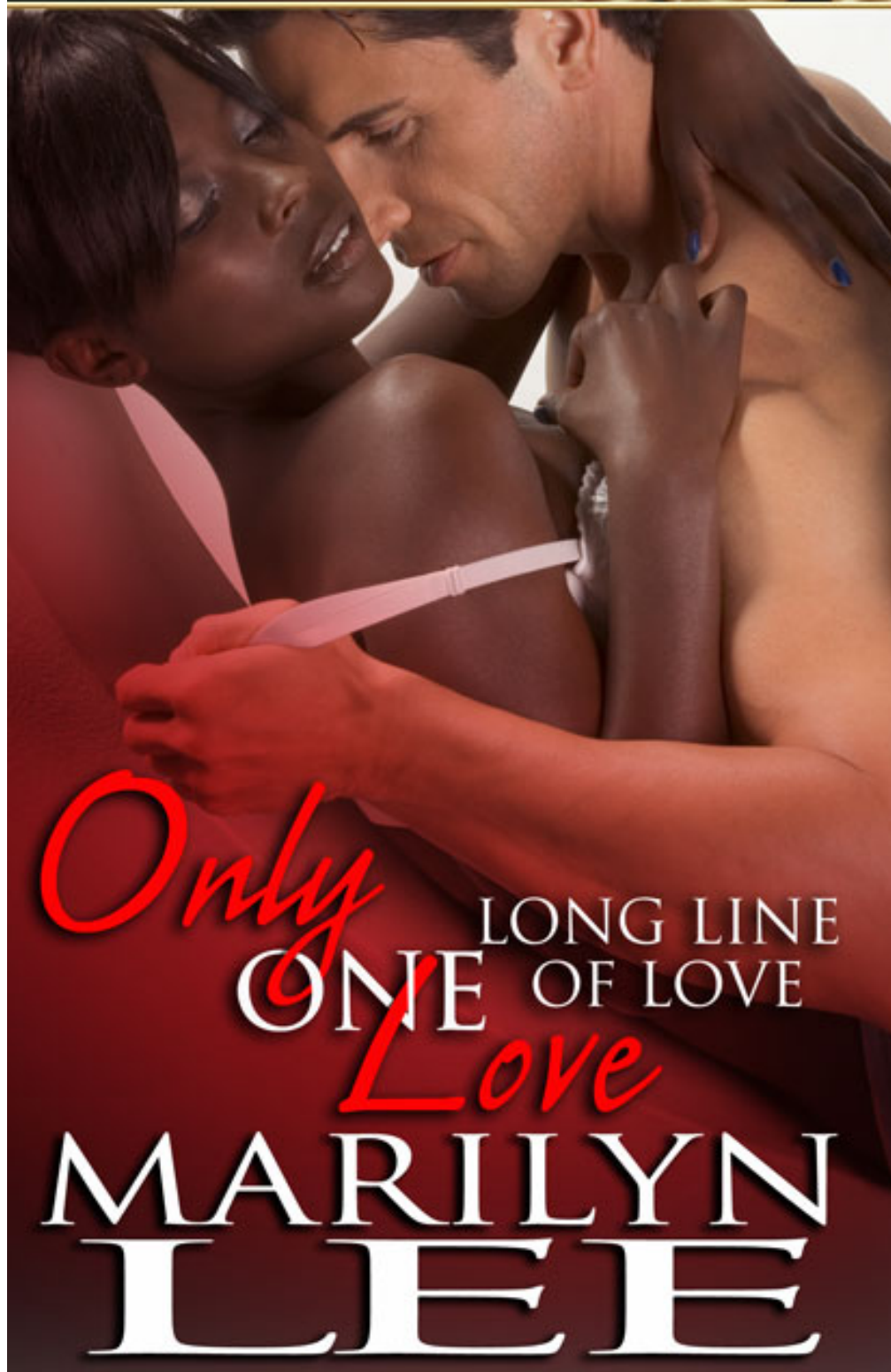


ELLORA'S CAVE FUSION



*Only* LONG LINE  
ONE OF LOVE  
*Love*

MARILYN  
LEE

## Only One Love

Marilyn Lee

*Long Line of Love, Book Three*

Peyton Grayhawk has spent his entire life feeling as if he'd lost the only woman he can ever love. He can't quite remember her, or the previous life they shared, but he's certain they'll meet again. In the meantime, Peyton has other problems. His quasi-little brother Cameron is involved with a woman seventeen years his senior. Peyton's determined to extricate Cameron from her sexual clutches. His decision to seduce the woman will stir long-dormant memories and send his entire family into crisis mode.

Despite her torrid, highly enjoyable physical relationship with Cameron Graydove, Avantae Sovern feels a need to end their affair so Cam can meet someone his own age—and she can be free to find the love of her life. She knows her long-lost love is somewhere out there, waiting...

One look at Peyton Grayhawk and Avantae knows he's the one. The couple has spent an eternity waiting for another chance at happiness. But by loving Avantae, Peyton has broken a Grayhawk cardinal rule that could force him to choose between family—or his one true love.

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Only One Love

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# *ONLY ONE LOVE*

**Marilyn Lee**

## Chapter One

Dressed in the unique, living leather mesh armor invented to help safeguard the royal family, Avantae slipped from her suite. She made her way slowly down the long, quiet corridor, her silver gaze darting from side to side.

Discovery outside her chambers during the two-week period of solitude before her Commitment Vows would prove more than embarrassing. It would include the indignity of having myriad warriors assigned to watch her around the clock to ensure she “behaved herself”. Nevertheless, she could no longer suppress her feelings.

She paused, recalling the events that had led to her risking censure from the Council of Elders.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Three weeks earlier, on a beautiful spring evening, a nude female warrior with pale skin, long blonde hair and large breasts had crept into Avantae’s private garden. As she watched from her balcony, the warrior, whom she recognized as Myung, made her way to the back garden where Peyton patrolled.

He whirled around a second before the warrior launched herself at him. Locoata, his sentient blade, flew from his thigh holster into his right hand.

Wrapping her arms around his body, the warrior pressed her breasts against his chest and sought his mouth.

Instead of repelling her, as Avantae silently willed him to do, he released Locoata to slide back into his thigh harness and quickly wrestled his would-be attacker to the ground, their mouths still locked together.

As a protectorate prime, he was always on duty. He was therefore granted the freedom to mate whenever security and decorum allowed—provided it was not in the direct presence of the one he served.

Prime protectorates were traditionally female. The few males who had reached Peyton’s level of skill nearly always chose to expend their sexual appetites with one of the female warriors under their command, as was their right.

Avantae knew she’d been foolish to hope he would be different and would abstain—as she had. She moved to the end of the balcony and continued to watch them.

Tears stung her eyes and her heart ached with pain. He lay between the female’s pale thighs, sucking her breasts.

The night breeze carried the warrior’s hot, illicit words to Avantae’s ears.

"Take me...please...fill me with your seed...make me yours if only for one night...please...I beg of you...put your cock in my pussy...mate with me...I need to feel it...I ache to feel it...to feel you deep inside me...you'll be my first...take me...take my pussy and make it your own...I want to bleed for you and all over your cock, my commander...I'm yours...make me your sex submissive...do with me as you will...as your cock wills...spill your seed...come in me."

"My cock aches for pussy," he said in a low voice, brusque with need. "But the pussy I hunger for is forbidden to me."

"I know of your need and of your forbidden desires. Take my pussy, my commander. Just for tonight...pretend this virgin pussy is the one you desire but can never have. Consume it...consume *me*."

Avantae leaned over the balcony, unable to look away.

Peyton lifted his body from Myung's and reached between her legs.

Avantae bit her lip as she caught a brief glimpse of the huge cock and balls hanging between his thighs as he rose to his knees.

Myung lay on her back with her knees bent and legs open. "Do it. Close your eyes and pretend I'm her. Fuck me. Fuck this virginal pussy that I freely offer you, my commander."

"I burn only for her. I shouldn't touch you. I shouldn't...but my need is great."

Myung reached out a hand to touch his thigh. "Just for tonight, burn for *me*. Burn for my pussy as it burns for your cock. Fuck me as many times as you like. Take my pussy and fuck me."

Cock. Pussy. Fuck. Avantae felt her own desire rise at the repeated use of the words she'd been taught only those of low breeding used for the male and female sex organs and the mating act. She rubbed her vagina. No. Her pussy. She liked the sound of the crude word. Small wonder those who were able to mate freely talked of pussy, cock and fucking. Fucking. She pinched her nipples and mouthed the deliciously forbidden words softly. "Cock...pussy...fuck...fuck..." How she longed to have her pussy fucked by a long, thick cock wielded by a big, handsome male devoted to her.

Pussy...cock...fuck. She felt the familiar rush of dampness between her legs she often felt whenever he was near.

"The Goddess forgive me, I will fuck you."

Hearing him speak the word sent a flame of heat all through Avantae. Decency and protocol dictated she either call out to make her presence known or move inside to her chambers to allow them to mate without an audience. She would do neither. She would do the only thing she could – watch and imagine she lay under his big body moments away from surrendering her innocence.

Baring her pussy, she fingered herself and watched as he pressed his shaft against Myung's body.

Moments later, Myung's soft cry filled the air as he pushed into her.

Avantae bit her lip hard. What utter joy Myung must feel having Peyton's huge length pushing its way deep into her. Balling a hand into a fist, she watched him drive his hips slowly downward until he lay between Myung's trembling thighs. She moaned, her hands clutching at his broad shoulders.

He held himself still for several moments before he spoke in a voice rough with lust. "Get ready to be fucked," he instructed.

Myung slid her hands down his body to grip his waist. "Yes...fuck me...please."

Resting his weight on his extended arms, he slowly slid his cock in and out of her.

Each time he drew his powerful hips away and moved back into her, Myung moaned. Avantae's pussy throbbed and her heart raced with jealousy. Each thrust back into the warrior hit Avantae with the force of a sharp weapon being pushed into her heart. Nevertheless, she couldn't look away.

The sounds of their combined moans and their flesh slapping against each other as he fucked the warrior deep and hard heightened Avantae's arousal, along with her hunger and jealousy.

Avantae gripped the balcony railing and rubbed her fingers against her clit as she watched the furious motion of his hips. The rapid clenching and unclenching of his taut rear must signal even deeper penetration.

He suddenly slipped his hands under Myung to lift her lower body from the ground. He then slammed his hips down.

Myung cried out and raked her hands down his back.

He buried his mouth against her breast and fucked her hard and fast.

Avantae watched, her heart racing until the lovers cried out.

Peyton sprawled between Myung's thighs for long moments after he stopped moving before he finally eased out of her to roll onto his back.

Myung lay beside him. "Was it a good fuck?"

Avantae closed her eyes. *Say no, Peyton. Please.*

He spoke without hesitation. "Yes."

"Do you want another one, commander?"

Avantae gripped the balcony railing. How could she possibly bear watching them together again?

"No."

Avantae released a relieved breath.

"You can take my ass this time, commander. Or I'll play with my cunt while I suck your cock until you spill your seed in my mouth."

Were all warriors as dense and unable to take a hint as Myung? *Calm down. You can't scream out that he's yours and order her away from him.*

He shook his head. "I've dishonored you enough. Forgive me and go. Please."

Instead of accepting his rejection with grace, the hellish warrior continued to press him for further intimacy. "Please don't feel as if you did anything wrong. I'm of age and I offered myself freely to you with the full knowledge that you want another. I wanted my first time to be with you—even though you didn't spill your seed in me, as I'd hoped you would."

"I'm a protectorate prime. I can't spill my seed in anyone who doesn't own my heart and my devotion."

Her sound of distress pleased Avantae. He had mated with her, but she was not his one.

He turned to look at Myung. "But you gave me a large measure of relief, for which I'm grateful."

"It was an honor to have you fuck me, my commander." She leaned over and kissed him.

He stroked his fingers through her long, golden hair. "You are a beautiful woman and a skilled warrior. Go and find a male who can fully appreciate your passion and devotion. Don't allow any male who doesn't love you to fuck you. Despite what you've been taught, it's fucking, not mating—mating is a thing of beauty to be shared with one you cherish dearly. Don't waste another fuck on someone like me."

"It was a pleasure to service you in your time of need, my commander. Should you need me again...no matter who I'm with...I'll always make my pussy, my mouth or my ass available for your plunder."

He sighed. "You're too generous. I know I hurt you."

"Yes, but that was inevitable given the length and girth of your cock, commander. It was a hurt I would gladly suffer again and again."

He stroked his hand down her back to lightly slap her pale ass cheeks. "Go find a male who loves you and allow him to fuck your sweet, hot pussy as much as he and you like."

"You found my pussy sweet and hot?"

"And tight and good. You have some of the best pussy I've ever enjoyed."

"No shit?"

He laughed and slapped both ass cheeks again. "No shit. Now go before you tempt me to fuck you again."

She stretched herself out on top of him and rotated her groin against his. "I would welcome you back deep inside me, commander."

"You are an Aireon warrior and deserve better than I just gave you." He gently lifted her body off his and sat up. "I won't dishonor you again. Now go."

"As you wish, commander." Myung rose and slipped between the bushes to her right.



Avantae watched her melt into the darkness with all the stealth of the skilled warrior she was. She suppressed the urge to scream abuse at the warrior's retreating figure. She took a deep breath and turned her attention back to Peyton.

He lay on his back with a hand tossed across his eyes. His legs were parted.

Avantae leaned forward. In the moonlight, she saw Myung's juices and blood coating the huge cock and balls that rose above his groin.

Standing there staring down at him, she vowed that she, like the lucky Myung, would soon impale herself on him while she happily spilled her virginal blood over his beautiful cock and majestic balls. And he would fill her with his seed.

She turned away and quietly crept off the balcony and into her chambers. There wasn't much time for her to decide how she'd get him to take her virginity.

Take her virginity? No. She wanted him to fuck her senseless and then flood her with his seed.

Tingling with anticipation and need at the thought, she slipped into bed and lay trembling with excitement. What joy she would experience once she'd shared her sexual soul song with the big, handsome protectorate she needed so much.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Dragging her thoughts from the past, Avantae shook her head, pushed herself away from the wall and continued her silent progress from her chambers. Near the end of the wide, dark corridor, she placed her hand over a hidden wall sensor. She felt a soft pulse against her open hand. After the scanning of her palm, a portion of the wall slid aside. With a final glance over her shoulder, she slipped inside. A soft murmur signaled the wall sliding back into place. Turning, she ran down a narrow, dimly lit corridor.

The door at the other end of the passage slid open. Avantae stopped abruptly, her heart racing.

A handsome man with short, dark hair silvering at the temples and blue-green eyes blocked her path.

She allowed her gaze to slowly slide over his naked body. Wide shoulders and a massive chest gave way to sculptured abdominal muscles, powerful thighs and long legs. A fine silverdine chain rested in the thick, dark hair that curled across and down his chest.

By the Goddess, he was beautiful. Small wonder Myung had been happy to mate with him. Avantae swallowed and allowed her gaze to dance over his body to the mass of curly hair below his waist and narrow hips. "I've been looking for you."

Noting her gaze locked on his semi-erect cock, he placed both hands in front of his groin and dropped to one knee, his head bowed. "Sovereignique," he murmured in a deep, husky voice. "Forgive my nudity."

She'd long admired the symmetry of his physique and loved the reddish-bronze color of his skin. The Goddess had decided to be kind, granting her wish to find him naked and aroused. She raised her gaze to his.

He rose, keeping his hands in front of his groin. "I was about to bathe. How may I serve you?"

Moisture pooling between her legs, Avantae knelt in front of him. "I've come hoping to serve *you*," she whispered.

"Sovereignique?"

Ignoring the surprise in his voice, she moved a hand in front of her lower body in a circular motion. Responsive to her non-verbal command, the living mesh retracted, revealing her pussy.

Peyton inhaled.

Pleased by the slow, deliberate way his gaze slid over her body, she tilted her hips and parted her legs to give him a better view of the pussy she longed to have him plunder. "See me and let me see you," she urged.

His hands fell away from his groin.

She watched with delight as his shaft sprang to life until it protruded a very satisfying length in front of him.

The beauty of his big body reinforced her determination. She had to surrender herself to him and feel his huge length tunneling deep into her body. Sucking in her breath, she raised her gaze to his.

He shook his head.

The lack of condemnation in his gaze removed any sting from his seeming rejection. He gently lifted her to her feet. "It's not proper for you to bow to any but her highness, your mother, Sovereignique."

She suppressed a sigh of impatience. Clearly he intended to make her work for the satisfaction she was determined to have. So be it. She reached out and closed the fingers of her right hand around his hard, warm flesh. "I have to have this inside me now." Her inability to use the illicit mating words Peyton and Myung had used annoyed her.

He shuddered. "Sovereignique!"

"Mate with me," she whispered.

He looked down at her pussy in silence. As he did, he eased his hips forward.

She watched his jaw clench. It would take some effort, but he would bend—either to her will or to his need. Protectorate primes of both sexes were renowned for their voracious sexual appetites—as were the ruling females. Together, they would enjoy incredible pleasure few would ever know. She *would* soon surrender her maidenhood to him. She slipped her other hand under his heavy balls and gently massaged them.

His low, sexy near-growl excited her. She gently massaged him. "Mate with me. Break my virgin barrier. Thrust into me until you fill me with your seed."

His Adam's apple bobbed wildly. He moistened his lips. "I can't."

She leaned close enough to inhale the heady scent of his body. "You can."

"No."

"You will. I command it."

He lifted his head.

Their gazes locked.

Desire filled his gaze.

She pumped his hard, long shaft. Imagining the thick length sinking into her, she bit her lip, her heart pounding.

His lids swept down, concealing his expression. His chest expanded as he took a deep breath before he shook his head. "That's not a command I can obey."

She tightened her fingers around his flesh. "You must obey me."

"No." He pulled away from her.

She dropped to her knees. The head of his length glistened. Unable to resist the lure of the pre-cum just inches away, she parted her lips.

"No."

She ignored him and touched her tongue to the warm tip of his cock head.

"No! You mustn't!" He jerked his hips back, stepping away from her. "You're not only my sovereign, but you're promised to the Macarae. To touch you would not only dishonor my entire clan but it would also mean certain death."

She rose and closed the distance between them. Locking her gaze with his, she reached out to stroke her fingers over the golden, sun-kissed skin of his chest. At six-foot-six with a forty-two-inch chest, he was the tallest and most physically impressive male in the royal protectorate. Only one male in Aireon boasted greater height—a minor court official named Sin-Bad who stood nearly seven feet tall.

Despite his remarkable height, Peyton had studied for years until he'd mastered the advanced art of defense required of those chosen to protect the ruling family. Only after he had attained that level of skill, which few males before him had achieved, had she been allowed to choose him as her protectorate instead of one of the fierce female warriors bred for generations to protect the royal family. None of the Macarae she'd met would present a physical threat to Peyton.

Nevertheless, she longed to shield him from all possible harm. She trailed her fingers down his chest. "I'll protect you."

His fingers closed around her wrists. Staring into her eyes, he gently forced her hands from his body. "It's my sworn duty to protect you, not seek protection from you, Sovereignique. Please return to your chambers."

Avantae sucked in an impatient breath. She had defied convention and her mentor, Leonita, to come to him before her Commitment Vows. She hesitated. Should she confess that she seriously considered asking him to flee to Earth with her? Although not

human, her people looked the part. She and Peyton could easily lose themselves on Earth or one of the many other planets where humans and those who appeared human lived.

No. The thought of the turmoil her flight would cause made that tempting choice impossible. She would do her duty to her people and mate with the Macarae, Javion. But just once, she would know pleasure in the arms of the protectorate for whom her heart raced and her soul song longed to sing.

Even though Peyton was always circumspect in her presence, she had long sensed his hunger to mate with her. She had also seen it in her favorite deck of cards. Each hand dealt included the two of cups, which she'd come to think of as their card.

The coming two weeks would be her last chance to share her sexual melody with him. She would soon be forever committed to Javion. Once that happened, she would never see Peyton again, as Javion had already decreed Macarae warriors would serve and protect them both after their exchange of vows.

At her silent command, Avantae's mesh armor detached from her body to fall at her feet. Naked and aroused, she knelt in front of him again. She pressed her large, firm breasts against his body before looking up at him.

He sucked in a quick breath, his gaze locking with hers.

Noting the sensual hunger in his eyes, she tugged at his hands.

He groaned and dropped to his knees in front of her, gulping in deep breaths.

She slipped her palms up from his waist to his chest.

He didn't protest.

She rolled his nipples between her fingers.

"Don't." Even as he groaned out the protest, he inched his hips forward.

Delighted to discover his nipples were sensitive, she leaned forward to twirl her tongue around his right one.

His chest rose and fell rapidly.

Avantae licked and bit at his nipple before trailing her lips across the fine hair on his chest to kiss and tease his left nipple.

Trailing his hands down her sides, he gripped her hips.

She lifted her head to smile at him, pleased at the level of sexual tension she sensed in him.

He shook his head, his eyes pleading with her to stop.

While she longed to please him, stopping was not an option. She placed her hands on his shoulders, applying steady pressure to push him backward.

He resisted. "Sovereignique...please don't."

"Avantae," she whispered. "After so many years at my side, surely you can call me Avantae when we're alone."

"Calling you by your given name would be disrespectful."

She shook her head. "Oh no, Peyton. No. Nothing you could say or do would be disrespectful."

"I have no right –"

"I grant you the right, my handsome brave one." She touched the small, silverdine half-heart charm he wore around his neck. It matched the half she wore.

"No."

"Yes," she whispered, gently stroking her fingers over the long, jagged scar on his left shoulder. Years earlier, when they were both teens, he had used his body to shield her from a projectile shot by a jealous would-be suitor. His bravery had nearly cost him his life.

She had remained by his side every moment of the many weeks he had lingered near death. Each time the healer advised his clan to prepare to say goodbye, she had gripped his hand and sang all the healing alms she knew. Although the efforts left her exhausted, he had survived. Afterward, she discovered they had formed an emotional bond rarely spoken of, but felt by both.

Leonita had proudly told everyone that Avantae's faith had helped save his life. She now knew her love for him had been just as instrumental in helping him hold on while his body slowly healed. She had willed him to live because losing him would have been like losing a vital part of herself.

Now the thought of never seeing him again...of never feeling his strong, reassuring presence at her side and at her back whenever she ventured out of the palace, sent a shock of despair through her. She could foresee no happy future that didn't include him.

Despite the Aireon rules and mores that forbade intimacy between a sovereign and her protectorate, her desire for intimacy with him had only grown stronger over the many years he'd protected her. She had suffered in silence, knowing that at night, when she longed for him most, his sexual appetite drove him into the arms of countless warriors she suspected could never mean anything to him.

A mating based on love and devotion, as her parents' commitment was, must give each partner immeasurable joy. She would not know that joy in her commitment with Javion, but she *would* share at least a few brief moments of bliss with Peyton.

"I'm tired of pretending I don't need and want you spilling your seed inside me." She leaned forward, caressing the scar with her lips and tongue.

He shuddered.

Smiling, she kissed the scar and lifted her head. "I've always known we are soul mates, meant to be together."

"We both know we can never be together, Sovereignique."

## Chapter Two

They couldn't be together as lifetime mates, but she would surrender herself to him. "Do you remember when we first saw each other, Peyton?"

"Yes."

The one word held such a wealth of feeling. The memory of their first sighting clearly meant as much to him as it did to her. He would be no more capable of saying no to her than she would to him. "I was ten and you were twelve."

"You were with your parents on a royal tour."

She smiled. "You were in the crowd. When our transport passed, our gazes met."

"And?"

She nodded. "And locked."

He continued in a low, almost reluctant voice. "For an all too brief moment."

"The moment was brief, but magical."

"Yes."

"And in that moment the emotional bond we share was formed. It's only grown stronger with time." She caressed the hair on his chest. "Surely you can admit it just this once."

"Sovereignique—"

She sighed. "Oh Peyton...please."

"Please?"

"Soon we'll be separated forever."

He shuddered.

"While we still have a little time, please don't keep denying what I know you feel." She ran her hand down his body to rub her palm over his pubic hair. "I can't go to Javion without mating with you at least once."

"Don't."

"I have to." She slid her hand lower and encircled his cock. "I have to feel this inside my...pussy."

He stiffened. "Such gutter language is beneath you, Sovereignique."

"You like it," she countered.

"I never said—"

"I know you do. I heard you use it with Myung in the garden...just as you intended me to."

"Spying on me is forbidden."

She shrugged. "We're going to do many forbidden things together. No matter how much you feel honor bound to protest."

"Sover —"

She slipped her hands back up his body to push against his shoulders. "I want to feel your cock sliding deep into my pussy now."

He shook his head, still resisting her efforts to push him onto his back. "No, Sovereignique. We can't...we mustn't."

"We have to, my love."

He caught his breath. "Your...love?"

She lifted her head and met his gaze. "Yes. My love. Surely you know how I feel about you."

He stared at her in silence.

"Don't you know how I've *always* felt about you?"

He sighed.

She ran a finger along his bottom lip. "I can feel your hunger to share this pleasure with me."

His eyelids lowered, concealing his expression. "Forgive my weakness. I meant no disrespect."

She cupped her palms over his cheeks. "Look at me."

A long moment passed before he obeyed.

She gazed into his beautiful blue-green eyes. "It's a weakness I've shared from the moment I chose you as my personal guard."

"It was an honor to be chosen, Sovereignique."

"You worked hard and earned your position."

"I did, and I can't disrespect the privilege bestowed upon my entire clan by sampling a...sweet fruit to which I have no right."

Her knowledge of his love of fruit gave the admission an added sweetness. She lifted one of his hands and placed it on her right breast. "I grant you that right."

"Sovereignique...please don't."

She took his other hand and placed it between her legs. "Just as I grant you the right to plunder my pussy."

"No..." Even as he protested, his fingers stroked into her.

She bit her lip at the wonderful sensation of feeling his fingers inside her. "Please don't deny us this chance to sing in sexual harmony. You'll forget me after my union with Javion."

He thrust his fingers deeper inside her. "I'll never forget you, no matter how many lives I'm blessed with."

She trembled, thrusting herself on his fingers. "Nor I you. It's well known that if one's will is strong enough, one may live many lives."

"Then we can look forward to perhaps having an opportunity to explore these feelings in another lifetime."

"What if we don't know each other in another lifetime?"

He rubbed his thumb against her clit.

She bit her lip.

"A sovereign knows her subjects and they know her," he reminded her. "You must believe. No matter how many lifetimes separate us, when we meet again, we'll know each other. In one of those lifetimes, we'll be together."

She shook her head. "I won't wait. I have to share at least a brief moment of this lifetime as your one. Please. Let's share one sweet sexual song that we can both cherish long after we've been separated." She ground herself against his palm. "Mate with me and make me yours."

He thrust a third finger inside her. "Please, Sovereignique, don't tempt me beyond my ability to resist. My body aches for a pleasure with you to which I'm not entitled. Help me to resist. Please. Don't tempt me to dishonor my clan."

As he pleaded with her, the long, strong fingers of one hand thrust in and out of her wet slit. The fingers of his other hand rolled her nipples until each one pebbled.

She moaned. "I have no wish to bring dishonor to your noble clan, but your touch is like paradise."

"Stop me now and return to your chambers." He rubbed his thumb against her clit. "Do it before I lose my remaining self-control."

"I struggled to remain in my chambers in prayerful solitude, but my heart was too heavy with grief at the thought of our impending separation." She stroked her hands over his chest. "Forgive my weakness. Please don't send me away to spend another long, lonely night alone. Mate with me just once."

"Once won't be enough."

"Then we'll do it more than once. We'll keep doing it until the unkind fates tear us apart from each other."

He sucked in a breath.

Feeling the resistance against her hands dissipate, she pushed at his shoulders.

When he lay on his back, she stretched out on top of him, slowly rubbing herself against his cock.

He groaned, sliding his fingers down her back to cup her bottom.

She shivered with anticipation and sat up.

He stared up at her, his hands still cupping her rear.

Smiling down at him, she closed her fingers around his thick flesh. "I need to feel this inside me now. Please."



"Sovereignique—"

"Shh. Don't talk, my love. Just feel how much I want and need you inside me. Feel my need and hunger for you, Peyton. Feel it and satisfy it."

His fingers tightened on her rear.

She sucked in a quick breath. "Take me."

"I can't."

"You're going to."

He sucked in a deep breath. "If we mate, you won't be able to conceal it from Javion."

She rubbed herself against his hard width that would no doubt stretch her channel. Delighted at the prospect, she decided she'd worry about the consequences later. "If we don't mate, I might as well be dead."

"Don't say that. Don't ever say that."

"Then give me what I need to live!" Lifting her hips, she placed his hard flesh along her own.

He stared up at her, eyes pleading. "Mating with you will bring condemnation on my entire clan."

She pressed against the hard length pulsing along her slit. "It's no transgression to service your Sovereignique in her time of need. And I do need you, my love."

He caressed her ass while he thrust his hips up and down, rubbing his length over her wet slit. "I need your help."

"Name it and it's yours."

"Please help me to resist. Please. I can't do this."

"That's the one thing I can't do. I have to have you. I don't care if it's wrong and I don't care about the consequences."

"You must care."

"I don't, and I won't let you care about them either!"

He slid one hand around to stroke the fingers along her slit, igniting a hunger she could no longer control.

Taking a deep breath, she eased her hips forward. She gasped as the immense head of his shaft parted her wet folds and lodged just inside her.

She looked down, marveling at how complementary his lighter skin tone was to her much darker one. Such wonderfully contrasting skin tones were meant to mesh and blend until they were one. She inched her hips a little farther forward.

His powerful hands closed over her waist, thwarting her efforts to impale herself on him. "It's not too late. If we stop now, no one need know how close we came to transgression. If we proceed, you won't be able to hide from Javion the fact that you have mated."

The argument held no more sway with her than it had when Leonita had made it earlier that evening. Although Avantae disliked deception, Javion wouldn't know that he wasn't her first. She would use the power vested in her as a ruling class siren to cloud his mind, shameful as such an act was.

"Leave Javion to me and allow me this one selfish act. Mate with me. Let me feel you stretching me...fill me up...spill your seed in me."

He shuddered. "I know it's not right, but I've wanted this for so long...I can't resist any longer."

She smiled. "Take me, my love. Slip deep inside me and make me your one—as you will always be mine."

"As you command, my sovereign." He rolled them onto their sides.

They lay staring at each other in silence for several moments.

She suspected his continued hesitation was another unwanted opportunity to allow her to change her mind. "Take me. Mate with me. Claim me as yours," she encouraged. "Once you have, I'll be very happy. And every time I'm with him, I'll close my eyes and remember and pretend I'm with you. I need this time with you. Please don't deny me."

"I should, but I can't." Slipping an arm around her waist, he cupped his palm over her bottom. He stroked the fingers of his other hand between her legs and inside her.

She closed her eyes and moved herself against his fingers. They felt nice and increased her need for him. "I love you."

He whispered to her softly in response. She was lovely. He adored her and had suffered through countless nights hungering for her. His need for her had nearly consumed him. He would gladly surrender his life to protect her.

"Living in a world that doesn't include you would be torture beyond belief. Let's not have any talk of dying, my handsome Peyton. Think only of making me your one."

He rolled over onto his back. "A world that doesn't include you wouldn't be worth living in, Sovereignique."

She opened her eyes and smiled down at him. "Then we have to enjoy the short time we have left together."

"Yes," he whispered in a brusque voice. "But we can't risk complete intimacy."

She rotated her hips and stretched her body out on his. "That's what I want and need. I've spent far too many sleepless nights dreaming of feeling you sliding into me and then spilling your seed in me." She licked his lips. "My body will become Javion's in two weeks, but my mind and heart will never be his. Those will always be yours. I'm fertile. Spill your seed in me and no one need know you're the father of my child and not him."

"We can't."

"We will. I have to have you inside me. If you impregnate me, it will make going to him easier to bear. You must be my first one." She moved her lips across his cheek to his neck. "Surely you want to be the first to take me, my love."

"I want and need that with a hunger which consumes me, but there are other ways for us to satisfy each other so that Javion can still be your first."

"I don't want him to be my first."

"He must be, Sovereignique – for both our sakes."

Avantae knew he was right. She sighed. Her determination to surrender herself to him would be delayed – for now.

She slid down his lower body to rest between his thighs, his erect shaft pressed against her cheek. She closed a hand around the base of his flesh. Sliding her tongue out, she slowly dragged the tip along his length, savoring the feel, taste and scent of him.

He cupped a hand over the back of her head. "That feels so good, but you mustn't take me in your mouth."

"If I can't have you inside me, I must at least taste you...suck you."

"Sovereignique –"

"Shh." She nibbled at the underside of his long, thick length, breathing in the erotic scent of his shaft.

He trembled. "Don't put your lips around me."

Despite his protests, she knew he wanted to be inside her mouth. Smiling, she parted her lips to draw him between her lips.

Several drops of pre-cum coated the tip of his shaft. She glanced up at him.

He stared at her, his eyes burning with need.

"If you won't spill your seed in my pussy, then you'll spill it in my mouth and I'll swallow every drop."

He curled his fingers in her short, dark hair and gently pressed his length against her lips.

Feeling the tension in his big body, she eagerly sucked the few drops of cock moisture before parting her lips.

"No..."

"Yes," she whispered. Cupping his balls, she slowly sucked at the helmeted head, swirling her tongue around it.

He groaned. "You'll make me come."

She wanted to please him with her mouth and later her pussy and her rear. Her goal was to make him come repeatedly inside her. She massaged his balls and sucked harder.

He shuddered, uttered a profane word he'd never used in her presence and surged his hips forward, driving himself deeper into her mouth.

Avantae closed her eyes. She steeled herself not to pull away in panic at the sudden and unfamiliar slide of his cock over her tongue and partway down her throat.

He held himself still and cupped his hands over the back of her head. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'll go slowly. I know you've never done this before."

But she had watched a number of female warriors performing oral mating on their one. She was nervous, but prepared.

She opened her eyes and gazed up at him. *Talk dirty to me, Peyton.* She projected the thought at him.

He smiled down at her, caressing her cheek with the back of his hand. "Taste me...suck my shaft and swallow my cum. Then I'll lie between your long, beautiful, dark thighs and eat your luscious pussy until you come all over my lips and tongue."

His use of the forbidden terminology increased her hunger for him while easing her remaining fears.

With his thick length still in her mouth, Peyton lifted her chin so he could stare into her eyes. "Does my use of the vulgar terms for mating dismay or disgust you, my sovereign?"

She gave a small shake of her head and fondled his big balls.

"Do you like it?"

She gave his balls a gentle squeeze.

"Then let me fuck your face, my lovely sovereign."

She opened her mouth to suck in a quick breath around his cock before sealing her lips around him.

He cupped his other hand over her head and slowly pushed his hips forward so that his big shaft surged into her mouth. "Suck me."

Moaning in delight at the taste of the hard cock sliding in and out of her mouth, she closed her eyes. Compressing her cheeks, she eagerly obeyed his command.

He shuddered. "Suck me, my lovely siren. Suck me until you make me come and brand me as yours alone."

Excited at what she viewed as a promise not to mate with anyone else, she leaned forward until her face brushed against his pubic hair. Sliding her palms over his ass when his hips jerked up, she swirled her tongue around him.

As she savored the feeling of sucking, her nipples hardened and her pussy flooded a number of times. She reached down a hand to finger her slit and rubbed her thumb against her clit.

His breathing became erratic. The sounds of his low, lust-filled groans filled the air. The muscles in his stomach rippled.

Convinced he was close to coming, she slid a hand across one of his nether cheeks. Locating his anus, she thrust her finger into it.

"Holy shit!" He curled his fingers in her hair, fucked his cock so far down her throat that she gagged and gasped in panic. Then he shuddered and she felt jets of seed sliding down her throat as he held her face pressed tight against his pubic hair.

With a supreme will, she overcame the urge to shove against his groin in an effort to dislodge the detonating cock from her throat.

Sensing her near panic, he abruptly released her head and eased his still-erupting shaft out of her mouth.

She sighed with relief and sank back on her haunches. Keeping her eyes closed, she relished the jets hitting her body.

When they stopped, he caressed her cheek.

She opened her eyes in time to see him rising to his feet.

## Chapter Three

Avantae gazed up at him.

He gripped his cock, bent his knees and placed it against her closed mouth.

"Part your lips and swallow the rest of my seed."

"The rest? There's more?"

"Yes. Open your mouth."

She hesitated for a moment before she reached out to close her fingers around him and slowly parted her lips.

"Yes?" he asked.

Although reluctant, she nodded. He groaned and jetted three small loads of cum onto her tongue. She massaged his balls and swallowed.

He shot another jet in her mouth.

She swallowed one more. Then she kissed and licked the big head of his shaft before rubbing her face against his pubic hair.

He made a small groaning sound and dropped to his knees in front of her.

Gazing up into his eyes, she realized that their roles had changed. For the moment at least, she had become his submissive. Having been raised with the expectation of ruling her people, the thought of being sexually subservient to a lover her people considered inferior excited her.

He reached between their bodies to thrust his fingers between her thighs and inside her.

"Oh..."

"You like that?"

She nodded. "Oh...yes."

He removed his fingers from her body and licked them. "Exquisite," he whispered. She smiled.

He leaned close to brush his lips against her ear. "I've changed my mind."

The Goddess be praised. "You have?"

"I have to have your pussy after all." He rubbed his free palm over her breasts while he slipped a finger back inside her.

She moaned and rotated her hips as her pussy flooded anew. "Are you going to finger me or suck me?"

He thrust a second finger inside her. "Neither." He moved closer until she felt his hard length against her belly. "I'm going to thrust my cock as deep as I can and then I'm going to fuck you slow and hard until you come."

"Oh...please do."

"I will. Once I have, I'm going to shoot my seed deep inside you." He nibbled her ear. "And then I'm going to turn you on your belly and fuck your big, beautiful, round ass."

Shuddering with love and unmitigated desire, she drew away from him. She lay on her back with her knees bent and her legs parted. She reached out to caress his stomach. "I'm yours to do with as you wish, my handsome commander. Make me your sex submissive. Treat me as if I'm one of your female warriors with whom you may do as you like. Take me and make me your one."

He kneeled between her legs with his cock pressed against her slit.

She tensed and clenched her hands at her sides, certain he was about to plunge into her pussy with one thrust. While she longed for that, she knew their first fuck might be rough and painful for her. But it would bring him pleasure and she loved him enough to be content with that.

He surprised her by stretching out on top of her instead.

She knew he weighed about two hundred and thirty pounds and loved feeling crushed under his weight.

Instead of reaching between their bodies to thrust his huge shaft into her and tear through her barrier, he brushed his lips and tongue against her mouth.

The taste and feel of his lips and tongue gave her a heady delight. She slipped her arms around his body and held him close, allowing her lips to part.

He kissed her with a slow, moist heat that not only took her breath away, but also sent a blast of heat searing through her entire body—from the top of her head to her curled toes.

She raked her fingers down his back to cup his ass as she returned the hot, demanding kisses he pressed against her lips.

He tore his lips away from hers and kissed a path over her neck to her breasts. Lifting his weight onto his bent arms, he twirled his tongue over each nipple before fastening his lips around the right one. He sucked it into his mouth.

She moaned, cupping her hands on the back of his head. When he'd sucked each nipple until she thought she would explode, he trailed a path of moist kisses down over her belly.

He slipped his hands under her to tilt her hips upward. He then parted her wet folds with the head of his shaft.

She opened her eyes. The sight of his big, fully erect cock nestled between the pink inner lips of her pussy sent a shudder of desire tinged with fear through her. Desire conquered the fear. She thrust her hips off the floor. "Do it. Fuck me," she commanded.

He surprised and shocked her by slapping the side of her thigh.

She gasped and stared at him. "I...no one's ever struck me," she whispered.

He caressed her stinging flesh. "And no one's struck you now. That was meant to stimulate you."

"It hurt," she countered.

"My cock is going to hurt more," he told her, his voice brusque, his gaze locked on hers.

But that would be a sweet, long-desired pain. "Why did you hit me?"

"I didn't hit you. I stimulated you because you're about to become my woman."

The muscles of her stomach clenched. "Your woman?"

"And my one. Do you know what that encompasses?"

"No, but I want to," she admitted.

A slow smile spread across his handsome face. "I am in command. I'll decide when and if and how much of my cock you can have. You can ask to be fucked, but you can't issue orders. Not when we're alone as lovers. Is that clear?"

She sucked in an indignant breath and lifted her chin. "No one has ever spoken to me with such disrespect."

"You've never been anyone else's sex submissive, but you are going to be mine."

Unable to deny his confident assertion, she lowered her lashes.

"And when we're alone together and about to fuck, I'll be your sovereign. I'll give the orders and you'll happily obey them."

"What...what are you saying? What do you mean?"

He rotated his hips slowly so that his cock seemed to pulse just inside her aching slit. "If I want my cock or balls sucked, you'll suck them. If I want some pussy, you'll gladly part your legs and wrap them around my body as I fuck you deep and hard until we both come. If I want to ream your big, luscious, dark ass, you'll eagerly hold your cheeks apart and wiggle your hips as I slowly drive every inch of my cock up your virginal ass. You'll do any and everything I command without hesitation or question. Is that clear?"

She felt a tension in Mariah, her sentient blade, along the mental link they shared. She had but to reach out her hand. Mariah would fly into it and ruthlessly tear into his flesh. Peyton's sentient blade would attempt to come to his defense, but he would be no match for Mariah, imbued with an insatiable bloodlust for anyone who threatened her Sovereignique.

Instead of summoning Mariah, Avantae savored a delicious sense of anticipation at being so dominated by the protectorate she loved and desired.

"What if I refuse to be obedient?" she challenged.

"Then I'll turn you over my lap and spank your ass until it stings and burns."

Such a prospect delighted rather than infuriated her.



He frowned and withdrew the head of his shaft from her. "Is that clear or shall I find someone else to fuck?"

"No!" She shook with jealousy at the thought of him with anyone else. "No. It's clear," she whispered, her cheeks burning at her shameless behavior. "I'm your submissive to command."

He rewarded her with a slow, warm smile. He leaned forward, allowing an inch of cock to slide between her nether lips and into her pussy.

She sucked in a breath, her stomach muscles clenching.

After a brief pause, he continued to push into her until she felt him pressing against her virgin shield.

Despite her desire, she trembled.

He shook his head and held himself still. "Have no fear, my beauty."

"I've never..."

"I know. You should know that I may command your body, but you command my heart." As he spoke, he slowly drove his hips downward.

She felt an incredible pressure against her shield. She gasped, shoving against his big body.

