustration and Beth froze in his arms.

"Don't bite me, Thryll." Her voice was firm, and she placed her hands against his chest.

"No, I'm okay, I won't bite. It's Zandor; it would not be fair to spill inside you when it's his intention to taste you, to imprint."

"What we did before was wonderful. Would that be okay with Zandor?" She smiled and trailed one finger down his chest.

His cock bobbed in anticipation as her fingers closed around his shaft. A warm rush traveled through his body at the memory of her spread out before him, exposed and helpless. "I think he'd notice if I mark your pretty little ass."

"What if we just go straight to the last bit?" Beth said, beginning to pump his shaft slowly.

Thryll inclined his head and grinned at her. *She can't say the words; she's so sweet, so innocent.* He bent to take her mouth. She opened for him, and their tongues tangled. His mouth filled with the flavor of fresh air, sunshine, and lust.

Her hands brushed a wet caress on his neck, her slender fingers tangling in his hair. He wanted to crush her against him and bury himself to the hilt. He held her close, her hard, cold nipples pressed into his chest, tantalizing his hot skin. He traced the outline of her body, her skin so soft under his hands. Beneath his palms, her rounded hips flowed to a peach-shaped bottom. When he traced the apex of her thighs, she opened her legs, so bare and luscious. His fingers glided between her folds and found her hot and ready. He pressed his erection against her and she moaned into his mouth, pulled his hair and ground against him. Kissing her deeper, he slipped his fingers deep into her moist pussy. Her folds opened their petals at his

touch, so wet for him, so hot and needy. Swirling her hard pearl, he sucked on her bottom lip and she came hard in long, trembling ripples.

"Thryll," she cried out against his lips.

He groaned; his fingers were soaked with her juices.

The rocks beside the river were smooth and bathed in sunlight. He led her deeper into the water. A ripple of passion shot through him when she spread her body face down across a tall rock and pushed her ass high in the air toward him. She looked so sexy when she glanced over one shoulder, her cheeks bright spots of pink, her eyes burning with passion. He ran a hand down the silky skin of her back and she arched like a cat, displaying her glistening pussy. Standing behind her, he scooped up the moisture and trailed it up to her exposed ass. He dipped a finger inside her tight puckered star and she sighed, pushing back.

He slapped one rounded ass cheek and then the other. "Tell me what you want from me, sweetness. Say the words I want to hear."

"I want you inside me, Thryll, deep inside, hard, and fast." She groaned, turned, and flicked her long, silken hair over one shoulder and met his eyes.

He watched her whole body blush as he swirled his finger around her ass. "Say it, sweetness."

Beth's entire body burned with embarrassment. How could she say the words he needed to hear? The soft halo of his hair tickled her ass as his tongue dipped with nerve-racking precision inside her pussy. Her body trembled so close to climax, but he held her balanced on a razor-sharp edge.

"Oh, p-please, I c-can't stand it."

The heat of his tongue burned as it danced through her pussy. His finger circled her ass, probing deep inside her to drive her up again. She whimpered in need and he chuckled and stopped.

"Say it," he crooned as he swiped a tantalizing lick across her pearl.

"I want you to fuck my ass."

"That's my girl. I like it when you talk dirty." His warm hands grasped her hips and pulled her closer to position her on the edge of the rock. Her whole body

trembled in expectation when the hot head of his cock caressed her pussy. In delicious torment, he stroked his shaft from pearl to ass. Beth mewed when his long fingers grasped her ass cheeks and the hot head of his cock pressed against her entrance, probing, opening. A hot luscious rush consumed her as his cock buried deep inside. After pausing for a moment, he withdrew completely and buried himself to the hilt again, his balls brushing deliciously against her pussy. She cried out in ecstasy. The heat of his body burned through her buttocks, his touch a flame against her skin. He filled her completely, stretching her to the limit. Her feet slipped from the rock as he dragged her hips toward him. He pulled her back again, increasing the impaled sensation of his massive bulk. Her hands rested on the rock, her body as limp as a rag doll, her weight supported entirely by his hands. He began to move, sliding in and out, in and out, his long, hard strokes sending ripples of exquisite sensations right to her swollen pearl.

Thryll drove hard into her sweet little ass. The moisture from her pussy dripped down and tickled his balls. Their sweat covered bodies slapped together loudly at every plunge. The rich scent of her arousal sent his cat into a frenzy and her moans of pleasure were driving him too fast to completion. She looked so beautiful laid bare before him, her skin glistening with a fine coating of sweat. He reached to touch the raven hair, spread out across the rock, fighting the desire to flip her around and lick her long, white and oh-so-bite-able neck. He loved her soft curves, the bounce of her breasts. He groaned when her body tensed as she neared climax, her ass beginning to pulse with ruthless intensity around his cock.

"Lady, have mercy," he shouted to the sky and rode her deep and hard until she screamed out his name. His own climax shattered into a spiral of erotic delight. He felt tears burn the back of his eyes. *Gods, he loved her.*

He slipped from her body and hugged her close.

"I love you, Elizabeth."

"I love you, too," she replied, turning in his arms, her face flushed. Suddenly she stepped away and waded deeper into the water

"What is it, sweetness?"

"Your eyes are gold; it will be safer if I keep my distance for a while."

Thryll ran toward her, lifted her high in the air, and plunged them both under the water. When they surfaced, he grinned at her annoyance. "It's your scent that drives my cat crazy; if you wash it off, it helps a great deal. My cat will be better after I hunt this eve. Tonight, I'll give you some time alone with Zandor."

"He may bite me if you're not around. Do you think it's safe?" She looked up at him, her eyes confused.

"His cat will be full and lazy after a hunt. Zandor will be in charge; you have my word."

Chapter Eight

Zandor shook the water from his hair as he strode from the river. The hunt had settled his cat and filled his stomach. Glancing up, he noticed Thryll sitting high in a tree, his cat form lounging across a branch. Zandor called to him and the snow leopard jumped down and morphed as his feet hit the ground.

"Even from the highest trees, there was no sign of Druiks. We're safe for a while longer."

"Good, your turn to hunt now; deer graze along the river; there are many."

"Okay, I won't be long." Thryll inclined his head toward an overhang of rock, sheltered by trees. "She sleeps. I believe I may have overused her. She's inexperienced in our ways. Earlier, she informed me, she's only had three Human lovers and they only took her once . . . I didn't know."

"What happened? I gather you were last eve's entertainment for Pic?"

"At first, I believed she was a female Pic required gentling for a Ram." He paused, noticing Zandor's black look, and rubbed his chin, his expression troubled. "Don't look at me like that. I had no choice, Zandor; it was the only hope of rescuing you. At first, I used my glamor on her, but when I kissed her, my cat went crazy."

"By the Lady, Thryll, what have you done to her?"

Zandor waited, his stomach clenched.

"Everything, I blindfolded her, tied, and strapped her." Thryll stepped back, sat on a rock and rubbed his hands over his face. "I made her beg for release, and then fucked her virgin ass while Pic watched."

Zandor drew a deep breath and tried to calm the anger welling up inside. "Okay, anything else I should know about? You haven't bitten her as well, have you? If you have, I may just kill you."

"I love her and she loves me." Thryll slowly rose to his feet. "She enjoyed our time together and she likes anal. We made love that way, while you were away." The air shimmered as he morphed and bounded into the forest.

Zandor paced up and down while he pondered the situation. The warm air caressed as it dried his body. *What if she is a cruel Druik trick? What if she really belongs to me? Could I ever love again? Maybe, I could learn to love her. Would she take me knowing what I am? She still wanted Thryll even after the ordeal he put her through yesterday. How could she be for me as well?* Her scent attracted him. No, he corrected himself; he craved her scent, didn't he? He wanted her, in every possible way. He longed to dive his tongue into her folds, open her petals, taste, and tease. He ached to plunge his cock into her, into every delectable hole. Yes! He needed to hold her close, to hear her call out his name in passion. His head ached. *Gods, I must control the beast and make my claim.*

She lay curled on her side, dappled light playing across her nakedness. Zandor stood perfectly still and gazed at her. His cat nudged him forward. *She is for both of us, you must allow me to imprint. Soon, we'll bite and take her for our own.* Stepping closer, he lowered himself to the mound of leaves and crawled onto the travel rug from the dune buggy. He smiled down at her and she stirred, her eyes fluttering open.

"You're back; I'm glad," she crooned as her hand softly stroked his thigh.

"I'm sorry Thryll exposed you so soon to our dark side."

She surprised him by her snort of laughter.

"I've never felt so alive. I loved it and will love more of it." She sat up and wrapped her arms around him. "Thryll's an expert of pain and pleasure. What's your expertise?" Her eyes sparkled with excitement.

Zandor pulled her close. So soft, so Human. He must be careful never to hurt her.

"I'm dangerous to you, little one. I enjoy pain. I love to inflict pain and give so much pleasure; you may not survive. I'm great of girth, as you've noticed. I may stretch you beyond what you believe possible. I lay with both male and female; in truth, Thryll and I are lovers. You must weigh all this before you allow me to imprint, for I'll be the most demanding lover for all time."

She did not as much as blink but laid a hand on each side of his cheeks. Her eyes were soft as she replied.

"I've questions. Will you answer them truthfully?"

"Yes."

"Will you sleep with others after we mate? I need to know this, Zandor."

"No! It's not what we do. I'll care for you, little one, and I'll not seek another female. When we give our promise before we mate, it's our agreement to accept each other for eternity."

"Why did you tell me that poor faerie was screaming in ecstasy, when she was dying?"

"You were fearful; it was best to shield you from the truth."

She seemed happy with his reply. He took both her hands and waited for the next question.

"Tell me about the transformation."

Dear gods, how had she discovered this? He drew a deep breath, deciding to be honest.

"When we bite, our venom will change you into a Pride female. You will become stronger, more agile and have improved senses like those you've already experienced. You'll grow fangs; however, you'll not be able to morph until you bear a cub."

"Explain 'cub'." She grimaced, dropped her hands and moved back when he reached for her.

"We call our babes 'cubs'. You have fears our child will be a cat? No, it will be as you and I and Thryll. Did you not understand the gift Nox gave to you? Our babes will all be a mix of the three of us. Not my cub or Thryll's cub but *our* cub."

He watched Beth absorb this information as she sat and stared into the undergrowth as if she needed to decide. Time passed and the awful pang of rejection began to creep into his soul. His cat wanted to break free and run into the forest.

"Thank you for your honesty." She looked up at him. "My life, in the Human realm, was very lonely. I honestly believed I'd passed my best 'use-by' date. I *know* you don't understand that expression; it means, I thought my chance to find a man was limited. I believe you will care for me. I can accept you for all you are, Zandor, and everything we will be."

Zandor's cat purred. Beth giggled, her eyes dancing with mischief, and pounced on him, rolling them both back. He pulled her close. She sprawled on top of him, her nipples hard against his chest. Damp, urgent bodies, flesh to flesh. Enjoying the sting of her sharp nails across his shoulders, he drank in her heady scent and fell into her erotic web. Gods, he wanted her in every possible way, to fill her with his essence, imprint his scent on her so she would never take another. He gripped her head and pulled her soft mouth toward him. Sucking on her tongue, so moist, so hungry, he tasted, enjoyed, and groaned when her impatient, honey flavored tongue plunged deep in his mouth. His skin raised in goose-bumps as her fingers tangled in his hair and she slid her long legs across his body. Her cool, hard nipples brushed his chest and sent blood in a head-spinning rush to his cock.

"I want you, little one; take me into you, and know me in all ways."

Beth trembled under his touch and kissed him with passion, sucking hard on his bottom lip. He responded with a deep growl, grasped her hands and trapped them in his fist as he rolled her onto her back and covered her with his hot body.

"Mine," he growled as his mouth closed over a nipple.

She arched as he sucked, teasing her nipple with his fangs, and she loved it. His scent, so familiar now, carried the pungent aromas of the rainforest, his breath of summer rain. She writhed as his heavy weight pinned her deliciously. His legs

rested each side of her hips; his huge cock pressed against her stomach. She enjoyed being beneath him. Hell, she loved him. She lifted her body for him to caress and shivered when his tongue played across erogenous zones she had not known existed. Their bare skin slid, silk on silk, as he explored and tasted her in devastating precision.

"You taste like honey and moonbeams," he purred and bent to cover her mouth.

His touch demanded, branded her and the soft kisses that trailed a path down her neck romanced. He dropped her arms and his strong hands lifted her hips, allowing him to feast between her legs. She cried out his name. His silken hair brushed her skin and tickled unmercifully. She watched his head bob between her thighs, opening her folds with long strokes of his tongue, swirling intently around her hard pearl. She quivered when his fingers gripped her ass cheeks, kneading as his thumbs caressed her ass, her pussy. With Thryll, she burned; under Zandor's hot mouth, she melted. He caught her pearl between his teeth and sucked. She begged for release and heard his wicked chuckle as she came in a shuddering torrent.

Zandor enjoyed the pain inflicted by her fingers twisting in his hair. He continued to savor the wetness of her body as she writhed in ecstasy. She tasted incredible, better than he could have ever imagined. Her scent, so concentrated here, left no doubt she was his, made for him, for them, by the Lady, just as Thryll had predicted. He watched her flushed face, her eyes deep pools of passion. He took pleasure in the tremble of her moist body against him. She was ready, he decided, and lifted her knees to his hips. *So wet, wet enough to take her ass. No, not yet, but soon, little one, soon.* He rested the head of his rigid cock to her pussy. *Watch her eyes, be gentle.* He pushed away his cat's urge to bite, and moved forward. Slowly, ever so slowly, he thrust into her hot wetness.

"You're too big, it won't fit," she gasped as her arms flailed.

"You were made for me, little one. Open for me; I'm yours." He waited on the precipice of delight; blood throbbed like war drums in his ears. "Relax, little one, I'll not force you."

Once she relaxed, he moved again into her heat. He understood her fear as her pussy gripped him tightly, but she would take him, all of him, here and in her ass. He reached between them and pinched her pearl, sighing with relief when she bucked at the contact and moaned delightfully. He would bring her up again, he decided, and watched her spiral quickly into bliss, coating him with her nectar. He took a deep breath of delight as her pussy began to quiver, clutched her hips, and drove inside.

Beth panicked, convinced he would split her in two. She bit her bottom lip as he thrust deep, and rode on the waves of an intense orgasm. All worries fled as her pussy stretched to the limit and accepted his massive bulk. She twisted but his warm hands held her tight as he withdrew completely and drove into her again. Sucking in his scent, she calmed and then her pleasure rose again as he awakened a ferocious need deep in her belly. She bit her cheek to stop swearing her undying love as the head of his cock hit the entrance to her womb, his hard muscles, golden skin, hot and wet, slid against her tender nipples, to torment, to inflame. A tremor of wild pleasure shot through her center at his exquisite intrusion and she tumbled over the edge again. Her entire body shook as he filled her with a pounding hot delight. He dropped her legs, fell forward, and cupped her cheeks in his hands. His kiss was fierce, possessive, deliciously demanding as fangs pierced her lip, leaving a metallic taste on her tongue. He licked the blood from her lip, raised his head, and swore.

"Gods, we're in trouble, little one, my cat has tasted your blood."

She froze. Heart racing, she lay pinned beneath him. His eyes burned gold as he began to move inside her. Every stroke was so intense, so thrilling, she rolled in perpetual climax with every plunge. He lifted his head to graze a trail down her neck with his fangs. She gasped when his teeth closed on her breast and lost herself in him, drowned in his essence. Any thought to stop him biting was hopeless. He raged like a storm, his eyes flashed color, darkness, and lightning. She watched his tormented expression, molten eyes so dangerous, lips pulled back over his fangs. In fear for her life, she pushed hard on his chest, stymied when he reared up, lifted her legs high in the air and drove into her with ferocity.

"Mine." He roared as he spilled, filling her with hot spurts and pushing her once more over the edge.

His cat roared. All control lost as she climaxed around his shaft. The slow, rhythmic waves squeezed him into an uncontrollable spill and plunged him further into madness. Her beautiful face blurred, lost in his cat's frenzy, to mark, to drink, to mate, to take. Her voice echoed somewhere in the sexual haze as he slipped from her body.

"Zandor, look at me, concentrate," she pleaded.

He lifted his head; yes, she was there, her scent, her softness pinned beneath his bulk. His cock grew hard instantly. *Do not bite. Take her again, but do not bite.* He turned her over and pulled her onto her knees. Gods, she weighed nothing and did not try to stop him. *How could she?* His inner cat roared. "*Bite. Mine. Take her now.*"

He ground his teeth. Stay calm, imprint. Slow, take it slow.

Beth cried out in panic when the tip of Zandor's massive cock nudged at her ass, pushing inside in one glorious, hot slide. She groaned in pleasure as he filled her completely, enclosing her with his body, wet with sweat as he plunged and withdrew. She pushed back to enjoy the long, tantalizing strokes in and out, in and out. She mewed with pleasure, the heat of his body against her back, his breath moist on her shoulders and the scrape of his fangs . . . delicious.

A warm hand touched her face and she lifted her gaze to meet Thryll's worried expression. She sighed as his tongue wiped a path across her lips, to savor, to taste. She heard him groan as the puncture mark on her lip began to bleed. She opened her eyes and met molten pools of gold.

"Mine." Zandor bellowed at his friend, the warning leaving his mouth in a guttural growl.

Beth gasped as Zandor pulled her up into his arms. His sweat-soaked chest pressed hard against her back. She moaned at the pressure of his cock impaling her ass so deeply. Trembling, she watched as Thryll growled long and low and moved toward them, his eyes locked on Zandor.

"What's happening? Thryll, Zandor? Both of you, calm down."

"Ours, Zandor, she is ours." Thryll inclined his head and displayed his sharp, white fangs.

Beth shuddered in delight when Thryll's fingers dipped into her folds and his fangs closed round her nipple. Flames licked her body as Zandor rocked into her and the dual sensation electrified her. She cried out in disappointment when Thryll's fingers slid from her pussy and Zandor slipped from her ass. Zandor's warm hands lifted her. She fell against him weightless, floating.

"Will you accept us, Elizabeth, both Thryll and Zandor for eternity?" Zandor's voice, soft, controlled came close to her ear.

"Will you accept us both, sweetness?" Thryll urged.

Beth's ears rang; she hung on the precipice of a denied climax. *Have they used glamor on me? Do I care? If it feels this good, it must be illegal. Yes, damn it, I want them both, and right now.*

"Yes, oh God, yes, please."

Her sex-crazed mind vaguely registered that Zandor had sat down against a tree, jungle patterns dancing across his golden body. Her legs turned to jelly when he reached up to pull her close. His kiss, hot, possessive, burned her sore lips before he turned and lifted her. A squeak of excitement left her lips as his cock slipped effortlessly up her ass again.

"We are going to mate you, little one. Remember this, our first time together," Zandor reassured softly, close to her ear.

The forest moved in and out of focus as he rocked rhythmically inside then pulled her back, pressing her once again to his damp body. His scent hypnotized as rough fingers worked magic on her painfully hard nipples; soft lips sucked gently on her neck and trailed kisses to her earlobe.

Fascinated by the halo of soft, platinum curls, she watched when Thryll opened her legs wide and knelt between them. His strong hands cupped her face and lifted her mouth for a long, deep kiss. She supped on his exotic tongue, savoring his moist breath, sighing in loss when he pulled away.

"I love you so much, sweet Elizabeth; burn with us, connect with us in your soul. Join us forever," Thryll whispered against her lips.

"Yes, make me burn, I want you both so much."

Delightfully trapped within their erotic embrace, she drank in the heady mix of stimulating aromas as their scents mingled. Thryll's cock nudged at her pussy. Pleasure rippled through her body. It slipped in. They filled her so full, so tight, and when they moved, she shuddered. Their sweat-coated bodies pressed against her, pinning her inside an erotic dance of undulating heat. She tipped her head back as they moved within her with practiced precision, like two well-oiled pistons. Her most intimate heat stretched in luscious fervor to accept the fullness of their wonderful gifts. Flesh rubbed against flesh and tantalized her with wild, delicious tremors. She dug her fingernails into Thryll's shoulders as multiple orgasms rolled into each other with each carnal lunge.

"I can feel you; your cock is caressing mine. She fits us so well," Zandor whispered to Thryll.

"Aye, I feel you thick beneath a fine blanket of silk."

"Do you burn for us, little one?" Zandor purred, his tongue caressing her.

Her reply came out in a gasp. "Yes."

Tongues licked her neck, and she giggled when they both suckled and tickled her throat. Their hot breath caressed her as they began to drive into her in unison. The world began to spiral into a mind-blowing delirium. The hunger within surged and she barely noticed the sharp stab of their fangs when they slid deep into each side of her throat. Her heart rushed with sudden fear as the warm flow of blood trickled down her neck. The trees above began to spin as they fed on her life force. Their venom flowed into her veins. No pain, only beautiful heat, and a rush of uncontrollable lust, so intense it threatened to consume her soul. She closed her eyes as a wave of euphoria took her up again, gripping her with exquisite tension. Visions of battles, castles, and endless kinky sex flooded her mind. *Lord, I am inside their minds, their memories, so many adventures, so many women.*

She tried to relax against the enormous pressure on her neck. They sucked so hard and pushed their venom relentlessly into her with delectable spurts. She

whimpered with need. Zandor growled and continued to drive deep inside her ass as his fangs buried farther into her neck. Her gaze fell on Thryll as he held her face gently in one hand, his eyes intently on her, his cheeks moving rhythmically as he sucked her blood. Hungry for more, she demanded all they could give. She ground her body against them, driving them deeper inside her. She called out their names and grasped handfuls of silken hair.

"I'm burning up; it's too intense, help me."

Beth tipped her head back on Zandor's shoulder as Thryll released his bite. His eyes turned slowly back to indigo twilight as he licked her blood from his lips.

"We burn for you, sweetness, you own our souls," groaned Thryll.

She pulled his head toward her to seek his lips, surprised at the hot metallic rush of his tongue against her own. Burning with passion, she writhed as Zandor held her tight, drinking fervently as they continued their relentless thrusts deep inside. She could only hold onto Thryll as her body squirmed in insatiable need. She screamed as they spilled together in long, hot spurts, flooding her with heat. Waves of orgasm surged through her, catching her breath. An uncontrollable convulsion shattered her core as she toppled over into insurmountable bliss. Thryll called out her name as she tumbled into darkness.

Chapter Nine

"Are you sure she's not dying?" Thryll pushed the curtain of curls from his face and peered at the porcelain white body at his feet. "Gods, she's so pale. I fear we took far too much blood, Zandor."

Zandor lifted his head from examining a pile of metal objects he had extracted from the saddlebags of the dune buggies. They were interesting, unfamiliar and now it was afternoon, he spread them out on the woolen travel rug to inspect them more closely.

"I've spoken at length about just that subject with my brothers. I do recall Blaise mentioning our venom not only changes a Human but can also heal. Methinks she'll sleep a while longer and then wake."

Zandor sighed as Thryll covered Beth with the blanket and fussed over her. He had insisted they wash off the blood and remove the smell of sex from her prostrate body. He already showed deep love for the female. He watched his friend bend and tenderly push a strand of raven silk from her face.

"She's slept most of the day. I'm worried we've overtaxed her system; she is, after all, only a Human. What if she dies?"

The question brought Zandor to his feet. He squatted down beside Beth and touched her cheek. Thryll hovered over him and it surprised Zandor to notice wet patches on his cheeks. *It took a mere Human female to bring this warrior to tears.*

"I don't think I could live without her now," Thryll whispered.

"Nor I, but she's well, much stronger than you believe. She's survived all that the Druik scum threw at her. It does pain me our mating was so violent, but I'm sure she enjoyed the same intense experience as we did."

He returned to the assortment of implements to continue sharpening each one against a river rock. "When you came upon us, I wanted to kill you; my cat didn't intend to share. I believe this is going to be a problem. I've no knowledge of how we proceed during her Moon Fire."

"My cat welcomes you; he loves you as I do." Thryll turned toward his friend with a bleak expression. He lifted the wine skin, took a long draft, and wiped his lips on the back of his hand. "I'm sure it wasn't the Lady's intention for us to fight over Elizabeth. I suggest we proceed together as we have with all the other females we've shared."

"You love her, but for me it is different. Mayhap this is the Lady's way."

"I don't understand," replied Thryll

Zandor stared at his friend. "It makes no difference; I've given my oath. The rest may come in time. In truth, how can I possibly ask Blaise to make her immortal? He'll know my feelings are lust and he despises any who don't love their chosen mates. I'd rather go through the centuries with you."

"She loves you." Thryll's eyes blazed. "And the Lady wouldn't give anyone into an emotionless union. Name me one other pairing that's not consumed in the fire of love."

"I can't but I don't feel that emotion for her, although my cat would argue. It's true, I desire her, I want her, I'll protect her from danger. This pure love that *you* feel is foreign to me. I'm no more than a beast. You, of all people, know that. I pledged to have no other and I'll abide by my oath. This, as you know, is not my nature and it's my untamed lust for many affairs, I fear."

"We've both enjoyed untamed lust," Thryll argued, opening his arms wide and looking at him with confusion. "When she bites us and carries our cub, love will come. She is everything we've asked the Lady for, a great gift to cherish. With the two of us to stay your lust, all will be well. You'll love her as I do."

"Will your love protect her from my whip? Or, mayhap protect her from my insatiable needs when she wants none of me? What will you do when she carries our cub and I desire to tie her, blindfold her and make her taste my whip? When I take her many times a day, when she is full and ripe. I'll want her again, soon after she births. I'll sip her milk and make her beg for my cock. Think you'll stop me?"

