

Would you like to play a game?

Shifting Reality, Book 2

Saint is half human, half demon...all trouble. With his roommate Thomas mated to Margo, and Mac on one of those long, lonely, feeling-eternally-sorry-for-yourself vampire vacations, Saint is on his own and restless.

A lovesick shifter's request to locate a woman isn't exactly his idea of fun—he's no matchmaker—but he agrees. And finds not only his quarry, but a whole lot more than he bargained for: a top player in his own online game that, until now, has somehow escaped his notice. A woman so tempting that when she touches the keyboard with her fingertips, he can feel it right down to his bones.

Housebound for the last few years due to an accident, Ume's only distraction from the endless physical therapy sessions has been an online role-playing game. When she logs in this time, though, something is different. She finds herself lost in the game—literally—and falling for a mysterious warrior on her way to face the Demon King in his lair.

And that's before it gets weird.

Warning: Explicit sex. One sexy, smart-mouthed demon, an adventure game, and more than a touch of kink. Sex online and then sex ONLINE. Spanking, silk ropes, a blindfold, one wild threesome between a Mystic, a Warrior and a *Kitsune*...and every online gamer's dream come true.

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My Demon Saint

R. G. Alexander

Dedication

For Cookie—Love is the reason. And to Beth, who always inspires me. To my Divas and Smutketeers, who keep me motivated even when I don't want to be. And for the readers who wanted Saint's story, this is all because of you. Thank you.

Chapter One

Boredom was a worm burrowing in his head, playing Perry Como's greatest hits as it went. Or was that Hell? Saint would have to ask next time he ran into the sperm-donating incubus he liked to call Dad.

The penthouse apartment that had been his haven until now was mocking him with a silence that jarred his spine and set his teeth on edge. No thoughts but his own. No company but his own. As scintillating a conversationalist as he could be, it was saying something that he was at loose ends. But there it was.

It had been like this ever since Thomas had moved into Margo's place. It seemed he was trying to set new records for how many times a cat shifter could claim his mate without coming up for air. And Mac? He'd made a sudden decision to go on one of his I-live-for-eternity-and-I'm-so-alone walkabouts to God knew where before he had to deal with the repercussions of his decision.

The film. He still couldn't believe Mac had agreed to do it. It was his gift to Thomas and Margo, he knew. But Saint had to wonder about the fallout for Mac with the elder vampires. No one loved to keep a secret more than an old, thin-skinned blood sucker.

Saint sighed. Putting off Margo's boss, the conniving Darcy Finch, and the producers who wanted to start filming *Shifting Reality: The Movie* had been easy. He was good at manipulating people. Especially greedy people. But without any new distractions, he was having a harder time restraining his dark side, the part that was restless. The part that wanted to create the kind of havoc his human mother had spent her short, harried life trying to keep him from.

He walked to the windows, looking down at the city below. Hollywood. A demon could get into an endless amount of mischief in this town. Even a half demon. A man with his talents could own it all.

But then, that sounded boring too. He chuckled. His desires didn't lean toward consumption, just the occasional chaos. It was a craving usually satisfied by the RPG game he'd created, *Demon Saint*. Thousands of minds connecting him to what it meant to be human, even as they chose avatars that were anything but. His creation had taken on a life of its own, but it was a life he had total access to, and total control over. It was where he got to play.

If only it were still enough.

He should go search out Mac and find a way to fuck with him, the same way he'd messed with Thomas. Of course, it might turn out the same way too, with Mac finding a woman to do more than nibble on. Then neither of them would have any time for their roommate. And there would be no one to keep Saint out of the dark.

Despite that possibility, Saint wasn't sorry. Not that he'd gotten Thomas hooked on vlogging, not that his roommate had decided to tell the world about himself, about shifters and vampires and demons through the online weblog, *Shifting Reality*. Damn fools thought it was a show. An act. The same way they thought his game was just a game, instead of a piece of him.

His own global therapy session. That fact tickled him to no end.

His online world was, for the most part, a recreation of one of the darker times of his life, when he was flung from his normal existence and tossed into a testing ground where time and space kept changing, and only sin remained. Demon trials. He supposed it was an evil version of finishing school. And it had *not* been pleasant. Luckily the humans couldn't seem to get enough. And through their experiences, he'd made a modicum of peace with it as well...with a little help.

If he hadn't come across Mac, how long had it been, a hundred years ago?—then he may have been lost to temptation. It was Mac who showed him he didn't have to fall prey to either side of his family tree. He had a choice. He could take his own path.

And then, much later, Thomas had come along and the two roommates had given Saint a feeling of family he'd never had before. He owed them. Which was why he'd helped Thomas with Margo. She was one classy number, perfect for his cat-shifting friend.

Hell, between the three of their sorry, supernatural asses, one of them deserved to be loved. The errant thought made him gag. He *wasn't* a romantic. He was the devil's imp. He needed to do something bad to make himself feel better.

He heard the floor creak and smiled. An opportunity. "For a wolf you're acting a lot like a nervous Chihuahua, Liam. I was wondering if you were going to chase your tail in the lobby all night."

When no quick response was forthcoming, Saint turned around and grimaced. Liam wasn't holding up that well. "I heard it was worse for canine shifters, but I had no idea. You've got it bad, don't you, puppy?"

Liam bared his teeth, but Saint knew it was more frustration than threat. He could sense the repressed desires inside him. And he knew exactly what the shifter wanted.

Julie Wu.

She'd been a contestant on *Shifting Reality*'s big finale, brought to the castle in Scotland to meet the "cast" along with Margo and a few other fanatical humans. Liam had agreed to play cameraman, but as soon as he'd seen the petite Asian beauty he'd been worthless. Apparently he still was.

Liam nodded, his jaw clenching. "I need your brand of help, Saint."

Saint raised an eyebrow, inwardly baffled. "My brand of help? Why don't you sniff her out with your super snout? Or look in Thomas's computer. He has all the personal info and addresses of the contestants.

Better yet—" he smirked, "—read one of her dirty books. That might give you a little insight into how to sweep gun-shy Julie off her feet."

Liam started to pace—his large, muscled body rippling with repressed power. "I can't. She's so fucking small, so fragile, and I don't trust myself. I just need to know where she is right now, if she's okay. What, or *if*, she thinks about me. Please, Saint. You did it for Thomas. And I'll owe you one."

Saint sighed. "Matchmaking? Well, it is something to do. Not the something I wanted of course. And you *will* owe me. I'm not a damned Cupid. Those morons act like they have velvet-tipped arrows up their tutus."

Even as he said it he reached into the pocket of his jacket for the Blackberry, his fingers caressing the screen and connecting. This was his gift. All demons could read inner desires, and there were a few species he could sense that traveled the spidery trail the way he did, but he liked to think no one did it better.

He could connect to any technology, move through the numbers and codes and find whatever and whomever he wanted in a heartbeat. The rush of it was exhilarating. When he was connected, there was nothing he couldn't do.

"She's in San Francisco. She purchased groceries about an hour ago, her cell GPS had her on the move, not toward home, somewhere else." Saint chuckled. "On a side note, if her recent online purchases are anything to go by, you'll have your hands full when you finally do get up the nerve to find her."

Liam moved closer. "Why? What do you see?"

"Toys. She's purchased a lot of sex toys in the last month, no handcuffs or cock rings though, so I think its all for...personal use. As in solo. Or research. But man, that one personal massager is hu—"

"You said groceries? But she didn't take them home?" The wolf shifter interrupted him, frazzled and flushed, and Saint knew he needed to stop torturing the poor dog before he lost all his control.

"Chill out. Give me a minute. She just linked her cell to someone else's computer. Downloading pictures." Saint snorted. "Why do people always think babies are cute? Nothing but baldheaded monsters without teeth that spit foul acid from every orifice. Not my idea of cuddly." He tensed. "Wait a second. I can see them."

"Them?"

Them. Two women, their foreheads bumping together as they laughed and oohed and aahed over the images appearing on the laptop screen. Julie Wu was there, smiling easily, her mind pushing aside its usual turmoil and insecurity for this one special moment with family. Her family. Her cousin Ume.

Ume, the woman beside her with the big, dark, bottomless eyes and exquisite features. Her fingertips slid over the pad, moving the cursor, and Saint swore he could feel the touch to his cock.

"Fuck."

Liam growled. "What? Who's with her? Is someone hurting her? Tell me."

Saint couldn't speak. He had connected. This was *her* computer. Her life. And he was being inundated with information. Ume, who lived alone. Ume who was a half-breed, like him. Born to a Chinese father and Japanese mother.

In a flash he knew where she went to school, that her inheritance from her mother's side ensured she would never have to work, but she always had anyway. She'd even started several charities and relief funds in her deceased mother's name.

Before the accident. An accident followed by a slew of painful surgeries. Saint had a sudden, uncontrollable desire to kill everyone who'd caused her pain. The man who'd been driving drunk. The surgeon who had operated. Everyone. To torture them slowly until they screamed and begged for mercy. Begged for death.

Damn, he could feel her fingertips again. They soothed him. Aroused him. Made him crazy. He scrolled through pictures of her. She loved to dance. She climbed mountains. She surfed. She was taller than her cousins, her body lean and muscled, her skin golden. Her lips were full and always smiling. Or they had been.

There was something about her. In her eyes. Something...special.

A frenzied growl brought him back to himself, reminding him he wasn't alone. He broke the connection, instantly feeling the loss. What the hell was going on?

Liam was shifting, changing into his beast. Shit. Saint held up his hand and sent a wave of seductive serenity, pulling the wolf back from the brink. "Julie isn't hurt, big guy. And she's not with a lover. She's visiting her cousin. Relax."

The larger man took deep breaths, reining his animal in once more, then met Saint's gaze. "If nothing is wrong, why did your eyes turn red?"

They had? He knew it was true. Could feel the restlessness in him now focused, homing in on its prey. Poor little prey.

Saint smiled. "I'm going to help you, my shaggy friend. Help you control yourself. Be your Cyrano. The voice in your head that knows all the right words to say."

Liam's expression was a humorous mix of hopeful and wary. "Why? What do you want in return?"

He shrugged. "Can't a demon do something selfless? Out of the goodness of his heart?"

"Not usually."

"Do you care?" Saint stalked toward the shifter, his voice lowering hypnotically. "Does it matter what price is paid to win the heart of your mate? And she is your mate, Liam. You know it. I know it. What wouldn't you do to make her yours?"

Saint knew the instant he'd won him over. Liam would do exactly what he said. Shifters were decidedly passionate about their mating habits. A trait that made him malleable to the whims of a hungry

demon. He wasn't sure who this Ume was, or why he was so drawn to her, but he would figure her out soon enough.

It was time to play.

"I can't believe James and Cindy are pregnant again. Jinny is only one year old. Are they trying to start a baseball team?"

Ume heard Julie snort from the kitchen where she was making tea. "It does look like that doesn't it? Still, if I'm going to be a spinster aunt, my brother and his wife have made sure I'll have enough nieces and nephews to distract me in my old age."

"Jules, all the children your brothers and sisters keep having aren't a distraction. They're an army."

The Wu clan had always been known for having large families. Julie was one of seven children, and her father and Ume's had been a set of twins, the oldest of nine children themselves. Ume was the only one her parents had had. Though since her father had moved back to China and remarried, he'd given her four half brothers.

Not that she heard from him much. She supposed it was because she reminded him of her mother, his Japanese-American bride. The one who'd made him a young widower by dying of a brain aneurysm a few days before Ume's sixteenth birthday.

She looked over at Julie from the daybed she was confined to, as usual. At least he'd left her with family. Her cousins, especially Julie, had been her angels. They treated her like another sibling, teasing and harassing her and becoming completely tangled in her life. She loved it. She loved them.

But she hated being a burden.

Three years of this. Three years of being waited on. Of looking up at people from hospital beds and couches. No dancing, no running. Just resting and physical therapy. It was enough to drive a normal person crazy. But Ume knew she wasn't normal. At least, that's what her mother had always told her.

Special Ume, plum blossom, meant for greatness. Ume looked down at her slender, pale legs and laughed sourly. What greatness could she achieve locked away from the sunlight? From life?

"Oh, I know that face." Julie plopped her tiny body down beside Ume's long legs with a sigh. She set the tray of tea and snacks down on the table alongside the daybed and looked at her cousin. "Keep that pout going and I won't tell you my news."

Ume dragged herself out of her private pity party and lifted an eyebrow. "What kind of news? Were these baby pictures smoothing the way? Did more happen in Scotland than just dirty inspiration?"

Julie blushed and pushed on Ume's shoulder playfully. "Ha ha. No babies. But it does have a little to do with my inspiration. My last ebook just became the bestselling paranormal romance of the year. My editor tells me its breaking sales records left and right."

Ume squealed and Julie blushed deeper, looking down at her hands. Ume rolled her eyes. "Don't give me that good little daughter expression. You deserve to be proud. If your parents didn't have to be kept in the dark about what you do for a living, I'd shout it from the rooftops. Luckily for you, neither one of them knows how to use a cell phone, let alone a computer."

Julie giggled. "Which is one of the main reasons I decided to write online." She glanced up at Ume through her lashes. "It is exciting."

Ume nodded forcefully. "Yes. It is. And just think, all of this because of your secret obsession with those online webisodes. Now that I've read your story, I really wish you'd tell me more about your time up there. I mean, the parts I wasn't watching live, of course. Did you ever find out how they did it?"

Julie's brow wrinkled. "How they did what?"

"All those special effects." Ume waved her hand expressively. "The ghosts, the strange goings on. How did they do all that live?"

"They're real, Ume. That's how they did it. I told you that."

Julie sounded so confident, so certain, that Ume didn't laugh—though she didn't, *couldn't* believe. There lay a slippery slope, believing that magic was real. A slope her mother had fallen down long before her death.

Julie seemed to have a similar imagination, but she'd made a career out of hers. The hardest part was Ume wanted to believe it too. Wasn't that why *she'd* become obsessed with that ridiculous game around the same time Julie had started watching *Shifting Reality*?

Julie was still studying her. Waiting for her reaction. "So what you're saying is, that werewolf in your story is real? Cause he was *hot*."

Her cousin stood so quickly she almost spilled the drinks in front of her. "You're changing the subject. But, yes. He's real too."

There was something in Julie's voice. "What aren't you telling me?"

Julie shrugged, her smile not quite disguising the regret in her eyes. "There's nothing to tell. Because I wasn't brave enough to take what I wanted. Story of my life."

Ume reached for her cousin's hand, her heart aching at her words. "Jules, don't say that. I've never known anyone braver than you. You put yourself out there every day. You wanted to write, and you succeeded. You flew to Scotland to be on camera, having no idea what you were letting yourself in for." She smiled charmingly. "And you're the only one who can deal with me when I get all maudlin and bitter. If you're not brave I don't know who is."

Julie squeezed her hand. "You are, Ume. If you'd been there, if you'd seen the man you wanted, you wouldn't have hesitated. You would've jumped in with both feet and never looked back."