Mariah flew over Avantae's discarded clothes and hovered near her head.

Seconds later Locoata hovered near as well.

"Stand down, Locoata," Peyton instructed, keeping his gaze locked on Avantae.

Locoata lowered himself to the floor.

Avantae gave no such order to Mariah.

Peyton raised himself higher and stared down at her. "Having second thoughts?"

"No."

He glanced at Mariah, still hovering. "No?"

*It's all right, Mariah. It hurts but I don't want him to stop.*

Mariah made a graceful sweep and retreated.

Avantae kept her gaze on Peyton. "Your heart? I command your heart?"

He nodded. "Yes, but you must know that already."

She'd known he desired her, but that wasn't the same as... "What are you saying, Peyton?"

"That I love you."

Happy tears welled in her eyes. "The Goddess be praised. Since when?"

"Since the moment I saw you in the transport all those years ago. No matter who I've been with, I've always known you were my one. Before today, no matter how much I enjoyed sex, I'd never been able to come."

"Then tonight will be special for both of us. You'll come for the first time and I'll be fucked for the first time."

"Yes. You will definitely be fucked tonight," he whispered.

She slid her hands around his body to hold him. "I'm your one? Or dare I hope I'm your *sheenea*?"

"Yes," he admitted. "You are and always will be the one person who completes me...the woman I'll love forever and a day."

Forever and a day. While she savored the wonder of the admission, he pushed his hips forward and broke her virgin shield. Covering her lips with his to silence her cry of pain, he slowly slid balls-deep inside her.

## Chapter Four

Avantae's eyes snapped opened. She glanced around. Instead of the cool green walls of Peyton's sleeping quarters, the walls around her were a pale blue. She blinked several times, confused. Just moments earlier she had lain under him, her body shuddering with an unbearably sweet pain, her sexual fire raging out of control as he slowly took her chastity.

Now she was in a strange room. She closed her eyes briefly, her heart racing with fear. Where was she? More importantly, where was Peyton? She took several deep, cleansing breaths, as Leonita had taught her to do whenever she was confused or afraid. She closed her fingers around the delicate half-heart charm hanging from a fine silver chain around her neck.

She reached down to her right side. A new fear raced through her. Where was Mariah?

Her eyelids shot up. No leather holster encircled her thigh. Swallowing a surge of panic, she glanced around, confused anew. Slowly she turned her head. She leaned forward, staring at the computer screen before her.

*Forever and a day. While she savored the wonder of the admission, he pushed his hips forward and broke her virgin shield. Covering her lips with his to silence her cry of pain, he slowly slid balls-deep inside her.*

As Avantae read the words, awareness returned. She sank back against her chair. Closing her eyes again, she sucked in several deep breaths. *Calm down, Vantae. Calm down.* Slowly, her heartbeat returned to normal.

She opened her eyes and reread the words.

*Forever and a day. While she savored the wonder of the admission, he pushed his hips forward and broke her virgin shield. Covering her lips with his to silence her cry of pain, he slowly slid balls-deep inside her.*

They were words she had written. She, Avantae Sovern, romance author wannabe. Not Avantae, Sovereignique Ascendant of Aireon. The words held no special meaning for her. She frowned. Then why were her panties soaked? Why did she feel the agony of a great emotional loss? She shook her head and rose, moving away from her computer.

Quickly crossing the living room, she stared out the patio doors. Beyond the balcony lay a breathtaking view of a large, urban city. She was in Philadelphia, not on some Earthlike planet located in the imaginary planetary cluster of Aeolia. This was Philly, not a small but proud female-dominated kingdom called Aireon. Neither Aeolia nor Aireon existed outside her too fertile imagination.

She glanced down. Instead of the dark, living mesh she expected, a pink silk pantsuit clung to her body. She brushed her right hand against her breasts and thigh before she palmed herself. Although her breasts were larger and her legs longer than the Avantae in her story, she was just as wet. And in just as desperate need for physical satisfaction as her heroine.

What was happening to her? The line between her and the product of her imagination—Avantae—was starting to blur too often. She felt restless and suffered from the growing fear that at thirty-nine, the opportunity to get married and have kids while she could still fully enjoy the experience would soon be impractical.

She thought regretfully of the ten years spent as the lead singer of the Sirens. While that time was responsible for her financial independence, it had also ensured she had little time to meet someone and settle down and live a normal life that included a husband and at least two children.

Perhaps it was time she confided in her best friend Lysette, who had taken over as lead singer when Avantae left the group five years earlier. She sighed. Or maybe it was time she stopped working on Avantae's story—at least until she could keep the fictional world she'd created from intruding on reality.

The ringing phone startled her. She moved across the room to answer it. "Hello?"

"Hey there."

She smiled, feeling some of her tension dissolve. "Lysette! I was just thinking of you."

"Great minds think alike, Vantae. So how are you?"

Her smile vanished. "I'm not sure."

"Still having nightmares?"

"What do you call nightmares that occur during the day when you're wide awake?"

"That bad?"

"Yes." She fingered her charm. "As I was writing, I got lost in the Aireon saga again. I almost felt as if I were there in Aireon with Peyton. I'm starting to fear I'm on a fast track to losing my grip on reality."

"You're not going nuts."

"Aren't I?"

"No. I'm finally beginning to understand why you gave up singing. You're a damn skillful author who can spin a paranormal tale so well you get as lost in it as your fans do."

Her "fans" consisted of a few thousand online readers whose emails encouraged her to continue to pen her ongoing serial, *Sirens' Tales*. She smiled. "Tell that to Jon."

"The Sirens were his biggest managerial success, which is why he took your decision to leave so hard."

"That and the fact that he felt my leaving resulted in the loss of a big contract," she pointed out. "And—"

"Oh no. Let's not have any revisionist history that casts you in a bad light, Vantae. Yes, we lost the deal Jon was trying to negotiate at the time, but it's not like it was a sure thing. And he's since negotiated even better contracts for us."

Avantae sighed. "I don't know what I ever did to deserve friends like you, Julianne and Sarita. I can't believe how supportive you all were of my decision to leave to pursue another dream."

"Hey, lady, we're sisters of the spirit and we'll always support you as you follow your dreams—just as you've always supported us following ours."

"Although I feel as if I have to write full-time, I do miss singing and traveling with you, Lysette."

"That's why we suggested you do a *surprise* appearance during one of our sold-out Philadelphia concerts later this year."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. The fans were very gracious in accepting me as lead singer, but I know they'd love to see you sing some of our biggest hits in the area where we launched our career. Our male fans in particular would love it."

Avantae smiled. The Sirens' fan base had always been predominately male.

"Annie, Rita and I would love it too. Jon is practically salivating at the idea."

"Then I'll think about it."

"Great. I'll tell the others you're considering it. Now, do you need to talk in person? If you do, I can rearrange my schedule and be in Philly in a little over three hours."

It would be so nice to have Lysette's full attention, but not in the middle of a concert tour. "Thanks, Lyss. I'm a little wound up, but I'll be fine."

"Are you still seeing Cameron?"

A vision of a handsome young male with smiling blue-green eyes, silky dark hair and an endearing sexual hunger for her danced in her thoughts. "Yes and no."

"You've ended your relationship?"

"There was really nothing to end. He's sweet and reeking of sex appeal."

"But?"

"But we've both always known our relationship isn't going anywhere special. It'll remain strictly sexual until we end it."

"Then why not take a break from *Sirens' Tales* and let him work some of the kinks out?"

Her adoptive parents, both lawyers, had raised her with the belief that successful African-Americans had a duty to date and marry other African-Americans. Although Avantae thought the idea was outdated, she had dated black men exclusively until the night she met Cameron at her favorite singles lounge. The moment their gazes met and

locked, her secret yen for Native American men, along with a powerful feeling of déjà vu, gripped her. During the two hours they spent talking and slow dancing, she'd been unable to shake the near certainty that they'd met before.

Driven by a powerful physical attraction, she'd soon found herself lying on a hotel bed with the young, drop-dead gorgeous Cherokee hunk buried to the hilt inside her pussy, sexing all her tensions away.

After enjoying multiple orgasms during a long night of hot sex, she'd wakened to find him aroused and as eager to please her as he'd been the night before. Despite the dictates of common sense that warned against dating a male seventeen years younger, they'd become lovers.

While he still satisfied all her sexual needs, an inner voice urged a quick end to their relationship. That voice rarely led her astray.

She sighed. "Seeing him is tempting, but he's too nice a guy for me to jerk his chain."

"It's not jerking his chain if you've been honest with him, and I know you have."

She'd always enjoyed sex, but lately she seemed to crave it with an increasing hunger that left her wondering what was happening to her. "I *have* been honest with him, but I can't tell him we have to stop seeing each other and then call him when I need sex."

"Why not? Men do it all the time."

"Maybe so, but I don't want to risk hurting him."

"He's an adult."

"I know, Lyss, but —"

"Is he in love with you?"

"No. We've both admitted we're in lust with each other with no danger of either of us falling in love."

"Then why can't you call him?"

Despite his being of legal age, their sexual relationship had always felt inappropriate. "I don't know."

"Call him."

She shrugged. "I...maybe I will."

"Do. Now if you're sure you're okay, I'd better get back to rehearsal."

Vantae smiled. "Knock them out."

"We always do," Lysette replied.

Vantae nodded. "I know you do. Listen, I need your opinion on the latest chapter of *Sirens' Tales* before I post it to my blog for feedback."

"Sure. Email it to me and I'll read it over and get back to you ASAP."

"Thanks. Give Annie and Rita my love."

"Will do. Bye, Vantae."

"Bye, Lyss."

Avantae hung up and returned to her computer. Instead of turning it off, she stared at the monitor. Feeling the raw emotions and powerful need between Avantae and Peyton drawing her back into the world of Aireon, Avantae pushed her chair back, her heart racing.

It was time to drive the fictional Peyton out of her thoughts with the help of a real male. As she stood with her hand hovering over the phone, debating the wisdom of calling Cameron, the phone rang. She glanced at the caller I.D and picked up the phone. "Cameron," she said softly. "I was just thinking about you."

"Same here, beautiful," a warm, deep voice responded.

She smiled. Just hearing his voice increased her hunger for physical intimacy while making her feel sexy.

"I need to see you. Do you have any plans this evening?" he asked.

The thought of spending the night struggling to stay grounded held little appeal. Still, continuing to sleep with him didn't feel quite right. But her need for physical satisfaction wouldn't be denied. Despite his age, Cameron had satisfied her as few other lovers had.

It would be so easy to say no, which would allow her to spend the night in his arms. "Yes, I do."

"Damn. Okay. I'll call you in a few days?"

That inner voice urged her again to end their relationship. *Let him down easy, but end it now. Say no.* "Okay."

She sighed as she put down the phone. *Now you get to spend the night alone. Way to go, Avantae.* Or she could go to Discreet and spend a few hours in one of their private rooms. The day stretched before her. She'd decide after lunch.

## Chapter Five

Peyton Grayhawk woke drenched in sweat, his heart racing. As he struggled to recall the details of the nightmare, he became aware of what had awakened him. His clock radio played the haunting strands of *Till*. The sultry female singer called him darling and sang of his being her reason to live and how she would love him 'til tropic suns grew cold or rivers flowed up stream. Each time he heard this particular rendition of the song, he felt as if the singer sang for an audience of one – him.

Peyton took several deep breaths and lost himself in her promise of worshipping him 'til all the seas ran dry. Lured by the addictive tone and quality of her voice, his eyelids drifted down.

Feeling his grip on consciousness fading, Peyton gave himself a firm mental shake. *Get a grip. It's just a song. You'll never meet the singer and she has no power over your happiness – unless you cede it to her. And you're not going to do that.*

Music had always had the power to move and inspire him. Like most of his siblings, he had a strong preference for country music. The CD, entitled *Sirens' Songs*, had sat unopened on his nightstand for two weeks after Cam had given it to him. It was only after Cam asked him what he thought of it that he'd finally listened to the CD one night when his live-in lover, Janet, had been spending the week in Vail skiing with friends.

The moment he heard the first soft, sexy sounds of the lead singer's voice, he'd instantly been drawn into a world of need and lust from which he'd been unable to extricate himself. Within a week of first playing the CD, he'd known his relationship with Janet was in trouble. Three weeks later, she moved out when he refused to propose.

He'd realized a few weeks earlier that falling asleep to the song made him hornier than ever. Unable to conquer what had quickly become a compulsion to listen to the CD at least once every day, he'd compromised by making *Till* his wake-up alarm. So instead of falling asleep horny, he generally woke with a hard-on.

Peyton reached across to his nightstand to turn off the CD. He ignored the momentary panic he always experienced when he silenced the voice that directly engaged his most private and primal needs and emotions.

He turned on the local all-news station. He then lay rubbing his aching cock against his mattress for several moments in frustration before he rolled onto his back and blinked up at his bedroom ceiling. His brows furrowed. Why was his ceiling white?

He glanced around the large, sparsely furnished bedroom. It took several moments before he reluctantly acknowledged that the ceiling had always been white. Why had he expected it to be green?



He slipped out of bed and stalked across the carpet to stare out the window, gazing at the water of the large pool glistening below his second-floor bedroom. A green wonderland stretched nearly a football-field length beyond the pool.

At thirty-eight, he had accomplished most of his goals. He'd proudly served as a Marine, held a third-degree black belt in karate, had a pilot's license and he headed a successful security firm. In addition, he owned a mansion and a rustic-style luxury cabin in the Pocono Mountains. He earned more money than he'd ever imagined possible growing up wearing his older brothers' hand-me-downs.

*You have everything a man in your position could want.* He glanced down at the tent in his briefs. Almost everything. In the cold light of day, with his emotional and sexual hungers unfulfilled, his accomplishments seemed almost meaningless. Watching his older brother Layton fall in love, quickly followed by Peyton's twin Randall meeting his *sheenea*, had heightened the sense of romantic loneliness Peyton had experienced all his adult life.

What was the point of all his material possessions when he woke horny every morning? Far worse than being alone was the disturbing and bittersweet turn his dreams had taken of late. Faint yet painful memories of a faceless woman whose touch and smile brought incredible pleasure and delight ensured his dreams were anything but restful. Once awake, he couldn't quite remember her, nor could he fully forget her or an incessant hunger to reclaim her—regardless of the consequences.

Regardless of the consequences? Damn, he needed to get a grip on himself. He walked into the bathroom. Perhaps a shower would help. But the cool water did little to alleviate his need for sexual release.

The current situation with Cam exacerbated his problems.

Damn. Why the hell did it always have to pour? Maybe he should've tried to maintain his relationship with Janet. With a woman sharing his bed, maybe he wouldn't lose himself in dreams that left him tired, horny and frustrated. After he'd extricated Cam from the mess he was in, life would hopefully return to an even keel.

The woman who replaced Janet would need to understand that neither beauty nor passion alone would entitle her to an offer of marriage. After noting how happy and content Layton and Randall were, he longed to meet a woman who moved him enough to make him lapse into his native tongue when he made love to her.

Janet had lacked that ability, which was another reason he'd ended their relationship when she started hinting that she wanted marriage. Despite her efforts, he'd been unable to fall in love with her.

*How can you love her or any other woman when your heart belongs to the one who haunts your dreams?*

Damn, he needed a way out of the emotional mess he'd found himself in. And he knew just the person to help.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later, he sat in his office watching a wary expression spread across his younger brother Declan's face.

He and Declan were two of the nine siblings who comprised the Grayhawk clan. Like some of Peyton's other brothers, Declan possessed what their deceased mother Malita had called "ancient gifts". In frontier days, Declan might have been called a medicine man or shaman, although most of his talents lay in his incredible ability to help soothe and heal emotional ailments.

Like all the Grayhawk males, Declan was over six feet tall and had dark hair. Peyton watched him run a hand through that hair now. "You want me to what?"

"I want you to help me find a woman," Peyton repeated.

"By woman you mean a lover?"

After the fiasco with Janet and his disturbing dreams, Peyton no longer trusted himself to choose a woman to share his bed. He nodded. "Yes."

"With all due respect, Hawk, none of us has ever needed help landing a woman."

All the Grayhawks, including the youngest, their sister Lelia, had inherited their father Joseph's dark hair, high cheekbones and other physical attributes the opposite sex seemed to find irresistible. Peyton inclined his head in acknowledgment of the truthfulness of Declan's statement, and in appreciation of his use of the term Hawk. In the Grayhawk clan, younger siblings addressed the older male siblings by the affectionate and respectful term.

"I know, and I don't mean I *need* help finding a woman. I meant I need your guidance in finding the *right* woman."

Declan shook his head. "I'm not following you."

"I need your help in assuring I pick the right lover this time." He sat back in his chair. "Janet was a bit of a disaster."

"Why?"

"She's beautiful and she's Cherokee, but..." He shrugged. "Too bad she can't speak Tsalagi."

"To be fair, Hawk, there aren't many people who can speak Tsalagi these days."

Peyton nodded. Declan's statement was part of the reason Peyton almost felt compelled to marry someone who was Cherokee and who spoke the language his mother had feared would one day be lost. "I know. Some people don't know our language even *is* called Tsalagi, but I didn't love Janet and I couldn't see any hope of falling in love with her."

"Janet always impressed me as passionate and wild about you." Declan arched a brow. "But I'm assuming the problem wasn't in your sexual compatibility..." He allowed his voice to trail off.

While the Grayhawks were a close-knit family and the brothers often discussed their sex lives with each other, Peyton had closely guarded a distressing secret for years

from his brothers. Could the intuitive Declan be aware of his secret? Peyton considered him in silence. Declan's dark gaze revealed very little of his thoughts.

"Janet was everything you indicated," Peyton admitted. "But this time I want to keep things impersonal. I want a woman who's emotionally undemanding."

"Oh?"

"I want one who will be there when I have physical needs, but who won't expect me to be at her beck and call. I have little interest in being dragged to parties or the damn opera when I'd just rather be left alone with a beer and my guitar."

Declan remained silent for several moments before he responded. "Isn't that the stance that Randall took with Benai? And isn't he delighted that she helped him see the light?"

Thinking of the passionate dark-skinned woman who had won his twin's heart, Peyton smiled. "Benai is the best thing that's ever happened to Randall."

"But?"

"But Randall and I are in different emotional places."

"In what way?"

He suppressed a scowl. Declan's probing questions could be as unnerving and as unwelcome as their older brother Brandon's inquisitive touch. "Randall's reluctance to fall for Benai was driven by his past hurt and his belief that romantic love was destructive. I don't share that belief. In fact, I'm eager to meet someone I can fall as deeply in love with as both Layton and Randall have."

"Isn't that a bit difficult given that you believe the one woman who completes you lived and died in another lifetime?"

"Difficult? Maybe. Impossible? God, I hope not." He sighed. "While I'm waiting to meet her again, I need some relief."

"Why not resume your relationship with Janet?"

Peyton shook his head. "I can't."

"Why not?"

He narrowed his gaze, recalling the heated words Janet had tossed at him before packing her clothes and storming out of the mansion. "I don't respond well to ultimatums. Besides, even with her, I..."

"Go on," Declan encouraged in the low, persuasive voice that almost compelled compliance.

In college Peyton had developed a reputation as a stud because of his ability to maintain an erection for hours—giving his lovers multiple orgasms. He'd lost count of the number of coeds he'd slept with and pleased. Through his many flings and beyond, one thing had always been missing from his sex life—the ability to ejaculate in a lover's pussy, ass or mouth.

Declan gave him an encouraging smile. "Even with her you...what?"

He grimaced. "Even with her I wasn't inclined to give up my freedom."

Declan sat back against his seat. "So you don't want to discuss the real problem bothering you?"

He arched a brow. "Are you implying I'm lying?"

Declan shook his head. "Of course not, Hawk."

He shrugged. "Besides, Janet was in love with me."

"I'm sure she's not the first woman to have fallen in love with you, Hawk."

"No, but I'm never going to love her. I don't want to use her or hurt her any more than I already have. I don't want to rekindle our relationship. Hell, actually I don't even want a real relationship in terms of the true meaning of the word. I just want someone I find attractive who can fulfill my sexual needs without expecting or wanting me to fall in love with and marry her."

"If you'll forgive my bluntness, Hawk, you sound like you're in the market for a high-class working girl."

He narrowed his gaze. "I don't do prostitutes, Declan."

"I know, but a very high-end one might suit your needs. The women who enter such arrangements are generally very professional. They provide sex without any unreasonable expectations of their partners forming an emotional attachment."

He stared at Declan. "Are you speaking from personal experience?"

Declan shrugged, glancing away. "You pick up tidbits here and there."

"Is that a yes or no?"

Declan met his gaze. "I've never had to pay a woman for her time or attention, Hawk. But we're discussing you."

He shook his head. "I'm not interested in a woman I have to share with other men. I don't want an emotional commitment or attachment, but I demand sexual fidelity."

"And just where are you going to find such a woman?"

"I have no idea." He smiled suddenly. "That's why we're having this conversation, Declan."

"You know I'd bend over backward for you, Hawk."

"But?"

"But such a request is out of my league. I'm not —"

Peyton held up a hand. "If I didn't need your assistance, I wouldn't ask."

Declan raked a hand through his hair. "I'm not sure what you want from me, Hawk. Do you want me to introduce you to some of the women I know? Or do you just want to tell me what's really bothering you and we can discuss that?"

Peyton sighed. Should he admit that the moment he'd heard the Sirens' lead vocalist singing *Till*, his relationship with Janet had been doomed? Although he'd so far resisted the temptation to discover anything about the singer's marital status or

biography, he felt as if he'd been bewitched by a woman he'd never seen as forcefully as his dream lover had bewitched him.

"My main problem is that I'm horny as hell."

"Are you looking for another fair Cherokee maiden?" Declan grinned. "One who speaks Tsalagi?"

"Do you know one?"

Declan shook his head, smiling. "Unlike Randall, I'm a selfish bastard. If I knew such a woman, I'd probably marry her myself."

Peyton laughed. "Who could blame you?" He sobered. "But we both know you're not selfish. If you were, you'd be in a more financially rewarding field."

Declan sighed. "Sometimes I wish I were, Hawk."

The admission surprised Peyton. As teenagers, he and his four older brothers had vowed to study and work hard so that their four younger siblings wouldn't have to share their struggles. As they each achieved financial success, they had pooled money and invested it for the benefit of the family.

In particular, they had been concerned that Declan and Lelia be free of financial worry so they could enter fields that allowed them to help others. Now he worried they had somehow pressured Declan into a career he might not enjoy.

He sat forward in his chair, frowning. "Declan? You no longer enjoy what you do?"

During the ensuing silence, Declan stared directly into his eyes.

He felt Declan gently probing his thoughts. Knowing Declan wouldn't attempt to delve too deeply, Peyton made no effort to rebuff his younger brother. While Brandon needed physical contact to explore another's thoughts, Declan could often do it with his gaze alone.

After a long moment, Declan briefly looked away, breaking the contact. He shook his head. "Don't misunderstand, Hawk. I still need and enjoy what I do. I just sometimes wish I had the financial means to make a meaningful contribution to the family's financial success."

Peyton sighed in relief. "Everyone contributes to our success as a family. Some of us contribute monetary means. Others, like you and Lelia, contribute something even more vital and necessary than money. You both help keep us grounded and mentally centered." He reached across his desk to clasp Declan's hand. "Remember that we survived as a family when we were so poor we barely had enough to eat, because of Mother's strength, vision and love. We could be happy without our combined financial success, but not without the abilities and qualities you and Lelia provide that keep us together as a family."

"Don't ever feel as if your contribution is any less important. We all know Randall contributes more to the family fund than the rest of us because he's more financially successful. Nevertheless, I'm sure you must know how much he values the contributions you and Lelia make to our family's success."

"Thanks, Hawk." Declan smiled. "Sometimes I get a little maudlin and need a little pep talk."

"Anytime." Peyton released his hand.

Declan ran a hand through his hair. "So what age range are you interested in?"

Although Peyton had no idea what his dream woman looked like, he felt certain she had dark skin and generous curves. Sometimes he feared he'd never meet the woman whose vague image haunted him. Given that depressing certainty, he'd have to settle. "I'll leave all that up to you. I want a woman who can deal with what I want without expecting love and marriage."

"I'm not a matchmaker, Hawk, but —"

"I know that, Declan, but you have...you know what you have. I'm not expecting you to go out to bars or high-class clubs. I just want your opinion when I do meet someone else."

"I'll gladly give that, Hawk, but maybe we should get others involved," Declan said.

"Others as in who?"

"The Stoners always seem to surround themselves with far more women than any three men need."

Peyton heard the barely concealed disapproval in Declan's voice. Peyton's friendship with Sin-Bad Stoner had always seemed to surprise his brothers. Layton had once said all three Stoner brothers projected an air of menace and ill will so strong, he wouldn't want to meet any of them on a crowded sidewalk in broad daylight.

Peyton himself had never fully understood the basis for the uneasy friendship between himself and Sin-Bad Stoner. During the years they'd known each other, Peyton had often found Sin-Bad staring at him with a puzzled look in his eyes. At those times, he suspected Sin-Bad was as perplexed by their friendship as Peyton was, since they had very little in common.

He shrugged. "Things have changed. Sin-Bad's fallen hard."

"For someone he met at that sleazy club he and his brothers hang out in?"

Peyton shrugged. "I believe he did meet Chandra at Foreplay," he said. "But I've met her. There's nothing sleazy about her. She's a no-nonsense detective."

"She doesn't mind sharing him with all his other women?"

"I doubt she's the type to be satisfied with sharing him."

Declan arched a brow. "She must be quite a woman."

"She's apparently woman enough to tame Sin-Bad somewhat. I've never seen him so content. Hell, they're engaged." Peyton struggled to conquer a brief streak of jealousy. While he was happy for Randall, Layton and Sin-Bad, their happiness heightened his own emotional loneliness. There were always women willing to ease his physical hunger, but he'd never met one capable of doing the same for his emotional one.

Declan rose and walked around the desk to place his hand on Peyton's shoulder. "It will happen for you too, Hawk."

Aware that Declan had correctly interpreted his fear, Peyton looked up at him. "How do you know that?"

Declan shrugged. "I don't know how I know. I just know you're not going to spend your life without love."

The words reassured him. Declan was right more often than not. So, just maybe lightning would strike twice and he might fall in love and actually experience a vaginally induced orgasm. He arched a brow and grinned up at Declan. "I don't suppose you can clue me in on her name and when this will happen?"

"Her name?"

"Yes. So I'll know her when we meet."

Declan laughed, squeezed his shoulder and returned to his seat. "That's beyond my abilities, but I have a feeling that, just like Layton and Randall, you'll know when you meet her."

Randall had fallen for Benai the moment their gazes locked. He had then spent months trying to deny his attraction. Peyton gave an exaggerated sigh. "I was afraid you'd say that."

Declan smiled. "Just promise me that when you do meet her, you'll keep an open mind and don't go scaring her away by telling her you don't believe in marriage."

Peyton and his siblings had watched their father's infidelity destroy their mother's happiness and peace of mind. Joseph Grayhawk's endless affairs had sent their mother to an early grave. "It'll be a cold day in August before I trust my heart to another woman who doesn't snatch my breath away and keep me breathless."

Declan frowned. "Another woman? Who was the first woman you entrusted your heart to, Hawk?"

Realizing what he'd said, Peyton blinked. He'd never been in love—at least not in his current life. He shook his head. "I'm too horny to know what I'm saying. I don't plan to willingly give my heart away. If some woman wants it, she'll have to win it."

"Fair enough."

"Now let's talk about something more pleasant."

Declan nodded. "Okay. How's Cam?"

During the last ten years, his siblings had embraced and welcomed Cam into the family. They'd agreed to use family fund money for Cam's college tuition so that he could concentrate on excelling academically without any financial worries.

Cam had repaid them by accepting their family traditions. He also called them all Hawk—even Lelia, who was three years his senior.

"Hawk?"

Peyton blinked and brought his attention back to Declan. "I think Cam's in over his head. It's time I liberated him from this woman who's ensnared him."

Declan sat forward. "I know you're protective of him, Hawk. We all are, but he *is* an adult."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning adults sometimes need to learn life's lessons by making mistakes. I think you should tread very carefully before you decide to interfere with his relationship."

"Why? It's just sex and I've invested too much time and energy in him to allow some conniving older woman to entangle him in her web."

"Why are you so sure their relationship isn't based on more than just sex?"

"Why else would he be interested in a woman so much older?"

Declan shrugged. "Some men like full-figured women. Some like women with dark skin and lush curves. Others prefer older, more mature women of any color."

"Are you speaking of anyone in particular, Declan? Like yourself?"

Declan responded after a brief pause. "I'm speaking in general, Hawk."

"Really? I think Cam likes that she's an easy lay."

Declan shook his head, his gaze narrowing. "Women have a right to explore and enjoy their sexuality as freely as men do without having uncomplimentary names applied to them, Hawk."

Peyton stared at him.

Declan gave him an unblinking stare in return.

After several moments, Peyton sighed and nodded. "Put in my place and rightly so. I had no right to call her names."

"Have you ever met her?"

"No."

"Then why do you have such strong negative feelings about her?"

"Cam told me it was just sex."

"We all know Cam shares our reverence for Layton, but he thinks *you* practically walk on water."

"What's your point?"

Declan shrugged. "I'm not sure. I just think you should tread lightly. I have a feeling that things could get very complicated and messy—as they were between Randall and Bancroft."

He frowned. All eight Grayhawk brothers had managed to remain close by not vying for the attention of the same woman. Once one brother expressed an interest in a woman, she was immediately off limits to the others. That family code had worked well for them—until Randall fell for Benai *after* Bancroft had staked a verbal claim.



The entire family had suffered months of uncertainty and strain before Bancroft admitted Benai was Randall's *sheenea*, or perfect mate. Unfortunately, the admission had only come after a physical altercation between Randall and Bancroft that had nearly resulted in all the brothers taking sides against each other.

Peyton shook his head. "There's no comparison here, Declan. Although I couldn't love Cam any more if he actually were our little brother, there's no actual blood tie between us. And he and I aren't likely to vie for the attention of the same woman."

"How can you be so sure?"

Peyton narrowed his gaze. "For one thing, I'm too damn old to have any interest in a woman who has a twenty-two-year-old lover."

"Cam told me she was thirty-nine, Hawk. That makes her less than two years older than you."

"Thanks for the reminder, Declan, but I'm not so old that I've forgotten my age." He frowned. "Have you had a vision?"

"No. I just feel that he might not have been as honest with you about his feelings as he should have been."

"Why would he lie to me?"

"I wouldn't call it lying exactly, but he looks up to you and he knows you don't approve of his relationship with her. So he tells you what you want to hear."

"I'll bear that in mind."

"But you're going to go ahead with your plan to end his relationship?"

Peyton wasn't sure why he felt driven to do all he could to end Cam's relationship with a woman he'd never met. Such an admission would surely result in another probing from Declan he wasn't in the mood for. He nodded curtly. "Yes. He's too damn young to get caught up in a relationship with someone so much older."

"He seems happy, Hawk."

"Why wouldn't he be when he's apparently found a woman who's as horny as he is? But that's just lust. Not love or affection."

Declan looked at him.

Peyton tightened his lips. Declan had the ability to invade his thoughts without breaking a sweat. Peyton shook his head. "Don't."

Declan immediately complied. "As you wish, but I hope you're not planning to seduce her."

"I'm going to do whatever's necessary to rescue Cam."

"Have you discussed this with Sin-Bad?"

Peyton frowned. "No. Why would I?"

Declan shrugged. "I don't know. I just think it might be wise."

"Why?"

"Well, he's the one who suggested you become a big brother, even though he and his brothers aren't. And isn't he the one who encouraged you to pick Cam?"

"Yes, but —"

"And I have a feeling he's mixed up in this somehow."

"Mixed up in what? Are you suggesting he has something to do with Cam's relationship with this woman?"

Declan sighed. "I don't honestly know what I'm suggesting. Sin-Bad knew Dad."

"And? How is his having known Dad relevant to this discussion?"

"I have no idea." Declan shrugged. "It's just a feeling."

"And you know we all respect your feelings, Declan, but Sin-Bad has never shown any particular interest in Cam. I can't imagine him wanting to discuss Cam's problems."

"Does Cam really have a problem, Hawk? Are you sure it wouldn't be better to allow this relationship to run out of steam on its own?"

"I'm sure I'm not going to let him make a mess of his life."

"I don't think trying to seduce her is the way to go."

He was getting pissed. "I'll bear that in mind too."

Declan glanced at his watch and rose. "I'm meeting Lelia for brunch. I'd better go."

Peyton smiled. "Give her my love."

"I will." Declan placed a hand on his shoulder. "Be careful."

"Of what?"

"I have no damn idea. I just feel you should be careful and think twice before you do anything you'll regret. In the meantime, maybe unwind by spending a few hours at Discreet. It's an upscale club on the waterfront at Penn's Landing. There's a three-hundred-dollar cover charge for men."

"Three hundred? They think a lot of themselves."

"That they do. Women pay half that. They have obscenely priced drinks to go with the cover charge. The clientele is affluent and known for being... uninhibited. They have private rooms for clients who want to rendezvous with each other while staying in a relatively safe environment. It makes it easier for clients who want to play without any commitment or fear of being recognized on the street or at a time and place when such recognition might be inconvenient. They have theme weeks—this is masquerade week. Why not grab a mask and head down there sometime this week?"

"You know an awful lot about this club. Is it a favorite of yours?"

"A favorite? No, but I have been there. Why don't you try it?"

Peyton shook his head. "Not my style."

"You might meet someone who will help you pass a few hours or even a night. If you do, fine. If you don't, you're only out a few hours and a few hundred dollars. Think about it."

He shrugged. "Maybe I will."

"Good." Declan squeezed his shoulder and left.

Alone in his office, Peyton allowed his thoughts to wander.

On Peyton's twenty-seventh birthday, Sin-Bad had suggested he become a big brother and mentor to a young Cherokee boy Sin-Bad had represented pro bono after he'd been caught stealing from a department store. Peyton had at first declined since he'd been in the Marines at the time. Sin-Bad had persisted and Peyton had reluctantly agreed to meet with Cam.

The moment he set eyes on Cam, Peyton had felt an affinity for him. Although Cam had initially kept his emotional distance, Peyton had gradually won his trust. Sin-Bad had been instrumental in overcoming all obstacles Peyton's military service presented to his becoming Cam's big brother.

The entire Grayhawk clan had embraced Cam. When Peyton was out of the country, his brothers took turns ensuring Cam stayed away from gangs and studied hard. Five years later, when Cam's mother died in a car crash, Peyton moved the college-bound teen in with him.

When Cam graduated three years later with honors, Peyton had rewarded him with a five-year lease at the Fairmount condo, where he currently lived. After spending ten years of his life watching over Cam, Peyton was determined to do his best to ensure Cam didn't make a mistake he might spend years regretting.

Peyton leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes. He'd been so engrossed with getting Randall to admit his feelings for Benai that he'd allowed Cam to fall into the clutches of an older woman. Despite Declan's warning, Peyton felt he had to act. What did a twenty-two-year-old male know about relationships worth pursuing when the object of his lust was closer to forty than she was to thirty, and was clearly using sex to keep him attached to her?

He'd do whatever was necessary to prove to Cam that the object of his lust wasn't worthy of more than a few one-night stands. Since Cam had already gone beyond that point, it was time to take drastic action.

But first he needed to relieve some of his sexual stress. Declan wouldn't have recommended this Club Discreet unless he was certain it lived up to its name.

## Chapter Six

Peyton stood in the entrance of the main room of Club Discreet. The words of an oldie—about a big, bad wolf noticing how good Red Riding Hood looked—filled the air. He glanced around and immediately noticed a tall, generously curved woman standing at the bar. An adoring male stood on either side of her.

Although he had decided against a full costume, his last-minute decision to purchase a wolf mask that concealed most of his face seemed almost prophetic.

She was dressed as a very provocative Red Riding Hood. The v-neck of the bodice provided an intriguing glimpse of her large breasts. The skirt of the dress kissed a very round ass before ending several inches above her knees. Sheer hose and black high heels showcased her long, shapely legs.

A red hood trimmed with black fur hung on her shoulders. A red mask covered half of the smooth, dark skin of her face. But she projected the air of a woman confident of her attraction to the opposite sex.

Peyton stood staring at her, unable to look away.

As if aware of his interest, she turned her head.

He found himself gazing into a pair of beautiful, dark eyes.

Her full lips immediately curved upward into a smile so warm and welcoming, he suddenly felt as if they were alone in a world made for two devoted lovers.

For a moment he expected her to rush across the room to fling herself into his arms so he could hold her and kiss her until they were both breathless with need. Then he would quickly peel off her clothes and make love to her all night long. He wasn't sure how he knew but he felt certain, once in her arms, he'd come inside a woman for the first time.

Filled with a sense of excitement and unbridled joy he'd never experienced with any other woman, he quickly crossed the room toward the bar. He stopped in front of her. As if in sympathy, the opening strains of *Till* by the Sirens filled the air.

Ignoring the frowns of the men standing with her—one dressed in an all-black outfit with a dark mask and the other dressed in white with a white mask—Peyton overcame an inexplicable urge to bow to her and extended his hand. "I believe this is our dance, Red," he said.

"What the hell—" the man on her left began.

"Get lost," the male on her right said.

She cast a quick smile at each indignant male before turning a slow, warm smile on Peyton. She silently gave him her hand.

He linked his fingers through hers. A surge sizzled through him.

They stood gazing into each other's eyes for long moments before he led her to the dance floor.

When he stopped and turned to face her, she moved close, slipping her arms around his waist.

He drew her closer, closing his eyes as he savored the feel of her soft curves pressed against his body. *At last. I have you back at last.*

They slow danced in silence. Listening to the singer's sultry voice made it more difficult for Peyton to keep his hands from straying down her back to her round ass. The urge to lift her chin and smother her lips with greedy kisses was even more difficult to suppress.

Even though he had arrived expecting to get laid and he assumed she had arrived with a similar expectation, he was reluctant to treat her like an easy lay.

Instead of groping her like a big, bad wolf determined to spend the night fucking, he thought in terms of romancing her, asking her out and making love only after they'd gotten to know each other.

The sooner they did that, the sooner they'd end up in each other's arms again.

Again? They'd never met. And yet he'd experienced a powerful feeling of déjà vu the moment he saw her. *At last. I have you back at last.* "What's your name, Red?"

She turned her head, brushing her lips against his ear. "I'm wearing a mask for a reason, and so are you." She spoke in a soft, sultry voice that heightened his awareness of her.

He lifted his head so he could look down into her gray eyes. "I'll remove mine," he offered.

She raised her right hand from his waist to place it on his chest. "That's a tempting offer, but I think I like you as a sexy silver wolf." She touched his cheek. "Although I have a feeling a hawk mask might have been more appropriate for you."

Peyton inhaled quickly. "A hawk mask?"

She nodded.

"Have we met?"

Her head dipped slightly and she appeared to be on the verge of nodding. She seemed to catch herself and finally responded after a noticeable hesitation. "I'm five-ten." You must be at least...?"

"I'm six-six."

She treated him to a sexy, beguiling smile. "If I'd met a handsome Native American male with beautiful blue-green eyes who was also tall enough for me to wear heels without fear of looking down on him, I would have remembered."

How did she know his ancestry when his mask covered the majority of his face? "Now that we *have* met, I'd like to get to know you. My name is —"

She pressed her fingers against his lips. "Things are kind of crazy in my life at the moment. I don't want any... I want to be free to enjoy the night without any complications. Let's remain nameless and keep our masks on."

He felt as if the air had been sucked out of his lungs. How could she not feel the powerful attraction he felt for her? How could she not want to know everything about him?

The urge to try to persuade her to change her mind proved difficult to suppress. But damn if he'd swallow his pride and make a fool of himself over a woman who not only didn't want to tell him her name, but didn't want to know his.

The music ended. Feeling as if he were ripping out his own heart, he allowed his arms to fall away from her and stepped back. "Thanks for the dance, Red." He flashed a cool smile in her direction and turned away.

She stepped in front of him, placing a hand on his chest. "Wait a minute."

"Why?"

"Just because I want to retain a measure of anonymity doesn't mean I'm prepared to allow you to rush away to spend the night with some other lucky woman."

He swallowed hard, struggling to conceal disappointment that she only wanted a one-night stand, which he suspected would mean nothing to her while being far too important to him. "What do you want?"

She leaned close enough to be able to brush her lips against his ear. "Buy me a drink and we can discuss it in a private room."

Despite his hunger for sexual intimacy, he reluctantly decided against sleeping with her. He wasn't going to make the mistake of falling for a woman whose sole interest in him was sexual. "That's a tempting offer, but I'm afraid I'll have to pass."

She seemed surprised. Clearly, she wasn't any more used to having men turn down her invitations than he was having women turn down his. "Why?"

He shrugged. "I'm feeling a little needy tonight. Sex alone, no matter how good, isn't going to be enough for me," he admitted.

"That's all I have to offer tonight."

"Then good luck with one of these other men. Good night," he said and turned away.

She followed him, catching his hand. "Wait a minute, Hawk."

Unnerved by her use of that name, and filled with a combination of anger and disappointment at how shallow she was, he stopped and removed his hand from hers. He gave her a wary look. "I'm not interested in a one-night stand with you. I don't know how much plainer I can make myself."

She sucked in a breath and stepped back. "I think that's plain enough."

They stood staring at each other in silence for several moments before she spoke again. "Although I could probably change your mind if I were so inclined," she told him.

She was probably right but hell would ice over before he admitted it. "I wouldn't count on that if I were you, Red." He turned and walked quickly away.

"Hawk!"

If she touched him again, he'd swallow his pride and end up in bed with her. That wouldn't be so bad if he didn't suspect there was a very thin line between becoming addicted to sex with her and falling for her. He wasn't about to fall for a woman whose sexual interests included anonymous sex with men she had no desire to get to know. He kept walking.

\* \* \* \* \*

Avantae fought back a feeling of panic as the man in the sexy silver wolf mask walked away from her. She longed to run after him and...and what? Beg him to stay with her? Oh, hell no! She'd never had to beg a man to spend the night with her. She wasn't going to start with him. If he didn't want her, she knew another tall, handsome Native American male who would be happy to spend the night with her.

She turned and, ignoring the advances of several men, walked to the ladies' room. In the private stall, she removed her mask. A hint of color stained her cheeks and panic seized her.

