

A man and a woman are shown from the waist up, facing each other in a close embrace. The man is on the left, shirtless, with dark, wet hair. The woman is on the right, with short red hair, wearing a gold bracelet. Between them is a large, stylized flame that appears to be made of fire or smoke. The background is a soft-focus forest scene with golden light. The overall style is romantic and sensual.

Sin

# FIRED UP

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# **Fired Up**

Strange Hollow

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(c) 2010

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## **Blurb**

*Air, fire, earth ... there's a whole lot of shaking going on.*

Erich's earthquaking emotions and fiery temper were enough to get him kicked out of his clan. The folks in Strange Hollow don't seem to care he's not a proper firekin, and once he meets Sarya, he figures he just might be home. From the moment he spots the red-hot air Fae, Erich can't wait to find out if the woman who looks like an angel has a devilish side.

Sarya's calm but lonely existence in the Hollow is shaken to cataclysmic levels with Erich's arrival. Not only does the earth move for Sarya when she's with him, but her fire burns out of control. The sinful cowboy pushes all of her buttons and strokes her wings just right. She falls for the drawl, and not a thing can deter her from growing a little more in love with him as the days pass.

Problem is: something is suddenly threatening the forest and all signs point to Erich.

## Prologue

She danced.

Naked and unashamed she twirled, her feet kicking up the leaves on the ground, the rich earth sinking between her toes. The scent of the loam filled the air and she dragged in deep breaths to let the story of the place come out through her motions. This wasn't just a forest glade, it was the birthplace of the animals. Where they brought their young to rest in the dappled sunlight. Here they made love with their mates and here they laid their heads down at the end of their days.

Sarya danced it all.

Breaking dawn's light flooded the clearing and changed the shadows into pools of liquid gold. Everywhere the dew glistened and reflected back like a million tiny diamonds suspended in the air around her.

She danced faster, something urgent inside needing to break free. It had been too long she'd hidden her joy away to try and fit in with her people, but no more. Here in Strange Hollow she was welcome. More than that, she was needed and honored.

The creatures of the forest understood her—spoke to her through their modest animal ways. As a Sylph, she was bound by her nature to care for the little ones. The furry and the scaled, all that clung to the ground.

The dance changed as her anger flared. She stomped and dragged her feet, limbs heavy with grief. Why was she condemned for loving the earth if she was supposed to love the things of the earth? That had been her argument before the council of air Fae. They whispered amongst themselves and nodded fearfully. The oldest of them was white-haired, black-eyed and frightening in his fragility.

*"We are to care for them because we are above them. We are like gods and goddesses to them and we do not lower ourselves to their level."*

Sarya did. She left before her people could remove her. She fled, seeking refuge in the towering steeples of chapels and other humans' holy places. If she started a few more rumors about the existence of angels, then the air Fae could find a way to clean up the mess. She was done with them.

Then she'd found Strange Hollow. The air had felt different as she approached. Stern, like a warning, but welcoming at the same time. When she shot over the town limits in the dark she was accosted by three large figures hovering in the air and directing her flight toward a small building in the center of town. She didn't even think to turn and flee.

The wind picked up and the creaking and swaying of the trees brought Sarya back to the present, back to the dance. The sun warmed her as she stretched her arms to the sky and slowly, oh so slowly, lowered herself to recline fully on the floor of the glade.

Strange Hollow had welcomed her in. They cared not that she had been of the air Fae, more concerned with who she was now. For the past six months she'd been slowly learning the answer to that question. Sarya scooped up the earth beneath her fingers and threw it into the air, letting the clumps and clods of dirt land where they may.

She was Sarya. She flew with wings and magic, but she loved the earth, and she refused to let her people's disgust lower her own standards.

A quick roll and a jump brought her to her feet and she laughed out loud and resumed her dance, now swaying in rhythm with the wavering limbs above her head. She danced until a sheen of sweat covered her body, her limbs fatigued and yet pleasure filled. The only thing she missed...

The dance ended.

Sarya paced to where she'd hung her light tunic, the one with slits for her wings to poke through. She wore it when she went into town for the sake of the villagers who didn't like nudity, or perhaps liked it too much.

No, if she was lonely, it was a small price to pay for the freedom she had and the chance to be a part of this community. Maybe someday she'd find someone who would be able to join her in the dance of life. Until then, she was satisfied.

She unfurled her wings and headed into town for supplies.

## Chapter One

“Mother fire and bless the flame,” Erich mumbled under his breath, hitching his duffel higher on his shoulder. The bus had dropped him on the rise above the town, a small hill barely big enough to be called a real hill, but it was high enough to give him a good view of the city below.

He’d stepped into an episode of *The Andy Griffith Show*. He expected Opie to come greet him as he meandered down the road toward Strange Hollow. Shit, Lassie had to be around there somewhere. He shook his head. Not much he could do about living in a 1950s throwback town at the moment anyway. His own clan had tossed him out on his ear and Strange Hollow seemed to be the only place willing to take him.

It’d been the green eyes... Not red like his father’s and his father before him. Nope. It seemed Erich was a throwback, just like the town. Too conspicuous in the clan, too *earthy* to live with the other firelings. Just as well. He liked being alone anyway. Didn’t need anything or anyone. Nah, he was good alone.

Pulling himself out of his pity party, Erich trudged down the hill, leaning back so he wouldn’t end up at a flat out run by the time he reached the bottom. His bag kept him upright, all his possessions weighing on him heavily as he made his way down what now seemed like a mountain.

He hit the bottom and the town looked more 50s as the seconds passed. He walked past a small diner, Maude’s, which appeared to be the local greasy spoon. Then The Cauldron, a bar, somewhere he’d probably be visiting eventually. From the sign in the window it looked like it turned into a nightclub at nine. Yeah, he could get his dance on. He peered through the window and saw a few customers milling around. At just past seven, it wasn’t bumping and booming just yet, but he figured that changed when full night fell upon the town. It was twilight at the moment and only a few people walked the streets. Slow and quiet. Maybe he needed a bit of that now.

Still walking, he headed toward the big building, his destination the house beyond. That’s what Jacinda’s letter had told him, and so far the map she’d included was spot on. He had to meet the town’s matriarch, get a housing assignment and figure out what the hell he could do for pay in the small town.

Up ahead he saw a sign for the General Store. At least there was somewhere to buy goods, hopefully groceries and the like. He’d sold his truck before leaving Florida and hoped the cash he carried in his pocket would be enough to pay his way for a while.

He approached the store with an easy gait, his ambling taking him where he needed to go in no hurry. Just at the door, he came upon a woman with violet eyes, a set of hips a man could get behind, and a smile as bright as the sun. He looked her up and down, admiring the sweet, voluptuous body, and something dawned on him as he took his time perusing the woman. She was doing the exact same thing to him. Well, *shit*. “Ma’am.” It’d be ma’am until she told him otherwise.

“You must be...” Her voice faded and she narrowed her eyes. “Erich Fierland.”

Heat flared in his cheeks—it wasn’t his fire coming to life, but sheer embarrassment at being caught staring at the woman who had to be Jacinda herself. No one else in the small town would have been able to spot him or name him, except her. “Yes, ma’am.” He

reached up and touched the brim of his hat. Gentlemanly thing to do and all that.

“Tell me, Erich of the firelings—”

“Not anymore, ma’am.” He didn’t mean to jump in and correct her so quickly but he didn’t want to misrepresent himself. He’d heard she could have a wicked temper, and he didn’t want to get on the wrong side of it, but facts were facts.

“Pffft.” She waved a hand. “They’re idiots and you’ll always be a fireling, clan or not. Now, tell me...” She shifted until she was standing next to him, and he automatically bent his arm at the elbow. She took his arm as if she’d done so for years. “Do you always look at women like you want to eat them alive?”

Yeah, the fire blazing in his cheeks seemed to envelop him from head to toe. “No, ma’am.”

She patted his hand. “Well, then. It’s nice to be appreciated. You don’t have a chance in hell, but it is nice.”

Erich barked out a laugh and smiled. “I like you, Jacinda Fergus.”

“Aw.” She pinched his cheek. “You’re young enough to be my grandson, but I like you too, Erich.” She walked toward the door, tugging him along. “Now, escort me while I do my shopping and we can chat about your life here in Strange Hollow. Toss your bag by the door there.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Uh...”

“I kill people who break rules, and incarcerate others, Erich. No one’s gonna take your damn bag. Now, put it down and take me shopping.”

Okay, he wasn’t saying no to that. Not when her eyes flashed deep purple and that bit of a glare entered her expression. Hell-to-the-no.

Erich grabbed a cart and followed Jacinda down the first aisle, doing his best not to stare at her ass. She stopped every so often, tossing food and other knick-knacks into the cart, seeming to wander down rows willy-nilly while she did her shopping. He enjoyed the bit of silence in the store. No staring eyes watching him because of his differences. No whispers or pointing fingers... None of it.

She fell back so that they were walking side by side. “What do you want to do with your life?”

“Uh...” He knew deep down, but it wasn’t something he could make money at, not really. “Work with fire?” Close enough to the truth for now.

“Fire chief? That’d be a good job for you. Not that we have fires here, but it’d be nice to have a hunky man wander around in the uniform.” She snapped her fingers.

“There you go, Mr. Fire Chief.”

Her fingers sparkled. Oh. Shit. “What’d you just do? Can you undo it?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “No. I made you Fire Chief and even magiced in a cute little outfit.”

“And you magiced it where, exactly?”

“Why, your house, silly!” She slapped his arm playfully and pranced down the aisle.

His house. Apparently he had one. *Huh*. He supposed they’d talk money later. Erich ambled after the flitting fairy who was light on her feet for such a curvaceous woman. He rounded the corner, scanning the aisle for his missing woman, when his gaze fell upon an angel.

An honest-to-God, make-his-dick-hard-in-an-instant, angel.

She had powder-white wings that reached from shoulder to ankle, almost glowing

under the neon lights of the store. Her milk-white skin had just a slight sheen of glitter coating her from head to foot. She wore a petite tunic, barely covering her ample breasts and voluptuous body. Curves upon curves upon curves. Her breasts were large, yet pert, and she had a tapered waist that flared out to a set of wide hips. To top it all off, the woman had a fiery mane of deep red hair that would put a fireling's coloring to shame. Next to this mystery woman, Jacinda appeared plain.

Had to meet her. Had to have her. Had to ... just had to. Wasn't a "want to" thing, but a "have to" thing, in more ways than one. More like a hundred and one ways and then some.

As Erich approached he heard the woman's tinkling laughter carrying on the air, calling to him. His heart nearly burst from the sudden emotion coursing through him. Arousal? Yes, but something more wormed its way into him and he wasn't quite sure what to call it just yet. He'd figure it out eventually.

Two sets of eyes turned on him, one violet and the other the iciest blue he'd ever seen. He could stare at those eyes all day and never get tired of admiring their depths. *Damn, he was getting poetic.* The woman had a strange effect on him all of a sudden.

"Erich, this is Sarya. Sarya, Erich." Jacinda facilitated the introductions.

He held out his hand and she grasped it in a loose hold. "Ma'am." He kept his grip gentle, afraid of bruising that sweet, white skin.

"Hello." Her voice tinkled like wind chimes on a clear summer day.

"I was just telling Sarya you're new in town, and seeing as she's heading home, I thought she could show you to your new house." Jacinda snapped her fingers and a key appeared in her palm. She handed it over to him, and he took it with a smile. Then she leaned toward Sarya, mock whispering. "It's the brick house on Fourth and Main. He's a fireling, you know, can't be too careful. Even the new Fire Chief could let a little something get away from him." Jacinda winked at him and in a poof of fairy dust she disappeared. Leaving him with a buggy filled with groceries that he probably needed and an escort he didn't want to ever let go.

\*

My. Oh, my.

Sarya twisted away so she could hide the fact she had to wipe drool from her lips. This was not what she'd expected to be doing tonight, meeting the hot new man in town and taking him home. She looked down at her toes and counted to ten, attempting to hide the flush of desire inching up from said toes.

Take him home. *Okay.* A fireling. A gigantic, gorgeous, built like a tank fireling now lived in town and she had to take him home. Or had she thought that already? It was hard to concentrate with the images flitting through her mind like miniature pornographic samplers. She'd take sessions of visions two, three and seven, please. To go.

"Sarya? You okay?" He touched her elbow hesitantly, and she closed her eyes. He had nice warm hands. Hmm. *Shake it off, girl, or he's going to suspect you want to crawl all over him.* She planted a smile on her face and turned, blinking rapidly to avoid making direct eye contact.

"Fine. Just fine. Do you have any other groceries you need?" She yanked the cart from his grasp and barreled down the aisle, her wing tips rustling with the speed of her passing.

Erich ran to catch up. "I'm not even sure what's in the cart. Jacinda was the one



sticking things in there.”

Sarya pulled up at the checkout. She glanced into his basket and quickly eyed the contents. Looked like enough for a modest setup, he’d be able to eat for a few days at least. “You’re good.” There was something else she had to do. *Please, brain, please...* “Oh! My things. I’ll go get them while you check out.” She fled.

By the time she’d found her meager collection of fruit and veggies and returned to the counter, Erich was chatting easily with a couple of the old timers in town. Male laughter rose from the corner and the deep timbre of Erich’s husky tone did something naughty to her body.

“Who’s the hotty?” Darleen, the checkout clerk, whispered. “New in town, right?” She admired him openly, and Sarya felt a strange sensation in the pit of her belly.

Oh my goodness, she was jealous! She plunked down her purchases a little harder than necessary. “You should be careful, Darleen.” She leaned forward conspiratorially. “Fireling. Has a problem with unprovoked flares.”

Darleen gasped and waved a hand before her face. “Oh my. Thanks for the warning. I mean, he’s welcome to join Strange Hollow and I’m sure I’ll do my best to treat him friendly like. From a long way away.” The clerk rang through the groceries as quickly as possible, all the time keeping a wary eye on Erich. When he moved forward to pick up Sarya’s packed sack, Darleen retreated as far as the small space behind the till would allow.

Sarya hid her smile and blocked Erich from moving any closer. Darleen was an animated ice sculpture, and Sarya didn’t think she’d be sweating after Erich anytime in the near future.

Erich grabbed his backpack from beside the exterior door as they left, and Sarya gestured down the road. They walked in silence for the first minute or two before Sarya realized this wasn’t helping. *Stick to the basics.*

“Your house is down this way. It’s not a bad house, the brickwork is very pretty and there’s a decent-sized garden in the back. I think there’s a workshop or shed as well, if you’re into that sort of thing.” There. They were a whole twenty-six steps farther down the road than when they’d started.

She took a deep breath. “I suppose you noticed there weren’t a lot of fruits and veggies in the shop. There’s a farmers’ market in the town square on Thursdays and the people who live on acreages bring in fresh crops. My favorite are the young carrots and then it’s nice too when...” He chuckled. A rich meaty sound that made her wings quiver. She glanced up at him. “What’s so funny?”

Erich looked her up and down once, casually, not with the hunger she’d seen in his eyes before. “I didn’t know angels were chatterboxes.” He winked and stepped forward again.

She blew out a puff of air that lifted her bangs. “Sorry.”

He shrugged. “Not a worry. You want to talk, talk. I’m a good listener, or so I’ve been told. I guess if I’m going to be the new fire chief I should find out what that means. You got any ideas on that one?”

Fire chief. There wasn’t going to be much for him to do. “It’s a volunteer crew, but there is a bell in the town square that will ring in case of emergencies.”

“Fire truck?”

“Water dragon.”

He smiled. "Ahhh."

The roadway was dark now and she stumbled over a crack in the sidewalk. He caught her by the elbow and that delicious warmth spread again. It radiated out from his fingers, along her needy cells until she felt her pulse everywhere. "Careful now."

Oh dear, oh dear. He pulled her closer and tucked her fingers into his arm. The heat from his body drew her like a moth to the flame.

"So tell me more about the job. Not a lot of fires, I believe that's what Jacinda said."

How was she supposed to talk when her mouth was watering so? The scent of him was delectable. Slightly musky, but all male. His arm was strong under her fingers ... and that heat. Damn, she was never warm enough up in her mountain cabin.

"Sarya. Am I keeping you up past your bedtime?"

Bed. Oh good golly, he'd said bed and her name almost in the same sentence. She squeezed her legs together to try and stop the pulse beating between them from deafening the town. Of course that made her stumble again, and he caught her, one of the grocery bags slipping from his grasp as he swung her closer.

She looked up into deep green eyes and wanted him. Badly. She fluttered her wings to get her balance and rose a tiny bit. A little bit more and their lips would be in line and she could—

"Damn, they are beautiful." Sarya shook herself and stepped back, her wings snapping open in surprise. Erich watched in fascination, his eyes wide. "I've rarely seen such amazing textures. Do you mind?"

He reached over her shoulder. She stood transfixed as he stroked a wingtip, and sheer ecstasy raced through her blood. Peanut butter, she shouldn't let him do this. Not in the middle of the—"Oh my..." The trickle of his finger down the edge of her wing felt like he'd caressed her clit, and she involuntarily moaned with pleasure.

"Sarya?"

A dash of cold air hit her and she folded her wings closed, slipping them away with her magic until she stood before him, a plain humanoid. "No. We can't do that. You can't do that."

They stood at the base of his walkway and she didn't want to go any farther, because if she did, she would want to go further. "We're here." She pointed up the stairs. "You're here. Bye!"

She twirled, intent on escape.

"Sarya, wait, don't go. What happened? What did I do wrong?"

