

Viola  
Grace



RAVEN DEXTER  
PARANORMAL  
MIDWIFE

Raven Dexter chose to pursue midwifery the moment she helped a teen friend deliver her baby. Fed up with unconcerned physicians, she studied until she could open her small practice in a moderately sized town. Her practice was slowly growing until the night a strange man demanded she come with her to attend a birth. Her introduction to the paranormal society was in the venue of delivering a small goblin baby that quickly took a chunk out of her arm.

The elf that took her to her first delivery moves in without even asking, taking care of everything from her appointments to making her meals, Eyleno Miz rapidly becomes indispensable and then becomes something more.

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Raven Dexter: Paranormal Midwife

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*Raven Dexter: Paranormal Midwife*  
*A Nexus Novella*

*By*

*Viola Grace*

## Chapter One

Raven groaned and stretched in her car. The snow was falling heavily outside the windows and the thought of hauling her supplies back into her home office was daunting. Sighing and giving into the inevitable, she opened the door and swung her legs out of the car, wincing at the residual pain of the dog bite that had been delivered to her calf earlier in the evening.

Stomping around the vehicle, her resentment spilled over. “The dog doesn’t bite. It loves everybody,” she muttered as she collected her bags from the hatch.

Of course, the dog loved everyone, as long as his mistress wasn’t in labour and the midwife wasn’t backing off as he snarled. Tanya had spent twelve hours huffing and groaning before the shrieking started and before Hector had gone nuts. Tanya’s sister had hauled the dog out of the house, but not before he had munched down on Raven’s leg as she knelt to catch the baby.

The glow on the new mother’s face had blotted out the pain, for a while, but eventually, she had to treat her own wound after she had finished taking care of the necessities of birth.

Now nothing was left except the follow-up visits and for Raven, a full night’s sleep. None of her other clients were due for weeks.

She smiled a little as she passed the sign on her front door. *Raven Dexter - Midwife*. It had taken her years of working full

time and going to school at night as well as her apprenticeship cutting into anything remotely resembling sleep, but she had her certification, her license and her practice was insured. A steady trickle of clients made her house payments.

She grimaced as she saw her reflection in the hall mirror. Her blazing white hair and red eyes were probably why her practice was slow to grow. Add in her chalky white skin and it took a pregnant woman with nerves of steel to trust her care.

A hot bath was on her agenda, but before she could do that, it was time to restock her supplies. She never knew when a little blessing would make an early appearance. Blotters, wipes, absorbent cloths, liquid disinfectant, nitrile gloves and a change of clothes with an apron for Raven. Some babies liked to arrive with a splash.

After repacking her visit bag, she was halfway to the bathroom with an anticipatory grin when a knock on her door redirected her, making her groan. She silently pressed her forehead against the wall and prayed for the knock to be silent. When it struck again, she hissed silently before turning to answer.

She paused in front of the door, straightening her clothing and putting on a businesslike face. It was after midnight and it could be a desperate husband at the door. It had happened before.

"Hello?" Her polite smile didn't waver as she took in her guest.

"Ms. Dexter? Ms. Raven Dexter?" The gorgeous male on the other side of her doorway looked as surprised as she was. The curl of his golden hair caught in the snowy light of the streetlamps and hypnotized her for a moment.

She regained her senses and nodded. "Yes. That's correct."

"You are a midwife?" He seemed sure and unsure at the

same time. It was an endearing quality.

He really was fun to look at. His flowing golden hair was almost as long as her own and the sparkle in his blue eyes was inviting. It took all of her concentration to process his question.

"Yes. I am a midwife. Does your wife need assistance?"

"My wife?" He looked surprised that she had come to that conclusion. "No. It is for an acquaintance of mine. She requires a midwife and you have a particular skill for this matter."

She felt a twinge of curiosity. "I might have that skill. Who are you?"

A light tinge of pink bloomed in his cheeks. "I apologize. Eyleneo of the Circling Storm Sect, at your service."

She missed that description. "What?"

"I am an elf of the Circling Storm Sect. My name is Eyleneo Miz. I am here to take you to the goblin queen. She is in labour and needs a midwife who cannot be compromised. You fit the description nicely." His grin was encouraging.

She merely stood there and blinked, so he gently but firmly pushed into her home and, after a few false starts, found her office with her kits. Wearing a bag on each shoulder, he escorted her to the door. "We are ready to go. Come along."

"I am not going anywhere with you. Who are you? Are you nuts? This is bizarre." Her exhausted brain was grappling with the odd scenario he was explaining and her mouth was tripping along, but her body went along with his, putting on the coat and letting him zip up her jacket. He lifted her feet one at a time and put her boots on.

"I know it seems mad. But there is a woman who needs assistance and you are the only one close enough to help. Please." His sincerity blazed out of his gaze.

If she could find one ounce of reality in this situation...it

was in his eyes. Pure truth and trustworthiness blazed out of his eyes and she was helpless against it. Raven let him shepherd her out of the house, but she paused out of reflex to double check the locks.

The rest of the trip was a blur, he tucked her into a dark car and he waited until she was buckled in. The familiar streets changed into a conglomeration of dark houses and strange towers.

Either he was telling the truth about goblins or she had gone off the deep end and was rapidly going under. Perhaps she was at home drowning in a warm bubbly bath.