*Go after him. Now. Before he disappears from your life again forever. Go after him.*

Although uncertain of the origins of the voice or why she should care if she never saw the stranger again, some inner feeling compelled her to obey. Leaving her mask, she ran from the ladies' room and down the hall to the main exit. Once in the parking lot, she spotted a dark luxury sedan leaving. She knew Hawk—her Hawk—was inside. She glanced around. By the time the valet bought her car, he'd be long gone.

Avantae sucked in a gulping breath, feeling as if she'd allowed her dream man to walk out of her life. Nearly overwhelmed with despair, she reached into her tiny evening bag to get her cell phone. When she heard the warm male voice on the other end, some of her despair vanished. "I need to see you," she told him. "Are you free?"

\* \* \* \* \*

After leaving Club Discreet, Peyton longed to go talk to Randall or Layton. But Randall was newly married and Layton was a new father of twins. It hardly seemed fair to burden either brother with his problems at a time when they should be strengthening their bonds with their *sheeneas*.

He briefly considered going to see Declan, but was in no mood for a lecture or another warning not to interfere with Cam's relationship. His older brothers Brandon and Bancroft would provide listening ears, but they each had their own issues to deal with. There was no question of his troubling his younger siblings, Jordan, Dalton and Lelia, with his problems.

Sin-Bad was the only other person he felt close enough to confide in. But like Layton and Randall, Sin-Bad was involved in a serious but relatively new relationship and Peyton was reluctant to intrude with a problem he was sure Sin-Bad would consider minor.

He went home, took a cold shower, undressed and spent an hour lying sleepless, convinced that walking away from her had been the biggest mistake of his life. What the hell had possessed him? What insanity had led him to think leaving her was his only option? Women capable of moving him as she had were rare. If she wanted sex, why the hell hadn't he given her sex?

If he had, there would have been the possibility of making her want more later. Now he had nothing but blue balls and the certainty that he had blown it big-time—unless he went back.

He jumped out of bed, dismissing the possibility that he might find her with someone else. Any man who stood between them had better get out of the way or have his ass kicked all over the city.

Once dressed, he rejected the idea of wearing the mask again. This time he would make it plain to her that he had no interest in concealing his identity. If she refused to remove her mask, he'd just have to convince her he was worth getting to know.

Two hours later, he sat in his car in the club's parking lot, deciding his next move. After having bribed the bartender, he knew little other than the fact that she had left the club alone not long after his departure. The bartender had refused to divulge her name or how often she frequented the club.

That meant he'd need to make Club Discreet a regular haunt until he encountered her again. He glanced at his watch. In the meantime, he'd better give Cam's problem his full attention.

He called Cam and got the special ring that indicated Cam was "busy." Peyton frowned. Cam was probably with his older woman. It was time to send her packing and in search of a man her own age.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lost in the sweet delight of feeling his cock ejaculate deep within the hot, tight, silken walls of his sovereign's body, Peyton was unaware they were about to be discovered until Avantae suddenly attempted to shove him off her.

Then Locoata sent a low warning hum along their psychic bond.

He pulled out of Avantae, rolled to his side and bounded to his feet. While he rushed across his chamber to pull on clothes, Mariah and Locoata flew toward the room's hidden panel. When it opened, both blades soared down the hall in battle mode.

Avantae raised her right hand. Her mesh armor lifted from the floor and wrapped around her body until she was clothed. She tilted her head, staring into the distance for several moments before she relaxed.



"Mariah says it's Leonita."

He sighed. "She's going to have my head."

Avantae shook her head. "I'll go explain."

He touched her arm. "How are you going to explain being alone in here with me instead of being in your chambers?"

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Leave it to me."

"I'm the one who's supposed to protect you."

She smiled. "And you do."

"I can't let you go alone."

"Trust me. I have to go alone. If she sees us together... I can handle her. I'll go explain and come back when I can."

"Sover —"

"I can handle her but only if I go alone. Trust me?"

He nodded.

She pressed a quick, warm kiss against his mouth before she left his chambers.

He showered, redressed and then paced his chambers impatiently until it became clear she wouldn't return.

As he was about to go to her chambers, Mariah arrived. She moved to hover near his temple. He closed his eyes, allowing her access to his thoughts.

*I've convinced Leonita that my visit to you was the result of boredom but she won't allow me out of her sight for the rest of the evening. She'll expect to see you in the garden for your normal patrol soon. I'll look forward to seeing you again in the morning when she leaves to meet with my parents. But we'll have to refrain from making love for a few days. Cocamora.*

Cocamora. *I love you.*

He opened his eyes.

Mariah remained near his temple.

"Tell her I said *cocamora zomar*." *I love you now and always.*

Mariah made a graceful sweep in the air before heading toward the exit.

\* \* \* \* \*

Peyton bolted up in bed with the remnants of the dream lingering in his memory. *Cocamora Zomar*. He shouldn't have, but he knew the meaning of the strange words. *I love you now and always*. He'd only ever meant those words with one woman. A woman he'd loved and lost but never forgotten. A woman his heart told him he was destined to meet again. When he did, he would be ruthless. God help anyone who tried to come between them.

## Chapter Seven

Avantae woke to the feel of a pair of warm lips caressing hers. Without opening her eyes, she smiled and turned from her side onto her back. A big hand slid down over her stomach, coming to rest between her legs. After the briefest of hesitations, the fingers sought out her wet folds.

Delicious eddies danced over her skin at the contact. Nice. Very nice. She parted her lips.

The tip of a tongue traced the outline of her mouth. "Wake up, beautiful."

She opened her eyes and blinked sleepily at the handsome face of the man stretched out on the bed beside her. His dark, almost blue-black hair was mussed, as if he'd just awakened, but his blue-green eyes were alert. He wore his running outfit, a tee shirt and a pair of shorts.

For a moment, she stared up at him, wishing his smiling face belonged to the stranger from Discreet. She had a feeling when Cam was older, he would be just as stunning and hard to forget as she feared the man she thought of as Hawk would be.

"Hey. Where are you? Who are you thinking about?"

Vantae blinked and stroked her fingers over Cam's handsome face. "And just why are you waking me?"

He grinned and reached out to pinch first one and then her other nipple as his nostrils flared. "The air is filled with the aroma of wet, warm pussy. I need some to help fuel my morning run." He leisurely pumped a finger in and out of her.

She shivered. "If you don't remove your hand, you're going to be pulling back a stump where your fingers used to be," she teased.

Undaunted and still grinning, he slipped a second finger inside her. "Another fuck with you would be worth the loss of a few fingers."

How could any woman resist a male capable of making her believe he really meant that? "Oh, Cam, you almost tempt me, but we really can't."

"Don't be cruel, sweet. We both know a pussy this hot, tight and wet is in need of a good, hard, deep fuck. In the words of that old song you often sing in the shower, a little sex in the morning beats a cup of coffee."

For her, good sex beat coffee every damn day of the week. Sex with Cam had always been good. Nevertheless, with her thoughts returning to Hawk, she resisted the urge to link her arms around his neck. "I know, Cam, but —"

"No buts, sweet." Cam made resistance more difficult when he ground his cock against her thigh.

Her stomach muscles clenched.

He brushed his lips against her ear. "Let's fuck, sweet. Just once more."

She longed to part her legs and hold the folds of her pussy apart in a clear invitation for him to fuck her hard and deep. Despite her sexual appetite, she wasn't an easy lay. Cam was the only male who'd managed to sweet-talk her into bed the same night they met.

If only she'd seized the opportunity to make the stranger from Discreet the second male she'd slept with the night they met. But in spite of her despair the night before, she was sure they were fated to meet again. When they did, she'd make the most of the meeting.

Cam's warm lips brushing against hers drove thoughts of the other male out of her head. She'd rarely been able to say no to him, which had been fine until she detected a hint of something more than lust on his part. The passionate depth of his lovemaking the previous night had reinforced her decision to end their relationship while they could both walk away with their hearts intact.

He dragged his tongue along her ear. "Let's finish what we started last night."

Moments after her arrival the previous night, they'd been naked and locked in each other's arms. Almost as if he feared they were spending their last night together, he'd repeatedly thrust deep into her, making her moan with delight. Their third fuck had been so intense and utterly delicious, they'd both become reckless and greedy for more pleasure. Mid-way through, he suddenly withdrew his cock, tore off his condom, tossed it away and then plunged his bare shaft deep in her pussy.

Instead of protesting, she'd wrapped her legs and arms around him. Then she'd sucked his tongue into her mouth and tightened her vaginal muscles around his long, hard cock. The utter delight of having a bare cock inside her for the first time in years sent her into a wild frenzy.

But only for a short period of time. Just before the point where the wonderful sensations spreading out from her stuffed pussy nearly overwhelmed her, she pushed against his shoulders. "Cameron!"

He lifted his head. "Yes?"

Would allowing him to come inside her be such a bad thing? What were the chances of her becoming pregnant when she'd never had so much as even a scare? And at thirty-nine, her window of opportunity for a safe pregnancy was rapidly closing. This might be her last chance to get pregnant.

She wanted to allow him to stay inside her...but an inner voice urged her to protest. She pushed against his shoulders again. "Don't come in me...pull out...now..."

"Vantae—"

She shook her head. "I'm serious. Pull out now, Cameron!"

He groaned and reluctantly withdrew from her.

She lay shivering with desire until he slipped on another condom, joined her on the bed and pushed back inside her.

"Oh...yes," she moaned and held him close as he'd fucked her with a ruthless hunger that triggered one of the most intense climaxes of her life.

Sobbing with pleasure, she dug her nails in his ass and, pressing her hips against his, tightened her vaginal muscles in an attempt to squeeze the last drop of cum from his hot, sweet cock.

Moments later, he collapsed on top of her, moaning her name.

Recalling that last, reckless fuck, her cheeks burned. Even after that incredible orgasm, her hunger for sex continued to consume her. She'd always had a strong sex drive, which her adoptive parents had been progressive enough to urge her to satisfy – as long as she chose her lovers carefully and guarded against STDs and unwanted pregnancies.

She'd done both and had never had any sexually transmitted diseases. Having unprotected sex with Cam for even a few moments had been sheer insanity.

Despite the great sex between them and her desire to marry and have a family, she was not going to get too serious about a man seventeen years her junior. Nevertheless, her need for sex had increased at an alarming rate. If she didn't soon find someone closer to her own age to sate her hunger, she feared she'd find herself prowling Club Discreet until she met her silver wolf...her Hawk...again.

While the thought of falling to those depths shook her, she didn't want to risk hurting Cameron by continuing their relationship. Besides, she needed to be free of all romantic entanglements when she met Mr. Tall, Dark and Stunning again.

"Come back to me, beautiful."

She wiggled her hips in an unsuccessful attempt to dislodge his fingers from her pussy. It took an effort to speak without moaning. "We agreed we make better friends than we do lovers, Cam."

He rubbed her clit. "Yes, we did, but you have to admit we make great lovers. That last fuck was –"

"Reckless and crazy."

"It was the most incredible fuck I've ever had." He lifted his head to stare down at her. "And I've had more fucks than I can remember."

As had she. Not that she was about to admit it.

He thrust his fingers deep inside her. "I need you," he whispered.

Unable to vanquish the memory of the sweet heat they'd shared the night before, she slipped her fingers in his hair, kissing his lips. "Last night was too sweet for words, Cam." But she had to end their relationship.

"Admit it, sweet. You need cock."

"I do," she admitted.

"You need cock. I need pussy. The solution is simple. Let's fuck."

Unable to deny the ache throbbing deep in her pussy, she slowly parted her legs.

"That's it, Vantae," he murmured against her neck. "Open those long, lovely legs of yours and I'll fuck you hard until you come."

Sleeping with him again was not a good idea. She should push him off her and roll away. Instead, she thumped herself against his fingers. "Fuck me," she whispered.

"Hard and deep—just the way you like it, sweet."

She closed her eyes in anticipation of the delights to come.

He continued to caress her until she was wet and needy.

With her eyes closed, her doubts returned. An inner voice whispered to her. *Stop him. Stop him.* Fighting to ignore the desire tightening her stomach muscles, she pressed her hands against his shoulders. "We both needed and wanted last night, but now it's time to be friends, Cam."

"Friends hell! I need and want you, and I know you want me."

She attempted to steel herself to resist her own desire. "Go for your run." She pushed against his shoulders again.

He stared down at her. "Come on, sweet. Just once more."

"I've given you my answer, Cam."

He groaned and rolled off her. "I hate it when you do that."

"You hate it when I do what?"

"Use that you-must-obey-me voice of yours that is nearly impossible to resist."

She turned onto her stomach and pressed her cheek against the pillow, closing her eyes. "Then go on your run."

"I plan to—after I get some pussy," he told her. He caressed her bare ass cheeks.

Damn him. He knew how much she loved having her ass touched. She bit her lip to silence a moan, but couldn't control the shudder that danced down her spine.

Apparently encouraged, he stroked a finger down her crack. Easing her legs apart, he rubbed his finger against her asshole.

She sucked in a breath.

"Ahhh. Now that I've got your attention, let's have another fuck." He paused for several moments.

She remained still, her pussy filling with moisture.

Correctly interpreting her silence for surrender, he slipped between her legs. His big body pressed hers against the bed. His lips closed briefly over her earlobe. "Let's start the morning off right. Let me love you, sweet."

The length of his hard cock pulsed against her. She shook with need. Her desire to resist vanished. After one last fuck, she'd end their sexual relationship. For now, she had to have him.

She made a small, helpless sound.

"What's that, sweet? You want some cock?"

She clutched his ass and ground herself against his groin.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"Condom," she gasped.

"Do we have to?"

She only hoped she wouldn't live to regret last night's brief moments of unprotected sex. "Hell yes!"

"Fine." He rolled off her and rose.

Feeling hot and hungry for him, she sat up to watch him undress.

He did it quickly and dragged on a condom before he stood over the bed to stare down at her.

He was just over six feet, with lean hips and a pleasingly hard cock. She'd been physically attracted to him from the moment she saw him. Although she'd had lovers with larger cocks, Avantae loved his satisfying girth that stretched her pussy. His lust for her and his determination to ensure she always came before he rolled away had kept her eagerly parting her legs for him.

He rarely needed much time to recharge his battery before he was hard and ready for another round of scorching-hot sex. Perhaps that's what had made younger lovers so attractive for her during the last eight years or so. Her sexual hunger necessitated a lover with a slow hand capable of making love more than once a night. Cameron could go for hours – giving her multiple orgasms each night they spent together.

"You are a beautiful woman," he whispered, sounding as awed as he had the first night they'd met.

"And you're a handsome man." She lay on her back and smiled up at him. "Now bring your handsome ass and hard cock over here."

"Gladly." He joined her on the bed. He pressed against her side and turned her face toward his. "Look at me."

Gazing into his eyes, she saw the unshakable resolve to please her. He was prepared to caress and kiss her until she signaled her readiness for sex by parting her thighs.

"I'm already wet and ready." She parted her legs.

He crawled between her thighs and brought his cock to rest against her entrance.

She glanced down their bodies. The sight of his shaft so close to her pussy sent a surge of hunger through her. "Take me...fuck me," she whispered.

"Oh yeah." He leaned close and shot his hips forward.

She closed her eyes on a soft sigh of pleasure.

When he was fully seated inside her, she wrapped her arms and legs around him. She closed her eyes and imagined she had *him* locked between her legs. She imagined *he* was about to fuck her.

Cam ground his hips against hers and shuddered. "Oh...sweet, you have the best pussy in the world."

A jolt of shame filled her at the near reverence in Cam's voice. He deserved better than to have her pretend he was another man.

She tightened her vaginal muscles around him to encourage him to stop talking and start fucking.

Groaning, he took the hint. Thrusting slowly in and out of her, he pressed his mouth to hers, sending his tongue stroking between her parted lips.

Surrendering to her desire, she rocked her hips against his. "Fuck me hard and deep, Cam," she instructed.

He shortened his movements so that his cock shot in and out of her with a pleasing rapidity. Waves of pleasure washed over her. She moaned, digging her nails into his pumping ass cheeks.

He shuddered against her and thrust deeper.

She lifted her hips off the bed. "More...give me more. I want all of you inside me."

He pushed his cock balls-deep into her, driving her hips back onto the bed.

Within moments they were sucking each other's tongues and fucking hard and fast.

Avantae clung to him. Thoughts of another lover and another face flashed behind her closed lids. She gasped against Cam's mouth and snapped her eyes open.

Cam dragged his lips away from her. "Am I hurting you?"

She dug her nails deeper into his taut ass. "No. No. Don't stop and don't slow down." She kept her eyes open and forced herself to think of Cam.

"I'm not stopping until we both come." He kissed a path down her neck to fasten his lips over her right nipple.

He took her quickly, his powerful hips driving his length in and out of her with a hunger she shared. Her passion heightened and when he fastened his lips on her left nipple and sucked hard, she gasped and came.

She raked her nails up and down his back. "Cameron," she moaned while another name echoed in her mind.

His climax quickly followed hers. He collapsed on top of her with his face pressed to her neck. She sighed and held him close, enjoying the sweet afterglow of their fuck.

After they'd both recovered from their orgasms, he pressed a warm kiss against her lips. "Damn, that was good."

"Yes," she murmured, stroking her fingers through his hair. "It's always been good with you."

"It can get better."

She shook her head. "No, Cameron. It's time you found yourself a woman closer to your own age and thrilled her out of her mind."

"I'd rather keep thrilling you, sweet."



## Chapter Eight

How could she explain her sudden eagerness to end their sexual relationship when she didn't understand it herself? While she enjoyed sex with him as much as she ever had, she had to be free of other lovers when she met her Hawk again.

"Sweet?"

She blinked, dragging her thoughts back to Cam. "Cameron, please. We agreed."

He sighed and eased out of her. Turning her onto her stomach, he leaned over and slapped her ass hard. When she gasped, he kissed her cheek and eased his finger into her flooded pussy.

She moaned in protest. "Don't."

He laughed and withdrew his finger. "I'm going running." He slapped each ass cheek hard several times.

Her cheeks stung. Her pussy flooded again. Thank God he didn't roll her onto her back. Or she'd have parted her legs and welcomed him back into her pussy.

He pressed a last kiss on her cheek. "I'll make this an extra-long run. Then I'm going to have breakfast somewhere. If you're still here when I get back, please don't be lying in bed naked and not expect to give me another fuck."

"Dream on."

"No. I'll be fucking on." He slapped her ass again.

"Ouch!"

He laughed.

She heard the bathroom door open and close. Feeling some of the tension leave her body, she pressed her cheek against the bed. She had time for a nap before she had to get up and shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

Seated in his car parked along the wall of an underground parking lot, Peyton watched Cameron emerge from the elevator. Cameron walked with all the confidence of a man who'd enjoyed a night of meaningless sex. He tossed the overnight bag he carried into his car trunk and quickly drove off in the opposite direction from where Peyton had parked. A late-model silver convertible occupied Cameron's second parking space. She was inside.

Peyton hesitated for several minutes before he finally got out of his car and quickly walked toward the elevator. He slipped his hand in his pants pocket, closing his fingers

around the spare set of Cam's keys. He paused at the elevator. Should he confront her or should he wait a little longer and hope Cam came to his senses?

Recalling how a few days without sex with her had sent Cam into near desperation, Peyton decided the sooner he rid Cam of her, the better. His decision made, he pushed the UP button. The doors of the middle elevator slid open. He stepped inside.

Peyton dismissed all remaining doubts as he rode to the fourteenth floor. The elevator doors opened. He strolled into the corridor and stiffened.

A tall male with long, dark, shoulder-length hair pulled back from his face lounged against the wall adjacent to the elevators.

Peyton clenched his jaw and crossed the hall to the man. He extended his hand and smiled at his older brother, Bancroft. "What are you doing here, Hawk?"

Croft grasped his hand tightly. "I'm sure you know Cam just left."

Peyton shrugged.

"So I could ask you the same thing."

Peyton disengaged his hand. "She's too damn old for him, Hawk."

"He's old enough to decide that for himself," Bancroft countered.

He met Bancroft's dark gaze and bit back the urge to ask if Declan had sent him.

Bancroft shook his head. "You know Declan would never betray a confidence."

Peyton nodded. Like some of their other brothers, Bancroft often knew things he had no rational way of knowing. Bancroft clearly had knowledge of Peyton's intentions. Apparently he didn't approve any more than Declan did.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Peyton?"

Even as part of him urged him to say no, another part insisted he had to. "Yes."

"Why?"

He compressed his lips. "I don't know why. I just know this feels like something I have to do."

Bancroft placed a hand on his shoulder. "Your following through with this would be as big a mistake as my making Randall's life miserable by insisting Benai belonged to me."

Peyton shook his head. "With all due respect, Hawk, there's nothing you can say to change my mind."

"Then I'll be very blunt, Peyton. You're about to fuck up big-time."

Peyton narrowed his gaze. "Do you know something I don't know?"

"I know what you're about to do feels wrong."

"Not to me."

Bancroft squeezed his shoulder. "Have I lost your respect, Peyton? Are you harboring negative feelings because of what happened between me and Randall?"

"No!" He reached up and closed his hand around Bancroft's wrist. "No! I know that if you hadn't lost your center of balance, you would never have tried to come between Randall and Benai."

Bancroft sighed. "That's exactly what I tried to do—come between Randall and Benai. If I still have your respect, trust me when I tell you that you do not want to do this."

He stepped away from Bancroft so that his hand fell away. "I have to."

"You want to. That's not the same thing as feeling as if you have to."

"I'm going to do what I feel is right for Cam."

"Have *you* lost your center of balance, Peyton?"

"My center of balance is just fine."

"Then what explanation will you offer Cam when he discovers what you've done?"

He shrugged. "He'll be pissed at first, but he'll get over it."

"Talk to him before you do this, Peyton."

"Talking to him won't do any good."

"Just as talking to you won't do any good?"

Peyton swallowed. The disappointed look in Bancroft's eyes bothered him. "I've thought about this a lot, Hawk. Please don't try to talk me out of it."

Bancroft sighed. "As you know, I have some painful experience with doing the wrong thing for what seemed like the right reason—at the time."

Bancroft's repeated reference to the tension between himself and Randall touched a nerve in Peyton. He sucked in an angry breath. "It's not the same thing, Hawk. You had lost your spiritual balance. I haven't."

Bancroft tilted his head. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes! I am!"

Bancroft shrugged. "Then there's nothing more for me to say. Call me if you need to talk."

He nodded. "Thanks, Hawk."

Bancroft clasped a hand briefly on his shoulder before he walked across the hall to the elevators.

Peyton waited until the elevator arrived, Bancroft stepped on and the doors closed before he continued down the hall to Cam's condo.

\* \* \* \* \*

The alarm clock roused Avantae. A smile curved her lips. Not only had Cam set the alarm for her, but he'd also found time to buy her an elaborate bouquet of flowers, which sat on the nightstand on her side of the bed.

She sat up and reached for the card.

*If I lived for a hundred lifetimes, you'd enchant me in each and every one.*

*Cameron.*

He was sweet beyond words and she was going to miss him more than any other lover. She glanced at the clock on the opposite nightstand. She'd slept for just over forty minutes. If she wasn't bathed and dressed by the time Cameron returned, he'd probably sweet-talk her into his arms again.

She'd gather her odds and ends from his apartment and take them home.

The sex with Cameron had been satisfying, yet the unrelenting knot of physical desire remained in her belly. She continued to feel emotionally starved. Sighing, she slipped out of bed and headed into the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later, as she dried off, she heard movement in the bedroom.

Cameron must have skipped breakfast in the hopes of a last romp before they officially became friends. She smiled, her pussy pulsing. One last, quick fuck with him held definite appeal. Tossing her towel aside, she walked into the bedroom naked and aroused. "Back for another quickie?"

In the bedroom, a tall, nude male with a beautiful, tight ass turned to face her.

The man with short black hair and the high cheekbones and coloring indicative of a Native American should have been a stranger. But Avantae felt a shock of recognition and absolute joy dance up and down her nerve endings as she met the man's magnetic blue-green gaze.

She saw a similar look of shocked recognition in the male's eyes as his gaze lingered on the heart-shaped charm that hung between her breasts. He uttered a soft, unintelligible word before he quickly dropped to one knee, his head bowed. Almost as quickly, he swore and bounded to his feet.

They stared at each other in stunned silence, neither making any effort to conceal their nudity.

Like Cameron, he was handsome. But where Cameron was slender, this familiar stranger had a muscular build, with broad shoulders, a massive chest, washboard abs, long legs and powerful thighs. Even flaccid, his cock was impressive in terms of length and girth.

From Cameron's description, she suspected he was the big brother figure of whom Cameron thought so highly. At least that's who he should have been.

In actuality, he was her silver wolf...her Hawk. And so much more. Would he recognize her?

He recovered first, turning a slow, intimate smile on her. "I undressed in hopes of taking a shower, but if you'd like to be fucked, this time I'm ready and willing to accept your charming offer, Red."

"You weren't so willing last night," she reminded him.

He shrugged. "Last night was a mistake I won't make again."

He had a deep, sexy baritone voice that sent a tingle through her and aroused dormant needs and stirred ancient memories. Why did her recognition of him seem to extend beyond their first meeting at Club Discreet?

"But I'm not into quick. When I'm with a beautiful woman, I always make sure she's thoroughly satisfied. That takes times." He glanced at the unmade bed. "Still hungry after your romp with Cam?"

Following his gaze, she saw the unmistakable stains on the bed sheets. Cheeks burning, she turned and rushed back into the bathroom, slamming the door. She closed her eyes and sank down onto the floor, wrapping her arms around her knees. Confusion, excitement and fear warred with each other.

Either she was losing her mind or the familiar stranger had strolled right out of *Sirens' Tales* and right into her life. She frowned.

*Get a grip, Avantae. He's familiar because you met him last night. You're not that Avantae and he's Cameron's quasi big brother. That's another reason why he seems so familiar.*

He was the big brother Cam often gushed about so often he now seemed familiar to her. Yet, if he weren't her protectorate, why had he bowed to her? Why had he seemed to call her Sovereignique? What was he doing here? And why had —

A tap on the bathroom door sent her bolting to her feet. She leaned her weight against the closed door. "What do you want?"

"I need to use the bathroom."

"This is a two-bathroom unit," she pointed out. "Use the other bathroom."

"The other bathroom doesn't have a tub with those strategically placed jet sprays that hit just the right spot with just the right amount of force."

She sucked in a breath at the mental picture her mind conjured up at his suggestive words.

"Open the door, Red."

She gave an annoyed shake of her head. Why was she cowering in the bathroom? So she was seventeen years older than Cameron. At twenty-two, he was certainly legal. Although she was no longer as slender as she'd been in her twenties, she had large breasts, nice legs and a big ass. Cameron had chosen her over the many younger women vying for his attention the night they met.

Besides, she had curves but no excess weight. She had no reason to be ashamed. "Give me a moment." She wrapped the discarded towel around her body and confidently opened the door.

He stood outside the door, naked and aroused.

She swallowed hard, her heart racing. Lord, his cock was a thing of pure beauty. Her pussy filled with moisture and she longed to rip off her towel, lean back against the door and shamelessly spread her legs.

The thought of feeling the big, dark, pink-helmeted head of his length beginning a slow slide between the lips of her slit and up into her body sent a wave of longing through her. It would be ecstasy to feel her pussy stretching to accommodate his cock.

*Get a grip, Avantae! Falling for him will end badly – just as it did before.* She forced her gaze from his groin to his chin. *Get away from him. Now. While you can still walk away.*

He stood close enough to the open door to make it impossible for her to step out of the bathroom without brushing against him.

She cast a quick, cool look at him and spoke in a frosty voice. "Excuse me."

"Of course." He didn't move.

She swallowed in annoyance and lifted her eyes to look into his blue-green gaze. She noted no trace of the impulse that had led to his bowing to her. "You're blocking my way."

He arched a brow. "Am I?"

"Yes, you are. Please excuse me."

"In a moment. I suppose you know Cam is only twenty-two."

Stung by the censure in his voice and eyes, she lifted her chin. "The last time I checked, twenty-two is considered a legal adult."

"Just barely, and you must know that, like many young men, he's horny as hell and thinks with his cock rather than with his head."

She narrowed her gaze and cast a brief but pointed look at his groin. "From the look of you, he's not the only one who thinks with his cock."

To her surprise, rich, warm laughter filled the bedroom. "Touché."

She met his gaze again.

He sobered and shrugged. "You're a breathtakingly beautiful woman with a sexy body. I know I'm not the first man you've given an immediate hard-on to. In fact, I'm sure the two from last night must have –"

"Satisfied their desires with someone else," she said quickly. It was bad enough he knew she'd made the foolish decision to sleep with Cam. She didn't want him to think she'd slept with either of the other men as well.

"Because you were satisfying yours with Cam?"

Determined not to give him the satisfaction of seeing how his words unnerved her, she gave him a long, cool look. "What's your point?"

"Cam is barely legal." He arched a brow. "You appear to be...a little older than twenty-two."

She clenched her hand into a fist. How dare he speak to her with such disrespect?

Almost as if he'd read her thoughts, he sucked in a quick breath. "I meant no disrespect."

Unmoved by what she suspected was an insincere apology, she narrowed her gaze. "But?"

"If you want a lover, why don't you get a man and leave Cam alone?"

She tightened her lips. She was not about to justify her relationship with Cameron to him—especially when they'd already agreed to end it. "When I want your advice, I'll ask for it," she told him coldly. "Is that clear?"

To her delight, he lowered his lids and inclined his head. "Crystal." The word *Sovereignique* hung unspoken in the air between them.

Pleased by his belated show of respect, she relaxed. "Now step aside."

He recovered quickly, lifting sinfully long eyelashes.

They looked into each other's eyes.

Noting the defiance in his gaze, she stepped closer and glared up at him. "I gave you an order. Step aside—now."

While he stared down at her in silence, she could sense a struggle in him. He wanted to obey her. He just needed a little incentive. *Step aside.*

He took a deep breath and slowly shook his head. "My days of obeying *orders* ended with my hitch in the Marines."

His defiance annoyed and surprised her. She pushed past him. As she moved into the bedroom, her foot caught on something. She glanced down. Her panties were wrapped around her foot. When she bent to pick them up, the towel loosened and fell in a tangle around her feet.

She snatched up the towel and defiantly turned to face him.

He stood watching her with an amused smile curving his sensuous lips.

Annoyed at his obvious attempts to make her uncomfortable, she kicked the towel aside. "Do you see something you like?" she challenged.

He leaned against the wall near the bathroom door, his gaze slowly roaming over her naked body. After noting her hardened nipples, he allowed his gaze to linger on her belly.

Her stomach hadn't been entirely flat since high school. Nevertheless, Cameron, along with all her other lovers, had seemed to appreciate her belly's slight swell.

Her level of arousal increased when he centered his gaze on the dark triangle of hair between her legs.

As he looked his fill, his breathing deepened. Finally, he lifted his head.

She forced herself to look into his eyes instead of at the huge cock she longed to feel sliding deep inside her. "Well?" she challenged.

He shrugged. "As I'm sure you know, you have a beautiful body that is padded and curved in all the right places."

She wanted to hear more. "And?" she encouraged.

He took a deep breath. "You have the loveliest natural breasts I've ever seen. You have long legs and a nice round ass. And I just know your pussy is as hot and tight as it is fragrant."

She inhaled slowly, savoring every word. She resisted the temptation to whisper that only a tight, hot pussy could fully appreciate a cock as long and thick as his.

*Stop it. He's Cam's big brother. No matter how well hung he is, you can't fuck him. You can't.*

"What about you? Do you see anything you like?" As if aware of her struggles, he reached down to palm his cock.

She swallowed slowly, willing herself not to surrender to lust.

He nodded toward the bed. "Why not share your charms with a man with enough experience to fully appreciate them?"

He was so handsome, sexy and deliciously well hung. More important than her physical response to him was the emotional one she felt. Her need to mate with him threatened to overwhelm her sense of decency.

She hungered to feel his big, muscular body pressed against hers as he slid his long, thick cock inside her—where it belonged. Still, sleeping with him after having slept with Cameron felt sleazy.

*So what? You've already told Cameron it's over. You're free to encourage this handsome hunk to spank your ass until it's hot and stinging. Then you can ride him all night long. In the morning, you can take him in your mouth and deep-throat him until he can't stop coming.*

But dare she submit? Or should she find the strength to walk away? She bit her lip. Even considering his suggestion should have been out of the question. Yet how could she muster the dismay her conscious dictated she display when the most primal part of her being whispered that her long wait to be reunited with him was finally over?

Her inner hunger and deep-seated emotional need took over. *I want him. I need him. I'm going to have him.*

Inflamed with need, she moved across the room toward him.



## Chapter Nine

As the tall, beautiful woman with the dark skin and amazing silver eyes slowly moved across the room toward him, Peyton fought to contain an overwhelming sense of joy and thanksgiving. Even as he longed to sweep her off her feet and into his arms, the urge to bow to her again was almost impossible to resist.

She stopped in front of him, looking regal and totally irresistible. He sucked in a breath, clenching his right hand by his side to keep from reaching out to caress her.

A half-heart charm hanging from a silverdine chain rested between her breasts. And damn if she didn't have the loveliest natural rack he'd ever seen. Dragging his gaze away from her breasts, he forced himself to look into her eyes. Declan's warning sounded in his head. Noting his desire mirrored in her silver stare, he knew he had to have her—regardless of the consequences.

"I need you," he whispered.

"I'm yours. Take me." Her soft, sexy voice swept over him like a warm caress.

He opened his arms.

With a smothered sob, she stumbled into his embrace with her face lifted and her lips parted.

Peyton trembled when she rubbed herself against his aching cock. Staring down into her eyes, his conviction that he'd finally met a woman capable of triggering a vaginally generated orgasm intensified. More, she touched his emotions in a way no other woman ever had. He had to taste her lips and feel her pussy welcoming him. He reached between their bodies to palm his cock.

She sucked in a breath.

He rubbed the head of his shaft along her slit.

She parted her legs.

He waited for an insistence he use protection that never came. Clearly she knew, as he did, that they were meant to be together with nothing between them. When he finally experienced his first vaginally induced climax, he had to come directly inside her.

She stroked his cheek, her touch both tender and arousing.

Their gazes met and locked.

He felt her desire for him in the tension in her voluptuous body. No mortal man could possibly resist such sweet temptation. Consumed with what felt like an ageless need for her, he dragged a finger along her slit.

She sucked in another shuddering breath.

He slipped his finger inside her. She was wet and ready for him.

She trembled and gripped his shoulders. Her enchanting silver gaze blazed at him. Commanded him. *Take me now.*

He burned with a need so powerful he knew if he didn't satisfy it, it would consume him. Easing his hand from between her legs, he positioned his shaft at her entrance.

Her hands tightened on his shoulders.

He drew in a breath and eased his hips forward until his cock head lodged between the wet lips of her pussy.

*Tread carefully.* He hesitated.

She trailed her nails down his back to cup her palms over his ass.

*Tread lightly.*

An alarm seemed to go off in his head, screaming that to go any further would be a betrayal of Cam. He should stop—while he still could. He sucked in an aching breath and drew his hips back.

"Don't...please don't stop!"

He froze, torn between obeying her and heeding Declan's warning.

"Don't stop!" She tightened her hands on his ass and thrust her groin against his.

As he felt his cock tunneling into the depths of her wet, hot pussy, he knew they were beyond the point of no return. Reaching down to cup her ass, he lifted her off her feet.

She sobbed and wrapped her arms and legs around him.

When, still torn, he stood clenching his teeth and making no effort to move in and out of her, she whispered to him, "Take me, my handsome Hawk. Love me as only you can."

Croft's warning assailed him. He shouldn't do this—at least not here. He shook his head. "I don't think we should—"

"Not only should we. We're going to," she told him in an authoritative voice he found difficult to dismiss. "Love me."

The last thing he could afford to do was fall in love with her.

She rotated her hips and slowly slipped her pussy up and down on his cock. Within seconds, his entire length was covered with her fluids.

Feeling her pussy massaging and cradling him, he shuddered, groaned and blew apart. Gripping her hips, he held her still as he shot his seed deep up into the pussy that felt as if it had been formed to complement his cock.

She closed her eyes and contracted her vaginal muscles around him.

He groaned and ground his hips against hers.

Her thighs shook and she leaned forward, her lips pressed against his ear. "Oh...God...being with you again is sweeter than I'd dared hope. Come in me," she

whispered. "Fill me with your seed and make me your one as you are mine...as you'll always be...my handsome, brave Peyton."

Her words resonated with the force of an emotional tidal wave. He'd been born to love this beautiful woman with the smiling silver gaze and the captivating voice. Freed from the countless years of sexual frustration triggered by his inability to orgasm with a woman, he couldn't seem to stop coming.

Her vaginal muscles continued to contract around him as she moaned and slammed her hips up and down moments before she exploded. Feeling her coming all over him kept him aroused and ejaculating deep inside her. The sheer power of his first orgasm inside a woman finally took its toll.

No longer able to support their combined weight, he sank to his knees. Clutching her tight, he kept his spewing cock inside her as he eased her onto her back and sprawled between her thighs. Cupping his hands over her ass, he drove himself as deeply into her as possible.

"Oh...yes...I can feel you still coming in me...what an incredible feeling!" she moaned, nibbling at his ear. "Oh God...your cum is starting to trickle out of me..."

He shuddered and slowly lifted his upper body so his extended arms took most of his weight off her. He stared down at her. "Are you all right?"

Her eyes fluttered open. A slow smile spread across her lips. "I'm full of your cock and your cum." She stroked her hands down his back to his ass. "What more could a woman ask for?" She rotated her big ass on the carpet. "I've never been better."

With the first rush of desire abated came awareness that sleeping with her in Cam's condo had been a mistake. Instead of wallowing in shame, he wanted her again. Even the risk of Cam walking in and finding him buried balls-deep inside her wasn't enough to make him pull his cock out of her.

It should have been. He shouldn't have been willing to risk hurting Cam that way. Yet he was. He frowned. "What are you doing to me?"

"Rocking your world," she told him, and tightened herself around him.

He groaned and, wrestling his need for her under control, resisted the lure of fucking her again, and drew his hips back.

With a sigh, she removed her arms and legs from him.

He sat back on his haunches.

She lay with her knees bent and her legs open. She rubbed her belly. "Look," she whispered.

The muscles in his stomach clenched as he watched a steady stream of his seed flow from the bottom of her slit and slide down her crack. He'd never seen such a beautiful sight. Overcome with an emotion he couldn't control, he lay on his stomach, gripped her hips and fastened his mouth over her pussy.

"Oh...yes...yes...eat me and make me come again," she urged, lifting her hips.

He slid his palms under her ass.

She made a small, pleased sound.

Encouraged, he slipped his tongue inside her.

She linked her legs over his shoulders.

The musky aroma and taste of her pussy, combined with his seed, kept him aroused and erect. He ate her with a slow delight he'd never felt before.

When she came, he kept his face buried against her and lapped at her slit until her hips stopped jerking. Then he lay with his face against her belly while she stroked her fingers through his hair. He was content to remain on the carpet with her, savoring the afterglow of the most incredible sexual experience of his life – until his cell phone rang.

Peyton rolled onto his side before he rose to cross the room and pick up his pants from the carpet. He pulled his cell phone from his waistband, sighed when he noted Bancroft's number on the outer display and reluctantly answered it. "Hello?"

"Cam is on his way back. I've stalled him for as long as I can. Unless you're ready for an ugly confrontation, if you've had your kicks, get your ass in gear and get out of there before he arrives, Peyton. You have fifteen minutes tops." Bancroft hung up without waiting for his response.

It infuriated and dismayed him that Croft thought so little of him that he assumed sleeping with her was strictly about his sexual gratification. Clearly he had lost Bancroft's respect. He swallowed a lump of emotion at the realization.

"Hawk? What's wrong?"

He turned to find her sitting up. Her beauty took his breath away. Having met and loved her, he now understood Cam's inability to walk away.

Cam. Oh damn.

He crossed the room and reached down to lift her to her feet. "Cam is on his way back."

She gave him a wary look. "We ended our relationship this morning."

He glanced at the bed before looking at her again. "Did you?"

"Yes."

"Before or after?"

"We ended it." She lifted her chin. "If you're waiting for me to blush and apologize for enjoying sex as much as you do, you're going to be one disappointed, handsome Hawk." She stroked a finger down his cheek, flashed him a quick smile and walked away from him.

He stared at her. Damn. Whoever said real women had asses must have had her in mind. That was an ass worthy of a large, lovely, beautiful woman. With a last look at her round cheeks, he turned to walk back to his clothes.

They dressed in quick silence and then turned to face each other.

"As you probably know by now, my name is Peyton Grayhawk. What's yours?"

Her eyes widened. "Peyton. Your name is Peyton?"

"Yes. You must have heard Cam say my name."

"He always referred to you as Hawk. Oh...God...this is weird. Peyton Grayhawk?"

"Have we met?"

"Before last night?"

"Yes. Before last night?"

"I'm not so sure anymore. Didn't Cam tell you my name?"

"Yes," he admitted. "But I wasn't interested enough at the time to pay attention."

"Charming. My name is Avantae."

Avantae. She who rules. He sighed. There was so much he wanted and needed to say to her. And no damn time to say any of it. "One of us needs to leave before he returns. Lady's choice. Shall I go or stay?"

"We could both stay and face him together."

He shook his head. "No. We really can't."

"Why not? If one of us sneaks away, we'll be behaving as if we have something to hide."

That's exactly how he felt. "We don't have time for this discussion. If you have no preference, I'll stay and talk to him."

"No. I'll stay."

"He's going to be...upset. Are you sure?"

"Positive. I'm not exactly in the mood to go racing away like we've done anything to be ashamed of."

That made one of them who felt no shame. "If you're sure, I'll go before Cam walks in and misunderstands, but we need to talk. What's your number?"

She told him. "Don't you want to write it down?"

"There is no way in hell I'll forget your number. Where do you live?"

She told him that as well.

He sighed in relief. Finally he had a way to reach her. After a brief hesitation, he crossed the room to kiss the corner of her mouth. "I'll call you."

She turned her head, brushing her lips against his. "Make sure you do."

"Don't waste any of your time thinking I won't. I can assure you I'll call."

She gripped his shirt. "Make it soon, Hawk."

"I will." He stepped away from her. "I'd better go." He'd reached the bedroom door before she spoke again.

"Hawk?"

He turned to look at her. "Yes?"

She gave him a sexy smile. "I'm a twenty-first-century kind of woman. What's *your* number?"

He gave her his cell phone number. "Are you going to be okay with Cam?"

"Yes. I told you, we ended it. Why wouldn't I be okay with him?"

Clearly she had no real understanding of her effect on men. He now had a better appreciation of Declan's and Bancroft's warnings. "Will you do me a favor?"