He held her in place, the incredible draw of his raised temperature, his mere touch, making her shake with need. Still, it wasn't his fault she was overreacting and she refused to let a newcomer to Strange Hollow think they weren't accepted. She gathered her courage and faced him again. "I'm sorry, it's just me. I need to get back to my cabin. You'll find everything you need in the house. If not, there should be a list of numbers beside the phone for any questions you have." She was rambling again. Sexual tension did that to her.

"Is your number there?"

She swallowed hard. "Maybe."

Those mesmerizing green eyes traced her face. "Maybe where, angel?"

She sighed. "Under the forest guardian number. I live in the mountainside fire watch station."

## Chapter Two

If asked, he was just moseying through the forest to make some sketches, survey his domain, as it were. He definitely wasn't there in the hopes of catching sight of his favorite angel. Nope. Not at all.

Tall, strong pine trees swayed in the soft wind. Leaves rustled along the ground, crunching beneath his feet as he made his way up the mountain. He wasn't exactly sure of his destination, just wandering in the general direction of the station, hoping ... just hoping.

He heard the small woodland animals react—birds chirping and squirrels scurrying away at his approach. He wanted to reach out to them, let them know he wasn't a threat, but in their eyes he probably was. A fireling who couldn't control his fire all that well could be dangerous in the woods. Part of him wondered why exactly Jacinda gave him the job of Fire Chief, but he wasn't about to second-guess or question the town's highest authority.

Thinking of Jacinda brought to mind the small home he'd been gifted with, and gifted was the right word. Inside, on the kitchen table he'd found the deed, all signed and made out to him as if he'd owned the house all along. Tears had sprung to his eyes at her generosity, but he'd dashed them away just as quick as they'd formed. No one, not even his own family, had done so much for him. The whole place had been furnished with mostly metal and glass furniture, stuff that wouldn't burn easily should he get "persnickety" as his momma used to call it.

Wandering up a well-worn path, Erich heard singing just ahead to the right. A soul-deep song that resonated with the earth and part of him—the part his clan had hated with a passion—was drawn to the sound. It was as if the tinkling on the air beckoned him forward. He hitched his backpack higher on his shoulder, his art supplies tucked neatly inside, and hiked toward the sound.

He left the path, his sturdy boots taking him through the underbrush with ease as he made sure not to trample the saplings and growing bushes as he walked. The earth was as much a part of him as fire and he didn't want to cause harm in any way.

The trees and wind led him to an open clearing where he saw the most beautiful sight he'd ever been privileged to witness. There, in the middle of the grass, swinging and swaying and as naked as the day she'd been born, was Sarya.

She moved and gyrated to her song, shifting this way and that as she continued the sweet melody that had drawn him to this very place. As if *she* had brought him to the clearing with her whispered words and hummed tune. She laughed and giggled, her body moving, falling, dipping and dancing. She went from standing to rolling on the ground to flitting above the earth with a beat of her wings, all in a span of seconds, bare moments in time.

Before he could convince his mind otherwise, he lowered himself to the ground and leaned against one of the pines growing strong in his forest. The tree sighed at the connection between them—most flora did when they touched an earthen, as if the body was a conduit for the earth itself. He didn't mind. The touch of earth was as enjoyable as the fire that sometimes surrounded him.

The humming grew louder, her movements more insistent, flowing from one to the next to the next. With infinite care Erich reached into his backpack to withdraw his sketchpad and a charcoal pencil. He began.

The outline, the beginnings of her body forming on the paper, was as easy as breathing to him. He moved the pencil over the paper with quick, efficient strokes, drawing the curve of her hip, the roundness of her bottom and the fullness of her breasts.

Her nakedness didn't surprise him for some reason, as if he'd expected her to bare all and be all she'd been born to be within her forest home. She was beautiful, stunning and arousing all at the same time. The artist in him could appreciate her form, but the man appreciated, no loved, her voluptuous body. He wanted to lick and touch every inch of her, and his throbbing, aching, hardened cock agreed.

Next were her wings, the fluttering, flitting appendages that he'd barely touched the night before. Something had happened between them at his tentative stroke of the downy feathers. He wanted to stroke them, wanted to love every part of her. With their complimentary gifts they belonged together. For they were gifted with presents that allowed them to be greater than humans, but not so great that they would become proud.

He should feel bad for watching, for staring and sketching her nude form without permission. But he couldn't feel guilty, not when the connection between them was something more than passing acquaintance.

He sketched her face from memory. Those ice-blue eyes that seemed to look right into his soul, her pert nose and full lips that he wanted to sip from for all eternity. Her delicate ears, so perfectly in proportion to the rest of her. He drew her hair as a cascading curtain whipping around her as she danced and sang in the clearing.

The wind was last, a tangible thing that seemed to surround her, carrying her on the breeze even when her feet touched the ground. He mixed a bit of his own fire into the sketch, melding her together with the three elements they shared between them—earth, air and fire—all one in the sketch. He'd remember this image for as long as he lived, and would be able to reproduce it at any time. He had plans for this sweet, sexy woman.

After tearing the sheet from his sketchpad, he placed the image against the tree he'd been leaning on. "Keep it safe for me?" he asked, pressing his palm to the smooth bark. A pulse of happiness and assurance coursed back at him from the pine. He smiled in contentment as he left his angel exactly as he'd found her, dancing and singing and loving.

\*

The wind swirled around her and Sarya sighed with delight, bringing her song to a conclusion. As much fun as she'd had, as wonderful as it was to let out her sexual frustrations by connecting with the earth, it was time to get on with her day.

She'd done nothing productive all morning, too tired from her restless night. Every time she'd closed her eyes there was Erich, his gaze burning into her. She shivered as she pulled on her robe. She'd even been tempted to use him for a little fantasy inspiration and bring herself relief, but somehow, she couldn't do that to him.

There was a connection between them, and to sully it by using him was wrong. Instead, she tossed and turned, falling asleep to the dream of his touch, the tender caress of her wing, the way his eyes feasted on her body as he looked her over. Coffee alone wasn't enough to break through the cobwebs, so after tinkering around with her to-do list, she'd abandoned it to find solace in the meadow. Now she just had to figure out what to

do about Erich.

Something brushed past her, a soft giggle on the wind. The light and airy voice of a dryad whispered, "I know something you don't know..."

Cassandra. Sarya smiled at the perfect timing. More distraction, just what she needed. "I bet you're longing to tell me."

Cassandra solidified into her human form: pale green limbs and long flowing straw-yellow hair. "Of course I am. "She blinked her green eyes and showed perfect teeth. "But you'll have to be nice to me first."

They walked together up the hillside. Sarya stayed on the paths the creatures had made in their wanderings. Cassandra flitted beside her, her light feet barely leaving a trace of her passing. Sarya liked the dryad. She was more alert than most of her kin. "You can't have any candy. But I have a lovely cake in the cupboard I'll share with you."

The trees around them shook in the wind and Cassandra laughed with delight. "Cake? With raspberries and whipped cream?"

"You're not a tree nymph, you're a little piggy! Of course with whipped cream, but I don't have any raspberries left until next season. Blueberries?"

Cassandra clapped her hands. "I'll share my secret for blueberries."

Sarya held out her hand to stop her friend. "Wait, I have to check this out." A trail led up the mountain that she didn't remember seeing before. This was her mountain. Every tree, every bush had a place and a reason and this path went the wrong way. There was nothing in that direction for the animals to seek. Sarya followed the meandering route for a little ways, bending to touch the earth at times, trying to feel what was out of the ordinary. When the path petered out and disappeared, the mystery remained.

"I want to show you!" Cassandra whined, and Sarya left the puzzle for later, when she didn't have a dryad to pacify.

It took a few more minutes hiking to reach the front porch of her cabin. When she'd arrived in Strange Hollow there had been a tiny miner's shack here. Jacinda had replaced it with the post and beam cabin Sarya now lived in, and added the towering turret that served as a lookout.

Sarya often used her wings to soar up and survey the far side of Mount Mitchell, but on the coldest days of winter, or in high winds, the tower was a blessing. The dryad danced ahead of her into the cabin, her feet leaving a slight tracing of dust in her wake. One of the downfalls of having earthy friends.

Sarya bustled around the kitchen, pulling out supplies for lunch. Cassandra picked and nibbled, her dainty fingers getting into everything. It was relaxing to have company, in spite of the fact Sarya's mind insisted on returning again and again to Erich. She wondered what he was doing this morning. Walking through town? Meeting new people? She shook her head. *Enough*. "So ... you have a secret to share?"

Cassandra put down the sliver of shortbread she held. Sarya hid her smile. It must be a doozy of a secret to make Cassandra forget her sweet tooth. "I have a new friend. Look what he gave me to guard." She twirled for a moment, her body unraveling then reassembling again, this time with a paper cradled carefully in her impossibly long fingers.

Sarya frowned. "He who?" If there was someone dallying with the dryad she was going to kick their butt. Cassandra was only a baby, she couldn't be more than forty or fifty years old, far too young for adult play. Sarya reached for the paper.

Oh my goodness. Someone had been watching this morning. The clean lines of the drawing were perfect. The passion she'd felt in the dance was clearly visible there in two dimensions. How was it possible to evoke so much emotion in a simple drawing? She held it up and stared.

"It's good isn't it? He's a nice man. Cool at the core, even though his hands are hot. I was worried for a minute he wanted to cut me down for firewood, but then I felt the earth in him. I like him." Cassandra returned to her eating.

Erich. It had to be. Sarya's heart soared with the possibilities. "Was he a tall man?"

Cassandra gave her *the look*. "I was in my tree. How do I know what tall is? He's nice and he makes pretty things. Can I have my picture back now?" She held out her hand.

Sarya felt a strange reluctance to let the drawing go. Cassandra tucked it away happily and finished off her feast. "I need to leave. My tree is lonely without me." She blew an airy kiss and then dissipated, blowing out the window in a rush of leaves and needles. So went a conversation with a dryad.

Sarya took a deep breath. He'd seen her dance. He'd drawn her. Erich was of the earth—there was no way a dryad would lie about that. There were too many things they had in common to avoid the truth. She wanted him. Wanted to see if he wanted her. Maybe it couldn't be forever, but if he was interested, she wasn't going to miss this opportunity.

The phone beckoned her and she steadied her nerves. *Start simple, Sarya.* Dinner. That was a good safe place. And if she took a little extra care with the meal and her appearance than usual and he still wasn't interested, there would be no harm done.

She picked up the phone and entered his number before her courage gave way.

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Erich rinsed the soap from his body, his cock still hard from watching Sarya's dance in the clearing. It didn't look like it'd be diminishing anytime soon. His prick definitely had a thing for the voluptuous angel. He was tempted, oh so tempted, to handle the problem himself, but didn't want to add Sarya as another entry to his "spank bank." She was worth more than a quick tug and pop. Squeaky clean, he stared down at his erection. "Well, boy, better get used to it 'cause she's too good for us."

She was all sinfully sweet and pure. She sure as hell was too good for a mixed boy without a clan. Too good by half for Strange Hollow more than likely. He wondered what brought Sarya to the land of misfits and mongrels. From what he could tell, there wasn't anything that wasn't perfect about her. Those curves, her eyes and that hair ... not to mention her wings. What he wouldn't give to run his fingers over their downy, feathery softness once again. If he'd read her right, they might just be an erogenous zone to boot.

As Erich turned off the water and reached for a towel, a soft ringing caught his attention. He wrapped the towel around his waist and kicked the remaining moisture off his legs. He could probably raise his body temperature enough to dry himself from head to toe, but the last time he'd tried... Hell, he'd ended up with a nice new renovated bathroom after the incident.

He padded through the house, following the ringing, trying to figure out if it was the front door or the telephone. Yeah, a ringing doorbell would be odd, but nothing was simple about Strange Hollow, it seemed.

Passing through the kitchen, the phone snagged his focus before he made it through

the small room. The answering machine kicked on and he stared at it, shocked that he had an answering machine and there was a welcome message already recorded.

“*Hello.*” Jacinda’s sensual voice rang out loud and clear and his cock finally deflated at the sound of another woman’s voice. “*Erich isn’t available right now, but if this is Sarya, he will call you back. Bye!*”

The machine beeped and a tentative, tinkling voice sounded over the speaker.

“Hello? Erich? It’s—”

He snatched the phone from the cradle. “Sarya?”

“Erich.” He heard her smile over the phone, causing him to smile in return.

“Hi.”

“Hi.” He chuckled. “I’m glad you called.”

“You are?” She sounded surprised, and he couldn’t quite understand why.

“Why wouldn’t a man be honored to have an angel call him?”

“Oh.” One syllable, and then nothing but dead silence. He wondered if she’d hung up, but she finally spoke. “I’m not an angel, you know.”

“Okay, open mouth, insert boot.” He took a deep breath. He’d obviously hit a few hot buttons and that wasn’t his intent. “Let’s try that again, shall we? I’m glad you called, because I enjoyed the short time we got to visit. I hoped we could meet again. Soon.”

“I-I’d like that.” Again, dead air.

He struggled to find something else to say. Damn if he’d let this conversation die already. “Did you have something to tell me?”

“Yes...” Her voice trailed away like a breeze.

The silence stretched on. He didn’t have much practice with the phone-talking thing. “Yes?”

“Wouldyouliketohavedinnerwithme?” She took a deep breath, audible over the phone line. “Whew, I actually got it out.”

He didn’t know what she was talking about. He hadn’t understood a word she’d said, but apparently it’d taken a good bit of gumption for her to say the words. “Uh?”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to.” He imagined her nibbling her lower lip, suddenly unsure.

“I’ll do anything you want, angel, I just didn’t understand the question,” he admitted, mirth fighting to rise to the fore.

“Oh.” Another deep breath. “Would you like to come to dinner? Here? At the station? It’s not much and—”

Oh. *Oh.* Dinner with his angel. “I’d love to.”

“Really? Really?”

“Really, really. I’d like it very much.” ’Cause he would. He’d like to do a lot more than just have dinner, but he figured Sarya deserved, and needed, slow and steady to get to her heart.

“Okay then.”

“Okay then.” *Now we’re repeating each other.*

“I saw—” She paused for a moment as if gathering her thoughts. “I saw what you gave Cassandra. It was—”

“I don’t know any Cassandra.”

“She’s a young dryad, not just another tree.” Sarya giggled.

Oh. *Hell.* The picture. “Huh. And she showed you...”

She harrumphed. “Showed and wouldn’t let me keep it. The brat.”

“I can make you another.” At least she wasn’t mad he’d been watching.

“I’d love that,” she whispered, her voice slightly husky, and his cock perked up, twitching and reminding him it was there, that it still wanted.

“Me too.” He smiled despite his uncomfortable erection tenting the towel around his waist.

“I should go.”

“Should I bring anything?” He’d bring her the world if she asked.

“No, just you.” She hung up, a soft click sounding as the phone dropped back into the cradle.

*Must be an angel quirk.* He’d never met another person who didn’t say good-bye at the end of a telephone conversation, but there was a first time for everything.

Several hours and a very long, cold shower later, Erich headed back up the mountain. He wore a pair of jeans and a polo shirt, unsure how dressy he needed to be for dinner, but considering what he’d seen her wear—and not wear—he figured jeans would work. At least until he convinced her to go with him to The Cabin House for a hoity-toity dinner.

He headed in the general direction of the station, following the whispers on the breeze that led him closer to her. Sometimes being of the earthen had a lot of benefits.

As he approached the clearing, a naked woman with a slender green body and pale yellow hair stepped from behind the tree he’d leaned against that morning. “Hello.”

“Hello.” He stopped in his tracks. *Must be Cassandra.*

“I have your picture. It’s very beautiful. Will you draw me?” She blew around him, dancing and twirling on the wind, leaving nothing in her wake to tell of her passing. She froze in what he figured she thought a provocative position in front of him. It didn’t have the purity of Sarya’s dance in the clearing. This pose held a purpose, with the goal of seduction, while Sarya’s motions were a part of the dance of life—for life and of life. Drawing Cassandra? Still art versus live beauty.

“I can, someday. Not today.” Her naked form didn’t interest him. Her slender body with its runway model lack of curves actually turned him off.

She stomped her tiny dryad foot. “Why ever not?”

“Because I’m headed to Sarya’s for dinner.”

She harrumphed. “Sketch me.”

“Another time.” He shifted to pass her, and she glided out of the way, glaring the entire time.

She sniffed and stuck her nose in the air. “I won’t keep anything else for you. I don’t want this pretty anymore. I want my own.” She shoved the drawing into his hands, and he rolled his eyes, smiling ruefully. Sarya had said Cassandra was young. He had to remind himself she was as emotionally developed as a child, even if she did look like a woman.

“Tomorrow, Cassandra, tomorrow. I’ll meet you here at midday and you can dance for me and I’ll sketch you, okay?”

“Okay... Must get back to the tree now.” She was gone in a whirl of wind and mist, merging back with her slender tree.

He shook his head. Only in Strange Hollow would he be accosted for a sketch. Well, at least he’d gotten back the picture he’d done of Sarya. Maybe now he could work up the gumption to actually give it to her at dinner.



As he trudged through the clearing, the words on the winds changed suddenly, directing him east instead of north. He couldn't fight the earth when it demanded so shrilly, so he headed off in that direction, hoping Sarya would forgive him for being late for dinner.

He wove this way and that, following the small creatures and the words on the wind, the whispering from the trees and the chirps of the birds. He went farther and farther, listening as he went, changing direction as he was told. It seemed like hours, but could have been minutes. He walked through the underbrush, pushing branches and trees out of his way, careful to walk where he was told.

Before long, he saw what he'd been brought to see. Orange paint appeared on several trees, vivid slashes marring the bark, draining life from his earthen cousins. Further along the newly trodden path, strings of orange plastic were tied around other trees, restraining their growth.