Ume's smile wavered. "Yeah. Look where that got me."

She thought about Julie's last abusive relationship, the controlling man who'd convinced her family he was the perfect suitor. And Ume had had her own brush with a wild, uncontrollable hellion who loved to drink more than anything. Including her. Ume may have deserved her fate for being so reckless, but Julie didn't. She deserved to have someone love her passionately. Someone who didn't want to change her.

Too bad the world was full of jackasses.

A few hours later, she leaned back against her pillows, emotionally worn out. Werewolf or not, it was obvious Julie had feelings about a man she didn't believe she could have. Ume's protective instincts had come out full force. If she knew where he lived she would drag him to her cousin's house herself, and wrap him up for her in a neat little bow, shifter or not.

It boggled Ume's mind. Julie truly believed in all of it. In shifters and vampires, ghosts and demons.

Oni was the name her mother used for the demons she was constantly trying to protect Ume from. But in her stories the evil spirits never looked like the one from Shifting Reality. Saint.

When she's seen him on camera, he'd always been looking down at some device, his dark hair swooping across his forehead, concealing his eyes. But from what she *could* see, he was gorgeous. Nothing like a troll or monster. Nothing that would kill you or steal your soul. The worst that beautiful creature could do was break a heart or twelve.

She had to admit, at least to herself, that seeing him in a link from one of Julie's emails was what initially had her looking up the online role-playing game he'd created. *Demon Saint*.

Usually she preferred her entertainment to be active, out of doors, somewhere in nature. But being confined for the last few years had gotten her a little too involved in soap operas, reality shows and online games.

When she saw how big the world of *Demon Saint* was, how challenging...she simply couldn't resist. Nothing had helped her pass the time between therapy sessions, or deal with her never-ending insomnia, better than the online quests.

Just thinking about it gave her a burst of energy. She opened her laptop and quickly typed in the password to enter the game. On the screen she could see her character statistics and the quests, or storylines, she was currently involved in.

She also saw Plum, the name she'd given the figure that she controlled within the confines of the game. Plum was the English translation for Ume, and she had to admit, she had fun bringing her character to life.

The creation of her avatar had taken days, and it was a masterpiece in her opinion. Just the right combination of warrior and mystic to be a sought-after player.

Maybe she'd gotten her mother's imagination after all. Plum was nothing if not an homage to her mother's beliefs. A female *kitsune*. A fox spirit with the ability to appear human and magic enough to fight the different demons the game created to challenge its players.

Ume had also created a talisman for her character. A necklace with a single, perfect pearl. A *hoshi no tama*, a star ball, believed to be the energy of the *kitsune* spirit, as well as protection against evil.

Her character was everything her poor mother believed Ume was. Special. A defender against the *Oni*. Powerful.

It was, without a doubt, the height of escapism. But she was addicted to this game. And, she reached up to grasp the teardrop pearl around her own neck, it reminded her of her past. Of her mother's stories.

If only her mother and Julie were both right. If only it were real.

Chapter Two

What in Hell was going on?

Scratch that. He knew exactly what was going on in Hell. The stereotypical slashing and shattering of hopes and dreams. Sex, drugs, rock and roll and the occasional sacrifice. And that was just the first level. What Saint really wanted to know was, what was going on with *him*?

Liam was on his way to San Francisco, armed with a Bluetooth and the promise of help from a demon. Half demon, but it meant the same thing. Saint was as bound to that promise as he was to his next breath. Especially since it would get him what he wanted in return.

Ume.

He was like a junkie, terrified and longing for the next fix. He'd touched her life for an instant, and now he couldn't wait to get back. So why hadn't he? Why was he hesitating?

He'd felt something, a jolt, a connection that he'd never felt before. It was as though a ghost had reached in to grip his heart. Among other things. Almost as if she'd touched him back. Connected to him without even being aware of it herself.

How was that possible? She was related to Julie Wu. And Julie was one hundred percent human. From that swift influx of feeling and information he'd received, Ume was too. But then, how had she affected him so strongly?

There was nothing to do but reconnect. Find the answers he needed. He wouldn't be able to relax until he had them.

He caressed his phone and opened his laptop, feeling the energy from both of them. Through these portals lay the life force of a billion souls crying out to be heard, to be seen in the darkness. They pulsed with desires. They resonated in his mind, a symphony of secret sins, a carnal cacophony of greed and lust, envy and fear. And hope. That one refrain that always set humans apart. Hope in the face of uncertainty and the knowledge of their temporary natures. It brought the rest into harmony. Gave it purpose.

But he didn't want to listen to their music tonight. He only wanted to hear one voice. Hers. Find Ume.

With a thought he was there. In her home. In her life. Invading every facet without remorse. This was an unknown entity. This was war. He felt the heat of her body as though she were beside him, and he knew it was true. She was different. If the feeling wasn't enough, irrefutable proof appeared right in front of him.

She was playing his game.

When he scrolled through her stats and found the date she began playing, his jaw dropped. Months. Closer to a year. She had leveled up dozens of times, been online nearly as often as he had, and he'd never noticed her.

It wasn't possible.

If he was just a man, maybe. The world of *Demon Saint* was large, even by serious gamer standards. For a normal man it would be tantamount to finding the proverbial needle in a mountain of hay.

Saint was not a man. This was his game. It was a part of him. He hadn't just developed the code—he was the code. He created as he went, for individual and group desires, with demons to challenge each avatar's strengths and weaknesses. He was Demon Saint. And the only way she could have slipped past his notice would be if she had some sort of magical protection.

Her character wore a pearl necklace enchanted to ward off evil. But every character gave themselves imaginary protections. Those only worked within the confines of the game. And only when Saint wanted them to.

He stood up and started pacing. Was she a trick? A test from his paternal side? A Trojan horse with Helen's allure custom made to reel him in? But no, she wouldn't be. His father had no time for him. That sick sod had only one purpose. Seduction. He had no patience for games or vampires or any of his bastards. He was too busy making them.

Saint went back to his chair and tried to relax. Tried being the operative word. With no roommates to stop him, he was about to do something stupid. He had to have more information about her. Had to talk to her.

He was going in.

He gave himself a human warrior character he'd used before. One just strong enough not to draw attention. After insuring the penthouse was protected from any unwanted visitors, he left his physical body behind, his consciousness streaming seamlessly into the avatar.

Saint had walked through his creation before. Interacted as if he were one of them out of boredom or curiosity. It amused him to no end to talk about himself in the third person. To listen to the players postulate or brag or outright lie about run-ins with the Demon King, Saint.

This time he was on a mission with only one mantra in his head. *Find her*. Find her. A few tweaks to the code should do it. He'd take her out of the countryside where she was protecting a group of whining villagers with her friends and put her in a more...conducive setting. She would give in to him. He would find out exactly what made her tick.

And then he'd wind her up.

What in Hell was going on? Ume stared at her laptop, utterly disoriented and confused. Her character *had* been fighting off a small horde of disgusting-looking little hobgoblins with a group of gamers she enjoyed playing with, having a blast, then the screen changed without warning.

A familiar cut scene appeared around her. The short movie showed her character walking into a crowded bar. She'd been here before. It was a rest stop, a gathering place between quests. All types of creatures, all skill levels, were welcome here to make friends, flirt and trade. It was a place out of time, one part medieval tavern, one part modern nightclub. A popular band was even playing on stage, so if her character wanted to ask the bespectacled bison with the giant guns to dance, she could.

It didn't make any sense. She still had her *kitana* sword drawn. When the movie clip ended and her character was allowed to move again, she turned to exit, determined to head back to her friends.

Someone was blocking her path. The avatar of a tall, stunning warrior. He was gorgeous, with a dark swoop of hair and eyes nearly as black as her own. He'd outfitted his avatar in tight brown pants, boots and a leather vest that left his muscular biceps bare, giving Ume a clear view of his weapon of choice. His left arm. It was covered in some sort of biotech that looked really impressive. That was one of the things she loved about this game. There were no limits. If you could imagine it, the creator had put it in the game, from *kitana* to futuristic weaponry to—she noticed the small earplug in his ear and smirked—mp3 players.

A chat window appeared beneath his image.

Sinner: That's a dangerous sword for such a beautiful kitsune. I could use someone at my side with your unique skills.

Ume's eyes rolled, ignoring the thrill running up her spine. This was a virtual world. In reality, she had a feeling this warrior, this Sinner, didn't look like *that*. But he *was* clever.

She started typing.

I'm impressed. You're the first person I've met that knows what I am.

He responded immediately.

Reaches behind you to run my palm along your fur I thought these three beautiful tails kind of gave it away.

Ume shivered. She'd felt that. A hand caressing her backside. How strange. Or maybe not, considering how long it had been since anyone had touched her in more than a medical fashion.

She'd never been one for cyber flirting. Face to face was more her style. It gave her a sense of the person's intentions. *Don't be silly, Ume. This isn't flirting. It's just a game. A character.*

Ume swore she saw the warrior smile.

In case you were wondering, I'm definitely flirting. Why don't we go to that booth in the corner and discuss it in private? That, along with a job I have for you that I think you'll want to take.

Oh my. Ume looked around her living room with a guilty blush. It didn't matter that she lived alone. She still felt a little like a teenager about to do something she knew she shouldn't. Suddenly getting back to the battle right away didn't seem so important. Nor did the computer glitch that had sent her here. She was curious. And there didn't seem to be any harm in satisfying that curiosity. She sent her character to the booth, and the warrior who called himself Sinner followed.

Ume took a sip of her soft drink to soothe her dry throat, then began to type once more.

What is this job? I'm curious.

Sinner's reply appeared in the window.

It's something I know you want. Something everyone wants. A treasure no one in this world has ever gotten close to. But first, *I slip my hand under the table and you can feel my fingers trace a line up your thigh, gliding between your legs* I want to know why you're here. Why I've never seen you before.

"What the—" Ume looked down, lifting up her laptop and the blanket beneath it. Nope. Nothing there. But she'd felt it again. Those rough, masculine fingers between her thighs. She still felt them. And her body was responding. Heating.

Maybe it was time to lower the dosage of her pain medication.

Maybe you should just go with it, the devil on her shoulder whispered. Ume raised her eyebrows. This was a fantasy, wasn't it? And there was no way for anyone to know who she actually was. But then again, there was no way for her to know who he really was either.

She settled in once more and bit her lip before responding.

I was in the middle of a battle. I'm not sure why I'm here. And I've never seen you before either. How do I know you aren't trying to set a trap? That you aren't working for the demons?

"That you aren't a teenager with braces and acne?" She mumbled out loud, trying to splash a little cold reality on her overheating libido.

Shakes his head at your distrust I work for no one but myself. I can take you to the Demon King's lair to retrieve his most sacred possession.

Wait a second...had he said what she'd thought he said? The Demon King's lair? Saint's lair? No one had ever been to that level. Ume had heard the stories. The game was a labyrinth of levels, always changing, adapting to each player's skill. The end result for most serious gamers was to get to Saint's lair. To retrieve his treasure and end the demon attacks once and for all. There were always rumors, but no one had ever gotten...she lost her train of thought as the hand she shouldn't feel between her thighs heated her skin.

Her heavy-lidded eyes focused on the screen again and she typed without thinking.

Why do I think you've used that line before? Not that you'd need it.

She covered her eyes with one hand, groaning. She was flirting. There was no denying it. Talk about desperate. Ume peered through her fingers as he responded.

Takes your hand and places it on my hardening cock It's not a line. I can prove it to you if you let me. In fact, I can do more than that.

She moaned. Was this happening? Could she really feel the metal of his weapon? The scratchy fabric of his pants? The thick erection beneath? She curled her fingers and shivered. It felt real enough. Wonderful and forbidden and real.

A ding of sound alerted her to a new window popping up above their conversation. The words there made her gasp.

The warrior has propositioned you. Do you accept? Y/N

"I know I'm going to regret this." Ume hesitated, but clicked yes before she could talk herself out of it.

A new cutscene began to play. The characters Sinner and Plum were in one of the bedrooms above the bar, facing each other.

"Lovely. Animated porn." Ume snorted, but she couldn't peel her gaze from the screen. These were superb graphics. When the warrior, Sinner, slipped off his weapon, and the rest of his clothes, her mouth began to water. He was so...it was...

Yeah. Really good graphics.

Her character began to strip as well, and Ume's heart started to race. This was silly. But at least she knew for a fact that this character's user was not a child. The game had strict policies and security in place to insure that minors could not access the program's more adult features. It was something young hackers continuously complained about in the main forums.

Sinner pulled Plum into his arms, pressing her breasts to his chest, his cock against the curve of her stomach.

Ume cried out in surprise. She was experiencing every sensation as though it were real. As if she were her character. Impossible. Her imagination wasn't *that* good.

But that didn't stop her from wanting more. From holding her breath to see what came next.

She didn't have to wait long. With a devilish smile Sinner lifted Plum into his arms and carried her, not to the bed, but to the wall. Ume could feel the soft fur of her tails against her back and her legs, her strong lean-muscled legs wrapping around Sinner.

Plum's tails. Not hers. Shit, she was going crazy, but she didn't care.

Her hand slid down her stomach toward her sex, desperate to ease this ache. She was so wet. She needed release.

On the screen one of Plum's hands left Sinner's shoulder to do the same. Sinner stopped her. "Let go, sweet. Let go and give in to me. I can make you come."

Ume bit her lip so hard she could taste the blood. Her hand couldn't move. He was stopping it somehow. And he'd spoken in the game. With a deep, rich voice that made her *need* to do what he wanted.

Before those thoughts could completely register in her mind *he* was inside her. Oh God. He felt just as big, just as sinful as he looked.

It had been so long since she'd had this. Three years. Ume's head tilted to the side and she moaned, lost to it. Lost to this stranger. "Fuck me."

Plum opened her full lips and moaned. "Fuck me."

Sinner growled. "Just remember. You asked for it."

There were no words to come close to describing how she felt as he held her against the wall and started to shaft her. *Taken*. Deep and long, hard and slow, filling her beyond what she thought she could take before dragging his hips back so slowly she thought she would die from it.

"Faster. Please. More." Ume was begging, unashamed that he'd brought her to this state so quickly. Teasing her with exquisitely slow strokes. Gripping her hips with his strong hands, controlling her body.

His seductive voice was raspy with desire. "What makes you think begging will help?" He thrust deep, laughing at her groan. "I'm enjoying this too much. Too damn much."

She curled her fingers, digging her nails into his biceps and clenched her inner muscles around his cock, making him shout, his hips jerking against hers. "Don't tempt the devil, babe. You may not be able to handle what comes next."

Ume stared at the character on screen through a red haze of passion. "I can handle whatever you dish out."

Plum sent Sinner a siren's smile. "I can handle whatever you dish out."

"Oh, poor girl. Now there really is no going back."

Her cries echoed through the empty living room, and her back arched hard off the daybed. *This*. This was what she wanted. She was drowning in sensations—the smell of him, the feel of the heat rolling off his body, burning her skin. The noises emerging from his throat as he powered into her, jarring her body with the strength of his thrusts, sounded animalistic. Wild.