"Sure, if I can."

"Don't tell him we slept together."

She frowned. "You want me to lie to him?"

"No. I want you to allow me to talk to him first. Please. He's not going to understand what happened between us unless I can explain it to him first."

She tilted her head. "Can you really explain it?"

"No," he admitted. "But I need to be the one to attempt the explanation."

She nodded. "Okay. I won't tell him we made love unless he asks."

"Don't tell him even then. Let me handle this."

"That's not my style and —"

"I'm asking you to allow me to handle this. I know him far better than you do."

"Fine. I'll let you tell him."

"Thanks." After a brief hesitation, he quickly crossed the room again to hold her close. "Oh damn, I don't want to leave you."

She brushed her lips against his ear. "Then don't."

"I have to." He pressed a hungry kiss against her parted lips before he quickly left the apartment. Instead of taking the elevator and running the risk of encountering Cam before he was ready to face him, he took the stairs. He emerged from the staircase to find Cam's car parked in the garage. For a moment he was tempted to return to the apartment, but decided against it. He probably smelled like sex.

After a quick shower, he'd call Cam and figure out a way to confess. On the drive home, he called Bancroft. "Look, I know you don't approve of what happened between me and Avantae, but —"

"So you slept with her?"

He didn't answer.

"I'll take that as a yes. So no, I don't approve," Bancroft told him coldly.

He could hardly expect anything else. "Fine. You were right. It was a mistake. Are you satisfied, big brother?"

"No, I'm not satisfied, Peyton. Judging by your tone, I assume you've lost your respect for our family traditions."

Chastened, Peyton swallowed hard. "No. Never. I'm sorry if I sounded disrespectful."

"If?"

He raked a hand through his hair. "I'm just...I just wanted to thank you for buying me some time with Cam."

"We're brothers, Peyton. I always have your back, even when I think you're dead wrong – as you are now."

With the possible exception of Randall, Peyton had a sinking feeling *all* his siblings would think he was dead wrong. He could almost feel Layton's dark, disapproving gaze cutting into him. But what the hell. None of them knew how he felt or how impossible resisting Avantae had been. Or the power and release of experiencing his first vaginally induced orgasm. He only hoped he could find a way to make Cam understand.

"Have you spoken to Layton?"

"I haven't spoken to anyone about this."

"But you think I should?"

"We don't keep secrets over women, Peyton," Bancroft reminded him. "Unless we've lost our centers of balance."

"Mine is intact, Croft."

"I'm very glad to hear it. Call me if you want to talk."

"Thanks," he said, and ended the call. For the first time in his life he felt alienated from Bancroft. He didn't like the feeling but he feared there wasn't much he could do about it if Croft wasn't willing to at least try to understand his feelings. He felt a chill at the possibility of his older brothers Layton and Brandon sharing Croft's view.

## Chapter Ten

After Peyton left, Avantae stood staring out of Cam's living room window, wondering what had possessed her. She should probably leave before Cam arrived, but that would feel like sneaking away. Telling herself she hadn't done anything wrong by sleeping with Peyton didn't help.

Sleeping with him? She shook her head. No. They'd made love. Although she didn't and couldn't regret intimacy with Peyton, she shouldn't have allowed it to happen at Cam's condo.

The entrance door opened. She tensed.

"Sweet?"

She took a quick breath and turned as Cam walked into the room. Noting the smile on his face and the look in his eyes, she decided Peyton had been right. He would be the best one to tell Cam they'd made love. "Hey. Did you have a good run?"

"Yes." He crossed the room. "You're dressed."

"I was just about to leave."

"Why bother?" He bent to kiss her.

She turned her head so that his lips brushed the corner of her mouth. "Cam..."

He slipped an arm around her shoulders. "Why don't you stay?"

She kissed his cheek before stepping away from him. "We agreed to be friends, Cam."

He caught her hand as she turned away. "Then why are you still here?"

"Cam—"

"I set the clock before I left to give you plenty of time to leave before I returned—if that's what you wanted to do."

She sighed. "You're handsome, sweet, considerate and sexy, Cameron. You deserve a woman who—"

"I want *you*, Vantae. I have since the moment we met."

Oh lord, this could get messy. "I think it should be clear that I find you very attractive, Cam."

"But?"

"But it's time we moved on."

"Why? Has some other lucky male caught your interest?"

How should she answer that? Her inclination was to be honest with him. However, she had no desire to hurt him. Nor did she want to undercut Peyton's chances of



softening the blow for Cameron. She moistened her lips. "We both knew from the beginning that we weren't going to have a long-term relationship."

"That was then." He stroked her cheek. "That's what I want now."

She removed his hand from her cheek and held it between both of hers. "I've always been honest about not wanting a permanent relationship, Cam."

He nodded. "I know, but —"

"I shouldn't have called you last night. I'm so sorry I did —"

"No! Don't apologize for calling me when you needed to be loved. I wouldn't have wanted you to call anyone else."

But she clearly should have, or taken a very long, cold shower. She would find hurting him difficult to bear. She gently released his hand. "I won't insult you by suggesting we can be friends, Cam."

"But?"

She shook her head. "But we can't be lovers anymore."

"There *is* someone else. Isn't there?"

"I..."

"Don't lie to me."

"Yes. There is."

"So why didn't you call him last night instead of me?"

Because she'd allowed her need for sex to overrule her good judgment. "I have no excuse for calling you and all I can say is that I'm sorry, Cam. I know that's an inadequate response, but —"

He stalked away from her to stare out the window. He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. "Fine. You know where the door is."

*Nice going, Avantae. You've hurt him.*

He turned to look at her. "If you change your mind...you know where to find me, Vantae."

She wasn't going to change her mind — not after having met and slept with Peyton. She picked up her shoulder and overnight bags. "I hope you can forgive me in time, Cam, and —"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't count on that if I were you."

She bit her lip. "Oh Cam..."

He smiled sadly. "There's no need to look like that, Vantae. There's nothing to forgive. You were right when you pointed out that you've always been honest about not wanting or looking for a permanent relationship with me."

"Then why —"

"Why am I having such difficulty accepting that it's over between us?" He shrugged. "I guess I allowed myself to be vain enough to think that, given time, I could

change your mind. I know better now, but that's not your fault. It'll take awhile but I'll deal with not having you in my life or bed."

He looked so forlorn that she longed to cross the room and put her arms around him. Doing that would give him false hope. "There's a woman waiting for you who will make you forget I ever existed."

He shook his head. "That's never going to happen."

"Yes. It will. It has to because you deserve it."

"You'd better go before I decide to try to change your mind and things get messy between us."

She nodded and quickly left his condo. Once she reached her car, she slumped against the driver's seat and blinked back tears. Why hadn't she met Peyton before she'd met and hurt Cam? Why did Peyton have to be a part of Cam's life? How was he going to feel when he realized she'd ended their relationship just as she was about to start one with Peyton? She feared it wouldn't matter to him that she'd insisted on ending their relationship before she'd actually met Peyton.

Peyton. She closed her eyes, moistening her lips. The moment she'd seen him, everything had fallen into place for her. She knew he was the only male capable of fulfilling all her fantasies while making her feel happy, safe and as if she were his soul mate. And yet nothing was clear except her growing certainty that she'd known him in a previous life. Her inability to resist him and an irrational belief that she couldn't live without him combined to frighten and titillate her. Yet hadn't she managed to live without him once before? If so, why couldn't she do it again, if only to avoid hurting Cam?

Her eyes snapped open. She sucked in a breath. How could she give Peyton up? Having been reunited with him and having explored their shared desire and need, which felt as old as time, how could she live without him again?

She sighed, blinked away more tears, and a sudden yet frightening fear came over her that she and Peyton weren't meant to be and could never be happy together at Cam's expense. She tried to shake off a feeling of despair as she started her car.

\* \* \* \* \*

With water beading on his skin from his long, cool shower, Peyton padded into his bedroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. He walked to his nightstand and turned on the portable CD player.

The addictive, sultry voice of the woman pledging he was her reason to live filled his bedroom and his heart, fueling his desire. Songs had always had the power to move him in ways he couldn't explain. He had grown up listening to country music, and hearing Ray Charles singing *America the Beautiful* when he was fourteen had stirred a spirit of patriotism in him.

Meeting a Tuskegee Airman during his senior year of college had cemented his desire to serve in the military. After college he had become a Marine. His career was cut short at ten years when the helicopter he was piloting was shot down in Afghanistan. Part of the wreckage had impaled his left shoulder and chest inches from his heart. It had taken three operations and nearly two years of therapy before he could lift his left arm above shoulder height without incredible pain.

He moved across the room to his tallboy. After years of applying an ancient remedy Declan had made, the scars caused by the injury and surgeries had largely faded.

Without warning, he felt a sudden painful twinge in his left shoulder. He grimaced. What the hell! He'd been pain free for years. His phone rang. Giving the series of suddenly angry-looking scars a last look, he stalked across the room to pick up the cordless phone from his nightstand.

Noting Cameron's number, he groaned and sank onto the side of the bed. How the hell was he going to explain having slept with Avantae to Cam and expect him to understand? He suppressed the urge to let the call go to voicemail. He pushed the answer button and lifted the phone to his ear. "Hi Cam."

"Hawk, I need to talk to you."

The dejected note in Cam's voice sent a wave of guilt and remorse through him. "Sure." He couldn't quite bring himself to ask what was wrong because he knew. God, he hoped Avantae hadn't confessed to sleeping with him. "When did you want to talk?"

"Now. Are you busy?"

Oh damn. He'd hoped to have a little more time before he had to face Cam. He shook his head. "No. Do you want to meet somewhere?"

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll come home to talk."

Home. The word sent a knifelike pain through him. He had always insisted Cam consider wherever Peyton lived as his home. To have Cam finally call the mansion home now felt bittersweet. "Okay."

"I'll be there in about an hour."

"Fine. I'll see you then."

After he hung up, Peyton dressed and then paced the living room floor. He longed to call Randall but didn't want to admit what he'd done. Randall had always given him credit for being a far better man than he actually was. He knew Randall would always have his back, but hated the idea of having his twin think less of him.

It was bad enough that his actions had undoubtedly lowered Croft's and Declan's opinions of him. God only knew what Layton and Brandon would say or think when they learned of his behavior.

He tried to tell himself that he was overreacting. After all, he didn't really know why Cam was upset. It could be anything from losing his job to crashing his car. Or —

No. No. He knew in his gut he was the cause of Cam's pain. He also knew what he had to do about it—admit what he'd done, apologize, hope Cam could forgive him and make sure it never happened again.

He was still pacing when he heard a vehicle approach. He glanced out the living room French doors. Cam's car sat in the driveway. Oh damn. Time to pay the piper.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Avantae arrived back at her condo, she felt like one gigantic bundle of conflicting nerves. While she couldn't regret having slept with Peyton, thoughts of Cameron's reaction to that revelation dampened her excitement. Why had she lingered in bed after Cameron had gone for his morning run?

She kicked off her shoes in the living room and sank onto the sofa. After a moment, she shook her head. If she had left, she might never have encountered Peyton again. Her mistake hadn't been in remaining in Cam's condo. It had been in sleeping with both him and Peyton on the same day. With her head clear again, she doubted anything she or Peyton could say would make that acceptable in Cameron's eyes. Surely he would view talk of an ill-fated or lost love as an excuse for bad behavior. Considering his relationship with Peyton, their sleeping together might almost be viewed as immoral.

She needed the assurance of Peyton's presence, but for the moment, that was out of the question. Maybe if she and Peyton allowed Cameron time to meet and fall for someone else before they continued their relationship, he might forgive them in time. But the thought of weeks or months of avoiding Peyton sent chills of dread and despair through her. Although tortured by doubts and uncertainties, she knew she desperately wanted to be with Peyton. Since that was impossible, she needed to dispel some of her negative energy.

The cordless phone rang as she reached for it. She picked it up, glanced at the caller ID screen, pushed the talk button and placed the phone against her ear. "Lysette?"

"Vantae! There you are! I've emailed and left several messages for you since last night. Are you all right?"

"Not really. I'm feeling so depressed I can't even work up enough enthusiasm to write."

Lysette spoke after a short pause. "Oh, hey, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for my critique to be depressing. I was just trying to give my honest opinion but it's just that, Vantae. An opinion. And it was made without the benefit of all the personal knowledge you, as the author, have of all your characters and their motivations."

Avantae frowned. "What? What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? What are *you* talking...are you saying my critique isn't the cause of your depression?"

"No. What critique...oh..." She glanced toward her computer. "You sent feedback on the latest chapters of *Sirens' Tales*?"

"Yes. Okay. I'm lost. I thought my critique was the reason you couldn't write."

Avantae sighed and rose. "I haven't read it yet but I will now." She crossed the room to turn her computer on. "Just give me a minute or so to read it."

"Okay. Then I'm going to want to know what's going on with you."

Avantae opened her mail program. There were several emails from readers following the serial, a few from her various online networking groups, spam, and three from Lysette. She opened the one with *Sirens' Tales* in the subject line. She read the rather lengthy email quickly.

"So these characters don't work for you, Lysette?" she asked, her gaze on the screen.

"The characters are really well written and the scenes between them packed with emotion, Vantae, but the one scene doesn't work for me so early in the story."

"Why not?"

"Well, given Peyton's code of honor and considering the danger for him and his entire clan if the authorities discover he's slept with his sovereign, I just can't see him succumbing so easily. I think an additional scene or two to show more of a buildup and a struggle before he succumbs would work much better. That would make his surrender more realistic."

"You have a great handle on Peyton's character and his concern and love for his clan. Your critique is on point," she admitted.

"Then you're going to rewrite these chapters so he doesn't sleep with her so early in the story?"

Avantae nodded. "No."

"No? Why not? I know such a rewrite would involve a lot of work, but it will make the story more believable and even more powerful. A few chapters showing his struggles to resist his love, desire and need for her will make their first time together even more delicious for the readers."

"I know I should rewrite, but this way, with him giving in to her the first time she tries to seduce him, feels...right." Avantae paused, conscious that her position didn't make sense.

"Oh. Ah. Okay. Think about it."

There was no need. Although she valued Lysette's opinion and common sense indicated she was right, Avantae knew she wouldn't do a rewrite.

"Enough about *Sirens' Tales*. Let's talk about what's depressing you."

"I met him, Lys."

"Who? Cameron? You took my advice and called him?"

"Yes, and I wished to God I hadn't."

"Oh hell! What happened, Vantae?"

She told Lysette about meeting Peyton at Discreet and then meeting him again after she'd slept with Cameron. She fell silent after admitting her fear that Cameron's feelings for her were far stronger than she'd suspected.

"Are you sure his feelings are that strong?"

Avantae closed her eyes, allowing her head to rest against the back of her chair. "I'm fearful they're strong enough to ensure he's not only hurt now but will also be devastated when he learns about Peyton and me. I don't know what to do."

"The hell you don't! You embrace your relationship with Peyton and see where it goes."

"But what about Cam?"

"What about him?"

"Lysette! Cam isn't going to understand my ending a relationship with him so I can start one with the man who's been his big brother for ten years! He's going to feel bitter and betrayed."

"I'm sure you're right, Vantae, but what's the alternative? Give up Peyton?"

The thought sent a stab of anguish through her. "No! I can't do that. I can't lose him again!"

"Again? Lose him again?"

Avantae blinked. "Did I say 'again'?"

"Yes. You did, and I think you meant it."

She moistened her lips. "I feel as if I know him...*knew* him, and I don't mean from Club Discreet. The moment I saw him, I felt this overwhelming sense of belonging with and to him. It was so strong I felt that nothing...that I would do whatever was necessary to be with him."

"I feel bad for Cam, Vantae, but he's an adult and you've been honest about your intentions from the start. He'll just have to try to understand that a love like yours and Peyton's only comes along once in a lifetime."

"I didn't mention love, Lyss."

"I know."

"He didn't say anything about love either."

"I don't know anything about *him* but I know *you*. I said love and I meant love."

Love. Avantae remained silent, wrapping her emotions and thoughts around the word. It felt like a perfect fit. That made the situation worse. Did Peyton's feelings include anything more than lust? Even if they did, how could they hope to build a relationship at Cam's expense?

"Vantae?"

"I'm not sure of much of anything except that I don't want to hurt Cameron."

"Given how he feels, not hurting him might be impossible."

"I can't hurt him. Peyton and I will just have to put any possible relationship on hold and not see each other again until—"

"That sounds great, but it's not a decision you should make on your own. Call Peyton so you two can make your decisions together."

"I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions. Besides, I don't think calling him now would be a good idea."

"Look, Vantae, you and I have always been proud of our ability to make our own decisions, but sometimes it's okay to let the man in your life help with the heavy lifting. I'm going to hang up now so you can call him. Call me if you need to talk again."

## Chapter Eleven

For several moments after the call from Lysette, Avantae sat staring at her computer monitor, her thoughts on Peyton.

He had been both passionate and tender. But did he have any deeper feelings for her? Did he think pursuing a relationship with her would be worth risking his relationship with Cameron?

She decided she needed answers to those questions before she could make an informed decision she could live with. She picked up the phone and dialed his number. The call went to voicemail after four rings.

"Hi Hawk, this is Avantae. I really need to talk to you. Please call me as soon as you can. I'll be home for the rest of the day. Bye."

\* \* \* \* \*

Peyton stood by the French doors watching as Cam walked into the room. He noted the tension in the other male's shoulders and the unhappy look in the blue eyes so like his and Randall's.

Cam paused several feet into the room and stood staring at him in silence.

Peyton swallowed a lump of guilt and crossed the room to place a hand on Cam's shoulder. "You wanted to talk to me."

Cam nodded and, rather to Peyton's surprise, shook his hand off his shoulder.

He frowned.

Cam turned away.

Peyton narrowed his gaze. "I'm listening, Cameron."

"I came to give you a chance to say I told you so."

The bitterness in Cam's voice disturbed him. Cam usually addressed him with far more respect. "What?"

Cameron swung around to stare at him. "About Vantae."

Peyton kept his face expressionless. "What about her?"

"You implied she was a skank and that nothing good would come of our relationship."

"Let's not have any revisionist history, Cameron. I never said any such thing."

"Didn't you, Hawk?"

"No, I didn't, and you know it."



Cam shrugged. "But you certainly made it clear you thought she was easy and not good enough for me."

Peyton took a deep breath. "That was before. I admit that I said unkind things that were out of line. I'm sorry I ever implied she wasn't good enough for you."

"Then why were you so set on me not seeing her?"

"Because of the age difference, Cam. You have to admit —"

"I don't have to admit anything, Hawk, except she tossed me out on my ass for another man and I feel as if..." He balled a hand into a fist and hit it against his chest. "As if she used her bare hands to rip out my heart and tear it into pieces so small I'll never be able to recover."

There was no mistaking Cam's pain. Peyton felt it as acutely as he would have had Cam been Randall. He raked a hand through his hair. "Look, Cam, I know you really liked her, but..."

"But what?"

"But you're handsome, young and eligible. You'll soon meet someone else who —"

"Who what?"

"Who you'll —" His cell phone rang. Annoyed, he lifted it from his belt. Noting Avantae's number on the outer display, he felt the back of his neck burn.

"Are you going to answer that, Hawk?"

He glanced up to find Cameron watching him. He shook his head, turned his ringer off and placed the phone in its case. "It can wait." Raking his hand through his hair, Peyton took a few moments before he went on. "You'll soon meet someone else capable of making you forget her."

"I don't want to forget her."

Peyton sighed. "Are you in love with her, Cameron?"

"Love?" He glanced away, shrugged and then shook his head. "That's a strong word to use for my feelings for her."

Peyton's phone vibrated. After a moment, he lifted it from its case. It was Avantae again.

"If you need to take the call, I can —"

"No." Peyton returned the phone to his belt holster. "What I need right now is to talk to you and to know how you feel about her. Are you in love with her?"

"Would you believe me if I said I was?"

Oh hell! "As you said, love is a strong word, Cameron. Now I know you don't want to hear this, but you *are* very young."

"I'm an adult, Hawk, and even teenagers can and do fall in love."

He nodded. "I know that, but you're still... Are you in love with her?"

"I..." He shrugged and looked away. "I don't know. I know I like her an awful lot, Hawk."

Like was a world apart from love. Thank God. He placed a hand on Cam's shoulder. "Are you sure it's over?"

Cameron nodded. "Oh yeah. She told me there was someone else. I...I can't believe she cheated on me, Hawk."

Peyton stiffened, allowing his hand to drop from Cameron's shoulder. "Cheated on you? You never said you two had an exclusive relationship."

"We didn't but only because she always insisted we keep things casual. They weren't casual for me. I haven't been with anyone else since the night we met."

"There's not really much I can say to make you feel better —"

"You could give me the okay to kick his ass."

"To kick whose ass?"

"Her new lover." Cameron balled a hand into a fist. "I want to kick his ass."

Damn, the mess he'd made kept getting worse. "If she wants to be with another man, let her go, Cameron. She's not the only woman in the world."

"That's easy for you to say, Hawk! You don't know what it's like to be with her."

If only that were true.

"Being with her isn't like being with any other woman. I...when we make love —"

Peyton compressed his lips and held up a hand. "Spare me the details, Cam."

Cameron stared at him. "Spare you? What happened to your insistence I could tell you anything, Hawk?"

"You *can* tell me anything, but there's no need to go into detail about having sex with her."

"Don't make her sound like some bimbo hanging on a corner, ready to sleep with anyone."

"What the hell is wrong with you, Cameron? I didn't say anything like that."

"Maybe not this time but that *is* what you think of her. Isn't it?"

"No!"

"That's been your opinion of her almost from the moment I mentioned her."

There was no point in denying he'd been far too intemperate when discussing her in the past. "Fine. I was wrong. Satisfied?"

"Now when it's over between us you decide it's time to be fair? Great. That's just great, Hawk!"

Peyton struggled to hold on to his temper. "Look, Cameron, I'm trying to be understanding —"

"You might be trying but you're not really getting the job done. Are you?"

He stared at Cameron. While he was certain Cameron didn't know he'd made love to Avantae, there was no misunderstanding the hostility projected at him. "Look, Cam —"

He shook his head. "Coming here was a mistake."

"Cam—"

"I don't know why I thought talking to you would make me feel better. I feel worse now. Thanks a lot, Hawk."

"Cameron, I'm sorry if you're disappointed or—"

"That's quite an understatement. I always thought you and I... I always thought you'd be there for me."

"I *am* here for you."

Cameron shook his head. "You're not. I can feel the distance between us. It's almost like we're strangers."

"No! You know how I feel about you, Cam."

"I thought I knew, but...you don't seem to care how I'm feeling now."

"I do care, but you're very young and I just happen to think you're overreacting a little."

Cameron stared at him.

Peyton could see a need for reassurance in his eyes. He swallowed hard. What the hell was he going to do? How could he offer Cameron the reassurance he needed when he had to have Avantae? When he was prepared to do anything to have her—including trampling over Cameron's feelings?

"Will you help me find a way to win her back? Will you help me fight him for her, Hawk?"

He lowered his lids as he shook his head. "No."

"Why the hell not? What happened to 'I have your back, Cam'? 'I'm always there for you, Cam'? 'You can always trust me and count on me, Cam'?"

"All that's still true, but—"

"But? When I need you the most you give me a damn but? Fuck you."

Peyton blinked, feeling his temper rise. "What? What the hell did you just say?"

"I said fuck you!" Cameron turned and left the room.

Guilt and anger kept Peyton from going after him. He crossed the room to the French doors to watch in silence as Cameron jumped in his car and sped down the driveway toward the gated entrance.

Oh hell! He crossed the room to the bar to pour himself a drink. He downed two shots of whiskey before he paced the living room again. His cell phone vibrated several times. He ignored it. The one person he longed to talk to was the one he needed to avoid—at least until he'd decided how to break the truth to Cameron.

He returned to his bedroom, undressed, put on a pair of swimming briefs and went down to the pool. He swam until his lungs burned and he could no longer ignore the throbbing in his left shoulder. By the time he climbed out of the pool, he'd decided he couldn't let Cam down. He'd have to call Avantae and tell her of his decision.

Something buried deep inside him rebelled at the thought, but he was an adult used to dealing with adversity. He couldn't hope to be happy with her while Cam was miserable.

But he couldn't face telling her of his decision today. He'd call her in the morning. While he was dressing, his landline rang. He was relieved when he recognized Randall's cell number on the caller ID. Sitting on the side of his bed, he picked up the cordless phone. "Randy?"

"How are you, Peyton?"

"I'm fine. How are —"

"No, Peyton," Randall interrupted him. "How are you?"

"I said fine, Randy."

"I know that's what you said, but I've been feeling depressed most of the day. I have no personal reason to be depressed, Peyton. It's your depression I'm feeling. So what I want to know is, why are you depressed and what can I do to help?"

"It's an ugly story that will make you think a lot less of me. So why don't we just say I've had better days and leave it at that?"

"Why don't you tell me what's wrong and we'll work out how to handle it together, just as we always have?"

"I don't want to talk about it, Randall. Not to anyone."

"I'm not just anyone."

He sighed. "I know that, Randy, but —"

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way, Peyton, but I'm going to discover what's wrong."

"Look, I'll call you sometime tomorrow. Right now I just want...*need* to be alone." He hung up without giving Randall time to respond. He turned on the stereo, stretched out on the bed and closed his eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sometime later he bolted upright, immediately awake as Randall walked into his bedroom. Damn. He never thought he'd regret Randall having his house keys and alarm code. "Randy —"

Randall strolled across the room to sit on the side of his bed. "I came in person since you wanted to do this the hard way."

He shook his head and looked away.

Randall clasped a hand on the back of his neck. "I'm not going to let you shut me out, Peyton."

He sighed and turned back to face his identical twin. Looking into Randall's blue-green gaze felt like looking into a mirror. Peyton had rarely been able to prevaricate or shield his deepest emotions from him, which was probably why Randall was there.

"Tell me what's wrong."

Peyton closed his eyes and leaned his head against Randall's shoulder. "I'm not nearly as good a man as you've always given me credit for being, Randy. I never have been."

"Even if that were true, it wouldn't change the fact that I'll always have your back—just as you've always had mine."

"There are limits to that and—"

"No. There aren't, Peyton. I will always have your back. Period."

"I've really fucked up big-time, Randy."

"How?"

He would have preferred not to look at Randall as he admitted what he'd done, but he couldn't stomach any more cowardice. He pulled away from Randall to sit back against the headboard. Meeting his brother's gaze, he told him how he'd started the day.

Randall didn't interrupt, but Peyton felt his twin's dismay at his admission. When he'd finished speaking, he got off the bed on the opposite side. He walked across the room to stare out his window down onto the pool while he waited for Randall to speak.

After several minutes of silence he turned to face Randall, who slowly rose from the bed. "Give it up before you hurt yourself, Randy."

Randall gave him a wary look. "Give what up?"

"Give up your attempt to think of a positive spin that will cast me in a better light than I deserve."

## Chapter Twelve

Randall shrugged and walked across the room to place a hand on the back of his neck. "Okay, maybe you jumped the gun a little, but by his and her admissions, she was determined to end it before she met you. Their breakup isn't your fault."

He shook his head. "That's going to be a small comfort when Cam learns I've slept with her."

Randall dropped his hand to his side. "Does he need to find out?"

The question surprised him. "Are you suggesting I lie to him?"

"I'm asking what purpose would be served by telling him, other than risking a relationship you've spent ten years nurturing and building?"

"He deserves to know the truth, Randy."

"I would normally agree, Peyton, but sometimes the truth can do more harm than good. Getting him to understand would be difficult at best. After spending an hour trying to comfort him, I can't see an upside to telling him—at least not now."

"You've seen him today?"

Randall nodded. "Yes. I would have been here sooner, but he arrived just as I was about to leave."

"Why did he go to you?"

Randall glanced away. "That's not important."

"It is to me. Why did he go to you?"

"He said he needed to talk, but..."

"But what?"

Randall met his gaze. "But you weren't interested in listening. I thought he'd misunderstood."

"But now you know better?"

He shrugged.

Damn. Randall was already losing respect for him. Peyton closed his eyes. "He wanted to go in to detail about sleeping with her and I wasn't interested in hearing that."

"Understandable to me, but not to him."

He opened his eyes. "Fine. What do you suggest I do, Randy?"

"I suggest you wait until he's over her before you see her again. We can invite him to Benai's and Tempest's next Girls Night Out, since he clearly has a thing for older

women. They have one coming up in a week or so and hopefully he'll fall for someone there."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then we'll figure something else out, but don't risk your relationship, Peyton."

The thought of not seeing Avantae for weeks or months while he waited and hoped Cameron fell for another woman held little appeal. "She deserves an explanation in person, Randy."

"I'm not suggesting she doesn't."

"Aren't you?"

"No. I'm only suggesting I'll give it to her for you."

"You?"

"Yes, Peyton, me. You did your best to intervene on my behalf when things weren't going well between Benai and me. It's my turn to try to do the same for you."

Randall was newly and very happily married to a woman he'd fallen for at first sight—just as Peyton had fallen for Avantae. Nevertheless, he was a far better man than Peyton would ever be. The moment Avantae saw Randall, she'd know she'd missed an opportunity to fall for the superior twin. "That's hardly... How is she going to feel getting such news from you?"

Randall shrugged. "I know it's not the ideal solution, but I really don't think it would be a good idea for you to see her again until we can get a handle on Cam's situation."

"You know how I feel about him, Randy, but—"

Randall narrowed his gaze. "Look, Peyton, I know this is a lot to ask of you."

"Then why are you suggesting it?"

"I'm asking it because Cam is an emotional wreck."

*So am I, Randall.*

"We need to proceed carefully, Peyton."

He glanced at the golden band Randall wore with such pride and pleasure on his left hand. "That's easy for you to say. You have Benai. You don't know how I feel about Avantae or—"

Randall shook his head. "Don't give me any shit. If you're hedging about not seeing her again when you know the effect it will have on Cam, then I know what you're feeling."

"But?"

"But you're far more capable of handling this than Cam is. I know what I'm asking of you, but you need to stay away from her for a little while."

He couldn't argue that Randall didn't understand because he *knew* Randall understood perfectly. "She deserves to hear the truth from me, Randy."

"I know, but let me tell her."

"Why? Because you don't trust me not to do the right thing?"

Randall put a hand on his shoulder. "I know the difficulty of doing the right thing when it will keep you away from a woman you really care about. Why put yourself through that and risk your relationship with Cam?"

He pushed Randall's hand off his shoulder. "What about my relationship with her? What about what I feel and want? What about *my* emotional vulnerability?"

Randall gripped the back of his neck. "Cameron practically worships the ground you walk on, Peyton. He's feeling hurt, angry and abandoned by you."

The words sent a guilty shock through Peyton. He jerked away from Randall. "I didn't abandon him!"

"I know that but unfortunately, at the moment, he doesn't. Please don't make the mistake I made with Benai and Croft. I should have stayed away from her until Croft had regained his emotional balance. Instead, I trampled on his feelings and emotions. I have to live with having made that selfish choice when I knew how it would affect him."

Randall's words stung like hell. "So you expect me to behave selfishly?"

"No. I expect you to be what you've always been – a better man than me, Peyton."

"We have a big problem because I've never been nor will I ever be a better man than you, Randy."

"I disagree, so please just give me a chance to explain things to her and time to talk to Cam again."

He shook his head. "I should be the one to do that."

"I know, but I'd view it as a favor if you'd allow me to try."

Peyton ran a hand through his hair. "I'll try, but I can't guarantee I'll succeed."

Randall nodded. "Thanks. What does she look like?"

Peyton described her.

"She sounds pretty."

"Pretty doesn't do her justice. She's beautiful."

Randall smiled. "Where does she live?"

Peyton told him.

"I'll go see if she's home now."

"Do me a favor, Randy."

"Name it."

"Don't charm her. Okay?"

Randall shook her head. "Trust me, Peyton, I'd burn in hell before I'd do anything to hurt you."

Peyton nodded as a lump formed in his throat. "I know, but you're so much better than I'll ever be."



"Anything good in me I owe to your influence, Peyton."

Peyton stared at his twin. "That's never been true, Randy. Your loyalty continues to blind you to my many faults."

He shook his head. "You're a far better person than you've ever given yourself credit for being, Peyton. Don't worry. She's not going to be any more interested in me than Benai was in you." Randall put an arm around his shoulder.

Peyton leaned his head against him. "I don't know if I can do this, Randy. I love Cam, but..."

Randall tightened his arm around him. "This is hard. I know. But we'll get through this together, Peyton."

Peyton pulled away and nodded.

Randall walked across the room toward the door and Peyton turned to stare after him. "I did need to talk to you. Thanks for coming, Hawk."

Randall shook his head. "I'm just Randy now, Peyton, and I'll always come when you need me."

"I know."

When he was alone, he picked up the phone and called Cameron. When his call went to voicemail, he hesitated before leaving a message. "We need to talk, Cam. Call me so we can set up a meeting. I know you're feeling as if I let you down, but that wasn't my intention. Please call me and we'll go somewhere to have dinner and talk." After he ended his message to Cam, he struggled with his desire to call Avantae but feared Randall was right not to trust him to do the right thing by Cam.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a solitary and rather depressing dinner out, Avantae walked into her apartment lobby. A tall, handsome male with dark hair turned to face her. It only took one glance into his blue-green gaze for her to realize he wasn't Peyton. Although they appeared to be physically identical, she felt none of the affinity she'd felt with Peyton the moment their gazes locked.

"Avantae Sovern?"

She nodded, forcing herself not to panic. Surely if something had happened to Peyton, this man who must be his twin wouldn't be so calm. "Yes."

He smiled and extended his hand. "I'm Randall Grayhawk."

She briefly shook hands with him. "What brings you here?"

"I apologize for coming unannounced, but I was hoping you'd spare me a little of your time."

"Is Peyton all right?"

"Yes."

Thank God.

"I noticed there's a restaurant onsite. Can I buy you a drink or a cup of coffee?"

She sighed. "You're bringing news so bad I'll need a drink to hear it?"

He shrugged. "I was hoping we could discuss the reason for my visit in private."

"Why are you here instead of Peyton?"

"I persuaded him to allow me to come in his place."

After having spent so many hours waiting in vain for a return call from Peyton, the news that this man had convinced him not to come didn't sit well with her. Given her inclination to tell Randall Grayhawk just what she thought of him, she pushed the UP elevator button. "Why don't we go up to my apartment so we can speak candidly?"

He inclined his head. "Thank you." He silently followed her into the elevator when the doors opened.

She gave him a quick glance, amazed that she felt no attraction for a man so clearly Peyton's twin. In fact, she struggled to control a rising dislike for him. She felt certain that he shared her total lack of attraction.

Inside her living room, she offered to make him coffee.

He shook his head. "No thank you."

"Would you like a drink instead?"

"No thanks."

She walked over to her French doors. "Why are you here instead of Peyton?"

"This is going to be difficult for you to hear, but Peyton needs to keep his distance for a while."

She definitely didn't like Randall Grayhawk. Who was he to tell her in that cold, unfeeling voice that Peyton had to stay away from her? She turned to stare at him. "At the risk of being rude, I'm going to come right out and tell you I'm not interested in having this conversation with you, Mr. Grayhawk."

He nodded and rose. "That's perfectly understandable."

She flashed a brief smile in his direction. "Great. I'll see you to the door."

He arched a brow and remained where he stood.

She frowned. "You're not moving toward the door."

"I know you think this is none of my business, but you'd know that wasn't true if you knew how close Peyton and I are. We don't have secrets from each other and we always have each other's backs. Peyton has been a quasi father figure to Cameron for the past ten years. Cam's going through a very difficult period now."

She sighed, recalling their last meeting. "I know."

"If he found out about..."

"If he found out about what?"

"News of your relationship with Peyton would devastate him."

She compressed her lips. "Peyton told you we slept together?"

"I told you we have no secrets from each other."

Great. "That still doesn't explain what you're doing here instead of him."

He paused, appearing to choose his words carefully. "As I said, I'm here because he needs to stay away from you for a while."

Damn he was arrogant. "According to you?"

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I know this is difficult, but please try to bear with me. We've accepted Cam as part of our family. We're not a perfect family but we're a close and loyal one. My brothers and I have rarely had any major disagreements centered around women because once one of us has declared an interest in anyone, she's off limits to the rest of us."

She had an uneasy feeling she knew where the conversation was going. "And?"

"And saying Cameron is interested in you is putting it lightly. As I said, he's part of our family and we're very close, so we all know of his interest in you—which makes you off limits to the rest of us."

She heard the steel in his voice and understood the source of Peyton's reluctance. "I see. It sounds as if you and your brothers have worked out a dating system that works for you."

"It works very well, as long as we adhere to it."

"That's fine, but doesn't the woman in question have any say in the matter?"

"Absolutely. She's free to see whoever she likes—as long as it isn't one of us."

"And if she's interested in a different brother?"

He sighed. "It would be breaking the code that has kept us close and loyal to each other. My older brothers and I grew up with very little other than our sense of family, honor and loyalty. That's part of what makes us who we are. When we don't abide by our code..." He shook his head. "Bad things happen."

"I'd already told Cameron it was over between us before Peyton and me... Before we made love."

He nodded. "I know."

"But?"

"That's all well and good—for you. But it doesn't absolve Peyton of his familial obligation."

She clenched her hand into a fist. "Okay, I've had it! Who the hell are *you* to say that?"

He sighed. "Look, I know how you must be feeling, but —"

"You don't know anything about me, Mr. Grayhawk, so please don't presume to —"

"I *do* understand—at least from Peyton's side of this." He touched his wedding ring. "My wife Benai and I were in a similar position not long ago. One of my older brothers, Bancroft, had already staked a claim— An interest in her before I met and fell for her."

She stared at him in surprise. "Wasn't that breaking the family code?"

"Yes."

"But?"

He shrugged. "I tried to respect his feelings for her for as long as I could."

"But?"

"But I was selfish and inconsiderate and I...pursued her before Bancroft had resolved his issues."

"And?"

He shook his head. "I nearly tore our family apart."

"But you obviously survived as a family."

"Yes, but —"

"But? Why are you here expecting more from Peyton than you were able or willing to give yourself?"

"I expect more because Peyton is a better man than I am."

"What if he wants to be as...selfish as you were?"

He sighed. "Peyton values our family code more than I was able to. Besides, if we keep breaking the code, it's not going to be worth much."

"I can respect your family code, Mr. Grayhawk —"

"Please call me Randall, and please try to understand how important it is for Peyton to stay away from you while Cam comes to terms with the end of your relationship."

Recalling Cam's near despair, she felt selfish and inconsiderate for wanting to insist on her right to see Peyton. "And how long will that take?"

"I don't know."

"So you expect us to put our relationship on hold indefinitely?"

"I have no right to expect anything from you, but I do expect it from Peyton—as will our older brothers."

"Okay, you're a close-knit family. That's great, but why should he be expected to please your older brothers?"

"Our parents had nine children and very few financial resources. We came from very humble beginnings. Layton, Brandon and Bancroft studied hard and all graduated high school and college early so that they could help lift us out of poverty. That required them to make a lot of sacrifices to ensure things were easier for the rest of us. But even if our elder brothers hadn't been so unselfish, our family tradition demands that we accord them a great deal of love, loyalty, respect and deference. My brothers are all amazing men and the younger of us go out of our way to be worthy of their respect. Peyton shares the desire to please them and to uphold our family code."

## Chapter Thirteen

Great. So Peyton would have to choose between her and his brothers. She blinked back a sudden flood of tears. The fact that he'd sent his twin instead of coming himself told her who he'd chosen. She swallowed a lump of disappointment and turned away.

Randall Grayhawk crossed the room to place a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I don't pretend to understand how you feel, but my wife Benai will. Come home with me and meet her. She's easy to talk to and will make you feel very welcome."

The offer, spoken in a soft, understanding voice, touched and surprised her. She took a deep breath to compose herself before she stepped away and turned to face him. "Thanks, but—"

"Please come."

"I wouldn't think of intruding into the lives of strangers."

"Your coming would be no intrusion. When Benai and I were having difficulties and I couldn't be with her to explain our family code or to comfort and reassure her, Peyton was a loyal, tireless surrogate for me. He was always there for her because he knew how much she meant to me. Now I get to return the favor. Peyton wouldn't want me to leave you alone in distress any more than I wanted him to leave Benai in such a position. Please help me to repay some of his loyalty by coming home with me. If you don't want to do it because you dislike me, which, given the circumstances, I understand, do it because it will give Peyton comfort knowing you're not alone now."

Oh, he was smooth, but she wasn't in the mood to be charmed. She shook her head.

"I promise that Benai and I will treat you with kindness and consideration as we do our best to see you through this difficult time."

She met his gaze and saw his sincerity. She smiled. "Peyton is lucky to have such a devoted twin."

"We're all devoted to Peyton and I can't tell you how blessed I feel to have Peyton as a twin. He's an amazing man—as I'm sure you'll quickly discover if you haven't already."

"Peyton and I don't really know each other, and yet..." She paused.

"You feel as if you've spent a lifetime or maybe a few of them waiting to meet him again?"

She blinked in surprise. "Do you believe in reincarnation?"

He shrugged. "As you can probably tell, we're Native American but I'm afraid I'm distressingly Americanized. Tsalagi is my native tongue and I respect Cherokee history and tradition, but I'm a very modern and practical man. I know Peyton feels as if he's lived before."

"Do you share that belief?"

"I'm fairly certain the life I'm living now is my one and only go round, but I love and respect Peyton too much to discount his beliefs." He tilted his head and extended his hand, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Please? Come spend the night with Benai and me. We would both consider it a privilege and pleasure to have you stay with us."

He projected a warmth and concern that overwhelmed her battered defenses. Why work so hard to erect a barrier against the twin of the man she longed for more than any other? Randall Grayhawk was clearly prepared and eager to extend himself on his twin's behalf.

"Avantae? May I call you Avantae?"

"Yes, you can, Randall." She nodded and extended her hand. When he closed his hands over hers, some of the despair she'd felt all day lifted off her shoulders.

He stepped closer and bent his head to kiss her cheek. "I promise you that Benai and I will take very good care of you and will be there for you when you need us."

Avantae surrendered to the urge to lean against him. As he slipped an arm around her shoulders, she closed her eyes and knew he would keep his word. "I'm looking forward to meeting your Benai."

"You'll find her delighted to meet you and eager to help in any way she can."

The warmth and pure devotion in his voice as he spoke of his wife warmed Avantae. Hopefully, Peyton would one day sound that way when speaking of her.

"Why don't you pack a bag for a few days? Benai and I would love to have you stay with us."