"What happened here?" he whispered against one of the trees, hoping to get something from the spirit within. Apparently, the animals and plants could bring him to this place, but they couldn't make the marked trees talk to him or even send him images. He stared around at the circle of marked trees, worry pulling at his mind.

"Erich..." His name whispered on the wind and he turned toward where the sound had come from, enjoying the caress of Sarya's voice on his skin. "Erich..."

He raised his voice slightly to the trees. "If you won't tell me, I can't help you." With that ultimatum in place, he headed toward the sound of Sarya's voice, the sound of his salvation.

## Chapter Three

Pots bubbled on the stove, the table was set and a tantalizing aroma lingered in the air.

But he hadn't come.

Sarya leaned on the deck railing and stared down the mountainside. Maybe she'd scared him off by being too forward and all that. Maybe he'd been on his way, walking through town, and stopped to talk to someone and found out she wasn't really an angel, or at least not a very good one.

The cold spot in her heart ached. She wiped a tear from her cheek and turned to go put the supper away. Her appetite had disappeared along with her sense of anticipation.

"Hello, is anyone here?"

She froze. Turning back, she spotted Erich's solid frame approaching slowly up the trail. She stood straighter, waiting for him. He'd really come. Relief washed over her, followed immediately by panic.

Time to move to the plan. The entire evening had been carefully thought out. In fact, she'd made a list and rewritten it a dozen times. First, she would greet him formally and offer the hospitality of her home. They'd have a drink and enjoy the small appetizers she'd prepared. More likely, she would watch him enjoy them, and her job would be to try not drool while looking him over discretely. Then she would turn on the background music and serve dinner. During the main course there were four items on her "safe to talk about" list, followed by international events and then sports statistics. She'd surfed the Internet and made notes after he'd accepted her invitation.

One step at a time, he drew closer. Oh fairy rings, he was gorgeous. All rock-solid muscles under a pristine shirt, the fabric covering his biceps stretched tight. His jeans bulged at the thighs, and she had to skip the whole package area or she'd be in so much trouble before she even started. She pulled her list from her pocket and peered at it anxiously. What came after dinner conversation?

"Hi, Sarya."

She jerked in surprise and only just managed to hide the note. "Erich." Heat covered her cheeks and she had to look away from the admiration in his eyes. "Did you get lost? I was worried about—" She slammed her mouth shut. *Nope*. Don't go there. Follow the plan. She took one step back and lowered herself in a deep curtsy before him. "You are welcome to my home. Air guard you, fire warm you, earth guide your steps."

Erich mumbled something before lowering the bunch of flowers in his hand to the stairs and offering his open hands to her. He knew the formal greeting of the air Fae. That was ... unexpected. She stepped closer and placed her hands in his, expecting him to complete the ritual. Instead he knelt, then turned her palms upward and kissed them, one after the other. He lifted his gaze to hers and winked. "You look simply amazing. May I come in?"

The heat of his lips against her skin lit a fuse. It raced through her blood and filled every inch of her. For the first time since moving to the mountain, she wasn't cold. In fact, she was about to spontaneously combust.

"Sarya..."

He squeezed her fingers, and she gasped. “Of course. Please ... please come in and ... um. How about the Dodgers this season?”

He chuckled and kept hold of one of her hands as he grasped the flowers and walked the final steps toward the house. “Sorry, not much of a football fan.”

“Me neither.” By the time she’d poured him a drink and pulled the tray from the oven, she’d gotten a second peek at her notes and things were rolling along nicely.

Erich wandered the living space of her cabin. “I love post and beam construction. Love how the timbers show so strong and bold against the background walls.”

“There’s a stained glass window in my bedroom. When the sunlight shines through it, the red wood of the oak turns to this beautiful...” His expression knocked her for a loop. *Okay, don’t mention bedroom.* “Yeah, I love post and beam construction too.”

He took the tray from her hands and placed it on the coffee table. She sat on the floor and filled a plate for him, selecting the most succulent of morsels. When she turned to hand it to him she slipped, catching herself with her free hand against his thigh. His emerald eyes fixated on her mouth. She deliberately released her bottom lip from between her teeth. Her hand shook, the food in danger of rolling off and falling to the floor. Erich caught her hand in his, steadying her, supporting her.

He took the plate, placed it back on the table, and shook his head. “Erich, you’re a damn fool...”

*What is he talking about?* “I’m so sorry, I’m not usually this—ohhh!”

He lifted her up and placed her on his lap. “I’m sorry, Sarya, if I’m over stepping my welcome, but I think there’s something between us that needs to be cleared up.”

*I’m sitting on his lap.* The firm muscles, the tight jeans, the package she’d seen without seeing—all under her bottom and ohhh... “Wh-what is th-there between us?” *Other than my dress and a pair of jeans I’d really like to see gone.*

“This.” He kissed her. It was soft and slow. A barely-there brushing of lips. He traced his tongue over her bottom lip, and she moaned, opening to him. His warmth carried everywhere now, his breath floating past her cheek, filling her lungs as she breathed him in.

She pressed closer, wanting more. The edge of a caress wasn’t enough and his flavor teased for more. Forget dinner, she wanted to feast on him. Erich held her back. He twisted his fingers into her hair and dragged her head away, her lips clinging to his until the last second. “Don’t stop, Erich.”

He shook his head. “I didn’t come here to ravish you.”

*No? Well, damn.* She lowered her gaze.

“Hey, no, don’t do that. That’s not what I meant. I mean, I’d like to ... well, not ravish you, but—oh shit.” Erich cupped her chin and forced her to look at him. “You push all my buttons, woman, and I can’t seem to speak without inserting my boots in my mouth.”

Sarya nodded. “I find I know the feeling.”

He smiled. “You ain’t wearing boots.”

They laughed together and suddenly the tension slipped away. She kissed his cheek, then skipped over to the stove to check the pots. She wished she was brave enough to throw her whole list out the window, but instead, she tucked it away. Just in case. She took the last pot to the table and smiled at him as he held a chair for her. “I guess I haven’t spent much time with a man I’ve been so ... attracted to before.” *Go for honest.*

That was what she should have done in the first place.

Erich took a seat next to her and sniffed deeply. “Hmm. It all smells mighty fine.” He took the hand closest to him and held it. “I’m attracted to you as well. Very, very much. So let’s just enjoy this wonderful meal you’ve prepared and afterward we can see what happens. No rush, just enjoy each other’s company.” He squeezed her fingers then let them go, his eyes full of mischief.

“Sounds good to me.” She opened up the first lid and let him serve himself. See what happens? She could hardly wait.

\*

Erich pushed away from the table, satisfied ... no, more than satisfied, full as a tick on a dog’s neck to be exact. He’d eaten everything placed before him and then some as they’d enjoyed their quiet dinner together sprinkled with small talk about the weather. He had a feeling she’d been nervous about the night, nervous to be alone with him, as evidenced by the small slip of paper she kept hidden beneath her plate.

He sure would like to take a gander at what she thought were open topics for them to discuss. But that’d have to wait. He had dishes to do. Erich stood, plate in hand, and gestured toward the door at the opposite end of the dining room. “That the kitchen?”

Sarya fluttered behind him, wind whipping around and tugging on him as if she commanded the very air he breathed. “No, no, no, I’ll do the dishes.”

Sensing her about a foot back, he spun on her and pulled her close with his free hand, melding their bodies together, feeling every inch and curve of her pressed against him like a second skin he didn’t want to ever take off. He dropped a kiss on the end of her pert little nose and watched the blush rise in her cheeks at the touch of lips to skin. “I got it. Least a man can do is wash the dishes after such a fine meal. You relax and I’ll have this taken care of in a minute.”

She stepped back, her blush rising higher, covering more of her face, and damn if that wasn’t one of the prettiest things he’d ever seen. “Oh. Okay.” She wrung her hands—that little slip of paper nestled between them. Her fingers were unfolding and refolding the thing, and she kept glancing at it while he stood there, small frown lines forming between her eyes.

“Sarya?”

“Hmm?”

“What ya got there?” He nodded toward her hands, wondering if she’d really show him.

“Huh?” She glanced down, seeming surprised by what she was holding. “Nothing.” She shoved her hands behind her back, hiding the paper from sight. “Nothing at all.” She smiled at him, but he didn’t believe her for a second.

“Right,” he drawled and tipped her face up with one finger. This time he kissed her plump, berry-hued lips, his tongue snaking out for a tentative taste.

The flavors of wind and fire burst on his tongue, cooling and burning him all at the same time, warming him from inside out with the ferocity of the flames. He moaned, venturing deeper, enjoying a flavor like his own, but with a feminine twist. Their tongues dueled and danced within each other’s mouths, tasting and penetrating with sweet, tender strokes. Passion flared between them—wind whirling and fire burning until he wasn’t sure if he could control what lived inside him. The ground seemed to shake beneath them, jarring them while spurring them on. As if saying, “get horizontal already.”

The distant sound of glass breaking pulled him out of his arousal-induced haze only to find that the wind *was* whipping hard, blowing the napkins and tablecloth this way and that. Fire encircled them, scouring the floor with the evidence of their embrace. And the ground had been shaking, vibrating the plates right off the table with the continued touch between them.

Panting, Erich released Sarya. Her eyes were still closed, her breathing coming in shallow pants.

She opened her eyes wide with wonder. “Wow.”

Erich shook his head and smiled. “Yeah, wow. Unless you liked your dining room. If so, I’m *really* sorry.” The circle of fire remained, burning farther and farther away, eating up the wooden floorboards. He tried, but couldn’t do a damned thing about subduing the flames.

“Oh!” Sarya slapped a hand over her mouth. The wind slowed to a gentle breeze and now the fire seemed to be diminishing as well.

Erich closed his eyes and concentrated on the earth, slowing the shaking and easing the pressure that had built beneath the surface of the land. Within moments, the dining room, looking a little worse for wear, was back to its normal, everyday setup. Of course, the ring of fire had ruined the flooring a bit and the earthquake hadn’t helped the dishes. But where had the wind come from? He didn’t ... couldn’t ... it wasn’t one of his elements. “I’m so sor—”

“Shh...” She placed her fingertips over his mouth, and the ground rumbled beneath them. With a giggle, she retracted her hand. “Maybe we shouldn’t touch just yet.”

“Maybe not.”

They cleaned up the room, hell, the house, without touching each other, and Erich’s arousal came down from a boil to a gentle simmer that could spark again at any moment. It was too soon to push—neither his body nor the house could take much more. The flooring would have to be replaced, and Erich planned on speaking with the dryads to see if there were any dead trees in the area. He wouldn’t down an earthen babe for a floor, but he would definitely clean up the woods and repair Sarya’s home at the same time. That, he could do.

After tossing the last of the glass into the garbage bin, Erich wiped his hands on his jeans. The hour had grown late and now was as good a time as any to say goodnight to his sweet Sarya, letting the next move be hers. Or not. They’d shown they could be explosive together, but would that be enough to urge her toward something more ... intimate?

“Sarya?” She was dancing on air, dusting and singing in the living room. “Sarya?” He called a little louder, catching her attention.

“Oh! I’m sorry... I get to singing and—”

“I know. I get a bit distracted by your singing and dancing myself.” He winked at her, unable to keep himself from teasing her just a bit over her morning show.

“Grrr... You!” She laughed, all tinkling bells and wind chimes. “You’re one big tease.” She stomped her foot to no effect considering she hovered several inches off the ground, the wind wrapping around her like a blanket.

“Yeah, I am.” He smiled, the evidence he’d been spying on her clicking into place one by one by one. The wind coming at her call and the fierce fire he’d started that hadn’t petered out so quickly. Growing serious, his mouth in a thin line, he stared at his angel

who wasn't what she appeared to be. "I *think* you may have some explaining to do. Do you?"

## Chapter Four

Somehow Sarya convinced him to accompany her upstairs without having to explain too much. She stared out the window into the distance, seeing the clouds tinged pink and red with the setting sun. Her forehead rested against the cool of the glass as she gathered her nerve to talk to him.

“You’re not...” Erich coughed softly. “Sorry, it’s probably a rude question.”

As if anything could be ruder than her not telling him the truth right from the start. She squared her shoulders and faced him. Standing in the top tower of the turret gave her courage. At least she knew they couldn’t make the place burn to the ground ... that was reassuring. “I’m not what?”

“Where’re your wings?” His face was beet-red, and she hurried to reassure him.

“I don’t have to show them. I thought it would be better if I ... you know... Just for now.”

Erich frowned. “But they’re a part of you, aren’t they?”

*Oh yeah.* “Yes, but they get in the way in the house, so I usually only unfurl them when I’m outdoors. Safer that way.”

He nodded slowly. “They make you look lovely, angel.”

“I’m not an angel, remember?” Way to go, Sarya. *Blurt, blurt, blurt.*

Erich raised an eyebrow. “It’s a nickname, darling. Yeah, you look like a picture perfect angel, especially when you spread those gorgeous wings, but it’s just a handle, something to call you. If it bothers you, I’ll just say your name. It’s a pretty name, Sarya.”

The way he said it made her toes curl. She swallowed and rushed onward. “I’m from the air Fae, but they kicked me out.” *Damn. Blurt again.*

His eyebrow—it hovered so high and refused to drop. “I think we’re all in Strange Hollow because we don’t fit with our clans. Makes no mind to me what they didn’t like about you. I like you for yourself—the bits and pieces you’ve shown me so far.” His gaze trickled over her. “And I’m not just talking about the physical bits and pieces.”

She smiled. “I like your bits and pieces too.” Oh lordy, did she ever.

Erich glanced around the turret before sitting on the long bench that lined the far wall. “Great view from up here, but you going to tell me what’s worrying you? Why’d you haul me up to the rafters of the watchtower?”

“It’s safe here.”

“Safe?”

Sarya nodded. *It’s time.* “Jacinda made the turret to withstand all the elements. She said she wanted me to have a protected place to go if I ever needed a retreat. The winds can get as strong as they want here—she’s got built-in dampeners. And my reason for getting kicked out of the clan?” *Am I really going to tell him?* She glanced in his direction. Erich sat at the front of the bench, his elbows on his knees, his body leaning forward as he listened intently. “I cared too much for the earth, but the real issue was this.” She raised a hand, palm up, and closed her eyes. The guards around her power loosened slowly and heat filled her fingers.

“Holy mother fire...” Erich’s whisper trickled into her ears like a blessing. She

opened her eyes to watch him through the ball of flames flickering in her palm. He smiled wider and wider as he rose and walked toward her. "It was you who started the fire down below, not me. That's why I couldn't put it out."

She nodded. Erich passed his hand through the torch she'd created and his expression grew darker. Hungrier. He touched their palms together and tongues of flame shot out. Oh, sweet mercy, it felt wonderful. One more step brought them close enough that they shared air. They shared heat. She wanted so much more.

"Jacinda put up fire guards on the turret?" Erich brushed her cheek lightly with a kiss en-route to whispering the words in her ear. She nodded, her throat gone suddenly dry. "She put up any other kind of guards? Like against—"

"Earthquakes. And water too. All the elements are tamed in the tower—"

He lunged at her, scooped her up and consumed her. They couldn't stop touching, they couldn't stop kissing. Hands and lips and touches and need. Over and over until her head spun, they wrapped around each other and heat ignited between them.

"I need to taste you. I need to touch you everywhere..." Erich tugged at her sundress, the top button snapping off and flying into a corner of the room. She helped him take off the dress. She helped him take off her bra as well.

Then she led him around the corner to where she had barely dared to hope and bring him.

"Bless the flame, you've got a bed in the turret. Sarya..." Erich turned on her, the centers of his eyes glowing red. "Sweet Sarya, you tell me now how far we're going, because I won't be able to stop unless you warn me ahead of time."

She tugged his shirt open and slid her palms over the rock-hard muscles under the supple skin. She sighed in delight as she skimmed a hand over the erection bulging his jeans. *How far should we go?* She stepped away and dropped her panties on the floor. His eyes darted to them and he swallowed.

Sarya giggled with nervousness for a second. "We're both grown-ups. We're here where it's safe. I'm not expecting promises, but I am expecting honesty. From you and me both." Sarya stopped and took a deep breath. She held out a hand to him. "Honestly? I want it all."

\*

Damn, but the woman knew how to make a man's cock go from rock-hard to near to bursting in a split second.

She was all curves and naked skin, her body tight in the right places and blossoming in the others. Her full breasts beckoned him, her hips begged for nibbles and the juncture of her thighs screamed for attention. All of her looked like she was darn near ready for some loving and Erich was just the man to oblige. He wanted her, no doubt about it.

But the honesty... Erich reached out, twining his fingers with hers and pulling her flush against him, their lips a hair's-breadth apart. "Now, angel, there's a problem right there."

She swallowed and he watched the movement of her throat, wondering what she'd look like with his cock enveloped by her sweet bow-shaped mouth. "W-what?"

"I expect you to expect promises ... a woman should always have 'em." He brushed his lips across hers, tiny shocks of pleasure coursing through his body. "Because I expect to be the only one sharing your bed for the time being. Think you might be able to grant me that?" He continued his journey, giving her feather-light kisses on her cheek, the spot



below her ear that made her shiver. "Can you?" he whispered in her ear, and she slumped against him, giving him her weight. He liked how she felt in his arms, all womanly and loveably soft.

She got him back for his teasing though, by nibbling his earlobe, tugging on the bit of skin, and the sensation seemed directly connected to his prick, his cock twitching and filling even more. "Yes," she moaned against his neck.

Erich shifted his hold from her hands, sliding his palms along her arms and up to her shoulders, wrapping his arms loosely around them. "Good girl," he murmured, kissing her temple. "Now, let's see about making you feel real good." He skimmed his hands along her back, guessing at where...