She loved it all. He didn't treat her as though she were fragile. As though she would break. He claimed her as his equal. Demanded everything like a conqueror. Trembled like a lover.

Her climax took her by surprise. A bonfire. A raging, burning conflagration rushing through every cell in her body, leaving nothing behind but ashes. He'd destroyed her. He joined her with a roar of satisfaction, and in that moment she knew she would never be the same.

Ume tasted the salt of her tears, mingling with the salty taste of his skin in her mouth and she realized she was biting his shoulder. She blinked, forcing herself to focus. Her *character* was biting his shoulder.

He was looking at the screen, directly at her. "More, Ume. Give me more." His guttural voice shocked her completely back to her senses.

She slammed down the laptop cover, unplugging it for good measure before placing it on the table beside her as though it had just turned into a poisonous snake.

Ume. The computer-generated character that had just made her climax had called her by her real name.

And she could have sworn she'd seen his eyes flash red.

She was trembling, and pretty sure she was never going to play *Demon Saint* again. Hell, she might never open that computer again. And she was definitely going to talk to her doctor about those pain meds.

She ran a shaky hand over her face, pushing her damp hair off her forehead. It had seemed so real. Her body was convinced it was. Her sex was still pulsing from the most intense climax of her life. And no one had actually touched her.

Playtime was over. From now on, she'd stick to the real world.

Chapter Three

It had been two days. Two long, difficult days. Ume threw her pen and the book of crossword puzzles she'd been trying to focus on across the room. Nothing was distracting her from what she'd done, what she'd seen on the computer the other night.

The physical therapist had come by yesterday, and Ume had nearly exhausted him, unwilling to stop until she'd been covered in a cold sweat, collapsing before having to listen to his lecture on going slow and taking it easy. But she didn't want to take it easy.

She'd wanted to be so exhausted that she didn't relive Sinner's touch. The touch of someone who didn't actually exist, or so she told herself over and over again. He couldn't exist. And it had just been her imagination that he'd spoken to her, that his eyes glowed.

Any other explanation was crazy. Instantly a memory of her mother tucking her into her bed filled her mind.

"Beware the *Oni*, Ume-chan. They know your desires as well as they know your fears. They will use both against you if they discover your existence." Her mother reached down and held the necklace she'd made Ume wear since she was a baby, watching the single pearl glimmer by the light of the small bedside lamp. "This should protect you from our *Oni*. It has always kept me safe."

But it hadn't. Not from her early death. Not from her own fears, that had grown to such paranoid proportions before she died that her teenage daughter had been embarrassed by her. Embarrassed...and cruel. That had been the hardest thing for Ume to accept. That like her father, she'd left her mother alone with her terror. And the last conversation they'd had before she died could never be taken back.

The one where she'd told her mother there was no such thing as *kitsune*, as *Oni*. The one where she'd called her mother crazy.

Maybe losing her mind was Ume's punishment.

"I know. I was just here, but my mother made her famous dumplings and she knew you would want some, so here I am again."

Ume jumped, swiping her palm over her damp eyes to hide her tears. "Dumplings, huh? Sounds delicious."

Julie stopped in the middle of pulling out a plastic container full of pork-filled goodness and stared hard at her cousin, making Ume squirm. "Have you been crying? You sound like you've been crying."

Ume shook her head but Julie wasn't buying it, rushing to the daybed, a look of true concern on her lovely face. "Ume Wu, tell me what's wrong right now. Are you in pain? Do I need to call the doctor?"

Julie took Ume's face in her hands and she crumpled, the tears she'd been holding in pouring down her cheeks. Her cousin looked bemused. It was understandable. Ume didn't cry. Not during the surgeries. Not when she'd discovered her chances of ever walking normally again. Not in front of people, at least. It was a lesson from her stoic father that she'd never forgotten.

"Please, tell me what to do. What happened?"

"I ha-had cyber se-sex," Ume sobbed. "And it felt real. I mean really real. And then...and then...hiseyesturnedredandnowI'mafraidtoopenmycomputer." She looked up at Julie, whose mouth was opening and closing like a fish trying to breathe above water. "You think I'm loony tunes, don't you?"

"Because you had cybersex? Or because of how fast you're talking?"

Ume sniffed loudly. "Because I've been playing that stupid game and now I think there's a demon on my computer. Oh God, I can't believe I just said that out loud."

Julie sat back. "You've been playing *Demon Saint*?"

Ume nodded, and Julie bit her lip. "And you think you had, um, cybersex with a demon?"

Ume nodded again.

"And it was good?" Another nod. "So, why are you crying again?"

Ume snorted, accepting the tissue Julie handed her. "You're no help at all. I'm admitting to you that insanity may run in my family and you just accept it. I keep forgetting you believe this is all real."

Julie sighed. "Okay, you want practical? I don't think your computer is possessed with an orgasm-inducing demon. To prove it, I'm going to sit here while you turn it back on. Besides, you can't be afraid of the Internet. You're my best customer."

She stuck her tongue out at Julie but felt a nervous flutter in her stomach when she looked at the thin, rectangular object of her fears. Maybe Julie was right. She should just open it up, turn it on and prove to herself once and for all that there was nothing to be afraid of.

Julie reached over and picked up her laptop, holding it out towards her. Ume's hands lifted hesitantly to take it. She opened it, releasing a startled shriek as it started to ring.

"Calm down, Ume. It's just my phone." Julie chuckled, pulling her cell phone out of her pocket with one hand, reaching over to turn on Ume's computer with the other. "Hello?"

Ume looked up as Julie's fingers grasped her wrist and held on tight. Her face had gone dangerously pale.

"Who is it?" Ume mouthed, momentarily distracted from the hum of her laptop booting up.

"Wolf," Julie mouthed back. Out loud she said, "Yes. I remember you, *Liam*. May I ask, how did you get this number?"

Ume started to smile. It was *him*. The man Julie had such a huge crush on. The one she'd regretted walking away from. He obviously hadn't forgotten her either, if Julie's blush was anything to go by.

The computer in her lap was making a strange repetitive dinging sound, and she looked down. It was a dialogue box from the game. The game that shouldn't have turned on automatically.

You have been given a new quest to find the Demon King's lair. Do you accept Y/N?

Oh, shit. Her hand started shaking. She slid her fingers over the mouse, comforted by the feel of Julie's fingers, tight as they were, around her wrist. She clicked on the *X* to close the box without answering, deciding she would uninstall the game and reboot, just to be safe.

The question dissolved and a new box appeared.

I'll take that as a yes.

A shock of energy pulsed from the mouse pad to Ume's fingertips and up her arm. She heard Julie's cry of surprise mingling with her own as an electric current passed through her body, charging the air around them. Before Ume blacked out she could have sworn she heard a wolf howl in pain.

A wolf?

She never should have turned her computer back on.

Demons weren't known for their patience. Two days of waiting had nearly destroyed all traces of Saint's humanity. She'd left him no avenue. No phone, no computer, no television signal to reach her. He wanted to go to her, to show up on her doorstep and demand an explanation for her abrupt departure from his arms. He wanted to tear down the world to get to her. A dangerous feeling for someone like him, because he could actually do it.

But she didn't know who or what he was. And her *hoshi no tama*, her talisman, still protected her. She had to give in to him willingly.

He'd done some research on her during the last forty-eight hours. Enough to know she wasn't his Trojan horse, not sent by a jealous demon brother or rival. But she might be his downfall all the same.

Her mother's family was from a small village in Japan near a forest that was a known dwelling of the *kitsune*, the fox-fire spirits that roamed that land. Like fairies these *kitsune* were—some mischievous, some protective, all of them old and powerful in their magic. Magic that had touched Ume somehow.

He was sure it was no coincidence that she'd created her avatar in their image. She must have heard the stories too. But even her knowledge of them could put her in danger, because a *kitsune* had the kind of power any demon would covet.

Any demon but Saint, of course. He had enough magic. He just wanted her. And that want was a madness that grew with every hour spent away from her. He didn't care to think about what it meant. Thomas and Liam had acted the same way, but they were animals. They had an instinct to mate. Demons weren't wolves. They lusted, but mating was never a part of the equation. So what was his excuse?

He'd need to get closer to her to know if there was anything unusual in her blood. Needed to taste her. It was as good an excuse as any.

Fuck, he'd never gotten to taste her. But he'd been inside her. He'd felt her pussy close around his cock and grip him so sweetly he'd nearly died from it.

How was that possible? He'd planned to make *her* feel his touch, to give *her* pleasure. He never expected to experience that kind of intensity in return. That wasn't how this worked. It had never been how it worked. But it had happened. And now he couldn't think of anything else.

He was losing control of the situation, which was why he'd had to formulate his plan. A full-proof plan. A work of genius. A plan he could implement as soon as she got online. And as soon as everyone and their brother stopped calling him.

First it had been Liam. He was in San Francisco, he'd said, and outside of Julie's house, but she wasn't at home.

"So why are you calling me when you should be calling her?"

He could hear Liam gnashing his teeth, and he laughed. "Trust me. Surprises are good, but most women like a little warning. Sneaking up on her in the state you're in will only scare her away. A little phone foreplay never hurt anyone."

Foreplay. Or cyber sex. Fuck, Ume had been wild. He'd hoped she would be. Now that he knew the passionate creature that lived inside her, he wanted to find out how far she was willing to go. How she felt about being tied up. Being spanked. She obviously liked role-playing. Would she enjoy playing innocent soul to his lecherous demon? Being fucked in the as—

Beep.

"Shit, Liam, I have to go. Mac is on the other line. Just take a few deep breaths and call the girl. And don't tell her you're standing outside her house, you'll sound like a rabid dog. Or a stalker. Good luck."

Click. "Hey, Mac. Done brooding?"

Mac laughed. "Just about. I wanted to make sure the penthouse was still intact."

"Aw, you were worried about me. You can say it. Don't be. I'm being a good demon and playing with all my toys inside."

Saint could hear the sound of the ocean in the background, and he knew without asking that Mac was back near his ancestral home, roaming the shores of the North Sea by moonlight. "Coming back anytime soon?"

"Soon enough. Are you okay, Saint?"

Damn vampires and that empathy bullshit. Psychotherapists of the supernatural. No wonder he was so damn moody all the time. "It's rainbows and bunnies all the time here at Casa de Devil. I'm fiddling with your taxes, helping Liam wrangle his mate, stuff like that. Oh, and I'm planning on kidnapping a woman into my game and defiling her in some fairly kinky ways as soon as she gets back online. So I'm fine. Busy, but fine."

Mac sputtered. "You're planning on what?"

"Not so worried about your taxes then?" Saint's smile disappeared as soon as he felt it. She was on. She'd connected. He didn't have much time. As scared as she'd been the other night, he was honestly surprised she hadn't taken longer. Fucking grateful, but surprised.

"Sorry. No time to explain. Gotta go."

He hung up on Mac and focused. This would take a powerful pull, a large amount of energy from him, but from what he'd seen she should be able to respond in kind. He was giddy, a word he would have laid money on never using. He couldn't wait to get his hands on her. In *his* world. Where he had total control.

He got comfortable, and set his mind free, sending it streaming into the warrior he'd named Sinner once more, determined to play the scenario out. Ume wouldn't be able to turn him off now.

When the transfer was complete, Saint shook his head, *Sinner's* head, before turning to find his playmate. He'd sent them to a beautiful, if remote part of the game. Somewhere they could be alone for the moment, without other players getting in the way.

She'd be stunned, sure. Vulnerable. She'd need his help, his guidance. And hopefully some of his more obvious charms. Saint grinned.

That is, until he saw what the cyber tide had dragged in along with her.

"Liam?" Saint lowered his voice, his eyes narrowing on the two, still unconscious females. "What happened? What are you doing here?"

The broad-shouldered giant of a shifter ran a hand through his sandy brown hair and grimaced. "Hell if I know, Saint. Where are we?" He looked down at his body and his jaw dropped. "And why am I naked?"

Saint rolled his eyes. "You aren't naked. It's called a loincloth. The game automatically gave you an outfit that fit your character. Shifters usually wear as little as possible, in case they need to turn furry in battle. Saves on wear and tear." He knelt beside the girls and shook his head. Julie Wu and Liam? "I didn't call either of you here. Just Ume. I think my wires are crossed, man, I really do."

"You called her? Here? That's Julie's cousin, right? The one you wanted me to find out more about?" Liam looked around, an expression of wonder crossing his rugged features. "I'm in a friggin' video game? I didn't know you could do this. Say, when this is over, my little brother is a huge fan of Hal—"

Saint was standing with his hand over Liam's mouth before he could blink. "They'll come to any second. Your mate and my...experiment. I need you to focus. First, you don't know me. Got it? I'm just another character in the game. Second, tell me *exactly* what you were doing before you showed up here."

Liam was mumbling. Fuck. Saint took his hand off the shifter's mouth.

"I called her. On the phone. Like you told me to. It was bloody awkward if you want to know the truth. Before she could tell me she was getting an unlisted number and calling the cops I heard two women screaming, felt a shock like a lightning bolt through the damn earpiece you gave me and whammo, here I am."

He didn't check. How could he not have checked? What was this woman doing to his mind? Saint hadn't even thought to make sure she was alone before sending out his signal.

Julie must have touched her. There had to be a conduit between them for something like this to happen. Not to mention a damn strong surge of power from Ume. Maybe she did have *kitsune* blood after all.

Saint shook his head. "No time." Bending back down to Julie, he touched her forehead, inserting the right coding so she wouldn't recognize him. He looked over his shoulder at Liam, whose teeth were bared warningly. "Just a little insurance. Don't worry, Fang, old boy, we can still get your girl. In fact, this might be the perfect place for both of us to get exactly what we want."

It wasn't what he'd intended. But there was no going back now. He had Ume exactly where he wanted her. Along with her cousin and a mate-hungry wolf.

A few minor hiccups for a demon in lust.

Chapter Four

"There's no place like home. There's no place like home."

"There's snow face in Rome? You're babbling, Ume. That doesn't make any sense."

Ume shook her head at her cousin. Here they were, in the middle of nowhere, sitting by a campfire across from a giant nudist and the warrior from her cyber-fling, and Julie was being cute.

The men were talking quietly amongst themselves, both of them eyeing her and her cousin with expressions that made Ume feel distinctly like a rack of tasty lamb.

It made her tails twitch.

"Julie, it may have escaped your attention...but I have a tail. Three in fact."

Julie covered her mouth to hide her smile. "I noticed that. I also noticed other, um, prominent features that I don't remember you having."

Ume groaned, looking down. When she'd created her avatar, she'd modeled it after herself, as much as she could. But when it was time to choose a body type, she couldn't resist. It had been a game after all. An anonymous, fun game. Now she'd gone from A cup to the perky prow of a ship in one, insane leap.

She buried her head in her hands. "Don't you get it, Jules? We're in the game. In. The. Game."