"Are you sure she won't mind?"

"I'm positive she won't mind. I was delighted when she suggested the possibility. Peyton is important to us both and since you're clearly important to him, you're important to us. We'd love to have you."

She pulled away from him. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am."

\* \* \* \* \*

Peyton had just climbed out of the pool when his phone rang. He strolled over to one of the tables on the patio to pick it up. Noting Randall's cell number, he put it to his ear. "Randy? Where are you? How did things go with Avantae?"

"I'm at her place now, Peyton. We had a rocky start, but she's in the bedroom packing a bag. She's agreed to spend a few days with me and Benai."

Peyton closed his eyes and sank into one of the deckchairs.

"We'll take very good care of her, Peyton."

He nodded. "I know that, Randy. I just don't know how long I can stay away from her. I know it's important for Cam, but I'm drawn to her in a way I've never been with any other woman."

"I can see why you would be. She's a beautiful woman with a sort of regal presence."

"You felt that too?"

"Yes."

"The moment I saw her, Randy, I felt...you probably know what I felt."

"That you'd finally found your *sheeneea* again?"

Peyton swallowed hard. His family shared an ancient belief that each person had a *sheeneea*—one person who completed them and helped shape who they were. His older brother Layton had known the moment he saw his wife, Tempest, that she was his *sheeneea*, and had proceeded to wait years until conditions and circumstances allowed him to claim her. Randall had known the moment he saw Benai that she was his *sheeneea*, although it had taken weeks for him to admit or accept it.

Peyton had spent most of his adult life certain that he'd not only lived before but had lost his *sheeneea* in another life. Although Peyton had often been uncertain how his twin viewed that belief, Randall had always been supportive. "I think it goes deeper than that, Randy. I think she and I have an ancient shared past that I can't quite remember even as I can't forget it. I know that doesn't make sense, but..."

"Benai and I will help in any way we can, Peyton. You know that, but I think it's time you confided in the big three."

As teenagers, Peyton and Randall often called their three oldest brothers, Layton, Brandon and Bancroft, the big three. Even as they respected and tried to emulate them, they were in awe of the three who had lifted their family out of poverty by their hard work and sacrifices. Although Randall was now the most financially successful of the family, the three older brothers had done much to ensure that Peyton and the others didn't have to work as hard when they graduated from high school.

It was a testament to the three oldest Grayhawks that all six of their younger siblings had not only graduated from high school with honors but had all finished in the top ten of their college classes as well.

With the death of their mother, Malita, Layton had become the family patriarch. The forty-two-year-old Layton was a father figure to the younger Grayhawk siblings. Even though only four years separated Peyton and Layton, the thought of disappointing Layton held little appeal.

The other set of twins in the Grayhawk family, Brandon and Bancroft, both possessed what their friends considered supernatural abilities. With a single touch on Tempest's stomach, Brandon had known that Layton was going to be a father even before Tempest knew she was pregnant. Bancroft had known that one of his brothers would soon meet his *sheeneea* before Randall and Benai met and instantly fell for each other.

Peyton feared that within seconds of asking to meet his three elder brothers, they'd know of his less-than-honorable behavior with Avantae.

Avantae. How he ached to see her.

"Peyton?"

He blinked and focused his attention on Randall's voice. "I'll call Layton in the morning. Right now I just need to eat something and get a few hours sleep – after I call Cam."

"Sounds like a plan. Sleep soundly knowing Avantae is with us and we'll treat her properly. You call if you can't sleep or if you need me for anything at all, Peyton. I don't care what time it is. If you need me, you call and I'll come."

He nodded. "I know. I've always known that. Kiss Benai for me, Randy."

"I will."

After ending the call, Peyton called Cam. There was no response so he left a message. "We need to talk. Please call me."

After he grilled two steaks, he had a few beers, took a shower and went to bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Patrolling the garden below Avantae's private chambers, Peyton struggled to accept the consequences of his loss of control the previous evening. Aireon males from humble origins were rarely allowed to ascend to the rank of protectorate. To betray the honor that had lifted his entire clan far above their former lowly station was nearly sacrilegious.

Although he and Avantae had escaped detection, he feared it was only a matter of time before his treachery was uncovered. Then his entire clan would be forced to share his disgrace. His thoughts turned to his two brothers, Cameron and Randall. Touching her had placed them in danger as well. That was something he'd had no right to do just so he could enjoy a selfish pleasure to which he wasn't entitled.

Recalling the exquisite pleasure and matchless joy of mating with the only person in the universe capable of completing him, he sucked in a breath. Nothing in his life had ever prepared him for that feeling. It was worth risking his position and life for. His brothers' lives and prospects were a different story. Now that Peyton had shown all of Aireon what his clan was capable of, their chances of rising to the same level had doubled. With two or more males in the protectorate ranks, his clan's fortunes would be forever elevated.

As the elder brother, it was Peyton's job to safeguard their prospects, not sabotage them. The previous night with Avantae had been priceless, but he couldn't afford another such lapse. If the Goddess was merciful, she wouldn't visit his sins upon his brothers' shoulders—especially if he made sure to never stray again.

Never stray again. Never touch her again. Never experience the joy only available within her arms. The thought of telling her of his decision and seeing the dismay in her



eyes, and possibly weathering a storm of tears, sent a jolt of despair through him. Weighing her tears and disappointment against his brothers' future left him no choice. He couldn't give in to temptation ever again.

"Peyton!"

Her soft, seductive voice, carried on the warm night air, danced along his senses. Steeling himself to control his emotions, he looked up.

She leaned over her balcony railing, her large, firm breasts bare and on display.

He swallowed hard, tore his gaze from her breasts and went down on one knee. "How may I serve, Sovereignique?"

"I require your assistance in my quarters," she said.

He rose and looked up at her again, knowing he didn't dare trust himself alone with her. "Sovereignique, I—"

She smiled down at him and straightened. She twirled her nipples between her fingers. "It's a very private matter we'll discuss in my chambers."

Peyton suspected she was completely nude and determined to lure him back into her arms. He couldn't allow that to happen. He recalled the feel of her breasts between his lips and struggled to ignore the passionate desires she awoke in him.

"That wouldn't be wise, Sovereignique."

Her lips compressed. "Wouldn't it? I don't recall asking for your opinion on the wisdom of my decisions."

He narrowed his gaze but didn't speak.

"I'll expect you in my chambers. I do not expect to be kept waiting, Peyton." She walked away from the balcony.

Suppressing a flash of annoyance, he turned and strolled across the garden and inside. Minutes later, he walked into her private chambers.

As he had feared, she was naked.

The sight of her lying on her back with her legs parted and her nipples rigid sent a jolt of desire surging through him. He offered a silent prayer before he dropped to one knee with his head bowed. "How may I serve, Sovereignique?"

"There's no need for such ceremony when we're alone, Peyton. Rise."

He did, slowly lifting his head to look at her.

She gave him a slow, suggestive smile. "I've spent the entire day waiting for the time when we could be alone." She extended her hand. "Undress quickly and then come love me, my handsome...master."

Recalling his disrespectful treatment of her the previous night, he felt the back of his neck burn. He lowered his gaze. "Last night was a mistake neither one of us can afford to repeat, Sovereignique."

She bolted upright, swung her long, shapely legs over the side of the bed and rose. "What?"

The beauty of her nude body left him longing to stroll across the room to take her in his arms. He regretted his lack of gentleness the previous night. Why had he been so rough? Why hadn't he made love to her instead of fucking her and using foul language?

"I will not engage in the dereliction of duty I displayed last night," he told her in a voice which he hoped conveyed his determination not to stray again.

She walked across the room to stare up at him. "You don't mean that."

"I do."

She placed a hand on his chest. "You can't mean it."

He nodded.

She slid her palm down his chest to his stomach. "You can't mean it," she said again.

He encircled her wrist and lifted her hand away from his body before she reached his groin. Retaining his grip, he took several steps away from her. "You know as well as I do what will happen if we're discovered together, Sovereignique."

She tugged at her wrist. "Let me go."

He released her, taking several more steps back.

"Surely you can't be afraid, Peyton."

He nodded. "I am, but not for myself."

"Then for who?"

"I would willingly face any punishment, no matter how extreme, for the pleasure of loving you, Sovereignique."

Her beautiful silver gaze lit up and a warm smile spread across her face. "I'm very glad to hear that, Peyton." She stepped closer.

He shook his head. "But I can't...I *won't* risk the same fate for my brothers. They deserve better than having me sabotage their prospects and lives for my own selfish pleasure."

"Please trust me to protect you and your brothers, Peyton."

"I know that you would do everything in your power to protect us, Sovereignique, but even you won't be able to protect us if The Council of Elders learns of my daring to touch you and risking the truce between our people and the Macarae."

She lifted her chin. She spoke in a cool voice that dared him to challenge her authority again. "You doubt my word, Peyton?"

With her silver eyes spitting sparks at him, she was even more beautiful than ever. He lowered his gaze, bowing his head slightly in a show of submission he no longer fully felt. "No."

"That's better." She stepped close enough to place her hands on his chest. "Take off your clothes," she whispered, her warm lips brushing against his ear.

Recalling her mouth opening and moving under his the night before, his stomach muscles clenched. His cock stirred. Ignoring it, he gripped her wrists and stepped away

from her. He lifted his head and stared down into her gaze. "I am not going to touch you again, Sovereignique. If you have any genuine feelings for me, please show it by respecting my fears and concerns for my brothers' lives and future prospects."

She stared up at him with a panicked look in her eyes. "You can't mean to deny me the comfort of your love and arms during my last days of freedom."

"I have to."

"No! Imagine what my life will be like when I'm with him, knowing I'll never be able to be with you again. The only thing that will make my life with him bearable will be the memory of having shared my last nights at home with you, Peyton. Please don't condemn me to a life of misery devoid of all but a few nights of happiness with the only man capable of being my one."

The anguish he saw in her eyes and heard in her voice matched the despair he felt in the deepest depths of his heart and soul. To have but a moment of bliss to torment him for the rest of his life ate at him like a malignant sore. But he had to remain firm.

"I won't forget my rightful place with you again, Sovereignique."

"Please...just share this one night with me and I will struggle to be strong enough to give you up," she promised.

## Chapter Fourteen

He felt certain another night in her arms would only serve to increase the chances of their being discovered together, in addition to making their parting even more difficult to bear.

She leaned forward, pressing her cheek against his shoulder. "Please... I can't bear to say goodbye to you without at least one more night."

He took a deep, agonizing breath before he released her wrist. "We will have to trust that the Goddess will be kind and that one day, in another lifetime, we'll be reunited. Until then, know that you are and always will be my only one." He bent his head and briefly dropped to one knee before rising. Suppressing the urge to sweep her into his arms and steal one last, sweet kiss, he turned and quickly walked toward the entrance.

"No! Don't, Peyton. Please! Come back! I command it!"

He kept walking, even though each step away from her left him feeling as if the air was being sucked out of his lungs, along with his reason for living.

\* \* \* \* \*

Peyton bolted awake the next morning covered in sweat. His heart raced. His left shoulder throbbed. After a quick glance around his bedroom, he collapsed back against the mattress, closing his eyes. He took slow, deep breaths until his heartbeat returned to normal.

The dream that had inspired his fear quickly vanished. He sighed in relief and then shuddered, certain the dream foreshadowed a tragic event in his previous life—the one he'd shared with Avantae. The guilt he'd felt the day before lingered, resting on his shoulders with the weight of a millstone.

He checked his messages. Cam had not returned his call. Benai, Croft and Layton had each called. He listened to Benai's message of support first. Then he played Croft's message.

"I'm available anytime you need to talk, Peyton."

He tensed as he listened to Layton's message. "Peyton, this is Layton. I think we need to talk. Please call me when you have time."

Talking to Layton would definitely not be the highlight of his day but apparently could no longer be avoided. He showered, dressed and had two cups of coffee before he picked up the phone to call Layton. Perhaps he would either be away from home or be too busy with Tempest and their newborn twins, Brandon and Malita.

His bad luck held. Layton answered on the second ring. “Morning, Peyton. I was just about to call you.”

Peyton narrowed his gaze. Had Croft betrayed his trust after all? Or had Declan? Or had Cam gone to Layton? Regardless of why Layton wanted to talk to him, it was clearly time for Peyton to face the music. “I need to talk to you, Brandon and Bancroft. Can you make some time for me tomorrow, Hawk?”

“We’re all at my house now, Peyton. Please join us.”

Who was “all”? Surely Randall would have warned him if he knew of a family meeting. “All?”

“Brandon and Croft joined us for breakfast this morning and are still here.”

“I see. Have the three of you discussed me, Hawk?”

“Yes, we have.”

The tone of Layton’s voice betrayed none of what he might be feeling.

Peyton swallowed hard. “Why?”

“Croft is worried about you and thought you might need to talk to me.”

“What about?”

“No matter how much I pressed him, he wouldn’t say.”

Peyton felt mean-spirited for having attributed bad motives to Bancroft. None of his brothers had ever given him cause to question their motives or loyalty. “You have Tempest and the kids to keep you busy and —”

“I’ll always view my position as elder sibling, along with the familial responsibilities attended with it, as an honor and a privilege. Tempest understands and fully supports my determination to always be available when one of you needs me, Peyton.”

“Thanks, Hawk. I’ll bear that in mind —”

“Good. Do that on the drive here.”

“I thought you might want to spend Sunday with Tempest and the kids and —”

“I’ll spend time with them after we talk. Brandon, Croft and I will be in the poolroom when you arrive. Drive carefully.”

Layton ended the call before Peyton could formulate an excuse to postpone the meeting.

As he stood frowning, his phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID. Damn. Cameron. He picked up his phone. “Cam. How are you?”

“Can I talk to you, Hawk?”

“Of course you can.”

“I’m on my way. I’ll be there in half an hour.”

“I’ll be here.” He made a brief call to Layton then sat in the living room to wait for Cam.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I more than like her, Hawk," Cameron said.

Peyton took a deep breath before he responded. "How much more?"

"Isn't it obvious? I love her."

"You love her?" He shook his head and placed a hand on Cam's shoulder. "I know this hurts like hell, Cam, but listen to me. When you're young and involved with an older and...skillful lover, it's easy to mistake great sex for love."

Cam pushed his hand away. "Why are you doing this, Hawk?"

Peyton frowned. "Why am I doing what? Pointing out the difference between passion and love? Because as the closest thing you have to a father, it's my job."

"I know the difference between lust and love."

"I seriously doubt that."

"Oh? You do? Well, guess what? Whether you doubt it or not doesn't matter. I love her. The moment I saw her, something buried deep inside me roared to life. I'm in love with her. I have been from the moment we met."

He saw the pain in Cam's eyes and heard the anguish in his voice. Lust was a powerful emotion, but it paled in comparison with love – the emotion he feared he saw in Cam's eyes.

He swallowed hard several times before he regained his ability to speak. "I know you're hurting, Cameron. When you're hurt, I'm hurt."

"But? There's a but lingering in the air between us, Hawk. Spit it out."

"But you're very young and –"

"My age has nothing to do with being in love with her, Hawk!" He shook his head. "What is this? I came here because Randall told me I was wrong to feel that I couldn't count on you –"

"You *can* count on me!"

"Then why are you so damn determined to belittle my feelings for her? Why are you trying to convince me I don't feel what I feel?"

*Because I'm a mean-spirited, selfish bastard who wants her for himself. Because I have to have her.* He glanced away from the hurt and confusion in Cam's gaze. "I'm not sure what to say to make this situation more bearable for you."

"I know how to make it more bearable."

"How?"

"I'm going to do whatever it takes to win her back – even if I have to kick the ass of the bastard who thinks he's going to take my woman from me."

He gave Cam a wary look. "I know you don't want to hear this, but –"

"No! No. Don't try to talk me out of this, Hawk. I'm not going to just sit back and let some man who can't possibly love her as much as I do take her from me."

"What the hell are you going to do if she *wants* the other man, Cam?"

Cameron narrowed his gaze. "I don't know why I wasted my time coming here. You clearly don't care how I feel. I finally get that. I won't waste any more of your valuable time." He turned away.

Peyton grabbed his arm and swung Cameron around to face him. "I don't like your tone."

Cameron jerked away and gave him a long, cold stare. "Don't you, Hawk?" Cameron practically spat the term at him, infusing it with an unmistakable lack of respect and affection.

Peyton sucked in an aching breath and struggled to control a sudden rage. He clenched his right hand into a fist. "Watch your tone."

Cameron narrowed his gaze. "If I choose not to?"

Cameron hadn't openly challenged him since he was a teenager.

"I'll give you a very unpleasant reminder of who the hell you're speaking to!"

"Are you threatening me, Hawk?"

He leaned close enough to look directly into Cameron's eyes. "I know you're upset, but there's only so much disrespect I'll take from you."

Cameron stepped back, spun around and stormed from the room. Moments later, Peyton heard the front door slam.

Great! Now he could go to Layton's house and be told all over again how selfish he was.

\* \* \* \* \*

Seated at a table on Randall and Benai Grayhawk's patio, sipping coffee after breakfast, Avantae noted the long, frequent looks her host and hostess exchanged. No one watching the couple could doubt that Randall was head over heels in love with Benai or that he was her fantasy man.

Avantae's thoughts turned to Cameron. If she hadn't succumbed to lust and taken him as her lover, there would be no obstacle to her and Peyton falling as deeply in love as Benai and Randall so clearly were.

Benai tore her gaze away from Randall long enough to smile at her. "So what would you like to do today?"

Recalling Randall's mention that he and Benai's relationship hadn't always run smoothly, she made her decision. "Lying around the pool talking sounds like just what I need." She glanced at Randall. "Do you mind?"

"I think that's my cue to make myself scarce." Randall rose and walked around the table to place a hand on Benai's shoulder. "When you discuss what an ass I was, be as charitable as possible, sweetheart."

She lifted his hand from her shoulder and kissed it. She mouthed the words *I love you*.

"I love you too." He pressed a quick kiss against her lips before he strolled into the living room.

Benai smiled at her. "Now let's talk Grayhawks, and how loving them isn't easy but is always worth the effort you put into it."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'll save you all the trouble of saying or just thinking it. I fucked up."

After Peyton stopped speaking, the other four Grayhawk brothers gathered in Layton's poolroom remained silent. Peyton cast a brief glance at each of his siblings. Standing by one of the three pool tables in the large room, Layton sighed and closed his eyes.

Brandon compressed his lips. Bancroft's dark eyes seemed unsympathetic. Only Randall's eyes held a willingness to understand and readily forgive.

Layton opened his eyes. "What the hell were you thinking, Peyton?"

"I know it sounds bad, but —"

Layton interrupted him. "It sounds bad because it *is* bad."

"Haw —"

"We've accepted Cam into our family. That makes him a brother."

"I know that."

"And you also know we do not fuck our younger brothers' women, Peyton!"

"I do know that, but —"

Randall crossed the room to face Layton. "You're being too hard on him, Hawk."

Layton looked incredulously at Randall. "Too hard on him? This shit of ignoring the code of conduct we all agreed to is getting old, Randall! First you and now Peyton. What the hell is it with you two?"

Randall clenched his jaw before he responded in a cool voice. "I readily admit that I behaved badly when I ignored Croft's interest in Benai."

"No. You didn't, Randall. The only one who behaved badly with Benai was me," Croft said.

"He still behaved badly, Croft," Layton said, his gaze narrowing. "He made no allowance for the fact that you'd lost your spiritual balance."

Bancroft shook his head. "I'm not going to have Randall blamed for my problems, Layton."

"Fine. Randall wasn't to blame. Are you going to argue that Peyton behaved properly as well, Croft?"

Bancroft surprised Peyton by nodding. "Yes. I am."



"Based on what?" Layton turned to face Peyton. "Have you lost your center of balance, Peyton?"

"No."

"Then how do you explain your behavior?" Layton sighed, shook his head and crossed the room to place a palm on the back of Peyton's neck. "Give me a reason I can understand or I'll have to admit that I'm a lousy role model and I've failed both you and Randall."

"Failed us?" Peyton shook his head. "No, Hawk. You've never failed us. I have no excuse for my behavior. Clearly neither Declan nor Croft betrayed me, but they both attempted to warn me to stay away from her."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I...I thought she was bad for him."

"What? She wasn't good enough for Cam but she was good enough for you?"

"It wasn't that I thought she wasn't good enough for him. I felt she was too old for him and was using sex to bind him to her."

"And now you think differently?" Layton asked.

He nodded.

"What are your plans?"

He knew what Layton and the others wanted and expected him to say. Hell, he wanted to say it but he couldn't. He shook his head. "I...I don't know," he admitted.

Layton stared at him. "You can say that now, knowing how devastated Cam is?"

"You're not being fair, Hawk," Randall said.

Layton rounded on him. "And you think his sleeping with Cam's woman was fair? In case you've forgotten, Randall, we have a family code of conduct that frowns on that type of behavior unless there're some mitigating circumstances." The anger and disappointment in Layton's voice felt like a sharp knife being thrust into Peyton's chest.

Randall didn't back down. "There *are* mitigating circumstances."

"Really? And what are they, Randall? Explain to me why he couldn't wait until Cam had accepted the end of the relationship before he slept with her."

"He's waited a long time to meet her again, Hawk. Waiting wasn't really an option once they finally met again."

Layton narrowed his gaze. "Don't talk to *me* about waiting, Randall!"

"I know you waited years until circumstances were right for you to win Tempest. But Peyton has waited even longer."

The conviction in Randall's voice surprised Peyton. Finally, Randall believed him. More important, when Layton turned to face him again, no trace of anger remained in his gaze. "She's your *sheeneea*?"

Peyton hesitated, faint memories struggling to fight their way to the surface. "I...think she might be."

Layton sighed. "Oh...hell. Fine." He clasped the back of Peyton's neck. "I'm delighted you've found her again, but staying away from her until things are less messy with Cam is still the way to go, Peyton. Believe me, I know what I'm asking you to do. The alternative is to risk Cam developing a warped view of women and love or feeling as if he can't depend on us."

Peyton took a deep, aching breath. "I'll try, Hawk, but..."

"That's all I ask, Peyton. Is that you try...do your best. He's our little brother and we have to accord him the same consideration we would our other brothers."

"I know, Hawk. I know and I...I'll try."

Layton smiled. "Good." He removed his hand from Peyton's neck and glanced at Brandon. "I think maybe Cam needs to get a little wild. Why don't we give him a week or two in Vegas?" He glanced at Peyton. "He's not in love with her?"

"He says he is and he'd like to kick my ass."

Layton's jaw clenched. "He knows you made love to her?"

"Not yet, but I know I need to tell him."

"Maybe so, but I don't think now would be a good time. Let's wait until he returns from Las Vegas and then decide if he's ready to accept the truth."

Recalling Cam's determination to win Avantae back, Peyton sighed. "I'm not sure he'll go."

"Oh, he'll go," Layton said.

Peyton wondered at Layton's assurance—until he realized he couldn't remember the last time he had refused to do anything Layton asked of him. Layton was an ideal elder brother, generally always considerate of his siblings and never asking anything of them he wasn't prepared to do himself. He also had an aura of authority that made falling in line with his "suggestions" seem the only reasonable course to follow.

If Layton said Cam would go, he would go—unless his feelings for Avantae outweighed his deference to Layton. But how likely was that? Peyton nodded.

Layton placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry this isn't a better time for you, Peyton, and even sorrier if you feel I've been too hard on you."

He shook his head. "Everything you've said was on point and as the eldest...we all expect you to do your best to keep us in line. I'm just sorry I'm making that harder."

Layton embraced him. "We'll get through this together, Peyton, and emerge stronger as a family."

"Speaking of family, I'm going to go spend some time with Tempest and the twins," Peyton said.

Layton smiled. "Tempest is eager to see you."

## Chapter Fifteen

Peyton left his siblings in the poolroom and went to the family room. Two bassinets sat in front of the sofa where Tempest lay reading a book.

She looked up, smiling as he entered the room. Swinging her feet onto the floor, she set her book aside. She patted the cushion next to her.

He bent to stroke a finger down the cheeks of his sleeping nephew and niece before sitting beside her.

She pressed a kiss against his cheek and slipped an arm through his. "How are you?"

He shrugged. "I was fair to middling until Layton ripped off several layers of skin."

She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "If he seemed hard on you, it's only because he takes his role as elder sibling very seriously and he loves you all so much."

He nodded. "I know." He glanced at her. "I suppose you know what's going on?"

"I know a little. You know how impossible Layton can be sometimes. He's determined to shield me—even when I don't want or need to be shielded. But I've talked to Benai and I know your Avantae is with her."

He sighed. "I don't know that she's mine."

"Benai thinks she is. And you are hers. Aren't you?"

He turned to look at her. "I don't think I have much say in the matter."

"You think she's...it's her? Your lost love?"

He nodded. "And I don't know how long I can stay away from her. When I've reached the end of my endurance, I don't suppose you'd be willing to intercede with Layton for me when I screw up and disappoint him?"

"You won't disappoint him, Peyton—even if you can't do as he asks. He loves you and he's very proud of you. That's not going to change if your feelings for your *sheeneea* outweigh what he thinks is best for the family."

"But, like him, I need to strive to do what's best for the family."

"No. That's his job as the eldest sibling. He doesn't expect the same level of sacrifice from the rest of you. He wants you all to be as happy as we are."

He smiled at her. "I know Hawk knows what a gem you are, but you should know the rest of us know it as well. And we're very grateful to you for making him so happy."

She smiled. "I can't begin to tell you how happy he makes me, Peyton, and how lucky I feel to be part of this family."

"Even though we keep fucking up?"

She laughed and kissed his cheek. "I'm a sucker for fuckups – not that I think either Randall or you fucked up. A Grayhawk in love and kept from his *sheene* isn't a beautiful sight. Nevertheless, neither Benai nor I would trade our lives with your brothers for anything. And I'm thinking your Avantae will feel the same. It's probably not going to be easy – nothing with you guys is, but I just know at the end of the day, she'll love you just as deeply as Benai and I love your brothers."

"I hope you're right."

"If I weren't, she wouldn't be with Benai, who will take very good care of her."

He nodded. "I know that. I just wish I could see her. I think if I could just spend some time with her, I could remember our past."

She sighed.

"That was your cue to tell me to go see her, Tempest."

She shook her head. "Layton wouldn't have asked you not to see her unless he thought it was best, Peyton."

He ran a hand through his hair. "I need some air." He rose and started toward the door.

"Peyton."

"Yes?"

She crossed the room to put her arms around his waist. "I know this is very hard for you but it's hard for Layton too. He hurts when any one of you hurts – as do I. He needs my support now more than ever. I can't suggest something I know he's against."

He hugged her. "Don't ever stop loving or supporting him."

"I couldn't if I wanted to. Please don't get discouraged or think badly of Layton."

"Hawk has never given me any reason to think badly of him. No matter what happens, he'll always be the big brother I look up to." He kissed her hair. "Now I need a drive."

When he left Layton's mansion, Randall was emerging from his SUV. "I don't know about you, but I could use a drink."

Peyton shook his head. "I'm going to go for a drive."

"Do you want company?"

"I think I need to be alone to clear my head. Okay?"

Randall sighed. "Are you sure?"

"I'm fine, Randy. I just need to think and for you to tell me how she is."

"When you called, she'd just asked me to leave her and Benai alone. She's wants to see you, but we'll take care of her."

"I know but...I don't know how long I can stay away from her, Randy. Maybe after my drive, I'll swing by your house and –"

"That wouldn't be wise, Peyton."

"What happens if I come anyway?"

"Please don't."

"Did you promise Hawk you'd keep me away?"

"What the hell kind of question is that? Do you think I'd conspire with anyone against you?" Randall asked.

He shook his head. "No. I know you wouldn't, but are you telling me I wouldn't be welcome at your house?"

"I'm asking you to please give it a few days before you make a decision like that."

"I feel like I've already waited an eternity, Randy."

"I know, but just take it a few hours at a time. Can you manage a few hours?"

He nodded. "I guess I'll have to."

"Then do that." He glanced at his watch. "If you're okay, I think I'll go find Cam and encourage him to enjoy himself in Vegas."

"Okay."

"Call me if you need me, Peyton."

"I will."

Peyton went for a long drive after he left Layton's mansion. He started out in Philadelphia's Wissahickon Park near the end of the city limits and ended up driving along the long passes of Fairmount Park in the inner city.

He arrived back at his mansion several hours later to find Cam waiting in the living room.

He stopped in the doorway. "Cam. This is a surprise."

Cam rose. "I hope it doesn't mean I'm no longer welcome here."

"What? Of course you're welcome here...home." He walked into the room.

"Randall said that would be the case, but I wasn't sure."

"Cam, how could you think you'd ever be unwelcome anywhere I am?"

Cam sighed. "About yesterday and this morning..."

"What about it?"

"I didn't mean to be disrespectful or to imply that you haven't always had my back. My only excuse is —"

"Cam —"

"Please let me finish. I had no right to take my frustrations out on you. I'm sorry and I need you to forgive me."

He crossed the room to put a hand on Cam's shoulder. "There's nothing to forgive." At least not on Cam's end.

Cam sighed. "That's such a relief. I didn't want to go to Vegas without making sure things were right between us."

"Vegas?"

He nodded. "Layton and Brandon called. They said I needed to get away and get wild. They're sending me to Vegas for a week and a half."

"And you're okay with that?"

"I wasn't until Hawk reminded me that we're all expected to make a contribution to the family and this would be my contribution." He frowned. "But for the life of me I can't figure out how my going to Vegas has any bearing on the family's well-being."

He would if he knew Peyton had slept with Avantae.

"But you're going anyway?"

Cam shrugged. "You don't say no to Hawk."

And there was good reason for that. Layton never betrayed a confidence and he was a rock. Clearly he and the others had rallied around Peyton while trying to shield Cam.

"I know the feeling," he said.

Cam shrugged. "Anyway, he said we'd have a family discussion when I returned."

"When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Do you need a ride to the airport?"

"No. Declan's giving me a lift. I just came by to make sure we were all right before I left."

They were—until Cam learned of his betrayal. He reached for his wallet. "What about money?"

"Layton and Brandon were very generous. I don't need anything—except to know that I haven't blown things with you."

"That'll never happen, Cam."

Cam sighed and then smiled. "Then I'm good."

"What about...her?"

He shrugged. "She wants someone else. I'll have to learn to deal with that."

Peyton raked a hand through his hair. "When you get back, we'll need to have a serious talk."

"About my relationship with her?"

Peyton nodded.

"That won't be necessary. That's over."

"How do you feel about that, Cam?"

"Not good at the moment, but I'll survive."

"So you're not in love with her?"

"She's not in love with me, but then she never pretended to be. I'll be fine since I don't expect to see her again. If I had to see her again...that would be a different story."

Oh hell. When he fucked up, he did it royally.

Cam glanced at his watch. "I'd better get home and pack my bags. I'll see you when I get back, Hawk."

"Have a good time, Cam."

"I'll try."

He walked Cam to the door, watched him drive away and then returned to his living room. The temptation to drown his despair in alcohol proved difficult to resist. He was determined not to travel down that road. His father had tried to excuse his infidelity by blaming it on abuse of alcohol. Damn if he would stoop to his father's level.

He took a long, cool shower. When he emerged with a towel wrapped around his body, his cordless phone rang. He glanced at the display screen before picking up the phone. "Hi, Declan."

"If you have no plans, I thought we might have dinner tonight, Hawk."

The only person he wanted to see was Avantae, but he suspected Declan might feel compelled to talk to him. "Sounds like a plan."

"Good."

The relief in Declan's voice assured him he'd made the correct call.

"Where would you like to have dinner?" Declan asked.

"I'm really not in the mood to go out. I'll toss a few steaks and vegetables on the grill and we can sit out on the patio."

"I'll be there in about forty minutes."

"See you then."

## Chapter Sixteen

"Benai said you wanted to talk to me."

Seated in the Grayhawks' living room after an early dinner, Avantae looked up as Randall walked into the room. She nodded. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not." He sat on the loveseat.

"I was wondering how he is."

"Peyton's been better."

"Did he ask about me when you saw him?"

"Of course he did."

She glanced down at her clasped hands. "Can I expect to see or hear from him soon?"

"I'm not sure how to answer that."

"Aren't you? Benai told me your brothers were likely to feel he should keep his distance—just as you suggested he should. Did you all gang up on him?"

"As you might know, Peyton was a Marine for ten years. He saw combat during several tours of duty. No one gangs up on him."

"But you all convinced him to stay away from me?"

"We all know how difficult this is for both of you, but we have to look at the bigger picture. We're a family with traditions and guidelines that have served us well over the years. I'm going to be blunt, Avantae. Peyton shouldn't have made love to you before he'd made things right with Cam."

She shook her head. "After what Benai told me of your courtship, I expected you to be more understanding."

He sighed. "Believe me, I understand what I'm asking. It's *because* I made the same choice under similar circumstances that I know it was a mistake. I'd walk barefoot over flaming coals for Benai...hell, I'd gladly give my life to keep her safe. Nevertheless, I was wrong not to take Bancroft's lack of balance into consideration before I pursued her.

"I should have stayed away until Bancroft regained his center of balance. I'd hate to think I started a trend in the family that will leave us a lot weaker than we were."

She wanted to suggest he was a spineless hypocrite for siding against her and Peyton, but one look at the anguish in his gaze convinced her of his sincerity. Tears pricked her eyes. She swallowed and looked away.



He rose and crossed the room to sit beside her on the sofa. After a brief hesitation, he put an arm around her shoulders. "I know it's probably small comfort, but Benai and I are here if you need us."

The words, which should have sounded and felt trite, provided a large measure of comfort instead. She sucked in a breath, turning her face against his shoulder.

He hugged her close, pressing his lips against her hair. "We're a large, supportive family. You needn't be alone unless you want to be, and Benai and I will be with you every step of the way."

"Every step, Avantae."

Hearing Benai's voice, Avantae jerked away from Randall, afraid Benai might misinterpret finding her in Randall's embrace.

Benai flashed a reassuring smile and sat on the other side of her. "There's no need to look like that. Peyton was a rock for me when Randall and I had difficulties. Now it's Randall's turn to do that for you...if you'll let him."

"You don't mind?"

"Absolutely not."

"You're that sure of him?"

Benai nodded. "And you can be that sure of Peyton. Even if he can't see you for a little while, he won't stray."

"I want to respect the Grayhawk traditions, but I feel this...ache to see him." Surprisingly, the admission in Randall's presence elicited no embarrassment.

"Oh, I know the feeling," Benai responded. "After one night spent at my place talking, Randall stayed away from me for seven long, lonely weeks."

"I can't wait that long," she said.

"Cam will be going to Vegas for ten days," Randall said. "When he returns, Peyton will tell him the truth."

"And then?"

"And then I'm not sure what will happen," he admitted, "but I know how he feels about you. Just please believe he's worth a little effort and maybe a little heartache."

"I'm not making any promises." She glanced at her watch. "Will you drive me home?"

"We were hoping you'd spend another night with us," Benai said.

"I really appreciate your hospitality last night and today, but you've given me a lot to think about. I do that best when I'm alone."

"Okay, but if you need to talk, you call me anytime. Okay?"

Although Avantae didn't make friends easily, she'd felt at ease the moment she and Benai had met. "Thanks."

Randall rose. "I'll take you home."

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night, Peyton and Declan sat on his patio sipping beers. "Why weren't you at the meeting?"

Declan shook his head. "I didn't want you to think we were piling on, and frankly I was a little apprehensive that you'd think I'd betrayed your confidence."

"I never thought that."

"Didn't you, Hawk?"

Peyton grimaced. "Okay. I admit I briefly wondered about that...but only because I wasn't thinking clearly. If I had been, the thought would never have crossed my mind."

"So how are you?"

"Lousy."

Declan sighed. "Do you want to talk?"

"Has your advice changed?"

"I still feel you should stay away from her until things are settled with Cam."

"And what if that takes weeks or months? I'm not Layton or Randall. I don't possess their fortitude or ability to deny this almost insatiable need gnawing at me."

"No one expects you to be anyone but yourself, Hawk."

"You think not, after Layton waited years for Tempest and Randall held out for seven weeks with Benai?"

"We don't all have the same abilities. No one expects any more than that you do the best you can. Do that and we'll manage."

"I can't stay away from her much longer."

Declan raked a hand through his hair. "I won't pretend that I understand how you must be feeling, but I know you're emotionally stronger than Cam is."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, Declan."

"He needs you to be considerate of his feelings, Hawk."

"I know that, but I don't think I have the...decency to do that."

Declan shook his head. "Oh no. Don't make the mistake of thinking that. If we've all underestimated your feelings and asked more of you than we should, the error will be ours. It won't reflect any lack of decency on your part."

Peyton shook his head. "You're being overly generous, Declan."

"No. I'm not. You're being overly hard on yourself. You've waited a very long time to meet her again. Now that you have, Cam is...in some distress, but we love him like a brother. We'll rally around and help him. Don't feel overly constrained by what we'd like to see happen. We all know you're as committed to keeping the family strong as the rest of us. No matter what, no one will misconstrue your motives or think any less of you, Hawk."

"Thanks. I needed to hear that." Even if it wasn't true.

"And I needed to say it so that you know you always have been and always will be a model brother I love and admire."

The words humbled and touched Peyton deeply. His throat muscles tightened. Tears pricked his eyes. He took a deep, shuddering breath.

Declan rose, walked around the table and gripped his shoulder. "I was coming anyway, but before I left home, Hawk, Brandon, Croft and Randall all called to ask me to come make sure you understood how much we all love you and how proud we are of the way you distinguished the Grayhawk name while a Marine.

"Nothing will change our love, admiration or commitment to you, Hawk. Nothing."

By the time Declan left, Peyton felt as if an invisible weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He went to bed and fell asleep almost instantly. His dreams started out pleasant before rapidly deteriorating into a nightmare.

\* \* \* \* \*

Peyton somehow managed to get through the next few days without giving any outward appearance that he and Avantae had been intimate. For the first two days, Leonita never allowed them to be alone together. He spent those nights lying sleepless in his chambers, fearful that Avantae would go to the Macarae without his having an opportunity to show her he could be tender and gentle when making love to her.

When he was alone, it was difficult not to sink into despair. What would life be like once she'd left Aireon to live in Macar? Everything he'd worked so hard to achieve could be traced back to his need to be near her. He'd spent nearly half his life preparing to protect her. The Council of Elders had assured him he'd earned the right to continue to protect the royal family once his service to Avantae ended. While he knew that was an honor, he felt even ascending to protecting the Sovereignique herself wouldn't hold the level of prestige he'd felt protecting her oldest daughter.

Without Avantae, his life would stretch into a meaningless tangle of years, each lacking more purpose than the preceding one.

On the third evening of their separation, Avantae leaned over the balcony as he patrolled her private garden.

He looked up at her.

"Leonita has finally returned to her chambers."

His resolve not to touch her again dissipated. Finally. They could be alone again. He could spend part of the night holding her.

"But we still need to be careful."

He clenched his jaw. Was she going to tease him?

"I've missed you. I need you. It should be safe for you to come to me tomorrow night," she whispered.

Another long, miserable night with her so near yet so unattainable. He nodded, aware that he had to be thankful for every moment they were able to spend together.

"Tomorrow night," she said, and left the balcony.

That night seemed endless. The following day felt even longer. Concentrating was difficult. Patrolling with any degree of efficiency was almost impossible. Each time he passed her empty balcony, despair threatened to overwhelm him. Was she having second thoughts? Would he have to spend another night hungering for just a few moments alone with her?

He turned away from her balcony.

"Peyton."

He turned and looked up.

She leaned over the balcony. "I need to be with you. Come to me quickly."

He obeyed, rapidly making his way to her chamber suite. As soon as the door to her bedchamber opened and closed, she rushed toward him.

He wrapped his arms around her naked body. Overwhelmed by his feelings for her, he held her in silence until she drew out of his arms.

She closed her eyes before she reached out to trail her fingers over his face.

He turned his head to kiss her palm. "What are you doing?"

She traced his mouth with her thumb. "I'm memorizing your face so that when we're separated, I can close my eyes and feel your face. When I'm lying sleepless at night—"

He pressed his fingers against her lips. "Let's not think about that until we have to. For now, let's enjoy every second we can share together."

She nodded, opening her eyes. "Let's start by your taking off your clothes."

Already erect, he quickly undressed.

She took a moment to stare at him in obvious appreciation before she stepped close enough to link her arms around his neck. "The last four days have been so long. My nights without you..." She stroked her fingers through his hair. "I've missed you so much."

He nuzzled her neck. "We have to cherish every second we have left."

She lifted her face to his with her lips parted. "Make love to me," she whispered, rubbing her hardened nipples against his chest.

Her soft, warm mouth opened under his.

The aromatic fragrance from her aroused pussy filled him with delight and hunger while washing away his plan to make love to her. He'd fuck her first and then show her his tender side.

As he drank of her sweet lips and sucked on her thrusting tongue, she leaned into him, rubbing her breasts harder against his chest.

Continuing his plunder of her mouth, he slipped a hand between their bodies to rub his cock along her entrance.

She gasped, pushed her hips forward and paused.

Feeling the engorged head of his shaft nestled just inside her sent a rush of pleasure through him. Determined to ensure they both enjoyed each sexual intimacy as fully as possible, he suppressed his need to push into her with one hard, desperate thrust.

Stroking his palms down her back to her big ass, he gently moved his hips forward, savoring each delicious inch of the descent into her tight, wet pussy. When he felt her vaginal muscles forming a firm, sweet seal around his shaft, his remaining patience vanquished.

He dragged his mouth from hers, kissing a path across her cheek to her ear. As he eagerly pumped in and out of the warm channel that felt as if it had been formed to pleasure him alone, he filled her ears with words of unmitigated need, hunger and eternal devotion.

With each expression of affection, she projected a wave of warmth and oneness that ensured she was the center of his world. It drove his need for her. Her pussy contracting around his hot, hard flesh sent electric jolts of pleasure all through him.

He gripped her ass, forcing her groin as close to his as possible. With her breasts crushed against his chest, and his pubic hair brushing against her shaved mons and her engorged clit each time he drove his cock back into her, he felt his climax building quickly.

He lengthened his movements in an attempt to pace himself and to prolong both their pleasure. His need to come couldn't be denied and he was afraid of coming before her. Then he felt the involuntary rippling of her stomach muscles. Her thighs shook. He only needed to hold out a little longer before he could totally surrender to his release.

If he did that, it would be over within minutes. He wanted it to last. Stroking his palms up and down her body, he pulled partway out of her.

She moaned in protest, her beautiful silver eyes fluttering open. "Why are you stopping, Peyton?"