Sarya's knees really did give out this time as his fingers brushed the ridges along her back where her wings unfurled. "Erich!"

He dropped his voice low, arousal tingeing the timbre. "I think I found your sweet spot. Makes you hot, doesn't it, angel? Is your pussy wet for me?"

She nodded against his shoulder, her breath coming in harsh, burning hot pants. "Yes, oh yes."

"Let's take this to the bed then and see just how wet for me you really are." He laid her down, nice and easy, his fingers playing over those bumps and soft patches of skin as he lowered her to the mattress. She writhed, her legs shifting and moving uncontrollably. Her back arched and neck elongated as she cried out her pleasure. He slid his hands from behind her, almost sad to lessen her pleasure for even a moment. "Let me shuck my clo—"

Her hands were on the button of his jeans before he had a chance to finish his sentence. Her nimble fingers unsnapped the button and lowered the zipper with ease, making him wonder just how many times she'd undressed a man. He banished the thought from his mind. They had a promise, no matter how shaky, and he aimed to keep it—pasts forgotten.

His cock throbbed and ached with the need for her, his prick practically jumping into her hand the moment she released him from the confines of his jeans. Her slender hand enveloped him, stroking his dick from root to tip, gathering the forming moisture and sliding it around his shaft, using it for lubrication.

Her tiny tongue snaked out to lick her lower lip and he followed it back into her mouth with his thumb, cupping her cheek with the rest of his hand. She moaned and suckled his thumb, the treatment going straight to his cock, making it throb in her hand, jerking and flinching against her touch. With every suck and flick of her tongue, he pushed closer to orgasm, his release already on the edge with only her mouth doing naughty things to his thumb.

He pulled his hand free, his thumb coming out with a soft *pop*. "That's enough, angel. Want to be in you *so* bad. Want to make love to you."

She leaned back, and Erich took her supine position as a form of permission, a quiet acquiescence to his need. In short order he shucked his shoes, socks and jeans, his shirt following quickly as he hurried to get naked, to touch her skin to skin.

She shifted to one side of the bed, giving him room to lie next to her, and he lowered himself gently, stretching alongside her until their bodies touched from shoulder to shin. His cock slid along her hip as if searching for its home all alone, and he wouldn't mind entering her at that moment, seeing if it truly did feel like coming home.

Erich attended to her nipples, pinching and rolling the hardened nubs between forefinger and thumb, plucking them and teasing her as she'd teased him moments ago. He closed his mouth over one nipple, suckling and nibbling the hardened flesh, giving her as much pleasure as he possibly could, as much as he knew how to give. Time for teaching each other would come later. For now, he just went on instinct and hoped he got it right. Considering the way she writhed against him now, pulling his head closer and arching her back, he figured he was doing a little something right. He released her breast with a final smack, smiling at her whimper. "Shh, angel, I've got you."

Erich rained kisses down her body, tasting and licking every inch of skin he could get his mouth on, between her breasts and the juncture of her thighs. He nibbled the hips that had been teasing him so, making sure he got his skin tasting out of the way so he wouldn't be distracted from what he planned next.

Then he went ahead and settled himself between her thighs. The ultimate prize for a man like him. He loved to feast on a woman for hours on end, and he planned to taste, lick and nibble as much as he could between those luscious thighs.

He paused, staring at her tawny-covered pussy, the perfect tight slit, hiding her precious pearl from view, protecting the tiny bundle of nerves from harm and from his stimulation. Her cream coated her outer lips, showing him just how wet she truly was. Flattening his tongue, he lapped at her sex, savoring the airy, scorching flavor of her juices, reveling in the taste as it exploded on his tongue. She moaned and writhed, her legs shifting around him, knees bending and thighs widening to give him more space.

Using his hands, he opened her labia, exposing the flushed pink flesh of her pussy to his gaze. "Beautiful." He inhaled her feminine aroma, his cock leaking and throbbing, screaming at him to get on with it and fuck her already. He'd get there ... eventually.

This time he lapped the sweetest cream right from the source, circling his tongue round and round her tender opening, stimulating his woman as much as he could. He licked her from anus to clit, savoring all of the smells and flavors she gave him with each passing second. Erich suckled her clit, making her scream with pleasure as he flicked the bundle of nerves rapidly with his tongue, fanning the flames of her pleasure ever higher. Again and again he repeated the motions, pushing and pulling her orgasm, demanding her release and accepting nothing less than compliance.

Sensing the closeness of her orgasm by the quickness of her breath and the sudden stillness of her body, Erich pushed first one and then two fingers into her heat, filling her as much as he dared just yet. He pumped in and out of her, searching for that sweet spot inside her pussy that would...

"Yes!"

...make her see stars.

"Yes, right there, by the air, yes!" She mumbled and screamed and begged as he stroked and pressed against her G-spot, keeping tabs on it as she rocked and rolled her hips in search of her pleasure. He allowed her to ride his face, taking from him what she desired. She deserved the happiness that release afforded a woman, the pure pleasure that would course through her veins and light up every nerve ending in her body.

Her pussy clenched around his fingers, harder and harder, coming in rhythmic spasms as the seconds passed. She barely breathed, her body tense and stiff as if she waited.

"Yes! I'm coming! Erich!" She screamed his name as her pussy clamped down on

his hand, and now he wasted no time, praying that the goddesses in Cosmo knew what they were talking about.

He rose to his knees, his cock hard and at the ready, and pushed forward into her still spasming pussy, stretching and filling her with his cock while her release continued. He pumped in and out of her sweet pussy, fucking and loving her like he'd never done with another woman. On and on and on her sex clenched around him, squeezing his cock with a constant rhythmic motion he'd never gotten from another woman.

She continued to pant and chant his name. "Still..." *Pant.* "Coming..."

*Praise Cosmo.* He didn't want her to stop, he wanted this orgasm to be the longest, greatest one in her life and damn it—it was gonna be.

His cock ached and demanded he come, tired of the teasing and poking and just wanting to enjoy being buried deep inside Sarya, but he couldn't oblige it just yet. Not when he had a pretty little clit staring him down, seeming to ask to be petted and stroked while he fucked his tiny angel.

Erich placed his thumb over her clit and Sarya bolted upright, practically crawling onto his lap and forcing him to sit back. She rode him then, him on his knees, her riding his thighs as if he were a bronc just looking to get broke. She slid along his dick, coating him in her juices, their bodies colliding with a slap of skin against skin.

Her breasts pressed into his chest, teasing and tempting him when he couldn't get at the berry-colored nipples as he'd like to. Erich wrapped his arms around her, his hands going straight for the ass that'd been swaying to and fro only moments before. He kneaded the supple flesh before taking control of her movements, giving him a little something extra to enjoy.

Harder and harder he pushed her body up and down, pumping his dick in and out of her heat while she rose and fell above him. Sweat coated them from head to toe, sex giving them that clean musky smell of good loving as they made love.

Erich picked up the pace, his orgasm approaching. Sarya's pussy still squeezed him for all she was worth, another release edging closer and closer with each passing second.

"Come inside me. Fill my pussy." She panted against his mouth, burning hot breath bathing him in the warmth of her fire.

"Yeah." He slammed into her, harder than ever before. "Yeah." He withdrew and slammed home again. 'Cause, yeah, being inside her was like coming home for good.

Sarya's fingers dug into his shoulders, her nails piercing his skin, leaving little half-moon cuts in their wake and he couldn't give any less of a damn. He'd be proud of them come morning, but for now, the pain pushed his pleasure along, yanking him closer to ecstasy and to the goal they both worked toward.

Again and again he plunged into her, the tendrils of release feeling around in his body from head to toe, nerve endings popping to life, coming on as if they'd never been so overcome with a pleasure like this before. Electric shocks of passion coursed through him, his nerves dancing, his pleasure sliding and making its way to his groin. Soon he was overcome with sensation, as if his body were afire—earth shaking, ground cracking and flames fanning with his release.

He filled her. Pump after pump after pump he filled his Sarya with seed, giving her exactly what he'd dreamed of and what she'd asked for. She screamed his name as her pussy clamped down around him harder than before, letting him know that as he came, she came as well.

He continued to thrust, his spent cock softening within her velvety wet walls. He didn't want to leave her warmth, he wanted to crawl inside and be a part of her forever.

She sighed against his neck, seeming content and quiet for a moment. "Let's do that again."

## Chapter Five

Something warm and firm pressed against her back and Sarya fought through the haze of sleep to remember why bright morning sunlight poured into her eyes. Had she left the bedroom blinds open when she went to sleep?

She wiggled, and realized something hard nestled in the crack of her butt, and the evening—and the night—and another time in the night—all flooded back into her brain. Erich.

He rocked his hips and his cock, again at the ready, teased the sensitive skin of her backside, and she hummed in anticipation. He reached around her torso and cupped a breast, playing with her nipple, and her heartbeat picked up speed. But when he kissed his way down her back to lick her wing ridges with short, soft strokes, she moaned in delight. Damn, he had the moves.

“Want you, angel. Want you again.”

“Yes.” Sarya adjusted her hips slightly, and the next time Erich rocked, the crown of his cock bumped against her wet center. He slipped in and filled her completely. He stretched her tender sheath to the maximum, his erection so good and hot and freaking huge. She dropped a hand to play with her clit but she didn’t need to. Erich leaned his torso away—she felt the loss of his body heat—but then he set up a stroking pattern over her back with his fingertips and every touch ignited her erogenous zones like pouring gas on a flame.

Every move sensual, every touch a whisper of a caress; it felt so decadent she was almost overwhelmed. Sarya let herself hover in the place between thought and sensation.

Another stroke. Another thrust, another caress. Erich whispered to her, the words indistinct but the messages clear. He cared for her as he brought her higher and higher until she flew without magic, without wings, without her connection to the mystic. Simply her connection to him was enough to make her soar.

By the time they could breathe again she had squirmed her way around to rest her head on his chest. Erich tangled his fingers in her hair, draping strands over his chest. She smiled as she watched him smooth the ribbons of red, the contrast with his skin bold and beautiful. The night had been a dream; his caring and loving and the sheer thrill of him taking her to the heights. She sighed. It was almost too good to be true.

Sarya could count on one hand the times she’d made love with a man and then spent the night with him. Was this going to be awkward? Honesty. That’s what she’d promised herself and him, and so simple was best, was it not? “Will you stay for breakfast?”

Erich lifted her chin, tilting her head back until their eyes met. “I’ll need to be going soon, but breakfast sounds wonderful. I suppose fire chiefs have to keep some kind of business hours. But I want to see you again. Tonight?”

Her heart lightened. “I can show you around town and then we could eat at your place.”

“I could take you out to dinner.”

Sarya giggled. He was avoiding something, but she wasn’t sure what. Maybe he was a disaster in the kitchen. “You could cook for me.”

Erich untangled himself from her gently. “Let’s save that for later. I’d like to see

what's what in Strange Hollow. Maybe meet a few more folks. I'll phone you later to set a time, okay?" He stood, naked and glorious in the sunlight, and Sarya licked her lips.

Hers. At least for now, 'cause, if she was only making love with him, he was only making love with her. A deal was a deal. But she could totally get into showing him off.

"You want to shower before breakfast? It's at the bottom of the turret, to the left of the kitchen. I'll find you a clean towel and I think I have a new toothbrush in one of the drawers. Do you like eggs? I know I have some bacon in the fridge and I can make us omelets, or if you prefer I'll make them scrambled." He smiled at her. "What?"

"You're a chatterbox. I like it, it suits you." He held out his hand and together they headed down the stairs, the warmth rising from within outweighing even the heat of the morning sun pouring in through the windows.

When they'd showered and breakfast was done, and Erich walked away after giving her one last body-melting kiss, Sarya sat on the stairs and watched him until he disappeared in the distance into the trees.

She'd never felt this before. A tiny flicker of hope rose. She wasn't going to be too optimistic, but there was something very special about the man. Maybe, just maybe, in a few days, or weeks, or months, she'd let herself start to dream about more. For now, she had a new friend and a new lover. That was enough.

Sarya closed her eyes and stretched out her hands to the sky, sensing for the earth, the trees and the messages the wind could bring her. An uneasy sensation brushed her cheek for a fleeting moment. Nothing tangible. Unrest? Coldness? Then it was gone and the smell of Erich on the shirt she wore broke her concentration as her mind filled with remembrances of the night.

She'd worry about the mystery later. She rose and went back inside to clean up.

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Erich whistled as he wandered back down the mountain, meandering this way and that as he traveled, worried, but not, about getting down to the station for orientation. He figured if he'd really been needed, Jacinda would have told him so.

Moving along the well-worn path, he felt the tug from yesterday once again. In the opposite direction. The earth called to him, urging him to go west, the other side of the trail. First east, now west as he headed down the hill. What could happen in the forest next?

With a sigh, he eased off the path. The pull ebbed and flowed through the ground, washing against him like the ocean, coming and going, strengthening and then weakening, making it hard to get a true reading as to the direction he should be going. Where was he being pulled?

There was no hope for it. With a groan, muscles that hadn't seen use in a while twitching and bitching, he lowered himself to the ground and yanked off first his left boot and then the right. Next were his socks, leaving him barefoot, but also open to the earth. He stuck his socks in his boots and rolled to his feet, different muscles bitching now. Damn, as much as he hurt, his cock twitched at the thought of the reasons behind his muscles aching. Sweet Sarya coming on his cock again and again. Man, a bum like him could get used to having a lover like her by his side night after night.

Erich kicked some leaves and twigs out of the way, getting down to bare earth and the heart of his power. It didn't take but a few brushes to see a little bit of grass. For this he dropped into a squat and petted the greenery. "Sorry, guys, but this is important

business.” He popped out his utility knife, something he carried out of habit, and cut into the ground, uprooting quite a bit of grass and exposing the brown dirt beneath.

He set aside what he’d uprooted, flicked the knife closed and stuck his feet into the holes he’d created. Like a shot to the gut, the pain poured through him. Harder and harder it pounded at him, seeming to come from all sides and nowhere at the same time. Again and again he had the wind knocked out of him from the sheer terror and aching power he felt coming from the east and the west. Worry came from the east, songs of orange ribbons clouding his mind. But pain, pure unadulterated pain, came from the west, calling him harder and longer than the east, letting him know just where he’d be going.

Exhausted from his connection with the earth, Erich stumbled back from the holes he’d created and plopped down by a tree. Leaning back against it, he brushed off his feet and pulled on his socks and boots with shaking, trembling hands.

Damn, but he’d never felt anything so strong, so wrong, before. No doubt about it, he’d be heading west for as long as it took to find the source of the pain and anguish he’d felt.

Shifting to a crouch, he reached for the grass he’d uprooted and replaced it in the divots he’d created. With a soft pat and a quick release of power, he urged the grass’s roots to take hold, to sink back into the earth it so loved, and become one with it again. His hands glowed a soft green as he worked his bit of Fae magic, hoping what he had after feeling all that anguish was enough.

When the grass seemed to green up even more than before, he rose to his feet, confident it would live regardless of the ordeal he’d put it through. Now there was nothing holding him back from finding the source of the pain.

Putting one foot in front of the other, he wove his way between trees, keeping his back to the sun. He followed animal paths, and sometimes animals, while he made his trek.

Before long, the sun was directly overhead, high noon, and he still hadn’t found the source of the pain. It grew stronger with each passing step, no doubt about that, but he still hadn’t found what he’d been searching for.

Farther and farther he walked, wondering if he was still actually within the boundaries of Strange Hollow as the trees grew more and more dense. He crawled over the fallen, dried-up logs and remnants of old trees that had succumbed to death.

A piercing pain, as if a hot poker were going straight through his brain, slammed into him, drawing him in a new direction, off the animal path and higher up the mountain. He staggered under the weight of the pain, gripping trees and holding his head as he moved toward the source.

Foot after foot he covered, scuffling along and wincing as his shuffling steps unearthed small plants, causing him more and more pain. With each step, he murmured, “Sorry.” One after another.

The trees opened up to low brush and the source became abundantly clear. A mass of orange painted trees were revealed. Tree after tree was covered in orange slashes and tape as far as he could see. There, in the center, was a downed tree, dryads of all shapes surrounding it, petting and stroking it as if... Another wave of pain roared through him, dropping him to his knees with an anguished cry.

The dryads noticed him. The women turned to face him, with their bodies ranging from stick-thin to abundantly round like his Sarya. All of them in varying shades of green

and even a few in colors *other* than green, as if they'd mated with flowers instead of trees once upon a time.

The males, recognizable by their builds and obvious possession of cocks, glared at him, the two largest coming forward, grabbing him beneath the arms and hauling him to his feet.

"Human," one spat at him.

"Filthy human," the other added.

"No, no, no..." A plump, purple dryad rushed forward. "I saw him talking with Jacinda. He's new, he's..." She approached him, her gaze flicking between the two large dryads holding him up—the only thing holding him up. "He's..." she sniffed the air around him, "he's earthen."

She grabbed one of his hands and yanked him from the men, pulling him along toward the fallen tree. The dryads scattered to the winds, flowing with the air and floating above the ground away from him to each end of the tree. "Help her? Please?"

Then he sensed it, sensed the pain and the anguish of the dryad trapped within. She couldn't escape, couldn't be free of her tree without the power of the earth behind her, beneath her. The signature of the dryad beneath his palms pulsed, growing weaker, feeling terrified and alone.

"Can you help her?" the plump dryad asked, wringing her hands. "She's my sister and..." Sap leaked from her eyes, the tree's tears running down her face.

He took a deep breath and the pain nearly overwhelmed him. "I can try." He rolled to his feet and looked around, counting their numbers. "I need you all to help me right her, to put her back on her stump and then hold her while I work. I—I don't know if it'll work, but I'll try. At least if I can get her out of the tree—"

"She'll still die then!" a faceless dryad shouted above the murmurs of the crowd.