It was true. She recognized everything, even though it no longer looked computer generated. The luminescent flowers at her feet that she knew flew around the glade like fairies every morning. The large and small moons, glowing red and gold in the sky. The eerie, whispering sound the trees made, like trapped souls or children laughing. It looked rich and vibrant. Real. Terrifying.

"It's happened. I've gone crazy." She looked up with a gasp. "Or I've had an aneurysm. Maybe I'm dead. I'm not ready to be dead yet, Jules. I'm really not."

Julie knelt in the dirt, huffing in exasperation as she pushed the long, flowing princess skirt she was wearing out of the way. "Listen to me, Ume. You need to calm down. You aren't dead. And if you're crazy, then so am I. Something happened that we can't explain yet." She pursed her lips. "But after the big guy and I have a talk, I'll have more information."

"The big guy?"

Julie nodded. "Liam. He's the cameraman from the show I was telling you about. He's here too. That can't be a coincidence. He was on the phone with me when this happened. I have a feeling Saint has something to do with our current situation, and I bet Liam knows exactly what's going on." She hesitated. "I'm not sure who the other guy is."

"Sinner," Ume shrugged helplessly at Julie's confused expression. "The warrior from the other day." "The one you...?"

"Yep."

After a speaking glance, Julie stood up as gracefully as she could and raised her voice. "I need some water to boil if I'm going to make us something to eat." She pointed to the giant nudist, and Ume's eyes bulged. "Take me to the nearest stream or brook or whatever."

Liam leapt to his feet as though poked with a cattle prod, the flush on his cheeks and fever-bright eyes making Ume nervous. She tugged on Julie's skirt and whispered, "Don't leave me. We're safer together."

Julie pulled away and squared her shoulders. "I'll be fine, Liam would never hurt me. You'll be fine too. At least you have a sword. Just don't move until I get back, okay?"

Ume nodded and pulled the blanket she'd been given closer around her, as though it could protect her. She watched her tiny cousin disappear with the behemoth and marveled. Julie was usually so shy. Apparently all she needed was a crisis of epic magnitude and a pink frilly dress to find her inner Amazon. Ume on the other hand had never felt so lost.

"I found you."

The warrior's voice pulled her out of her own thoughts with a jolt. He was even sexier in person, damn him. And real. How was this possible? How many times was she going to ask that question before she started irritating herself? "What?"

The warrior tilted his head, his dark hair falling across his eyes. "I've been looking for you for days. You left so quickly."

Ume blushed. "About that. I, um, you see—I wasn't myself. That is, I'm more myself now than I was when we—oh hell, you don't *know* me."

He slid from his spot on a downed log to his hands and knees, watching her with hunger in his gaze. "I know you." He moved closer, slowly, as if he didn't want to startle her. "I know how wet you can get, how hard you came when I was inside you. The sounds of your pleasure."

He crawled toward her like a panther, and Ume was having a hard time catching her breath. Days spent fantasizing about him, one climax that had only made her want more, had lowered her resistance.

She shook her head, and he froze a few feet away from her. "I'm not normally like that. I don't sleep with strangers." She pinched the bridge of her nose with two trembling fingers and closed her eyes. "Or figments. You seem nice, but truthfully? You're just a character in a video game. Or an illusion created by my disintegrating mind. I'm not exactly sure which."

"Does it matter, Ume?"

Her eyes popped open at his solemn tone. "What did you call me?"

He lifted one shoulder, gesturing toward the woods. "It's what she called you, isn't it? Ume. Plum. If I am not real, then when I bury my face between your legs and make you come, when I bend you over and spank you until you are begging for my cock...does it matter?"

"Uh..." Ume gulped.

Sinner smiled cajolingly. "I assure you I won't be offended if you use me for sex. There are several stops between this place and the Demon King's lair, many opportunities for me to make you co—"

"The Demon King! The quest!"

Ume stood up and threw off her blanket, her mind racing as she paced back and forth beside the kneeling Sinner. "That has to be it, doesn't it? This quest. I saw it on my laptop before we were zapped. We have to find the demon's treasure to end it." She chuckled a little hysterically. "That is assuming this is actually happening, and that Jules is right about it being a little prank by the quote unquote *real* demon creator of the game. What do you think?"

When he didn't answer, she placed her hands on her hips and glanced down, "Yoohoo? Any thoughts? Where did you go?"

He was staring, wide eyed at her cleavage. Her barely covered cleavage in the leotard-like body suit she'd foolishly chosen for her avatar.

"They were, um, bouncing."

Ume bit the inside of her cheek to stop her smile. "They do that."

His throat bobbed. "It's distracting. I can't think about anything but..."

She tapped her booted foot. "But?"

"But fucking them."

Ume threw up her hands, pretending disgust when inside she was melting from the heat in his gaze. "Men."

She turned away in desperation, scanning the tree line for her cousin. "I wonder what's taking them so long. Julie isn't exactly fond of nature."

Sinner's pained groan had her glancing over her shoulder. Suddenly, she felt like groaning too. Her tails, obviously having a mind of their own, were caressing his bare arms and neck enticingly. But he wasn't looking at her tails. In the process of fondling him, the furry fiends had revealed the bottom half of her outfit to his view.

She sighed. "I forgot about the thong."

Her warrior growled. "I didn't."

Hopefully there was a trading post on the way to the Demon King. She really needed an outfit change. She could deal with insanity. Could even deal with magic and demons. But she'd lose it if she had to walk around in this triple-X torture contraption for one more day. Or the one-track minded warrior would.

She'd try to convince herself that she really *didn't* want that to happen.

Saint was one horny devil. He chuckled derisively at himself. Of course he was, it was his nature. Sex was all his father had been interested in, and now that Ume was so close, it was all Saint could think of.

What came as a surprise were the other feelings that came *with* the lust. The pride when she finally decided to jump into the illusion and finish the quest instead of falling apart. The humor when she teased her cousin for emerging from the woods with branches in her hair and a love-struck wolf slave close behind. The profound happiness when he saw her reveling in the freedom this body had given her. The freedom to move, to run, that he knew she hadn't felt in years.

Saint had a feeling the human half of him was falling hard for this woman already. His demon side was just plain hard.

They'd started early, walking until the sun was high and they'd hit one of Saint's favorite towns. The one where all the best sins grew and thrived. This was where he usually came to eat, drink and be merry. Only now he's wasn't alone. He had his own party, such as it was. The wolf, the writer, the *kitsune* and him. The liar.

Lies. Demons did that well. What exactly did he think would happen when she found out who he was? That Sinner was also Saint? That he'd brought her here to find out more about her power. To have her again. Mostly to have her again. What would she do?

This was not his best plan ever.

"I feel so much better." Julie Wu came out of the trader's shop dressed in snug leather pants and a leather jerkin, a beaming smile lighting her face. Saint also noticed she'd gotten a small quiver and a light ash bow. Ready for anything. Clever girl.

Julie twirled. "It was wonderful. I couldn't find what I wanted in my size, but after I described it to the trader, it appeared like magic. Isn't that fantastic? No more pink princess for me."

Liam shuffled his feet, grinning. "I liked the princess." He winked. "She was more...accessible."

Julie giggled, and Saint looked away, jealous of their ease around each other. What had happened to the shy girl from the castle? The one who'd run away?

He was also confused. He narrowed his dark gaze on the tiny woman. "Are you sure it wasn't there before?"

Liam looked over at Saint, startled. "Saint must have put it there for you. I told you he wasn't a bad guy."

Julie sniffed. "We'll see about that. He can send me all the clothes he wants, but until I know why he dragged us into his little game, I'll withhold my judgment."

Saint met Liam's gaze and shook his head. He hadn't put anything in there for Julie. He'd been too distracted by Ume to focus on anything else. He had to get a handle on this. And quickly.

Julie turned and clapped her hands, drawing his attention back toward the shop. "Look out Xena, warrior princess."

Ume made a face. "At least it's better than my last look, *Manga* Barbie. Though I do wish your Saint had thought of breast reduction trader stalls. The trader kept drooling all over them."

The trader was a player. Shit. That meant he couldn't kill him. He could, however, send a band of nasty ruffians his way. Maybe a computer virus. He took a deep breath, assured of vengeance, and studied Ume's new look.

It hadn't helped. She was in thigh-high boots, a leather and metal skirt concealing her thong, and a sturdier top, but she was still a distraction. He'd be swatting players away like flies.

His frustration made him grumpy. "I thought you were planning on covering up."

She frowned in his direction. "I can't help it." She shrugged at the others. "My tails kind of limit my fashion options. It's better than the leotard, isn't it?"

Saint saw the thong underneath the short skirt and felt a pulse pounding at his temple. The sky darkened, storm clouds appearing from out of nowhere. He took a breath. He had to remind himself he *was* the program, it reacted to him. He needed to gain some control.

What he really needed was to get this girl bound and on her knees before he started a cataclysm. *Be nice*, he told himself, forcing out a rough, "You look good," before walking ahead of them toward the inn.

Liam caught up to him, newly dressed himself in black biker leather. "You okay?"

Saint snarled. "Why shouldn't I be? I've obviously made another successful match. You and Julie are together now, right?"

Liam tugged on the curls at the nape of his neck and lowered his voice. "Not exactly. She let me kiss her. It was amazing. And I kept my breathing shallow like you said, so I wasn't overwhelmed by her scent." He made a yearning sound in the back of his throat. "She smells unbelievable. She's mine. If I had a doubt, it's gone."

"So what's the hold up?" Saint didn't have time for this. He had plans for Ume tonight. Plans that didn't involve babysitting this overgrown puppy.

"She's human, that's the hold up. Cats like Thomas are different. With wolves, it can get wild. And then there's the bite. I don't think I can have her without needing to bite her."

Saint sighed. He knew Liam. He was an Alpha, a leader. This was what losing your head for a woman did to you. "Look, she wants you. And where we're going, by the time the night ends she won't be able to resist her desires. Trust me. I created this place, didn't I?"

Liam frowned. "I want her to want me without any of this bullshit." He swore under his breath. "I know how I've been acting. How I sound. She's just so small and vulnerable. I feel like a monster beside her."

Saint placed a consoling hand on his shoulder and raised an eyebrow. "That's because you *are* a monster, bro. But she doesn't seem to mind. And she doesn't seem all that vulnerable right now. Just because she's human, because she had an abusive ex, doesn't mean she'd be turned off by your brand of romance."

Liam opened his mouth again but Saint shook his head. "Trust me." He lifted his arms and turned, walking backwards to face the women behind them. "And welcome to the Inn of the Drunken Lotus."

When he pushed open the doors he felt his shoulders relax. This was his baby. His favorite spot. It reminded him of his younger, demon days. After facing pain beyond imagining, there were always places of pleasure to recuperate. Good pain. Good sex.

Good sin.

Females and males of all shapes and sizes, and in various states of dress stood in the far corners of the room, dancing to the sensual drumbeat of the music. The air smelled of sweet hookah smoke and sex, and the ground level tables were framed by soft, silken pillows. There were large doors on either side that led to a thousand-and-one delights, each kinkier than the next. It was enough to make a demon cry with happiness.

"Now there's a familiar face. Haven't seen you around here lately."

Saint saw Manx and smirked. Of course *he* would be online right now. The technofile had a sixth sense for trouble. And he loved this place as much as Saint did. For a non-demon, the man was impressively debauched.

He placed a finger over his mouth, and indicated Ume with a subtle head bob. Manx's grin grew, and he winked. "Sinner, who do you have with you?"

Saint let out an inward sigh of relief. Manx would keep his secret. For now. But from the way he was looking at Ume...he may be hoping for a reward in return for his silence.

An idea formed in Saint's mind that was too arousing to resist.

"Why don't you join us, and I'll introduce you properly."

The tall, blue-haired mystic bowed. "I was hoping you'd ask."

Chapter Five

Ume had to admit, she was enjoying herself. If this was what crazy felt like, maybe it wasn't so bad. She'd given Julie the benefit of the doubt. Saint had somehow pulled them into the game, and the only way to find out why was to reach his lair. What could be simpler?

Especially when she had this strong, healthy body. She'd never been faster, or felt more alive. The *kitsune* aspect of her character must be responsible for that, as well as her new, intensified sense of smell.

Sinner, for example, smelled delicious. Mouthwateringly delicious. She'd had to stop herself from dragging him into the woods several times already. Since they'd entered the inn it had gotten much worse. He stayed protectively close to her as they pushed through the crowd, close enough to lick.

Lick? What was wrong with her?

The same thing that was wrong with Julie, she'd noticed. The energy between her cousin and Liam was electric. From her new, altered senses, it was clear to Ume that the wolf shifter was in love. Just as clear that he was overly careful around the petite Julie.

Ume wished she could tell him. Julie had always been complicated. One of the only girls in her brood, overprotected and shy at first glance, but Ume knew better. Beneath the silk was all steel. When Julie wanted something, she found a way to make it happen. Ume may be louder and more careless, but Julie's quiet determination had moved mountains. Liam wouldn't know what hit him.

"Ume, I want you to meet my good friend Manx. He is a mystic. We have fought together many times. Manx? Meet Ume, warrior *kitsune*, and her friends, Liam the Wolf and..." Sinner glanced over at Julie, an eyebrow raised.

Julie bit her lip, blushing. "Jules the bard. Are there bards here? Is that right?" She looked over at Ume, who nodded. "Okay then."

Sinner turned back to his friend quickly, but Ume caught the mirth in the look he shared with the stranger. "Jules the bard. Lets all find a table and get off our feet."

Ume tried to catch her warrior's gaze. There was an undercurrent in the air, a darker, smokier scent to him, as though he were excited. Because of the mystic? She studied the new man as they all lowered themselves around a table.

He was as handsome as her warrior was beautiful. A strong jaw and brilliant indigo eyes were framed by a shock of long blue hair. He was also covered from top to bottom in blue tattoos, and little else.

What was it with this game and nudity? But Ume had to admit, he smelled pretty damn good too. He smiled at her, his eyes dropping to her breasts as they bounced with every movement. She liked that look, and she wasn't sure what to make of her reaction.

Sinner's hand covered her lower back and she shivered, feeling his touch to the tip of her tails.

They had to find Saint before she started forgetting who she really was. Before she didn't want to go back.

"I'm not feeling very well." Ume turned to find Julie's fingers touching her temple. She looked pale. "It must be the smoke."

Liam stood and pulled her up into his arms. "I'll take her outside." He nodded at Ume. "She'll be fine. I'll protect her."

Ume caught Julie's gaze, and swallowed a sound of surprise. She was *faking* it? But why? The minute she thought the question she knew the answer.

Julie wanted to be alone with Liam.

"Are you sure, Jules?"

"I'm sure."

The couple turned and made their way out of the crowded club, leaving Ume alone with Sinner and Manx. Talk about dangerous. "Anybody else hungry?"

Manx leaned back against the wall, his heavy-lidded gaze seductive. "I'm always hungry. Ask Sinner."

Her warrior chuckled, dipping his chin in agreement. "It's true. We've shared enough meals together for me to know we have similar appetites."