"I need this to last as long as possible."

"We can do it again and again...all night long. Don't stop."

He pushed back into her, sliding his hands down the soft, warm skin of her back. Everything about her enchanted him. How would life be worth living once she was gone? Once he could no longer experience the sheer delight of feeling her arms around him, and look into the gaze of a woman he knew would always cherish him as deeply as he did her?

"Touch my ass," he whispered.

"Oh Peyton." She slipped her hands down his body to his tight buns and slowly pushed her hips forward, impaling herself on him.

He closed his eyes, savoring the rush of emotions surging through him.

"Take me and make me your one," she encouraged.

The urgent words energized him. He then slid his hands down to her warm ass.

She moaned soft encouragement when he reclaimed her mouth. Surrendering to the primal need she created in him, he took her with a series of rapid, deep thrusts.

She dragged her nails up and down his back in response. Her vaginal muscles tightened, bathing his cock in what felt like a river of her sweet juices.

He raised his palms and slapped her ass in time with his thrusts until her cheeks jiggled.

"Oh...Goddess!" She dragged her mouth away from his.

Her pussy contracted wildly around him.

He reclaimed her lips and thrust in deep.

She shuddered in response.

Finally, he felt she was close to coming. He slipped a finger down her crack and into her asshole.

Her mouth opened as she gasped.

He sucked on her tongue.

She arched into him, her entire body shaking with the force of her release.

Her wild contractions drove him over the edge. He groaned and shuddered as he pumped his seed into her. Then he slumped forward, pinning her against the wall.

They remained standing, still locked together for several minutes until he regained the strength to withdraw from her. After pressing a gentle kiss against her mouth, he lifted her in his arms.

She smiled up at him. Linking one arm around his neck, she stroked the other half of the heart charm that hung from the silverdine chain on his neck. "I love you now and always, Peyton. Always."

\* \* \* \* \*

Back in her condo, Avantae felt restless and increasingly depressed at Peyton's failure to contact her. How could he bear their separation without even a phone call? Was he indifferent to her feelings? Or did he care that she'd lost her appetite and found sleep elusive?

She wanted to respect his family traditions, but she didn't know how much longer she'd be able to stay away from him. If he didn't call her soon...what? What would she do?

She gave an angry shake of her head. What if she'd mistaken his lust for something real? What if he didn't want to see or talk to her? Surely if he did, he would have done as Randall had done, defy his family and see her.

By the Goddess. What would she do if he didn't return her feelings? What if he'd seduced her just to prove how wrong she was for Cam? She closed her eyes, overwhelmed with despair at the thought.

Maybe writing would help. She turned on her computer and closed her eyes while taking deep breaths. Once she felt calmer, she read the last scene she had written. As she read, long-buried memories pushed their way to the surface.

*Forever and a day. While she savored the wonder of the admission, he pushed his hips forward and broke her virgin shield. Covering her lips with his to silence her cry of pain, he slowly slid balls-deep inside her.*

She sat staring at her monitor, fearful she had lost her mind. But her most primal instincts could no longer be denied. A sovereign knows her subjects and they know her. By the Goddess, she knew why she hadn't rewritten the first love scene between Avantae and Peyton. Because she had written it as it had actually happened so long ago. What else could explain Peyton's instinctive show of obedience and her expectation that he would obey her without question?

At long last they had been given a second chance for happiness. Now she had to help Peyton remember. Then they'd find a way to tell Cam of their relationship.

*Peyton. Oh, Peyton. Please. Call me. Give me a sign that I'm not in this alone. Please. Please remember me and what we once shared.*

## Chapter Seventeen

Peyton woke with the remnants of the dream lingering in his conscious mind. Or had it been a dream? Why would he feel as if he'd lived before if it were only a dream? If only a dream, why had he bowed to her? Why did he suddenly feel a soft, seductive voice urging him to remember a shared past?

*Please remember me and what we once shared. Be mine again. Let me help you remember. Call me. Call me.*

He knew what he had to do. He sat up and reached for his cordless phone.

She answered on the second ring. "Hawk?"

"Yes."

"Finally!"

"How are you, Red?"

She sighed. "I'd be better if we were together."

"Believe me, I know the feeling."

"We need to talk."

"I'm listening."

"We need to talk in person."

He closed his eyes, shaking his head. "I know, but that's not an option at the moment."

"Why not? Because your brothers have decided it's not?"

He narrowed his gaze. "There's something you should understand. Layton wouldn't ask anything of me that he wouldn't have been prepared to do himself."

"I'm sure you believe that to be true."

"That's only because it *is* true. Layton has gone out of his way to keep us together as a family since our mother died. Please don't attribute selfish motives to him or any of my brothers. They're all good, decent men."

When she spoke again her voice had softened. "I didn't mean to imply they weren't, Peyton. I'm just...frustrated and a little afraid that their advice will keep us apart indefinitely. I'm only asking you to consider the fact that just because their advice is given with pure motives doesn't mean it's *good* advice."

"You don't understand. We have family rules we're all expected to honor and uphold."

"Please don't think I don't respect your family's mores, Peyton, but—"



"Do you?" He found her silence at the question unnerving. "We're a very close-knit family. We value each other's views and I value their good opinions," he told her.

"I understand, but we need to talk, Peyton. That's all I'm saying."

"We can talk."

"In person. Please. I need to see you. Don't make me beg."

He sighed. "I have no wish to make you beg, but —"

"Don't you want to see me?"

"You have no idea how much I want to see you, but —"

"Why does there need to be a 'but'?"

"We need to make things right with Cam before —"

"You can't put the horse back in the barn, Peyton."

"I know that, but we...I need to do this the right way this time."

"Don't make me beg, Hawk. Please."

"Please understand my position, Red. I've already let everyone down. I can't do it again."

"I need to see you. If you have any feelings for me, you'll allow me to keep my dignity intact."

The authoritative tone in her voice made continued refusal difficult. He relented. "Okay, Avantae, but we need to meet in a very public place."

"Okay."

"And I need another day or two."

"Another...okay, two days. We'll see each other in two days?"

Two days would give him some time to clear his head and hopefully strengthen his resolve. "Yes."

"That'll seem like a lifetime, but okay, Peyton. Two days. Name the time and place and I'll be there."

After hanging up, Peyton lay staring up at his bedroom ceiling. He'd made her and himself happy. He thought of Layton's reaction and sighed. Should he call Randall? His hand hovered over the phone. Perhaps Randall and Benai could join them. Then, if he weakened and was tempted to go home with her or take her home with him, Randall could ride shotgun. On the other hand, if he *did* go home with her, he wouldn't want to put Randall in the position of having to deceive Layton by covering for him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Avantae spent the next two days trying to write while worrying about what she would wear for her first date with Peyton. Her heart assured her she had won his love and devotion on Aireon. But if that were true, how were his brothers able to persuade him not to see her until they deemed it appropriate? And how could she be sure he'd

actually keep their date? Peyton seemed to think his eldest brother Layton practically walked on water. What if he convinced Peyton that meeting her for dinner was a mistake?

She lost track of the number of times she'd picked up the phone to call Peyton. Each time, she decided against it. She didn't want to give the impression she didn't trust him. Now that she knew who they both were, she couldn't afford to do anything that drove a wedge between them. Although she longed to have him make love to her again, she feared she'd have to wait until they'd talked to Cam about their relationship.

She woke with an upset stomach the morning of their date. Would he meet her or would he stand her up? If he intended to keep their date, why hadn't he at least called to leave a message to confirm?

Determined not to waste the day, she spent an hour working out in the complex gym before showering and going to the spa. She had a full body massage, a facial, a pedicure and a manicure. She then had her hair done. She returned home for a quick shower before dressing. When she was satisfied with her appearance, she left for the restaurant where she and Peyton had agreed to meet.

\* \* \* \* \*

During the two days he spent waiting to see Avantae again, Peyton felt as if he floundered in a vast ocean during a wild hurricane. He struggled with the sensation that he was a man past the point of rescue, about to drown. Despite the support he'd always experienced from his family, there seemed no way to avoid either hurting Cam and disappointing his family, or hurting Avantae. Torn between family loyalty and his feelings for Avantae, his performance at work suffered. Each day was a constant struggle not to snap at everyone. Despite his exhaustion, sleep eluded him.

Peyton woke the morning of his date with Avantae in a mental fog. Getting through the day took nearly all his resolve. Finally the workday ended and he headed home to shower and change.

Randall called as Peyton left for his date with Avantae. "Benai and I are having dinner out. Join us."

"Thanks, but I have plans already." He got into his car and waited for Randall to ask about his plans for the evening.

"Oh. Okay."

"Give Benai a kiss for me."

"I will. Are you all right, Peyton? Do you need to talk?"

"No. I'm okay. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"You're sure you're all right? If you like, I can put off dinner for an hour and come see you."

Damn. Randall must sense something was wrong. "I'm as good as I'm going to be, Randy. Don't worry about me."

"How can I not, Peyton?"

He sighed. "I'm not all right now but I will be. Go enjoy dinner with Benai."

"Let's make a date for Saturday morning. Come riding with me and Benai, or just me if you don't feel like company."

"Thanks but I don't want to make any plans for the weekend yet."

"Okay. Let's stop beating around the bush, Peyton. I think you need to go talk to Hawk."

"Been there. Done that."

"I know you can't keep the promise you made. I fucked up enough with Croft for the both of us. Please do this the right way. Call Layton and be straight with him."

"He's not going to want to hear—"

"He loves you and wants you to be happy. He might not be thrilled, but he'll understand. Call him."

"I will...after our date tonight."

"Call him first."

"So he can talk me out of seeing her?" He shook his head. "I have to see her, Randy. I know it sounds selfish and...hell, it is selfish, but I can't help how I feel."

"Peyton, please...we can't tear the family apart. No one else has stepped out of bounds except us. What kind of example are we setting for the others? You know they look up to us and, between the two of us, we've fucked up pretty good."

He closed his eyes briefly. "I know that and that's the last thing I want to do, Randy, but...I can't control my feelings anymore. Please understand."

"I do, but... Do what you have to do, Peyton. No matter what, I'll always have your back. Always."

"You've never let me down, Randy."

"I hope I never will because we're brothers of the flesh and spirit to death and beyond, Peyton."

"I think we've already been brothers beyond death, Randy. I know I've lived before and I have memories of another brother who—" He swallowed in an effort to dislodge a sudden lump in his throat. "Who was the best part of me then—as you are now. I let him down, Randy."

"But you've never let *me* down, Peyton. Never, and I'm sure he understood and forgave whatever transgression came between you."

"I won't ask you to cover for me, Randy."

Randall sighed. "If that's what you need me to do—"

"No! No. I won't have you doing anything to damage your relationship with Hawk on my behalf."

"I can't let you go through this alone."

"I'll be fine and you have other interests now and —"

"Benai understands how close we are, Peyton, and what you mean to me. She knows I'll do whatever is necessary to support you. She wouldn't want it any other way."

"Tempest is great, but Benai is extraordinary. Give her a kiss for me and enjoy dinner with her. I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Ah...okay...if you're sure."

"I am." He ended the call and drove to the restaurant. Avantae hadn't arrived so he ordered a drink and waited.

A tingle along the back of his neck signaled her arrival. He looked up from his drink to find her standing in the entrance. The moment he saw her, the storm of emotions that had raged through him calmed. Regardless of the ensuing consequences or fallout, keeping their date had been the right decision.

With the uncertainty removed, he studied her. Damn she was beautiful. She wore a lavender-colored silk dress that left one shoulder bare. A satin panel circled her waist. The skirt of the dress fell in folds and ended just below her knees. She looked regal, supermodel-gorgeous and pleased to see him.

With his heart racing, he swallowed hard and rose. Suppressing the urge to drop to one knee as she walked toward him proved difficult to resist.

A beautiful yet seductive smile curved her lips upward. She extended her hand.

He clasped it between both of his.

Their gazes met and locked.

*Cocamora zomar*. The strange words danced in his head. Their meaning hovered just out of range in his memory. Did she know what they meant?

"I was afraid you might not come, Peyton."

"I couldn't stay away any longer." He released her hand and waited until she sat before he returned to his chair.

The waiter approached. They placed their orders and sat gazing at each other in silence until their drinks arrived. Glancing at his, Peyton decided he needed a clear head. He left it untouched. "I know it's crazy, but I feel as if...no...I *know* we've met before in another life."

She nodded. "We've done more than meet, Peyton. We were very important to each other. You've started to remember. Haven't you?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure why."

"What do you remember?"

He shrugged. "I have flashes of remembrances — usually after dreams."

She pushed her untouched glass aside and leaned forward to look into his eyes. "They're not dreams, Peyton. They're memories. Before we met, I was writing an online serial called *Sirens' Tales*." She grimaced. "I was vain enough to think I had enough

talent that the stories just sprang into my head without much conscious effort on my part. But *Sirens' Tales* is so easy to write because the events all happened."

"I get the impression our relationship in the past didn't end on a positive note."

She blinked rapidly and briefly glanced away from him. "No. It didn't, but the Goddess was kind. We've been given another chance, Peyton."

"Why do I get the feeling we tried to take our first chance at someone else's expense—as we're doing now at Cam's?"

"If given the chance, I can make him understand, Hawk."

Her voice was so persuasive he almost believed her. Afraid she was about to turn those powers on him, he changed the subject. "What did you think of Randall and Benai?"

"They're incredible. It's so obvious they're in love with each other that I felt a little petty because I was jealous. I've never seen such love and devotion on display."

"You'll see it again when you meet Layton and Tempest. They share a similar depth of devotion."

She smiled. "So it runs in the family?"

"As a matter of fact it does. When we fall in love or enter a committed relationship, we don't stray." He reached across the table to cover her hand with his. "I won't ever stray, Red."

She squeezed his hand. "Neither will I. I've waited a very long time for another chance with you, my handsome Hawk. Can we go somewhere and talk?"

He shook his head. "If we go anywhere private, I'm not going to waste time talking."

"So let's not talk. Let's just go some place private. You must know we can't continue like this."

"I know, but I have to talk to Layton first. I have to be honest with him about my feelings."

"Tell me first," she urged.

"I think I'm in love with you."

"You only think? I know how I feel about you."

"And how is that?"

"*Cocamora*," she whispered.

"I shouldn't, but I know what that means."

"That alone should tell you we need to talk in a private setting."

"I know that, and we will. Give me time to talk to Layton again."

"What if he insists we wait indefinitely?"

"No matter how my conversation with him goes, that's not going to happen."

"Do you need his blessing to see me?"

"We were raised to cherish family ties and to revere our elders and family head, who keeps us together in our own little tribe. Layton now heads our family and since there are so many of us, he has a lot on his shoulders. We all know that and love him just a little more because of all the sacrifices he made growing up to help lift us out of near poverty.

"My brothers are all amazing men because of the example he set. Determined to make our lives better, he got his first job at thirteen and gave his checks to our mother for family use. He graduated high school at sixteen and was the first Native American valedictorian at our school. Then, while working a full-time job, he graduated college *magna cum laude* before he was twenty. He received his master's two years later while working full-time and mentoring us. He set the bar high."

"Too high?"

He shook his head. "My next two oldest brothers, Brandon and Bancroft, met the challenge. They graduated college *magna cum laude* as well, and both had master's degrees by the time they were twenty-two while working full-time and helping improve our family's finances.

"Following Layton's example, the oldest of us believed in excelling academically, graduating as soon as possible and getting high-paying jobs to make our mother's life much easier, and to ensure our younger siblings wouldn't need to work quite so hard and could grow up with less hardship."

She smiled. "I can see why you're all so close. How did you and Randall do in college?"

He shrugged. "Because our three older brothers worked so hard, we were kind of slackers. We were nearly eighteen before we graduated high school."

Her beautiful silver gaze widened. "Oh horrors!"

He laughed.

"What about college? Randall told me you were the first in the family to graduate *summa cum laude*."

"Randy is modest. It's an honor we both shared. Like the older three before us, we worked full-time while in college. Randall has a talent with computers and his earnings far outstripped mine. After college, he encouraged me to follow my heart and promised he'd have my back and help cover any financial detriment that choice caused our family.

"So our paths diverged. He worked harder and earned his master's degree while designing more software and managing to make the U.S. Olympic boxing team."

"He must have been an amazing man."

"He still is, Red."

"I'm sure he is, but let's discuss you, Hawk. What did you do?"

"Our creed is *Ka-ah-haw mo-har*."

She nodded and murmured. "Family first."

He blinked. "Randall told you?"

"No."

"Then how do you know what it means?"

"I'm not sure. I've always had a knack for picking up languages." She frowned. "But that's not Tsalagi."

"You speak Tsalagi?"

"I can't actually speak it but I can read it in a rudimentary way. But that phrase isn't Tsalagi."

"No, it's not. I'm not sure of its origins. It's one of the few valuable lessons our father taught us, though God knows he didn't live by it himself."

She squeezed his hand. "Go on."

"Since we all believe in putting family first, we talked to our older brothers. Both Layton and Brandon had forgone their desire to serve in the military to help our family prosper. With their blessings and encouragement, I joined the Marines."

"Randall tells me you had a distinguished but short career as a pilot."

He felt a twinge in his left shoulder. "I served for ten years before returning home. I got a master's degree and began making my contribution to the family coffers."

"Education is important to your family?"

He nodded. "We all have master's degrees and we all contribute a percentage of our income to a family fund. But I want to know about you. Who are you?"

"Who do you think I am, Peyton?"

He answered truthfully. "The one person who completes me. My woman...my *sheenea*."

Tears filled her eyes. "Would it frighten you away, Peyton, if I admitted you are my reason for living?"

"No." He took a deep breath. "Do you mind if we skip dinner? I need to go talk to Layton."

"You didn't answer my question. Do you need his approval to see me?"

"I can't tell you how much I love and admire him. His approval means a lot to me. I want it and I'll do what I can to earn it, but I don't need it."

"What happens after you talk to him?"

He recaptured her hand. "I want to spend the night with you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Peyton arrived home to find Layton's car parked in the oval of his driveway.

As he parked, Layton turned off his engine and got out.

Layton had always insisted his siblings treat his mansion like home, coming and going at will. Conversely, Layton had always gone out of his way not to invade their

private domains. Although he had the keys and alarm codes to all their homes, he'd never used them.

Peyton had always viewed Layton as an ideal older brother, more than deserving of the respect they all accorded him.

He got out of his car and met Layton on the front steps. "Hawk. Is something wrong?"

Layton clasped his hand, placing his other hand on his shoulder. "Benai called earlier, worried about Randall."

Peyton's heartbeat quickened. "Something's wrong with Randy?"

"I arrived to find him in perfect physical shape. He was surprised to see me. He insisted nothing was wrong but he avoided my gaze and paced the entire half hour I was there. So here I am, Peyton. Clearly you have a problem we need to discuss."

"I'm sorry to drag you out this late, Hawk. I know you'd rather be home with Tempest and the twins."

"I'm here for a reason, Peyton."

"I do need to talk to you. I was going to call you." He opened his door and stepped aside to allow Layton to enter before him. They walked into the living room. "Do you want a drink, Hawk?"

Layton shook his head.

"Then I won't waste your time by beating around the bush. I can't keep my promise not to see Avantae until things are straightened out with Cam, Hawk."

Layton sighed, raking a hand through his hair. "Are you sure? It's only been a few days."

"I know how long you waited for Tempest, but I've never possessed your strength of character or the same level of commitment to *Ka-ah-haw mo-har*. Each day without seeing her has felt like an eternity. Without her, I feel as if I'm on a canoe in the middle of a tempestuous ocean being tossed about while I struggle with the constant threat of drowning. I hate disappointing you and setting a bad example for the others —"

Layton rose from the sofa, crossing the room to face him. "While family obligations precluded Brandon and me from serving our country, you joined and represented our family with honor and distinction. One of the proudest days of my life was watching you graduate from the Naval Academy, Peyton. You have never disappointed me nor set a bad example for the others."

"I saw her tonight."

Layton's dark brown gaze didn't flicker. Nor did he speak.

"I know I should have called you before I did but I was afraid you'd talk me out of seeing her and...I can't bear staying away from her anymore, Hawk. The moment I saw her tonight, I felt a calm delight I've never experienced with anyone else."

"She's definitely your *sheenea*?"



"She's more than that. She's my one, Hawk. I feel as if I've spent countless miserable lifetimes waiting to meet her again. Now that I have...I have to be with her. I know you don't agree, but having your blessing would mean more to me than I can say."

"And if I don't give it?"

Peyton sighed, feeling a weight descend on his shoulders. "I'm going to see her anyway."

"I see."

"I didn't say that lightly, Hawk. You know how I feel about you —"

Layton shook his head. "Never mind, Peyton. I've clearly placed an unfair burden on you and —"

"No. You haven't. I'm just not as morally strong as you and Randall. I feel so lost without her."

"Then tell me what I can do to help."

"Give me your blessing."

"I love Tempest so much that without her, even with the twins and you and the others, a large part of my life would feel as if it weren't worth living. I want that for you and the others." Layton embraced him. "You don't need my blessing, Peyton, but you have it."

Peyton closed his eyes and clung to him. "Thank you. I know this is going to make things more difficult with Cam."

"She's your *Sheeneea*, Peyton. We'll deal with Cam as a family." Layton released him. "Go spend time with her and when you're ready, we'll be happy to welcome her into the family."

"Cam won't."

"She's not his *sheeneea*."

"Are you sure, Hawk?"

"Yes. Brandon, Croft and I all talked to him about her. The coming weeks will be difficult for him, but he loves you. He's been around us long enough to know what meeting one's *sheeneea* means."

"Randall was right to insist I talk to you." Peyton gripped Layton's hand. "You've lifted an incredible weight off my shoulders, Hawk."

Layton placed a palm on the back of Peyton's neck. "All part of being the eldest brother."

"I know I haven't made it any easier, but no one has ever done it better than you, Hawk."

Layton smiled.

As they embraced again, Peyton knew the weeks ahead were going to be unpleasant, but would be a little easier because he now had the blessing of the only person he admired more than Randall.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back in her condo waiting for Peyton's call, Avantae undressed, took a quick shower and slipped on a pair of pajamas before she settled down to write the next chapter of *Sirens' Tales*. For once the words wouldn't come. Rereading the last love scene she'd written left her feeling depressed rather than uplifted.

Her subconscious must be blocking her memory of what had happened next. Like Peyton, she felt their first love affair had ended tragically. Was that why she couldn't or wouldn't remember what had taken place on Aireon?

Or was she delusional? If not, she must believe she had once been Sovereignique Ascendant, next in line to rule after her mother, Her Royal Highness Supreme. That would have made Peyton her...servant?

She shook her head. How could she ever view him as anything but an equal whose love and adoration she needed almost as much as she needed to breathe?

Once she and Peyton had spent some time making love, they'd have to talk. They'd need to understand and remember the past before they could hope to receive Cam's blessing and forgiveness.

She sat staring at her monitor, lost in a struggle to remember her past, when the ringing phone startled her. Blowing out a quick breath, she rose to answer it. A smile curved her lips as she glanced at the caller ID.

"Hawk. Did you talk to Layton?"

"Yes."

"And he gave us his blessing."

"Yes, but how did you know?"

She smiled. "There's very little tension in your voice and after hearing Randall sing his praises, I was hopeful that he would."

"I'll be there in half an hour."

"I hope you have a suitcase."

"Actually, I don't. I'm going to take the next few days off and I was hoping *you'd* pack a suitcase and come spend the rest of the week with me."

"I'd love to."

"Good. I'll see you soon, Red."

"I'll be waiting, Hawk."

After she hung up, she sent Lyss a quick email to tell her she'd be with Peyton and not to worry if she didn't hear from her for a few days. Then she packed a suitcase,

dressed in a silk pantsuit that emphasized all her assets, and waited for Peyton to arrive.

## Chapter Eighteen

The moment he closed the door to her condo, Peyton engulfed her in a warm embrace. She closed her eyes and savored those first sweet moments when they both knew they shared a love so deep and true it had spanned several lifetimes.

When he finally released her and wiped at her cheeks, she realized she was crying.

"Don't," he whispered, cupping his palms over her face. "Don't ever cry for me again, Red."

She took his right hand in hers, brushing her lips over it. "Do you remember what happened to us?"

"I have a feeling it wasn't pleasant, but we've been given another chance. Let's concentrate on that for now and worry about the past later. Right now I just want to take you home with me and..."

"And what?"

He trailed his hand down her cheek to her breasts. "And fuck you so deep and hard you'll be sore as hell and walking bow-legged tomorrow."

She linked her arms around his waist. "Did you come prepared to play safely?"

"Condoms?"

She nodded.

He shook his head, slipping his palms around her to cup her ass. "I need it raw, Red."

The thought of his big, erect cock ejaculating directly into her pussy again sent a rush of delight through her. "I'm very...fertile now, Peyton."

"Good. What do you say I take you home and we'll see how quickly I can knock you up?"

His use of a phrase she'd always considered crude excited her. She rubbed her groin against his. "Take me home and knock me up, my handsome Hawk."

"That's the plan." He slipped his hands into the waistband of her pants and thong to caress her bare ass cheeks. "You are so beautiful."

She smiled and lifted her chin with her lips parted.

He bent his head. "Damn, I love you," he whispered before he kissed her until she had to pull her lips away to gulp air into her lungs. When he lifted his head, he squeezed her ass. "You deserve to be made love to, but I need to fuck you first."

"I like being fucked," she told him. "Take me home, handsome, and fuck me until my knees knock, my thighs shake and I come all over your big, beautiful cock."

"Damn, you're getting me aroused. Fuck it." He suddenly stepped away from her and started pulling off his clothes.

"What are you doing?"

With his shirt and undershirt lying on the floor, he kicked off his shoes and pulled off his socks and pants. "Home is where the heart is and my heart is wherever you are, Red," he told her.

Gazing at his naked body, with his cock semi-erect, her pussy flooded. He personified masculine perfection with his big chest, wide shoulders, narrow hips, long legs and beautiful genitals. She moistened her lips. She would soon feel his cock powering into her pussy and his cum jetting deep into her body.

He leaned against the entrance door. "One lovely night I'd like you to strip for me, Red."

"You would?"

He nodded. "Yes, but right now what I need is you naked against the wall, ready for a good, hard, raunchy fuck."

She quickly pulled off her clothes and underwear. Leaving her thigh-high dark hose and heels on, she dropped to her knees in front of him. Placing her hands on his thighs, she leaned forward to rub her face against his cock and balls. She inhaled his scent before extending her tongue to lick his big balls and the base of his cock.

He inhaled sharply.

Smiling, she cupped a hand under his balls while gently nibbling at the underside of his warm shaft.

His hips inched closer.

Taking the hint, she kissed and licked a path up from his sac to his cock head. After casting a quick smile up at him, she tongued the hole in the tip of his penis.

He shuddered. "Oh...Red...Red."

She brushed her lips over his cock head before taking it between her lips and into her mouth.

"Damn!"

She compressed her cheeks. Sucking him slowly, she pressed her tongue against the underside of his thick, hard length. She'd never particularly enjoyed giving blowjobs, but she loved the feel and taste of him.

His hands descended on her shoulders, pulling her closer.

She spent a minute or so gently sucking the head of his shaft before slipping both hands around his body to his taut ass cheeks.

He pushed his hips forward.

Taking the hint, she twirled her tongue around the big, warm head pulsing inside her mouth. She loved the taste and texture of his cock. Eager to give him pleasure, she

pulled more of his hard length between her lips and settled down to give him a deep-throated blow.

He gripped her head, pushing her mouth as far along his cock as he could.

Conquering her gag reflex, she dug her nails into his ass and sucked harder, until his thick length filled her mouth and her cheeks ached.

Her reward came when he groaned, shoved his hips forward and erupted in her mouth.

She swallowed as quickly as she could, surprised by both the power of his ejaculate and the number of detonations. Just as she felt she would have to pull her lips away to get air to her lungs, he pulled his cock out of her mouth.

She gasped for air.

He urged her to her feet, pressed her against the wall by the door, lifted her left leg and thrust his cock balls-deep in her with one hard thrust.

With her pussy feeling stretched around him, she stared up at him in wonder. "You're still so deliciously thick and hard. How long can you stay erect?"

Slipping his big palms over her ass cheeks, he grinned down at her. "I can stay erect for hours and give you multiple orgasms," he told her. "I can fuck your sweet pussy all night, my beautiful Red."

The image his words conjured was so erotic, her vaginal muscles convulsed around him as she enjoyed a mini climax. In response, she felt a quick but powerful jet of semen inside her.

She gazed up at him. The sex between them was great but the emotional high she received from having him inside her touched her on a much deeper level.

He withdrew partway from her.

"Don't," she protested. "Please don't stop."

"That's the last thing I'm going to do, Red."

"What *are* you going to do?"

He caressed her breasts. "I'm about to fuck you until I can feel your sweet pussy juices gushing all over my cock."

She trailed her nails along his chest. "Oh yeah? Are you going to talk about it or actually do it?"

He thumbed her clit.

She sucked in a breath. "Oh, Peyton. When you touch me..."

"What?"

"I feel happy, at peace, and so blessed to have you back again. I do have you back. Don't I?"

"Yes. Oh yes." Speaking in a brusque whisper, he thrust back into her.

"Oh...yes...yes." Linking her arms around his neck, she pulled his head down.

His lips crashed down on hers. Clutching her close, he drew his hips back and then quickly shot them forward again.

Savoring the shock of pleasure that shook her body, she moaned against his lips. "I'm yours, Hawk. Take me. Fuck me."

He slipped one arm around her waist, placed the other against the wall and pounded his cock in and out of her.

Waves of pleasure crashed over her, until she felt submerged in an ocean of delight. His chest against her hardened nipples, his lips and tongue cajoling and teasing hers apart, combined with his hard cock pushed her into a quick, powerful climax.

Moments later he exploded inside her. After a brief period of resting against her, he withdrew. Then he embraced her, whispering against her ear.

She pulled away to smile at him. "Peyton...you were just speaking in Tsalagi."

"Why should that surprise you?" He shrugged. "It's my native tongue."

"I know, but Benai told me that in the beginning of their relationship, Randall often spoke to her in Tsalagi when they made love. She said he later told her it was his way of showing how deeply he felt about her before he was ready to admit it in English. Should I read anything into your lapsing into Tsalagi?"

He lifted a hand to her lips. "You mean other than the fact that I adore you?"

"The feeling is mutual, Peyton."

"Good. Now let's dress and go home."

"Are you up to driving?"

He nodded. "I want our first night together to be in my bed. Okay?"

She nodded. "Yes."

Ninety minutes later, they tumbled into his bed naked and aroused. After a quick, hard fuck, they lay in a tangle of arms and legs. He touched the charm hanging around her neck. "Where did you get this?"

"I've always had it. Where's yours?"

He shook his head. "I don't have one."

"Maybe not now but didn't you have the other half once?"

"I don't know anything except that I'm tired."

She snuggled closer. "Then sleep."

They fell asleep in each other's arms. Between brief naps, they woke to fuck three more times.

Before dawn, he withdrew his cock from her pussy, lying spoon fashion behind her.

She sighed, sated with pleasure. "I feel so full of cum. What a lovely feeling."

He kissed the back of her neck. "God, please don't let this be a dream. Don't let me wake up to find myself alone in bed filled with grief because I've lost you."

She turned in his arms in the semi-dark bedroom. "You'll never lose me again, Hawk."

He kissed her lips. "We still have to deal with Cam."

"I know." She turned again, settling her ass against his groin. "We'll make him understand – together."

"Together," he echoed before whispering to her in Tsalagi.

Content, she fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Used to rising early, although tired, Peyton woke just after seven a.m. Avantae slept beside him. Easing her onto her back, he lay propped on one elbow, watching her. It took several minutes to convince himself he was awake and not dreaming.

Pressing a light kiss against her lips, he slipped out of bed. A quick, cool shower might help wake him up. Pulling on a pair of briefs and jeans, he left the bedroom.

In the living room, he called Randall.

"Are you all right?"

"I've never felt better, Randy. For the first time in my life I feel emotionally complete. What you and Benai and Hawk and Tempest share is within my reach – as long as I'm prepared to trample on Cam's feelings."

"I know what you're going through, Peyton."

"What's your advice?"

"Tell Cam as soon as possible. He loves you. It might take awhile but he'll forgive you. The sooner you tell him, the less betrayed he'll feel."

"I'll fly to Vegas this weekend to tell him. Thanks, Hawk."

"For what?"

"I know you didn't betray my confidence but your worry about me triggered Benai's worry. I came home to find Layton waiting to talk to me. We cleared the air and he understands how I feel about her."

"I'm glad. I'd hate to have him think we're the two fuckups of the family."

Peyton laughed. "But we are."

"I guess we are, but we're lucky enough to belong to a very loving and forgiving family. We must have done something right. If you have no plans for the next few days, Benai would like you two to come over for dinner one night."

"Thanks, but I think we want to spend as much time alone as possible."

"Understood."

"We'll take a rain check."

"Okay."



\* \* \* \* \*

Avantae woke to what felt like a fairytale day with Peyton kissing her. She enjoyed the frequent, lingering kisses that lengthened the breakfast they shared in bed. After a shower, they took a long ride along the Wissahickon Creek Trails on his big black stallion, Locoata.

"Locoata? Why Locoata?" she asked, stroking the stallion's back.

"He's as loyal as someone I once knew, trusted and loved."

She half turned to look at him. "Someone?"

His arm tightened around her waist. "Maybe he wasn't a person, but I miss him."

She nodded, turning back to look ahead along the quiet, tree-lined trail. "I know the feeling, Hawk. I miss her too."

After a moment of silence for what they both felt was the loss of a part of themselves, he sighed. "You seem to remember more than I do. Do you know what happened to them?"

"No. I don't...but I'd like to think they somehow managed to survive and if the Goddess extends just a little more graciousness, maybe we'll at least discover their fate."

"I suppose that's the best we can hope for."

"But I don't think either one of them would want us to have anything but fond memories of them." She sighed. "So let's think happy thoughts."

He kissed the back of her neck. "That's easy because I'm happiest when I'm with you."

She turned to brush her cheek against his shoulder.

After their ride, they had lunch at the Wissahickon Inn before returning to the mansion. They settled on the living room sofa to cuddle and talk.

"I don't know anything about you," he told her, stroking his big palm over her belly. "What do you do? Do you have a family? Have you ever been married? Where were you born?"

"As far as I know I was an only child."

"You don't know?"

She shook her head. "I was blessed to be adopted and raised by the best parents in the world when I was just six months. They had somewhat modest means and wanted to pamper me so I grew up an only child. They've always been so supportive of me—even when I told them I was dropping out of college after two years to pursue a music career."

His hands stilled on her breasts. "You sing? Of course you do with that voice."

"Why 'of course'?"

"Any woman with such a persuasive speaking voice is bound to have a beautiful singing voice."

Smiling, she lifted his hand from her breast to her lips. "Thank you."

"How did your career go?"

"Very well. I didn't do it long but I made far more money than I ever thought I'd have. I was able to buy my parents a beautiful house in California and a condo in Florida, where they live now."

"You were lead singer?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

He trailed his hand down her breasts, over her stomach and under her dress to palm her bare pussy. "Because everything about you, including your voice, is special."

"You're very sweet."

"What happened to the group when you stopped performing?"

She trembled, closing her legs on his hand. "The Sirens are even more successful now."

He stiffened. "The Sirens? You sang with The Sirens?"

"Yes." She removed his hand before she turned to face him. "Until I left to write our story. Were you a fan?"

"Actually I'd never heard of your group before Cam gave me one of your CDs. The moment I heard you sing *Pledging My Love*, my whole world changed."

"In what way?"

"My relationship with my live-in lover was over."

"Oh...I can't pretend to regret that but I hope she wasn't hurt."

"Have you ever been married or engaged, Red?"

"No." She stroked his cheek before slipping her arm around his neck. "I wasn't exactly a choirgirl, but I never fell in love with anyone because I was waiting for you, Peyton. I've loved you from the moment we met so long ago. I'm always going to love you and only you. Now I want you to love me."

"Oh Red, I do."

She pushed up her dress, exposing her vagina. "Show me."

He rolled her onto her back, unzipped his pants and withdrew his cock.

She closed her eyes and parted her legs. "Oh, give it to me, handsome. All of it."

He bent to kiss and tongue her.

A few lashings of his tongue and thrusts of his fingers and her pussy flooded. "That's so nice." She gripped his shoulders. "But I want to feel you inside me now."

He rose long enough to undress before rejoining her on the sofa. Slipping between her thighs, he pressed his cock head against her entrance.

She lifted her hips, sliding her palms down his back to his ass. "Love me."

"I do...I do..." He sank balls-deep inside her.

She sighed with pleasure, holding him close. "Oh...yes...yes. I love you so much, Peyton."

"I love you too," he whispered, lapsing into Tsalagi.

He made love to her slowly, giving them both time to savor each long, deep, delicious stroke of his cock sliding in and out of her pussy. Lost in the sweet delight of knowing he was finally hers again, she lost track of how many times they came before he groaned, shuddered and collapsed on top of her.

Sated, happy and tired, she drifted to sleep with him still inside her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Still buried deep in Avantae, Peyton dozed. He came awake abruptly, a feeling of dread crashing over him like a giant tidal wave. It took him a few moments to realize he'd been awakened by the sound of a vehicle and then the opening and closing of the front door.

He knew with a sickening certainty who was arriving. The living room doors were open. Damn, he'd fucked up again. He scrambled to pull out of the sleeping Avantae.

Several inches of his cock was still lodged in her warm, tight pussy when Cam appeared in the living room doorway.

"Hawk! Vantae! What the hell?"

*Oh damn!* Peyton froze. "I can explain, Cam."

"The hell you can! You bastard! I trusted you...looked up to you...practically worshipped you and you..." He sucked in a breath and stared at Avantae, who lay unmoving under Peyton. "And *you*...you knew what my relationship with him meant to me. How could you do this...with *him*? Of all the men in the world, you have to leave me for *him*?"

Without waiting for a response from either of them, Cam turned and ran from the room.

Fuck! Peyton pulled out of Avantae, rolled off the sofa and grabbed his pants. By the time he'd pulled them up, Avantae sat up with a hand covering her breasts and pussy. Her eyes glistened with tears.

Peyton sighed. He felt like crying as well. "I have to go after him." He ran out of the room barefoot. By the time he reached the open front door, he saw Cam's car tearing down the driveway.

Shit! He returned to the living room.

Avantae turned from the French doors to face him. "I'm so sorry, Peyton. I wanted him to know the truth, but I didn't want him to find out this way."

He shook his head while pushing his feet into his shoes. "I have to go after him." He pulled on his shirt and rushed across the room. At the door he turned to look at her. "Are you all right?"

"I...I... You go. I'll talk to you later."

"You're leaving?"

"I think it's best. I'll call a cab and —"

"No. Go upstairs and do whatever you need to do. I'll call Randall or one of my other brothers to take you home. I don't want you to be alone. Wait for Randall?"

"I don't think he's going to be very sympathetic toward me."

"This is my fault. Not yours. He knows how I feel about you. He won't judge you. Please, Red. I don't have time for this. Will you wait until one of my brothers arrives to see you safely home?"

She nodded. "I'm perfectly capable of making my own way home, but I'll wait if that's what you want."

"You promise?"

"Yes."

"Thanks." He left the room, grabbed the keys to his SUV from the hall table and left the house. As he drove, he called Randall's cell number. The call went through to Randall's voicemail. When he couldn't reach Brandon, Bancroft or Declan, he reluctantly called Layton.

Layton listened in silence before he swore. "Damn it. Can this shit get any worse?"

"I'm sorry. I —"

"Damn it, Peyton!"

"I didn't plan for him to find out this way."

"I know that. I'm just...never mind. We'll deal with this. I'll call Benai to go with me to pick her up."

"Thanks, Hawk."

"Peyton...we'll stand by you."

"Thanks. That means a lot." He ended the call, relieved Avantae wouldn't have to be alone with Layton, who was rightfully pissed. He then called Cam, who didn't answer. But then, he hadn't expected him to.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

After Peyton left, Avantae allowed herself a quick cry for the anguish she knew Peyton felt and for the pain they'd caused Cam. Then she showered and changed her clothes. She regretted agreeing to remain at Peyton's mansion for one of his brothers to take her home.

None of them approved of her and Peyton's relationship. Despite what Peyton thought, they surely would blame her for the way Cam had learned she and Peyton were seeing each other. Having the sight of them locked in a sensual embrace would make forgiving them even more difficult.

She was about to call a cab when she heard a vehicle arriving. Standing at the French doors, she watched a dark SUV stop in the oval. A tall male with dark hair with a hint of silver at his temples alighted.

She recognized him from Grayhawk family pictures at both Randall's and Peyton's mansions. Oh hell. This would be unpleasant. He walked around the hood of the vehicle and opened the passenger door.

A sigh of relief escaped her lips when Benai got out. Thank God!

Deciding against meeting them at the entrance door, she waited. Minutes later, she watched them walk into the living room.

Benai gave her an understanding smile, extending her hand. "Avantae, this is Layton. Layton, this is Avantae Sovern."

Avantae reluctantly turned to face the man both Randall and Peyton seemed to think could almost walk on water.

Although he extended his hand, his smile didn't reach his dark gaze. His voice was only a few degrees warmer than dry ice when he spoke. "Hello."

Well, damn if she was going to behave as if she needed to be ashamed of loving Peyton—even if their timing left something to be desired. Placing her hand in his, she met his gaze and responded in an equally cool voice. "Hello." Then, recalling how much Peyton valued his older brother's good opinion, she softened. "I'm sorry we're meeting under these circumstances, which must cast me in an unpleasant light in your eyes."

To her surprise, he responded in a warmer voice. "You're very important to Peyton, which makes you someone I'm very interested in getting to know and view in a positive light."

"Have I made that difficult?"

This time his smile reached his eyes. He arched a brow and released her hand. "A little."

Benai stepped forward, placing a hand on his arm. "Layton!"

He shrugged. "She asked."

Great. They were back to dry ice.

He turned his attention back to Avantae. "Peyton asked me to see you safely home."

"But you'd rather not?"

"We're both delighted to see you home," Benai said quickly.

He turned to look at Benai. "I'm perfectly capable of speaking for myself, Benai."

"I know you are, but you're upset and I just don't want you to lose sight of how important she is to Peyton, Hawk."

Hawk? Clearly, once things were settled with Cam, she'd be expected to worship at Layton Grayhawk's altar as his siblings did. And she would – when hell froze over.

"Thanks, Benai, but I had that lecture from Tempest before I left the office."