"She won't." He dropped his voice to a whisper, eyeing the pine before him. "Not if I can help it. All right," he called out. "Count of three, I want her vertical. Ready?"

Erich positioned himself near the stump, wanting to make sure they placed her exactly as she'd been. He noticed the markings on the break. A chainsaw had felled her. No doubt in his mind. "One." A person did this. "Two." *Heartless bastards*. "Three!" He used every muscle within him to place the unknown woman back as she'd been.

Surrounded by the dryads, he placed his palms at the source of the tree's pain and concentrated, willing the tree to heal, just as he'd worked on the grass not long before. Willed and desired and wanted and prayed—he worked for hour after hour after hour. Noon passed and the afternoon sun broke through the trees, framing the still pained tree, but finally the tree shuddered as if saying "enough" and magic shimmered around them. The cut healed. The other dryads removed their hands, shifting their hold to him as he slumped against the ground, exhausted.

Within moments, the tree's form took the shape of a slim, green dryad with shimmering orange hair. She looked at him with tears in her eyes as she bowed her thanks.

Erich closed his eyes and prayed for the world to stop spinning.



## Chapter Six

Erich relaxed on his couch, his attention shifting every few moments from the book in his lap to his front driveway. He'd find it empty and return to the book. Seconds ticked by, turning into minutes, with his focus jumping between the new clock on his mantle, the book and back the driveway again. Like an intricate game of tennis, he kept his gaze bouncing between the three, unable to focus on any one thing.

The healing had been exhausting, nearly life-ending. Okay, that was a bit of an exaggeration, but he hadn't made it down the mountain as quickly as he'd liked. His once rapid steps turned into a dragging walk and more than once he'd been tempted to crawl.

The dryads had offered to carry him, but he was too manly for such a sissy thing. He snorted. Be carried by a bunch of trees? Not in his lifetime or the next. By the time he'd reached home he'd been ready to simply flop into bed and sleep for a year.

Which he did. Sort of. He slept for several hours, waking to his cock pounding and looking for relief with not a single hope in sight. The reason for his condition, his angel, immediately popped to mind the moment he was conscious enough to sit up.

It had been hours since he'd been buried deep within her sweet pussy, and now he wanted her again. He'd promised to call her. Erich had dialed her number and asked her to come over.

Now, he waited. They'd agreed to dinner at his place, simple takeout from The Cabin House, the town's most hoity-toity restaurant, and some good conversation. He wasn't sure he was up to much more, regardless of how eager his cock seemed to be.

Even after his long nap he was still ready to keel over at any moment. A soft wind brushed against his window, the wind chimes announcing a change in the weather, and Erich stared out the front window, aching for a glimpse of Sarya's angel-like wings.

Out of the sky, seeming out of nothing, she fluttered down, her wings allowing her a soft landing, first one foot and then the other coming to rest on the ground. As before, she wore a short, sleeveless tunic that granted her wings freedom.

He stared, open-mouthed, while her wings seemed to fold within her, sliding beneath her tunic, her skin, to become part of her once again. He was sad to see them go, anxious to explore them fully. He loved her wings—loved everything about her.

Sarya approached the door with slow, measured steps, her eyes trained on the ground. He watched as she rose up the steps, and chuckled at the deep, visible breath she took right before knocking on the door.

He still had a smile on his face when he levered his body off the couch and padded toward the door, feeling the aches and pains not related to his morning gymnastics with Sarya. Damn it.

With a flick of the lock, he swung the door open and his breath caught in his chest. Damn, but she was the prettiest woman he'd ever laid eyes on. That thought sprang to mind each and every time he saw her. Maybe it was because they were so alike in their abilities, in their histories, and the reasons for being in Strange Hollow. Or was it the simple fact that he lo—

Nah, not yet.

"Come in, come in. Have a seat." He stepped aside and gestured toward the couch

he'd just been occupying, hoping she'd sit soon so he could do the same. He prayed even harder that she'd not want a tour of the house. Just being on his feet tired him out already.

She smiled, a small tilting of her lips, and his cock perked up and took notice.

*Down boy.* He followed her toward the couch, planning to sit across from her, take comfort in the cushions and just be around her for a while, no expectations. Then again, it seemed his saucy Sarya had a few expectations of her own. She pulled a dozen candles from a little bag hanging from her belt and arranged them on the coffee table, a smirk building on her beautiful face. "What are those for? I mean, they're pretty and all that."

He wavered on his feet. Before he had a chance to collapse, he had his arms filled with soft, warm, willing airen Fae, her lips crushed against his, her arms flying around his neck. He, his body, couldn't help but respond to the stimulus. His cock, already half-hard, went full-on hard and ready to fill his woman. He plunged his tongue into her mouth as she opened to him, tasting the sweet vanilla, woods and musk that was all her own. He delved in and out, mimicking exactly what he'd like to do at that moment if he had the energy.

She pressed harder against him, pushing him off-balance, and he fell to the couch with a grunt followed by a groan as she insinuated her knee between his thighs, pressing up against his balls. He pulled away from the kiss. "Sarya, honey..." She kissed him again, her tongue licking the seam of his lips, and the whole time his cock bitched at him for possibly refusing. Over her shoulder he saw one of the candlewicks on the table burst into flame.

Damn, she was smart as well as beautiful. "Sarya ... I'm not up for much..." He mumbled against her lips, her body writhing against him as he tried valiantly to say no. Even with a way to safely deal with their uncontrollable fire, he just didn't have the strength.

She wasn't having it. "Just ... let me..." Her nimble fingers flicked the button of his jeans like a pro, those same fingers lowering his zipper, the noise loud in the quiet room. Their rasping breaths mingled with the metallic sound.

"Sarya. I—"

She pressed two fingers against his lips. "Shh... I know you're tired. I heard on the wind today about a healing. Just let me take care of you. Use the candles if you need to." Her hand snaked into his jeans, her small palm wrapping around his length, her fingers barely touching on either side of him. He groaned, his eyes closing, unable to stay open against the pleasure of her touching him so intimately.

"Ah ... that's it." She smiled against his neck and then began her descent, her body shimmying against him as she slid down him with ease. Inch after inch, his cock grew harder, throbbing and aching, and he hoped and prayed she was about to do what he thought she was gonna do. Damn, but he wanted her mouth on his cock.

With her chin resting on one hipbone, she looked up at him from beneath her long lashes, a self-satisfied smirk in place. "Lift up, lover."

Oh, he liked that word on her lips. Liked it a lot.

He did as she asked, lifting his hips so she could shuck his jeans. Naked from the waist down, he spread his legs, giving her space between them. Now she could either suck him or fuck him, he didn't care which anymore, not with his cock aching and needing the way it did. Didn't care one bit.

It seemed she was in the mood to suck. She crawled up from the floor and started at

the base of his cock with one long lick from root to tip. She circled the crown of his cock with her tongue, sinking the delicate pink flesh into the slit, gathering the pre-come there and swallowing it down with a hum from deep within her chest, causing him to groan in return. The floor vibrated under them, just the slightest bit, but between his exhaustion and his need for her, earthquakes were unlikely to be an issue.

She suckled the barest bit of his tip, the head of his dick responding to the sucking motion, releasing more and more pre-come into her mouth. More moans, more groans, and she still hadn't sunk that pretty bow-shaped mouth around his entire dick yet.

The moment he thought of her lips wrapped around him, she did as he hoped, sinking down around him, sucking and swallowing his length until her nose was pressed into his groin. He resisted the urge to thrust, to move, to shift, to do anything. This was her show, her gift to him, and he wasn't about to fuck it up.

She slid her tongue down the underside of his cock, moving along his length, her mouth wrapped firmly around it the entire time. She moved up and down, pushing his arousal higher with every lick and suck. She fucked him with her mouth, made love to him with her tongue as the seconds passed and turned into minutes, and yet she didn't tire. Her hand joined her mouth, stroking his lower half, the other hand massaging his balls while her mouth worked magic on his dick.

Again and again, her hands working in tandem, she milked him, stimulating him and urging him to come down her sweet, tight throat.

"Coming, love." And he was, hard and fast, pressure building low in his balls with each passing moment. Each suck urged him on until he came with a roar, Sarya's name on his lips. She continued to suck him, her throat moving as she swallowed his seed. He laid still, his body pulsing with release, his lungs heaving with tired breaths.

He relaxed into the couch, spent. Tired. Exhausted and needing sleep. And so he did.

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Sarya smiled down at Erich. She'd managed to tug his legs back onto the couch, and arrange a pillow for his head. It was impossible for her to shift him enough to redress him. The best she could do was to grab the comforter from his bed. Covered up, he rolled and settled in, a contented expression on his face. On the coffee table, the candles all burned with a clear, pure light, the flames flickering as if they were laughing.

When the phone hadn't rung this morning, Sarya wondered why he hadn't called, and forced herself to avoid thinking the worst. He wasn't ignoring her, he was busy settling into work. Finding out about his duties in town. In the afternoon when the wind brought the rustling message of fear and death and restored life, she'd heard his name whispered and knew to wait.

If she could have helped, she would have gone to his side, but while she loved the earth, it rarely spoke to her. The messages she heard were old and timeless, not fresh like he must have heard. She leaned over and kissed his cheek before leaving him to his well-deserved rest. She wasn't quite sure what he'd done this morning, but it was something that pleased the trees.

She was glad to eventually get his call. Glad to come and find him needing her, needing some attention.

Now, Sarya wandered through his tidy house. Even after only two days the stamp of the man appeared everywhere. Jacinda's magic had brought his things from elsewhere, and while they were not plentiful, they all spoke of his character. Bold paintings

decorated the walls, filled with brilliant colors and firm lines. She wandered into the back of the house, into the spare bedroom. There was an artist's desk, the angled surface covered with sketching paper and pencils. An easel stood in the corner of the room, the natural light falling on the rectangular frame. The faint outline of a picture teased her and she approached to examine it closer.

The sketch he'd done the previous day appeared on the parchment, light pencil markings outlining her naked form on the clean white expanse. It was rough, faint, a barely-there expression she assumed he would use as a guide when he painted. It was beautiful.

Erich's size, his overall rough and tumble fiery spirit, was in such contrast with the delightful beauty she saw everywhere. A study in contrasts, and she admired it greatly.

Knickknacks of wood and clay were scattered around the few shelves and bookcases. She picked up a jar with a lacy fern brim, so delicate and fine and yet looking as if it had grown in the outdoors. She expected the frill-like edge to feel soft, yet it was made of rock-hard fired clay. She turned the piece carefully, admiring it, and found the initials E.F. etched into the base. Erich.

She replaced it with care and gave it one last finger brush over the surface before heading into the kitchen. He could sleep for a while, but in the meantime she'd make sure there was food ready for when he woke. Peeking into the fridge, she gathered supplies and set to work.

By the time the meal was done, night had well and truly fallen. The streetlights shone through the windows, and she drew the curtain to block the beam falling across his face. Erich snored lightly, one arm draped to the floor, his body slack in complete relaxation. She sat and watched him for a while, admiring his face—the strong, high cheekbones, the shadow of beard across his chin.

Something about the man drew her. "Erich?" She knelt beside the couch and stroked his cheek lightly. He turned to brush his lips against her fingers. Then he breathed deeply and didn't move again except for the slow rise and fall of his chest. So much for the rest of their evening together.

She kissed his lips, savoring the taste of the air escaping from his lungs, drawing it into her. Storing it for later when she'd be alone. After one last trip to the kitchen to put the meal away in the fridge, she wrote a note. She blew out all the candles, one by one, then propped the note against the largest one and let herself out.

The temperature had fallen, and she hurried to unfurl her wings to head home as quickly as possible. Instead of taking the main street and following the foot trail, she flew a direct route, hoping to get home and into the tub to soak away the chill that even now sank into her bones. The wind puffed and gusted in little zephyrs, swirls and light breezes that teased her with the scent from someone's barbeque, followed by the smell of rotting leaves. She concentrated on home, the beacon of safety, even if it would be a cold and lonely place after having spent last night in Erich's arms.

Perhaps she should have stayed? No, not when he was exhausted. It was early enough in their relationship and she didn't want to cross any lines and push too hard, too fast.

She gave a cry as something slammed into her shoulder, tumbling her in a circle until she could gather her balance and press out her wings to slow her momentum. A ripping pain tore across her left wing as she plunged out of control into a branch, the wiry fingers

tearing into her feathers and ripping a line open. The pain was incredible and darkness clouded her eyes. Only sheer stubbornness brought her to the ground in one piece, the magic of her airen nature catching her when her wing couldn't.

She leaned on the tree trunk, one hand straight out to support herself as she gasped for air, bringing her trembling stomach under control. It was good she hadn't eaten at Erich's or she would have lost her dinner, the pain now pulsing through her like ragged knife blows.

Above her the branches of the tree swayed, and she tucked herself into the darkness, furling her wings into her back, biting her lip to stop from shouting out as throbbing agony raked her. Her eyes sought the night sky, seeking for any sign of what had hit her.

Nothing. Nothing but stars through the branches against a midnight-black backdrop. She perked up her ears to listen. She heard nothing but the noises of the night.

"Are you okay?" the tree whispered. Sarya gasped in surprise before she recognized the voice as that of a sleepy dryad.

They were so innocent at times. It wasn't the tree's fault Sarya had been hurt. "I'm fine," she lied. Still, better safe than sorry. "Is the path to my home clear? Can you tell, earthen sister, if anyone walks the ground between here and my home?"

The whisper came slowly. "No one walks. The ground is clear."

Sarya patted the trunk and then forced herself forward. She wasn't far from home, and her shivering limbs would be better served by soaking in the bathtub than standing shaking in the forest wondering about mysterious objects in the night sky.

## Chapter Seven

The heady scent of home cooking drew him from sleep. Slowly, ever so slowly, his mind tossed off the vestiges of unconsciousness until he could recognize the smells filling his nose. Baked potatoes, baked chicken and an apple pie or cinnamon apples, something that reminded him of his grandmother's home cooking.

Erich rolled, shifting until he lay on his back, inhaling the scents surrounding him and reveling in the fact that someone cared enough about him to cook him a meal, a meal of tenderness and home. He stretched, eyes still closed and body stirring, coming closer and closer to wakefulness.

Soft lips stroked his, a tentative touch of skin against skin. He moaned and opened his lips to the kiss, delving into the sweet, lilac flavored mouth, the woods and flora exploding on his tongue and...

It wasn't his Sarya he was kissing, wasn't the woman he'd fallen head over heels for and definitely wasn't *his* woman. His eyes flew open, and he met the gaze of a woman, her eyes filled with hope and uncertainty, but definitely *not* the piercing blue eyes of his lover.

Rough, probably rougher than he should, he shoved her away, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand as she steadied herself on the end of the couch, and he finally got a good look at her.

He absorbed the straw-blonde hair, grass-green eyes and the pale green skin that could only belong to one of the few women he'd met since coming to Strange Hollow. "Cassandra."

She clapped her hands, a smile blossoming on her face as she rushed to his side, perching on the edge of his coffee table and knocking over a candle. "Oh, Erich, you remembered! I thought you'd forgotten me since you pushed me away, but you didn't, did you?"

She rambled on and on, and he pushed to a sitting position, shifting until a little more space appeared between them. The sudden realization he was naked from the waist down, his jeans lying neatly over the back of the couch, shook him. "How'd you... What're you..." He surreptitiously wiped his mouth once again, pretending to yawn, while he figured out how to cover his ass and get the dryad out of his house. "How'd you get in here, darlin'?"

Women always seemed to like his drawl and for once he'd use it to his advantage. He didn't mean to deceive her, but she had some sort of wild look in her eyes that his gut told him not to trust. He snuck his pants under the blanket and wiggled them on, feeling more than a little foolish.

"Oh. Oh! The door was open and I found you asleep and I knew you'd left it for me." She batted her eyelashes at him, all seductive-like, staring with interest at the blanket, and he straightened a little. He hadn't left the door unlocked and he couldn't imagine Sarya doing that either.

"Uh huh. Well, I appreciate you making me a home cooked meal and all." Finally zipped and hidden, he tossed the blanket to the side intending to stand and escort her out.

She smiled, showing a mouth of bright white teeth. "You're welcome." She shifted

to the couch and trapped him, lacing her long, slender fingers with his. “I wanted to show you that I could take care of you. Well, after you missed our date...”

Their date? What in the world was she getting at—“Oh! I missed our drawing session. Sorry about that...” He remembered the burning hot sun on his back at high noon while the pain and tales of death brought him deeper and deeper into the forest. “I was called away and—”

“Yes. I know. The *others*...” Her face turned ugly for a moment, vicious almost, and unease grew in the pit of his stomach. In the blink of an eye, she fluttered her lashes and dropped a huge smile his way, a sickly sweet expression. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. You’re here with me now.”

“Right.” He tugged his hand free and wiped his palms on his jeans. “You didn’t happen to see Sarya—”

“Sarya?” Cassandra practically spat the word. She waved her hand toward the mountain. “She went home. She left you, in your time of need, mind you.” Then she narrowed her eyes and whispered like a conspirator, “I think she went home with one of those dryad males she fancies.”

Right. He didn’t believe Cassandra for a second. He and Sarya had agreed to keep it exclusive. He remembered the hope in her eyes and the beginnings of love shining back at him. No way his woman had taken up with another. Not after what they’d shared the other night and mere hours ago.

Cassandra bounced onto the couch next to him. “The trees said she took a spill of sorts.”

“She took a spill *of sorts*? You didn’t go check on her?” He ground out the question through gritted teeth, his worry growing as each second passed.