"You're not talking about food are you?" Had she just said that out loud? She clapped her hand over her mouth and the two men threw back their heads, their loud laughs drawing several envious female gazes.

"No, Ume, we're not." Sinner snared her gaze, his expression turning intent. "Does it shock you that we've shared women? Manx and I are very much alike. We both like to control a woman's pleasure. Every aspect. To give her more than she thinks she can take."

He looked down at her flushed neck, watching her rapid pulse and his lips quirked. "And Ume, a *kitsune* can take a lot. But I think you know that. You can feel that. So tell us... How hungry are you?"

Something stirred to life inside her. Something wicked. Wild. She knew what he was asking for. What he was offering. Both of them. Two beautiful, sensual men, focused on her.

If she were herself, in the real world, she might hesitate. Probably. Julie had been right the other day. Ume, before her drunken ex had run them both off the road, was known for being daring. Taking risks. Trying anything. But she'd learned from her mistakes. Or she thought she had.

Only now, she *was* a *kitsune*. She was a wild, magical creature whose thighs were already tingling at the thought of what might await her should she agree.

She licked her lips and jumped in with both feet. "I'm starving."

"I was hoping you would say that."

Sinner took her hand in his and stood, tugging her behind him without waiting for Manx.

Ume's laugh was breathless. "Impatient?"

A large black door opened as if by magic and Sinner dragged her through before pressing her against the wall. His face was taut with restrained desire. "For you, Ume."

He pressed his hardening erection against her, and she hummed, feeling his heat through their clothes. His long, dark lashes flickered. "As long as you're here you are mine. No matter what happens behind these walls. Do you understand?"

A thrill shot through her, but she lifted her chin, feeling bolder than she'd ever been before. "I suppose if I forget you'll just have to find a way to remind me."

"Fuck, she's perfect, isn't she?" Manx's rough sigh made her jump.

Sinner smiled grimly. "Yes. For me."

"We'll see." Manx held up his hands and moved down the hallway, opening another door that led, Ume guessed, to a private room.

Sinner half carried, half dragged her alongside him, restless energy pouring off him in waves. He seemed edgy, and Ume wondered why. She'd already said yes to the dirtiest fantasy she'd ever had, hadn't she?

Moments later she heard the door close behind her, but she couldn't move. This was not a bedroom. It looked more like the romper room of the damned. Chains dangled from the walls, and red silk ropes hung from the ceiling. There was a tall, round beanbag-looking couch, a few metal chairs, and one glass cabinet filled with things she'd only seen for sale online.

But no bed.

Maybe a threesome *wasn't* the dirtiest fantasy she'd ever had, because as insane as her logical mind was telling her this was, it was seriously turning her on.

"She's not running."

"No, she's not."

"Her tails are quivering."

"Trust me, that's a good sign."

Ume huffed. "She's still in the room. She can hear you."

Sinner pulled her into his arms. "Also a good sign."

He kissed her, and she instantly melted into him. Had they kissed before? Had she ever been kissed before? If she had, this was more. This was better. He tasted like hers.

Her warrior pulled his lips away from hers and looked into her eyes, something vulnerable and unsure in his expression. Confused. Why was he confused? It was wonderful.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and tried to pull him closer, but he resisted.

"Ready to play?"

"Huh?"

Ume turned to glance at Manx when he chuckled. Her jaw dropped. He was naked. Completely, utterly naked. "You *do* have tattoos everywhere."

Manx winked. "I knew you were wondering."

She was so busy staring at one fascinating design growing before her eyes, that it took a moment to register the rope. "What the hell are you doing?"

"We are tying you up, Ume. Right now just your wrists, we'll see about what comes later."

"Sinner?"

He smiled, but there was a strange spark in his eyes. "Let go, Ume. Trust me."

She already did. It scared her how much.

She trusted him. Why did that knowledge scare him? Wasn't it exactly what he wanted? The problem was, Saint didn't trust himself.

Watching Manx bind her wrists already had the demon in him raging to be set free. To take. To fuck. But Saint wanted more than that. He wanted to give her more pleasure than she'd ever imagined. So much that when she finally realized who and what he was, it wouldn't matter. Nothing would matter but this.

While he still had some semblance of control he connected to his partner in crime. Like opening a private chatroom in his brain that only they could see.

"I can't share her the way we have the others."

Manx responded instantly.

"I had that feeling. You know I've always been a breast man..."

Saint nodded sharply. *He* would be the one to give her all that mattered. The pleasurable pain, the sweet sting that he knew instinctively she would love. It would surprise her how much.

His skin was burning, every muscle stretched tight, determined to hold on to the control he knew he'd need for this. Not just touching her. But watching her respond to someone else. It would be torture.

He couldn't wait.

He pulled her long, dark hair over one shoulder to whisper in her ear. "Have you ever been spanked, Ume?" She made a noise that sounded decidedly like a squeak, and he laughed. "I'll take that as a no. It surprises me. A bad girl like you. Wild and bold. It surprises me that no one has tried."

He flexed his muscles and gripped the fabric covering her with his bare hands, making short work of its removal. By the time all but one piece was gone, Ume was shaking.

"Oh my God."

Saint ground his jaw together as he removed that blasted thong, leaving her bare and open to their view. "Not even close, love."

He saw Manx swallow hard, taking in her character's unbelievable proportions. He gripped his tattooed cock in his fist, and Saint understood exactly how he felt.

Saint grabbed the red bag and slid it in front of her, nodding in satisfaction when it stood at hip level. Perfect.

"Look at Manx, Ume. See how hungry he is. For you. You like the way he looks at you. Don't bother to deny it."

Ume shook her head absently. "I won't. I mean, I do. I like it."

"Smart girl. Any other answer and I wouldn't have done this." Saint bent her over the bag, the rope giving just enough to allow for the movement.

"Fuck." Manx's look of helpless joy was almost comical as he watched her breasts jiggle and sway.

Saint's teeth would be ground to powder at this rate. Maybe he *should* have created a breast-reduction stall. A potion. Something she would believe. But then, he'd been enjoying the view too much to even consider it. He knew what Ume really looked like. Thought her body was perfection, just the way it was.

But those breasts she'd given herself were too delicious to resist.

Saint circled her, smiling into her eyes before disappearing behind her again. "Spread your legs, Ume."

She hesitated, and Saint pounced. He pressed his thigh between hers and opened her legs wide. So wide she lost her footing, and all her weight was balancing on the bag. "That's it. Oh, that's beautiful. You okay?"

He heard the quaver in her voice. The excitement she couldn't quite conceal. "I think so."

"You think so?" He let his fingertips glide down her back to her tails, which were stiff with expectation. He gripped all three in his hand and tugged lightly.

"Oh! Yes. Yes, I'm okay."

He smiled, letting her go before taking off his clothes. She was ready.

She couldn't think. Could hardly breathe. She wanted to scream at them to do something. Anything. Her body was on fire and all they'd done was tie her up and take off her clothes. Ume watched the handsome Manx stroke himself slowly, hypnotically, and heard the distinctive sounds of Sinner undressing.

Sinner. A character from a game. So why was he suddenly the focus of her every thought? She wanted him inside her. She needed him. He was hers. Game or not, delusion or not, it no longer mattered.

She was keyed up, each muscle so tightly wound that the first smack of Sinner's palm across one cheek of her ass had her arching like a bow. The second made her gasp at the sharp sensation, the heat that followed.

The third, the one he'd sent between her legs, sent an arc of burning heat up her spine, making her arch with the strength of her climax.

"Damn she's responsive."

Manx's words made her laugh, though the sound was mangled by her tears of release. She couldn't remember ever coming that hard, or that quickly. And never from...something like that. "Responsive? Is that guy code for easy?"

"Maybe." Manx's smile was wicked. "But in this case? That's a good thing, sugar. Believe me."

She looked over her shoulder at her warrior, marveling at his body again. She noticed how still he was standing, with his fists clenched, and his eyes closed. "Sinner?"

He stayed silent for so long Manx chimed in. "Still with us?"

"Blindfold her."

The gruff words shocked her. "No! Wait, I want to see."

Manx moved to the cabinet, gathering a few bottles and a long, blue swath of silk. "I think you need to go with him on this, Ume. You'll feel even more. As a *kitsune* you'll sense more. And he'll be able to give you what you need."

He nodded encouragingly at her disappointed expression and placed the fabric over her eyes.

As soon as the knot was tied behind her head she felt Sinner move in behind her. He pressed his chest against her back and she moaned at the heat of his skin. "You steal my control, Ume. There's so much I want to do to you, but you come so sweetly for me, so hard and sweet, that it's all I can do to keep from falling on you like a mad thing."

She could hear the truth of it. Hear how close he was to the edge in the rasp of his voice. She shivered, amazed at how powerful she felt. Tied up, blindfolded and powerful. "Do it."

He lifted himself off her with a growl, spanking her tingling ass once, and then again. "Not yet, greedy. First I want to watch how you react to what Manx has planned for you."

She stiffened, reaching out with her heightened senses. Manx was close. She heard a bottle open and a scent reminiscent of cinnamon filled the air.

"Warming oil," Manx spoke with a slow drawl, an accent that had increased along with his arousal. "I'm slipping it up and down my cock, Ume. So when I press those ample, luscious, impossible breasts of yours around it I can glide in and out with ease."

Ume whimpered. It sounded so good. Even better was the feeling of Sinner's fingers clutching her hips convulsively, as though counting the minutes until he could get inside her. Fighting to hold back.

Manx's large, slick hands cupped her breasts, and Ume bit her lip. They were just as sensitive as her own, insignificant pair. Every scrape of his fingernail, every touch sent a lightning bolt of need to her sex.

He pressed her flesh around his hard shaft and started to thrust. "Jesus, sugar. You are every young boy's wet dream. You love it all, don't you? Everything we do to you. You want it, don't you?"

"Yes! I love it. I want more. Sinner, please."

Did he not realize he was slipping his cock between her thighs? She was soaking him, drenching him. She felt empty. She needed him inside her. "Please."

His grip on her hips turned bruising, his voice, when he spoke, was so rough and gritty she almost didn't recognize it. "Please what? You have to say it. Beg me, little *kitsune*. Beg me to fuck you."

Manx was thrusting between her breasts, his fingers pinching her nipples roughly, deliciously. She could smell the sweat on his skin, his desire for her, increasing her arousal. But none of that compared to him. Sinner.

"Fuck me, Sinner. Please fuck me. Now."

A bark of surprised laughter came from Manx at her sorry attempt at begging, but it was enough for her warrior. His first thrust held nothing back, but she was so wet and ready for him she didn't want him to go slow.

Yes. This was what she needed. What she'd been craving since that first, strange encounter. And it was better now. She could feel everything more intensely, each sensation amplified, not only by the blindfold. But by him. Sinner.

He powered into her, jarring her whole body with each stroke so that her mouth pressed against Manx's hip. She sucked his skin between her lips, muffling her cries.

"Shit, sugar, you're gonna make me—" Manx shouted his release and Ume tore her mouth away from his skin to cry out herself as Sinner tilted her hips, thrusting deeper, harder, *yes, harder*.

His groan was ragged. "You feel so good, Ume. I never want to stop. I never. Fucking. Want. To. Stop."

Ume felt another wave crashing over her. Powerful and consuming. Before it had a chance to ebb there was another. And again. Time began to lose meaning. Her throat was raw from her cries of pleasure. She lost count of the times she came.

She was shaking so hard she was afraid she would break apart. She could feel Manx's soothing touch on her hair, the press of his lips against her temple, but even that was too much for her sensitive skin.

"Tell him to come, sugar. Tell him you want him to come. Beg him if you have to."

The whispered words were urgent, breaking through the haze that was surrounding her. "Sinner, I want you to come. I want to feel you come inside me. Please. I need to feel it."

R. G. Alexander

Her words set him free. His cry of release echoed against the bare walls of the room, his climax so powerful it made her come again. Her body, still vibrating from the last few orgasms, shuddered with intense pleasure.

A few minutes, or hours later, when two pairs of gentle masculine hands untied her bonds, Ume had a sinking feeling she would never be the same again. And neither would her fantasies.

Chapter Six

It was near dawn, but the two moons were still lighting the way for the five silent travelers climbing the steps that would take them to the Demon King's lair.

Ume wasn't sure what she was feeling. Surprised that her body had rebounded so quickly for one thing. But then, in the game, she never seemed to run out of energy. She was also confused and a bit taken aback by her bold behavior, and in that regard Sinner wasn't helping. Since their experience at the Inn of the Drunken Lotus, he'd been different. Cautious. He'd barely spoken a word to her in hours. She was walking beside Julie, while the three men lagged behind, keeping their distance.

At least he'd brought her another outfit to wear, seeing as he'd destroyed the last one.

"Men."

"You said it."

Ume glanced over at Julie, who seemed to be just as shaken up as she was. "What's wrong with *you*?" Julie crossed her arms defensively, her blush still visible in the dim light. "I don't know. I'm not myself here. I'm behaving out of character."

"Nothing you did could compare with what I did," Ume muttered.

Her cousin leaned closer and lowered her voice. "I attacked Liam."

"Yeah? Well, I think I participated in a porno."

"What?" Julie covered her mouth, looking over her shoulder at the men's questioning gazes, and slipped her arm through Ume's. "What?"

Ume sighed. "Don't ask. I'd rather hear about you attacking Liam."

"I couldn't help myself. I feel like a different person here. Like I've actually fallen into one of my stories. Does that make sense?" At Ume's nod she continued. "And Liam is just so sweet and sexy. We went for a walk, and I, I guess I jumped him."

"Did he go all wolfy?"

Julie lifted a hand to cup her neck thoughtfully. "Sort of." Her sigh was heartfelt. "It was—"

"Amazing." The two cousins spoke in unison, catching each other's gaze and giggling like teenagers.

"There's something else, Ume. Before we, um, before Liam and I were together, I was hungry, and mentioned really wishing we had some of my mother's special dumplings. The next thing I knew a man walked by selling dumplings." Julie stopped and gripped Ume's arm. "They were *her* dumplings, Ume. Her recipe."

Ume furrowed her forehead. "You think Saint is just randomly granting your wishes?"

"I don't know what to think."

"I think she's making it happen."

The two women turned to stare at Manx, who ducked his head apologetically. "Sorry ladies, I thought it might be more interesting to hang out with you than those two brooders."

Ume lifted her chin, deciding to ignore the fact that this man had done things to her she'd never even read about. "What do they have to be broody about?" They'd both gotten exactly what they wanted. Ume *harrumphed*.

But Julie had another question. "What do you mean I'm making it happen?"

Manx hesitated. "You're a writer, right. A bard? You're in a fictional world that is always changing. You must have a pretty powerful imagination."

Ume shrugged. "Makes as much sense as anything else that's happened here."

Julie looked fascinated. "I wish I'd known this sooner. The possibilities are endless." She sent a suspicious glance toward Manx. "Who *are* you? How did you know I was a writer?"

Manx shook his head. "Just a friend." He turned his indigo gaze toward Ume. "Trying to make sure no one gets hurt."