"I know you'll not take her against her will." Thryll growled deep in his chest and his lips drew back from his fangs. "You may be a fearsome warrior but I know you well. You'd die before you brought pain to Elizabeth. You think her desire will stop when she is with cub. By the morrow, she'll be strong and so will be her desire for all things rampant," he said angrily and poked a finger in Zandor's chest. "She'll want to take us both and her great love will pierce your frozen heart. I know you, Zandor; you receive no joy from inflicting pain on those you love. Your lust comes from the enjoyment of those you whip. Our mate was close to orgasm after six cuts of my leather. We'll train her to enjoy the whip." He paced up and down then turned and smiled at Zandor. "Do you remember the Lonza female who lusted after us? She knew nothing of the whip but as you instructed her, I pleased her with my mouth. She took your cock hungrily up her virgin ass and begged for more."

"Yes, I remember and after twelve moons she left us."

"I missed her too." Thryll shook his head wistfully.

"I do believe I *loved* her. She left my heart like a shriveled pea. Gods, Thryll, I can't go through that pain again."

"She wasn't our mate." Thryll inclined his head, surprise apparent on his face.
"Elizabeth will never leave us. Open your heart or lose her trust."

Thryll stepped back when Zandor raised his head. His eyes glowed dark gold as his lips drew back from his fangs.

"I smell the stink of Druik on the wind." Zandor roared as he shimmered into his cat and bounded up the tall, red cedar.

Leaves and bark rained down upon Thryll as the big, black leopard's claws tore into the tree. Parrots screamed and lifted off in every direction when the big cat roared. It leaped effortlessly from branch to branch, slid down the trunk backward, landing as Zandor, softly on the forest floor.

"Many, perhaps four hours to the west, the dust cloud is clearly visible in the sky." Zandor pointed into the distance.

"We will be discovered; mayhap aiming for the portal is the only choice."

"I don't believe they will find us just yet, but in case they do, I've sharpened the metal objects into suitable weapons." Zandor rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Beth is going to be a problem. By morning, she'll be in Moon Fire. There is nowhere to hide her, unless we try for the caves as Nox suggested. It's doubtful we'd make the portal before daybreak anyway. Pack up everything except her clothes and food for tonight," he said dismissively.

Thryll had no reason to argue. Zandor led an army in Dryad and knew how to proceed in battle; in this, Thryll trusted him implicitly. He turned at once to gather their belongings and pack the saddlebags. His mind drifted to Beth. They were fools for mating her in this wilderness. *What is going to become of us now? Gods, what will happen if love doesn't come for Zandor?*

He watched as his friend approached Beth, surprised when he gathered her into his arms and kissed her tenderly.

"Wake for me, little one. I need your heat." Zandor's fingers caressed her nipples and slid down between her folds.

"Don't you think our time would be better spent fleeing this place?"

"Come, sit down, kiss and caress her; she will wake in need." Zandor looked up at him with hooded eyes.

"How do you know this?"

"She burns for us still and we do have a little time to spare for our luscious mate." Zandor chuckled as Beth pushed her body toward him.

"I believe our time will be better spent taking her to a safe place before her transformation."

"We stopped because the Druiks would notice us in daylight." Zandor smiled as he caressed Beth's cheek. "It will be dark in one hour. They are three hours away. The Druik scum will make camp for the night, as they fear the Night Spirits. We will have time to play and feed our mate before we leave this place. The caves are no more than two hours away."

"I'm concerned they'll find us during her Moon Fire. Gods, Zandor, if they capture her, all will be lost."

"Nox would only know of safe caves high in these mountains. We have the ability to climb with ease, not so the Druik scum." Zandor shot him a hard gaze. "We will carry both Beth and provisions far above and wait for my brothers. I believe it will take four more days before they arrive, even if Nox went straight to Dryad."

Zandor looked up at his friend; he had never noticed him so flustered. *What a strange thing is this great love, which makes a male so distracted.* He rested his hand on Beth and she mewed softly at his side, her lips sweet and open to his kiss. *Gods, her response made him ache.* Her tender touch made his heart thunder like a battle horn. *How strange, to act like a green boy with this female. His brothers had spoken the truth; a true mate would stir emotions so deep, seasoned warriors would cry for joy.*

Zandor bent and wiped a long lick across her bottom lip as Thryll spoke softly to her and sat beside them. Her eyes fluttered open and her smile lit up like a ray of sunshine. Zandor watched her beautiful face, her white teeth biting into her bottom lip as Thryll bent to take one succulent rose-tipped nipple into his mouth. A tremor rippled through Zandor's body as she arched her back toward him. He bent to lick a path around her other nipple before taking the delectable bud between his teeth. She

moaned delightfully and he sucked her breast into his mouth, molding it with his hand. He met Thryll's eyes as their fingers collided at her apex, both seeking the heat of her pussy.

"Hey, do you make habit of touching people when they're asleep?" Beth's voice cut across Zandor's lust.

His mouth made a slight popping sound as he lifted it from her breast. Thryll, the coward, jumped back as if stung and had already given his apology. Zandor smiled when her eyes blazed and her body became stiff beneath his touch.

"I'll take you in any place and at any time I feel the need."

"Thryll promised that sex would be on my terms." Her eyes narrowed and she tried to back away from Zandor's firm hold.

Zandor released her as he glared at Thryll. "You made this promise?"

"Aye, she needed reassurance we would abide by her wishes in this, and in our arrangements at home." Thryll nodded somewhat sheepishly, his hands stroking Beth's hair as if she were his pet.

"Lady's blood, Thryll, do you think I'll sleep contentedly in another room while you fuck my mate?"

Zandor turned his head slowly back to Beth, surprised to see her trembling. "Didn't I explain before we mated of my needs? Is my brain addled, or did you agree to have me, as I am, without change?"

"Yes, but that d-doesn't include trying to f-f-fuck me while I'm asleep," she gasped, tears brimming in her eyes.

"You can be assured, Human, when *I* fuck you, you'll most surely awake."

Beth looked from one to the other; Zandor had the look of a man possessed, while Thryll appeared a little sad. She began to shake when Zandor shot her a look of disdain and reached across her to cup Thryll's head. He drew him close and slanted his head, meeting Thryll's mouth in a deep kiss. Beth drew a sharp breath as they kissed with a savagery unknown to her.

"Should I be jealous?"

Heat rushed into her face as she waited. Zandor's head lifted after a long time.

"On the morrow, you'll be begging me to fuck you." He growled and sprang to his feet. "Your Moon Fire will be driving you to insanity. Mayhap on our journey this eve, you should rethink your intentions, for unless you do, I'll have none of you." He threatened over his shoulder as he stomped toward the dune buggies.

Tears pricked the back of her eyes and pain struck deep in her heart. She plunged her hands into her hair and pulled hard. "Oh, God, what have I done? I can't lose him, tell me what to do."

"He denies his love for you," replied Thryll, grasping both her hands, pulling them gently free from her hair and holding them firmly. "This, I think, was a trial, to see if you would be complacent to his whims."

"What? Why would he do that and why did he kiss you like that? Shouldn't you do that sort of thing in private?"

She frowned when Thryll chuckled, angry at his attitude. *Surely, he can see Zandor has broken my heart.*

"Zandor told the truth when he said he enjoys males as much as females. He kissed me to make you jealous; once we would never touch without a female between us. A female changed Zandor. He thought he was in love with her but I know that's impossible. Ever since she left us, he has become very aggressive with both males and females. I suggest you allow him time to cool his anger, but don't leave it too long before you go to him. He's confused because he is fighting an attraction he can't deny." Thryll cupped her face in his large hands.

Beth shrugged off his touch and sprang to her feet. "Where are my clothes, or do you plan to keep me naked?"

Thryll walked a few feet away and returned with a pile of clothes and a bundle containing food. She wrenched the clothes from his grasp, tossed her hair over one shoulder and headed toward the river.

"What a bloody cheek." *How dare they think they can just use me when they get the bloody urge? If Thryll thinks for one moment I'll crawl to Zandor to beg forgiveness, he has no idea how stubborn a 'Human' woman can be.*

Cold water lapped against her body, removing most of her bad temper. She turned to see Thryll watching her loud ranting with a puzzled expression.

Determined not to leave the water while he watched, she dived deep, coming up behind an obscured rock. She found it quite easy to stay out of sight as she climbed out of the water, farther along the bank.

Beth pushed through waist-high dry grass, moving some distance from the river. She took great handfuls to dry her body and sat within the clearing, protected within a ring of tall vegetation. The sun heated her body delightfully as she finger-brushed her hair. Overcome by tiredness, she lay down and closed her eyes. *How long had she slept before?* The rumble in her belly told her a few hours had passed since her last meal.

Voices hard and harsh woke her from a pleasant doze. She sat up, not quite sure of her surroundings. A sting of indignation ran through her with the memory of Zandor's anger. Voices again and splashing. She stretched languidly, recognizing Zandor then Thryll arguing close by.

Men. She rose slowly to her feet and circled back to where she had left her clothes. She dressed quickly and listened to the raised voices. Her mates were both in the water, diving and arguing about . . . what? She had no idea. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her of the food Thryll had for her. She found the bundle on a smooth rock beside the wine skin. She took them both, sat on the travel rug, and opened the bundle. Dried fruit and a selection of nuts tumbled out of a small piece of cloth. She sighed in frustration. *Meat, I need meat. If I see another nut, I'll go crazy.* Her stomach complained loudly. She groaned, reached for the nuts, pushed them into her mouth and washed them down with a long gulp of Miza from the wine skin.

Beth jumped to her feet as Zandor and Thryll thundered into the camp, arguing loudly. She winced when Zandor grabbed Thryll by the neck, threatening to kill him where he stood.

"What the bloody hell are you two fighting about?"

She bit her lip, trying desperately not to smile when Zandor turned his head slowly in her direction, uttering a long string of curses. Grinning, she walked toward them as Thryll's face broke into a relieved smile. She gasped when Zandor strode forward, picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. Wheezing as air left her lungs in a rush, she shivered as cold from his wet clothes seeped into her body.

"Put me down, you great oaf."

A sharp pain across her bottom silenced her for a second. Dear God, did he really think he could spank her? Well obviously he could, she decided, as four more blows smarted on her backside. Her legs wobbled uncertainly when he finally dropped her to her feet beside the dune buggy.

"How d-d-dare you hit me, you, you b-b-east."

"If you act like a child then I'll treat you accordingly," he spat.

"You'll treat me with respect or I'm leaving; I'll find my own way home."

"You deny our sacred bond?" Zandor's eyes blazed down at her while his hand held her upper arm firmly "The Lady will not permit you to leave me."

"Oh, so it's okay for you then? What did you say? If I didn't open my legs at your command you would have none of me? I think that was the phrase."

She stepped back as Zandor flicked his soaking hair over one shoulder and let out a long string of expletives. His cold eyes bored down at her.

"I've *given* you my oath. I've no *choice* but to stay with you *even* though you break your word to me. In truth, you *must* welcome me to your bed as your true mate. I'll not force you. I get no pleasure from rape. Know this, little one, if you *plan* to refuse me *again*, I'll not sit idle and wait. I'll fill our house with *males* that please me. My *oath* is to have no other *female* for eternity, a fact *you* should remember."

"I haven't broken my word to you."

"Methinks I mated a witch. You refused me when I caressed you with gentleness, yet you took *all* Thryll demanded *with* an audience. You deny I informed you I'd be a demanding lover," he said, his eyes flashing to amber.

Beth threw her hands up in the air and glared at him "Demanding? Insatiable is more like it. Don't I have any say in it at all?" She paused when his face dropped into a mask of abject misery. "Anyway . . . what has this to do with you wanting to kill Thryll and why are you both soaked to the skin?"

He looked so funny standing there in a puddle of river water, she smiled.

"Do you find it *amusing* to pretend the river claimed your life?" Zandor's eyes narrowed and his hands balled into fists at his sides. "To let me dive a thousand

times to recover a body that was never there. Is this the *punishment* you give me for my honesty?"

Beth looked into eyes suddenly more hurt than angry. His soaking wet hair clung to his cheeks and he was shivering. Lord, he had wanted to kill his best friend for allowing her to drown. *Oh, hell, this man cares for me and he has no idea.* She touched his face, pushing the wet strands of hair away from his eyes. He stiffened noticeably when she rose on the tips of her toes to brush a kiss across the hard line of his lips.

"I'm *so* sorry. This is all happening so quickly, my head is spinning. I needed a little time alone; you can understand that, can't you? I hardly know either of you and I'm not used to all this sex. My neck hurts like hell and my body is so stiff I can hardly walk."

Her skin pebbled when his freezing cold hands closed around her back and pulled her close. Cold seeped through her clothes.

"I thank the Lady for your safety," he said, resting his wet cheek against her head. "You and I will come to an agreement, little one, before this night is over."

Chapter Ten

Thryll decided to remain silent as Zandor stripped off his wet clothes and tied them to the back of one of the dune buggies. When Zandor lifted his gaze, his face creased in a deep frown. "Bring me one of the female's shirts," he ordered.

Thryll rummaged through the saddlebags, pulled out Beth's soiled shirt and threw it to his friend.

"Gods, I'll be hard for a week; her scent is all over it." Zandor grimaced and wrapped the bright crimson garment around his waist.

Thryll tried without success to keep from grinning. "It's much better than meeting the Druiks naked."

"Not really." Zandor lifted his head and smiled. "Methinks the Druiks will keep to the roads. They rarely travel into the forest."

"I hope we can reach the caves before Beth changes."

"I welcome her transformation." Zandor snorted. "It will be interesting to see which of us she bites first. My guess it will be you, for I still believe the Druiks have something to do with this."

Thryll shrugged when Beth strolled into the camp and walked straight to his side. Without a second thought, he pulled her close, inhaling her delicious scent and enjoying the touch of her hand against his back. He shook his head when Zandor watched him with narrowed eyes, lifted one shoulder in a shrug and strode into the bushes.

"He's still angry with me. Was he spoilt as a child?" Beth asked, looking back at Zandor.

Thryll ran a hand up her arm, enjoying the soft skin skimming under his fingers. He cupped her cheek and drew her around to face him. Her eyes lifted under long, black lashes to search his face. Her scent drifted over him and his stomach did the now familiar drop. *Mine for all eternity.*

"Will you ride with Zandor tonight?"

"Why?" Beth rolled her eyes and let out a long sigh. "Isn't it obvious he's got no interest in me whatsoever?"

She looked so sad under that false bravado. Thryll drew her close and kissed her hair, her cheek. Under his hands, her body trembled, sending her pain of rejection deep into his heart.

"Oh, sweetness, I'm sorry this has been so difficult. Zandor has a past he can't let go."

"It might help if you explain."

"We were both close to a Lonza female named Petrillia. She stayed with us for almost twelve summers. He did what all unmated males fear; he fell in love or believed he did. When she left, he became obsessed with the lash. I think he wanted me to beat her memory from him. It was almost a year before he'd share a female with me again. That was four summers ago and nothing has changed. He's attracted to you and to your scent, but he believes his heart belongs to Petrillia."

He felt Beth stiffen in his arms, her eyes narrowed.

"You knew this and let him mate me?"

"Yes, I thought you'd cure him of this sorrow. I believe deep down he loves you even if he doesn't acknowledge it yet."

She pulled away from his hold and stood staring into space. Thryll waited, his heart racing as she began to pace around the clearing.

"Fucking hell! Why didn't he tell me? Why didn't he go after this Petrillia, if he's all goo goo eyed over her?"

Thryll watched as his mate began to crumble before him.

"She found her true mate. She didn't love Zandor or me. She used us for sex. This is usual for Pride females. We don't usually fall in love with anyone other than our mates. The Lady made us this way. Methinks Zandor was in lust with her; she *was* very kinky."

"I can be as kinky as he likes. In fact, after these past few days, I realize that kink was missing from my life." Beth stopped suddenly and turned to face him. "In fact, I fucking *love* kink. Okay, I'll ride with him. Do you want me to make him forget that slut? I can, you know."

Thryll roared with laughter at Beth's determined face. He took the few steps to her quickly and pulled her into his arms. Laughter spilled from her as her hands clasped around his neck in a gentle embrace. Her head tipped back, sending a caress of raven hair over his bare arms.

He moaned. "I want us to be together always. I know you can seduce him, sweetness, and *don't* be gentle."

* * * * *

Zandor shrugged at Thryll's grin and raised a brow when Beth slipped onto his dune buggy. Gods, her shirt hung open, leaving her bare to the waist and she had fashioned his spare shirt around her, low on the hips, leaving long brown legs and a peek of bottom open for all to see. He bit his lip as her warm hands slid around his bare chest and her two hard nipples pressed against his back. The scent of feminine heat enclosed him with an insatiable desire. *Lady's blood, how will I survive this ride?*

He turned the dune buggy to follow Thryll into the forest. He glanced behind to see the campsite disappearing into the twilight shadows. He allowed Thryll to choose a narrow, bumpy deer path running beside the river, which turned away to follow the edge of the mountain. A breeze drifted from the flowing water, cooling the sexual heat from his body. *Only another hour to the caves and I'll make her want me.*

The rainforest surrounded Zandor in a comfortable familiarity. His inner cat knew every sound, distinguished each scent; knowing, without necessarily seeing, the position of the creatures that surrounded him. His senses told him that within the forest canopy, an orange-eyed owl searched the forest floor for the foraging mice. The sounds of night soothed with the mating calls of frogs frolicking in the shallows. He looked out across the river, enjoying the cool breeze on his sweat-soaked skin. Moonlight danced like a flotilla of half-moon boats across the river. In the distance, fruit bats rose from the caves high in the mountain in great chattering swarms to feast on the forest fruits.

Grinding his teeth, he stifled a moan as her body ground against him at every bump. Her moist skin burned his flesh in an uncontrollable wildfire. Zandor quivered when her fingers squeezed his nipples. Beth's heat scorched his back. She lifted the material from his waist and slid closer. His cock stood to attention. *Gods, I can feel her folds, damp against my ass.* Sharp nails trailed down his chest and her warm fingers slipped under the cloth to stroke his shaft. His body quivered in need.

He stepped on the brake. "I can't drive this buggy if you fondle me, little one."

A low growl rumbled close to his ear followed by the exploration of her very wet tongue. Zandor turned and slipped one arm around Beth's waist, lifting her to bring her across his thighs. He grasped a handful of her long, raven hair and drew her close. Her eyes sparkled and the moonlight glistened on a pair of very white fangs when she smiled. He lifted her as she scrambled against him, turning her to straddle his thighs. Her fingernails dug a tantalizing path across his shoulders and her mouth tasted his chest. She tipped her head back, her eyes molten gold in the moonlight. He held his breath. *Dear Lady, she's transformed.* Her body pressed so hard against him, he could feel the pounding of her heart against his chest. Gripping her

arms, he let out the breath he was holding. She growled again, deep and seductive, leaned against him, and licked a wet trail across his lips.

Zandor ran his hands up her back. Her skin burned under his touch. Her scent poured from her open folds, driving his cat to madness. His cock bucked when she mewed and ground her folds against his aching shaft.

"Mine," she purred.

"Yes."

Zandor took her mouth, drank in her decadent scent and it infused into him, surrounding his heart in a silken caress. He trembled with desire and pulled her against him, damp skin on skin. She mewed in his mouth and slowly rubbed her luscious breasts side to side across his chest. Needing to take her, he lifted her thighs and she wrapped her tanned legs around his waist. His cock ached with need, he moved against her, pressing his throbbing shaft against her hungry flesh. She lifted and the wet heat of her surrounded his cock. *Gods, he was going to spill.*

Her slick heat engulfed him in molten pleasure, burning him with an unfamiliar longing, so unlike the usual lust he had for a female. His gaze met her hooded eyes for an instant before she rested her head on his shoulder. Her moist breath caressed his neck, sending waves of foreign emotions coursing through his body. When her inquisitive tongue flicked out to taste his skin, his cat rejoiced. *She wants to bite; dear Lady, is she truly the one for me?* His head began to spin in a strange euphoric delirium. He held his breath, waiting.

"Mine." She declared as she licked a path down his neck.

He relaxed into her bite, sharp and deep, which sent a shiver of delight straight to his cock. Every suck from her hot, demanding mouth sent a lick of fire deep in his balls. A white-hot path of intense carnal exaltation rolled over him as her venom flooded his body. Foreign thoughts filled his mind, and emotions, *female* emotions. Exploring her mind, he searched for the love his cat demanded, but found *nothing*. He touched her pointed ears and ran a finger across the new tender tip, a confirmation she had completed her transformation. Pushing aside his cat's grief, he cupped the back of her neck and inhaled the sweet aroma of blood, his blood, as she suckled his neck.

"Oh, little one, drink deep, take all you need."

The forest moved in and out of focus when she ground her hips, riding him relentlessly, her pussy holding him in a rhythmic pulse. As her powerful scent surrounded him, gripping him with unfamiliar emotions, he could not think past the female in his arms; she had become more important than life. He burned for her with a passion that frightened him. *Could he truly love her when she had no love for him?*

"Beth, gods, I'm on fire."

His climax came in a rush of rapture so great it seared his soul. Bright starbursts danced behind his eyes as memories, *her* memories, flashed like dreams across his mind. He witnessed the sorrow of her parents' death, the loneliness she endured. The pain of rejection he inflicted upon her and her deep love for Thryll. Her inner cat, a wild, untamed beast, welcomed his cat with a purr. He must try to reach Beth. He pushed at her mind. *Love me too, little one, love me too.* Purring when she pulled back, he gazed into deep pools of fire and amber.

"All mine," she whispered with lips ruby red from his blood.

Zandor knew the words came from the cat, bonding with her during transformation. The untamed beast, blended with her by the Lady. The uncontrollable wildness neither of them had told her about, which would be part of her for forever. A pang of regret hit him in the gut when her eyes cleared to soft cobalt and her trembling fingers touched his cheek.

"I *do* love you, Zandor. You *do* believe me, don't you?"

* * * * *

Thryll sighed and turned the dune buggy around. Zandor would not normally fall behind. What could have happened? He found them naked, only covered with velvet shadows. They sat entwined in the middle of the path, the engine of the dune buggy humming softly. He stopped and with a tinge of resentment, watched his mate bite another. Grinding his teeth, he waited until Zandor raised his head, eyes unfocused and smiling weakly.

"It would seem our mate has grown fangs."

"Mine," she said again and snuggled into his embrace, her pink tongue lapping at the two open holes on Zandor's neck.

When she turned to look at Thryll, golden firelight danced in her eyes. Thryll smiled as her hands reached out toward him. He froze when Zandor growled softly, narrowing his eyes.

"I can't give her to you, not yet."

"I need him," purred Beth, and lifted her body from Zandor, struggling against his embrace.

Thryll climbed off the dune buggy slowly, pulled off his clothes, and stuffed them into the saddlebags. He turned to face Zandor. "It's only a short time before we find the caves. She needs to bite me now; look at her, the cat's in full control. Beth doesn't intend to hurt you, Zandor, she only understands the need to mate. You knew this would happen and your reaction is normal. I don't think our cats really understand sharing.

"She spoke to me as Beth," said Zandor as he released her arms and slowly brushed a kiss across her mouth. "She has some control over her youngling. She'll be angry with us. We should have told her about the cat. She will not understand the power of the beast, the voice. The fight for control, the deceit and lies they tell to gain power over the body. Many changelings have gone mad, trying to manage it; we should have prepared her."

Thryll shrugged in reply. He turned his eyes to Beth, stood still, and allowed her to come to him. His heart raced with joy when she turned her wild, molten eyes on his face and inhaled deeply.

"Mine?"

"Yes, Elizabeth, I'm yours forever. Come taste me, drink my essence."

He opened his arms, Beth's hands slipped around his neck and she pressed her body against his length. He lifted her up to take her wet, open mouth and almost flinched when her burning skin sizzled against his naked flesh. Closing his eyes, he immersed himself in her potent scent, filling his mouth in a wet caress. He drank of her, his cat accepting the heavy musk lingering from Zandor. Her legs went willingly around his waist and locked him in a tight embrace. He dropped his hands

to cup her rounded buttocks, pushing his aching cock against her soaking folds. Heat from her body pulsed through him when she ground against him and moaned in his mouth. Her fingers sank into his hair and she cupped his head, pulling him ever closer. He groaned when she caught his exploring tongue between her lips and suckled. Desperately needing her to bite him, he heard Zandor's voice and opened his eyes.

"She needs you inside her, she needs us both." Zandor stepped toward them and lifted her hair to kiss her nape.

Thryll pulled her closer. Locked in his arms, her body shivered and she broke the kiss. A long moan escaped her lips.

Zandor smiled and began to stroke her back and trail kisses down her spine. Thryll grasped her bottom and thrust upward, slipping deep inside her wet heat. Her pussy gripped him, a rhythmic pulse driving him to ecstasy. He sighed when she tipped her head back, her hair spilling across Zandor's chest, her eyes wide and unfocused. *Gods, she is so beautiful*, he mused as she arched her back when Zandor's long, tanned fingers tormented her rosy nipples.

Thryll gasped when Zandor's cock brushed against his sac, slipping easily up her ass. He held Zandor's gaze as his friend took her firmly around the waist and ground into her. Thryll bit his lip, trying desperately to stop spilling as hot caresses glided against his thigh with each bend of Zandor's knees. Then Zandor's massive cock brushed his shaft, a steady pulse only a skin's thickness away, in a tantalizing slide. They moved in practiced precision, the movement of both male and female caressing a ferocious ecstasy. Beth's eyes flashed and she licked her bottom lip, Zandor pushed her gently toward him and grasped his shoulder to lock them together.

Thryll jerked back when she struck like a snake, her venom shooting through his jugular in a lightning strike of scorching lust. He stalled mid-thrust, his knees weak as he fell into her mind. He could see her cat, its green eyes glowing, its coat black and glossy. He discovered her wealth of love for him and the intensity of it squeezed his heart. Zandor's large palm cupped his head and he heard his voice.