Cassandra shrugged and eased closer, her slim hand coming to rest on his chest, stroking him through his shirt. “Oh,” she purred. “Sarya’s a big girl. She could have called for help.”

“Right.” He pushed Cassandra away again and rose from the couch, anger pouring off him in waves. “She’s my woman, Cass. Look, I’m sorry for missing our appointment and I appreciate you trying to take care of me, but if I’m reading the signals right, you’re looking for something I can’t give. Now, I’ve got a woman to check on.”

He didn’t wait for a response. He didn’t have time. He had a feeling the dryad was downplaying Sarya’s “spill” and that it really had been worse than she’d said. It was coming on midnight now and he remembered it being just shy of dark when Sarya had arrived. That meant she had probably flown home rather than walk the forest in the dead of night. Her spill would have started in the sky and ended on the ground most likely, and that just didn’t sit right with him.

Erich left Cassandra staring at him, mouth gaping, while he grabbed his boots, worry making his fingers fat and fumbling. He pulled on his battered leather cowboy boots and reached for the door. Splinters of wood peppered the ground. Yeah, the door had been open, his ass. The dryad had used her powers on the wood to keep her entry quiet, most likely.

“Let yourself out, Cassandra.” He slammed the door behind him, anxious to get to Sarya and not feeling much for the woman he’d left. Nah, that was a small lie, but he didn’t have time to examine just what he felt toward the lying dryad at the moment.

Erich took off at a jog, his feet pounding the earth, and part of him wished he had the

gift of air like his woman did. He'd be flying through the clouds, beating his wings and rushing to get close to her, to make sure she was okay. Instead, he had to be consoled with a quick run from his house, up the mountain and to her door.

Entering the forest, he put his hand against a nearby tree, one he didn't sense a dryad presence within. No telling how far Cassandra's bat-shit craziness reached. "Is everything okay within, kin?"

The tree sighed and he felt a soft pressure against his palm as if the tree leaned into his touch. "Erich the Mighty."

Erich shook his head at the moniker. "Is the path clear for me this eve, my kin?"

"All is clear for Erich the Mighty. You won't have trouble with earth nor air this eve."

He wondered at the assurance that air wouldn't be bothering him, but he brushed off the worry and thanked the tree for its help before running down the path, following shortcuts he'd remembered from his earlier visit. He weaved in and out of the flora, diving around trees and bushes, not wanting to hurt those who'd already helped him this evening.

Before long he was huffing and puffing at the front door of Sarya's small home, knocking rapidly while he worked to catch his breath. Soft cries and moans met his ears and he tried to open the door, not caring he was invading his lover's privacy in such a way. Those cries and moans came only from one source ... pain.

The door was locked against him, and he turned to his side, braced his shoulder and stormed toward the barrier, busting it open with one hit. The sight before him had his eyes going wide with shock. "Sarya?"

She sat in the middle of the floor, shards of pottery, glass and shattered trinkets surrounding her. Tears poured down her face, her wings spread wide. Blood soaked the top of one glorious, previously white, wing.

"Oh, Sarya." He stepped over the broken glass and around the fallen bits of the decorations in her home. He didn't want to break anything else as he made his way toward her. "Baby?"

He reached for her, and she shook her head, wiping her nose on the back of her hand. "No." She sniffled. "I'll..." she sobbed, "break something else." Tears ran anew down her cheeks, covering her face and dripping onto the front of her now soaked tunic.

How long had she been home? What had happened? "Sarya, baby, I'm going to pick you up—"

"No. My..." She hiccupped. "My wings. And they'll ... and then... It'll hurt." She buried her face in her hands and cried as the movement obviously caused her pain.

"Grit your teeth, darlin', 'cause you're gonna hate me for a bit and then it'll all be better." He hooked his foot beneath a nearby ottoman and tugged it closer, taking a close look before deciding it was free of glass and whatever else peppered the ground.

"Here we go now." He placed his hands beneath her arms and lifted, placing her gently on the ottoman despite her screams of anguish at her wing's movement. The moment she sat down she was able to adjust the wounded wing until it was spread straight, the pressure relieved a little now she wasn't sprawled on the floor.

"That's my girl." He took a quick look at the top section of her wing, examining the hole that went clean through but managed to miss the bones. "Just a flesh wound, baby. Nothing to worry about."



"It hurts," she grumbled.

"All right then. Give me two shakes of a lamb's tail and I'll get you patched up. Where's your first aid kit?"

"Kitchen." She sniffled.

He made his way toward the kitchen, picking around the bits that didn't look too broken, trying to salvage what he could of her home's decorations. He found the kit with ease and hotfooted it back to her. She sat just where he'd left her, the good wing wrapped around her while she held the wounded one straight and still.

"Here we go, and while I patch you up, you tell me what the hell happened tonight." He poured some hydrogen peroxide onto a gauze pad, wiping away the blood that'd accumulated on her wing, blowing softly against the damaged tissue after every swipe.

She sniffled. "I-I came home." *Sniffle*. "And my wing hurt." *Snort*. "And I couldn't put it away." *Sob*. "And they destroyed everything." She started crying again.

"Who destroyed everything, baby?"

She wiped her tears away, drying her eyes and cheeks with her hands. "My wings."

\*

It was frustrating, infuriating and painful. Not to forget embarrassing. She had been no better than an elephant in a china shop, and now Erich had to play nursemaid to her. The touch of his fingers, gentle and soft against her tender wing membrane, teased her. The pain slowly easing as he straightened the pinfeathers and pulled the tangle smooth. The rip in her wing hurt less than the knot in the delicate supporting feathers. When Erich hummed a soothing tune and used long controlled strokes to pull the delicate veins back into symmetry, a shiver took her.

How could she throb with pain and still feel aroused? His touch was like magic, drawing her away from the place of self-pity and misery where she'd been wallowing.

"Is that better, baby?" He dropped a kiss on her cheek, his hand still supporting her wing, and she bit her lip. He made another slow stroke down the edge of her wing, and a moan escaped her lips before she could cut it off. "Your wings are so beautiful. Are you okay otherwise?"

He dropped to his knees, his hands brushing over her body, gentle but insistent as he checked her shoulders, her back, her limbs. It drove her crazy—her nipples tightening, her sex growing wet. He made her needy and wiped away all her fears. "Oh sweet fire, Erich, stop..."

"Did I hurt you, darling?" He leaned closer, concern painting his face, and she shook her head. How was she supposed to tell him his every touch drove the lingering pain away and made her need him desperately?

*Be honest.* The whisper in her brain gave her release. "Love me, please?"

His pupils dilated as she watched. "You've been hurt. I'm not such an ass to take you when—"

She grabbed him by the front of his shirt and crushed their lips together. The ecstasy of his touch on her wing had started a fire within she wanted stoked and fed. His taste filled her mouth, her head, her body. He held her shoulders, his knuckles brushing her wings, and she moaned. He swallowed the sound and lightly pressed his hands to her wings. Nothing but sensation, the overarching desire of passion rolled over her and she spread her wings slowly to full stretch.

Erich leaned away, gazing over her shoulders, admiration visible in his expression

but concern lingering. “Baby, I want you, but I want to care for you more than I need to—”

She rustled her wing tips, stirring the air, bringing a swirl of air magic into play to muss his hair and caress his shoulders. “No more talk. Love me.”

Erich glanced around the room cautiously. “Here?”

Damn. They were liable to set the house on edge if either of them lost control of their powers. Sarya looked at the mess of broken trinkets surrounding them and laughed. She’d already managed to knock over just about everything breakable with her pain-crazed stumbling. “I doubt the house can get any more damaged than it already is.” She kissed his forehead, then rose up and tugged him to his feet as well. She opened her tunic before she realized she’d never be able to remove it completely. Fine. It took two wiggles and a small hop and her panties were in her hand. She held them up on a finger, dangling them in front of his face. His jaw dropped.

“Holy shit, Sarya, what are you trying to do to me?”

Was that a trick question? She dropped the scrap of fabric to the floor, his gaze following the material. Then she planted her palms against her waist, slowly caressing her own skin until she held her breasts, plumping them up, massaging and pinching her nipples in turn as his attention snapped back to watch her. He swallowed hard, and one hand rose to reach for her.

“Watch.” His eyes flicked up to meet hers, and she licked her lips slowly. He was going to refuse her, she sensed it. Somehow she had to prove this was what she really wanted.

She returned to playing with her breasts, his gaze now locked on her fingers, the desire on his face growing by the second. What was it about the man that made her lose all inhibitions? As an air Fae she was used to her body being on display, but this wasn’t about being naked. This was about being stripped bare to nothing but her core self—what made her who she was and what she cared about.

Right now, that was him. She wanted him with every fiber of her being. The healing of her wing would come faster if she furled them, but the fascination they held for him... She wanted to experience the total sensation of making love with him.

Carefully, ultra cautiously, she turned, leaning over to plant her palms on the ottoman. The position left her backside presented to him, her bottom tilted up and bare, wings wide. Sarya twisted her head to see his response.

Erich’s mouth hung open for a second before he snapped it shut and took a deep breath. “Baby, are you sure?”

She lifted a hand to her mouth, sucked a finger, then dropped it between her thighs to touch her pussy. She was wet, liquid painting the inside of her thighs, and his groan echoed in the room.

He moved so fast she nearly fell. “Put your hand back down. Tell me if I do anything that hurts you.” Then he was between her legs, his mouth on her sex, tonguing her center, and it felt so good all pain wiped away. He feasted on her; the noisy slurping sounds a wonderful part of the whole experience. Tingling rays of pleasure spread through her belly, his tongue stroking and caressing, teasing her to a peak. Then he slipped a finger into her and pushed her over the edge, her climax pulsing as the wind picked up and swirled around them.

Erich stood. She heard the sound of a zipper and suddenly his hard length pressed

into her still pulsing sheath. The broad width of his cock stretched so good as he held her hips and buried himself to the hilt. Slow strokes followed—retreat then advance—the heat of his shaft spreading into her and building the pleasure again.

His hands left her hips and he caressed the edge of her wing. For his entire arm's reach the delicate but insistent touch sent an electric thrill within her. A thrust of his hips, a stroke down her wings. The constant repetitions made her gasp out in delight. "Yes. Oh, Erich, more, harder."

She pressed back as he rocked his hips forward, the slap of skin-on-skin loud and hard. He panted, the sounds from both their throats echoing in the room. Air rustled her wings, heat flashed over their bodies. She opened her eyes expecting to see her house going up in flames but it was only her. Only him. The heat of their passion glowing red around their bodies.

An inferno flashed and she lost control, an orgasm racing through her, her sex squeezing his cock, trying to capture him and hold him within her.

"Sarya!" One final thrust and she felt him let go, his seed scalding her, filling her. His hands supported her wings and held her close, the physical connection rich but outweighed by the heart connection she felt for the man.

She loved him.

## Chapter Eight

He loved her. Like a bright sunrise coming over the plains, like cool mountain air filling his lungs and riding fast and hard across the fields. Yeah, he loved her, more than his next breath. The past three days had proved that.

They'd spent their days and nights making love under the stars and sun, enjoying being in the pure air of the high altitude and just being together. While she healed, he cared for her, making sure that wing was good as new before she took to being alone in her cabin, and even then he couldn't seem to leave her alone.

So he brought her home with him. The moment she could painlessly retract her wings, he carried her down the mountain, much to her protest, and brought her back to his house to finish her recuperation. Not that she had much healing left to do, but he wanted her here, with him.

"Sarya?" He padded through the two-bedroom house, searching for his angel.  
"Darlin'?"

"In here."

He chuckled. Not that he knew where "here" was. He followed her voice, hunting for his sweetheart from room to room until he found her in his studio. She stared at his greatest creation ever, her fingers tracing the planes of the bust occupying the table in the center of the room.

"Angel?" He crowded her against the table, his arms wrapping around her waist, pressing his body against hers as they stood staring at his handiwork. He'd fired the clay the last time he went to town to gather some clothes while Sarya was still healing. Fired the clay, immortalizing the figurine for forever.

"It's me," she whispered, and he felt slight tremors wracking her body as she spoke.  
"It's me ... that-that first day in the clearing."

He pressed a kiss to her neck, inhaling the sweet scent of vanilla and the forest that lingered around her always, savoring the flavor of her smell on his tongue. "It is, angel. Fell a little bit in love with you that day. Had to have a memory of you just in case..."

She turned in his arms, those ice-blue eyes boring into his, and he found he couldn't tear himself away from her gaze. "In case?"

"Needed a little piece of you with me always. In case ... in case my stay here wasn't as permanent as I'd hoped."

She cupped his cheek, tracing her fingers over his jaw, and he leaned into the touch, enjoying the burst of arousal that thrummed through his veins as they connected. "You'll always have a place here, Erich. Always. By my side and in this town."

Well. Damn. It wasn't a declaration, and he wasn't ready for one either, but it was as close as they'd come in their time together. "And I'll never leave ya, angel."

Her gaze skirted away and he breathed an inner sigh of relief. Men and heavy emotions didn't always go together and it seemed that Sarya felt the same way at the moment.

"What's this?" She fingered one of his favorite machines.

"It's my wheel. I do sculpture with clay, but I also spin it into bowls and such. It's ... relaxing." He joined her, once again wrapping his arms around her waist as she explored

the wheel. He rested his chin on her shoulder, looking at the wheel with new and curious eyes. “You throw the clay in the center, water up your hands and just connect with the earth in a way that’s... It’s just... I... Want to try it?” He couldn’t really explain the connection, not in a way she’d understand.

She rubbed her cheek against his, pressing their temples together in an intimate touch. “Yes.”

In moments, he had them seated at the wheel with Sarya cradled between his thighs, a lump of fresh clay in hand and bowl of water at their side. “Now, first we’ll throw the clay down and get it nice and centered on the wheel before we set it to spinning.” Erich tossed the clay down in the middle with ease, years of practice having him throw the ball in just the right spot.

“Wet your hands, darlin’, and we’ll get to molding this bit of the earth.” He dipped his hands in the clean, clear water and smoothed the cool liquid over her hands, sprinkling the clay with droplets as well.

Wordlessly, he guided her hands to the clay, showing her how to caress and stroke the bit of earth in their hands. When the clay was nice and wet, he pressed down on the pedal to force the wheel to turn slowly. The clay spun beneath their fingers, the soft earth moving under their hands easily with the water for lubrication.

“Oh.” She laughed as wet clay covered their palms and hands. His cock hardened with the tinkling laughter, with the closeness they shared with her nestled between his thighs. “Oh.” She murmured, pressing back against his groin, wiggling and shifting her heart-shaped bottom against his lengthening cock.

“Witch.”

She leaned back against him, turning her head so that her face was burrowing into the side of his neck, lips nibbling and teeth nipping the skin. “Only for you.”

\* \* \* \*

Sarya wandered Erich’s house, flitting joyfully from place to place. As much as she loved her mountaintop dwelling, spending the past couple days with him had been truly magical. Intimate.

She even felt all domestic and shit—baking cookies and fixing dinner while he went out and took care of tasks for his work. She pushed away the thoughts that threatened to rise—the ones with “home” and “family” type labels. It was too soon, even if they did fit together so well. Even if they did care for each other. Even if she was totally and completely head-over-wingtips in love with the man. Logic had no place in this.

She giggled for second before wrapping her arms around herself as tightly as possible, hugging until the joy built into explosive pressure and she was seconds away from going off like some kind of air Fae-type firework. Sarya turned up the music and danced through the living room, humming along with the music and letting her emotions carry her along in a euphoria of pleasure.

Tonight. Tonight she was going to *tell* him she loved him. No more flitting around the topic, she needed to say it and he needed to know. Then maybe they could make love and plan for the future, a future that included both of them.

One over exuberant step took her too close to the side of the bookcase and her hip nudged a scroll from its precarious perch. It tumbled to the floor, rolling away from her until it came to a rest against a small pile of papers tucked under the china cabinet. She

reached to straighten them, but the edge of the scroll snagged the whole thing into a mess. Sarya sighed and pulled the whole lot out to adjust them easier.

*Department of Lands and Resources.*

The top paper didn't catch her eye as much as the ones underneath. Aerial photographs and land contour maps. She read with confusion and then with growing horror as she recognized sections of Mount Mitchell from her own firewatch map. Whole acres of forest on the extreme edges of the land owned by Strange Hollow were being annexed for development.

"This isn't possible. This is restricted land. It's ours." Perplexed, she wondered why this information was here in Erich's house. Under a cabinet. She flipped pages rapidly, trying to find any connection between the condemning material and her beloved Erich.

His name wasn't there, and her heart eased. This was obviously one of the things that had been bothering him the past couple of days—the distraction he'd spoken about. Then she saw it.

*Timeline for implementation:*

*Inside source has suggested the initial clearing of land can proceed. They will keep us informed if there are any changes in development. Selective clearing will be aided by our source identifying and tagging the valuable hard wood timber to be harvested first.*

She couldn't read any more. Her hands shook as she piled the papers together on the table. For some reason it was vital the edges lined up just so as her mind raced in a million directions. An inside source? Maybe she could help Erich figure out who that was. Did Jacinda know about this? Initial clearing of the land? Sweet mother flame, there were dryads living amongst all the forested areas of Strange Hollow. This was not just an unauthorized development, it was akin to murder.

She reached for the phone to contact Erich. She had to talk to him, had to know what she could do to help stop this travesty. The phone rang—a strange double echoing sound—and she paced quickly toward his bedroom following the strange noise. Shit. There was his cell phone, resting on the side table by the bed, ringing away. She hung up in exasperation. He'd left in such a rush this morning he had forgotten his phone.