Ume knew he was trying to tell her something, but before she could decipher his expression, she saw a glimmering in the distance. The sun was coming up, and its rays revealed an archway that could only lead to—the Demon King.

"This is where we get off." Liam took two large strides and slipped his hand into Julie's with an apologetic smile.

Julie looked up at him, frowning. "What do you mean?"

Liam's smile wavered. "This is Ume's quest. She and Sinner are the only two who will be allowed to go through that archway."

Ume turned to look at her warrior, who was looking everywhere but at her. "Is this true?"

"Yes."

She was getting angry. He wasn't so monosyllabic when he had her tied up a few hours ago. "It would have been nice to know this beforehand."

His black gaze clashed with hers at last. His looked...tormented. "I'm sorry."

Manx stepped forward. "I'll make sure these two get where they need to go."

"Am I the only one totally lost here?" Julie tugged her hand away from Liam and placed her fists on her hips. "I want to find out why Saint decided to play with us like this. And if he doesn't tell me, I'm going to sic Margo on him."

Ume saw Sinner flinch. But it was Liam who spoke. "Baby, please trust me. Everything's going to be all right."

Julie's expression softened. "Fine. You three go ahead and let me say goodbye to my cousin in private."

Liam and Sinner looked suspicious, but obeyed. Manx put his finger to his nose and mouthed, "Clever girl," before following the other two.

Julie grabbed her taller cousin and pulled her into a tight embrace. "If Manx is right, then I can help. I'm going to imagine an invisible doorway behind that arch. I think Saint is harmless, but if I'm wrong, just call my name, and the door should appear to take you home." She pulled back with a bemused expression. "That sounded even stranger than I thought it would."

Ume smiled fondly at her cousin. "If this works, you have to promise me you'll write about it. It's a perfect sequel to your bestseller."

Julie blushed. "Believe me, the thought had crossed my mind. Be safe, cousin. I'll be waiting."

"What do you think they're talking about?"

"Our imminent demise, no doubt."

Saint glared when Manx began to chuckle. "Don't laugh, traitor. We saw you cozying up to the enemy."

Manx held up his hands. "Just trying to help you two out, brother. For a couple of guys who just well and truly claimed their women, you're both looking pretty bad."

Liam's smile was slow, but satisfied. "I'm just trying to recover. My shy, little mate is actually a hellion."

A shimmer of humor crossed Saint's expression. "I'd say I told you so, but demons never brag."

The shifter tilted his head. "What about you? Have you decided how you're going to break it to her?"

He knew what had to happen. He just wasn't sure he wanted to do it anymore. He knew what she was. He had his answers. She didn't know it, but magical blood ran through her veins, faint, but it was there. She was closer to her *kitsune* character than she realized. Only she wasn't just a character. And this was no longer a game.

Ume had changed something in him. Shredded his defenses and made him face a part of himself he'd buried long ago. The part of him that was like his father. A slave to his needs. Controlled instead of in control.

He'd lost it. Couldn't rein in that half of him that he knew would scare her. He'd felt the demon rise and made Manx blindfold her, so she wouldn't be able to see his eyes, wouldn't be able to see them turn fiery red. In the end none of his precautions mattered. In the end she had to beg him to stop. He'd become a monster.

Demons didn't fall in love. But what he felt when he looked at her...he wasn't sure how to handle it.

He should just send her home. Before she found out. Before she knew the man she'd shared herself with, the man who'd gained her trust, was born from darkness. Didn't deserve her.

But some masochistic part of him knew he had to finish it. Knew he had to see this through to the end.

Saint ignored Liam's question and shared a look with Manx. "When we go through the arch, take these two home. And Liam, make sure you get to Ume's house as fast as you can."

He turned toward the embracing women and raised his voice. "Ume, its time."

Time to finish the quest.

She walked beside him the last hundred feet in silence. A silence that was driving him crazy. "Ume, I—"

"Don't. Don't apologize again. If you do I might have to cut off something important."

Noticing the grip she had on her *kitana*, he smiled. She was so strong, his Ume. So fearless. But she wouldn't need her sword for this first battle. He had to warn her. "They say there is one hall we have to get through to get to the Demon King's most treasured possession. You have to face things about your past, about yourself, that aren't always pleasant."

He wished she didn't have to go through it, but he couldn't change it. If she was going to see him, she needed to see everything.

Ume squared her shoulders and kept walking. "I liked this better when I thought I was crazy. When I didn't believe any of it was real."

Saint took a slow, deep breath. "I know."

He glanced at the plain, unassuming building that housed his lair and had to smile. How many gamers had imagined a palace made of gold, with jewel-encrusted doors and fire-breathing dragons guarding the gate? It used to amuse him, how people let their imaginations run away with them. Now he just wanted this to be over.

And he wondered about the one thing he had no control over. What she would see in the hall.

The doors opened on their own, and Ume inhaled sharply. "I guess he's been expecting us."

"I'm sorry if I hurt you. I couldn't seem to stop. I lost my head." The words came tumbling out. He wanted her to forgive him as Sinner, the man she'd known. It would be something he could hold on to.

Ume didn't disappoint him, though the relief in her expression broke his heart. "Is that why you've been acting like this? Sinner, you didn't hurt me. You may have ruined me for sex with anyone else again." She chuckled wryly. "But you didn't hurt me. Well, not in a bad way."

He wanted to beat his chest with pride. Wanted to take her again. Wanted to do anything but what they were about to do. "Ume, we don't have to go in there. We can find another way."

Her expression softened. "I'll miss this too. But I can't stay here forever. It's amazing, but it's not real. It's not my life."

A muscle ticked at his temple as he forced himself to let it go. He'd broken, given in, given her an option. In the end she'd made her decision.

They walked through the doors and found themselves in a long narrow corridor covered with artwork. Japanese wood block prints.

"Beautiful," Ume whispered, making Saint flinch.

"Look closely. You should recognize something." Hadn't he created it so she would? Once again, not his best plan ever.

"My mother? Sinner, that's my mother holding me as a baby. That's when she gave me the necklace."

Ume absently stroked the pearl drop at her throat. Saint noticed for the first time it had taken on a new luminescence.

He walked with her in silence, listening to her translating the symbols that ran alongside the paintings. It told the story of a woman who had been protected by the spirit of a *kitsune* ancestor. An ancestor who had been enemies with an *Oni* and worried that its human family was being threatened. The only way it knew to protect them was to sacrifice its body and give its spirit, in the form of a pearl, to hide its progeny from the demon's view.

Ume's mother had been the last of her line until she'd had her little girl. She so loved her baby that she wasn't willing to take any chances. She gave the child her talisman, thinking enough time had passed that it would be safe.

But the *Oni* had been patient, and it had known. It chased the woman in her dreams, making her fear for her child, making her insane. Every night for years it played with her, taking revenge for all the time it had waited to attain the *kitsune* star ball. The soul of its enemy.

The next few prints sank Saint's heart, since he easily understood the translation. Ume's mother had suffered, but she'd also learned how to control her dreams. Learned that she had power in them.

It had taken time, but she had patiently developed those powers, until one night, when the *Oni* had promised that he would find a way to kill her daughter on her sixteenth birthday, that the talisman could not protect her from everything—she struck out. She battled with the *Oni* bravely, as a *kitsune* warrior, until both of them were near death.

The mother knew she would have to sacrifice herself to stop the *Oni* once and for all, but she didn't hesitate. As her ancestor had before her, the mother willingly gave up her body for her daughter's life.

"I never believed her." Ume was crying. "I called her crazy. But she wasn't was she? She sacrificed herself for me. Why would she do that?" The hand on her face curled into a fist. "And why would Saint show me this?"

"A mother's love. And he didn't do this. You see the truth inside you. Some see cheating on their wives, or bullying their children. Your biggest shame, your sin, is this. I'm so sorry, Ume."

R. G. Alexander

And he was. Sorrier than she would ever know. A fucking demon. A demon who, if he hadn't been sent to the abyss by Ume's mother already, Saint would have found and destroyed himself. Now that she knew, she would never be able to forgive him for what he was.

And he would never recover.

"Come on. It's time to finish this."

They walked toward the end of the hall where it opened up into a large throne room. The Demon King's lair. Only he wasn't a king. Wasn't even a whole demon.

And his only treasure now was her.

Chapter Seven

Ume was wrung out. She wasn't sure she would ever be able to forgive herself. What her mother had gone through for her was unimaginable. Had her father known? Had he had any idea? Was that why he'd abandoned Ume before her mother's ashes had even been interred—because he knew it was her fault?

And was this why she'd been pulled into Saint's damn game? For her necklace? She was still holding it, felt it warm her hand, pulse against her fingers. She hoped the *kitsune* spirit would be with her now. If she had to fight a demon, she would be a warrior like her mother.

The room was huge. And empty. One throne chair sat on a dais, but it wasn't particularly ornate. Just a chair. No paintings hung, no treasure chests lined the walls, no people waited for an audience. As throne rooms went this one was a little...well, sad.

"You're here."

"Finally."

Two identical voices. Two identical men. One with black eyes. One with red. Both wore hooded sweat jackets and jeans. Both wore black combat boots. Both held Blackberries.

And both of them had identical faces to her warrior.

"Sinner?"

Ume looked over at him in confusion. Was this another test?

Her warrior shook his head and walked further into the room. "This isn't a test, Ume Wu. It's not a trick."

He turned to face her and the two images of him walked over to stand beside him. "I am Saint. Human." His human half saluted her. "And demon." The demon licked his lips and snarled.

Both figures stepped closer, into him, and disappeared, leaving only her warrior in the room, his arms out as if in supplication.

Ume's breath had been knocked out of her. "Why?"

His laughter was self-mocking. "Because I was bored and you were unique. An anomaly. Entertaining. And you had a magic in you that I didn't understand."

"You were bored? You did all this because you were bored?"

"At first I just wanted to watch you. Know you. I touched your mind in the game out of curiosity. But then something happe—"

"You fucking bastard." Ume dropped her sword and flew at him, needing to feel his flesh beneath her fists. She pounded on his chest, kicked his legs out from under him, unable to calm the rage that was consuming her.

Saint didn't defend himself. "I'm sorry."

"Fuck off." She could hardly see through her tears. "I trusted you, you liar. You just wanted my necklace. You just wanted to trick me. You're a Goddamned demon? I *hate* you."

Saint rolled her over so quickly her head spun. She was on her side, his hips pressed against her thigh, his hands gripping her wrists on the floor above her head. "Hate me, Ume. Despise me. But you need to know I didn't want your damn necklace. I just wanted you."

They glared into each other's eyes, their hard, panting breaths the only sound in the room.

Ume's body was quivering, but it was no longer just with rage. He had to be a demon, how else could she explain it? He'd been playing with her this whole time. She should skewer him with her *kitana* for putting her through all this, for reminding her how it felt to be able to run. For showing her the truth about her mother.

But being this close to him, smelling him, was making her body heat with arousal.

She saw his pupils dilate as he sensed her instinctive response. Saw a spark of ruby red in their black depths and was shocked at her reaction. It wasn't normal to want someone this badly. Especially someone like Saint.

She could feel his erection hardening against her leg and she licked her lips. Her body was tuned to his, trained to his. Those hours in that room of the inn filled her mind. The way he took her. The way he'd played her.

Something was seriously wrong with her.

His smile was dark and wicked. It made her tails twitch. "If this is how you hate, Ume, then please, hate me more."

She pressed against him, arching her back. She couldn't seem to help herself. "I hate you."

He growled, bending down to take her mouth in a soul-stealing kiss. He took her breath, gave it back to her. His tongue tangled with hers, and she drank in his taste. She could feel his hands tearing at her underwear, at the fastenings of his pants, and she wondered that he didn't make their clothing magically disappear. Even a second was too long. She was already wet. Already dying for him. Would it ever stop? This addiction?

He kept her on her side, lifting her knee high against her chest, and then he was there. Inside her. No preliminaries, no wooing. It was always like this between them. An instant blaze. But she didn't need any romance. She didn't want romance from him. Though he gave it to her anyway. In the way his fingers twined with hers as he thrust at an angle that brought her instantly to that rocky, jagged edge. In the way his soft lips begged her for more without a word. Seduced her.

She tore her mouth away from his to grab a lungful of air. "I hate you."

Saint groaned. "I hate you too, Ume. You've ruined me. Fuck, you feel so good. I hate the way your pussy feels like it was made for my cock. I hate how hot and sweet and wet you get. How I know I could do any filthy, dark and dirty thing to you and you would just fucking love it and ask for more."

"Yes."

His hips jerked. "Yes? Is that a request? Let's see how sweetly you hate me after this."

He slowed his thrusts and Ume's head tossed on the ground. No. She needed more. She needed that frenzied out-of-control feeling back again. She didn't want to think. She only wanted to feel.

His thumb, coated in her arousal, pressed between the cheeks of her ass. "I can take away most of the pain in here, Ume. Or just a little. I know how you like a touch of pain, don't I?"

"Mmmmmm, oh I—oh!" Ume gasped as his thumb pressed inside her ass, stretching her, readying her for more.

She'd never imagined anything like this, never imagined she would love this feeling. The *kitsune* in her had no such limitations. It shouted for joy and rolled over onto its stomach, offering Ume up like a sacrifice.

"Oh, baby. Have I mentioned I hate how perfect you are for me?"

His cock slid out of her drenched sex, the head pushing inside the tight ring of muscles and filling her. Oh God, filling her so completely she could hardly breathe. The stinging stretch only added to the pleasure. A feeling unlike any she'd ever known. Too much. Not enough. Too far.

More.

She felt her tails wrap around his waist, pulling him closer, deeper and he cried out. "Yes, Ume. Damn, you'll kill me."

The tip of one tail pressed between his muscular cheeks, tracing the sensitive skin teasingly as he rocked inside her.

She knew the instant he lost control. His growl sounded feral, and she could see his red eyes in her mind. One hand gripped her hair, the other cupped her shoulder for purchase as he took her like a man possessed.

A demon possessed.

And Ume loved it. Every sensation, every stretch, brought her closer and closer to her release. She was leaping from the edge of that cliff and diving head first into the fire below. His name a scream on her lips.

"Saint."

The sound of her voice triggered his own climax, sending him hurtling after her into that space where there was nothing but ecstasy. Nothing but this.

When it was done he collapsed beside her, pulling her into his arms and murmuring her name softly. Over and over again. Ume. Ume.

She wanted to stay this close to him forever. And that one thought gave her the strength she needed to go. When she could breathe again, she tugged herself out of his arms and stood up. She looked down at her clothes, torn in some places but still on for the most part, and straightened her skirt.

"Ume?"

She couldn't look at him. She didn't dare. She wasn't sure how she felt about anything. All she knew was she needed to go home. "You can put this scene on the wall now. Add it to my sins."

She turned and ran down the hall and out the door, not stopping until she'd reached the arch and cried out, "Julie!"

A door of light appeared out of thin air, but Ume didn't have time to marvel. She heard Saint calling her name, coming closer. She had to get out of his world.