"Thryll, finish it."

His head swam and his throbbing cock demanded release. She trembled and climaxed around him, her inner muscles rhythmically gripping him in erotic delight. Bending his knees, he drove into her. Against his length, Zandor's shaft shuddered to climax with her. Thryll thrust up into her heat and allowed their fire to engulf him. His cock exploded and he came in endless, magnificent release. Beth released her bite, her head dropping to his chest, her eyes shut.

He smiled when Zandor pressed a kiss to her cheek as he slipped from her, then took the travel rug from the saddlebags and spread it on the forest floor. Thryll gently withdrew from her throbbing body and laid her on the carpet. He covered her then stood looking down at her, marveling at her delicious pointed ears. She lay very still, her breathing slow and steady as if she were in a deep sleep.

Thryll glanced at Zandor; he was standing so close, he could feel the heat of his body. Zandor stepped in front of him, and with a crooked smile on his face, reached up to cup his head. A rush of warmth spiraled through Thryll's belly as Zandor's thumbs trailed a hot path across his lips and his hair dropped in a silken caress across his chest. Zandor bent his head to kiss him and firm, full lips moved across his mouth in a remarkably soft, possessive embrace. A gentle kiss only experienced once before, during their joining with Petrillia. Since she left, Zandor demanded his touch, only with pain.

"You're mine too," Zandor whispered and sank his fangs into his neck.

Thryll dragged in a shocked breath and clutched at Zandor's shoulders. "Gods, Zandor, what are you doing? It's forbidden to bite a male."

He swayed in a rush of euphoria as Zandor's venom emptied into his veins. The day-old bristles on his friend's chin raked his neck deliciously. His cock hardened immediately and pressed against Zandor's belly.

"The Lady matched us." Zandor chuckled as he released his bite. "There is no foul. You're my mate as much as Beth is, don't you agree? *I love you*. You know you want me. Bite me, Thryll, and make me yours."

Zandor waited to see his friend's reaction but Thryll stood without speaking. Long, hazelnut lashes rested on his cheeks and obscured his enticing indigo twilight

eyes. A shaft of moonlight pierced the forest canopy and hit his back, illuminating his platinum curls in a brilliant halo. Zandor smiled as his friend slowly raised his eyes and stared at him with hunger. Heart rejoicing, his body trembled when Thryll stepped forward and ran the tip of his tongue down his neck. Thryll's curls tickled his chest in a strange, feminine way, his scent a subtle mixture of all three of them. He purred and exposed his neck, allowing Thryll to bite down hard and suckle his neck in long, passionate pulls. Silky-smooth venom exploded in his veins with a deeply satisfying love. Grinning, he touched Thryll's cheek as he lifted his head. His friend stood back, staring at him with a confused expression, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. *Dear Lady, he wants me.* Zandor licked his lips. Thryll's cock jutted out from his body, twitching slightly.

"I want you so much, need you to love me. Let me show you how much I love you." The vibration in Thryll's voice showed the truth of his words.

Zandor slowly slipped his hands around Thryll's waist and kissed a path down his chest, falling to his knees to take his shaft into his mouth. He moaned, and Thryll gasped, tipping his head back, allowing the magnificent mantle of his moonlight curls to tumble down his back. He tasted of Beth, but soon Thryll's own rich, earthy scent filled Zandor's mouth. Thryll's shaft, a velvet smooth slide, weighed heavy on his tongue, and his hairless balls were drawn up tight. Under his touch, Thryll's buttocks tensed, his skin as soft and supple as any female. He sucked harder when Thryll whispered his name and twisted his fingers delightfully in his hair. He would have all of him, in the days to come, he decided. Gods, he tasted good, he wanted to suck him forever.

Thryll slid his fingers into Zandor's hair. How long had he dreamed of this moment? His knees trembled at each flick of Zandor's tongue across his sensitive slit. This delight was better than he could have ever imagined. Zandor's skill made him delirious and most surprising, his declaration of love. What did he want? Zandor usually demanded only pain from him and gave nothing in return. As if lashing Zandor until he collapsed and then brutally fucking his ass brought *him* any real pleasure.

"If you keep this up, I'll spill. Then what use will I be to you?"

His knees trembled when Zandor lifted his hooded amethyst eyes and slowly removed his mouth from Thryll's shaft.

"I've been neglectful of your needs; 'tis time I made up for it. I want to love you in every way," he purred and drew Thryll's cock deep in his mouth.

Thryll gasped at the pull on his shaft as Zandor sucked him down his throat. Zandor's long fingers bit hard into his buttocks, rocking him deep within the wet heat of his masterful mouth. How different the powerful delight of a man's love. The glory of the peaceful forest around them paled into insignificance. He fell into the heat of Zandor's mouth, reveling in the scrape of teeth down his shaft, the swipe of his tongue. He cried out when Zandor drew him deep into his throat, as if anticipating the climax raging up from Thryll's balls and shattering his soul. His lover drank him down, sucking him dry and then caressing his back, his legs. He met Zandor's gaze and watched his wet cock slip from between his friend's lips. His legs would no longer support him; he collapsed to his knees and fell into Zandor's embrace.

Beth watched her mates from under her lashes. A strange jealousy surged through her. Thryll's expression of pure ecstasy when Zandor took him into his mouth would stay in her mind forever. They had bitten each other and Zandor had declared his love to Thryll, not her. They kissed and caressed each other with passion and here she lay, on the forest floor, forgotten. She winced when a feminine voice whispered in her head. *If that's not bad enough I've gone completely mad and can hear voices.*

"Sister, you, and I are one. Our mates are betraying us. They did not think you were significant enough to inform you about me. I'm the cat who joined with you when you became Pride. I'm very wise in all things and will help you through our life together. Tell me, sister, what did you do to anger the Lady that she cursed you with those two ungrateful males for mates?"

"Oh, I"

"You only need to think to speak with me. Please do not share our conversations with those two unworthy imbeciles," the cat replied in her head.

"Who are you?"

"I am Tass. We are Arious Pride. When you become me and we hunt together, you will see what I see and feel what I feel. Now answer my question."

Beth watched Zandor pull Thryll into a long, passionate embrace and sighed.

"Thryll told me they were both attracted to my scent, that I'm both their mates. This declaration of love and the physical stuff hasn't happened before. I thought my transformation would make them want me."

When Tass growled, Beth noticed a soft growl escape her own lips.

Thryll turned his head and gazed at her, his eyes narrowed. She decided to feign sleep; what else could she possibly do?

"You must leave them tonight. I have the power to control your Moon Fire."

A pang of pain struck Beth's heart. How could she leave them? She loved them.

"I can't leave them. I need them."

Beth squeezed her eyes shut when Tass growled again and Zandor's head shot up.

"Our mate is waking, best we wash in the river," he said, unraveling his long body from Thryll's embrace.

"You mus-st," hissed Tass. "They have no appreciation of us. Thryll's love is divided and Zandor cares little for us. A male should worship his mate, the essence of his life, the partner of his soul. Unless they understand this, we are worthless to them. Is this what you want, sister? Can you lie untouched, while they pleasure each other in front of you? Look at them and you in Moon Fire, a time when you're most desirable."

"I promised to have no other, as they did."

"And yet they have broken the Lady's command. By biting each other, they broke their promise to you, sister."

"I have nowhere to go."

She relaxed when Tass purred, contentment flooding over her.

"It's a short journey to the portal; we can easily travel to Lyoness and from there to Dryad. The king will speak to the Lady and we'll be matched to a male who loves us unconditionally."

Beth watched Thryll run a hand down Zandor's back before turning toward the river's edge. Once again, she sighed. *"Why did they mate me, if they really only wanted each other?"*

"Mayhap your Moon Fire did not come up to their expectations. An itch that needed scratching and now they realize it's only each other they desire. A female was just an excuse before, to allow them to lie together."

Yes, of course that made sense. She could not hope to change her own self doubt grown over years. Her stomach twisted with the thought of leaving them, but she had to agree Tass had a point. Why should she stay when she was not wanted?

"Okay, how do I get out of this?"

"Send them to the caves. Bathe in the river; rub your body with the water crocus flowers to cover your scent. Ride out of the forest. I'll guide you." Tass purred.

"How will you know the way?"

"The Lady gave me knowledge of the Gates. I know everything that will aid you and protect you. When your cub is born, you'll share my knowledge and may never want to change back to that furless body again."

Beth snorted at the thought of becoming pregnant. *Not much chance now, is there?* She had only just released their child seed with her venom; no doubt, Zandor had drunk the first potent load. She ground her teeth in anger, sat up and marched toward the river. Moonlight illuminated the pathway and her new enhanced eyesight made the night as clear as day. Stopping at the river's edge, she glared at Thryll, who stood beside Zandor, both waist deep in fast-flowing water.

"Elizabeth, come bathe with us. You must be starved." He opened his arms in greeting and smiled brilliantly.

Beth lifted her chin and scowled at them, biting her lip when Zandor flinched and raised both hands palms up.

"We didn't think your Moon Fire would give you any moments of clarity. You're annoyed we left you to sleep?"

Beth stepped into the cool water and ducked under. She stood and flicked her hair over her shoulder and turned toward them. As she began to speak, her voice faltered and stuck in her throat. They stared at her. Lord, they were her magnificent, beautiful mates, and she loved them. Tears burned the back of her eyes as she drew a deep breath.

"No, not in the least. I'm confused."

When Thryll waded toward her, his arm surprisingly warm as it rested across her shoulders, she flinched and his eyes narrowed.

"What has confused you, precious one? A bad dream perhaps?"

Beth met the blank look in his eyes with contempt.

"Nightmares more like, but unfortunately I was awake. I saw the performance you put on in the woods. I'm confused— you both drank each other's blood, shared your venom."

She pulled away as Thryll turned her chin to face him.

"You were asleep, Elizabeth," he said warily.

Beth touched the fresh marks on his neck and held up her blood-smeared fingertips in evidence. "No, I wasn't. You've betrayed me, *both* of you. Will you lie to me now, and pretend Zandor didn't say he loved you, and then had sex with you in front of me? You've both lied to me, or decided not to inform me about things."

"What things?" Zandor demanded.

"My transformation, for one. You should've at least mentioned the pointed ears and how about the voice in my head, my fucking cat? Now, I suppose, you'll tell me biting each other is okay, when my cat tells me it's forbidden. If you wanted each other, why the fucking hell did you mate *me*? You're both cruel and fucking poor excuses for Pride males."

She clenched her fists when Thryll looked down, his long lashes dark against his now ghostly pale skin. Cursing under her breath, she kicked at the sand as Zandor looked away into the distance, his hands resting on his hips, more defiant than sorry.

"I know we've avoided informing you of many things, Beth, and I'm truly sorry." Zandor turned his dark amethyst eyes on her and sighed. "We were worried

you might change your mind if you knew the truth. We will explain everything as soon as we reach the caves. I believe they're only a few hundred paces farther down the track. See how the mountain rises just ahead. I'll go and seek out the caves as soon as you've eaten. I'm sure they'll be filled with every comfort, as Nox promised."

Beth shrugged. "You can both go as you seem to need each other's comfort so badly. I'll wash and feed myself with the provisions in the saddlebags. Don't worry; I have my cat to keep me company."

"I'm surprised you're not overcome with passion for us," said Thryll, stepping forward to kiss her cheek and lick a path to her ear. "Mayhap after a meal, we can pleasure you all night."

"Oh, *really*, and here I was thinking Zandor had drunk all your *pleasure*. Hard for me to compete with *him*, don't you agree? Tell me, Zandor, does he taste better now I've released his child seed? You just couldn't wait to find out, could you?"

She snorted when Zandor swore colorfully and strode from the river, sending great waves in his wake. Thryll blushed deep red.

"You knew about our feelings for each other before we mated, but it's true we shouldn't have bitten each other. We can work it out, Elizabeth, you must trust me," said Thryll, reaching for her.

Beth brushed away his hand, her hands coming up, defensively, in fists. "Yes, I knew you enjoyed each other during sex, with a female, that's what you said I believe? This is something entirely different. You both *lied* to me. I *trusted* you when you told me Moon Fire is the most erotic, desirable sex a Pride male can experience. And yet you both preferred each other. I saw your face, Thryll; you want him more than me, don't you?"

"It's different, Elizabeth, please try to understand." He groaned.

Her stomach twisted and her heart sank, cold flowed into her, ice filling her veins. *I've lost them.*

"You see, sister, *all is lost*. Let him go, let them both go," Tass insisted.

"Leave me while I bathe, Thryll. I don't want to talk about this anymore."

She took one last look at Thryll standing before her in all his naked beauty. Water had straightened his platinum curls and they clung in train tracks to his chest.

Beth reached up and touched the marks she'd left on his neck and he trembled under her touch. She shook her head slowly and lowered her eyes, her hand dropping with a splash into the river.

"I'm sorry," he muttered before he turned and climbed up the bank.

As soon as they were both gone, Beth sobbed and reached for the clump of water crocuses, their round purple leaves floating on the surface of the rock pool. The fragrant chalk petals formed cups of gold pollen drifting in the ebb and flow of the river. The flower heads slipped through her fingers and required considerable strength to break. She gathered six blooms, left the water, and scrubbed the fragrant petals over her body.

A familiar roar broke the silence; no doubt, both men had morphed. *Good, run away. You deserve each other.* She ran swiftly back to the dune buggies and raked through the saddlebags. Shrugging into her clean clothes with difficulty, she dragged the dry cloth over her damp skin. She collected food, a wine skin, and water, found the medical kit, a blanket, her spare clothes and pushed them into the backpack. She tore Zandor's wet clothes from the buggy and threw them in a heap on the forest floor.

"Where do I go, Tass?"

"Into the forest, sister. We need no path; keep away from the mountain. The portal is not far. You must eat and stay awake; our journey will continue into the next day. Cover your neck, for if we meet anyone, it will be safer if they don't know you've been recently mated. We must hurry in case they return."

"They will hunt me down."

"I hear their cats, they are angry. The cats want you, sister. 'Tis their only way to find peace. The males are too cowardly to face you. They believe your Moon Fire will overcome you soon, so they will wait. Foolish males."

"I'll miss them. Are you sure this is the right thing to do, Tass?"

"We have what we want from them."

Beth pressed her fingers to her temple. "And what is that?"

"You are Pride, they made you so and time will tell if they really care for you."

Beth jumped into the saddle, slammed her hand on the start button, and turned into the forest. Animal paths led in all directions. She turned onto a winding track leading far away from the mountains.

"Faster, sister, head away from the moon. See the bright star? Go toward that, hurry now."

Chapter Eleven

"Females. Lady's blood, I will never understand them. Why does she use the term 'fucking' as if it were a curse? Sometimes her lips move and she spits endless drivel. How am I supposed to reply, when her words make no sense?"

"It would seem the wonderful act of fucking can be a pleasure and a curse for a Human. Gods, Zandor, mayhap some Humans are so disgusting, fucking them *is* a curse." Thryll ducked under an overhanging branch.

Zandor stopped and turned. Thryll's face was a white blot in the moonlit trail behind him. "What does she expect from me? I told her what I was, didn't I?"

"She's hurt, confused. Gods, it was foolish to do that in front of her. We could have easily included her, Zandor."

"No. I wanted *you*. I'd given her my attention, filled her twice with my seed. She has no cause to complain, Thryll, none whatsoever."

"What is a mate without trust?" Thryll grasped his arm, his eyes reflecting his despair. "Would we survive without it? We have lost her trust and we've no excuses to give her. She saw the ecstasy in my face, when you took me in your mouth. She knows I love you. When you declared your love for me and not to her, it broke her heart."

Zandor touched Thryll's face then dropped his hand onto his shoulder. "You worry too much. Her Moon Fire will make her forget everything soon enough. We should hunt now, while we can; soon she will be begging for release. Methinks she will be so desperate, she will find her own way to the caves, her little nose following our scent. She will crawl to us, pleading for us to pleasure her. I love it when they

beg. Mayhap I will teach her the pleasure of the strap, or better still, I'll fashion a cane from a sapling. Her white skin will look splendid with red stripes"

"You have no love for her at all, have you?" Thryll replied, shaking his head.

"She has no love for *me*; I saw her mind when she bit me. She loves only *you* but *I* am also tied to her for eternity. My feelings for her are moot. What use is love when it isn't returned? She was fully aware that if she rejected my love — *which she did* — then I'd have leave to take any male I chose. This suits me, Thryll; I'll use her for my cubs, but I'll not offer my heart to her again."

"And our cubs? Will you love and protect them?"

Zandor raised his head and stared into the midnight sky.

"Our cubs will be immortal, blood of my blood, bone of my bone. They'll hold my heart for eternity."

* * * * *

Thryll followed Zandor into the cave set high in the mountains. The cool, dark interior provided a welcome relief after the long climb on a full stomach. Zandor had felled a huge buck earlier and they'd spent over two hours savoring every bite of the succulent flesh before seeking shelter from the early sun, now hot on their backs, and the Druik threat looming somewhere below.

"Nox didn't exaggerate. Look, the cave is all he promised," called Zandor as he inspected the provisions. Barrels of wine lined one wall, alongside boxes of supplies piled high in sealed wooden cartons. Bedrolls wrapped in oilskins lay in one corner. Zandor checked the boxes and walked back to enjoy the cool breeze brushing across the entrance.

Water ran down a fissure in the granite forming a small waterfall not six paces from the opening. Thryll trailed his fingers in the cool water and brought the glistening droplets to his mouth; it tasted sweet. Fresh water and a natural shower, he mused. He peered out over the forest; a pale haze hung over an emerald field. In the distance, two tall, white pillars rose from the mist flanking each side of the Gate, the constant changing scene within easily visible. Fires from the Druik camps lined

the edge of the forest to the south. From the smell of ash in the air, they were extinguishing their fires and making ready to leave.

Thryll's cat brushed his mind and he allowed the beast to speak.

"I can't feel our mate. Her cat is wild and out of control, I fear for Elizabeth's safety."

"How long?"

"She disguised her scent at the river; only her cat would know to use crocuses."

Thryll rested a hand on the cave entrance, his mind filling with images from his cat.

"Zandor, my cat has lost Elizabeth."

"And, pray tell, where do you think she would go?" Zandor replied, strolling from the cave, hands resting on his hips. He raised a brow. "She knows the Druiks are close and her Moon Fire will render her senseless before too long."

"I don't know where she's gone but the youngling is more powerful than we imagined and no doubt influencing her. Gods, if we lose her and she's in cub, the youngling will morph her into a cat forever."

Zandor narrowed his gaze. He growled deep in his chest and drew in a deep breath as if to taste the air. Turning his gaze to Thryll, he swore. "May my soul rot. My cat confirms she is breeding, having conceived after our mating. The youngling boasted of this before we argued last eve. Lady's blood. Her cat has turned her against us." He scanned the forest below. "Damn. And the Druiks are on the move; now she's in danger of being captured or worse."

"A cub . . . so soon, gods, Zandor, could we be so blessed?" Thryll gripped Zandor's arm.

Zandor growled. "We'll be surely damned if we don't find her and Pic takes our cub."

"Surely the Knight Watch will arrive soon and if not we'll make a run for the Gate."

Brushing his hand off with a snarl, he rounded on Thryll. "If you think my plan is to run like a coward, you are very much mistaken. The Druiks must pay for

the death of every Fae by their hands and I've the need to deal with Pic personally. We've no choice but find Beth before my brothers arrive,"

"I'm prepared to fight by your side as always, but how can we possibly protect Elizabeth from the Druik scum?"

Zandor narrowed his eyes; his mouth turned down at the edges. "When we find her we've no choice but to join our glamor and render her senseless until the battle is won."

* * * * *

Sweat trickled down Beth's neck and ran in rivulets between her breasts. Her head ached and she longed to stop and close her eyes, even if only for a few seconds. The unforgiving forest grasped and tore at her clothes. Trees stretched out their branches to whip cuts across her cheeks and bare flesh. The relentless voice deep in her head pushed her farther away from her mates. The pain of leaving them had become an intolerable ache in her heart. *What am I doing? Oh God I need them. I don't want to be here.*

She stopped the buggy and fell forward, resting her head on her arms. The forest swam before her eyes. Hunger gnawed in her belly. She reached for the bag of nuts hanging over the handlebar and poured some into her mouth. She gagged, her throat dry, without enough spit to chew. The water had run out two hours previously and she retched every time she sipped the wine. She spat the nuts onto the forest floor and forced back a sob of distress.

"Why won't you take me back?"

"It's better to continue; drink the wine, sister."

"Oh, shut the fuck up. What am I doing here? You know I'd go back if I wasn't so fucking lost."

She reached for the wineskin and drank deeply; the rich, spicy brew made her shudder but it wet her throat. "If you know so much, Tass, find me water before I die of thirst."

"There is no water this side of the Gate. You must hurry."

A cool breeze rustled the trees and the forest fell into an uneasy silence. Beth instinctively looked up to the sky; a single raindrop touched her cheek in a cool caress. A bank of storm clouds swirled above the forest canopy, a purple and gray mass highlighted with intermittent flashes of lightning. The ground trembled and thunder rolled from the heavens.

"From the sound of the thunder, I think we're in for one hell of a storm."

Beth had experienced many tropical storms, a common occurrence in Australia during the summer months. They had always disturbed her, and now the thought of being out in the open during what promised to be a nasty one terrified her. *Keep away from trees.* Her mother's advice rang in her ears. *Good Lord, I'm in the middle of a forest . . . Don't run in the open or you will surely be hit by lightning.* Therefore escaping on foot across the clearing to that nice pile of rocks was out of the question. *Keep away from metal objects.* Okay, then, she'd leave the bloody dune buggy, crawl along the forest floor, keep away from the trees and not go in the open. *Right, got it.* She snorted.

Lightning flashed, followed immediately by a roll of thunder shaking Beth to her teeth. *That was too close!* She hoisted the backpack on one shoulder and glanced around for some sort of cover. Lightning cracked again close by. She flung herself away from the dune buggy and rolled onto the ground. No, now she was too close to a tall red cedar. She cried out in frustration and rolled under a bush, dragging her backpack behind her and using it to cover her face.

Rain fell in torrents, the forest floor changing from leafy comfort to wide rivers of muddy water. Beth lay watching a small parade of dead leaves float past in an ever-widening flow. Cold rain soaked through her thin clothes; too soon, she lay wallowing in mud. She squeezed her eyes shut, burying her face into the backpack; it smelt like Zandor. She whimpered when his scent enclosed her entire being, her stomach clenched and searing pain gripped her heart. *God, Zandor, don't you know I love you – I love you both.*

"It is just a storm, sister. We can still ride to the Gate."

"Did I give you permission to speak? Be quiet and leave me be."

She lay for what seemed like hours before the final roll of thunder echoed in the distance. Pushing a wad of mud-soaked hair off her face, she scrambled from under the bush. The dune buggy sat bogged up to its axles in mud and debris. Not a chance of digging that out, she decided.

Beth lifted her head and sniffed. The aroma of food hung on the air. Bacon perhaps, cooked over a campfire, and coffee. She took a long drink from the wine skin, shuddered, and surveyed the area. Someone had made a camp under the pile of boulders not fifty feet away and had food, hot food. *I hope it's not the bloody Druik.* She turned in the direction of the delicious smell and took a few cautious steps; the cool, sticky mud seeped through her toes as she slid toward the clearing.

"Where are we going, sister?"

"I'm going to find food and you're going to shut up."

She took a few steps forward; her foot tangled in a tree root and she fell, face down in a pool of mud. The root bit into her ankle, cutting into the bare flesh. Her hands sank deep into a myriad of slimy, unrecognizable matter. Dark water splashed into her face and dripped off her eyelashes.

"Oh, yuk."

Spitting out the mud, her fingers frantically probed the murk for purchase. The soft, sticky muck made a popping sound when she finally pushed her body free. She slumped against a tree, rubbing her filthy hands on the trunk. Water dripped from her hair. She tried to wipe the sticky gunk off her face and only succeeded in spreading the muck into her eyebrows. She dabbed aimlessly at the mud and leaves covering her from top to toe, with no effect. She groaned. Sludge covered the backpack. She bent, her fingers tightening around the slippery handles.

"Put your back into it, girl."

Gritting her teeth she yanked and the backpack came loose in a rush with a loud sucking sound. The satchel flew over her shoulder in an impressive arc, nearly wrenching her arm from its socket. It flew out of her grip and landed on a high branch some distance away. Unable to prevent the inevitable, she fell flat on her back in the squelching mud, sending gray water spraying in all directions.

"Oh, life just keeps on improving." She muttered and staggered to her feet.

The mud behind her made a small squelching sound. Air rushed from her body in a whoosh as she slammed backward into a brick wall. A warm hand, smelling faintly of leather, clamped down on her mouth, cutting off her cry. Another hand rested against the bare flesh of her ribs. Unable to move, panic, then sheer terror and then finally hopelessness gripped her.

"Well, well, what do we have here? Do I see a little piglet wallowing in the mud." His honey-coated voice sounded so close to her ear, warm breath brushed her cheek.

The next second, her molester spun her around and pressed her against a tree trunk. Her throat closed with fear. The coarse bark scraped against her flesh as he ground his massive bulk against her, seemingly oblivious to her filthy state. The scent of warm male and leather enclosed her and she looked up into royal blue eyes, set in features that could only belong to the god Thor. Masses of platinum silk hair tumbled down, curtaining his face. A wide, soft mouth curled with a wolfish grin at her bare breasts. *Sharp white fangs. A Pride male. Hopefully one with honor.*

"No, not a piglet. Tell me, sweetness, did you plan to offer for my service before or after you bathed in mud?"