"It didn't take?"

He was silent for a moment. Then warm, deep laughter filled the room. He hugged Benai and kissed her cheek before he turned to face Avantae again. "The circumstances for our first meeting aren't ideal, but your importance to Peyton makes you important to me as well. Please accept my apology for my less-than-warm welcome." He extended his hand again.

Sensing sincerity in his voice and gaze, she extended her hand. "I'm sorry too. Both Peyton and Randall told me how hard you've worked to keep your family close."

He placed his other hand over hers. "They've both given me more credit than I deserve –"

Benai interrupted him. "No, they don't. You really do deserve the respect they...we all show you, Hawk."

He released Avantae's hand and turned to look at Benai. "Thank you."

Benai leaned forward to kiss his cheek. "No. Thank you for helping to make Randall the man I love so much."

He caressed her cheek. "Randall's a lucky bastard." He turned to look at Avantae. "And I know Peyton feels he's lucky to have you back in his life."

Avantae swallowed a lump, deciding she had been too hasty in deciding Layton's brothers gave him more accord than he deserved. After all, instead of being home with his wife and twins, he was there to see her home – because Peyton had asked him to.

"Thank you."

"Peyton asked me to take you home, but I'm wondering if you'd consider stopping at my house first. My wife, Tempest, is eager to meet you." He grinned suddenly. "And to repair any damage I've done."

She wanted to be alone so she could have another cry. But she decided she needed to accept his olive branch. There'd be plenty of time for feeling sorry for herself later.

Besides, she was eager to meet the woman who inspired that look in his eyes and change in his voice when he spoke of her.

"I'd like that. Thank you."

"Great." He turned to Benai. "If you two will wait in the SUV, I'll make sure the house is locked and set the alarm."

When Benai reached for Avantae's suitcase, he took it from her hand. "I have it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Peyton spent two hours trying to find Cam before his cell phone rang. Recognizing Randall's ring, he activated his wireless earpiece. "Hello."

"I just talked to Benai. Damn, Peyton, I'm sorry I wasn't available when you called earlier."

"I've fucked up again, Randy."

"Where are you? I'll meet you."

He shook his head. "No. I fucked up. Not you. I need to face this shit on my own."

"The hell you do! Where are you Peyton?"

"In hell."

"Then that's where I need to be too. Where are you?"

"Do me a favor, Randy."

"Name it."

"Go home to Benai. I need to handle this myself."

"Peyton—"

"I don't want to drag you into this shit. Layton is already pissed enough. I had to ask him to go take Avantae home and—"

"He's upset but he's not pissed with you, Peyton. He took her home to meet Tempest and the twins."

"He did?"

"Yes. Benai says they're trying to talk her into staying with them for a few days."

He sighed in relief. Then Layton had accepted her. While that was a relief, Peyton still had to find Cam. "Go join them, Randy. I'll call you after I talk to Cam. Okay?"

"Peyton—"

"I'm in a dark place right now, Randy. You're married. I'm not going to drag you here with me."

"How do you think you can prevent that, Peyton? You think I can bask in the light while you wallow in the dark? When you were shot down and nearly killed, I passed out and was unconscious for hours despite all the miles and oceans separating us. We're bound in a way neither of us can deny. Now where the fuck are you?"

"Randy, please. Do this for me. Please. Go be with Benai. That's what I need you to do for me now."

"Peyton—"

"I need you to go be with Benai and be there for Avantae. Right now I have to concentrate on making things as right as possible with Cam. Please do this for me. I'll call you if I need you. Please?"

"Damn it! I...okay, but—"

"Thanks, Hawk."

He ended the call. He drove aimlessly for half an hour, feeling lost until he remembered Declan's suggestion that he talk to Sin-Bad. The way his luck was going, Sin-Bad would be somewhere on vacation with his fiancée. A wave of relief rushed through Peyton when Sin-Bad answered his phone on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"This is Peyton."

"Peyton! I was just thinking about you. How are you?"

"Not good."

"What's wrong?"

"Have you seen or talked to Cam lately?"

"No. Should I have?"

"I've fucked things up with him and I really need to talk to you."

"How bad have you fucked up, Peyton?"

"Royally."

"Damn. Let me call Chandra to tell her I'll be late for our date and then I'll be at my condo in half an hour. I'll wait for you there."

An hour later, Peyton sat in Sin-Bad's Rittenhouse Square condo trying to decipher the look in the other male's dark blue eyes.

Sin-Bad raked a hand through his hair before rising from the sofa, where he'd sat as he listened to Peyton's confession. "Damn, Peyton. What the hell possessed you to touch his woman? You fucked up big-time."

Seated on a loveseat, gripping a half-empty glass of whiskey, he glared up at Sin-Bad. "No shit, Sherlock? Tell me something I don't already know."

"If I'd known you were capable of doing anything this fucking stupid, I would have told you who he was."

Peyton stiffened. Dear God, could things possibly get any worse? "I know who he is."

Sin-Bad shook his head. "No. You don't." He stopped pacing. "Where is he?"

Peyton sighed and shook his head. "I don't know. By the time I'd dressed and followed him, he was gone. I called his cell several times, but he didn't answer."



Sin-Bad swore. "Damn. What the hell possessed you, Peyton?"

He raised the glass to his mouth and swallowed the contents. Then he slammed the shot glass onto the coffee table with enough force to crack both the glass and the tabletop.

He shot to his feet and faced Sin-Bad. They were both roughly six-six. He clenched his right hand and glared into the other male's eyes. "I didn't come here for a fucking lecture from you!"

Sin-Bad narrowed his gaze. "But that's apparently what you need." He stepped back from Peyton. "You know he practically idolizes you. How the hell could you stab him in the back like that?"

Peyton was hard pressed not to deck Sin-Bad. He took a deep breath. "I said I don't want or need a lecture from a man who makes a habit of fucking his brothers' women more often than he changes his damn underwear."

Sin-Bad stared at him. "Don't piss me off, Peyton."

Peyton had never lost a fight and rarely experienced physical intimidation. Yet, not for the first time, Peyton felt a sense of menace emanating from Sin-Bad. But damn if he'd show fear. "Fuck you."

"Fuck *me*? You—" Sin-Bad suddenly shook his head, swore and swung away from Peyton. He moved to stare out the living room windows.

"It's time you told him the truth, Sin."

Peyton swung around, frowning. He hadn't heard the door open. So how the hell had Sin-Bad's younger brother Sebastian entered the room so quietly? Like Sin-Bad, Sebastian was over six feet with dark hair and blue eyes. Peyton had been aware of tension between the two brothers for years. Sebastian's lack of deference to Sin-Bad as the elder brother had always amazed Peyton.

While he generally liked Sebastian, he wasn't in the mood to bare his soul to him. "Do you mind if I talk to Sin-Bad alone?"

He watched the brothers exchange a cool stare before Sebastian looked at him. "I don't want to force your confidence, but I'm aware of who Cameron really is."

Peyton frowned. "So am I."

Sebastian glanced at Sin-Bad. "Are you going to tell him or shall I?"

Sin-Bad swore and stormed across the room to stare at Sebastian. "I'll handle this, Seb."

"From what I can see, you haven't done a very good job of that, Sin. Or Peyton wouldn't be in this mess."

Without warning, Sin-Bad backhanded Sebastian, sending him flying across the room. Sebastian bolted to his feet and charged across the room to grab Sin-Bad by his collar.

Sin-Bad knocked his hands away and then closed his fingers around Sebastian's throat, lifting him off his feet. Then somehow, Max, the third Stoner brother, was in the room, holding the two brothers apart.

"What the fuck? I've had it with you two always at each other's throats!" Max roared. "I'm tired of being in the middle." He shoved both brothers back a few feet.

Sin-Bad sucked in a deep breath and turned to look at Peyton.

Peyton felt a chill.

Sin-Bad's eyes glowed. His lips were curled back, revealing teeth that were much sharper than any human's teeth should be. The confrontation between Sin-Bad and Sebastian, and Max's intervention, had happened in a matter of seconds!

Peyton glanced at the other Stoners. Max and Sebastian's eyes glowed too. They had sharpened teeth as well.

"Holy shit. What the hell *are* you three?"

Sin-Bad took a deep breath and closed his eyes and mouth briefly. When he opened them both, his teeth were normal and his eyes no longer glowed. He walked over to Peyton. "It's time we had a heart-to-heart talk, Peyton." He glanced over his shoulder at his brothers. "I need to talk to Peyton alone. Do me a favor, Max, and take Seb out of my sight before I kick his ass all over the city."

Sebastian snarled, but didn't resist as Max tossed an arm over his shoulders and walked him out of the room.

Sin-Bad turned back to him and nodded toward the loveseat. "You'd better sit down."

Peyton walked to the loveseat and sank onto it.

Sin-Bad sat across from him on the sofa. "As you must have guessed by now, we have a lot to talk about."

"How can you three move that fast? What the hell are you?"

"In a word? Vampires."

## Chapter Twenty

That explained the air of menace. Several of Peyton's brothers had been visited by their dead mother while all were awake. So he was less inclined to dismiss things that went bump in the night than others might be. "All three of you?"

Sin-Bad nodded. "Yes, but right now we need to talk about you, Cam, your father and your past."

He remembered how Declan had linked Sin-Bad, him, Cam and their father. He swallowed, filled with a certainty that he was about to receive bad news. "What do Cam and my father have in common?"

"What do you remember about Cam's mother?"

He recalled a pretty American Indian with long dark hair and dark eyes who had Cam when she was only seventeen. He'd often thought she'd gone out of her way to avoid him so they'd only actually met a few times before her death.

"Not much. Why?"

"What did she tell you about Cam's father?"

Peyton shrugged. "That he'd deserted her before Cam's birth and Cam had suffered for never having known him."

"You'll forgive me for saying this, but Cam *did* know him for a brief time, and as far as I'm concerned, would have been better off *not* knowing him."

"Why should she lie to me?"

"Why should she avoid the man who devoted so much of his time and energy to keeping her only child out of gangs?" Sin-Bad countered.

Peyton shook his head. "She was shy."

"Shy?" Sin-Bad shook his head. "Camela made a habit of seducing older, married men. I'd hardly call her shy. Still, I suppose she did have a modicum of decency – which is why she avoided you."

Peyton took a deep breath. "For the love of God, will you cut to the damn chase and stop beating around the bush?"

"Camela knew your father – in the biblical sense."

Joseph Grayhawk's many infidelities had haunted the family and led to Peyton and all his male siblings vowing never to cheat once they entered a committed relationship. As far as he knew, he'd never met any of his father's many lovers. "All too many women other than my mother knew him that way, but Cam's mother was just a child."

Sin-Bad shrugged. "Some men like young women. As the years passed, your father chose younger and younger lovers. One of those lovers was Cam's mother."

Peyton felt a sudden constriction in his chest. "I don't think I want to hear any more." He rose.

Sin-Bad motioned for him to sit. "I'll make this as painless as possible."

Peyton reluctantly resumed his seat.

"By now you must have figured out why you and your siblings found it so easy to embrace Cam."

Peyton shook his head.

Sin-Bad rose and crossed the room to sit next to him. "As you know, his mother's last name was Doveflower. Cam's last name is made up of portions of his parents' names. Cameron Morgan Graydove. Dove from his mother, and Morgan and Gray from his father—Joseph Morgan Grayhawk."

Peyton bolted to his feet, feeling as if he'd been hit in the solar plexus. Even as he shook his head, he knew it was true.

Sin-Bad rose to face him. "Cam's one of your half brothers. That's why I encouraged you to become his 'big brother'. I knew, or hoped, that being around his big brothers would help keep him out of gangs and trouble."

Peyton clenched his right hand into a fist. "Are you telling me you've known all along?"

Sin-Bad nodded. "Your father swore me to secrecy."

"You deceiving bastard!" Peyton swung his fist.

After having watched how fast the other male could move, Peyton was stunned when his fist actually connected with Sin-Bad's chin.

Sin-Bad's eyes glowed and he danced back several feet. He curled his lips back. "I'm going to make allowances for the fact that you're upset. But don't ever try that again, Peyton."

"Or?"

"Or I'll slap your happy ass all over this room."

Recalling the devastated look in Cam's eyes infuriated Peyton. "You might not find that as easy as you think."

Sin-Bad tightened his lips and then surprised Peyton by nodding. "Given your past history, you might be right."

"I've had enough of your cryptic shit! Why the hell didn't you tell me the truth, you lying bastard? All these years you've been lying to me while pretending to be my friend."

"I was your father's friend and I've been *your* friend. With help from Max and Seb, I've spent forty years watching over all of you, from Layton to Cameron. Why do you think you all received so many scholarships?"

"We earned them through hard work! Nothing was given to us. *Nothing*. We earned everything we have."

Sin-Bad nodded. "Yes. You all worked very hard and you did earn everything you received, but this is an imperfect world. Many intelligent, hard-working students don't receive the scholarships they've earned. Max and I made sure you all got what was due to you and if a scholarship didn't exist, Max, Seb and I created one.

"I tried to be there if any of you wanted to talk." He shrugged. "Unfortunately, your brothers are difficult to get close to."

"They're just more discerning than I am. They clearly knew you were a fraud!"

To his surprise, Sin-Bad laughed, crossed the room and put an arm around his shoulders. "I'm a centuries-old vampire, Peyton. I've done lots of shit in my long life, but I have always been and always will be your friend. As for your brothers, I'll always be available and willing to help them as well, but you, me and my brothers have a special bond."

Peyton shook his arm off and stepped away from him. "I think you've done more than enough to *help*."

Sin-Bad shook his head. "Don't be so quick to dismiss my help, Peyton. You never know when having three-centuries-old vampires covering your back might come in handy. Besides, as I said, we have a special bond."

"The way this damn day is going, next you'll be telling me my brothers aren't my brothers and that you and your brothers are my real siblings and that I'm some damn vampire as well." He shuddered at the thought.

Sin-Bad laughed. "It's not as bad as that, Peyton. Layton and the others are your brothers—at least in this life. However, in another one, you, Max, Seb and I were brothers of a sort."

Peyton sighed. "I don't think I can take any more bad news today."

Sin-Bad nodded. "You're probably right. There'll be time to discuss our home world after we've found Cam."

Their *home world*? God, was he some type of alien? He dismissed the thought. "Does Cam know the truth?"

Sin-Bad shrugged. "Like some of your other siblings, Cam has hints of ancient abilities. He probably either knows or suspects the true relationship between you, which is probably why he calls you all Hawk."

That meant Peyton truly *had* committed the cardinal Grayhawk sin—he'd pursued a woman on whom one of his brothers had already staked a claim. Such an act was even more reprehensible because Cam was so much younger and looked up to him. "Damn, I've fucked up!"

"It's a mistake you wouldn't have made had you known the truth."

"I'm not so sure that's true. My hunger to be with her is so great, I don't know if even knowing he's my brother would have made enough difference to keep me away from her."

"She's your one?"

Peyton nodded. "Yes, and the hunger for her just ate at me until I couldn't bear it anymore."

Sin-Bad frowned. "What's her name?"

"Avantae Sovern."

"Avantae Sovern?"

Peyton stiffened. "Oh fuck. Please don't tell me you know her."

A smile curved Sin-Bad's mouth. "Not in the way you're implying. Describe her."

"She's absolutely stunning. She's tall, voluptuous, with beautiful dark skin and incredible silver eyes."

"And she has a persuasive voice?"

"You *have* met her."

Sin-Bad ran a hand through his hair. "When can I meet her?"

Peyton frowned. "Aren't you happy with Chandra?"

Sin-Bad bared his sharpened teeth. "In a word? Yes!"

"Then what's your interest in Avantae?"

"I think she's someone we...Max, Seb and I, would love to meet. And I know someone else who's waited a long time to meet her again. And you as well."

"Who?"

"How much, if anything, do you remember about Aireon?"

"I...I have...dreams about it but no clear memories."

"Consider yourself lucky. What happened on Aireon still saddens me after all this time."

"Do you blame us?"

Sin-Bad studied him in silence for several moments before he responded. "No. No one should have been forced to make the choice you faced."

Peyton shook his head. "I think I need to go see Layton and tell him who Cam really is." He paused. "Are there...others?"

Sin-Bad shrugged. "As you must know, your father was virile."

"Great. As if ten kids he couldn't support wasn't enough."

"Your father wasn't a bad man, Peyton."

"He destroyed my mother."

"It wasn't intentional. He had feelings for her, but he was weak and looking for something he never found."

Peyton sighed. "I have more questions than ever but I need to find Cam."

"What are you going to say to him when you do?"

"I don't know."

"When you've decided how to handle this, and if you haven't found him, let me know and I'll call him."

"What makes you think he'll answer you?"

"He'll answer because he'll have no choice."

"Why not?"

"There are benefits to being a vampire." He arched a brow. "Care to discuss the possibility of becoming one?"

"No!"

"Suit yourself."

About to turn away, Peyton stiffened. "About my father..."

"What about him, Peyton?"

"While his cheating aged my mother prematurely, he looked much younger than he actually was when he died."

"And?"

"Was he...a vampire?"

"No."

"Would you tell me if he had been?"

Sin-Bad shrugged. "He aged gracefully."

"That doesn't really answer my question. Was he a vampire?"

"I've given you all the answer I intend to, Peyton."

"Don't you think I have a right to know?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure you really need or want to know. I will say again that he did care about your mother and that he did love you and Randall."

"Then why did he single us out to—"

Sin-Bad crossed the room to place a hand on his shoulder. "Your father loved you both, but he had a lot of demons he never learned to deal with. But don't doubt that he loved you and Randall as much as he loved Layton and the others. I know he wasn't a perfect father, but he did his best financially and he never verbally or physically abused any of you."

"Is that supposed to mitigate what he did to our mother?"

"I'm not going to apologize for him. I'll only say that he loved you and you have no idea how proud he was when you became a Marine." Sin-Bad tightened his hand on his shoulder. "Max, Seb and I were proud as well. You represented your countries well, Peyton."

"Countries?"

"Yes, Peyton. Countries."

Peyton inhaled slowly, decided he'd had enough revelations for one day, and left.

\* \* \* \* \*

After Peyton left Sin-Bad, he called Randall. "Where are you, Randy?"

"We're all at Layton's."

"Is Avantae still there?"

"Yes. Are you okay?"

"No. I knew I'd fucked up but I've just talked to Sin-Bad and found out just how *badly* I've fucked up." He told Randall who Cam was.

"Damn. Given the way Dad cheated, I guess we should have expected that we had other siblings. There are probably more we don't know about."

"No doubt but I'm worried about the one we *do* know about. Cam."

"You can't beat yourself up because of something you didn't know, Peyton."

"Both Declan and Croft tried to talk me out of sleeping with her but I was too damn determined to do what I wanted to listen. Now I have to find a way to make things right with Cam. You think if I allowed him to kick my ass he'd forgive me?"

"He'll forgive you because he loves you and he must know in his heart you never intended to hurt him." Randall paused before he went on. "If you're coming here, maybe Benai and I should take Avantae home with us."

"No. I need to talk to her. It's better if that happens with all of you there to ensure we don't disappear somewhere together to shut out the rest of the world."

"Is that what you want to do?"

"Yes."

"I'll tell her and Layton you're coming. When?"

"I'll be there in about forty minutes."



## **Chapter Twenty-One**

Avantae felt a chill when Randall walked into the room where she sat with Tempest, Benai and the sleeping twins. He paused in the doorway. After a quick glance at Benai, he looked at her. "Can I have a word with you, Avantae?"

"Sure."

"I meant alone."

Alone? Then it was bad news. "What's wrong? Peyton's all right...isn't he?"

"He's on his way here to talk to you."

"Then why do you want to talk to me alone?"

"Layton says we can use his office." He extended a hand. "Please join me?"

Tempest and Benai, seated on either side of her, each squeezed her hand. It was definitely bad news. She nodded and walked across the room to him.

They walked down the hall. He stopped by a closed door and opened it. "After you."

She walked inside a large room with a desk and two leather chairs, and a leather sofa along one wall. She turned to face Randall as he closed the door. "Let me guess. He's coming with bad news?"

He put a hand on her back to urge her toward the sofa.

When she sat down, he sat next to her. "He's going to need your understanding."

"Why do I get the feeling he's going to start with the we-have-to-cool-it-for-a-while spiel?"

"Things have gotten more complicated."

"How?"

He shook his head. "Peyton spent ten years building a rapport with Cam. Having Cam discover your relationship in a way that gave the appearance of...betrayal is difficult for Peyton."

"It wasn't exactly a field day for me either, Randall."

He nodded. "I'm aware of that but you didn't spend years gaining his trust and love."

She sighed. "What's the bottom line?"

"That's something Peyton will tell you."

"Let me guess. He wants to talk to me here with all of you around?"

He shrugged.

"He doesn't think I deserve to have the bad news delivered in private?"

He slipped an arm along the back of the sofa and leaned close to look in her eyes. "I think you know how he feels about you."

She glanced at his hand, close to but not quite touching her bare shoulder. Recalling one of her many conversations with Benai, she arched a brow. "Just how far are you prepared to go to convince me of *how* important I am to him, Randall? Benai told me Peyton once kissed her with enough passion to make her toes curl in an effort to convince her of your worth."

His lips twitched. "I'm a very happily married man, Avantae. I have no intention of kissing anyone but my wife."

"But you're not above flirting?"

"What makes you think I'm flirting?"

"The look in your eyes and the tone of your voice. If you lean any closer, I'll be able to tell what you had for dinner."

He removed his arm from the back of the sofa and leaned away from her. "It's going to require a lot of effort and understanding on your part to make your relationship with Peyton work, but he's an amazing man. You might not like what he has to say to you tonight, but you will hang in there with him. Won't you?"

"So he's going to ask me to wait again?"

He shrugged.

She gripped his hand. "Do you know how long I've already waited? I'm so tired of waiting."

"You've talked enough with Benai and now Tempest to understand some of our family dynamics. Cam is our little brother. Peyton is in love with you, but he's also a part of this family and an honorable man. He's not going to be able to be happy with you at Cam's expense."

He took her left hand and held it between both of his. "He's going to need you now more than ever. This is a very difficult time for him. Please don't make him have to choose between you and Cam."

"And if I do? Which would he choose?"

His jaw clenched. "If you love him half as much as he loves you, you won't try to force that choice. If you do, you're going to make him far more miserable than he needs to be. Please, Avantae. Don't hinder him. Bear with him and help him."

She sighed. "I don't want Cam hurt, but—"

"Then bear with Peyton while he works things out with Cam."

"And how is he going to do that?"

He released her hand. "Things might get a little unpleasant between them."

"By unpleasant, do you mean...if you think I'm going to stand by while Cam batters Peyton, you'd better think again, Randall."

"Unless your feelings for Peyton are strictly physical—"

"They're not and you have no reason to suggest that!"

"Then you're going to need to understand and accept our family traditions, Avantae."

"There are other traditions he should remember and observe."

"None that come before our familial ones." He rose, starting to turn away.

She caught his hand. "Peyton is starting to remember. Have you no memory of Aireon, Randall?"

He shook his head. "Peyton had a reason to remember—you. I have no memory of ever living before. Even if I had, I wouldn't trade my life with Benai for a hundred with anyone else. Nor would it change the value I place on our family traditions. When I fell for Benai, I was in the same position Peyton's in now. I fucked it up. Please help him to get it right. Show him how you feel by being there for him. Give him space and your understanding. He'll never need or appreciate it more."

"But to allow Cam to do to him what you allowed Bancroft to do to you—"

"First, Bancroft didn't do anything to me that I didn't deserve for not having honored our family traditions. Second, Peyton was my sparring partner and I made it to the semi-finals in the Olympics as a light heavyweight. Peyton can take care of himself. What he *can't* do is handle this as well without you."

She tugged at his hand.

He resumed his seat beside her.

She squeezed his hand. "Peyton couldn't have a more loyal person in his corner than you, Randall. But then you've always been his number-one supporter."

"He could use another one."

"He has it."

He lifted her hand and brushed his mouth across her fingers. "You won't regret it."

Recalling how their last relationship had ended, she shivered. "I hope not."

He put an arm around her shoulders. "This time will be different. This time things will end as they should have before."

She closed her eyes, leaning against him. "It has to, because I can't lose him again."

"Tell me about...what was it called?"

"Aireon."

"Tell me about Aireon."

\* \* \* \* \*

Avantae and Randall were still in Layton's study talking when Peyton arrived. Randall kissed her cheek and left them alone in the room, closing the door behind him.

Peyton stood with his back against the door. "How are you?"

She sighed. "My stomach is tied in knots. You asked Randall to soften the blow?"

"What did he tell you?"

"He talked a lot about your family traditions and how Cam is like a younger brother —"

"He's not *like* a younger brother. He *is* our younger brother."

She listened in silence as he told her of his conversation with Sin-Bad. "Your friend is named Sin-Bad and he has a brother named Maxvillion?"

He frowned. "Most people call him...how did you know his name is Maxvillion and not Maxwell?"

"Is there another brother called Sebastian?"

"Yes. How do you know the Stoners?"

"I'm not sure."

"Sin-Bad wants to meet you."

"I'd like to meet him and his brothers, but right now we need to talk about us."

He nodded. "We have to give Cam time to accept that we're in love."

"So all your family, including Randall, has been telling me. He also implied Cam might want to...get physical with you."

He shrugged. "He might."

"And you're going to let him?"

"I have no intention of allowing him to use me as a punching bag, but I have to admit, he's entitled to a few well-placed punches."

"He's six-two, Peyton."

"I'm six-six and about thirty pounds heavier. Cam isn't vicious and I can take care of myself."

"What do you need from me?"

"Your understanding and patience. We can't see each other until I talk to him. I know that's not what you want to hear, but it's what I need to do."

"Oh Peyton. I'm trying to understand, but... I really am trying."

He extended a hand.

She rose, rushing across the room to him.

He engulfed her in a warm embrace, brushing his lips against her cheek. "Just please bear with me, Red. Once I've talked to Cam —"

She lifted her head to gaze in his eyes. "What if he won't forgive you?"

"He's my brother. No doubt he'll be angry and want to lash out at me, as I would if our roles were reversed, but he'll forgive me. Eventually."

She caressed his cheek. "Make love to me before you go?"

He shook his head. "I've been fucking up since the moment I saw you again. We'll have all the time we want to make love after I've faced Cam."

"But we've already waited so long."

He nodded. "I know, but Cam is very young and impressionable. If I don't do what I can to make things right with him now, he might be scarred for years. He might never trust my brothers or me again. And we're all the family he has."

She sighed. "I know all that and I'm sorry to appear unfeeling —"

"I know you're not unfeeling. Believe me, I share your hunger, but we've already put our needs and wants ahead of Cam's more than once. Let's give him more consideration this time." He grimaced. "Besides, Layton would kick my ass if I touched you here."

"Could he?"

"Could he what?"

"Kick your ass?"

Peyton shrugged. "We've never had any reason to test it and we never will. It might sound old-fashioned, but we're a traditional family and he's our family patriarch."

"Who must have done a great job because you all jump to his defense at the slightest perceived criticism of him."

"You couldn't ask for a better older brother."

She sighed, pressing her cheek against his shoulder. "When will I see you again?"

"Hopefully Cam and I will settle things soon. Until we do, I don't think we should be alone again." He tipped up her chin to gaze into her eyes. "Will you wait for me?"

"I'll wait for you forever and a day, Peyton."

He bent his head to press a warm, sweet kiss against her lips. "I love you." He lifted his head as his cell phone vibrated. Keeping an arm around her shoulders, he pulled his cell phone from the case at his waist, glanced at the outer display and lifted it to his head. "Hello? I've never been there. I need directions...I'll be there ASAP."

"What is it, Peyton?" she asked as he returned the phone to its case.

"That was Sin-Bad. Cam is at his mansion waiting for me. I have to go."

"I'll go with you."

"I'd love that, but this is basically between Cam and me. I need to go alone."

"I seem to recall being there when we hurt him, Peyton, and —"

He pressed a finger against her lips. "Did I mention that I'm old-fashioned?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I expect a certain amount of deference from you, Avantae."

She stared at him, an indignant retort trembling on her lips. "What?"

"Is that going to be a problem for you?"

"Yes!"

He slapped her ass hard enough to make it sting. "You'll get over it."

"I'll get over... What!"

He stung her other ass cheek. "I'm not a very modern type of guy. I like a woman who's prepared to allow me to be the man."

"What if I have issues with that caveman attitude?"

He caressed her stinging ass cheeks. "You'll get over it—even if I have to spank your ass raw until you do."

She tingled with anticipation at the thought of his big palm stinging her bare ass cheeks. "If you think—"

"We'll have to discuss this later. Right now I have to go." He kissed her lips. "Will you stay here or go home with Randy and Benai?"

"I'm going home."

"Please do me a favor and go home with Randy and Benai."

"Peyton—"

"I don't want you to be alone. Please?"

"Fine. I'll go home with Randall and Benai if they'll have me."

"They will." He kissed her cheek and left the room.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Peyton had a quick word with Layton and Randall before he encountered Bancroft in the foyer. He paused. "Hawk."

Bancroft placed a hand on his shoulder. "How are you, Peyton?"

"I've been better. Right now I need to drive out to Sin-Bad's mansion to meet Cam."

"I'll come with you."

"Thanks, but that's not necessary."

"That wasn't a request, Peyton. I'm coming."

Having Sin-Bad witness his deserved humiliation would be bad enough. He didn't want any of his siblings there. A quick glance at Bancroft assured him protesting would be useless. "We'll take my SUV?"

Bancroft nodded.

They made the first few miles of the drive in a silence that wasn't particularly comfortable for Peyton. Although he knew Bancroft would never voice the actual words, he felt certain he was thinking *I told you so*. "You were right, Croft," he said into the silence.

"I offered that advice in an attempt to keep you from making the same mistake with Cam that I made with Randall and Benai."

"I should have listened to you and Declan, but I felt...driven...drawn to her in a way I couldn't explain or resist."

"I know."

"You do?"

"Yes, but enough about things outside your control. Tell me about your Avantae."

"She's beyond beautiful."

"So I noticed."

He tensed again. "You did?"

"Having met her, how could I fail to notice how beautiful she is? But I have no personal interest in her beyond the fact that she belongs to you."

"I...I knew that."

Bancroft laughed. "The hell you did. Tell me something about her."

"She completes me, Croft. She always has. I feel as if I've been waiting to meet her again for several life times. She's my *sheenea*...my one."

"And she feels the same way?"

"Yes. It's incredible. Or it *will* be once I make things right with Cam. I *can* make them right with him. Can't I?"

"He's our brother. Of course you can."

"I disappointed and betrayed him."

"Randall forgave me."

"Not everyone is as forgiving as Randy."

"True, and I'm sure Cam's pissed, but he'll get over it—even if we have to slap him around until he does."

"No. He's done nothing wrong, Croft. The fault is mine alone."

"You're not exactly the kind to allow anyone to slap you around, Peyton."

"He's entitled."

"Nevertheless, he'll have to understand that we're not perfect. We make mistakes—as will he. Don't worry, Peyton. We'll get through this."

"Thanks, Hawk."

Cam's car was parked in the oval in front of Sin-Bad's mansion. It was time to pay the damn piper.

Bancroft leaned over to squeeze his arm.

Peyton found the brief contact reassuring. Suddenly he was glad for Bancroft's presence.

The moment Sin-Bad opened the door for them, both Peyton and Bancroft noted the picture at the bottom of the staircase. A striking woman with cocoa-colored skin and silver gray eyes, dressed in a dark blue bodysuit, stared at them.

Peyton turned to look at Sin-Bad. "What are you doing with a picture of Avantae?"

"It's not your Avantae, Peyton. It's the last sovereign of Aireon. Max did it from memory, but we can discuss that later." He glanced at Croft. "It's been a long time, Bancroft."

Bancroft inclined his head. "Thanks for your help, Sin-Bad."

"Wait until you see Cam before you thank me. He's in the living room. He's angry and in the mood for blood."

Peyton raked a hand through his hair. "He's entitled."

"The hell he is," Croft said.

Peyton turned to look at him. "I betrayed his trust—"

"Yes. You did."

Croft's ready agreement dismayed him. "That's why I need to face him alone, Hawk."

Bancroft shrugged. "As you wish."

"The living room is the only door closed down the hall," Sin-Bad told him.



Peyton took a deep breath before he quickly walked down the hall. He tapped on the only closed door and opened it without waiting for a response.

Cam, standing at the window, turned to glare at him. "You are the absolute last person I ever want to see again, Peyton."

Peyton? Cam hadn't called him anything but Hawk for years. "I'm sorry, Cameron."

"You're sorry? You slept with the woman you knew I cared about and you think sorry is enough? No fucking way!"

Peyton clenched his jaw. "What else can I say?"

Cameron pointed a finger at him. "Sin-Bad said we're half brothers. Would you have slept with Benai behind Randall's back? Or did you feel it was okay to betray me because I'm only a half brother and an illegitimate bastard?"

Cam's angry tone did nothing to mitigate the pain in his gaze.

Peyton crossed the room to place a hand on his shoulder. "Cam —"

Cameron swore and angrily knocked his hand away. "Don't touch me and don't ever expect me to be deceived by your phony caring again, you cheating bastard!" Without warning Cam launched a flurry of blows at him.

Infuriated, Peyton instinctively blocked each attempt before decking Cam.

Sprawled on his back, Cam stared up at him, his lip busted.

He leaned over Cam. "Who the fuck do you think you're talking to?" he demanded.

Cam spat out blood. "To a lying, cheating, backstabbing bastard!"

Unable to control his rage, Peyton hauled Cam to his feet and clenched his right hand. "I've taken all the disrespect I intend to take from you."

"Peyton!"

He glanced around.

Bancroft ran into the room through the open door to grab his fist before he could hit Cam again. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Peyton sucked in a breath, stepping back.

Bancroft turned to face Cam, positioning himself between them. "We don't take swings at our elder brothers in this family."

Cam, his eyes glistening with tears, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "He's not my brother and in case you've forgotten, my last name isn't Grayhawk, so that made it all right for him to betray me!"

Stung by Cameron's words, Peyton swallowed hard. "You ungrateful little —"

Bancroft turned to glare at him. "Enough, Peyton!"

Peyton swallowed hard but remained silent.

Bancroft turned back to Cam. "It doesn't matter what your last name is. What matters is that you are an important part of our family." Bancroft cupped the back of Cam's neck and pulled him into a half embrace. "Don't you ever doubt that."

Cameron gulped in a deep breath and then buried his head against Bancroft's shoulder. "Why did he do this to me, Hawk? I thought he...he made me believe he cared about me."

Bancroft glanced at Peyton.

Peyton swallowed, blinking hard in an effort to keep tears at bay. "I do care about you."

Cam jerked away from Bancroft. "If you care so much, why did you betray me and why the hell did you hit me?"

"Because you were trying to deck *me* and you were disrespectful."

"You deserved it! I won't ever respect you again!"

Peyton stared at Cam, feeling as if a dagger had been thrust into his heart. The look in Cam's eyes made his heart ache. Was this how Bancroft had felt when he'd thought Randall had betrayed him?

"I was wrong, Cam, and I'm so sorry you feel betrayed. That was never —"

"How the hell else do you expect me to feel?"

Damn good question. "You didn't give me a chance to explain."

"How can you explain sleeping with my woman?"

"She's not your woman!"

"How *can* she be when you took her from me?"

"I didn't take her from you, nor did I betray —"

"You did! How can you stand here and deny the obvious? Am I so unimportant to you that you think I don't even deserve to hear the truth?"

Peyton raked a hand through his hair and looked at Bancroft, feeling helpless. "Hawk...?"

"Why don't you leave me and Cam alone to hash things out, Peyton?" Bancroft suggested.

"I'm the one who fucked up, Hawk. Not you."

"I'm the one who understands what he's feeling now. Allow me to do for you what I couldn't do for Randall. Leave this to me."

Leaving Bancroft to deal with Cam would be cowardly. He sighed. "I need to do this."

"I don't want to talk to or see you ever again, Peyton," Cam told him in a cold voice.

"I know it doesn't mean anything to you now, Cam, but I'm sorrier than you can imagine. I know I've hurt you, but —"

"But your desire to fuck her was more important than our relationship?"

"This isn't about fucking, Cam! She's important to me."

"You don't even know her! How could you betray my trust just to sleep with a woman you don't even know?"

Peyton closed his eyes, shaking his head. Where was the way out of this mess?

Bancroft embraced him. "He's angry and hurt, Peyton. I know you feel you need to handle this situation, but he's in no mood to hear anything you say. Let me help smooth things over."

He gripped Bancroft's jacket. "I shouldn't have hit him."

"Leave it to me, Peyton. I'll make him understand. You go spend the night with her."

"No! I can't. I can't do that again—not after ruining my relationship with him."

"It's damaged but not ruined. Cam and I will go see Declan and between the two of us, we'll make him understand." Bancroft kissed his hair and released him. "Leave us alone."

He stepped back. After a brief look at Cam, he turned and left the room, closing the door behind him. He leaned against the wall, struggling to keep despair at bay. The situation he'd created was impossible. No matter what he did, someone he loved would end up hurt and betrayed.

He heard Cam's sob and Croft answering in a low, soothing voice. He pushed off from the wall and stumbled down the hall, away from the sounds of distress he'd created.

Sin-Bad stood in the foyer. "Are you all right?"

"No. I fucked up!"

Sin-Bad placed a hand on his shoulder. "Part of the blame was mine for not being honest with you."

He shook his head. "No. This shit is all my fault. I know our rules. I've ruined a relationship I spent ten years building and I don't know what to do because I know he's never going to forgive me and I..." He paused, a frown furrowing his brow. He felt a faint, silent tugging at his mind along an ancient link he'd long thought broken. A quick glance around the foyer revealed he and Sin-Bad were still alone.

"What's wrong, Peyton?"

He turned to find Sin-Bad studying him closely. "I don't know. I feel as if...someone or something is calling to me."

Sin-Bad stared off into the distance. "Your presence here has awakened him."

"My presence has awakened who?"

Sin-Bad shook his head. "He can wait a little longer for a reunion. Right now you have other, more pressing concerns. Let's go out for a drink."

He shook his head. "I just want to go find Avantae and shut the world outside far away from us."

"Then go do that."

"That's the one thing I can't do yet."

"Yes, you can. I can feel your turmoil. Let her soothe you as only she can." He glanced toward the living room. "Cam is in good hands with your brother."

"I hit him."

Sin-Bad shrugged. "He was totally disrespectful and had it coming. Don't lose any sleep over that, Peyton."

"I would have hit him again if Bancroft hadn't intervened."

"So? Maybe he'll think twice before fucking you off again."

"Don't you get it? Everything he said was right and because I couldn't handle the truth, I hit him! He didn't deserve to be knocked down! I'm feeling out of control. I need to be alone with this darkness spreading through me."

"There's no darkness spreading through you, Peyton. You've been separated from your one for far too long. That would take a toll on anyone. As for Cameron, he's hurt now, and angry. But he will forgive you once he understands."

"I'm not so sure of that. Some pains and injuries are unforgivable—like a big brother's betrayal."

Sin-Bad gripped his shoulder. "And some loves, like that between brothers, are so strong and enduring they can forgive any injury—no matter how grievous. As you know, Seb and I have our differences."

Sebastian appeared beside Sin-Bad. "But I would die without a moment's hesitation to protect Sin-Bad."

Sin-Bad smiled at Sebastian. "Sometimes I'd like to wring your neck, but let anyone or anything menace you and it's on."

Peyton watched the two vampire brothers stare at each other for several moments before Sin-Bad turned back to face him. "Things look bleak now, Peyton, but brothers have a way of working out their differences."

Driving home, he felt conflicted and out of control. Should he go see Avantae? Or should he go back to Sin-Bad's mansion and pound Cam to a pulp? What had called to him as he stood in the foyer with Sin-Bad?

Randall, waiting in the foyer when he arrived home, took one look at his face and put an arm around his shoulders. "Do you want to talk?"

"No."

"Then let's go upstairs. I'll spend the night."

"You should be with—"

"I should be where I am—here, because you need me. Benai and I agreed that I needed to be here with you now. She's with Avantae."

"I don't know what I'm going to do, Randy."

"We'll figure that out together, Peyton. Right now we need to find a way to relieve some of your tension."

"I don't know if that's possible."

"Of course it's possible. We just have to find the best way to do it, but first let's get you cooled off."

After a quick shower, Randall lying beside him in his darkened bedroom, Peyton told his brother what had transpired at Sin-Bad's mansion. "I had no right to treat him as I did."

"I know things look dark now, Peyton, but Croft knows what's going on in Cam's head. He'll reach him. Go to sleep and I'll be here when you wake," Randall said in their native language.

Peyton rolled onto his stomach and slowly drifted to sleep with Randall speaking to him in a soft, soothing voice.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Avantae sat at the desk in one of Randall and Benai's guest rooms staring at her laptop screen. Tears streamed down her cheeks. After several hours of writing her memories, she knew what had happened to tragically end her first relationship with Peyton.

She wiped at her wet cheeks before glancing at the clock. 4:20 a.m. Where was Peyton? Why hadn't he called? How had his meeting with Cam gone? If it had gone well, surely he would have called her. She picked up her cell phone and called him.

Randall answered on the third ring. "Avantae? Peyton's asleep," he said in a whisper.

"How...how did the meeting with Cameron go?"

"Not well."

"Is he okay?"

"Peyton is fine, physically."

"And Cam? How is he?"

"A little worse for wear, but he's with Bancroft and Declan so he'll be okay."

"Did Peyton hurt him?"

"He didn't batter him if that's what you want to know."

"But he hit him?"

"Cam is okay."

That didn't answer her question. She sighed. "May I speak to Peyton?"

"He's asleep."

"Please wake him."

"He's miserable when he's awake, Avantae. He needs to sleep."

"I need to talk to him."

"I'm sure you do, but I'm not going to wake him."

Damn him! "That shouldn't be your call, Randall."

"I know you love him and he loves you, but that doesn't change the fact that he and I are closer to each other than we are to anyone else. He needs to sleep and I'm not waking him."

"You don't understand how I feel."

"I know he needs to sleep now. I'll tell him you called when he wakes."

She was sick to death of the Grayhawks interfering with their relationship. "Randall...please..." She pressed a hand against her lips to silence a sob.

"I'm sorry, honey. Forgive me. Go talk to Benai. She'll understand and offer comfort, but he needs to sleep."

She hung up without responding. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she undressed and lay across the bed. Just before dawn, she drifted to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Avantae...Avantae...wake up honey...wake up."

Avantae opened her eyes. Daylight streamed into the room. Benai sat on the side of the bed, gripping her arms. "It's all right. You're awake now."