Even while agitated, she glanced around the room with a hint of a grin crossing her face. They'd been a little distracted this morning, waking in each other's arms and slipping together into lovemaking like it was the most natural thing in the world. She straightened the covers and grabbed the pillows from where they'd been tossed on the floor. She folded the discarded clothes neatly. She blushed for a moment as she opened his closet to put his things away, and then froze in horror.

There was a basket on the floor filled with orange development tape and cans of spray paint. A large pair of work gloves rested in there as well, and she gingerly picked one up. The fingertips were stained from the spray paint, the enormous fingers of the glove dwarfing her hand as she peered at it in disbelief. Inside the wrist were the initials EF.

Her heart broke. Her throat was tight as she gasped for air. The tears filling her eyes made it nearly impossible to see the numbers she punched into the phone as she made the most difficult call of her life. "Jacinda? We've got a problem."

She stared numbly out the window as her future shattered.

## Chapter Nine

Erich stood in the kitchen of the fire hall, mixing up a batch of chili for the rest of his team. The guys on the fire crew had been understanding, accepting even, that his earthen nature had called him to right a wrong and then kept him a bit longer when his gal had been hurt. The wolf on his crew understood more so than the others since he'd found his mate and understood that protective need, the desire and the instinctual "have-to" that lived and breathed within him.

Plus, word of the healing had traveled to the dryad in the bunch, letting the guys know Erich was a good guy, a savior and a man to be respected among them. That'd been enough for the dryad, and now Erich figured the men he worked with deserved a bit of respect in return for what they'd done to support him, newcomer and all.

Of course, he should probably clue Sarya in on all the comings and goings on her mountain at some point. But with her still healing and the pain she'd been feeling still fresh in his mind, he couldn't bring himself to spread more trouble her way. Naw, he'd hold onto the stress a bit longer. He needed to linger around the mountain and see if he couldn't figure out what the hell was going on up in the hills that would cause somebody to harm such a beautiful creature as a dryad.

In the peace of the kitchen, stirring the chili while the cornbread cooked in the oven, he most certainly didn't anticipate having a visitor, but the wolf's voice echoed through the station. "Hey, boss! Someone's here to see ya!"

Sarya. "Send her on back!" He hadn't foreseen her arrival, but he sure as hell wasn't gonna send his woman away just 'cause he was working. Not like there were many fires or emergencies in Strange Hollow. Jacinda and the sheriff kept a tight rein on the citizens, making sure the bad stuff happened elsewhere. Rescuing kittens would be a pleasant occurrence.

He kept an eye on the stove, watching to make sure the pot didn't boil over as he attempted to cook up the best damn batch of chili the men had ever tasted. Slim arms wrapped around his waist and the overwhelming scent of pine invaded his nostrils. He glanced down at the hands petting his abdomen—and froze. Sarya was most definitely not green.

"Cassandra. Mind telling me why your hands are on me like a burr?" He placed the spoon he'd been using on the spoon rest. Hands free, he pried her arms from around him and gently pushed her away, anxious to get the overwhelming scent of her away from him.

"Oh, don't play coy, Erich."

"Coy's got nothing to do with it. I've got myself a woman at home and—"

Cassandra's face darkened. "That... That *thing*. She's an abomination. An airen who loves the earth and spits fire and—" She stomped her foot, roots momentarily springing from her legs before the dryad regained control of herself.

The woman was a bit crazy, it seemed. Had a death wish as far as he was concerned. The ground rumbled a bit beneath him, fire burning through his veins. "Now, I don't take with striking a woman, but you might want to watch your words, Cassandra."

"Why? 'Cause you've deluded yourself that there's some sort of feeling between

you? I was there, Erich. I felt the passion inside you and know that you want me just—”

“I *thought* you were Sarya.”

Tears glistened in Cassandra’s eyes a moment before the woman’s visage darkened, her eyes turning to slits and hate filling her glare. “I thought so, I thought that maybe... It doesn’t matter now. You chose her, didn’t you? I figured you would. Especially after I—”

“Erich?” Jacinda’s voice cut through the conversation like a hot knife through butter.

His attention immediately darted to Jacinda, noticing Sarya just over the fairy’s shoulder. The matriarch’s expression gave him pause. Anger warred with a bit of hatred, and for the life of him he couldn’t figure out what he could have possibly done to elicit such a look from her.

“Jacinda?” He kept his voice flat, calm. Maybe she was pissed ’cause he’d been away from his post so long, but the guys hadn’t given any hint of that.

“Erich. It seems we have a problem. I need you to accompany me to the Town Hall. Now.”

Well. Damn.

\*

Sarya paced slowly behind the group as they headed down the long route to the meeting place. She felt like she was the one walking the green mile, the convicted criminal headed to the gallows. How could he? How could Erich be the one to turn his back on the earth and the dryads, and assist in the illegal encroachment of the land? The proof seemed inescapable. In response to her phone call, Jacinda poofed into the house and took one look at the gloves, snatched up the paperwork, and then with a face like a thundercloud, called together the council.

Erich’s position in Strange Hollow wasn’t the only thing up for judgment. If he were found guilty, his very life would be forfeit. Jacinda ruled with an iron fist and rule breakers were used as an example to others. After every block they traveled, the whole line silent and morose, another stake pierced her heart. It would be her fault if Erich died today, her fault the talented hands that created such beauty would be stilled forever.

But she’d had to act. Hadn’t she?

For one moment she was tempted to let her wings out, swoop ahead, and snatch him up to flee to another place. Take him away from whatever twisted situation he’d gotten into and save him from the certain death that waited, now only steps away. If she thought even for a second that she could get away with it, she would. She’d leave her home and everything in it in order to save his life and let him attain redemption somewhere else. Only ... Jacinda and the guards now watching the air would stop them before they even got clear of the city.

Tears rolled down her face and she wiped at them haphazardly. When he was gone, she’d leave too. She’d always thought Romeo and Juliet were the stupidest people on the earth, until now. Even if Erich had been the one to betray and hurt the community of Strange Hollow, she still couldn’t turn away from the fact she loved him.

The court filed into position, Jacinda and the elders at the long desk on the low dais, Erich behind a railing facing them. Community members poured in and took seats in the gallery beyond where Sarya sat, whispering behind their hands as they wondered what was going on.

One of the elders stood to read from a parchment, his furry knuckles gripping the



paper, his tangled hair bristling around him like a mane. “Erich Fierland, you have been accused of mutiny against the town in the form of unauthorized construction and attempted murder against its members. How do you plead?”

Sarya clutched the railing in front of her as she watched Erich’s face pale to white and he opened and shut his mouth a few times. “Murder? What the hell is going on?”

The bailiff stood and motioned to the crowd for silence, the murmurs loud and questions rising on the air with a swell of noise.

Erich stared up at the council before him, confusion clear in his expression. “Jacinda? You want to explain what’s happening here? I heard tell you’re a strict enforcer but a fair one. If that’s true you’re gonna have to have a heap more information for me than just an accusation that makes no sense at all.”

Jacinda stood, tiny in stature but her presence filling the room. “You have nothing to say about a development on the outskirts of Strange Hollow? Can you honestly stand there and tell me you have no idea there have been dryads’ homes cut to the ground, risking their lives?”

“Shoot, I knew about that—”

Gasps rose from the crowd

Erich spun, his hands rising up in defense. “No wait, I knew because I was called to help.” He turned back to face Jacinda, shaking his head. “I didn’t know I had to report everything to you, and as for the rest of the question, I’ve been trying to figure out what’s going on—”

“Liar!” The cry rang out as the speaker rushed into the room. Sarya rose from her seat as Cassandra drew closer, her green skin mottled with rage. “You killed my sister, and I’ll kill you.” The branch the dryad raised into the air was carved to a sharp edge, and as she flew at Erich the blade flashed menacingly. Sarya screamed, and the room filled with noise and confusion as Erich snatched at the dryad, grasping her wrist and holding the blade away from his throat with great effort.

“Enough!” Jacinda’s shout cut through the chaos and everyone in the room froze, immobilized by the fairy ruler’s magic. “I called this court to follow procedure, but it seems you’ve all forgotten that while we live in a special town, we still know how to behave like civilized beings. Sit. All of you.”

Jacinda fluttered over the top of the desk and approached the frozen tableau of Erich and Cassandra tangled in their macabre pose. “I think this situation raises more questions than it answers.” She tapped Cassandra on the shoulder and the dryad squeaked in pain and anger as a glowing green mist surrounded her. “Sit, there.” Jacinda pointed and the woman reluctantly moved aside, tossing wounded glances at Erich and dirty looks in Sarya’s direction.

Erich’s eyes moved, but nothing else. The fairy shook her head and tapped him with her wand. Erich straightened slowly and then stood, head high, arms folded before him.

“Jacinda, I can honestly say I have no idea in hell what you’ve accused me of. I only know about the dryad because I saved her life the other day. She’d been cut off at the base and I wore myself out silly getting her to survive. The construction? Well now, there I am guilty of one thing. I’m guilty of trying to solve the mystery without bothering you. It was wrong to try and impress you with a solution when I wasn’t even sure what the problem was, but being new to town, well, I guess I wanted to show that your faith in me wasn’t misplaced. But that’s all I know. So if you’ve got any other proof you need to

show, I'd be obliged if you bring it out, since it seems I stand accused and face a death penalty. And I'd sure love to be able to face my accuser, since the no good son of a bitch needs to be punished for their lying ways."

Sarya gasped in horror, and Erich's eyes turned to her, disbelief spreading across his face. "Sarya? You?" The pain in his voice tore a strip from her heart. His expression hardened as she watched. It was like the love inside him poured out, disappearing into the air and leaving him empty.

"Now hold everything, let's wait and get this straightened out." Jacinda rapped Erich on the head with her wand, and he swore. "That's for not being smart enough to know you share when there's a mystery that needs more than one person to solve it. Don't try to impress me, just do your job."

She fluttered close and kissed his cheek, and the room murmured again, this time with giggles and coos of excitement. "And that's for saving the life of a friend. Charges dismissed. Erich is innocent of wrongdoing."

Erich leaned back, and Sarya collapsed into her chair. He wasn't guilty. The block of ice around her heart melted a little until she remembered the expression in his eyes when he'd thought she'd betrayed him.

"So now what? We still don't know who is involved in the development." Erich pointed at Cassandra. "Although I have my suspicions she could answer a few questions if we tried."

Jacinda raised a brow. "I agree. I'm going to deal with this one in private, I think." She turned to the crowds and fluttered her fingers in their direction. "Go away. Nothing more to see..."

Sarya rose to go to Erich's side, fighting the crowds to reach him.

The back doors of the room opened and a shrieking dryad streamed down the aisle. "Erich the Mighty, we need you. Help us, they are cutting us down. They are pushing us over. Erich—"

The dryad collapsed to the floor at his feet, changing into a pile of dry leaves that instantly crumbled to dust.

"Someone cut down her tree." Jacinda grabbed Sarya by the shoulders and turned her to face Erich. "Take him to the edge of the forest and start to deal with the situation. We'll join you when we can."

"Jacinda—" Erich protested, but the fairy was already winging back across the room.

"Do it, Erich. You and Sarya are the only ones who can stop this. You can trust her, you need to trust her. I'll go and get the rest of the crew together and join you as soon as possible."

Sarya looked up into his eyes. The eyes that had been so full of love this morning, now staring down at her, empty and dark. "Erich, I didn't—"

"Not now. We've got to go." He grabbed her by the hand and pulled her from the hall into the open. When he turned to face her, his chest heaving with an enormous sigh, she gave a little gasp of sorrow. It was like he'd shut himself off from her completely. "I don't know why you did it, but Jacinda said to trust you and go fight, so I will. But that's all I can do right now."

Sarya nodded as her wings unfurled. She couldn't imagine how she was going to fly with such a heavy heart, but somehow she'd prove to him she really did love him. Somehow, she had to get him to forgive her. He stepped into her arms, and she held him

close, the stiffness in his body breaking her heart as she soared up into the sky toward the coming battle.

## Chapter Ten

Erich's heart broke with every beat of her wings, every breath she took and every tear that streamed down her face and soaked his shirt. He hardened himself against her show of emotion. Not minutes ago she was ready to see him hang and suddenly she had an aching heart and womanly emotions, blubbering against him.

No, he couldn't let her get to him. Not again. Not ever again. Besides, they had a battle ahead of them and he couldn't afford to let emotion get in the way of the fight looming. He'd have to be on his toes to deal with the heartless humans, because it had to be humans cutting down such peaceful folk.

Sarya dropped them in a clearing—her clearing. Their clearing. In defense, he turned from her the moment his boots touched earth.

"Erich, I—"

"Save it." He cut her off, not willing, not wanting, to listen just yet. If ever.

He didn't have time for tears any longer. He could hear the pain and anguish around him, surrounding him, burrowing into his skin like a thousand needles and pouring into his soul like hot lava. He dropped to his knees, digging his hands into the dirt beneath his fingers and he cringed at the added level of hurt that coursed through him from head to toe.

"Eri—" Sarya's fingers brushed his back, and another wave of pain ripped through him as if her fingers were knives themselves.

"Damn it, Sarya. Just leave it." He growled low in his throat, beating back the hurt that built again in the earth. Releasing the ground, he rested his hands on his knees, his breath coming in great gasps, chest heaving and lungs aching with each attempt at breathing. Those needles that'd been tearing up his skin were now embedding themselves in his lungs, beating him up something fierce.

Erich rolled to his feet, his breath still barely coming no matter how much his body needed it. He reached for one boot, tugging it off, and then the other. Sarya stood to the side, her fingers woven together in front of her, her wings wrapped around her shoulders like a protective sheath, a mask of pain and sadness still marring her face. Emotions he didn't quite have time for, not with all the dustup going on.

"They're to the west—most of the trouble anyway. We've got to go west and settle things before heading back east. East is fine for now. They're just spraying and tagging. West is the pain, the hurting." Weary from everything he'd already experienced, he turned away from his former lover and began trekking across the ground, his boots left to sit in the middle of the clearing—with his heart.

"Erich?"

With pain lacing through him, the dryads and the living things of the forest calling him west, he turned to Sarya, the pain of her betrayal all but forgotten. "I can't fly with you, Sarya. Not again. I'll walk and heal what I can while I make my way toward the hurting."

She ducked her head quickly, hiding her face from him. "I-I'll fly ahead. See what I can do without hurting too much."

He nodded, a quick jerk of his head. He heard rather than saw the flutter, the quick

beating of her wings as he felt a gust of air at his back, her scent surrounding him a split second before the forest engulfed him with the flavors of aching and breaking and hurt.

Erich steeled himself for what was to come and followed the trail of destruction. Small trees lay toppled and broken, baby dryads crying and screaming for their mammas that weren't there anymore. Animals scurried away from the destruction headed toward him.

He brushed his fingers across the babes' leaves, offering them comfort, quieting them and whispering soothing words as he trudged toward what would surely be a battle. The trees weren't fighters but lovers of the earth. Many of the townsfolk held destructive powers, and it'd come down to him and Sarya that could do some damage yet heal what they broke when all was said and done. Oh, he imagined there'd be a garden witch or two that'd come and help when things had calmed, but he also figured an earthquake was getting ready to rock the hollow like never before. He planned to be at the center.

Coming over the next rise, his fingers brushing yet another tree, dryad free, as he walked by, he spotted the devastation and destruction he'd been feeling since he'd entered the woods.

Large Caterpillar machines littered a newly created clearing. Men with axes were hacking at the ground, and even more men with chainsaws were cutting the trees marred with orange paint and damning ties. He wasn't quite close enough. A fluttering behind him alerted him to Sarya's presence.

"I tried with a dust storm, but the trees... They're hurting so bad, Erich, I thought I'd do more harm than good. I'm not earthen, but I *heard* them. I swear I did."

He nodded. Yeah, he'd been hearing them too, and not just in his head either.

"They're all hurting. Fire will—"

"Fire will ignite the trucks. We can't put out a gas fire, not even together."

He rubbed his temples, the pain of the forest throbbing in his mind. "No help for it then."

Erich wove his way down the hill, traipsing over fallen trees and debris as he soothed the dying flora as best he could. The dryad trees, well, wasn't much he could do for them at the moment. He'd been lucky to save the one he had the other day by getting there so quickly. These others? They'd been gone long before he'd even been alerted to the impending fight.

He hid behind a Caterpillar bucket truck and watched the scurrying humans as they did their deathly deeds. He wanted to destroy them all—pull them to the ground and destroy them one by one.

He stood next to the truck, confident in his hiding place, and summoned the earth coursing through his veins. Summoned the strength and the destroying abilities that lived with him—summoned it all. Within heartbeats, the ground shuddered beneath him. With the next breath, it groaned and shook, a breeze ruffled his hair and the fury of the earth swam through him. Shaking and rumbling, cracking and crumbling the ground beneath the humans' feet, it created great chasms he hoped would engulf some of the machinery whole.

The only side effect of releasing the emotion was that some of the trees and brush suffered his anger, his hate and his pain. But he could fix it. Would fix it when it was all over. He just had to destroy enough...

Shrieks of fear and fight or flight responses surrounded him, growing louder and

louder with each passing second until all he heard was the pain of men and the hurting of the earthen creatures caught in his turmoil.

“Hey! You!” The distinct cocking of a gun rang over the sounds surrounding him, drawing his attention away from the battle raging within him, around him and beneath him. “Stop it.” The voice sounded again. Erich kept his eyes closed, unwilling to see the man he was most assuredly going to kill. “It’s you. She showed us—it’s you, the fire / earth guy. I didn’t believe her, but it’s you and you’re doing this and you’d better stop or I’ll-I’ll...”