"Get off, you're fucking squashing me, you big oaf."

"You must've experienced very poorly endowed males, if you think I'm fucking you, sweetness." He grinned and bent to lick one of her exposed nipples. "Mayhap when I clean you up a bit, you can experience all a real male can offer."

"No, thank you."

"You're not one of our usual campaign females. What are you doing in this realm?" He frowned and shifted slightly.

"I've been in the Druik laboratory. They took me some time ago and I escaped. I've been trying to get to the Gate, but my dune buggy got stuck in the mud."

"Your what?"

"Never mind, it's a Druik form of transport. My name is Beth."

"Hawke of Knight Watch, and what Pride are you, sweetness?"

Beth looked at him and said nothing. Tass broke into her thoughts.

"We are Arious Pride."

Beth lifted her chin. "I am Arious Pride"

"Indeed." Hawke snorted and tossed his hair over his shoulders. He stepped away and glared down at her. "And just when, exactly, were you taken by the Druiks? Or do you lie, for I think I know all the females of my Pride."

Beth shivered under his cold gaze.

"I'm not sure how long it was . . . I've lost track of time."

"I see, well then, mayhap you'd better come with me. Have no fear, 'twill not be me who judges your truth," he said.

Stepping back, she stumbled.

Hawke's blue eyes narrowed, he took a firm hold of her arm and led her across the clearing. They rounded the pile of rocks. Beth gasped. On the other side, the huge granite slabs rose in stark grandeur to form a natural cathedral-sized cave, keeping twenty or more men safe and dry from the elements at its entrance. Dressed in identical uniforms—black leather pants and boots, a gray tunic with a black leopard's head against a lightning strike—each carried a sword sheathed in a scabbard centered between their shoulder-blades plus a short sword and dagger at their waist. They sat around a fire that made no smoke, above which great pans of bacon and other tasty morsels simmered. A huge pot sat warming at the edge. Her stomach rumbled. *Mmmm, coffee and real bacon.* She inhaled the thick, delicious aroma, tasting the much-loved beverage on her tongue. Some of the men smiled warmly at Beth or maybe they were just grinning at her mud-splattered appearance. Others kept their eyes firmly on the plate of food on their lap.

One man rose and walked toward them. Beth took a deep, steadying breath and looked up, way up; he stood at least seven feet tall, and his long hair fell to his shoulders like glistening black water. A gold circlet enclosing a running gold cat pressed into the flesh on the top of his left arm. The thing captured her gaze; the figure bounded for a few seconds then sat panting before resuming. *What kind of magyck is that?* His lips curled up at the corners as he looked down at her. This man captivated her with his hooded, deeply sensual blue eyes and powerful body. *Wow, he is beautiful.*

"What have you found, Hawke?"

"We shall see; do you know this male, Beth?"

Beth shook her head slowly. "No, can't say that I do."

"She claims to be Arious Pride and yet she doesn't recognize her king." Hawke lifted his chin. "Methinks something is very wrong here. Perhaps I've caught a Druik spy?"

Beth began to reply when Nox emerged from the gloom clad in black leather. His wings were missing and a gold sword hung at his waist. He stepped forward and studied her.

"I know this female. She belongs to Zandor. Although, she was Human when last I saw her and not coated in filth."

"You're Zandor's mate?" Hawke's eyes opened wide and he reached for the dirty rag that Beth had tied around her neck. "You didn't think to mention that fact. Lady's blood, I licked her breasts. Where's my brother, I must explain?"

"Will you *please* be quiet for just a minute," said the tall man. "I'm King Blaise of Knight Watch and Zandor is my brother, as is Hawke." He turned and smiled at Beth, offering his hand. "The bites on your neck are fresh and you must be in Moon Fire. Where *is* Zandor?"

"That's a long story; truth is I have no idea."

"He left you alone?" Blaise asked in obvious dismay.

"We had a disagreement." Beth glanced around at the watching faces. "It's not something I care to discuss in public."

She stood in silence as Blaise turned away, issued orders to his men then took her arm gently and led her further under cover. The natural overhang fell away into a deep, sandy alcove containing bedrolls and saddlebags. The air smelled warm and musky with the mingled scents of Pride males, leather and spices. Beth moved to where he indicated and sat on a pile of blankets. *He seems harmless enough.* He turned away, bent down and extracted a tunic from a saddlebag and a pile of soft towels. One of his men walked into the alcove carrying two large pots of warm water. He set them down at her feet. She pulled back in alarm when Blaise set about removing her clothes to clean the mud from her body. She immediately relaxed when he spoke softly to her. *He's using glamor on me.*

"Have no fear, Beth, let me help you. I'm the only male Zandor won't try to kill for touching you. I'm devoted to my mate; her name is Daii, the Spell Weaver. I'm no threat to you, Beth, and you may speak to me in confidence. Now, pray tell, why has Zandor left you alone?"

What the hell.

"I've two mates, Zandor and Thryll. The last time I saw them, they were too involved with each other to care what I was doing. In fact, Zandor was telling Thryll how much he loved him, something he's not yet said to me."

Trying not to flinch, she sat motionless as Blaise washed the filth from her body with surprising tenderness then handed her a wet towel to wash her breasts. After she had finished, he wrapped her in a soft towel, tipped her head back and began to wash her hair. *A king, washing my hair, this must be a dream.* She looked into his face, and his eyes narrowed for just a second before he replied.

"Zandor is *different* from most males. In fact, I made him immortal to prevent him from killing himself during his unusual sexual practices."

"Yes, Thryll told me all this. Zandor went crazy after a female left and wanted to be lashed, almost to death, to forget her."

"It's most unusual for Pride males to fall in love *before* finding a mate and yet he insists he did. I find it hard to believe he took you unless he thought he could love you," said Blaise as he dried her hair and handed her the tunic.

"We exchanged harsh words; he insisted I should submit to him, whenever he wanted. I objected to this, once. I'd never experienced sex with two males together before and most of what we did was new to me. All I needed was a little break. He said, unless I complied, he would bring males to our home for his enjoyment and flaunt them in front of me."

"So you left?"

"My cat insisted I leave; she said they didn't want me."

"Younglings try to gain possession of our bodies." Blaise rested a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Your mates should have warned you of this. Our cats try to convince us that life as a cat is better. If you lose control over your beast, when you

morph, it will be forever. Don't listen to your cat if it tries to take you from your mates."

"I won't ever again, that's for sure. My problem is, Zandor doesn't believe I love him. He thinks I only care for Thryll. I don't know why he acts so callously toward me."

"Zandor is demanding, this is true, but he's a wounded soul. You will find a way to heal him, Beth. Thryll loves him. He has for some years, but it was always their wish to share their love with a female. Can you remember where last you saw them?"

"They were heading for the caves Nox told them about in the mountains. We were to stay there until you arrived; the Druiks are not far away."

"The Druiks camp at the southern edge of the forest." He paused and beckoned forward a man carrying a large mug and a plate of food. He waited for the man to leave and offered Beth a piece of bacon. "I'll try to get you safely to the Gate before they attack; mayhap Nox will take you."

"I don't know where to go once I'm through the Gate."

"Nox will take you to one of our camps in Lyoness." Blaise smiled and continued to feed her. "It will be safe for you to wait there, until we return. We have camps close to all the Gates. Your cat should be able to find one if you become lost."

"I'm afraid I've lost Zandor and Thryll. They don't want me, and I can't go home now."

"I'm sure they want you, Beth. This is just a misunderstanding. You are confused; it's obvious your mates failed to instruct you before your transformation. When this problem with the Druiks is resolved, you will see Zandor and Thryll in a different light. Here in the wilderness, is no place for love, Beth."

"I do miss them terribly. My heart hurts; I feel as if I'm in mourning."

"A normal reaction when your mate is away." Blaise smiled. "'Tis lucky your beast has cooled your Moon Fire, or your scent would render my troops useless."

Beth chewed the bacon, her face growing hot with embarrassment. "So it affects all males, not just my mates. Is that why they wanted to hide me in the caves?"

"Yes, on both counts. A female in Moon Fire sends our cats crazy." Blaise chuckled. "Although we are attracted to our true mate's scent in the first instance, it would be foolish to trust an unmated male with a female in Moon Fire."

"I see."

"It's unfortunate you've not enjoyed what, for most females, is a delightful experience." He offered her the last piece of bacon and pressed a cup of coffee into her hands. "Now, I think it would be best if you rested here for a while. I'll make arrangements with Nox to take you to the Gate and I'll send a couple of my men off to find your mates."

"What happened to Nox's beautiful wings?"

Blaise got to his feet in one fluid movement. "He can retract them; he prefers to fight wingless." He gazed down at her. "He says they get in the way."

"Why didn't he bring Faerie warriors to fight with you?"

"They are only a thought away. Nox is very powerful, as are we."

"How much of a threat are the Druiks? I've seen their technology; they're more advanced than Humans. They have powerful weapons. I can't imagine fighting them with just swords."

"I wouldn't underestimate them, but we don't fear technology. We have magyck and the Lady Boda to watch over us," said Blaise, running a hand through his hair. "They can be defeated, as they don't have Human weapons. I'm familiar with guns and suchlike. The Druiks use crossbows, and the silver bolts prevent our magyck. Hand to hand, they prefer the Rods of Pain but are no match for a warrior with a Claymore."

"You have Scottish Claymores?"

"Aye, we do; a fine weapon, don't you agree?" Blaise smiled.

Footsteps on gravel came closer as Hawke strode into the alcove carrying her backpack.

He inclined his head. "This belongs to Beth; it has Zandor's scent all over it." Hawke dropped the backpack and stood gazing down at Beth, his eyes smoldering.

"Is there anything else?" Blaise folded his arms across his chest and glared at him.

"Gods, she smells wonderful, and without the mud, she's a rare beauty."
Hawke licked his lips salaciously, stepped a little closer and sniffed the air. "How can you hope to keep her safe from one hundred and twenty randy Pride males?"

"Let it be known, as her protector, I'll kill any male who touches her."

"I owe her an apology." Hawke swallowed, his eyes never leaving her face.

"Very well, get on with it," demanded Blaise.

"I'm sorry I touched you, Beth." Hawke offered his hand and then withdrew it when Blaise growled. "I meant no harm and I must request that you explain to Zandor I had no idea you were mated to him or anyone else."

Beth pulled the tunic over her knees. A sheen of sweat glistened across Hawke's top lip.

"Okay, but if Zandor or Thryll ask me, I will tell them the truth."

Hawke shot a glance at Blaise and his king nodded solemnly.

"We'll deal with this after the battle; Nox will take her to the Gate."

"We need Nox in the battle," replied Hawke angrily.

"There's no other I can trust." Blaise shrugged "No matter, he'll be back in an instant. Come now and leave Beth to rest. She has a long journey ahead of her this eve."

Chapter Twelve

Zandor stood for some time and listened to his cat. He had no reason to disbelieve the beast; after all, his cat did have a vested interest in finding their mate. The news he received disturbed and yet comforted him. His cat insisted Tass used her influence during their mating to block Beth's true emotions. *Tass, gods, the beast had even chosen a name.* As soon as it knew Beth had conceived, it fed Beth's insecurities, and then encouraged her to cause the argument and leave.

"We must assume Beth's heading for the Gate. Her youngling no doubt has a plan to take her to Dryad and hide out in the forest until she delivers. Her cat knows of the Druik threat, so I'd imagine she'd take Beth on a path to the north. If we

morph, we can travel the mountain path and follow the edge of the forest. With luck, we may cut her off before she attempts to cross the open ground to the Gate.

"A storm approaches." Thryll pointed to the darkening sky. "Mayhap the Lady sends the rain and thunder to slow her down?" His face had drained of color with the news of Beth leaving and it had not yet returned.

Zandor crouched and scrubbed both hands over his face. "The Lady probably sent it to strike me down for my stupidity. My cat informs me that the youngling blocked Beth's mind to me during our mating. I found no love in her for me and yet her eyes told me differently. You know, in the laboratory, she and I grew very close. She told me what you said, about us all being mates. She wanted me then and I pushed her away. I didn't trust her and yet she gave herself to me willingly, when she knew I could have easily killed her. I didn't think it possible she really wanted me, that she loved me. Now she and our cub are in danger. Gods, what have I done?"

"Elizabeth isn't a child." Thryll rested a comforting hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "Lady willing, she'll forgive you and me. That's if we find her *before* she goes through the Gate or runs into a Druik patrol."

Zandor rose to his feet and slapped Thryll on the back. "Lead the way."

* * * * *

Beth opened her eyes. Nothing had changed; the cave was still bathed in the soft glow of a lantern. How long had she slept? Her stomach rumbled. She rolled over to peer out of the entrance. Blaise sat on a pile of blankets, his back resting against the cold granite wall. Three men sat before him. Hawke, she recognized, and Nox . . . the other could be Blaise's twin, although his silky raven hair fell well past his shoulders. They spoke in hushed tones but she could hear them clearly.

"They've been given uniforms and weapons but they both insist on speaking to her. Zandor grows angrier by the second and I fear for the safety of your men, Sire," whispered Hawke.

Beth drew a deep breath and her heart thundered against her chest. *They're here; they've found me.*

"Dare will speak to them. She needs to sleep and eat some more before I let them see her. She's breeding and distressed; if she loses her cub, the Lady will hold me accountable."

He rested a hand on the newcomer's shoulder. "Your mate was Human, Dare, explain to them the need for compassion for a female undergoing transformation. Make it clear how displeased I am with their behavior and inform them I will expect a valid justification before I allow them to see her."

"Very well, but it's hopeless explaining anything to Zandor while he's in a rage," said Dare, getting to his feet. He glanced toward her. "He doesn't recognize Beth's worth. She's a rare prize and will make a fine friend for Jill. My mate craves news of her world."

Beth crawled a little closer. *At least the king likes me.*

"Time grows short, the enemy is moving on our position." Nox snorted and his hair crackled as if charged with electricity. "I should leave with the female as soon as the sun slips from sight. This domestic problem is as inconsequential as a flea on a dog when we have a battle to fight." He sniffed dismissively.

Beth froze as Blaise glanced at her before inclining his head to speak softly to Hawke; Hawke stood immediately and strode away.

"Yes, I agree," said Blaise, turning back to Nox. "Zandor and Thryll will be needed and I'm sure they both have justice to deal out. I assume this man, Pic, is the leader of the place where you were imprisoned. Have you special plans for him?"

"I've thought of little else, and no doubt Zandor feels the same way." Nox's face hardened as if struck in stone. "Mayhap you can make Pic immortal so we may torture him for eternity."

"Mayhap you should dispatch him quickly and free the Gates of his evil."

"No. I've no compassion for Pic. He must pay for his crimes and I'll give him the same consideration that he gave to his victims," said Nox, curling his lips into a snarl.

"'Tis a shame Pic is but one problem; methinks the Druik Council of Elders will not take kindly to our invasion."

"I don't care, Blaise." Nox snorted and rubbed the sand from his hands on his knees. "'Twas Pic who killed my sister. Mayhap not by his hand but by his deed, he enslaved both Pride and Fae with the Elders consent, no doubt. He must pay for that crime and if the Druik Elders take offence to that, they're just as guilty."

Beth smiled grimly. *I'm with you all the way, Nox.*

"If I had my wish, the Gate would be closed to them forever," replied Blaise softly.

"Aye, if I had the Lady's permission, I'd have done so many summers ago. Likely she will give it now, and then we will be free of this scum."

When Hawke returned with more food and a mug of coffee, Blaise brought it to her and offered to feed her the small slivers of chicken. She shook her head and reached for the coffee. She smiled at him when he placed the food next to her, then smoothed the hair from her face and returned to sit at the alcove entrance. The moment he turned away, she stuffed the meat into her mouth; rich, spicy flavor exploded on her tongue. She ate again, more slowly to savor the delicious meal. Her fingers just reached around the huge mug and she sipped the coffee, holding the potent brew in her mouth as if it were fine wine.

Beth mulled over Blaise's words, her heart pounding. Pregnant. No, she couldn't be, not so soon. Anyway, how could Blaise know? *What will I do if I am pregnant? Where will I go if they abandon me in this God forsaken place? Nox said he'd take me through the Gate. Would he help?* Zandor and Thryll's faces crossed her mind. They were here and wanted to see her. *Dear God, Zandor sounded so angry.* She reached for her backpack and picked off the drying mud. Once it was clean, she pulled out her pants. The soft leather brushed her palm and warm scent filled her mind with a flood of sweet memories. Thryll. He said he loved her. Her heart ached for him — she loved him. *Stop it, you fool, he loves Zandor and you know it.*

"Yes, sister, listen to your heart." Crooned Tass, deep inside her head.

"If you don't shut up, I'll never morph, ever."

With a sob, she sagged against the pile of saddlebags and pushed her legs into the pants. The soft leather dragged against the deep scratches and stung painfully. Ignoring the throb in her ankle, she pushed her feet into her boots. She had to leave. It would hurt too much if Zandor yelled at her again; she just couldn't bear it. She waited until Blaise moved away from the entrance, snatched up the backpack and walked toward Nox.

The King of the Faerie raised his emerald eyes as she approached. His hair flowed in undulating black silk across his shoulders.

"Your Majesty, I think it would be better if I left. I'm causing too much trouble remaining here. You're correct; my problems can be dealt with after the Druiks are crushed."

"A wise move, Elizabeth of Knight Watch." Nox inclined his head. "It would be better if Zandor focused his anger on Pic rather than on you. Females and war don't mix. Many a warrior falls when his mind isn't on the one trying to dispatch him. Come then, we shall go now before your mates arrive."

Beth smiled when Nox stood slowly and took her arm. The air shimmered and in an instant they were transported outside and now stood beside a row of horses on the other side of the stone cathedral. Mixed scents surrounded her, of men, mostly, and horses. She wondered if the women Hawke had mentioned followed the troops. It would be reasonable to assume they paid available agreeable females to service the men, Pride males' sex-drive being what it seemed. Her stomach clenched; they would service her mates as well, or had already. *God, these Pride males are killing me. I can't live like this.*

Rows of tents lay camouflaged in a clearing and over one hundred Knight Watch troops readied themselves for battle. Lines of archers were making their way to a hill on the north side. Glancing around in amazement at the preparations for battle, Beth stumbled over tufts of grass; Nox smiled down at her but remained silent. The horses snickered as they approached and a massive black stallion with a long, flowing mane and tail whinnied in recognition. Beth waited patiently while Nox un-hobbled the horse. It was already equipped with a saddle and two bulging backpacks.

"Darkness will keep you safe in any realm," he said, leading the horse toward her." He'll take you to the secret camps of the Knight Watch." Nox took a small, bright blue stone from his pocket and handed it to her. "This stone will mask your presence; place it at the entrance to the camp. I'll return for you and my horse after the battle."

"How will you get back if I have your horse?"

"I 'm Faerie, I'll fly."

The sun hung low in the sky and the temperature began to drop as Nox climbed into the saddle and pulled her up behind him. His body, a hard warm mass, pressed against her thin tunic. His hair moved slowly against her cheek as if it had a life of its own. She inhaled deeply; his scent was the fragrance of pine forests and fresh air. She jumped when his hand brushed her thigh and she heard him chuckle.

"You're safe with me now that you're Pride, Beth. If you were still Human, my touch would have bonded you to me for life."

"Oh, so that's why you refused my help at the laboratory."

She clung to his waist as he urged the horse into a gentle walk and they slipped away around the edge of the forest. Long twilight shadows poured across the clearing, concealing them between their zebra stripes.

"Yes. In all my five hundred years, I've resisted the urge to touch a Human female. Methinks they would lose their appeal as they age and my eye would wander. I don't plan to be unfaithful when I take a mate; indeed, if she's Human, I'll make her Fae *before* I touch her."

"You can do that? What happens if you make a mistake and change a Human and she isn't the one for you?"

"Faerie live for a very long time; *if* I made a mistake, I think the Human would thank me for a long life without ageing or sickness."

A pain shot through Beth's chest and she trembled. Her stomach clenched and her fingers gripped the saddlebags until her knuckles went white.

"Oh, dear God, what's happening to me?"

"The farther we move from your mates, the more you'll suffer. I can help." He reached back and placed an open hand on her back.

Warmth spread from his fingers and flowed up her ribs, contentment surrounding her like a warm hug.

"Oh, is that your glamor?"

"No, it's magyck. If I used my glamor on you while you are in Moon Fire it would send your cat into frenzy and the Prides and Faerie have a treaty for peace."

"Meaning what?"

"My glamor would make your Moon Fire slide into insignificance. You would want many males, at the same time, in every conceivable way."

"Oh!"

* * * * *

Zandor inclined his head to Blaise, stepped around Dare, pushed Hawke aside and strode deeper into the rock cathedral. Beth's scent surrounded him. He paused, suddenly nervous. *What am I going to say to her? That I'm sorry? Gods, she'll think I'm a fool.* He drew a deep breath, turned the corner, and searched the empty alcove.

"Beth, are you hiding from me?"

His voice echoed in the silence; he clenched his teeth. *I'm betrayed again. This time by my king and my own brothers.* He turned. Thryll, a few paces behind, raised his brow.

"She's not here . . . they lied to us."

Thryll surprised him by turning and launching his body at Hawke. The pair hit the cave wall with bone crushing force then rolled across the floor, trading punches and insults.

Zandor flung himself forward when Dare entered the alcove and rushed into the fray. "You lying bastard, I'll kill you."

The air rushed from his lungs as he hit Dare in a tackle. They both rolled into the passage and slammed into Blaise, knocking the king off his feet.

Zandor groaned when Dare flipped him over and restrained him with calm efficiency.

"Enough," Blaise bellowed, rolling to his feet.

Zandor's chest hurt like hell; Dare held him pinned face down under his knees, one hand clamped like a vise on his throat.

"I've no reason to kill you, brother; do you yield?"

"In your dreams, whelp."

Zandor heard the familiar slide of steel as Blaise unsheathed his sword. His king's next words chilled him to the bone.

"Brother or not, Zandor, I'll remove your head myself if you dare to attack me or your brothers again. Do you understand?"

Zandor nodded his aching head and sucked a welcome breath into his lungs. Dare pulled him to his feet and spun him around to face Blaise. Hawke pushed Thryll to his knees beside him and stood with both hands pushing down on his shoulders.

"'Tis just as well I am a lenient king, for the penalty for attacking a Knight Watch prince is death." Blaise glared at Thryll and rested the tip of his deathly sharp sword in the soft hollow of his neck. "I do hope you have a good explanation for this behavior."

Zandor moaned when Thryll lifted his face. A deep purple bruise covered one cheek.

"Sire, you said we may speak to Elizabeth and she's gone," Thryll whispered.

"Nox is missing and I asked him to take her through the Gate." Blaise turned his gaze on Zandor. "I thought he intended leaving after dark, which would have given you both ample time to speak with her. No matter, she'll be safer away from the battle."

"We had an agreement; you said if I calmed and listened to Dare's eloquent sermon, I could speak with her. Why do I need your permission, when the female belongs to us, by the grace of the Lady? What kind of trick is this, Blaise? "

"No trick. I speak for the Lady. Your mate is extremely distressed, and witnessing a battle may further threaten the life of your cub. Is that what you want? This problem wouldn't be taking up my time if you'd just controlled yourself for the three days she was in Moon Fire. What sane male leaves a female in that state, in the

middle of a forest with the enemy one hour's walk away? Do you intend to abandon your son as well as your mate, Zandor? Is this how your father raised you? To be a coward?"

Bile rushed up Zandor's throat. "No, I'd not intentionally abandon my mate or my cub but, in truth, I am a coward. I was too afraid of being hurt by a female again and now I've destroyed the most precious thing in my miserable life."

"You both have much to learn about females." Blaise shook his head as he slowly sheathed his sword.

A horn sounded. Dare turned and strode out into the light. Troops were rushing around, collecting their gear.

"Report," bellowed Blaise upon his second-in-command's return.

"The Druiks have Nox surrounded; he's not fifty paces from the Gate and throwing fireballs. Beth is with him; it's unclear how she fares."

"The archers are in place and will attack on my command. Hawke, take fifty men and circle around behind the enemy. Take them from the south. Dare, ready the rest; we ride to the Gate. Zandor and Thryll, with me," ordered Blaise.

* * * * *

Thryll's stomach clenched as they rode out into the clearing. The Druiks spread out before them to the south. They stood in formation upon two rows of dune buggies. Some fifteen paces behind cruised four silver transport vehicles. Twenty paces from the Gate, Nox's distinctive black warhorse danced from side to side to avoid the silver bolts sailing in quick succession from two Druik crossbows. Beth clung to Nox's waist, her black hair flowing unrestrained in the wind. The King of the Faerie stood up in his stirrups, forming balls of red fire on the palms of his hands to fling at the enemy forces. The ground shook as each magical fireball hit its mark and burst like a thousand cannons. Great clumps of vegetation, filled with the Druiks machines and body parts, exploded high in the air.

Thryll watched powerless as Zandor pushed his horse recklessly to the front of the line, slammed on his helm and drew his sword with a metallic screech. Then,

without waiting for permission to attack, Zandor yelled a battle call, dug his heels into his horse, and galloped off alone, toward Nox.

"Hold." Blaise swore loudly and glared at Thryll. "We ride as one." He turned his warhorse toward the archers and raised an arm.

Lady, watch over us. Thryll's fingers tightened around the reins as Zandor aimed his horse across the clearing.

Once Blaise lowered his arm, the air thrummed as a hundred arrows shot high in the air, darkening the sky as they dived in a graceful arc toward the Druiks. The front line of the archers knelt to reload while the backline shot a farther blanket of arrows toward the enemy. Screams rose above the battle as arrows met their mark.