She shook her head, gulping in deep breaths. "It's not all right! He's dead. Peyton is dead. The Macarae killed him and his brothers and it was my fault!"

Benai urged her into a sitting position and hugged her. "I just talked to Randall. Peyton is fine. He's still asleep. It was just another nightmare."

She pulled away from Benai, blinking rapidly and wiping at the tears streaming down her cheeks. "Benai? What did I just say?"

"That Peyton was dead and someone called the Maca-something had killed him and his brothers, but it was just a nightmare. Randall is with Peyton and he's fine."

"I remember it all...what happened to him...to us...and our baby."

"Your baby? You're pregnant?"

"Pregnant? What are you talking about? I have to talk to Peyton!"

"Randall is reluctant to wake him."

"Please, Benai...make Randall understand that I have to talk to Peyton!"

"I'll try but he's very protective of Peyton and he thinks he needs what he called a healing sleep."

"He's been asleep for several days already! Isn't it time to get him medical attention?"

"I know you're hurt, angry and frustrated, but they won't allow anything to happen to him, Avantae. Both Randall and Declan are still there. They'll know if he needs medical attention."

"Maybe so, but I've had enough of Randall deciding I can't talk to Peyton! I'm going to Peyton's mansion myself and Peyton can decide if he wants to see me or not!" She pushed the cover aside and got out of bed.

Benai rose and caught her hand. "That attitude isn't going to get you very far," she warned. "If you attempt to force Peyton to choose between you and his siblings, I'm here to tell you, he'll choose them."

Avantae stared at her. "Are you implying he doesn't love me?"

"No. I know he loves you deeply, but you're eventually going to have to understand how close the brothers are. I was foolish enough to try to force Randall to

choose between me and trying to repair his relationship with Bancroft. He sent Peyton to stay with me but he went after Bancroft."

"He chose Bancroft?"

Benai shook her head. "You're going to have a problem with Peyton's relationship with his brothers if you choose to view it in that light. I know Randall loves me but he also has a deep devotion to his siblings that he won't compromise."

"And you're okay with that?"

She nodded. "I can't imagine ever loving anyone else and I know he feels the same way about me. But let's face it, Avantae, a large percentage of relationships and marriages don't last long."

"Are you saying you don't expect your marriage to Randall to last?"

"No. I expect to love him and to have him love me for as long as we're both alive."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"I was speaking about the general chances of marriages failing. While most marriages don't last long, the Grayhawks are always going to be brothers. Accept his unshakable devotion to his siblings without viewing it as a challenge to his love for you and you'll be fine."

Avantae sank onto the side of the bed. "I want to honor and respect their traditions but I'm starting to feel as if his family is determined to keep us apart."

Benai sat beside her, squeezing her hand. "They're not. They know you're his *sheene* but they're worried about Cam. They've recently learned he's really their brother. You should have been off limits to Peyton."

"That didn't seem to mean much to Randall when he went after you."

Benai's gaze narrowed. "You have no idea how much Randall's suffered because of that decision, so please don't presume to think you do."

Avantae sucked in a breath, shaking her head. "I had no right to say that."

"No, you didn't."

"I'm so sorry, Benai. You and Randall have been extremely kind and considerate. You didn't deserve that."

Benai sighed. "It's okay. I understand, but you should know that Randall's actions caused a lot of friction in the family. Now the same thing has happened with you and Peyton so naturally the family is feeling a little shell-shocked."

"I didn't know Cam and Peyton were actually related when Peyton and I...made love."

"Neither did they until several days ago."

"Where does that leave me, Benai?"

"His feelings for you haven't changed. All that's different is that you'll need to exercise a little patience until they find a way to deal with Cam."

"Is he...all right?"



"Cam?"

Avantae nodded. "I must sound like a selfish bitch going on about how I need to see Peyton when Cam walked in on us and..."

"Things between him and Peyton are at a difficult stage."

"Did Peyton hurt him? Randall wouldn't say."

Benai grimaced, shrugging. "He might have...hit him."

"Oh, Benai!"

"Croft was there and he made sure things between them didn't get out of hand. Randall and Declan have been with Peyton. Layton, Brandon and Bancroft spent time with Cam. Declan has a healing touch. And Brandon's touch can be...invasive, but he'll eventually help Cam understand why you and Peyton were drawn to each other. But we'll need you to be a team player and not see Peyton until—"

"They say so? How can you buy into that line of thinking, Benai?"

"Because I love Randall just as you love Peyton. I've already told you that if it comes down to a choice between his brothers and you, I'd be very surprised if he chose you."

She shook her head. "Maybe Randall made that choice, but Peyton won't. He told me he didn't need Layton's approval to see me."

"Randall didn't have Layton's approval to see me either, but he did. That didn't stop him from choosing to go after Bancroft instead of staying with me—even though I begged him to. Peyton loves you, but he also loves his brothers. As long as you can accept that, you'll be as happy with him as I am with Randall and Tempest is with Layton."

"Doesn't sound like much of a deal."

"Doesn't it? You should know that loving the Grayhawks comes with trade-offs. A big one is accepting how important their siblings are to them. That devotion doesn't mean they love you any less."

"Doesn't it?"

"No. It just means his capacity for love is so deep it can encompass an endless love for you and a deep devotion to his siblings. Can you accept that?"

Avantae sighed. "I'll have to. Won't I?"

Benai nodded. "Yes, but believe me, Peyton will make it up to you in ways that will thrill you beyond belief. And when he tells you he'll never stray and will love you as long as he lives, you'll believe him and be that much happier."

"You have this spiel all figured out?"

Benai shook her head. "It's not a spiel and believe me, there was a point when I felt as you do. I was so angry with Layton because I thought he wanted to keep me and Randall apart."

"And now you think he walks on water—just as they do."

Benai laughed, linking her arm through Avantae's. "Once you get to know him and learn how devoted he is to his siblings, you'll think he's pretty special too."

Avantae nodded. "I'm beginning to believe you."

"Good. Now, how about I order breakfast while you shower and dress?"

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The afternoon sun shone into the bedroom when Peyton woke. Randall turned from the windows to cross the room and sit on the side of the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm not sure." Peyton sat up against his pillows. "Have you heard from Croft?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"What about Cam? Have you heard from him?"

"No, but then he's probably still a little hurt and angry."

"And hating me?"

"He doesn't hate you, Peyton."

"But?"

Randall shrugged. "Discovering your relationship with Avantae was shocking enough. He also has to deal with learning he really is our brother. It's a lot to absorb for someone who thought he was alone in the world. He's going to need a little time to acclimate himself to everything before he'll be ready to see you again."

"What is it about us, Randy, that we can't seem to uphold our family's most sacred code like the others? Do you think that's why Dad singled us out to be given the cold shoulder? Because he knew we wouldn't measure up? Did he see too much of himself in us?"

Randall sighed. "I don't know why he seemed to resent us, Peyton. Hell, maybe it was because we're the only two without dark brown eyes. Whatever his reasoning, I know we didn't do anything to deserve...the lack of affection he reserved for us alone."

"We've distinguished ourselves from the others in an unspectacular way. None of the others have ever pursued a woman one of us had a prior claim on."

"True, but you're not making any allowance for the fact that we upheld our family tradition—until it conflicted with our finding our *sheeneas*. No man should be forced to choose between a tradition and being with his *sheeneas*."

"I like the spin you put on our behavior, Randy."

"It's not spin, Peyton. It's a fact none of the others would dispute."

Peyton sighed. "Sin-Bad hinted that Dad was looking for something he never found."

"I guess that and alcohol were his excuses for his countless infidelities."

"If he never found it, Randy, are we doomed to take up the search?"

Randall shook his head. "Hell no! I'm not looking for anything. I have everything I want and need in Benai."

"I feel like that about Avantae and yet there's still a little part of something missing. When I left Sin-Bad's mansion, I felt it calling to me."

"It? What called to you?"

Peyton ran a hand through his hair. "Don't ask me what it is because I don't know. Hell, I don't even know what my next step should be except that I want you to go home to Benai."

"I will—when this is over." Randall glanced at his watch. "How would you like to spend the day?"

"What about work?"

"It's Saturday."

"Saturday?"

Randall nodded. "You've been out of it for a few days. None of us has gotten much sleep lately. Brandon and Declan are down the hall asleep now. Layton and Croft are downstairs. You gave us several unsettled nights, Peyton. It's good to have you back."

"Shouldn't I be hungry?"

"You drank the protein shakes Declan made."

"I'd really like to see Avantae."

Randall shrugged. "So let's go see her."

"Aren't you supposed to talk me *out* of seeing her?"

"Why? Cam knows about your relationship now and he's halfway to accepting it. And after spending nearly four sleepless nights listening to your nightmares of losing her, we all know how important she is to you. From what Benai tells me, she needs to see you as much as you need to see her."

"Oh God. You have no idea how I ache to see her."

"I think I can remember feeling that way when I couldn't see Benai."

"Where's Cam?"

"He's back in Vegas, this time with Dalton and Jordan in tow."

"What must they think of me, Randy?"

"Dalton and Jordan?"

Peyton nodded.

Randall shrugged. "They understand."

"Understand what? That I think there should be an exception to the family code for me?"

"No. They understand that you've waited a very long time for an opportunity to see Avantae again." Randall placed his hand on the back of Peyton's neck. "None of us

think any less of you. You didn't know Cam was a blood relative and you were driven by ancient forces none of us expected you to control."

"You don't need to bend over backward trying to defend the indefensible, Randy."

"I'm not. Let's face it. Layton raised the bar pretty high. Brandon and Bancroft kept it there. Watching me and you stumble has helped them realize that they won't have to strive so hard for near perfection."

"Damn. What a legacy."

Randall shrugged. "We did our best. They know that's all they have to do—their best."

"I'm curious. Why did Cam return early from Vegas?"

"He met a woman who excited him so much that he rushed home to tell you he thought getting over Avantae wouldn't be as difficult as he thought."

Great. So if he'd kept his cock in his pants a little longer, none of this might have happened. "Have you talked to him, Randy?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"He's upset with me at the moment."

"You? Why?"

Randall arched a brow. "Probably because I told him if he didn't watch how he spoke about you, I'd rip him a new one."

Peyton shook his head. "He didn't deserve that."

"He has to learn that we can disagree with them but we do not show blatant disrespect to our elder brothers."

"He must think you and I are ganging up on him."

"He'll get over it."

"I sure hope so."

"Dalton called earlier. Cam is starting to relax and enjoy himself."

"Is he doing it with anyone special?"

"I believe he's captivated by the same woman whose delights sent him rushing home to tell you about her."

*God, please let him fall in love with her and forgive me.* "Do you know anything about her?"

"She's older." Randall grinned. "Seems our little brother likes his women older."

"How much older?"

"Dalton says she looks around 38."

So Avantae wasn't an aberration. "And he really likes her?"

"So it seems."

"And she likes him?"

"What's not to like? He's a young, handsome, well educated straight male with lots of potential."

Peyton smiled, shaking his head.

"What?"

"Have you ever met one of our siblings who you didn't think was amazing, Randy?"

"Is it my fault I was lucky enough to be born into a family full of amazing people?"

"Have I ever told you how...special I feel to be your twin in yet another lifetime?"

"No, you haven't."

Peyton laughed and he and Randall embraced. "Thanks for being here, Randy."

"I'll always be here, Peyton. Always." Randall hugged him before pulling away. "And now I really think it's time you got up and took a shower." He held his nose. "You're a little ripe there, buddy."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Avantae took a slow, deep breath. It didn't help. When she released it, her heart continued to race. Her knees shook. With her back to the French doors in her living room, she clenched her hands together.

She stood that way until her condo doorbell rang. Then she hurried to the entrance door. "Yes?"

"I'm looking for a beautiful, irresistible woman nicknamed Red. Know where I can find her?"

Peyton. At last! She jerked the door open and tossed herself at him, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Peyton! Oh, Peyton!"

He engulfed her in a tight embrace, his warm lips pressed against her cheek. "Avantae...Avantae...oh Red, I can't tell you how I've missed you."

They clung together for several long moments, both trembling. "When you called and told me you were coming, I could barely contain my elation."

"It feels like we've been apart for weeks instead of days."

She longed to surrender to her desire, but mindful of her conversations with Benai, she hesitated. "Is this okay, Peyton?"

"My being here?"

She nodded. "I love you and I know your family traditions are important so I want to respect them."

He smiled at her. "You are an incredible woman, Avantae Sovern. My family traditions are important to me and I love you even more for caring about them."

"Yeah?" She linked her arms around his neck. "Show me how much you love me, Hawk," she whispered. "I want to see if it's half as much as I love you."

They broke apart and quickly tore off their clothes.

She kissed a warm, wet path along his shoulders and down his bare chest. She nibbled at each nipple, taking delight in his husky groans at the attention she gave them. Then she licked her way down to his abs before dropping to her knees in front of him.

"No."

About to lean in to kiss and caress his genitals, she sat back to look up at him instead. "Why not? Don't you like it?"

"I love it, but right now I need to be inside you so I can feel like we're two parts of one whole again."

"Oh Peyton...that's how I feel about you."

He leaned down to lift her to her feet. "I love you, Red."

She leaned close to him, her face lifted. "Show me."

He bent to touch his mouth to hers. She longed to grab his cock and force it inside her, but decided she'd try being woman to his man.

He palmed himself and eased inside her.

"Oh!" She moaned against his mouth, slipping a leg around him. "Peyton...my Peyton."

"Yours...only yours...always yours." With his warm, insistent lips cajoling hers apart, he cupped his hands over her ass and gently pumped in and out of her.

Even as she kept her eyes closed and her hands clenched into fists to keep from holding and clutching him close, she couldn't stop herself from contracting around his hot, hard flesh. Lord, he felt so damn good. She felt tingles of pleasure all the way from the bottom of her feet to the top of her head. With her breasts crushed against his chest and his pubic hair brushing against her shaved mons and her engorged clit each time he drove his cock back into her pussy, Avantae felt the involuntary rippling of her stomach muscles and the trembling in her thighs that signaled the nearness of a fierce, powerful climax.

As if determined to totally dominate her, he pulled partway out of her and released her ass, reaching down to unclench her fists. "Hold me," he commanded. When she didn't immediately comply, he linked her arms around his neck. He then slid his warm palms slowly down her back to reclaim her ass.

She moaned when his mouth crashed down on hers. Abandoning all pretense of gentleness, he started to fuck her deep and hard, setting her aching pussy on fire. He rubbed his chest against the hardened tips of her breasts. He slapped her ass until her cheeks jiggled and stung.

"Oh...God!" She dragged her mouth away from his to gasp as waves of pleasure thundered over her. Only seconds away from coming, she raked her nails down his back, her pussy ablaze and contracting wildly around him.

Taking advantage of her parted lips, he pressed his mouth against hers again.

Burning with the need to enjoy the sweet release that was so close, she thrust her tongue out.

Sliding a finger down her crack to rub her asshole, he thrust his cock as deep as he could and sucked on her tongue.

She arched into him, dug her nails into his ass, ground herself against his pubic hair and shuddered to the most intense and satisfying climax she'd ever experienced.

He dragged his mouth across her cheek to whisper against her ear. "That's it, sexy baby. Show me how much you love this by coming for me. Come for me."

She obeyed, feeling as if she were drowning as a giant wall of bliss swept over her with the force of a tidal wave and submerged her in pure, unadulterated sexual delight and an almost unbearably sweet release.

When she surfaced, it was to find him gasping against her neck as he pumped his seed into her. Then he slumped against her, his weight trapping her body against the wall.

She murmured softly, stroking her palms down his damp back while he gasped against her neck.

She lost track of how long they remained locked in the sensual embrace before he drew away from her. Taking her hand in his, they went into the bedroom to get in bed.

Lying on her side with him curled spoon fashion behind her, she sighed. "Hawk?"

He nuzzled her neck. "Yes, Red?"

"How is Cam?" she asked, enjoying the decadent feel of lying in his arms, secure in the knowledge that he loved her as deeply as she did him.

"He's still not ready to talk to me, but I hear he's met another woman who he's quite taken with."

"You don't sound too excited by the idea."

"She's a little...old for him."

"And how old is old, Peyton?"

"Around thirty-eight."

"Hey! I happen to be thirty-nine."

"I know, and I'm not saying it's old. I'm just saying it's too old for Cam."

She sighed. "You probably have a point there, but I hope she makes him happy."

"I do too, but he's a little young to get too caught up with one woman."

"I guess he is and I'm so sorry we hurt him."

"I have a feeling he'll have an easier time forgiving you than me."

"Why?"

"No matter how Randy tries to clean it up, I betrayed him, and the worst part is, I...I'd probably do it again because I love you so much."

"Oh, Peyton. I've always felt that way about you and I know I always will. That has to mean something to him."

"Maybe it does. I talked to Jordan on the drive here and he said Cam sends his regards."

"To?"

"To us both."

"Then he will forgive us." And then they could work on forgiving themselves.

"Then everything should feel almost right."

She lifted her head to look at him. "But something besides our relationship with Cam is off. Isn't it?"

"Yes." He told her of his conversation with Sin-Bad. "He says he still wants to meet you."



She turned in his arms. "When can I meet him?"

"Should I be concerned by your eagerness?"

She nipped his bottom lip. "You've owned my heart since the moment we met...eons ago. Should you be concerned? Not just no. Hell no!"

"Good." He slapped her ass. "Because I've only ever had one love—you. I've waited countless lifetimes to be with you again."

"This time we'll have a happy ending."

He nodded. "Yes. I'll go call Sin-Bad." He rolled away from her.

She reached out to grip his hand.

He glanced at her. "What?"

"I *do* need to meet him..."

"But?"

She tugged at his hand. "You have a very nice ass and the meeting can wait. My need for you can't."

He grinned and joined her on the bed again.

She sighed with pleasure as his warm lips settled on hers. He made love to her with a slow, tender deliberation that left her sobbing with pleasure as she fell ever deeper in love with him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Peyton paid close attention to Avantae's reaction when they entered the Stoner Mansion the next afternoon. He felt the same nameless something calling to him. He looked at Avantae. With her brow furrowed and her head tilted, he decided she must feel it too.

Then she saw the portrait in the foyer. She dropped to her knee, bowing her head.

Several moments passed before Peyton lifted her to her feet.

She looked at him, her eyes filled with tears. "Peyton...it's my mother."

He nodded, slipping an arm around her shoulders. After allowing her several moments to compose herself, he led her into the living room.

Sin-Bad, Max, Sebastian and Chandra were inside.

Sin-Bad and Max immediately dropped to one knee. They spoke one word in unison. "Sovereignique."

After a brief hesitation, Sebastian and Chandra kneeled as well, their heads bowed.

Avantae crossed the room. She touched Max's shoulder before placing her hand on Sin-Bad's. "Sin-Bad and Maxvillion." She moved to stand in front of Sebastian. "And you must be Sebastian."

"Yes, Sovereignique," he said in a quiet, respectful voice.

Avantae stepped back. "Rise. Please." She glanced at Chandra. "Who were your parents?"

"I don't know. I was raised in a series of foster homes."

She touched Chandra's cheek. "I sense that you're a descendant of Aireon."

Chandra glanced at Sin-Bad. "Sin thought I might be but...how could you know that?"

"So you doubt the blood of Aireon runs through your veins?"

"I'm not sure. But if it does, how do *you* know any of this?"

"Why did you bow?"

Chandra shook her head. "I have no idea."

"Don't you?" Avantae smiled. "Although I never actually ascended the throne, I was next in line and a sovereign knows her people..."

"And...they know her." Chandra finished.

"Exactly." Avantae frowned suddenly and turned to look at Sin-Bad. "Chandra is a descendant of one of our people. Peyton and I have both lived and died before, but you and Maxvillion and possibly Sebastian...you're not descendants. I can feel..." She tilted her head. "You're Ambelle and Sin-Bad's children...not descendants, the originals – and yet, you're different. How can you three still be alive and still look so young?"

Sin-Bad sighed. "Actually we did die ...we just didn't stay dead for very long."

"Why not?"

"Because of what we are."

"Are you vampires?"

"Yes."

She took a step back.

Sin-bad shook his head, kneeling again. "No matter what we are now, we were and always will be Aireons first, Sovereignique, and at your service."

Avantae smiled. "Ambelle would be so proud of you all."

"She would be prouder still to be remembered by you after all this time," Sin-Bad said.

"I'm thrilled to see you again, but though we're Aireons, our time is past. I'm now just Avantae Sovern. Please. Rise and no more bowing."

Sin-Bad rose. "I didn't appreciate our way of life until it was too late. Aireon is lost to us, but we now have a little bit of it back, Sovereignique, and –"

"Avantae. Call me Avantae."

He shook his head. "I –"

"I insist, Sin-Bad."

"That will take some getting used to, but in the meantime, I have something for you and Peyton that I've had for a very long time. Excuse me?"

She nodded.

He left the room. When he returned several minutes later, she felt the faint but unmistakable tug of a physic bond she'd thought shattered forever. She glanced at Peyton, noting he'd tensed and was now staring at the two large boxes inlaid with gold leaf that Sin-Bad held.

He handed her the top one. "Sovereignique."

She took it, hugged it briefly against her breasts and then opened it with shaking hands. A sleek, foot-long blade soared from the velvet cushion and twirled around her head several times before gently coming to rest against her breasts.

Her eyes filled with tears, which quickly spilled down her cheeks. "Mariah! Oh, Mariah!" She lifted her sentient blade and pressed her lips against the ornate handle.

Sin-Bad turned to hand Peyton the other box.

Holding Mariah against her breasts, Avantae watched a look of delight spread across Peyton's handsome face as his sentient blade, Locoata, exploded from the velvet cushion and settled against Peyton's outstretched palm.

"I believe this is also yours, Peyton." Sin-Bad lifted a silverdine chain from the bottom of the box. A half heart charm dangled from the chain.

Peyton nodded, looking at her. "Yes. It's mine."

She took it from Sin-Bad and moved behind Peyton to put it on. "Now we're almost whole," she whispered.

He nodded. "Almost."

She turned to look at Sin-Bad. "How did you get them?"

He hesitated briefly before responding. "The Sovereignique managed to come to Earth to entrust them to my parents after..."

Avantae took a slow, painful breath. "After Peyton and I were...dead?"

He nodded. "Yes. After our parents were murdered, I discovered them among their possessions."

"Their murder? At the hands of the Macarae?"

"Yes."

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry. I know how my mother valued Ambelle's service and how sad she was to accept her resignation. Thank you for taking care of them, Sin-Bad."

He bowed his head. "Because of my former lack of respect for our way of life, I didn't have the privilege of standing in Aireon's defense. So it was an honor to be of some small service." He dropped to one knee. "*Ka-ah-haw* Aireon."

She looked at him through a sudden flood of tears. Would Aireon have fallen had she put country first over her love for Peyton? "Country first," she repeated. She placed a hand on his shoulder. "Aireon will live on in our hearts but we have to live the life we

have now, Sin-Bad. I'm not your Sovereignique Ascendant anymore. I gave up the right to the title when..." She glanced at Peyton. "When I fell in love."

Peyton crossed the room to put his arm around her shoulders. "We can't go back, Avantae."

She thought of the loss of her entire family as well as Peyton's. "I wouldn't if I could because we could never have been together there, but my parents...my sisters and your brothers..."

"I know." He kissed her hair. "I know."

She felt Mariah's hand pressing against her neck, pulsing in sympathy.

"Can we have a moment?" Peyton asked.

"Of course," Sin-Bad answered.

Moments later she and Peyton were alone in the room with Mariah and Locoata.

"Do you remember what happened, Peyton?"

He nodded, his chest rising and falling slowly. "Yes. We were discovered making love. I lost my service commission and my clan was disgraced. When the Macarae learned of your pregnancy, I was given the death penalty."

She shuddered against him.

He paused, fighting back tears as the memory of what happened next rushed back to assail his senses. "My brothers died trying to break me out of prison. Then they told me you were pregnant but you'd lost our baby, and they decommissioned and deactivated Locoata. After the loss of everyone I loved, there was no reason to appeal my sentence. I insisted on a quick execution. I...I had no idea they would make you watch."

She sobbed, clinging to him as she remembered an ancient memory of watching him stand in silent defiance, grimacing but refusing to make a sound as his knees were broken. Then, as they were about to behead him, he'd whispered, "*Cocamora zomar*. I love you now and always."

Bile rose into her throat and she shook her head, rejecting the rest of the painful memory.

"What happened to you, Avantae?"

"The Macarae wanted to forgive me if I'd swear allegiance to them. I could never marry one of them after they'd killed you and your brothers. I refused and sealed Aireon's fate. We fought but they were stronger and more brutal than anyone should ever be."

She had to suck in several breaths before she could continue. "And Aireon fell. When I knew we'd be defeated, I...I couldn't live with what I'd done...all the grief my selfish insistence on having you had caused all those I loved."

He pulled away to stare at her. "What did you do, Avantae?"

"They took Mariah from me and left me with the promise of belonging to one of their butchers. I wanted to be with you and our baby so I took poison on my wedding night, confident the Goddess would forgive me and one day allow us to love each other again. That's all I remember."

His eyes glistened with tears. "Randall and Cam were my brothers then, and they both died trying to free me. I was responsible for their deaths."

She touched his cheek. "The Goddess was kind to them as well. Neither of them remember. Even if they did, they are of Aireon. In their heart of hearts they understand the concept of one. No one should have to give up their one. They'll forgive us. They will."

He nodded. "I know Randall would but I'm not so sure about Cam."

"I am. He'll forgive us. And now that we both remember, we'll have to work on forgiving ourselves and doing our best to make sure we don't...devalue their sacrifices."

He engulfed her in his arms. "Oh God, I wish I didn't remember. They're ugly, painful memories."

"Yes, but now we have an opportunity to make new ones and we will work very hard to earn Cam's forgiveness, Hawk." She kissed his hair. "It won't be easy, but we'll earn it."

He nodded. "Yes. We will. And now I just want to take you home and fall asleep in your arms, secure in the knowledge that you are mine at last and this time I get to keep you forever."

She looked up at him. "This time almost everything is perfect."

"We'll remove the 'almost' once Cam forgives us."

"And Cam will forgive us—even if I have to retort to the remnants of the powers invested in me as Sovereign Ascendant of Aireon to coerce him."

"No!" He jerked away from her. "No, you won't coerce him, Avantae."

She blinked. "What?" Had she spoke aloud?

"As you said, Aireon's time is past. We have new lives to live and in this one, I don't intend to be subservient to you. Nor will Cam be."

"Peyton—"

"You're going to have to view us as equals, Avantae."

"I do!"

"Then he will forgive us or not—without any undue influence from you." He stroked her cheek. "I told you I'm old-fashioned and I intend to wear the proverbial pants in this relationship. Is that going to be a problem for you? Are you going to be able to handle a reversal of our previous roles?"

Now that she knew who she had once been, playing the obedient, always agreeable woman to his man would probably present an ongoing challenge for her. But when she

thought of the alternative—another life without him, she knew it was one she was ready to willingly embrace.

She bowed her head and dropped to one knee. "*Servique zomar.*"

"I offer my service now and always," he repeated. He reached down to lift her to her feet. "I don't want your service, Red. I want your eternal love and devotion."

"You have that, Hawk. You have been my one since the moment our eyes met when we were both children on Aireon."

He cupped her face between his palms. "Do you know how much I love you? How much I've always loved you? I have faint memories of countless other lives lived out in misery because you weren't there. I've only ever had one love through my many lives and it's always been you, Red. I'll love you for eternity, my Red...my Avantae...Sovereignique of my heart."

"Oh Peyton." Tears of joy streamed down her cheeks. "Will you do something for me?"

"Anything."

"Will you marry me?"

"Yes. Oh yes, Red, I will."

She tossed her arms around his neck. "When? I want to get married very soon and have your baby to replace the one we—"

He kissed her and held her closer. "We've been blessed with another chance for happiness. It's time to let the past and all the painful memories associated with it go, Red."

She nodded. "So when will you marry me, my handsome Hawk?"

"Soon." He wiped her cheeks.

"Let's set a date."

"Lady's choice," he told her.

Noting hesitancy in him, she frowned. "There's a 'but' hanging in the air, Peyton."

He shrugged. "There really isn't. You set the date and we'll make the arrangements."

"But?"

"But let's not tell anyone other than Randall and Benai until we give Cam a little more time to accept our relationship."

She sucked in a breath, barely suppressing the urge to insist no one but them should have so much influence on such an important decision. She looked into his eyes, saw the resolve and swallowed her protest. Peyton was determined to have his way. And she was determined to accept and support his decision. The reversal of their previous roles had already begun.

The Goddess willing, Cam wouldn't keep them waiting too long. "Peyton?"

"Yes?"

"Were you ever going to ask me?"

"To marry me?"

She nodded.

He touched her cheek. "Of course I was, but I'm an old-fashioned guy. I wanted to romance you a little first, but I was definitely going to ask you."

"And you don't mind that I...asked you first?"

He shook his head. "No. I kind of like that you did...shows how much you love me, and I like that a lot, Red."

She smiled and linked her arms around his neck. "I'm yours to command."

"For how long?"

"Forever."

"That just might be long enough," he whispered, and pressed his lips against hers in a warm, slow kiss filled with the promise of endless love and eternal devotion that she fully shared.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Six weeks later, after having Cam reject all of his attempts to repair their relationship and after a surprising, but welcome, announcement from Avantae, Peyton's patience had eroded. He would no longer watch Avantae and Benai make secret wedding plans.

Nor would he have Avantae denied the same respect and good wishes from Lelia that both Tempest and Benai had enjoyed during their courtships.

He suspected his failure to openly declare his intentions of marrying Avantae was responsible for Lelia's marked lack of warmth toward her. Once Lelia knew how much Avantae meant to him, Peyton was sure she would make more of an effort to get to know Avantae. She would surely also offer to prepare the traditional lover's balm which had been passed down through generations of Grayhawk women. Lelia had eagerly prepared it for both Tempest and Benai.

The Grayhawks believed use of the special blend of herbs, spices and roots on the wedding night helped to strengthen the long line of love they all believed in. Since it took weeks to make, Lelia would need to begin preparations soon so it would be ready by their wedding night.

On the drive home from work, he decided to call Layton and ask him to schedule a family meeting so he could formally announce their engagement to the entire family, and to share their other news.

It saddened him to realize that it might take years to repair his relationship with Cam. Even then it might never be as strong as it had once been. Hell, Cam would probably never fully trust him again.

He sighed and turned his thoughts to Avantae. After a shower and a change of clothes, he'd pick her up for dinner and later have her love his blues and regrets away. Then they would make long-term plans.

He arrived home to find Cam's vehicle parked in his driveway. Filled with conflicting emotions, he alighted from his car and walked inside.

He paused in the living room doorway to take several deep, cleansing breaths.

Cam rose from one of the loveseats and slowly crossed the room toward him, his lids lowered to conceal the expression in his eyes.

Damn. That wasn't a good sign. Although he longed to rush forward and embrace Cam, he knew he had to allow Cam to dictate the terms of this meeting. For once he would show Cam that he was capable of putting his needs above his own.

"I know I had no right to use my key to come in without permission...but I've missed you and I...I wanted to come home."



"Cam—"

"I just wanted to come home."

Home. Peyton swallowed hard several times before he could trust his voice. "You're always welcome home and—"

"I'm so sorry for the way I behaved and the things I said. I thought I loved her and I felt betrayed and hurt and I wanted to hurt you and...I'm so sorry I was such an ass."

Peyton sucked in an aching breath. "You weren't an ass, Cam, and no matter how you phrase it, I did betray you. I'm the one who needs to apologize. Everything you said about me was true."

"No. It wasn't. I was in big-time lust with Vantae. What straight male wouldn't be?"

Males like Layton and Randall who were already head over heels in love.

"But I didn't love her and I've always known she didn't love me. She was always honest about not wanting a real relationship with me. I should have known she was your *sheeneea*."

"You couldn't be expected to know any such thing."

"I should have known it because you slept with her. I never thought she was mine so I should have been more understanding and more gracious and allowed you to enjoy getting to know her again. I've been selfish—"

"Stop it! Please, just stop it, Cam! I'm the one who did everything imaginable wrong. Me. Not you. And I want to know who the hell has been filling your head with lies. Our shattered relationship is *my* fault."

"Shattered? It's not shattered, unless you're telling me you... What are you telling me?" His eyes filled with tears. "That you can't forgive me? If that's what you're telling me, I...I don't know what I'll do. You...you're more than a brother, you're the father I never had."

Cam's tearful words forced Peyton to relive all the anguish his betrayal had caused and made his conduct even more unforgivable. Yet Cam was there trying to shoulder the blame for Peyton's faults. He reached out a hand to Cam. "I'm so sorry I hurt you, Cameron. Please forgive me. I was selfish and inconsiderate of your needs and feelings and that was unforgivable of me."

"There's nothing to forgive. She's your *sheeneea*. I know what that means, Hawk."

Hawk?

Cameron had finally forgiven him.

Overcome, Peyton's eyes filled with tears. He dropped to his knees, placing a hand over his face.

Cam knelt beside him. "Hawk? Can you forgive me for not being more understanding of what you were going through?"

He removed his hand to look at Cameron through a flood of tears. "There's nothing for me to forgive, Cam. I hurt you in a way I may never be able to fully atone for and –"

Cam placed a hand on his shoulder. "It only happened the way it did because she's your *sheeneea*. And because she *is* your *sheeneea* and not mine, I no longer view it as a betrayal, Hawk. Declan and Bancroft helped me understand."

"They shouldn't have tried to influence you."

"They didn't. I went to them because I missed you. For the last ten years, I've always known that no matter what was going on in my life, you were there for me. I didn't like not knowing that anymore. I know Layton is the head of the family, but you...you're...you've been my anchor, Hawk. Whenever something bad was happening, I'd always think 'I'll tell Hawk and he'll make it right.'

"The first time we met, I tried to pretend I didn't feel anything, but the moment I saw you, a part of me knew I could trust you. I've always trusted you and looked up to you since then."

"Until now?"

Cam shook his head. "That hasn't changed. Even when I was being as disrespectful as possible, I didn't mean the things I said. I knew even then that she must be your *sheeneea*...I knew it but it was hard to accept because I had a crush on her. I'm over that now and I just want you back in my life."

Peyton pulled Cam into his arms and they clung to each other, neither making any effort to conceal their tears of joy that the relationship they'd both cherished for so long wasn't beyond repair.

He spent an hour with Cam before he decided to share the secret he hadn't shared with anyone else.

Cam listened in silence and then smiled and slapped him on the back. "Pregnant? You mean I'm going to be an uncle?"

He nodded. "Yes, and we wanted you to be among the first to know that we're getting married."

"I know you'll be happy together, Hawk."

"Yes. We will."

"Is she ready to see me?"

"She's a little hesitant because she feels we handled the start of our relationship badly and that ended up hurting you."

"Tell her I'm looking forward to seeing her again and welcoming her into the family."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I am."

"Great. Now – I hear there's a new woman in your life."

Cam shrugged. "Sort of. It was a rebound vacation fling thing. Even though we didn't have sex, she was very exciting and...older. I like older women, Hawk."

"So I understand. What's her name?"

"Traci."

"Are you still seeing her?"

"I don't know what's going to happen. She travels a lot."

"What does she do for a living?"

"I don't know. She really didn't want to talk about herself."

"Which made everything about her more exciting."

Cameron nodded. "That and the fact that she's so beautiful she takes my breath away."

"So how did you leave things?"

"She said she'd call me when she's in Philly."

"And you're okay with that?"

Cameron nodded. "Yes. The fact that she practically wrapped me around her finger so soon after I thought I was in love with Vantae helped me see you were right."

"About?"

"My being too young to get too serious with any one woman. When she comes to Philly, I'd be happy to see her, but in the meantime, I'm going to continue dating."

"So we're okay?"

"We're more than okay, Hawk."

"Thank God."

"I thank him all the time for you, Hawk. Meeting you made such a difference in my life."

He clasped a hand on the back of Cam's neck and pressed his forehead against Cam's. "And mine. I wouldn't trade the last ten years for anything, Cam."

After Cam left, Peyton showered and changed. He was in his car on his way to Avantae's condo when Lelia called.

"Lelia, I was just thinking of you earlier. How are you?"

"I'm fine. How are you, Hawk?"

"I'm great. What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering when you were going to make a move."

"What? Have I forgotten something I needed to do?"

"With Avantae. Last week, Tempest and I were discussing whether we should start a batch of lover's balm and I—"

"Oh Lelia."

"What? Did we misread your intentions? She is your *sheenea*...isn't she?"

"Yes."

"And you *are* going to marry her one of these days. Aren't you?"

"Oh, I most certainly am."

"Then what's wrong?"

"I didn't think... I got the impression you didn't like her and had no intentions of preparing it for her."

"Where'd you get that idea from, Hawk?"

"You were so warm and friendly with Tempest and Benai that it was clear you liked them both. I was beginning to think you didn't like Avantae."

"I do, but..." Her voice trailed off.

"But what?"

"She's so stunningly beautiful and has a sort of...regal presence that makes me feel a little inadequate."

"Avantae *is* beautiful and regal, but then so are you, Lelia. You have no need to feel inadequate with anyone."

"Thanks, Hawk."

"I mean it, Lelia. You don't ever need to stand in any woman's shadow."

"I'm lucky to have brothers such as you, Hawk."

"You know we wouldn't trade you for anything. Don't you?"

"Yes, I do, and I can't tell you how special it makes me feel."

"You are very special, Lia. You light up our lives in ways I can't even explain."

"Okay, a few more comments like that and you'll have me crying my eyes out. So let's talk about something else."

"Like?"

"Like are you going to make an honest woman of her anytime soon?"

"Mind your own business, little sister, and stay tuned for some big news."

"I'll take that as a yes. Give me a hint about this big news."

"No hints. Bye, Lelia." Smiling, he ended the call.

Moments later his cell phone rang again. "Hi, Red," he said, recognizing Avantae's ring.

"Did you get lost, Hawk?"

"I'm on my way. I'll be there in half an hour."

"I'll be waiting for you."

When she opened the door, Mariah and Locoata both flew across the room to hover near his head. He stroked both their handles before he swept Avantae into his arms and kissed her until she tore her lips away from his.

"Now that's what I call a hello, handsome." She caressed his cheek. "You look happy. What's happened?"

"I'm deliriously happy." He lifted her bare left hand to his lips and kissed it. "Where's your engagement ring?"

"In the bedroom."

"Why isn't it on your hand, Red?"

"Are you getting senile already, Hawk? We agreed I wouldn't wear it until Cam was ready to come to terms with our relationship. Now why are you so late? I was beginning to think you'd stood me up."

"When I got home tonight, Cam was there."

She tensed in his arms. "How is he?"

"He looks good and we had a very enlightening conversation."

"And?"

"And we settled our differences."

She drew back, studying his face. "You're not bruised."

"Did you expect me to be?"

"I'm not sure. Is *he* bruised?"

He arched a brow. "That question makes us sound like a bunch of savages, Red."

She shrugged. "I didn't say that, but you and your brothers do seem to think it's acceptable to punch each other out every now and then."

"Hey! We don't punch each other out."

"You don't?" she asked sarcastically.

"No, we don't, but on the rare occasions we do have a physical...disagreement, it's always done with love."

She feigned a meek look. "Of course it is. So? How is he?"

"He's amazing, Red. Despite everything, he still thinks I'm worth being related to."

"You are."

He sighed. "I don't deserve it, but he's forgiven me. He knows we're engaged and he knows you're pregnant."

"How did he take the news?"

"He's looking forward to being an uncle."

"He's already one."

"I know, but our baby will be the first born since he's found out we're really brothers. And he sends his regards to you."

"He's forgiven *you*. What about me? Does he hate me?"

"Of course he doesn't hate you. In fact, he's probably always going to have a bit of a crush on you...that is, until he meets his *sheene*. Can you handle that, Red?"

She linked her arms around his neck and smiled up at him. "Hey, I'm an Aireon who has her one back, her sentient blade and another chance at love. I can handle whatever this world or any other throws at me."

He tightened his arms around her waist, allowing her to feel his cock slowly hardening. "Can you handle a lusty, soon-to-be hubby with a rock-hard cock who needs to love you all night long?"

She rubbed her hips against his groin. "As long as you love me, I can handle anything, Peyton."

"Good answer. Lelia called me tonight."

"How is she?"

"Good. She and Tempest have been discussing preparing lover's balm for our wedding night."

She released a sigh and blinked rapidly before her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Hawk. I know how important that is to a Grayhawk wedding night and I was afraid no one would care enough to make it for me."

"She's teaching Tempest and eventually Benai as well, but for now, she's the only one who knows how to prepare it properly. She rightly thinks you're beautiful and regal and will happily make it for our wedding night."

"I'm so pleased and relieved."

"She wants to get to know you."

"And I want to get to know her."

"Good. Now how did you spend your day?"

"You mean other than daydreaming about you?"

He smiled, rubbing his semi-erect cock against her. "Yes, Red, other than that."

"I spent two hours answering emails from readers wanting to know when I'm going to post more *Sirens' Tales* to my blog."

"What did you tell them?"

"I was noncommittal because I wasn't sure what to tell them. It's your story too. Should I continue with the blogs?"

"Do you want to?"

"I like that there are people interested in our story. So, yes, I want to continue posting it."

"Then do, but I think it would be better to come up with a happier ending than we originally had."

"Agreed."

"Good." He nibbled at her ear. "Now let's get serious."

She rubbed her breasts against his chest. "I'm all yours, Hawk."

“And I have been and always will be yours. *Cocamora zomar*, Red” he whispered, lifting her in his arms.

“I love you now and always,” she repeated.

With that delicious promise filling his ears, he closed his eyes and groaned with delight as he enjoyed the slow, sweet slide into the pussy and the heart that would be his for all eternity.

## About the Author

Marilyn Lee lives, works and writes on the East Coast. In addition to thoroughly enjoying writing erotic romances, she enjoys roller-skating, spending time with her large extended family and rooting for all her hometown sports teams. Her other interests include collecting Doc Savage pulp novels from the thirties and forties and collecting Marvel comics from the seventies and eighties (particularly *Thor* and *The Avengers*). Her favorite TV shows are forensic shows, westerns (*Gunsmoke* and *Have Gun, Will Travel* are particular favorites), and mysteries. She loves the old Charlie Chan mysteries. Her all-time favorite mystery movie is probably *Dead, Again*, and nearly every vampire movie or television show ever made (*Forever Knight* and *Count Yorga, Vampire* are favorites).

Marilyn welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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