She was crying as she walked through the doorway.

"Are we too late for the intervention?"

"Lower your voice, Thomas. He's depressed not deaf."

Saint wanted to smile as he listened to Mac and Thomas bickering outside his bedroom door. He wanted to, but he couldn't. Couldn't feel anything lately. Didn't care.

He'd lost his treasure.

"Saint, we're coming in."

He looked up from his position on the bed to watch them all pouring into the room. Mac, Thomas, Liam. His eyes widened. Margo and Julie? Interesting.

Liam caught the direction of his glance. "She knows, Saint. I told her everything." He shrugged helplessly. "She's my mate."

He noticed Julie blushing and it made him snort. Ah. A reaction. So still something in there after all. Damn it. "Congratulations."

"He speaks." Margo smiled at him compassionately. "We've been worried."

"Why? I just wanted some alone time."

Thomas pointed at him. "Hah. *That's* how we know something is off." He gestured around the room. "Notice anything else wrong with this picture? Saint, unplugged. No computer, no phone, no game system. And you've been like this for what? Two months? You can't fool us, buddy. This is a full scale emergency."

Mac was staring at him intently. Damn vampire empathy.

"Go away."

"She misses you." Julie's soft voice had everyone turning in her direction, including Saint. "She's better now. Stronger. The physical therapist has been shocked with how much stronger...but she misses you."

It must be the *kitsune*. Before she'd left he'd felt it, felt the change in her power. Felt her embrace that part of herself. Maybe he even helped it a little. If it took away some of her pain, gave her some peace, he was glad.

Thinking of her made him ache. He didn't want to ache. He just wanted to be alone. "She doesn't miss a demon. She misses a character in a game. She misses Sinner."

"Bullshit."

The women gasped at Mac in surprise. Saint raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"It was you, Saint. You she was with. You she misses. And I'm sick of you wallowing. You don't wallow."

"Why? Cause that's your job?"

Mac crossed his arms. "Yes, okay? I wallow, Thomas whines and you manipulate. That's how this dysfunctional family works."

"I don't whine," Thomas whined.

Margo chuckled and received a glare for her effort.

Mac stepped closer to the edge of the bed. "Why are you giving up? Because she's mad? Hell, I've been mad at you for a hundred years, and you've yet to leave *me* alone. Don't you love her enough to drive her crazy? Enough to try?"

"It's because he's afraid he'll hurt her, demon that he is. Afraid he'll either fuck her to death or lash out at her in anger."

Everyone sent the newcomer a surprised look, but Julie just smiled. "Manx, you're here."

"How did he get in?"

"Did you leave the door unlocked?"

"Are you seriously asking me that? I have the best security sys—"

"Guys," Liam's loud growl silenced Mac and Thomas. "We told him to come. He contacted us about a month ago."

"I did. When Demon Saint started to crash."

Margo's tone was distressed. "The game is crashing?"

Saint grimaced and studied Manx. He'd never seen the southern technofile in person before. Not a blue tattoo in sight, but he could still see his friend inside the normal packaging. Long brown, braided hair, and wire-framed glasses hiding deeply blue, troubled eyes.

The game. Saint hadn't considered that. Without him to guide it, without his interface, it would eventually start to degrade.

Manx glanced at Saint apologetically. "I wasn't aiming to step on your toes or anything, but I had to do something. Whole levels were disappearing so I, well, added a bit of myself until you got back on your feet." He gestured to the iPhone in his hand. "I had no idea it took so much energy."

Of course not. He wasn't a demon. "You can have it, if you want."

A muscle twitched in Manx's jaw. "Generous of you. Since you tossed her away along with your responsibilities, can I have Ume too?"

He had Manx up against the wall, his forearm pressing on his throat, before anyone could move. "Don't you know I could kill you?"

Manx held up his hand to stop the others from coming to his rescue. "But you won't, Saint. Because I'm your friend. And you don't hurt people you care about. Humans or Other. And you wouldn't hurt Ume. Because you love her."

The room was filled with tense silence for one minute. Two. Then it happened. Saint could feel the smile blooming on his face. He couldn't stop it. The same way he couldn't stop the hope filling his human heart, the wicked plans forming in his demon's soul.

He did. He loved her. He'd never thought he could. Not really. Not like this. But he loved Ume. Waiting for the life and pain to drain out of him wasn't working. Leaving her alone wasn't working. He'd just have to try a different approach. He'd have to do things his way.

Saint could barely hear Thomas and Mac's banter through the excitement buzzing through his system, bringing him back to life.

"Uh oh. I know that look. Julie, your cousin might be in trouble."

"You can say that again."

Manx choked. "I'll say it if he takes his arm off my windpipe."

Thomas lifted his hands in the air dramatically. "This demon has been cleansed."

Saint licked his lips. "Hallelujah."

Chapter Eight

Ume was walking. A simple act for most, but for her? She would never take it for granted again. Most times she didn't even need the single cane. She smiled. Soon enough she would be back to her old self. And the first thing she planned to do with this newfound freedom was start running again. Maybe take a kickboxing class.

The idea of punching and kicking something really hard without being arrested was appealing. She'd just been in one of those moods.

For the last few months.

Her cousin Julie had called, but Ume didn't feel like talking. Especially, and she hated herself for this, to Julie. The woman was so happy lately. Deservedly so, but still. She didn't want to hear about the latest mating escapade, or how her cousin couldn't get any work done, or plan the wedding that her big family was insisting on, without Liam distracting her with his wolfy needs.

She was a bad cousin. But, she swore to herself, she would be the best maid of honor anyone had ever seen. Julie had saved her life. Literally.

Too bad no one could do anything about her heart.

It had taken her a long time to beat them into submission, the feelings she had for Sinner/Saint. She'd tried to use logic; she'd never met him in person, she didn't know who he really was. Though she knew *what* he was. Namely, a demon. And humans and demons didn't mix. Not in her world. Hadn't her mother's death taught her that?

Her heart didn't care. It even argued back. She had *kitsune* blood in her veins, the protection of its spirit around her neck. A spirit she could now feel. One that had given her strength. She wasn't exactly a normal human.

And Saint was only half demon. Nothing like the one that had tormented her family. They could make their own rules.

That argument had gone on for weeks. Weeks of crying into her pillow at night, of reaching for her laptop only to hurl it across the room. Weeks of waiting for a demon who never came. Never fought for her or asked for a second chance.

Never gave his heart.

In the end logic won by default. The point was moot if the demon didn't love her back.

She'd almost reached the grocery store when she saw it. One of those computerized billboards that showed advertisements for cologne and car dealerships.

I love you, Ume

Ume bit her tongue in shock and looked around. Surely that couldn't be...? No, she straightened her shoulders and kept walking. There had to be at least twenty other Ume's in the San Francisco area alone. Someone was proposing, in a grand scale yes, but not to her.

She passed an idling car full of people and the radio blared, the station changing until she heard the distinct sounds of Blue Oyster Cult's *I'm Burning For You*.

She took a deep breath. *Nothing to see here. A coincidence. Just keep walking, Ume.* When she came upon yet another billboard, she didn't want to look, but she couldn't help herself.

I mean you, Ume Wu. I love you. Saint Loves Ume. Clear Enough?

Without a word she turned on her heel and walked home as fast as she could, not looking anywhere, not listening to anything. The cramp in her thigh wouldn't slow her down. This wasn't happening. It couldn't be happening.

Not even if she desperately wanted it to be.

She opened the door to her house, locking it behind her, then walked the length of it making sure everything electronic was still unplugged.

"Did you get my notes?"

Ume shrieked and whirled around to find Saint sitting comfortably on her sofa. "Oh shit."

He winced. "Not exactly the reaction I was hoping for, but understandable." He stood. "I'm not going to make a menace of myself, Ume. I mean, I could. I want to. I was planning on it. But I'll try to leave you alone if you can answer one question."

She was trembling. Still unable to believe he was really here, in front of her. Anger and hope warred inside her, her stomach was in knots and her heart was racing.

She'd really missed him. He made her feel alive.

"What? What's the question?"

He pulled out his Blackberry and turned it around so she could see the box on the screen.

The Demon has admitted he loves you. Do you love him back? Y/N

She could feel the pearl warm against her chest. The *kitsune* spirit? Was it warning her or sending its approval? It was impossible to tell. She'd have to make this decision on her own.

"You lied to me, Saint. Used your powers to pull me into a game without my permission. Tied me up and *spanked* me. All while making me believe you were someone else."

Saint paled. "Yes."

"You also showed me how my mother truly died, let me see the truth about my heritage, and played matchmaker for my cousin and Liam."

Hope flickered in his dark gaze. "Yes."

She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "I probably shouldn't put the spanking in the bad category. Its not bad if I like it, is it?"

Those full, beautiful lips of his were twitching. "That's always been my motto." After a few, long moments, she heard a groan rumble in his chest. "Ume, please. It isn't a good idea to leave a love-sick demon hanging."

That just made her mad. "You mean the way you left me hanging for two mo—"

He was kissing her. Finally. *Yes*. Just the way she remembered. She wrapped her arms around him and he made a desperate sound against her lips, as if he'd been just as lost without her, just as tormented as she'd been.

Saint pulled back and tore his jacket off, dragging the white T-shirt over his head and letting it drop to the floor. Her Sinner. Her Saint. He was glorious.

She sucked on her bottom lip, insecurity taking over for a heartbeat.

"What is it, Ume?"

She motioned to her chest, far less ample and obvious than it had been when they'd last been together. "Any false advertising issues? Beyond this point lies no bouncy castle."

Saint laughed, the sound rich and sensual, full of promise. He pushed her hands away and took off her shirt, inhaling sharply at the small golden mounds he found bare beneath. "You are perfect, Ume. Let me prove it to you."

He gripped her waist and lifted her off her feet, until her breasts were parallel with his mouth. "If you still had Plum's body, for example, I couldn't do this."

Ume gasped as Saint opened his mouth over her breast, her entire breast, and sucked hard. "Oh, my. That *would* be a shame."

He hummed his agreement against her skin, sending electric jolts of sensation through her body. Her body. Not a character's in the computer. He was here, kissing her. Devastating her with his tongue.

He carried her to her daybed. The daybed where she'd been trapped, in so many ways, before he'd helped to remind her that she was passionate. Alive. That anything was possible.

He laid her down, still licking, lapping at her stiff, sensitive nipples. "You taste even better. How do you do that?" He glanced up quickly, catching her rapt gaze. "You never really answered my question."

Ume watched him stand and allowed him to lift her hips, and pull off her shorts and underwear without a word. She smiled as she watched him take off the rest of his clothes with impatient movements, his cheeks flushed, his eyes sparking with ruby light.

"You're not going to cut me any slack are you, plum blossom?"

She laughed at the nickname. "I never heard a question." She hadn't. Technically it was true.

Saint lowered himself over her, his thick shaft gliding across her thigh, making her pant. She was swiftly losing her ability to form coherent thoughts. It had been too long. She needed him.

Her arms lifted but he caught them before they could wrap around his neck. "You can't distract me. I'm not that easy, Ume."

She frowned playfully. "I thought the word we were using was responsive."

He refused to take the bait, shaking her lightly until she looked into his eyes. "You should know you are in trouble, Ume. Demons, by their very nature are demanding, possessive, and greedy as Hell. And the spawn of an Incubus? They're born with a taste for hedonism that makes them the worst type of match. All issues that usually don't matter because demons are not known for having hearts. For being able to love at all."

"Your sales pitch could use a little work."

Her breath caught at the trace of fear she could see in his expression. The sincerity. "I won't lie to you, Ume. Not ever again. No matter what."

He didn't have to say it. She could feel it. Love. Saint loved her. And he was afraid she was going to send him away. "Could we do it again? Go back into the game? Y'know. Just on special occasions?"

Saint furrowed his brow, confused. "We can go anywhere you want, but I don't know what that has to do with—"

"Yes."

"Yes?" The red light flared to life once more. "You're saying yes because of the video game?"

Ume rubbed her hips against him seductively. "I'm saying yes because I love you too, you big sexy demon."

Shock loosened his grip and she slid her hands into his hair, pulling his head down until their lips were a breath apart. "Though I do miss my tails."

His laughter vibrated against her lips and warmth bloomed in her chest. Maybe demons were dangerous.

But if you had their heart, it was worth the risk.

About the Author

R.G. Alexander has lived all over the United States, studied archaeology and mythology, been a nurse and a vocalist, and now, a writer. She is happily married to a talented chef who is her best friend, her research assistant and the love of her life.

If you want to find out more, go to www.rgalexander.com or her group blog www.smutketeers.com.

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Shifting Reality, Book 1

Thomas Lyons is your average cat shifter. Cool, seductive...and bored out of his mind. With the new popularity of all things paranormal, he doesn't see why he should hide anymore. When his half-demon technophile roommate hooks him up with a computer, Thomas starts a blog announcing to the world who and what he is. Oddly enough, the more he shares, the less he's believed. In fact, people begin thinking it's a new online series with fantastic effects.

Margo Sheffield doesn't dance on tables anymore, not since her reckless naïveté cost her so much. These days, her only guilty pleasures are dark chocolate, shoes—and a certain website with a man whose purring voice sends shivers down her spine. When the show, Shifting Reality, offers a week in a haunted Scottish castle with the stars, it seems a far-off dream. But when that dream becomes reality, her boss's insistence that she mix business with pleasure—or else—is more like a nightmare.

Thomas's focus on the show is blown by the luscious, camera-shy handful. And Margo can barely think about contracts when she's surrounded by newlywed ghost hunters, a matchmaking demon and a man whose addictive touch makes her head spin. A showmance is the last thing she needs, but with a sexy cat like Thomas on the prowl...she just can't resist.

Enjoy the following excerpt for My Shifter Showmance:

"None of that, now, Margo. Not between you and I."

That was all the warning she got before she was spun around and lifted in the air to settle, breathless, straddling his lap. "Mr. Lyons, I think we should talk about—"

"Hush." Thomas curled his fingers into her hair, pulling her down to meet his searching lips before she could get another word out. Margo's last thought was, *Oh hell*, before the kiss scrambled her brain.

He growled, the pressure of his lips opening hers as he sought entrance. God, his taste. And the way he was kissing her, exactly the way she'd always imagined he would. Greedily, hungrily...perfectly.

Her sex pressed against his thickening erection, and through their clothes she could feel the heat of him. He was blazing. She slid her tongue across his fangs. His body jerked in reaction, and she did it again, loving the fact that she could make him respond to her. Make him as crazy as he was making her from one simple kiss. Who was she trying to fool? She'd been crazy for him since the moment she'd seen the first video. Her fingers dug into the muscles of his arms, wishing she could touch his bare skin, desperate for more contact. *Closer. Harder. More*.

"Margo, baby..." He'd pulled away. Why had he pulled away? She looked at the agonized need tightening his expression, her brows lowering in confusion when he shook his head. "I never in all my years imagined saying this, but we should stop. We shouldn't do this here. And if you keep grinding against me, I won't be able to stop myself from tossing you on this table and taking you right now, in full view of our online audience."