The strong smell of male sweat and horses engulfed him as the Knight Watch warriors closed in formation behind their king. The air practically crackled with anticipation as all eyes turned toward Blaise. The men were silent, only the creak of leather saddles and the jingle of the horses' tack broke the calm.

"Charge!" yelled Blaise and his massive black warhorse leaped forward.

* * * * *

Beth's fingers ached as she clung to Nox's belt. The metallic taste of blood filled her mouth from biting down on her tongue to prevent screaming. She ducked and rolled from side to side with every fireball Nox flung at the Druiks. *Dear God, I'm going to die.* The wind brought a spray of blood as a fireball reached its mark, the sticky red slick coating her bare arms and sticking to her hair. The air stunk of sweat, blood, loose bowels and piss as the Druiks fell. The screams of the dying and the sickening sounds of metal ripping apart surrounded her. *If only I could cover my ears, oh God, make it go away.*

She shivered with fear when Nox groaned, sat down heavily in the saddle, and leaned against her. Crouching over his prostrate body, she urged the horse forward as Nox turned Darkness to face the Druiks. The horse side-stepped closer to the Gate. She whimpered as more Druiks crossbow bolts hit his body and the faerie

slumped over Darkness's neck. The horse reared as another rally of arrows shot over Beth's head, sending the Druiks for cover. The two with crossbows were reloading from the cover of a dune buggy, too far away now to do much more damage.

"Beth." Zandor's voice pierced the horror.

At the touch of Zandor's hand on her arm, she looked at him in stunned amazement. She sobbed as he turned his horse to cover her from the Druik onslaught. His soft, amethyst eyes peered at her through the slit in his helm.

"Nox is unconscious. Be brave, little one; kick the horse and go through the Gate. I'll cover you. They can't hurt me." He reached out and grasped one of her hands which had been clinging to Nox's belt.

Beth kicked Darkness and he moved swiftly into a rolling canter; Zandor stayed close, protecting her with his body. He didn't flinch when bolts buried into his left arm and thigh. *He's sacrificing himself for me.* Not five paces from the Gate he released her hand slowly, allowing his fingers to trail across her palm in a sweet caress. She cried out when his eyes rested on her with a deep longing.

"C-come with me, p-please."

"Not while Pic lives, Beth. Go and keep our son safe."

A rally of arrows whined overhead as Zandor slapped Darkness's rump with the flat of his sword. Roaring a fierce battle cry, he spun his horse around and charged back toward the cover of the oncoming Knight Watch warriors.

The Gate loomed before her, resembling a gigantic movie screen, the scene within changing every few seconds. *Which one do I take? Why didn't they tell me there were so many?*

A crossbow bolt passed so close, the breeze lifted her hair in its wake. She kicked the horse hard and he charged toward the Gate just as the scene changed.

Silence, blessed silence. The air around her grew suddenly warm. Heat from a blazing sun soaked through her clothes. The horse stopped and she glanced around in dismay. This realm resembled a wasteland, an empty wilderness but for a couple of concrete buildings. She looked at the Gate, no scene of the battle showed in its depths. She ran her hand down Nox's back as he slumped over the horse's neck, a

sleek fall of raven hair covering his face. He lay very still. Blood soaked Darkness's neck in a glistening sheen and dripped in crimson cherries to the thirsty sand.

"I don't believe it," said a familiar male voice.

Beth turned in the saddle and froze. Pic stood not five paces away, brandishing a Rod of Pain, his wide grin disclosing yellow teeth.

"I sent my men to capture Nox and you deliver him for me; how convenient." He chuckled.

Chapter Thirteen

Thryll's stomach clenched as he stared across at the Gate, through which Beth and Nox had just disappeared. *Dear Lady, she's entered Tion Three.*

His grip tightened around his sword as he charged across the battlefield to meet Zandor, oblivious to the carnage around him. A Druik trooper aimed a Rod of Pain at his leg and he swung his sword and took his arm off at the shoulder. The Druik's eyes widened with shock and he grasped at the bleeding stump before falling to his knees. Thryll stared down in strange fascination at the Druik's blood dripping off his boot. He heard Zandor yell and lifted his head in time to see him decapitate an advancing Druik with one sweep of his sword. Zandor's back, left arm and thigh glittered with silver bolts. Under his helm, his mouth tightened in a terrible smile. Thryll's breath caught in his throat as Zandor lifted his sword in salute, spun his horse around, and rode once more into the fray.

"Thryll." Dare rode to his side and yelled. "Thryll, wake up man, there's nothing you can do for Beth. You'll be no good to her dead."

"They entered Tion Three."

"Damn it, we'll take an army if necessary to retrieve them, but for now the threat is here." Dare swore and indicated toward the Gate.

The noise of battle closed around Thryll, the air heavy with death. The pungent smell of blood and spilled guts made his stomach turn. To the south, Hawke's troops surrounded the remaining Druik forces and cut down all that did not surrender. Bodies littered the battlefield, both dead and injured, a terrible sight.

The once peaceful emerald clearing was now soaked in sticky, crimson puddles. A dense, swirling mist rolled across, as if the Lady were covering the bloodbath from his sight. While he sat motionless, Zandor rode out of the ethereal cloud like a demon on horseback and ripped off his blood-splashed helm.

"I enjoyed that." Zandor laughed and dismounted to wipe his bloody sword across the tunic of a fallen Druik. "Pic believed his troops would destroy us with their superior weaponry. Gods, Thyrll, did he really believe their rods of death could reach us on horseback?"

Thyrll shook himself out of his stupor. Now Zandor was no longer under threat, he could function again. "Is Pic dead?"

"I don't know." Zandor frowned and glanced toward the group of prisoners dragging the bodies of their fallen comrades into a pile for burning. "Blaise told the prisoners to inform him if they find Pic's body among the dead."

Thyrll dismounted and began to pull the silver bolts from Zandor's body, relieved to see none too deeply embedded. Zandor's mouth formed a hard line but he remained silent. By the time the last bolt fell to the ground, his body had already begun to heal.

"Elizabeth took Nox into Tion Three."

"Then we shall go at once to retrieve her." Zandor's eyes narrowed as he stared across the battlefield. The Gate stood out like a beacon in the twilight. "I doubt Druik forces are there or they would have arrived as reinforcements." He leaped onto his horse and headed toward the Gate.

* * * * *

Beth cringed when Pic stepped toward her and leveled his Rod of Pain at her leg. Inside, her cat snarled, desperate to spring forth and tear Pic to shreds. Nox hung limply across Darkness's neck. Beth placed her hand on his back. *Thank God, he's still breathing.*

"So, my dear, how did you come to be with the King of the Faerie? I thought you were destined for Zandor's bed. You've transformed into Pride, so who do you belong to . . . ah, Thryll, no doubt."

"Zandor is my mate and he'll be here with the Knight Watch any minute."

"Do you believe they know you're here?" Pic laughed low and with menace. "Only a fool would enter this realm when you had all of the Lady's Five Gates to choose from for safety. You've obviously not been informed about our Gates, have you, Human?"

"Nox sent me here."

"Ah, yes, Nox. Do you think perhaps he desires you for himself or does he know the truth of it and brings you here for Zandor's toy when he tires of me?"

"Tires of you? Are you mad? Zandor hates you and wants you dead."

"Zandor desires *me*. You're but a passing fancy." Pic waved the Rod of Pain in small circles, so close that the hum of its power tickled her leg. He chuckled and rubbed his crotch slowly. "I have what he needs; he wants to be my sex slave."

Beth snorted. "You're a sick son of a bitch."

"He mated you and Thryll did too, no doubt? They soon tired of you, didn't they? Moon Fire, in a Pride female, is supposed to be the most desired experience for all Pride males? Normally, they'd kill any male that interfered and yet here you are with Nox. My guess is, you didn't come up to their expectations."

"You know nothing, you pathetic freak."

"Do you remember the night my orderly put you in Zandor's cage? He didn't want you, did he? Do you know why? That very afternoon, I had his ass twice and he enjoyed my mouth on his cock, many times."

"I don't believe you." *Don't tell me he submitted to this little worm.*

"So you're in a position to know, are you?"

"Yes, I am. He hates your guts."

"*Really?* So much so, he begged me to fuck him harder and locked his eyes on mine when he came in my mouth. He has such a sweet, musky taste, don't you think? You must have heard that little noise he makes when he comes; it's almost a purr, isn't it?"

A stab of pain shot through her. *How could he possibly know that? Oh, Zandor, I'm so sorry . . . you did this just to help me.* She drew a deep breath and looked away as Pic moved slowly around the horse to the side where Nox's ashen face pressed against Darkness's mane.

"Get off the horse; I'll need to stabilize Nox, or are you going to let him die?"

Beth dismounted. Her legs crumpled under her and she sat down hard at Pic's feet. Bile rushed up the back of her throat. Pic's fingers were twined in Nox's hair as he bent to kiss him, pulling away to lick across his lips. She glared at him when he turned and smiled at her, his pudgy hand closing around Nox's leather-clad buttocks.

"Nox desires men as much as Zandor and now I have him under my power, I'll have his ass. He was a little reluctant before, but the silver bolts will keep him subdued enough for my pleasure."

She took a breath to reply when the bright sunlight caught a flash of steel.

"Damn you to Hell," rasped Nox as he drove his dirk under Pic's chin with incredible force.

A fountain of blood erupted before her as Pic gurgled something unintelligible and grasped at his throat. Beth scrambled back when he slumped to his knees then fell to the ground face first beside her. She stared at his twitching body, her eyes fixed on a patch of scarlet blood spreading out across the sand at her feet. Lifting her chin, she met Nox's brilliant emerald eyes; he spat on Pic's body and slid a bloody dirk back inside his boot.

"I've no magyck to heal my wounds, at the moment, but Pic failed to remember I'm immortal." He pulled a distinctive star-shaped ring from his finger and offered it to her. "Press this into his cheek. Mark him to show all of Druik Void the King of the Faerie has claimed his revenge."

Beth clutched the ring to her chest. Steeling herself, she drew on the mountain of hate welling inside her for this despicable man. She bent over his twitching body and rolled him over. His empty eyes stared into space, and blood trickled from the wound in his throat. *For Zandor.* With as much force as she could muster, she drove the ring into his cheek. When she removed it, the distinctive star had branded Nox's

mark into his skin. She stood and passed Nox the ring. His bloody fingers closed around her own.

Come now, Beth, we must leave this place. You will have to remove the silver for me to recover," he gasped, gripping his chest.

Beth's heart began to race with fear. Nox was deathly pale and his skin glistened with sweat. *If he passes out we're both fucked.* She ground her teeth and tried to think straight. She needed medical supplies to treat him.

"What is this place? Should I search for medical supplies?"

"It's a training ground for Druik troops. Mayhap they have what you need inside that building. Look if you must, but hurry, they could return." He wheezed and coughed, spitting blood.

Beth turned and walked swiftly toward the first cement building. She stepped cautiously inside the open doorway. The storeroom had a strange, unfamiliar odor and the only light came from one globe suspended from the ceiling by a long, black cord. Tall shelves lined the interior walls. Long benches, packed with equipment and machinery parts, ran down the center of the room. She recognized a line of white containers at the back of the room. *Medical kits.* She ran to the shelves, dragged down two, and set them on the bench. Relief flooded through her. The boxes held trauma first-aid supplies. Heading for the door, she lifted her face to enjoy a snatch of cool breeze from an air conditioner set halfway up the far wall. High on a shelf by the door, she noticed a pile of empty canvas bags and blankets. *Yes, I'll need these.*

She disregarded her aching fingers, stuffed blankets and medical kits into the large bag, pulled the drawstring tight and dragged it from the storeroom into the sunshine.

Nox had moved Darkness to the shade in front of the doorway; he sat slumped with his eyes closed.

"Nox, I've found what I need."

When he opened his eyes and nodded slightly, Beth smiled to comfort him. Pain shot down her arms as she hoisted the bulky bag onto the horse and secured it across the saddlebags. Her knees trembled with effort when she dragged her aching body up behind Nox.

"Where do I go? How do I know which scene to take?"

"We'll take the first friendly Gate. It doesn't matter which. Zandor and Thryll will find us." Nox made small clicking sounds with his mouth and Darkness moved forward through the Gate and into the coolness of night.

* * * * *

Darkness found a cave behind a waterfall and the splash of cool water did nothing to soothe Nox's body, after the slow, seemingly endless journey. Beth's trembling fingers pulled him from the horse, sending a jolt of agony through his chest. He fell hard on his knees and winced when the skin tore from his hands as he hit the floor. Pain such as this had never troubled him before today. The sting of the wicked, silver bolts cut through him with such savagery, he gasped for air.

"Breathe slowly," Beth said and came toward him, her eyes wide with fear.

He tried to speak as she patted at the blood on his tunic with a wad of cotton. He held up a bleeding hand to stop her ministrations and crawled to the wall. Wheezing for breath, he pushed into a sitting position and slumped against the cool rock. The ringing in his ears almost drowned out the rush of the waterfall as it cascaded past the entrance.

He had no recollection of this cave. In truth, he knew every Knight Watch camp within the Five Gates. To protect them from unwanted visitors, he insisted Beth place the blue stone at the entrance. He glanced around, narrowing his eyes in the darkness, his fingers sinking into the surprisingly dry sandy soil below him. A short distance from his feet, sooty stones, blackened by fire, reared in a circle. A pile of skins covered a small cache of barrels. A neatly piled stack of logs and kindling sat almost hidden below a slight overhang in a blanket of velvet darkness. *Well stocked, but by who?* A light breeze brushed his cheek, bringing the fresh scent of a pine forest. The cave opened up around the bend; mayhap it led to the other side of the mountain?

Beth bent down and inspected him; she placed a hand on his head and pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I have to get those bolts out; some of them aren't in too deep. Immortal or not, you're going into shock."

"I'll live and I don't think trying to remove them in the dark is a sensible idea."

She searched through the saddlebags. "What do you use to light a fire? We need one; it's too cold in here,"

"Magyck, but I've none as long as this silver is in my body, so you'll have to try. It's a simple spell; your youngling will guide you."

She smiled and sighed deeply. "Ah, yes. Thryll showed me how he made fire. I miss him and I miss Zandor too. Will you tell me what to do? My cat is a fool."

"I am no fool, mistress. You must first collect wood to burn. Then point at the kindling and see the fire."

Beth pulled at her hair in frustration.

"Do our cats butt into every conversation? Damn it, I can't even think straight. And how the bloody hell, do I *see* fire?"

"This I don't know, Beth." Nox shook his head. "I have no cat. I'm a Faerie but what she says is true. You must imagine the wood is on fire and it will be so. For now, perhaps if you give me my cloak from the saddlebags, it will be sufficient. You're tired and under too much stress to concentrate."

Beth kneeled beside him and smiled her best doctor smile.

"I'm a doctor. I gave an oath to provide care for the sick and injured. I can't just sit here while you bleed. My eyesight is brilliant since my transformation; I'll only need a little more light to work on you. I know you're in pain but you must try to help me."

"There are supplies over there; mayhap there will be a lantern or two. First you must tend to Darkness; unfortunately he isn't immortal and needs to graze." Nox coughed and spat out blood.

Nox relaxed when Beth nodded and got to her feet; she swayed a little but moved toward Darkness with a confidence only gained by someone who was comfortable around horses. First, she removed the heavy saddlebags and tack,

leaving only the black leather halter, then she searched through the saddlebags, retrieved a flat round brush and began to rub down the horse with practiced precision.

Nox tipped his head back to watch her. A different kind of pain shot through his chest, bringing tears to his eyes. He ground his teeth, his mind flooded by images of his sister, lying battered and broken at his feet. *Had she felt pain such as this? Would she have survived if she'd been immortal, or had the rape destroyed her mind?* His sister's weak pleas to send her through the veil echoed through his mind. Would he meet Pic in Hell for killing his own sister? The Lady sent immortals to the Underworld for such a crime. Quilla would speak on his behalf when she stood in the Lady's grace, but would the Lady grant *him* mercy?

"You know it's not unusual for people with massive blood loss to dwell on bad things." Beth stood before him holding a lantern. "Are you thinking about your sister?"

He shook his head in an effort to concentrate on the stream of words coming from her lips. "Yes, Quilla. She was the youngest."

He flinched as Beth's hand rested on his shoulder and he inhaled the warm scent of horse lingering on her skin.

"Do you believe we go to a better place when we die?" Her eyes narrowed with determination as her head lowered to face him.

"Aye, we go through the veil and into the glory of the Lady Boda."

"Then you must believe Quilla is in a beautiful place, whole and happy."

"I know in my heart she is safe, but to destroy the small flicker of life that remained in Quilla will most certainly send me to Hell. To kill one's own blood . . ."

"You gave her mercy, protected her in the only way possible and God and your Lady will understand," said Beth.

Nox battled to stay awake when she moved toward him and a shaft of silken hair brushed his hand as she raised the wine skin to his lips.

"Now although I'd never advise alcohol for someone with your injuries, it obviously won't kill you and might help dull the pain. I'll collect some water, and then perhaps you might be able to help me light this lantern."

* * * * *

Beth picked up an empty canteen, and carefully climbed down the slippery rocks. The deep pools gouged out at the cave entrance glistened with fresh water. The walls of the cave were smooth and mossy under her groping hands. She slid precariously close to the edge of the narrow walkway and hesitated, the roar of water making her tremble with fear. Standing motionless, she watched the dangerous sheet of shimmering liquid silk not one arm's length away. She took a steadying breath and crouched down to crawl slowly forward to wash her hands and face. Mist billowed around her, the dense white clouds soaking her clothes and hair. Plunging the canteen into the pool, she watched until the air bubbles stopped and then backed away. Her feet slid on the slimy rocks and her hands grasped for purchase on the cold, wet wall as she climbed, heart pounding, back into the cave.

She returned to find Nox sitting very still, his eyes closed and the wine skin discarded on the ground by his side. Beth inclined her head and studied him; her physician's knowledge told her she must remove the silver bolts before he deteriorated any further. Straightening her shoulders, she lifted her chin. *I must think clearly; just how difficult can it be to use the magyck I've inherited from the Prides?* She would not use her cat's chosen name, nor would she make another mistake with her 'youngling'.

"Cat, give me instructions to light the lantern and make fire."

"Hold out your hand, mistress, and imagine a ball of white light resting in the palm."

Beth opened her hand and looked intently at her palm. Some minutes passed before she spoke. "Yes, I can see it now. What do I do next?"

"Pick up the lantern and let the ball of light roll down your fingers and into the lamp."

Beth jumped as the fluorescent sphere filled the lantern. She grinned as she placed the lantern close to Nox. She touched his forehead. He didn't stir and his brow felt clammy under her trembling touch. She turned, collected wood and

kindling and piled them carefully into the ring of stones. "How do I set these logs alight?"

"See the logs on fire, smell the smoke, feel the warmth and it will be so," Nox replied in a soft raspy voice.

She closed her eyes and collected images and smells from her memory. The fire in her imagination crackled, red and orange flames licked the logs and a small spiral of smoke rose into the air. She opened her eyes. At her feet, the small, wood fire burst into life, spilling a vermillion glow into the darkness.

The rush of pure magyck flowed through her fingers and every hair on her body stood to attention. *Oh, my God, it's real.*

Nox groaned and she turned at once. Clearly, she needed to forget all about magyck and think rationally. Spreading a blanket on the ground beside him, she picked up the medical box and peered inside at the contents. She recognized most of the usual items: bandages, dressings, sutures. Only the small, glass phials of liquid were unusual. Peering closely at the contents, she turned each one over in her hand; no doubt they contained antibiotics, pain relief, and a local anesthetic. The labels, however, listed names she did not recognize. Never mind. The surgical kits were complete and would do nicely.

Taking two medical kits, she knelt down beside him, took a pair of scissors and lifted the hem of his tunic. She smiled, glad to see his emerald eyes open a slit.

"Do you intend to cut me?" he said, closing his hand so tightly around her wrist her bones ground against each other.

"No, of course not. I'll have to remove your clothes to attend to your injuries. Now you're awake, perhaps you can take a look at those small bottles in the medical kit and tell me what they're used for. I believe one is a local anesthetic, like the one we use in my world to numb the flesh, so it doesn't hurt when I remove the bolts."

"I am Faerie." Nox released her hand and shook his head slowly. "No human or Druik concoctions will work on me. Have no fear, I may fall into unconsciousness, but I will not die."

Beth drew a deep breath and cut open his tunic, unable to keep her face professionally passive. Purple and black bruises surrounded five bolts buried deep

in his hairless, peach-colored flesh. The sweet, metallic scent of his blood rose warm from his body.

"There is another in my leg, here on the right," he muttered, indicating a small tear in his leather pants.

Beth undid the laces of his fly with trembling fingers and Nox lifted his hips to allow her to pull the tight, damp leather down his muscular legs. Heat rushed into her cheeks, as inch by inch, the leather slipped from his hairless flesh. Her head grew giddy from the scent of pine forest, fresh air and the potent musk of virile male. She forced herself to stop staring at his magnificent cock, and concentrated on removing his boots. After folding his pants with unnecessary care to give herself time to collect her scattered wits, she grabbed a blanket and covered him to the waist.

"How can you possibly remove the bolts while I'm covered?" Nox grabbed the blanket and flung it to one side. "Does my nakedness disgust you, Human?"

Beth shot him a glance she hoped signified her anger.

"I believe you mentioned I was no longer human. As to your body, to be honest, I think it's quite beautiful. Now will you move over and lay on the blanket. I don't want dirt getting in your wounds."

The bolt in his leg had penetrated the fleshy part of the outer thigh. Beth pressed around the wound; the top of the bolt lay just beneath the surface. She doused her hands and the area with alcohol. Nox hissed between his teeth but sat surprisingly still while she used forceps to locate and remove the metal. Blood flowed freely from the torn skin.

"This is most unusual for me, to bleed. My wounds usually heal quickly; 'tis the silver that prevents this," he said between clenched teeth.

Beth held a wad of cotton against the incision and pressed hard. In a few minutes, the bleeding slowed enough to cover it with a dressing. She moved to Nox's chest and examined each wound. None was close to any major organ, although one sat very close to a lung. She bit her lip. *I hope Faeries are the same as Humans. What if they have two hearts?*

She glanced up to see Nox watching her closely. She smiled at him, trying to convey confidence. Luckily, three of the bolts in his chest were sticking out; she

washed the area with alcohol and removed them swiftly. Despite taking every care not to hurt him, she still heard Nox moan and his head rolled back, his face pale with dark shadows beneath his eyes. She felt for the pulse in his neck. Heart rate rapid. Skin clammy. She pulled the blanket over his inert body and sat staring into the fire. In all good conscience, she could not continue. Immortal or not, he needed blood to keep his brain functioning and a Faerie with his power would be extremely dangerous if he lost his faculties.

She rose slowly and washed her hands. They had supplies and plenty of water. She had to wait until Nox stabilized before she continued to remove the remaining bolts.

"Thryll, Zandor where are you?"

Chapter Fourteen

Zandor inhaled the fresh wind coming off the sea and sighed. He wished Beth could have returned with them to Dryad. He yearned to show her the castle where he grew up, the field in which he and Thryll fought their first tournament. Gods, the fear in her eyes haunted his every waking hour. Not so, finding the body of Pic encased in a shroud of crimson blood. He laughed at the memory. Nox had revenged his sister in the most painful way he knew. Pic had suffered and in death pain had etched his face. The crows were gathering when they left. No words were spoken over him, and he'd had no time to seek forgiveness—let the demons take him straight to Hell.

The sun blazed high in the sky as they rode across the drawbridge to Feltich Castle and entered the courtyard. Zandor's gaze flickered toward the keep. The appetizing aroma of roast pork and beef drifted from the kitchen. Two kitchen maids giggled, their heads close together, as they walked toward the keep, laden with baskets of eggs. He ground his teeth. How could life go on with such normality here, while his own life remained a shattered mess? Their squires appeared as if by magyck and ran toward them with the grooms close behind. The horses, exhausted

and soaked in sweat, sprayed large globules of foam in every direction with each toss of their heads.

Zandor unclenched his numb fingers from the reins and slipped from his saddle. His back ached and his arms felt like lead – a condition he often found himself to be in after a battle, although they had left the Druik Void five days ago to search for Beth. With no time to change his blood-soaked clothes, his body still stank from the carnage. His tunic, stiff from sweat and filth, stuck to his flesh and dry blood flaked from his pants. His eyes burned from lack of sleep and his throat was so dry, his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Even the horse troughs looked inviting. He must bathe, although hunger gnawed at his belly. His heart begged him to continue the search, but he had no strength left to do so. Glancing around, he saw Thryll dismount and speak in an unusually harsh tone to his squire before dismissing the lad.

"We should have kept searching; returning here is madness when Elizabeth could be in danger," said Thryll, turning his blood-splattered body to Zandor, his eyes blazing with rage.

Zandor passed the reins and helm to his squire with a nod then raised his chin. A light breeze cooled the sweat from his brow and lifted the hair stuck to his cheeks. He ran his swollen fingers through his matted hair and opened his mouth to speak, not at all sure if he could. "Do you think Nox would allow anything to happen to her? He dispatched Pic so 'tis obvious he can protect her very well. As they aren't in the usual realms, he may have taken her to Other World, to recover from his injuries."

"You put too much faith in Nox. He's a male alone with our mate. She is vulnerable and likely to turn to him for protection. How does that lie with you Zandor, or don't you care if Nox tups her? They say when a female is fucked by a faerie, she'll never have another between her legs."

Zandor coughed to clear his throat. "Mayhap sharing a female isn't such a good idea; we've not argued like this since we were children." He clasped Thryll's arm and felt his body stiffen in response. "I trust Nox as I would you. He's honorable and we can trust him with Beth. I looked into her eyes before she left. I saw pain and

love. She'll not betray us. Our sweet mate is suffering the pain of separation. The bond is strong."