Erich opened his eyes and stared down the barrel of a gun held by a man standing mere feet from him, a crazed look of fear and anger warring on his visage. “You’ll what?” Erich took a step toward the coward who had killed so many. Erich would go down, but he’d go down fighting. The earth still rumbled beneath his feet, reminding him, comforting him and pushing him onward. “You’ll what?”

“I—I’ll shoot.”

“I won’t stop. *We* won’t stop.”

Others from Strange Hollow piled into the clearing, walking on still trembling legs, but walking toward the men all the same, brandishing homemade weapons. Determination written across their faces.

The man’s hand shook, almost as much as the ground beneath his feet, and Erich knew any second now he’d be facing a bullet and damned if he didn’t care. Not much of anything to live for any longer anyway. He watched in slow motion as the man’s finger tightened on the trigger, watched as the sweat on his face beaded and slithered down his face, watched as...

“Sarya! No!”

\*

She thought it would hurt. Guessed it would be painful. But what was pain when she was already dead? When there was nothing left for her to live for if Erich would not be in her life?

She’d watched the scene play out below her as she hovered in the air, the need to help growing, but her sense of hopelessness growing even faster. There were too many humans running to and fro as the ground shifted and moved beneath their feet. Erich’s strength over the earth amazed her, and another streak of guilt assaulted her as she realized all the confusion and misunderstanding between them could have been avoided if she’d just waited and spoken to him before making assumptions and accusations.

When she saw the human pull out the gun, her throat closed with fear. Suddenly a clear vision of what she needed to do appeared—the only thing that could be done. Like a picture perfect painting showing the way, she hadn’t hesitated, but folded her wings and plummeted to the ground. Flung herself in front of her beloved and spun to face the assault.

The bullet ripped through her chest, tearing her flesh and burning a hole through her life. With one last effort she threw out a hand to the man and hurled heat from her fingertips toward the gun, enveloping it with flames. The stock turned white-hot and he cried out in agony, his palm seared and bubbling where the skin had contact with the metal.

Time stood still.

There was a hazy blue light behind her eyelids and she struggled to see around it.

“Sarya. Baby. Don’t move.” Erich’s voice came from a long way away and she fought to follow him.

The sounds of the battle rang in her ears and she clutched at his hand. “Take my fire...”

She poured out everything in her heart, passing through her fingers the vital part of her soul into his keeping—the magic within her that made her who she was. Part air Fae, part the unusual and twisted offering of fire. Without thinking about it she passed the rest as well. Anything she could give him to win this battle, to save him from injury ... she’d willingly give it all.

The love she had for the earth, the way she loved to dance in the morning light and share the joy of creation with the wilderness—she gave it to him. She shared her love for Erich and all the multi-colored facets that entailed. The deep regret she bore because of not thinking through her actions when she found the damning information. The overwhelming joy she’d felt in his arms time and again. Not just their lovemaking, but their laughter and playfulness. The jokes and the teasing, and especially the peaceful moments between sleep and wakefulness that made her life complete.

Her bones felt like limp noodles, strength passing out of her, and she smiled up into his beautiful face. “I love you.” A whisper was all she could muster.

Something wet hit her cheek and then another. “Darlin’, you’re not leaving me. You’re going to be fine and you need to come back to me.”

Why would he want her back? He hated her. The noise in the background faded. Was her hearing going, or was it that there was nothing more to hear?

“I love you, Sarya. Come back. You need to come back to me, woman. I need to be taking you for long walks in the forest and to look out over the whole wide world from the watchtower together. I want to hold your sweet body tight up against me and never let you go.”

There was a loud pop in the background and a sudden flush of heat rolled over her. She felt Erich’s arms tighten around her and the sensation of being lifted into the air. “I love you, Sarya,” he said again.

“But, you thought, I...” The heat disappeared and so did the thought. What had he said? There was a coal burning on her chest and she wiggled to try and displace it.

“Don’t move, my beautiful Sarya.” Another burst of static reached her ears. “If you heard that, don’t worry, it’s the Caterpillars. They’re burning nicely, and there’s a pretty red glow over the skyline.”

“Burning?” The coal sank deeper into her body and she hissed in pain.

“It’s okay. The water Fae have arrived. They’re guarding the tree line. And the dragons showed up, the one who breathes water and the regular flamethrowers with buckets from the river.”

His voice eased the throbbing. The brush of his lips against her cheek—did she imagine that? The blueness rolled again and she felt weightless.

“Jacinda, you need to help me.”

*Why did he sound so sad?*

“You sure about this, Erich? There’s no going back, you know.” The question in Jacinda’s tone sounded like she was scared. Sarya wanted to tell Erich that whatever it was he asked for couldn’t possibly be worth it. When the head fairy of Strange Hollow grew frightened, you shouldn’t mess around.

“You said it’s the only way. I want to, I really do.”

“I need to hear it from your lips, Erich Fierland.”

“Heal her, Jacinda. Heal her and make her mine. I love her.”

*He loved her?* Blessed warmth spread through her body, driving away the pins and needles that blossomed from her chest to her shoulder. A clear bell sounded in her ears, and suddenly Erich’s low chuckle filled her head. She opened her eyes and looked up into his face. There was no condemnation in the dark depths, nothing there but brightness. Nothing but ... love? She sat up gingerly, expecting pain to sweep over her, and swore. “Blessed mother fire, where are we?”

There were no burning Caterpillars, no ravished trees. The sky overhead was bright blue of the morning, not the gray clouds that had marred the afternoon sky during their fight. A butterfly floated past and she held out a hand, amazed to feel no complaint from her body as she moved. Flowers filled the meadow and she breathed in deeply, their sweet fragrance adding to the beauty of the place.

She had to be dead. It was the only solution she could imagine.

Erich twisted her in his arms, and she settled against his chest, resting her ear so she could listen to the firm beat of his heart. He stroked her hair slowly, and she sighed with contentment.

“Heaven is a wonderful place.”



## Chapter Eleven

“Damn it, woman! Sit your ass down before I paddle it so hard you won’t be able to sit for a *week*! You were just shot two weeks ago and you need to *rest*.” Erich growled and scooped her into his arms, plopping down onto the recliner and settling her in his lap.

“Promises, promises...” Sarya giggled, stroking and petting his chest. “Come on, love...”

She called him love, and damn but he never got tired of hearing it. “Say it again...” He brushed his lips across hers, savoring her vanilla taste, deepening the kiss until their tongues brushed, sending a burst of arousal down his spine.

“Love,” she whispered against his lips.

“Almost lost this.” He stroked her back, paying special attention to her wing slits, stroking the ridged skin, enjoying the shudders that tingled down her spine, absorbing the tiny uncontrollable movements.

“But didn’t.” She twined her arms around his neck and he nuzzled hers.

“I’d kill her if I could.”

She popped him on the back of his head. Saucy. “No talk of killing when you’re getting me all worked up and hot.”

He scraped his teeth across her skin, his cock throbbing with the moan he elicited from her throat. “Love you. I almost lost the woman I *love* because Cassandra was jealous. And I’m allowed to want to kill the person who caused all that mess—almost destroyed us and almost killed you.”

He petted her slits once again, his fingers dancing over the skin, relishing the push he felt against his fingertips, letting him know just how much he affected her.

Sarya ran her fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp. “But she didn’t. I’m here, we’re here and you saved the day. In more ways than one.” She buried her face against his neck, and he felt the hot splash of tears against his skin.

“Sarya, baby, are you upset about ... *you know*.” He couldn’t bring himself to say it out loud. They hadn’t talked about it, hadn’t discussed the events amidst the battle with fire burning bright, the ground shaking and wind whipping around them. Hadn’t talked about what the Fae royalty, one of the only Fae in existence who could perform such a task, had done for them. They hadn’t talked at all. Oh, they’d expressed their love as she’d recovered, but they hadn’t *talked*. Seemed now was as good a time as any. At least, before other things distracted them. She paused a moment, and he pulled her face away from the crook of his neck, urging her chin up with a single finger and brushing away the new tears with his thumb. “Baby?”

“No, but what about you? Do you regret it? Just because I was dying, I trapped—” She sniffled, sobbed and then buried her face against his chest, hiding from him once again.

Damn it. Cowboys weren’t meant to share feelings with talk but with action, and he didn’t know what the hell to do now. “Aw, shit.”

Sarya pushed away from him as if to rise, and he held her fast. “Erich...”

“Sit your ass down like I told you or I really will paddle it, baby.”

She glared at him. From crying to glaring in a split second. Damn, but he loved her.

“I don’t regret it for a moment. Jacinda joining us like that, making us share parts of our souls and everything that made us individuals. It felt like coming home after searching for something my entire life. Sarya, I *love* you.” Tears sprung to her eyes anew. “Aw, baby, don’t cry. Do you regret...” He couldn’t bring himself to finish it, to speak it aloud.

“Never.” Her declaration was instant and fierce; her eyes burned bright, the ground shook beneath them and air swirled around.

“Baby, we really should be having this conversation in the tower if you’re going to go all rumbly on me.” He kissed the tip of her nose, enjoying the blush that blossomed all over her face.

“Oh!” She punched him in the chest, and he raised a single brow. “I hate I’ve got something new that I can’t control. How you don’t cause an earthquake every time you get frustrated is beyond me.”

Smiling, he repositioned her, forcing her to straddle him, bringing their bodies closer. He gripped her hips, relishing the fullness of them even after her body had spent so much time healing.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m having trouble getting the hang of the flying thing. Air is a mite tricky to control if you hadn’t noticed, and it’s not like I had much control over my fire to begin with. Add air into the mix and I’m a moving, shaking, great ball of fire.” He winked at her, bringing their lips together in a sweet, sensual kiss. Their tongues twined in a leisurely swirl, exploring and tasting and loving without working to arouse. This was a gentle reconnection after the stress of the last few weeks. Her wound had completely healed, their powers exchanged, and now talking things out a bit opened the door to further exploration and discovery. “Love you, baby,” he murmured against her lips. “Love you more than the fire I wield, the ground that supports me and the air I breathe.”

She moaned and melted against him, all curves and love and sweetness and light. “Love you too, Erich. So much. Almost lost you...”

“Me? Nah. I’m a tough old horse.”

She snorted and somehow made it look adorable. “You’re hung like one.”

“Minx.”

“Your minx.”

He pulled her into another embrace, their lips brushing, breath pushing and pulling between them. “Mine. All mine.”

“Then make me yours.”

They hadn’t made love since the battle, since they’d exchanged so much and gained everything. Now seemed to be the right time ... he just had to get them to the right place.

Well, no time like the present to work on those new flying skills.

\*

She couldn’t stop the laughter bubbling up from within. With their fingers linked tightly together, she guided Erich through the trees, his wobbly flight path amusing her and his constant stream of comments and curses filling her with delight.

“Landsakes, woman, slow down. You’re like the Mario Andretti of the air Fae. Slow down, I said. Watch out for the limb on the right. Shit—”

His grip tightened and her fingers threatened to go numb, so she relented and eased off a little on the speed. He’d refused to tell her where he wanted to go, but after the first few minutes she’d suspected she knew. Their clearing.

All the members of Strange Hollow with any kind of healing gifts had chipped in to work their magic throughout the forest. The grass and flowers had grown up fresh and new, like it was spring instead of full summer. The trees that had been murdered were laid to rest, and the little ones with some tendering were surviving and growing again.

They touched down to the grass, her lightly, him with a tiny stumble and a roll so he ended up kneeling at her feet. She smiled down at him, brushing her fingers through his hair. The air was sweet around them, the recent painful memories of the location being erased as he leaned over and kissed her belly, his hands clasping her hips to hold her in place. Hmm, more than forgetting he made her think of new things she wanted to do here in the pristine meadow with new life surrounding them.

Erich kissed her gently, leaning his forehead onto hers as he took deep breaths, and she laughed again. It was good to be alive. "What are you doing, silly?"

"I'm memorizing your smell."

"Then I'm glad I took a shower this morning." He pinched her butt and she squealed. "Erich!"

He tugged at her skirt until it slipped past her hips, her panties following in the next instant. His tongue bathed her skin, tracing small circles over her hipbones, across her belly. She furled her wings to shed her tunic, baring her torso to the bright afternoon sunshine. His eyes darkened as he glanced past her breasts to peer into her eyes.

"Love ya," he whispered to her. "Love every inch of ya." His gaze dropped, caressing her breasts, over her belly and back to her sex where she ached with a hard and constant need for him. He leaned in and nudged her curls with his nose, bumping her clit, and a soft moan escaped her lips. "Love the way you look, the way you sound. The way you taste." He opened her to his gaze, pressing the curls on her mound apart and touching the tip of his tongue to her sex.

Barely there. Just a brush, fleeting and oh-so-good. Her legs trembled and he grasped her hips again before he licked the entire length of her slit.

"Oh, sweet air and wind." Sarya closed her eyes and opened her legs wider, needing everything he wanted to give.

He dove in, his tongue flicking and dancing against her sensitive skin. He stroked her labia, inched into her sex, then circled and teased her clit. Her heartbeat throbbed throughout her entire body and she shuddered on the edge of release. It had been so long since they'd touched, since they'd loved.

Erich slipped a finger into her heat and stroked, and that simple touch was enough to send her over the edge. Her climax rolled along her nerve endings, tender and deliberate at the same time. Like the brush of wind that carries a seed to a new place, starting the journey of life all over again.

She was ready to start again. With him, together. Sarya opened her eyes, smiling at her lover as he rose up and stripped off his own garments, tossing them to the ground before he picked her up and spun her in a circle. "Erich!"

He laughed out loud, the joy in his voice echoing off the trees around them. Skin to skin, nose to nose, he slowed and kissed her tenderly. She hung suspended above the ground, the hard length of his erection nudging her belly, wetness painting her skin. He jostled her upward a couple of inches and wrapped her limbs around his hips, and she drew in a sudden breath as his cock nudged her sex.

He kissed her, rocking into her body an inch at a time. Deliberately stretching her

wide on his shaft and pressing her apart until there was nothing between them. He sank to his knees and settled even deeper, filling her body. Filling her soul. "I love you inside and out." The acknowledgement made her heart sing.

"I love you too, Erich Fierling."

They moved together, the fresh air sliding past their skin. She rose over his shaft, letting herself drop back down, sinking deep and fast. He held her hips, helping her stay in tempo, tilting his pelvis just right so he somehow touched that spot deep inside that made butterflies inch up her spine. Tightness grew again, her limbs heavy with need. And when he snuck a hand between their bodies and pressed against her clit in time with his thrusts, she climaxed. She squeezed his cock, felt him tremble as he rocked into her, and then he came too, crying her name out to the sky as his body remained joined with hers.

They stayed there, arms embracing, bodies tangled, until the breezes picked up and cooled them.

She kissed his cheek, his nose, his chin. Sarya snuggled tight against his chest, and he sucked in a quick breath. "You're gonna get me all riled up again if you don't stop that."

She leaned back and stared up at him in confusion. "Stop what?"

"That." He wiggled and she wondered for a second what was going on. Her hands rested lightly on his back, the strong muscles of his torso under her fingertips. She stroked him subconsciously and he squirmed again. "Sarya, you're driving me crazy."

It couldn't be. She reached around him a little further, pressing her palms to his shoulder blades and then exploring the skin between. There. Where they had never been before she felt slim ridges twice the length of her hand. She brushed the length of the bulge and he groaned aloud, his cock jerking between them. "Sweet mother fire, whatever you're doing, don't stop. I've never felt such a thing in my life."

Sarya wiggled free from his grasp, and he whimpered at the loss. "Hush, darling, just wait." She peeked at his back to check her suspicions. There, clearly visible, were two wing slits. Whatever magic had been shared between them, he was changed more than they'd expected. Sudden and complete joy filled her and she spread her arms to the side and twirled, her feet leaving the ground.

"Baby? What's up?" The laughter in his voice made her flit back to drop a kiss to his lips before dancing away, the story needing to be told the best way she knew how.

As she danced, naked and unashamed before him, she considered the best way to break the news he was going to *really* be able to fly. She gave thanks for the blessing of him in her life. Here, where the circle of life began and ended. Here, where they'd go forward to face the changes and challenges love brought to them.

She danced.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Vivian was playing hooky the day they taught about the importance of getting a "real" job; she was hiding out at the local library rereading everything for the fifth time. Since then she's become a Jack-of-all-trades with a job-experience list only slightly

smaller than the average phone book.

She's hiked, biked, canoed, kayaked and camped throughout Canada, Europe and the States, including Hawaii and Alaska. All these adventures have now become settings for her overactive muse to wander.

Vivian lives in Western Canada with her longtime sweetie, two wonderful kids and a dog that looks like a stuffed toy.

\*

Celia would have loved to have written her own biography, but she just didn't know what to say. In a fit of desperation, she turned to me, her most trusted confidant and friend. I realize you're asking yourself, "Who is this?" I am Cali, her cat. I also go by a few other names, but those may be too strong for your delicate ears. Suffice it to say my mommy is very creative and not just with writing.

My mommy, Celia, began writing in August of 2006. I know this because it was around that time our meals started coming later and later in the day. As months passed, she spent more and more time in front of the boring screen. Though it was fun to chase the little arrow around every once in a while. You should hear her scream! But I digress.

She's worked hard to give readers sexy, quirky heroines they can relate to. And you better damn well appreciate it. All I got was late night feedings. And I didn't even make it into one of her books by name! That damn kitten, Katie O'Meghan, did. Bitch.

Well, enjoy her writings and if you want to praise her for her work... don't. I'd like to get fed at some point, people.

Fine. If you must contact her, her website is at [www.celiakyle.com](http://www.celiakyle.com) or you can send an email to [celia.kyle @ gmail.com](mailto:celia.kyle@gmail.com). But when I go hungry, I'll blame you all!

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