Audience. The cameras. Hell. Chi and Liam were gone, but Margo knew each room had its own grouping of stationary cameras. She'd been *grinding*? Mortification stung her cheeks. She imagined the people online watching her behavior, maybe even her coworkers, and she tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her.

He stood, holding her struggling body easily in his arms and strode swiftly to the kitchen, nodding at the Goth servants before heading into the large pantry room and closing the door.

The lock turned with a click of finality, and Margo bit her lip. Would Darcy fire her for her inappropriate behavior? She huffed out a dark laugh. Her boss would no doubt wholeheartedly approve. As long as it got her those *Shifting Reality* rights.

He swept his hand out, drawing her gaze to the deep pantry filled with dry goods and empty jars. It was nearly the size of her bedroom in the insanely expensive cubbyhole she called an apartment. And the ceiling was so high, stocked to the rafters, that they actually had a sliding ladder leaning against one of the shelves.

Thomas caressed her jaw with his thumb, bringing her attention back to him. "There's no sound equipment, no cameras here. Just you and I. Talk to me, Margo, please." He ran his fingers through his hair, looking frustrated. "If I were Saint or Mac, I'd have a way to know what you're thinking. Know why you look like you regret what just happened."

"If you were Saint or Mac, I wouldn't be in this pantry." She spoke without thinking, flinched as she saw his pleased expression. Shit. Why didn't she just tell him she only regretted he'd stopped? That she'd wanted to smother herself in chocolate and whipped cream and be his dessert? She sighed. "What I mean is—Hell, I don't know what I mean. I think we should go to bed. Separately. To separate beds. Alone. We can talk about the reason we both know I'm here in the morning."

Work, keep saying it, this is for work. Contract not coitus. Contract not coitus.

"I smell you."

She crossed her arms defensively and looked at him askance. "I'm sorry?"

Thomas shook his head, his eyes going dark as he took a deep, lung filling breath. "Just, now that there's no distraction, I can really *smell* you. It's rich. Spicy and sweet. Like pumpkin mousse or, well, I've never smelled anyone quite like you."

Pumpkin? "You smell nice too. I'm assuming we both shower. What's your point?" She was being belligerent, but she couldn't seem to help it. She was having a hard time accepting how easily she'd lost

control. The old Margo would no doubt have thrown caution to the wind, damned the cameras and danced for him on the table, perhaps torn off his buttons with her teeth. Which was one of the reasons she'd been buried beneath mountains of to do lists and restrained hairdos for the better part of a decade. The old Margo was nothing but trouble.

So was Thomas Lyons. His pupils had dilated, his strong features had sharpened and his cheeks looked flushed. He looked...feral. Wild. Like he was ready to pick up where they'd just left off, whether she liked it or not. Her slender thread of control began to fray once more. She should leave now. The pantry. The castle. The country.

Thomas blocked her way to the door. Did his fangs look longer? More intimidating? He towered over her, backing her up until her shoulders hit the ladder. He took her wrists in his hands and lifted her arms over her head. She gripped the rungs of the ladder, clinging instinctively, fascinated by the predatory look in his eyes.

"My point," his voice was rough, needy, "is that you aren't going anywhere, kitten. Regardless of what your mind is telling you to regret or run from, your body is speaking loud and clear. And it wants what I want."

"What?"

Thomas leaned into her, his lips lightly caressing her neck as he whispered, "More."

"I will always love you." Not just a figure of speech when you're undead.

Big Girls Don't Die © 2009 Crystal Jordan

In the Heat of the Night, Book Two

Six months ago, Andre St. James committed the ultimate one-night-stand party foul by turning Cynthiana into the spawn of Satan...also known as a vampire. He insisted he knew they were meant to be together forever and ever, so why wait for her to be on the same page with him to suck the life out of her?

What. Ever. The only thing the two of them share is chemistry that blasts off the charts. So she drop kicked him out of her life and told him to never come back. He listened. Until now.

Andre knows Cyn has trouble dealing with his take-no-prisoners approach to life, and that turning her against her will was a mistake. But he's got patience born of centuries of immortality, and he'll do whatever it takes to get back into her good graces and stay there forever. Including wait until she has no choice but to turn to him.

After all, no one understands forever like a vampire. He's loved her from the moment he saw her...and he always will.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Big Girls Don't Die:

My hands clenched on the steering wheel. I had to get to my cousin. That's all I could think. Please, please let Desi be okay. I loved that little girl so much. I was going crazy right now. Worry gnawed at me like a hungry werewolf. One quick look at the speedometer told me that I was about ten miles over the speed limit. They wouldn't pull me over for that, would they? I pushed my convertible Mini Cooper a little faster.

Flicking a glance down while I punched the speed-dial, I tried to get Misty on the phone for a progress report on Desi. It was a few hours to Las Vegas from Los Angeles, but if I hurried I could be inside the hospital before dawn. Something else to get pissed at Andre for. No reflection, no sunlight.

My stomach rumbled. Oh, yeah. Cravings for blood. Another lovely side effect. When was the last time I had fed? I meant to have something substantial before I went to Eclipse, but Andre had sort of interrupted that plan. I'd barely taken any blood from him, so my stomach felt as if it was digesting itself right now.

"Hi, this is Misty and Desiree, leave us a message—"

"Damn it." I huffed out a breath and tossed my cell phone on the passenger seat.

My gaze swept the barren landscape along I-15. There wasn't anything for as far as I could see except dirt and stars and a few ragged Joshua trees. When I glanced back at the road, a large white jackrabbit hopped in front of my car.

"Shit." I jerked the wheel and swerved to miss it, but the crunch of bone sounded as it bounced against the underside of my car. "Oh, that is just nasty."

And then my tire blew up. Rubber popped. The Mini Cooper's back end spun out. My heart stuttered as my pretty little car made grinding noises when the metal of my tire rim hit pavement.

"Shit, piss, motherfucker. Oh God. Oh God."

Skidding off onto the soft shoulder of the road, the car finally came to a stop. I sat there and panted while my heart rate galloped. My knuckles showed white on the wheel, and I had to force myself to relax my grip and reach down to shift into park. My hands shook on the door handle when I hauled myself out to go look at my tire. I walked around the car to the passenger side and kept an eye out for crazy-ass drivers who might be too blind or stupid to see the emergency flashers on my car and hit me. Oh, yeah. That was the flattest tire I'd ever seen. Little bits of rubber hung off it and flopped on the ground.

"Spare tire, Cyn. Put it on and get the hell to Vegas." Popping my trunk, I—What the hell?—Where were the jack and tire iron? I had forgotten to check for them in this car when I bought it from the used car dealership last week. Now that I needed 'em, they were nowhere to be found. Fan-damn-tastic. Time to call in reinforcements.

I opened the passenger door and fished around for my cell phone. Please, please let me have cell phone service. I was in the middle of bumfuck nowhere. I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, not daring to look. My breath whooshed out when I saw I had full bars. I pulled in a deep breath while I dialed my roadside assistance number. The number was programmed into my phone, just in case. You never knew when a Rambo-wannabe jackrabbit would hang on to your bumper and use his last breath to shred your tire. Fucking bunny.

I punched in all the appropriate numbers and listened to a recorded voice tell me to call 911 if it was a life threatening emergency. Well, duh. "Hello? I have a flat tire, and I need someone to come put on my spare—"

The woman dispatcher's professionally concerned voice cut me off. "Okay, ma'am. Are you in a safe area?"

I looked around at the miles and miles of dirt. "I'm kind of in the middle of nowhere, but I guess I'm safe."

"Good. Now where are you exactly?"

"I'm not sure. I'm eastbound on I-15 about a hundred miles west of Las Vegas. I don't see a call box or any mile markers."

"So, you're east of Las Vegas—"

"No, I'm west of Vegas going east toward Vegas." I rolled my eyes.

"What city did you just pass?"

Did I just speak English? I swear I'd told this woman I had no idea where I was. I was worried about Desi, not about where I might pop a tire. "I'm not sure. I know I'm about a hundred miles west of Vegas."

"All right, ma'am. We'll dispatch someone, and they should be there in about twenty to thirty minutes."

"Thank you!" I could be with Desi soon, then. I shivered as the cold desert night air hit my bare shoulders and legs. Hurrying back to the driver's side, I slid into my seat.

Twenty minutes later, my phone rang. Oh, good. Must be the tow truck driver.

"Hello?"

An older female voice responded, "Hi, Ms. Trent. I'm sorry, but we won't be able to dispatch anyone until we know your location. Can you tell me exactly where you are?"

I blinked. "Um. I already told the last lady I talked to."

"Can you tell me again?"

Okay, stay calm. I'd only been on the side of the road for about half an hour. Everything was fine. "Sure. I'm not one hundred percent sure of where I am, but I'm eastbound on I-15 about a hundred miles west of Las Vegas."

"Are there any mile makers nearby?"

"No." And I sure as hell wouldn't wander around in the frigid ass desert to look for one.

She was silent for a long moment. "Um. All right, ma'am. We'll dispatch someone, and they should be there in about twenty to thirty minutes."

"Sounds good." I sighed and dropped the phone on my lap.

Twenty minutes later, my phone rang.

"Hello?"

A pleasant male voice answered. "Hi, Ms. Trent. I'm sorry, but we won't be able to dispatch anyone until we know your location. Can you tell me exactly where you are?"

What will happen when the hunter becomes the hunted...

Tempt Not the Cat © 2009 J.C. Wilder

A woman whose chances for love were destroyed...

After surviving a brutal kidnapping, Erihn Spencer has spent the past eighteen years living in the shadows. Scarred both physically and mentally, she spends her days writing romance novels dealing with the type of relationship she's avoided. The night before heading into the mountains to start her new novel, a stranger approaches and shakes her world with one perfect kiss.

A man who could be her savior...

From the moment Fayne kisses her, the desire to possess this shy beauty is irresistible. Thrown together in a secluded house in the mountains, he's torn between his need for her and the secrets that are destined to force them apart. As Erihn struggles to break free from years of self- imposed isolation, he finds he is the one who is now trapped by his desires, his dark self.

Their worlds collide and old secrets lead a bitter enemy to their door.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Tempt Not the Cat:

She moved like a cat, dainty, her feet barely touching the floor.

Fayne leaned against the bar, his pint of Scottish ale forgotten. Through the wide arch leading into the coffeehouse, his gaze followed her as she wove her way through the tables filled with chatting patrons.

Her hair was long and loose, ending just below her backside. To most people, it would appear to be brown but his preternatural eyesight detected glints of red and gold in the long strands. Unbound, it obscured her profile reminding him of Cousin It from *The Munsters*. Okay, not exactly flattering but the resemblance was undeniable.

Dressed in a long skirt the color of dirt and an enveloping cream-colored shirt, she was as diametrically opposed to the other women in their barely-there summer dresses as chalk was to cheese. Covered from head to toe with her modest, slightly oversized clothes and long, shaggy hair, she looked as if she were trying to hide from something.

Maybe everything?

His chest tightened. He loved puzzles. Curiosity had certainly almost killed this cat a time or two, but that didn't stop him from his favored pastime. Puzzles drove him mad and women were his favorite riddle. He reveled in their femininity, their scent and their innate sensuality. Basked in the hidden mysteries of their shapely limbs and secretive eyes. Overdosed on their voices and wrapped himself in their beauty while rejoicing in their strength.

In short, he loved women.

His eyes narrowed when the stranger stepped onto the stage. Reaching up to adjust the microphone, her slender fingers curled around the base as she raised it to the correct height. With one slim hand she pushed back her hair, allowing him a glimpse of her profile. Dark brows, a lovely cheekbone and a slightly snubbed nose, her skin was creamy pale and her mouth was lush.

He licked his lips.

The woman glanced to her left and smiled at her friends as they jostled for better viewing positions on the low-slung couch and chairs. A shy smile curved her mouth and a gentle blush swept her skin. She ducked her head as if embarrassed.

Even from here he could sense her nervousness. For some of the preternaturals, emotions could be detected by either taste or scent. With the room crowded with people, for most it would be difficult to pick up on any one person. But not him. Her scent was unique and it had already imprinted itself in his brain, becoming part of him.

Lemon.

Paper.

Flowers. Blue Lady roses to be exact.

And a healthy dose of warm feminine flesh.

Something dark stirred in him, gently nudging the leash of his willpower. The moon was waxing, and the urge to mate was growing stronger. It'd been over ten months since he'd last taken a woman, and the demands of the approaching full moon were taking a toll on his restraint.

After the debacle with the vampire Mikhail during winter solstice last year, Fayne's pleasure-seeking life had been derailed by the unexpected inclusion of a six-year-old mortal child. He smiled at the thought of the boy he called son, Max. Few things were more important to a were-cat than physical gratification and their own creature comforts, but his son was his top priority. Max came first with him.

Period.

End of story.

Even though he loved Max and would sacrifice anything for his welfare, for the next few weeks Fayne was free to do as he pleased. Max was off with his friend Bliss in South America on an archeological dig and having the time of his life.

Certain that his son was well taken care of, Fayne had other pressing matters to attend to. With only a few more days until the full moon, time was growing short and he had to act fast. He glanced at the women sitting with Shai and Jennifer.

To Shai's right sat a stunning brunette with dark red claws. She was lovely, but there was something brittle about her. Across from her sat Melanie Reynolds, the movie actress. She wore a barely-there pink leather dress, and her breasts were in danger of escaping. Too overblown and very married—two things he avoided.

There was something to be said about subtlety. As he'd prowled through the years, Fayne realized that he appreciated the subtle woman. The one who lightly dabbed perfume on the back of her knees rather than bathing in it. She wore high-collared shirts and demure lace bras rather than crotchless panties and garter belts. A confident woman didn't need to proclaim her femininity to everyone around her, it simply was what it was. The women most men would overlook intrigued him the most. The shy ones who didn't command center stage and constantly play the 'me me' game. Women who glanced away rather than returning his gaze boldly. Of course they always looked back again, just in case they were mistaken and he hadn't been looking at them. The subtle shyness, the faint blush of color on their cheeks when they realized it was them who held his attention. They all had their stories to tell—their darkness and their light.

He lived to ferret out their secrets.

Turning, his gaze landed on the woman standing on the stage. This beautiful little wren wasn't so much understating her sexuality as being completely unaware of it. She'd buried her feminine curves beneath layers of ill-fitting clothing and long, heavy hair so that most men would overlook her.

But not him.

What did she look like with no clothing on? Did she prefer serviceable white cotton lingerie or was she the kind of woman who dressed like a schoolteacher on the outside while wearing miniscule thong panties?

His groin tightened.

Either worked for him as lingerie had a tendency to get torn off women's bodies when he was around. Be it cotton or silk, the only thing he wanted to see it on was the floor.

Glancing over at Shai's friends, he smiled. No, he'd found his mate. He smiled as he turned his attentions back to the woman on the stage. She'd do perfectly.

It was time for the cat to prowl.

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