Zandor rolled his shoulders and strode into the keep, making his way to the great hall to report to Blaise. Thryll fell in step beside him, muttering under his breath and ignoring onlookers who enquired as to their well-being. They stopped before Blaise, seated at the head of the laden banquet table, his queen Daii, beside him. Their king lifted his head as the footman announced them, pushed his plate away, got slowly to his feet and walked to meet them.

"So no luck?" His hand lifted to cover his nose. "Gods, what is that smell? Haven't you washed since the battle?"

Zandor bowed respectfully. "We found Pic dead at Tion Three with a stab wound in the neck. Nox's mark was branded on his cheek. We've searched unsuccessfully for Beth in all our camps within the Five Gates. I can only assume they're in Other World, or mayhap in a realm not mapped by our scribes."

"Nox would've sent a message if they were in Other World." Blaise rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I'm assuming you didn't inform Beth of our Gate system and she entered Tion Three in error. It's reasonable to assume that if Nox was incapacitated she took the next visible Gate, not having the knowledge to wait for one of our five. This being the case, they may be in any one of a thousand realms. You've only one course of action and that's to wait. Nox will recover eventually and return her to Dryad."

Zandor took a deep breath. The aroma of food from the banquet table made his stomach rumble. "Yes, I agree, we have no other choice. Thank you for your patience, Sire."

"I think we should continue to search, Sire," Thryll said quietly.

Blaise raised a brow and shrugged.

"If I'd an inkling of even the direction she took, I'd send an army to search, but methinks your time would be better spent cleansing yourselves and regaining your stamina. What would Beth think if she saw you in this condition?"

Zandor squeezed Thryll's arm to stop further argument and smiled at his brother. "Yes, we'll go directly to the baths."

"That would be best. My queen may protest if you sit at our table in this state. I'll instruct your squires to attend you," Blaise said.

Zandor followed Thryll down the damp stone steps that led to the baths below the castle. He smiled when Thryll's hands clenched into fists as he entered his private room and dismissed the body servant curtly. Steam rose in white plumes from the pool hewn out of solid rock and fed from the hot springs. Soft blue light illuminated the area, spilling across the wide massage benches and the table with large drawers containing his toys and lotions. Zandor pulled his tunic over his head and watched Thryll rip off his clothes before diving into the hot water. He turned back to the door and spoke quietly to the waiting servant.

"Our squires will deliver clean clothes and food within the hour."

He pushed the door closed and slipped the bolt. He struggled to remove his blood soaked boots and swore when his stiff fingers fumbled at the buttons of his fly. He heard Thryll grunt and lift his body from the pool.

"Looks like you need some help," said Thryll, his fingers brushing Zandor's cheek before he bent to undo his fly.

Buttons undone, Zandor moaned when Thryll's warm fingers closed around his upper arms and Thryll pulled him to his feet. His pants fell in a heap around his ankles. He stepped free and followed Thryll to a small table beside the pool, which held a jug of Miza and two goblets.

"Here, drink, you're exhausted." Thryll handed him a goblet. "And you stink like the dead." Thryll grimaced and drained the contents in one gulp.

Zandor scowled, emptied his own goblet, then dived into the pool. Hot water hit his skin, scorching his battered flesh. He relaxed. The Miza warmed his belly and the steaming water soothed his aching muscles. He sank to the bottom, holding his breath until his heart beat fit to burst. He rose slowly; a cold blast of air hit his face as he broke the surface. He looked over at Thryll who stood close by, washing his hair with fragrant sandalwood soap.

"Here, get rid of that awful smell," said Thryll, passing him the soap, his lips lifting up at the corners.

Zandor pushed the fragrant suds through his hair and over his skin. The dried blood that had sat beneath his nails for the past five days vanished. He lifted his head to look at Thryll as he refilled their goblets from a jug beside the pool. Water ran down his mate's spine, over the hard muscles of his back and trickled between the inviting cleft of his ass. Zandor's entire body filled with desire. *Gods, he is the most beautiful of all males.*

Zandor smiled when Thryll glanced over his shoulder as he approached. The steam was rising in white tendrils from his bare buttocks. Zandor rubbed the soap between his palms and applied the suds to Thryll's back in long, even strokes. Thryll stood stock still, and Zandor paused to evaluate his friend's attitude to his advances. His answer came when Thryll placed his goblet down, turned and pressed his lips across his mouth. Zandor inhaled Thryll's distinctive scent and opened his mouth to enjoy the hot, probing of his tongue.

Zandor pushed his fingers into Thryll's wet hair and cupped the back of his head, dragging him closer to intensify the kiss. As Thryll's hands cupped his ass, he rubbed against him, his cock sliding against Thryll's like dueling swords. Zandor broke the kiss, and gasped for breath; Thryll's eyes were deep enough to drown in, so full of lust.

"I want you so bad," Thryll groaned.

Zandor licked a path across Thryll's bottom lip and closed a fist around his hard shaft. "Let me love *you*. I know you want my ass, but let me fill *you* this time."

A flicker of doubt crossed Thryll's handsome face and Zandor knew at once the reason. "Will I be your first?"

He smiled when Thryll ducked his head, his sienna lashes brushing his skin. Thryll looked back up, his cheeks blazing with color. He nodded once then glanced away. Zandor dropped to his knees, hot water splashing around his chest. He ran his tongue over Thryll's hairless balls, sucking each one gently.

"Open your legs."

He grinned when Thryll moaned and complied. Zandor purred as Thryll's warm fingers raked across his skull, holding him in place. He breathed deep to inhale his familiar sweet musk and dragged his beard across the tender skin of

Thryll's thighs. Enjoying the pleasure of Thryll's fingers tightening painfully in his hair, he drew a ragged breath, took Thryll's thick shaft deep into his mouth, and sucked hard.

Thryll's knees buckled as Zandor's hot mouth tightened around his shaft. Soapy fingers circled his ass and probed inside. He clenched his muscles in reflex and swore when Zandor slapped his buttock hard in response. Cold air hit his cock when it slipped from Zandor's mouth.

"Relax and let yourself go; don't hold back." Zandor took Thryll's cock back into his wet warmth and slid up and down his shaft in tantalizing strokes.

"Sweet Lady."

A tremor shook his body as Zandor finger-fucked his ass to the rhythm of his mouth. His cock swelled. Blood pounded in his ears as Zandor's masterly tongue and fingers drove him to madness. He could hear his own hysterical oaths echoing across the pool. *Gods, this is too much.* A sweet, intense tension began to build deep in his balls and he shattered, filling Zandor's mouth in pulsating spurts. His body shuddered and he clung to Zandor's hair as the last tremors shot down his legs. He trembled as Zandor rose slowly to his feet, his hands a warm caress, and turned him toward the side of the pool. The smooth rock pressed cold against his hot flesh, Zandor's wet skin a hot slide against his back.

"Rest your chest against the rock and hold your ass cheeks open for me. Push back and relax," Zandor crooned close to his ear.

His bones turned to jelly and his hands slipped on his wet ass cheeks when Zandor's soapy fingers stroked his entrance. The hard point of Zandor's flesh pressed against his opening, and panic rose in his chest. He dropped his hands and gripped the side of the pool. His heart pounded with fear and he flinched away.

"Gods, Zandor, I'm sorry."

Zandor splashed water over Thryll's back and turned him around.

"No, *I'm* sorry. Come on, I'll rub you down."

He offered his hand to his mate and smiled when Thryll's cheeks glowed brightly as he took a deep, steadying breath. Zandor spread a towel on the wide wooden table, memories of the females and males he had enjoyed here making him horny. He pulled open a drawer, pondering for a moment before selecting the tub of aphrodisiac cream. As soon as he lifted the lid, the pungent smell of pepper and spice filled the room. This magical potion used only by the Knight Watch princes would make a rock melt to his advances.

Zandor rubbed a little of the ointment on his hands, at once feeling the subtle effect deep in his balls. He waited for Thryll to lay face down with his head resting on his folded arms.

"Turn over. You have a bruise on your chest; I'll start there."

He chuckled when Thryll rolled over and watched him from beneath sienna lashes, his hands gripping the edge of the table.

Zandor began to massage Thryll's chest, rubbing small circles around his tiny taught nipples. He bent and ran his tongue across his open lips and Thryll grabbed at his head and pulled him down, thrusting his tongue between his teeth. He lifted his head, seeing uncertainty in Thryll's eyes.

"Why don't you trust me with your body, when in battle you trust me with your life?"

"Gods, Zandor, it's not *you*." Thryll threaded his fingers through Zandor's hair and held his gaze. "I can't stop thinking of Elizabeth. If the Rams have her, if they're raping her w-while w-we . . . while we . . . Lady's blood."

Zandor scooped more cream from the earthenware tub and ran it down Thryll's stomach. A thrill ran straight to his balls when Thryll sighed and his cock twitched, filling out hard and proud against his stomach. Zandor closed a fist around Thryll's shaft and felt his body tremble under his touch.

"The camps at Lyoness are all no more than a mile in each direction from the Gate. We found nothing, no tracks, and no signs of a Ram raiding party. Gods, their scent hangs in the air for weeks; we would have known if they'd been anywhere close by. Beth is never far from my mind and yes, of course, I'm worried; but today we have done all we can. I feel her loss the same as you, but I need to find comfort. I

need to fuck, *be* fucked by you until I fall asleep. Otherwise, on the morrow I'll be a shell. I'll not have the strength to continue the search."

"You agree we renew the search in the morn?"

Zandor moved his hands over Thryll's shaft, his thumbs rubbing the drop of pre-cum over the tip.

"Yes, now relax."

Thryll gasped when Zandor grabbed his ankles and slid his backside to the end of the table. His body hummed with a deep primeval lust that grew and burned through his body like liquid fire.

"If turning your back to me troubles you, I'll take you here like a maiden. Lift your legs and rest them on my shoulders. Don't take your eyes off my face; I want to see your soul when I fill you," Zandor growled as his fingers clasped hard on Thryll's hips.

Thryll bucked his hips when Zandor's cream-covered hand pumped his shaft. His expert fingers pushed cream inside his ass, massaging and probing with infinite care. Zandor's eyes, hooded, soft globes of the deepest amethyst, smiled down at him; his soft full lips and luscious mouth made Thryll weak with desire. His cock ached and his entire body throbbed with need. Zandor's hands burned against his skin with every soul-destroying caress.

The towel bunched beneath his back as Zandor pulled him closer. Without taking his gaze away, Zandor paused, scooped more cream from the pot, and lathered his massive cock. Thryll swallowed and his entire body clenched in apprehension. The sticky head nudged in a tantalizing swipe against his ass then Zandor lifted his head and stretched out both hands toward him.

"Take my hands," he said, his husky voice barely above a whisper.

His palms were slick with the cream, and the room was suddenly thick with Zandor's potent scent. The pressure on Thryll's ass increased, tormenting, teasing. His sphincter muscles quivered with anticipation as Zandor locked his eyes on his face.

"Tell me," Zandor demanded, slowly increasing the pressure.

Thryll bit down hard on his tongue, so close to spilling before the first stroke. Gods, he was horny, but this . . . what if he whimpered like a female? Would his virgin ass take a weapon as massive as Zandor's without splitting apart? He drew a deep breath and tried very hard to relax. "Fuck me."

At once Zandor's lips lifted at the corners and the grip on Thryll's hands tightened, pulling his shoulders from the bench. His legs trembled on Zandor's shoulders, tickled by his damp hair. He cried out as Zandor wrenched him forward, a sharp pain tearing through his ass. Zandor's eyes turned to amber then back to normal; he gave no quarter. Thryll tried to remain calm but shuddered, his ass impaled on a red-hot poker, tearing him apart with every inch. Flames licked his balls, and his cock jumped, threatening release. He suddenly understood the pleasure-pain Zandor had demanded countless times from him.

"Relax, I'm only half way in." Zandor dropped his hands and his fingers dug painfully into the skin of Thryll's hips

Thryll let go and succumbed to the fire. He moaned as Zandor pushed in deeper and a throbbing mass of pleasure-pain seared deep, igniting a fountain of untapped desire. His ass stretched and he enjoyed the wonderful feeling of completeness, of hot, throbbing fullness. Thryll's gaze locked on Zandor's face when he paused, buried deep within. The warmth of his hands soothed a path up his thighs, and the heat of his damp flesh pressed hard against his buttocks.

Zandor moved slightly. The intense sensation shot down Thryll's legs, and his cock bucked against his belly. He cried out in frustration when Zandor withdrew completely before sliding in deep again and again. Shaking, he gripped the sides of the table as Zandor gripped his shaft tightly, painfully; three more thrusts and he withdrew completely and stepped away.

"On your knees," Zandor ordered and climbed up onto the wide bench behind him.

Thryll complied and then whined as Zandor impaled him with his prick in one swift movement. His hips were clasped tightly in an iron grip. Zandor shafted him without mercy.

Zandor ground his teeth; he would not spill, not yet. He drove into Thryll's tight ass until it relaxed. *Ah, he's enjoying it now.* Thryll's entire body trembled beneath him like a maiden's during her first tugging. *Gods, he's so beautiful, his eyes wide with pleasure-pain. I'll have his beautiful ass all night.*

Zandor grasped Thryll's cock again and his lover began to pant, sweat dripping off his body.

"I beg you, let me come. Please, Zandor, have mercy." Thryll let out a cry like a wounded animal.

Zandor increased his grip and thrust again hard. Thryll whimpered. His knuckles were white from gripping the edge of the bench. Zandor released his hold on Thryll's shaft, tipped his head back and allowed the fire to lick up his balls. Somewhere in the depths of his frenzied desire, he heard Thryll gasp.

"Gods, I love you."

The fire consumed him and shot through his cock, bathing him in waves of delicious sensation.

* * * * *

Thryll awoke with Zandor's weight hot against his back. His body ached; Zandor had taken his ass four glorious times during the night. The sheets were damp and heavy with their mingled scents. He stretched and his lover's arm tightened around his waist, his arousal pushing hard into the small of his back. Zandor had given him the ultimate night of unbridled passion. Sweet Lady, this morning he knew, at last, Zandor loved him.

Zandor's warm fingers trailed down his body." Mmm, I love your muscles." He chuckled and reached down to stroke Thryll's cock. "Gods, I'd have you again but I'm famished," Zandor murmured.

The bed dipped as Zandor untangled himself from the sheets and staggered, bleary eyed, to the bathroom. Thryll rested his head on his hands. A slight tremor of passion stirred his cock as vivid details of their lovemaking flashed through his mind. He had been such a fool to deny himself this pleasure for so long.

"You should get dressed if you plan to eat before we leave," called Zandor from the bathroom.

They had spent the night in Zandor's bed. Thyrll rose languidly and slipped from the sheets, stopping to view the assortment of toys and whips lined up on the table beside the bed. A tremor of desire went through him when Zandor walked from the bathroom, water glistening on his skin, a towel casually draped around his hips.

"We can try those later if you like, my sweet maiden," Zandor teased, lifting a long, marble phallus to his lips and licking it suggestively around the tip. "Although I'd pay a fortune to have one the likes of Pic's. Gods, Thyrll, I can't believe I enjoyed that disgusting little Druik so much."

"I'm a little surprised you agreed, but then again your ass rules your head."

"You know what I am." Zandor's brow wrinkled, a deep line forming between his brows. "Just because I took your ass doesn't mean I've changed. Gods, I've wanted to have you for years. Last night was a dream come true. But as for Pic, I didn't know what the scum had done to Nox's sister, not then. His wife whipped me soundly, they tied me up and both of them had me. I thought it was over, but Pic wanted to suckle me dry. He had this amazing black phallus. You know, Pic took me higher than I've ever been with a male before."

"So everything you said to me last night was a lie?"

"My sweet maiden's jealous." Zandor lifted a shoulder then his lips curled up seductively.

"Stop calling me that or I'll tie you to the bed, thrash you, and then give you the ass-fucking you deserve."

Thyrll flinched as Zandor grabbed him by the hair and brought his mouth down hard on his lips in a bruising kiss.

"Now that's the Thyrll I love." He growled when he lifted his head, his eyes dangerously amber with streaks of gold.

* * * * *

The great hall echoed with noise and the rich aromas of breakfast hung thick in the air. Zandor's stomach growled in appreciation as he strode toward the laden banquet table. He bowed before Blaise and took a seat close to his right, smiling respectfully at the other members of his family. Servants buzzed around like a swarm of bees. He raised a brow at Blaise, searching for an explanation.

"Arious's Festival begins on the morrow. Have you lost all track of time?" Blaise chuckled and pushed a platter of hot meats in his direction.

"Yes, so it would seem."

Thryll arrived, his cheeks colored from rushing. He bowed low before taking a seat.

"I've had word from Allure the Fair," said Blaise, inclining his head toward Zandor. "The Fae have searched for Nox these four days past. With Pic dead, the Druik Council of Elders will elect another to run Druik Void East. I've no doubt the experiments will continue; mayhap we should have destroyed the laboratory."

Zandor shrugged. "I doubt we could have inflicted much damage without Nox or a regiment of Faerie Warriors. They have very advanced technology, even by Human standards. Methinks they would rebuild in another region. For that matter, who knows . . . they may have many of the same facilities all over the realm."

"I overheard them discussing many things," said Thryll, leaning forward in his chair. "They want us all dead, Fae and Prides; we are a constant threat to them. They want to turn the Humans against the Fae. The Humans have mixed feelings about the Fae and have no knowledge of our existence at all. Some believe the Fae live in their realm to do good deeds, while others believe they steal children and wreak havoc. Other Humans think the Fae are a myth, yet believe in Werewolves and Vampires."

"The Humans have no idea about the realms. Some leaders, I believe, have a notion that they exist. I can't imagine what the Druiks would gain by removing the Fae from the Human realm." Blaise sipped from his steaming cup.

Zandor bit into a wedge of buttered bread and chewed slowly. He took a long drink of mulled wine and wiped his mouth. "Mayhap they plan an alliance. The Human race is many millions with weapons even Nox would find difficult to

destroy. If the Druiks aligned with the Humans, the people of the Five Gates would be in mortal danger. I had the opportunity to speak to Dare's mate, Jill, on just this subject. They're a very volatile race with many different leaders. She informed me that in her opinion, an alliance with the Druiks, wherein they have the Fae and the Prides as a common enemy, would be a disaster."

"Hmmm, they would need proof of Pride existence first." Blaise placed his cup down on the table and rubbed his chin. "Only the Fae can pass through the Gates into the Human realm. No Human has ever left the Five Gates to tell of us."

"Beth was taken by the Druiks from her realm. Therefore, the Druiks already have an advantage. They have the knowledge to travel between the realms," said Zandor, running a hand through his hair.

"Lady's blood. Mayhap they captured a Spell Weaver?" Blaise's eyes changed from blue to gold and back again.

"I saw none in the laboratory," said Thryll

"Then we must wait until they make the first move." Blaise tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling.

The sound of children's voices and footsteps echoed in the great hall. Zandor turned and gripped the goblet until his knuckles hurt. Petrillia practically danced across the hall toward him. Two very young girls wearing matching pink dresses followed in her wake. He got to his feet as his former lover curtsied low before Blaise, then she smiled coyly and threw herself into Zandor's arms.

"Oh, Zandor, my love," she cooed, lifting her face to brush his lips.

"Petrillia, this is most inappropriate, your mate . . ."

"Is dead and I'm free. I've always loved you. Come, give me your promise," she replied, snuggling against his body.

"My condolences to you and your children."

"So *formal*, Zandor, and after all I taught you. Come now, I *know* all about the Human who ran away with Nox. You are free of any promise, my love. Not even the Lady would hold you to such an unfaithful mate. Isn't that true, Your Majesty?" She pouted and turned in his arms to address Blaise.

"You are correct. The Lady's law does give a female the right to refuse." Blaise ran a hand through his hair and glared at her.

"And, isn't it true that a widow may claim any such male?" She grinned up at Zandor, her hands slipping around his waist.

"Yes, that is the law."

Zandor growled and Thryll rose slowly to his feet.

"It's nice to see you in such good spirits after George's untimely death. I assume the pairing was unsuccessful?" Thryll said, his eyes closing to slits.

"Oh, Thryll, you silly thing. George was the sweetest but he was against having any fun," replied Petrillia, rolling her eyes. "He was never home and then it was once a week, flat on my back." She ran a finger down Zandor's cheek, put it in her mouth and sucked. "Are you and Zandor still together?"

"We are, and Elizabeth is our mate." Thryll smiled.

"Oh, goodie, then I'll take you both."

Zandor gripped her arms and lifted her away from him. He shuddered at her potent female scent, even though she looked the same and had the exact almond-shaped green eyes he remembered. He recognized the lithe, beautiful body he had worshipped, but he could not, for the life of him, remember *why* he had loved her. Staring at her, he saw a vision of her of screaming in passion as Thryll and he fucked her, but the memory of the lust she had provoked in him had vanished. Only Beth's beautiful face, blushed and wide-eyed with ecstasy, filled his mind. He dropped Petrillia's arms.

"You've grown even taller, both of you." She looked up at him, licking her lips.

"It's been five summers. I've changed. I'm not the young, green lad of nineteen you left without a second thought."

"So I hear." She grinned.

"What about your children?"

"Mother will care for them. It's all arranged."

Thryll snorted and stared at the ceiling in disgust.

Zandor shook his head. "No, Petrillia, I'm Given to Beth. We *both* are and we need to find her. We'll be leaving shortly to resume the search."

"Yes, I suppose she'll have to make it official before we make our promise," she replied nonchalantly.

Chapter Fifteen

Beth sat with her hands wrapped around her knees, gazing at Nox. One full day had gone by since she had removed the last two bolts. The memory horrified her. His eyes had rolled up in his head and blood spurted in every direction. She staunched the bleeding by binding his chest tightly, and only removed the dressings to change them an hour ago. He looked like hell, his face deathly white and his breathing painfully shallow. She touched his brow; the cold from his clammy skin sank into her fingers. *Dear God, if he wasn't immortal, I'd think he had only hours to live.*

The small, enchanted fire gave off a tremendous amount of heat and barely a whiff of smoke. *Black Fire*, Thryll had called it. Yet Nox laid still and frozen like a corpse. An immortal, she decided, far outreached her field of expertise. Her stomach cramped again and the now familiar wave of deep longing engulfed her. *Damn it, where are you, don't you know I need you both?* Hot tears welled in her eyes and she gave in and sobbed.

But her lone pity party only lasted a few moments. Nox's teeth began chattering like a bad set of castanets. Beth dried her eyes and straightened her shoulders. She leaned toward him to push a lock of long hair from his face.

"I'm c-cold." He gasped.

Beth reached for the canteen and pressed it to his lips. He drank a little and his eyes flickered open.

"How long . . . ?" His pupils were wide and he blinked as if to focus.

Beth leaned close. "This is the third night; we've been here four nights altogether."

"Will you lay with me and warm me with your body?"

Beth frowned while she pondered his question. She noticed his lips turn up slightly at the corners.

"I only require your warmth, sweet angel," he whispered and lifted the blanket.

Beth slipped under the warm covering and rested her head on his shoulder. He moaned. She lay very still. Her body ached with exhaustion and she was finding it hard to stay awake.

Sometime later, she awoke, her face damp against smooth skin, the warm scent of pine and male flooding her nostrils. Sprawled across Nox, with his arms wrapped protectively around her body, she stiffened. A wave of black silk hair caressed her cheek as if it acted on its own.

"All is well, sweet angel. Your magyck has cured me," crooned Nox as his hand rubbed her back from neck to bottom.

She pushed up on her elbow to look at him. He smiled at her, flashing brilliant white teeth, and his eyes twinkled like raindrops on a lotus leaf. *Oh, my God, I bet almost every woman on earth would want to wake up looking into those eyes.*

"You're better? Good, last night I thought you were close to death."

"I owe you a great debt. Anything you desire, just ask and it's yours. Soon I'll take you to Other World and then we'll find those mates of yours."

Beth pulled away from him with a pang of guilt for sleeping in the arms of a naked faerie. Her cheeks grew hot at the thought of his glorious body. *Why do I always blush? It's so un-cool.*

"To be honest, I don't think they want me anymore?"

"Mayhap while you find me something to eat, I'll explain a little about Thryll and Zandor."

Beth got slowly to her feet; her breasts ached and on inspection she found they'd grown to huge proportions overnight.

"Mayhap I'll also tell you a little about being a Pride female and the lands of the Five Gates." Nox chuckled as she peered down the front of her shirt. "Firstly, since you're breeding, the swell of your breasts is quite usual. Pride females carry their cubs for nine weeks and they deliver through their belly."

Beth dropped the saddlebag and gaped at Nox. "What? Nine weeks? You have to be joking . . . and what did you say about the delivery?"

"As you progress, a dark line will appear. On the day of delivery, it opens and the cub is born. It closes directly. 'Tis the same as the Fae. You should know after Moon Fire, a Pride female only conceives once per year and then only if she desires."

Beth handed him the wine skin and placed the bag of dried fruit and nuts beside him. "Anything else I should know?"

"You'll live a long life, perhaps three times longer than a human and not age much until the last few years. Although, I'd guess, as your cub is immortal, Blaise will grant the same to you and Thryll."

"O-okay."

"The Fae live in Other World; 'tis not reached by a Gate. Only a Fae may take another being through a Circle of Light. This you will witness when we leave here today. The Lady is our Divine being; she rules over the lands of the Five Gates, of which Dryad is one. Your mates will teach you how to recognize these Gates. This realm is unknown to me, so we must travel from Other World to find our way back to Dryad." Nox paused to chew a handful of nuts and drink from the wineskin.

Beth groaned and rolled up in the fetal position with another cramp. Nox touched her and the awful feeling stopped immediately.

"I understand much about Thryll and Zandor and I'll no doubt be in a similar situation when I find my own mate." He drew a breath and it whistled between his teeth. "There is a male I've loved for over one hundred years, Allure the Fair. Can you see the comparison? If I find a mate, will she be his as well? It's our way to lay with whoever we choose, but like the Pride males, once mated, we must be true."

"So Zandor and Thryll have been lovers for a long time?"

"Lovers . . . no. Friends . . . yes. Petrillia was the catalyst; she made them realize their desire for each other."

Beth growled and looked away, anger surging through her body at the mere mention of the bitch's name.

"So I hear, but I don't understand. What was so bloody special about her."

"They were young, perhaps nineteen summers; she was very experienced." Nox smiled and laid a warm hand on her arm. "You know, a male remembers the first time a female takes him in his mouth and swallows. She taught them to enjoy the lash. Zandor likes to give and receive pleasure-pain. She was their first in many things and after enjoying the false phallus, Zandor began to crave the ultimate delight of a real cock."

Beth swallowed and knew her face had turned crimson.

"So that's when he and Thryll . . . ?"

"No, not Thryll. Zandor came to me . . . *I* was his first."

"You? God, this is too much information."

"Ah, so you still think like a Human, sweet angel." Nox chuckled softly. "To understand your mates and accept them, you must know the facts. By the time Petrillia left them, they were both changed. Thryll had by that time taken many males; he prefers the dominant position but as far as I know, he has only kissed Zandor. They split for a time and Zandor chose a path of destruction. Thryll would go and find him beaten and abused and carry him home, only to find him missing by the morrow. Blaise found him and brought him back after he'd suffered rape at the hands of five Rams. He made him immortal to save his life. I invited Zandor and Thryll to Other World and taught Thryll how to pleasure Zandor, with whip and body. There's no doubt they were destined to love each other, but they needed you, Beth, to be the catalyst. Accept them for what they are; allow them to love you *and* each other. Encourage this without fear and they'll give themselves to you unconditionally."

Beth stared into her cup of Miza. A lick of erotic fire caressed her folds and she squirmed. *I have to admit even the memory of them kissing makes me as hot as hell.*

"Yes, I can accept all that; my only concern is they may actually prefer each other."

She frowned when Nox tipped his head back and laughed.

"You are thinking like a Human again. They are tied to you emotionally. The pain you feel is the bond you have with them. It burns with desire and can't be

denied. Of course, with this arrangement between the three of you, do *you* believe you have the right to be pleased by just one of them . . . if that was your choice?"

Beth stared at the blackened rocks around the fire. She wanted both of them, it was true, but both together every time?

"I guess we all have our own needs . . . perhaps one may be a day person and one a night or I'll take both together . . . I have done that before . . . so it would make no difference to me."

"So if *they* chose to love each other one night?"

Beth looked into Nox's eyes and understood completely.

"I understand, to make this work, I must allow them to and not get jealous."

"Exactly . . . and can you do this without reservation?"

Beth met his gaze and lifted her chin. "Y-yes. I think so."

* * * * *

The dew had not dried on the grass when Nox kicked Darkness down the path to the pine forest below the waterfall. Beth drank in the fresh morning breeze with its varied scents of wildlife and fauna. Darkness's hooves crunched on the dry pine needles underfoot, sending a pungent odor of decay into the air at every step. She watched with interest when Nox stopped and dismounted in a small clearing with tall brown grass, walked a short distance away and drew a silver circle in mid air. Without pausing, he climbed back onto Darkness and they walked through.

"Welcome to Other World," declared Nox with pride.

Beth held her breath. Before them, a road of white crystal wound its way through a forest of tree houses. Faeries darted back and forth beneath the canopy like a mass of butterflies, their magnificent, diaphanous wings prominent against a magenta sky. Most had black or white wings tipped with a multitude of iridescent colors. They laughed as they went about their business, their laughter like the tinkling of bells.

"This is beautiful."

They rode slowly through the forest, while the Fae buzzed around them asking questions. Beth smiled as Nox answered each with amazing patience. Her heart missed a beat when a male dropped down before the horse and chased the other faeries away. He stood seven feet tall with pure white wings; his hair fell to his waist like a shimmering fall of buttercup silk.

"I've been out of my mind with worry." He took Darkness's halter and stood beside them, his wings pulled in tight at his back.

"Beth, may I present Allure the Fair." Nox turned in the saddle and grinned.

"So this is what you left me for. Gods, Nox, don't I have any say in the matter?" Allure the Fair snorted.

"I was injured and this female helped me." Nox leaned down and cupped Allure's face, rubbing a thumb across his lips. "I've promised to return her to her mates. You remember Thryll and Zandor?"

When Allure nodded, a breeze brushed Beth's cheek, and they were suddenly inside a large room. She tried to steady herself and gazed around. Beneath her feet, the knotted wooden floor flowed in seamless amber brilliance between the curved walls. One complete side of the room opened to a view of the forest shaded under a bow of heart-shaped leaves. She gazed around in wonder and realized the room grew out from the trunk of a tree. On a large sofa sat a huge man who resembled Dare or perhaps Blaise. He rose to his feet, tossed a sheet of glossy black hair over one shoulder and inclined his head.

"I am Rio of Knight Watch," he said, his voice like honey.

"I'm Beth."

"Elizabeth of Knight Watch; she belongs to Zandor and Thryll," said Nox from the doorway.

"I wish you well, Elizabeth." Rio raised a brow, a look of amusement crossing his handsome face.

She smiled at him, admiring the string of gold-ringed warrior beads hanging from his temple. "What brings *you* to Other World?"

"He's receiving training in magyck at Blaise's request. He will be the first Pride to use a Circle of Light," said Nox cheerfully. He turned as Allure entered the

room. "Allure has arranged a bath for you and some clothes. When you're presentable, he'll escort you to Dryad. 'Tis the Arious Festival and your mates will be at the castle. 'Tis a time when all Prides return home."

* * * * *

Beth sank into a bath set into the floor, with water as clear as a mountain stream. The bath and entire room grew from the same massive living tree. Next to a tall window, a sprig of leaves grew out of the frame, dusted with fragrant lemon blossoms. She picked up the soap, held it to her nose and inhaled the sweet perfume of violets. She sighed, delighted to be clean again.

Wrapped in a soft, white towel, she stepped into the next room. A large bedroom spread out before her, plain and masculine with a window overlooking the forest. She ran her hand along the chest of drawers. The wood felt silky with the hint of beeswax beneath her fingers. The scent of Nox infused this room, she noticed as she walked toward the massive bed. A pale blue gossamer dress hung over the bedrail; blue slippers of the finest deerskin sat on the floor.

She dressed quickly, finding the clothes fit her like a second skin. A knock came on the door and Nox stepped into the room. He grinned at her and bowed respectfully.

"Now you look like a princess. Come, Allure is ready to take you home."

* * * * *

Beth stepped through the Circle of Light into Dryad. The tropical island stretched out before her, surrounded by an endless azure ocean. Feltich Castle, complete with a moat and an impressive drawbridge, loomed like a massive dark stain against the emerald green hills.

Allure the Fair grasped her elbow tightly and marched her across the bridge. He spoke with authority to the guard at the gatehouse and led her into the keep. A cold wind cut through her dress when he left her standing in a drafty dark corridor.

She waited in trepidation until he returned a short time later with a boy of about fourteen. Beth smiled when the boy turned to her and bowed.

"This is Prince Zandor's squire; he'll take you to his room and inform his master that you've arrived," said Allure curtly.

"Zandor's a prince?"

"He's the brother of a king, is he not?" He snorted, glared down his long, regal nose at her, then turned on his heel and marched out the door.

She gazed with astonishment after him. *Why does he have to be so rude?*

"My name is Jules, milady." The squire bowed respectfully. "If you'll follow me, I'll take you to my master's rooms."

Beth walked swiftly to keep up with the young lad. She gaped at the opulence of the castle, which was not medieval as it first appeared but a mixture of every century and culture she could imagine. People dressed in rich clothes of silk or soft leather passed her in the stone corridors. The males were decked out in as many jewels as the females and all wore their hair long and flowing around their shoulders.

"This is the room that joins Prince Zandor's and my lord Thryll's bedchambers." The young squire stopped before a pair of impressive wooden doors and stepped to one side. "Mayhap you would like to rest here until they arrive. I'll have refreshments brought to you, milady," he said and bowed low.

"Thank you."

Beth placed a hand on the gold metal doorknob and the door swung open soundlessly. She smiled. The potent scent of both her mates mingled with the fresh flowers set in the center of a highly polished table. The room opened out before her in magnificent splendor, a rich mixture of dark blues and grays. Very nice, she mused, removing her slippers and burying her toes into the plush carpet. It matched the royal blue hangings around a four-poster bed at least ten feet square. The walls held paintings of the Dryad countryside and coast. Heavy matching velvet drapes were drawn back to reveal a view to the sea.

A door to an adjoining room opened. Beth started and turned to face a tall, willowy female, her slim body encased in a long floral gown cut to the waist to

reveal a moderate cleavage. The woman stopped suddenly, a frown creasing her brow. She eyed Beth with suspicion, tossing her head and sending long, golden curls tumbling over her shoulders.

"And who are you?" she demanded, her blue eyes flashing with anger.

Beth lifted her chin, her nose flaring at the female's pungent musky scent. *Had the woman come from Zandor or Thryll's bedroom?*

"I might say the same to you. What are *you* doing in my mate's room?"

"My name is Petrillia and you would be Beth, no doubt," she replied with such venom Beth flinched.

"Yes, Thryll mentioned your name. Does your mate know you frequent other males' bedrooms?"

My mate died in the battle against the Druiks, so now I'm free." Petrillia tossed a length of silken hair over her shoulder. "I know you've rejected Zandor and now we're both free to choose our life mates. I intend to claim him and would have by now, but Thryll insisted he search for you. Zandor wants *me* so it's *you* that's not welcome here."

Beth's stomach clenched with the insecurity of seeing this beautiful woman. *He loves her, oh, dear God, what can I do?*

"*You must not let her see weakness, mistress. If you truly want Zandor you must fight for him,*" her cat hissed.

Beth narrowed her eyes, her hands balling into fists at her hips. "No, I'm sorry *dear*, you're very much mistaken if you think I'll give him up. I suggest you leave before I call the guard and have you removed."

"Do you think he cares for you or intends to keep his vow?" Petrillia laughed as she brushed by her and stopped with one hand on the doorknob. "He's taken many females to his bed since he returned. He openly disrespects you but he *loves* me. When I offer to take your place, which one of us do you think he'll choose?"

Beth's legs began to tremble; she ground her teeth into a smile. "No contest, he'll choose me. He gave me his promise, *I* released his child seed and *I* carry his son. Go away, Petrillia, and keep your paws off my mates . . . or so help me I'll scratch out your fucking eyes."

"You think he's a fool?" Petrillia's eyes turned to amber and she growled deep in her chest. "He knows you care only for Thryll and it's *his* cub you carry. You don't know him as I do . . . he's *mine* and always has been. Fight me . . . and you'll lose, Human weakling." She spat and flounced from the room in a sea of pink silk.

Beth slumped onto a soft gray sofa and stared into the cold fireplace. *Could this be true? Had Zandor discussed her with Petrillia?* A cold chill ran down her spine and the familiar pain of loss clenched her heart with ferocity. *What would happen if he chose Petrillia? Would Thryll, gentle loving Thryll, leave her too? They were a pair, lovers . . . in love . . . mated . . . would she be left with no one?*

Tears pricked the back of her eyes and hot tears ran down her cheeks.

"You can't fight Petrillia with tears, mistress. Does it anger you that Zandor discussed you with another female? He shouldn't divulge your personal problems to an old lover. Those private things, a male of honor should hold close. This should make you angry, mistress, not weak with despair."

Beth had no time to reply as two sharp knocks sounded on the door. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Come in."

A young girl entered, carrying a tray laden with food and wine. She smiled broadly, bobbed gracefully without upsetting the tray and went about unloading the contents onto the table.

"Thank you. Do you know if Prince Zandor is in the castle?"

The young girl lifted her head and her pale blue gaze rested on Beth's face.

"I do believe I saw the prince in the great hall, milady. Is there anything else I can get for you?"

Beth stood at once and smoothed her gossamer gown.

"No, thank you."

The girl bobbed again and scampered from the room. Beth looked at the jug of Miza, poured herself a glass and drank it straight down. If Zandor knew she had arrived and decided to join the party in the great hall rather than see her, well, so be it. She needed to have it out with him and now was just as good a time as any.

Anger welled up in Beth as she reached the great hall. The crowd parted to reveal Zandor in an alcove, his arms entwined with two nymph-like goddesses. She stopped, overwhelmed with deep anxiety. How could she compete with such stunningly beautiful females? She squared her shoulders and decided to confront him. *It's now or never.*

Stopping directly before him, she balled her hands on her hips and glared. She began to curse under her breath when his eyes flickered to her, then away as he slowly licked a path up one female's pointed ear. Her stomach lurched when he flashed a brilliant white smile at her. *Had she ever seen Zandor smile before today?*

"Ah, sweetness, you must wait your turn." He purred and turned to slant his mouth over the other female's mouth.

"You asshole."

Rage welled inside her when Zandor raised his head and laughed. She stepped forward and slapped him smartly across the face. Stepping back, she watched Zandor's arms slip from the females. The women moved away from him, their mouths open and their eyes wide in a look of surprise.

"What was that for?" Zandor's brow creased and he stood staring at her, his hands stretched out at his sides, palms up.

"How dare you!"

"What have I done?"

"You broke your word, you dog; I should scratch your eyes out."

"I can't remember ever giving you my word, *wild thing*." Zandor's brow furrowed, but his eyes sparkled with amusement. "Indeed, methinks your claws are as sharp as your tongue. Mayhap if you like it rough, you would be better suited to my brother."

Beth lunged forward and aimed a well-placed knee at his groin. He stepped sideways just in time to avoid the blow. His hands closed around the tops of her arms, and he spun her around and pressed his hard body against her back. She swore loudly and stepped back, ready to grind her heel into his toes, but his soft voice gave her pause.

"Ah, brother, this one has claws. Do you want her?"

* * * * *

Zandor folded his arms across his chest. A strange feeling of pride welled up in him. *She believes Heath is me. Lady's blood, she's jealous.* But his pride soon turned to rage when his twin, Heath, grabbed Beth's arms. Scowling at his brother, Zandor tried desperately to pull his anger under control. He waited until Beth lifted her chin and her eyes opened into wide cobalt pools. Her cheeks flushed a deep rose.

Thryll touched his arm and whispered close to his ear. "You didn't tell her about Heath, did you?"

Zandor growled and ignored this unfortunate truth. He inclined his head, smiling at Beth as if she had displayed perfectly normal behavior and lifted his gaze to Heath. "I see you've met Beth, *our* mate."

"I have, indeed." Heath stepped away from Beth as if she were on fire and smiled broadly. "I'm glad the Lady had the good grace to give this wild thing to the pair of you." He turned swiftly back toward the bemused females.

The music started up again and the people began to mill around. Zandor pulled Beth close to his chest. He buried his face in her long silken hair and inhaled her warm sweet scent. "I thank the Lady for your safe return, little one."

He ran his hands down her back, conscious of the slight tremor running through her body.

"Lady's blood, Elizabeth, we thought you lost forever." Thryll stepped close and bent to kiss her cheek. He stroked her hair. "You must tell us everything that happened."

Beth fell into Zandor's warmth. She inhaled deeply and the terrible loss that wracked her body subsided in a long sigh. She turned in his arms and reached for Thryll, burying her face in the warm skin of his neck. *Safe at last.* She relaxed as the heat from Zandor's body radiated through her dress like a hot bath. She lifted her head and glared at Zandor.

"You have a twin and forgot to mention it."

"I had other things on my mind at the time, little one." Zandor chuckled and brushed his lips against her cheek. "My family is all here with the exception of Rio and he will arrive on the morrow. I'll introduce you right away."

"I've met Rio."

"Where did you meet him?" Zandor's entire body stiffened under her arms. "I supposed him off on a quest for Blaise. He wasn't at the laboratory . . . no, I would have seen him."

Beth smiled broadly, amused at his show of jealousy.

"He's receiving instruction in magyck from Allure the Fair and Nox, I believe. I knew he was related; he's the image of Dare."

"Rio, Dare, Blaise, Jannus, my sister Diera, and my late father resemble our maker, the god Arious." Zandor gazed down at her from beneath his thick lashes. "You'll meet my mother, who gave her fairness to Hawke and his twin, Helsa. My twin and I resemble my grandmother in coloring; her name was Amber of Knight Watch. They say her hair ran with gold. "

"Like yours, it's the most fascinating hair I've ever seen. It changes color like it's on fire."

"And yours, my precious one, shimmers like a lake deep at night and by day covers your beautifully rounded bottom like a shawl of the finest midnight silk."

Beth's face grew hot. *Zandor being poetic? The very thought made her legs turn to mush.* She changed the subject.

"Amber is a beautiful name. What shall we call our son?"

She smiled when Thryll touched her face and tipped his head to indicate she follow him. She stepped from Zandor's embrace and went with him through the crowd to an alcove. After sitting down on the padded stone seat, she looked up at her mates; both were grinning like fools.

"Well? Not Archibald the Mad or anything like that?"

"Do you believe we met by chance?" Thryll chuckled and nudged Zandor in the ribs. "Or that you decided to take a *chance* with us?"

Beth wriggled her nose and lifted her chin. "Well, I guess I did take the chance you wouldn't run off and leave me with Pic when I broke you out of the laboratory."

"Well?" Zandor looked down at her, opened his hands wide, palms up and raised one perfect brow.

Beth growled in confusion as Thryll burst out laughing and Zandor slapped him on the back.

"Oh, for God's sake, what has got into you two?"

"Chance, Beth," said Zandor, touching her cheek. "We would like to name him Prince Chance of Knight Watch."

* * * * *

Beth's head spun from meeting so many people; the entire family with the exclusion of Rio attended the day's festivities. She loved them all but especially Dare's once Human mate, Jill. Dare mentioned with a grin how Jill had introduced the court musicians to Human music, much to the annoyance of the Pride elders. She laughed until her sides ached when Jill told of her first meeting with Dare, gorgeously naked in a pool and how he had scared her to death. Jill's American accent brought a wonderful sense of calm. They chatted for ages and Jill promised to organize some clothes for her. Zandor's mother greeted her with warmth and pinched Zandor's cheek. Queen Daii, a small elfin female with the most glorious peach-colored skin and hair like moonbeams, smiled warmly in greeting and took both her hands. Her son, Ryees, sat in Blaise's arms, so much like his father but with eyes that glowed like opals of every hue.

Beth leaned against Thryll and yawned as his warm arms slipped around her waist.

"You've my family to meet yet. They'll arrive on the morrow," he whispered in her ear.

"I think mayhap we should take her upstairs now. It's been a long day," insisted Zandor.

They took her hands and led her from the hall. Beth grew apprehensive when they reached Zandor's private rooms.

"This part of the castle belongs to me . . . well, to *us*. We have ten rooms." He stopped in the hallway, his thumb rubbing her hand in soft circles. "Seven are bedchambers with bathrooms and dressing rooms, and there's a large private sitting room over there." He indicated a door across the hall. "And visitors' rooms. You may prefer to have the bed-chamber between our rooms, or another, if you prefer a little privacy."

Beth glanced at Thryll and then to Zandor. She smiled when Thryll's hand tightened slightly on hers; his gaze held a daunted expression but Zandor looked down at her as if she were his next meal.

"Human mates sleep together every night."

"We need to talk, little one." Zandor chuckled and threw open the bedroom that she had waited in earlier.

They stepped inside and Beth sat on the end of the huge bed. Both men leaned against the door, arms folded across their chests, smiling at her. Finally, Thryll walked over and sat beside her.

"Living with two mates will be difficult, demanding, Elizabeth," he said, taking her hand, the warmth of his fingers a reassurance against her skin. "When we first mated you, I thought you might die. Wouldn't it be better if we gave you a little more time?"

"Time? Time for what?"

"You were shocked when I fucked Thryll." Zandor pushed away from the door, walked toward her and tenderly cupped her face. "You need time to adjust, to accept us for what we are. You must learn how to share, Beth."

She shook her head. "No, not shocked . . . seeing you both like that turned me on, to be honest . . . but . . . it hurt when you told Thryll you loved him. You'd just mated *me* . . . *yet never once said you loved me* . . . I felt unwanted, discarded."

Beth trembled when Zandor ran his thumb across her bottom lip, shaking his head slowly.

"You're everything we want."

"Everything we need, Elizabeth," said Thryll, squeezing her hand.

Beth raised her chin. "You know, I really wish you both would just shut up and kiss me."

Zandor's mouth closed over hers. Beth opened her mouth to taste him. Lord, he tasted so fine. She sank her fingers into the mass of silky hair hanging around his shoulders and kissed him back with everything she had.

Thryll's lips touched her neck. She shivered at the touch of his fangs brushing across the bare skin on her shoulder.

She trembled when Zandor lifted his head and Thryll pulled her close, slanting his mouth hard against her lips, ravishing her with long strokes of his tongue. After reducing her to mush, he lifted his head, kissed her nose, and grinned at Zandor.

"Have you any of that cream in your room or did we use it all last night?"

"I'll get it." Zandor grinned broadly and strode into his room.

The adjoining door slammed shut and Zandor began to swear. Beth stiffened and glared at Thryll. "Oh, not again."

"Why don't you make yourself comfortable, sweetness?" Thryll's mouth twitched in a smile and he patted her shoulder. "The sheets are as soft as silk; we'll join you in a moment . . . I promise."

* * * * *

Zandor flung open the door and bellowed down the hall. "Jules get your lazy ass in here."

He turned as Thryll stepped into the room, bolting the door behind him.

"What the hell happened in here? Is that Petrillia's scent?"

Zandor rubbed his face; he could not believe his eyes. He dropped his hands and waved toward the bed.

"Aye, it's her scent. 'Twould seem she intends to ruin my life. How am I to explain *this* to Beth?"

Zandor's collection of sex toys littered the bed, slick with female juices; the sheets were damp and tangled. A dress lay crumpled and torn in a pile on the floor.

"There's no need for her to know; it's easily fixed." Thryll shook his head.

Jules appeared at the open door and bowed very low. Zandor watched his eyes widen as he gazed around the room.

"Did you let a female into my private bedchamber?"

"Aye, Sir, it was Petrillia. She informed me you required her this afternoon."

"Didn't you think this strange when you escorted my *mate* here this morning?"

"Well, aye, I did, Sir." Jules trembled. "Petrillia insisted she'd spoken with you in the meantime. She wasn't here long, Sir; she left saying she would come back later."

Zandor rubbed a finger across the bridge of his nose. He could not blame the boy as females often visited his chambers.

"Very well, get this mess cleaned up, quietly mind. Burn the linen and dress and have the floor washed. Use the other door and be mindful that I'll be resting in the adjoining chamber."

* * * * *

Beth waited in the massive bed; she could hear Zandor's muffled voice. She covered herself with the sheet up to her neck. A moment later, Zandor stepped back into the room with Thryll behind him. Thryll pulled his tunic over his head and locked the door.

"What happened?"

"My bed wasn't made," replied Zandor, stripping in seconds and slipping into the bed beside her.

Beth took a deep breath. Time to face the demons. "Petrillia was in your room when I arrived; did she use your bed?"

The tip of Zandor's ears went pink.

"Well, yes, I guess she did." He shrugged.

"You might just as well tell me; I'll find out anyway."

She held her breath when Zandor rubbed his hand over his face and grimaced.

"I have sex toys and she used them and spread her scent in my bed."

"To remind you of what you're missing?"

"Aye, no doubt," he said dismissively. "But I'm here with *you* and I believe you mentioned something about a kiss."

Zandor's tongue made a hot, tantalizing glide down her ear. Beth giggled. His strong hand cupped her head, his warm fingers threaded through her hair, pulling her into a devastating kiss. She opened her mouth to his probing tongue, drowning in his potent scent. Thryll lay between her legs and thrust his tongue between her folds. Her body trembled and she jerked, mewling into Zandor's mouth while Thryll hummed on her bud, his hair tickling her thighs.

Zandor cupped her breast and rolled her tender peak between thumb and finger. Her skin pebbled and her body arched, rolling in constant pleasure as his hair fell across her in a silken caress. While he bent to torment her nipple with soft sucking sounds, she writhed in ecstasy. She stroked his hair as he nibbled and suckled on one breast then the other. With Thryll's teeth clamped on her bud and his tongue flicking against it unmercifully, her legs stiffened, flames of desire spiraling into her belly. The combined sensations slammed through her, climbing hot and out of control, vibrating straight to her core.

"Oh, Lord, I'd forgotten just how good you two are together."

She spiraled into climax as Zandor's mouth crushed her lips again, muffling her cries. Relaxing in the afterglow, she allowed Zandor to explore her mouth.

He tensed and groaned in her mouth, breaking the kiss to suckle her breasts again. She glanced down; Thryll lay across her legs, his head bobbing between Zandor's thighs. He lifted his head and smiled at her dreamily, his face covered with her juices, then he bent and sucked Zandor's glistening shaft deep into his mouth again, his eyes all the time locked on hers.

An intense roll of passion shot through her and she trembled.

Zandor raised his head and gazed at her with unfocused eyes. She pushed her fingers into Thryll's hair and pulled him up toward her.

"I knew she wasn't ready; back off, Thryll," said Zandor, stiffening against her, his eyes narrowing.

Beth touched his face, her other hand fisting Thryll's cherubic curls.

"I want you to love each other when you're with me, without restraint. Kiss him and show me how much you love him."

She moaned when Zandor kissed her with tenderness and sucked gently on her bottom lip. Turning to Thryll, he cupped his cheek, slanted his mouth, and they kissed hungrily, their hands exploring her body in intimate caress. When Zandor pulled away and rolled from the bed to retrieve a pot of cream from the table, Thryll bent and kissed her nose, his chest pressing hard against her wet nipples.

"Are you sure, precious one?"

Beth took his head between her hands and kissed him, their mingled scents heavy on his breath. All the while his body moved over her, damp skin on skin. His shaft pressed urgently against her slick pussy, and she lifted her legs, enclosing his waist, her heels digging into his buttocks.

"Gods, I love you," he whispered and thrust in to the hilt.

Zandor gripped his throbbing cock and knelt behind Thryll. He watched Thryll's perfect ass bounce as he slammed into Beth. Her grunts of pleasure and the slap of their bodies fell like music on his ears. He scooped the cream from the jar and coated his aching shaft. Thryll's skin slid wet beneath his hands as he caressed his buttocks and ran his hands up his spine. Then Thryll knelt back, lifted Beth's legs over his shoulders and bent over her to present Zandor with his delectable ass.

Zandor looked over Thryll's shoulder into Beth's eyes and sank his cock deep into Thryll's tight ass. He pushed in hard, awakening a ferocious need that started in his balls and curled in his groin. He heard Thryll's gasp of delight as he brushed his pleasure spot and saw Beth's eyes become deep pools of lust, sending him into frenzy. He plundered Thryll's hot ass, pushing him deeper into Beth's hot pussy with every delicious thrust. Heat shot through him when Thryll pushed back with every stroke, demanding more of him, his buttocks dripping with sweat. He rode him hard, slamming deeper with every gratifying thrust. He grasped Beth's thighs, the muscle beneath his hands tight and slick with sweat. Their unique bond gripped

his heart; he fell once more into her beautiful eyes lost in fiery lust. He tipped back his head and roared, shuddering to conclusion.

He slipped from Thryll and lay on his side, watching Beth scream out her climax when Thryll shuddered and collapsed over her, his body glistening. The room hung heavy with their scents and he breathed them in, enjoying the rush of pleasure.

Beth opened her eyes and watched Zandor head for the bathroom. She lay pinned to the damp sheets beneath Thryll's heavy weight. She sighed when he lifted his head and kissed a line along her jaw.

"Oh, I've missed you," he gasped, breathing heavily.

"Me, too. I'm sorry I've been a nuisance. I didn't mean to hurt you, Thryll."

"If we'd told you more, your cat wouldn't have caused so much trouble. Younglings need discipline; I fought with mine all the time." Thryll sighed, pushing damp hair from her face.

"I thought you were born with them."

"No, they emerge when we're mature. Gods, I can't imagine a child coping with a cat." Thryll grinned, rolled off her and lay on his back.

The bed dipped and Zandor rolled toward her, kissed her tenderly, and leaned across her to kiss Thryll.

"I need to bathe." Thryll chuckled, lightly slapped Zandor's ass cheek and left the bed.

She groaned when Zandor rolled over her, supporting his weight on his elbows, his cool body pressing against her sore nipples. She opened her legs and he settled between her thighs, his erection pressing hard against her folds. When he met her gaze, his hair fell over his face and brushed her cheeks. She trembled under his alpha male intensity.

"Have I told you how beautifully you growl when I take you? *Wild thing*." He chuckled, running a finger down her ear. "And how your pupils dilate and your cheeks flush the prettiest shade of pink? And how I long to spank your sweet rounded bottom until you come."

"I . . . I don't think you mentioned that"

"Hmm . . . but for now, all I want to do is love you . . . slowly . . . until you come just for me," he replied, rubbing his body slowly against her.

Breathless, she moved her hips slightly and at this invitation, he pushed forward, taking her in one long, delicious slide. He filled her completely with a hot, satisfying fullness and lay pinning her to the bed. She sighed when he kissed her neck and grazed her skin with his fangs, sending waves of passion straight to her core.

"Do you want me to bite you again?"

"Is it permitted after we've mated?"

"I can bend the rules, little one . . . for you."

Beth lifted her chin and Zandor licked a path down her neck as he rocked in her pussy. Their bodies slid together and his scent drove her into a frenzy. She dug her fingers into his back. He swiveled his hips; the sweet movement sent fire licking down her legs.

"Come for me, Beth . . . just for me."

Intense waves of insatiable need raged into an earth-shattering orgasm when his fangs sunk into her neck and he sucked hard. His venom shot through her veins, making her quiver in delight. Gasping, she dug her nails into his shoulders. He came in a shudder and rested his face against her breasts, breathing heavily. She kissed his hair as he lay there squashing her beneath his huge frame.

"This is going to be a very long night, little one; you've been missing five days." He drew himself up on his elbows. "We've a lot of catching up to do."

* * * * *

Loud battering shook the bedroom door, dragging Beth from a sated slumber. She jumped in fright. Zandor lifted his hand to still Thryll and slipped from the bed. Cool air brushed her damp buttocks and legs before Thryll gathered her against the heat of his body.

"Relax, precious one, Zandor will deal with it." He purred.

With a rush of pink silk, Petrillia burst through the door as soon as Zandor slipped the lock. Beth scrambled across the bed, intent on killing the woman. She cursed when Thryll's arm went around her waist, pulling her back to him and holding her tightly. She fought in vain against the restraint as the sound of a whip cracked the silence. Then, to her dismay, Petrillia, dressed only in two wide bands of black leather and wearing sexy, long high-heeled boots, cracked the whip across Zandor's bare thighs.

"Come, Zandor; come to the play room with me." Petrillia purred and flicked the whip so that the short leather straps cut across his bare back.

Zandor grasped her arms and she pressed against him, lifting her head to seek his lips.

"Get away from him, you filthy bitch, or I'll tear your eyes out," Beth screamed, elbowing Thryll hard in the ribs.

Ignoring her outburst, Zandor focused on Petrillia who stood close to him, her hands stroking his buttocks. "How many times must I explain, Petrillia?"

He frowned when Petrillia pouted and ran her tongue seductively across her bottom lip.

"We're so good together," she replied, and grasped him between the legs, massaging his length with her free hand. "I know what you desire; I crave to suck your cock and drink you dry. Come with me and I will fulfill your every fantasy. I will do anything, Zandor, *anything*. I will never ask you for your promise; you may have anyone you choose. If it pleases you to watch while I'm pleased or disciplined, I'll not complain, even if it is a Ram."

"Take your hands off him you filthy sl—"

Thryll's hand clamped over Beth's mouth, cutting off her words.

Zandor turned to look at Beth. Gods, she would explode in a minute. How could she possibly trust him now? He must deal with this now, before things got any worse.

"Thryll, keep her quiet; I can't think while she's screaming obscenities."

Beth glared at Zandor and bucked in Thryll's arms.

"Hush," he said, and laid a warm hand on her thigh.

She trembled when his hand slid up her belly and cupped her breast. She bit the inside of her cheek to suppress a moan as he grasped her nipple and began to tease it between thumb and finger. *How could he be so relaxed? What if Zandor chooses Petrillia?* She watched in dismay as Zandor's cock grew in Petrillia's expert hands. Less than a second later, he made a strange noise deep in his throat and his hands went to her neck and squeezed. She giggled when Petrillia squeaked in alarm and released him, her hands closing around his wrists.

"No, Petrillia, I'm bonded to Beth. You must find another male to satisfy your lust."

"You *know* you love me; how many times have you told me so?" She gasped and pulled hard against his wrists.

"I was in *lust* with you four years ago, and mayhap I should thank you for teaching me how to give and receive pleasure. Beth is the female I've been seeking all my life." His hands dropped from her neck and he wiped them on his thighs as if to rid himself of her scent.

"You can't possibly want that fat bitch. Gods, Zandor, she's *Human*," she replied, turning her head to glare at Beth in disgust.

Beth ground her teeth when he made no reply. She watched as Zandor pushed Petrillia from the room, closed the door slowly, slid the bolt, and rested his head against the wooden surface. His muscles tensed as he took long, deep breaths. *Did he mean that speech? He looks more devastated, than relieved she's leaving.* Without so much as a backward glance at her, he lifted his head and strode from the room.

Beth struggled and Thryll loosened his grip.

"Fighting with Petrillia won't help the situation. I'll go to him. Stay here," he ordered and followed Zandor from the room.

Beth slithered from the bed and listened at the door. She heard rustling and a door opened and closed. She ran to the bedroom door, slipped the lock, and peered out just in time to see Zandor and Thryll disappear around a turn in the passage. They had both dressed in long silk robes that touched the floor. She turned and

slammed the wooden door with such force it flung open and smashed into a small table, flinging the jug of wine across the floor.

"I've had enough of this shit!"

She lifted her head, marched into the bathroom, and scrubbed their scent from her body. She walked into her dressing room and flung open the closet. The clothes, so generously supplied by Jill, were hanging in neat rows. She pulled down the first one, a purple cotton shift that fell to the floor with generous splits up both sides. Her hands shook with anger as she pulled the dress over her head, slipped on the sandals Nox had given her and stepped out into the hall.

Zandor's squire, Jules, eyes wide with uncertainty, stood at the open door to her bedchamber. When he turned and bowed, she tapped him hard on the shoulder.

"Can you take me to Jill, Prince Dare's mate?"

"Yes, milady."

* * * * *

Dare's eyes narrowed in dismay when Beth walked into his sitting room, her face pale and stained with tears.

"I-I'm s-sorry to d-disturb you, I'd l-like to s-s-peak to Jill if I m-may." She sniffled.

"Sit down, Beth, what's happened?" Jill tossed her mane of long auburn curls over one shoulder, scooped up Flame, and deposited him in Dare's arms.

Dare swallowed and glanced at Jules. The boy shrugged and he gave him a nod. The squire stepped into the passage and closed the door silently.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No, p-please stay. L-look, I've given it my b-best shot, you know . . . with Thryll and Zandor. It's p-pointless with Petrillia offering herself to Zandor all the t-time." Beth shook her head at him, her eyes rimmed with red, her long, slim fingers making small pleats in her dress.

Dare rubbed his chin. "I think you'd better explain."

"She's a s-snake. She . . . let's say, *left her scent* in Zandor's bed." Beth drew a deep breath, hiccupped, and dabbed her eyes with the back of her hands. "Then s-she threatened to take him from m-me and . . . s-said that he l-loved her. Just a s-short while ago, she b-burst into our bedroom, c-caressed his naked body and called *me* . . . f-fat."

Dare rolled his eyes. "How did Zandor react?"

"They both left me to go after her." Her hands balled into fists in the folds of her shift and a single tear ran down her cheek. "L-look, Nox owes me a f-favor, can you contact him? I d-don't c-care where I go, as l-long as it's far away from them. Nox c-can stop the pain. I m-must go, I c-can't bear to l-look at them e-ever again."

"Well, I can contact him for you, but mayhap you should discuss this with Jill. It's a big decision, leaving Dryad and taking a royal cub with you."

"I s-see," she replied, her face taking on the expression of a trapped rabbit.

Dare handed his son to Jill, the baby's hair a soft embrace across his palm.

"I'll go and contact Nox directly but I'm sure a compromise can be found."

Dare strode through the castle and took the staircase to the king's solar, two steps at a time. Dear Lady, Zandor had crossed the line this time. The guard at the door bowed solemnly, knocked, and announced him. He waited until he heard Blaise reply and stepped inside. He stopped and stared. There, sitting on the sofa wrapped in their robes, were Thryll and Zandor.

Blaise lifted his head and raised a brow. "Is there another disaster I'm not aware of?"

Dare's fists balled at his sides, his fingernails cutting deep into the flesh of his palms. He strode over to Zandor and grabbed him by the neck.

"Damn your eyes, I should've killed you in Druik Void."

"Hold, brother, and explain. I'm none too happy with this pair either," said Blaise, jumping to his feet, his hand closing around Dare's shoulder and squeezing.

Dare dropped his hands and explained.

Zandor grinned up at him like a monkey and the urge to push his teeth down his throat surged through him in an uncontrollable rush. He lunged forward, tipping the sofa on its back and the three of them tumbled to the floor.

"She's a wild thing, our Beth, and this only shows how much she loves me," Zandor said as he rolled away and jumped to his feet, still grinning.

Dare got to his feet and growled. "You bloody fool, she wants to leave with Nox . . . leave *you* . . . she can't bear the sight of you."

He watched Thryll right the sofa and sink down in apparent exhaustion.

"Zandor came here to ask me to send Petrillia back to Lyoness and to inform her father she's not welcome in Dryad." Blaise picked up a goblet and took a long draft. He placed the wine gently on the table beside his chair and glowered at them. "He also requested a public bonding ceremony, at the festival on the morrow, so there'll be no doubt as to his or Thryll's intentions toward Elizabeth."

Dare waved his hand in the air in disgust. "If you'd told her, perhaps she wouldn't be asking me to contact Nox."

"I've been explaining to her *all* day," said Zandor, narrowing his eyes. "I can't believe she's upset again. I *did* throw Petrillia out of the bedchamber, after all. We didn't invite her. In truth, Beth is wild and has a youngling's intense jealousy . . . which I can do nothing about."

"I don't think leaving her alone after such an incident is any way to gain her trust. She'll stay with us tonight and mayhap I can explain your intentions to her."

"She belongs to us; we'll explain things to her," Zandor replied, springing to his feet like a cat.

"Go ahead, Dare," said Blaise, leaning forward in his chair. "Inform Beth I'm coming to speak with her. Take her to your antechamber. I'll stand witness that these two are telling the truth; mayhap that will settle things."

* * * * *

Beth sat quietly and listened to Dare's explanation. She had enjoyed the talk with Jill, although Jill's transition to a Pride female from a Human had been as smooth as silk. She thanked Jill and followed Dare into a room farther down the passageway. This chamber showed the same splendor as the rest of the castle but here Dare's personal collection of weapons lined the walls. She smiled at him when

he informed her he used the room to interview various dignities from within the Five Gates.

"I should explain the significance of a public bonding ceremony," he said quietly, taking a seat on a splendid leather sofa opposite. "It's when a Royal gives his amulet to his mate, to signify her cubs are of Knight Watch lineage. The Prince Royal, the next in line to the throne, usually performs it in public, but in your case, as you have two mates, it will ensure all your cubs are of royal birth. It will also dispel any idle speculation surrounding Zandor and Petrillia."

She bit her nails when Dare stood to answer a light tapping on the door and opened it to admit Blaise, followed some paces behind by Zandor and Thryll.

Dare excused himself and left, shutting the door softly behind him. Beth sat in silence. Blaise stepped forward, his face grim.

"Beth, I do understand your reluctance to listen to your mates' excuses, but if I may offer you some advice?"

"Yes, of course, although I would prefer that you allow me to leave. I think they've said enough already. In fact, I doubt if I can tell between truth and lies anymore."

"This, I understand, but you should know I witnessed the conversation between them and Petrillia. Zandor and Thryll both stated you were their mate and they intended to find you. Petrillia, being the female she is, decided you wanted nothing to do with either of them and offered herself. I may add, as a widow she had every right to seek another mate in similar circumstances. By this, I mean a male whose child seed is viable and who has lost his mate. Widows are the only other Pride females permitted by a potent male."

"I *didn't* intend to leave them *permanently*. Who would say such a thing?"

"It makes no difference." Blaise shrugged his broad shoulders and narrowed his eyes. "I understand it's Zandor who's causing difficulties? You have no such problems with Thryll?"

Beth shrank back in the seat as if he had struck her. Dear God, had he discovered a way out for Zandor? Had Dare made a mistake and Zandor planned to take Petrillia in the public bonding ceremony?

"In truth, I love them both so deeply it hurts. Zandor breaks my heart. I want to trust him, but seeing him with her . . . well, I just can't. I refuse to stay here and watch him flaunt her in front me. If I can't have them both, I'll go and live in Other World."

"Your time with Nox. Did you give yourself to him, Elizabeth? Has he offered to keep you with him in Other World?" Thryll spoke so softly she almost missed it.

Beth's eyes stung. She took a deep breath, but tears fell unrestrained down her cheeks. She lifted her chin, stabbed to the heart. How could he think such a thing?

"I c-cared for him and r-removed the b-bolts. If you m-mean do I like him . . . well, yes, he's very k-kind. He took me to Other World and g-gave me his w-word . . . if I ever needed anything, I only h-had to ask. No! I. Did. Not. Have. Sex With. Nox."

Zandor let out the breath he had been holding, knelt down before Beth and took her trembling hands. Her beautiful eyes were red-rimmed and when her breath caught in a sob, it almost destroyed him.

"I've been faithful to you, little one, in mind and body. I left our bedchamber to wash the stink of that female from my person. I would not sully our bed with that disgusting odor. I went to see Blaise, to request her removal from Dryad, never to return. You can be confident she's no longer in the castle and her name will never be spoken in your presence again. This is the festival of our maker, Arious and tomorrow, I will declare before the people of Dryad that you belong to me, as my princess. I will declare Thryll is our mate and a prince of Knight Watch. I'll give you my amulet and my vow, before the Lady and our people."

He tried to smile but Beth's sorrow flowed over him.

"I don't r-really want to l-leave." She sobbed and lifted her eyes, her cheeks stained with tears.

"Tell me what else I can do to make you stay."

"Anything, precious one, I'll cut off his ears if that's your wish." Thryll sat on the arm of the chair beside her, one arm protectively resting on her shoulders.

"I can't s-sleep in any bed you've had *her* in . . . I won't!" Beth said, looking up at him, her bottom lip protruding slightly and her voice quivering.

Zandor tipped his head back and laughed, he pulled her into his arms. Relieved when her hands clung tightly to his shoulders, he brushed her cheek with his lips. "Oh, little one, *I love you.*"

* * * * *

Beth stretched, and found herself wedged delightfully between two naked bodies. The sheets had vanished long ago. The rough, curly hairs on their legs tickled her thighs. Skin, heavy with sweat, slid on skin. She smiled; the warm mingled scents of *her* males and sex clung to her body. They were in a guest room, some doors down from Zandor's bedchamber. Her body glowed with the memory of their night of passion made all the more wonderful by Zandor's declaration of love.

She moved her legs, her folds wet, slippery, and so very hot. They had both taken her twice, while the other sucked her tender breasts. She licked her lips, tasting the musky scent of them, and giggled. The sweet memory of her mouth, full of Thryll's velvet cock while Zandor pumped his ass, sent ripples through her clit. As the moon slipped from view, Zandor had returned from bathing, his body cool against her burning flesh. Then he had knelt before her and stroked the massive head of his erection across her lips. The tang of his pre-cum still burnt in her memory. God, her mouth had stretched to its limit when Thryll slipped up his ass and rode him hard. She wiped a finger over her lips, remembering the burst of hot cum trickling down her chin, so wickedly wonderful.

* * * * *

They had bathed together in a huge bathtub and left her alone. Beth wandered around the bedchamber, wrapped in a towel.

"Wait here. A maid will come to help you dress," said Zandor before he left to dress for the ceremony.

She opened the door to a soft knock and two smiling servants marched in, their arms filled with gowns and covered baskets. Beth shrugged and sat before a mirror at their request. The young women buzzed around her, brushing her hair with a comb soaked in rose oil. Beth looked suspiciously at the small tubs lined up on the dressing table. *Make-up? I hope they know what they're doing.*

She leaned back and closed her eyes while they brushed and fussed. Opening her eyes, she stood at their command and slid into a dress made of the palest blue silk. Cut low across her breasts, gathered at the waist with a stunning gold belt, it fell to her feet like a sheet of water. She walked to the mirror and examined the unfamiliar reflection. They had highlighted her blue eyes and woven strings of forget-me-knots through her hair. Her skin glowed; the color had changed over the past few days to a healthy golden hue and not a line in sight. Her eyes slanted up a little in the corners, blue as an azure sky. She touched her ears, running a finger to the point. They suited her, she decided. *I look rather nice, no, not nice . . . beautiful.*

"Thank you."

She grinned when the maids giggled and curtsied.

"We have been assigned to you, milady," replied the one who called herself Agnes.

"Have you seen Prince Zandor and Lord Thryll?"

"No, milady," said Prue. "I hear they've organized new furniture for their rooms, more to your taste. We've got rooms close by in this wing, next to the squires, so you only have to pull the bell and we'll be right there."

* * * * *

A sharp knock came at the door.

Prue opened it to a young man dressed in red silk. He bowed very low, his white blond hair falling in curls over his shoulders.

"I am Luc, milady, the king's squire. I am to accompany you to the Bonding Ceremony." He waved toward the door, offering his other arm with a stiff smile.

"The king will be making his usual speech and Prince Zandor will declare his

intentions. There's quite a crowd, milady; all are anxious to see who captured Prince Zandor's black heart."

"Black heart?"

"Aye, milady, he has quite a reputation. When the Town Crier issued the proclamation last eve, there was much festivity in the village."

"I see."

"Yes, milady." He continued as they walked along the corridor. "It was thought the prince would never find a mate who could melt his frozen heart."

The squire led Beth through the castle and into an underground passageway. A crowd roared in the distance, the noise becoming deafening when they climbed a flight of steps into blinding sunshine. She stood inside a huge, white marble amphitheatre. Zebra-striped shadows from the many columns rising up toward the ceiling covered the floor. Noise thundered from a huge assembly of people, packed together on a circular platform of steps cut into the side of the mountain.

She watched Blaise deliver a speech which brought the crowd to their feet, cheering. Zandor strode out of the shadows, glanced toward her with a brilliant smile across his bronzed face and extended his arm. She drew a deep breath as he turned. The point of one ear glistened. A gold decoration hugged his ear, fixed to his earlobe by a small chain attached to a brilliant sapphire. Lord, he looked like sin, dressed in a soft black tunic and pants. Gold armbands enclosed his upper arms and long golden chains hung around his neck, heavy with amulets. The sun kissed his hair into streams of molten gold. When he stood beside Blaise, the crowd fell silent.

"I come here today with love in my heart and bid you welcome, Thryll of Lonza, into the Royal Pride of Arious."

Thryll appeared from behind a column and walked toward him with his head held high. *Look at him, he's gorgeous.* His hair fell about his shoulders in a swirling mass of curls, he wore pale blue silk and a ruby ring sparkled on his finger. She watched as he kneeled before Blaise, keeping his head low. When his king stepped forward and placed a hand on his head, he closed his eyes.

"Dear Lady, I ask that you give this male to Zandor of Knight Watch for eternity."

The crowd cheered and stamped their feet when Thryll got slowly to his feet and stood grinning beside Zandor. Beth jumped when a hand touched her arm; she spun around to see Rio. She accepted his proffered arm and he raised one side of his mouth in a crooked smile.

"It's time to run for your life, Beth"

"No, I don't think so."

"Come, I will escort you."

They walked slowly across the bright marble floor. Beth recognized the familiar faces of Zandor's family sheltering in the shade of a tall column. Jill waved madly and Dare grinned as they made their way slowly toward Blaise. Rio bowed respectfully and turned her to face the crowd. Her face grew hot when Thryll and Zandor turned to acknowledge her. She bobbed, a little self-consciously, in front of Blaise, her throat too tight to utter a word.

Thryll stepped forward and held out his hands, palms up. "Place your hands on mine, sweetness, head against my head," he whispered.

Beth shivered slightly when a breeze brushed her bare skin, but the warmth of Thryll's body engulfed her, his scent flooding over her.

"Will you have me for all eternity?" Thryll's voice rung out crystal clear.

"I will."

She smiled as he kissed her gently. As soon as he stepped to one side, Zandor took her hands and inclined his head.

"Don't look so frightened, little one." He fixed his deep amethyst gaze on her, rested his head against her forehead and drew a deep breath. "I promise before the mighty god, Arious, the Lady, our king and these witnesses, to have no other female, for all eternity. I will respect your wishes, Beth, and I promise to love you, unconditionally. For in truth, *I love you* more than life . . . *wild thing*." He chuckled.

The back of her eyes burned with tears when he removed one of the chains from around his neck and placed it over her head. The heavy gold amulet pressed against her breasts, warm from his body and anointed with his potent scent. He bent to kiss her. She lifted her head. His mouth crushed hers, dominant, and possessive. The crowd whistled and cheered while he ravished her lips. Time stood still.

She heard Blaise cough and Zandor lifted his head.

"I think there's no doubt of my intentions, Blaise." He gazed down at her with a warm smile on his face. "And I know she loves us both with her heart and soul."

A shudder went through her when Blaise placed one hand on her head and one on Thryll's.

"For all eternity."

A tear ran down Beth's cheek when she turned her back on the crowd and walked hand in hand with her mates to join the family. Blaise had planned a party in the great hall in celebration and they made their way through the passageway back to the castle. Beth entered the brightly decorated great hall to thunderous applause; she clung to her mates' hands, overwhelmed when people pushed forward to give their congratulations.

She laughed when Zandor snorted and pushed through the crowd to the king's solar. Inside, she relaxed with Blaise and the immediate family, chatting happily on sofas while servants served copious amounts of delicious dishes. Beth sat and let out the breath she had held for far too long. Zandor and Thryll stood drinking goblets of Miza a short distance away; she looked up at them with deep, all consuming love. *Her mates for eternity. Good Lord, Blaise granted Thryll and me immortality.* She glanced around the room at the happy faces of her mates' relatives. *My family.* A warm hug surrounded her; she could not remember ever being this happy.

The sofa dipped when Rio sat down beside her and lifted his goblet to her with a wicked grin.

"So, *wild thing*, are you happy with the Lady's choice? Do your mates please you?"

She smiled; both Thryll and Zandor were staring at her with brows raised.

"Oh, yes, *very* happy . . . they're purr-fect."

~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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