"Your patient is this way." He parked the car and escorted her through alleys that held strange and hostile smells, but Eyleno moved calmly and quickly and all too soon, they were passing creatures that were even less human looking than her elfin guide.

"Goblins?" She swallowed. There was an acrid scent in the air, similar to sweat but very different. Her mind accepted it as the smell of a different race with a different diet.

"Goblins." His word was calm and confirming.

The large house that they entered was full of the creatures, each more hideous than the last. Afraid to be caught staring, Raven walked right behind Eyleno, so close that when he stopped, she ran straight into him. As she righted herself, she couldn't help noticing that he smelled *really* nice, like autumn and the sun altogether.

"Here are the women's quarters. The maid will take you through." He handed the bags to the four-armed woman and Raven blankly followed her bright blue and pink luggage.

Females filled the labour room. The woman on the bed was hideous with fangs exposed in pain. Raven immediately introduced herself.

"Thank the burning sun that you are here. The child is almost here." The woman grimaced, a truly frightening sight.



Raven got to work, the anatomy she faced blessedly familiar. The woman was indeed ready to give birth. The dark head was becoming visible. When the small son came sliding into the world, Raven caught him with practiced hands. As she turned him over her arm to clear his lungs, a prickling sensation started and then the little bugger munched down on her arm with all his might.

"Son of a bitch!" She didn't want to shake her arm, but it was hard keeping still until he released of his own accord. As quickly as she could, Raven handed him over to his mother and took care of the afterbirth and making sure that the bleeding was not excessive.

Her own bleeding was continuing from her forearm as the punctures were still sluggishly giving up their bounty. Hissing, she dumped alcohol on the wounds and bound it with gauze. When the proud father came into the room and licked the child clean, she had had enough. Raven passed out.

*What a messed up dream* was the first thing that ran through Raven's mind. It continued through her consciousness as she raised her arm to her forehead and then froze in place when she saw the neat bandage around her left forearm.

"No way in hell." She was bolt upright and heading for her office in seconds. Her bags were there, depleted and spattered with blood.

A cleared throat made her turn around. The elf with the golden hair was standing in her kitchen, sipping a cup of coffee.

"Eyleno?" Her right arm scrubbed at her forehead and she grimaced as she saw the grime still on her skin.

"You remember...good. Your payment for last night's services is on the table. The magical community has need of such a one as you. A woman who not only rejects the

pigments of her genes, but also the magic that can curse an infant." He gestured with the mug and she turned to see the large leather bag on the centre of her entry table.

Absently, she wandered to the table and lifted the bag. It was heavy. The contents were shining gold coins. There had to be fifty coins in there and she had no idea what the value would be.

She looked up from the shiny bounty and asked her tormenter. "Why are you here?"

"I have been elected as your handler." He raised his mug in salute. "Raven Dexter, I am yours."

Out of the thousand images that sprang into her mind with that one phrase, she only had one thought. "Are all the babies gonna bite me?"

He grinned. "We will discuss that. But for now, have a shower and get dressed. Though you are enchantingly pale all over, I don't think you meant to display yourself so openly."

A quick look down showed she was wearing her unbound hair and nothing else. She cursed and stomped into the bathroom with no decorum and all attitude. It was not the first time she had been caught sleepwalking naked, but it was the first time she had taken a walk naked while awake. It must have been the exhaustion and the persistent hallucination that there was an elf in her kitchen and a goblin bite on her arm.

She turned on the shower and warmed the water before stripping off the bandage and stepping in. Raven felt almost human today, which was head and shoulders above her regular mornings. The water felt sinfully delicious and as she washed the blood off her hands and out of her hair, a thought came to her. *What if there really is a coffee-drinking elf in my kitchen?*

## Chapter Two

Eyleno was still there and he was making her pancakes. He was also talking to her about magical races.

"Now, Raven. I have brought you a primer for the magical races, including some you will never meet. In this area, you basically need to deal with goblins, dwarves, trolls, dryads, werewolves and occasional magi and a few elves."

She laughed and sipped some of the coffee he had brewed. "No mermaids?"

"No, they deliver underwater. Not an option for you."

Oh, he had thought this out. "So, is there a lot of demand for my services?"

He chuckled. "Yes, the goblins are fast breeders and the trolls often suffer from lack of pre- and postnatal care."

"What about dryads?"

"They usually only need assistance with the first daughter. Sons are so rare as to be almost a myth."

He finished her tower of pancakes and set it in front of her before making a few for himself. His voice took on a lecturing tone. "The moment that the infant is born, the tree will start the links to their life force. If the sapling needs to be moved, it has to be done by three elder dryads, so the labours tend to occur in dryad-heavy areas."

She looked down at her arms and scowled. "What about goblins, do they always bite?"

He chuckled and poured another round of batter. "Goblins are highly carnivorous. The family should have had

a rabbit nearby to start him on, but they were all exhausted by the continuing labour."

"Excuses, excuses. Is that the worst to expect?"

"Well, spider goblins create a web that is used to catch the baby to stop the delicate legs from snapping. Rock goblins tend to climb when they are in pain, so you may have to chase or catch on those deliveries."

Her mind was reeling as she took a look at the book in front of her. She opened the pristine pages and gasped at the lovely, colourful illustrations that framed her name.

"Is this...was this made for me?"

He grinned. "It was created by the great Archivist, specifically for the one woman who would not have an ounce of magic in her blood."

That sounded rather odd. "What do you mean?"

"I can't read it. The words blur. No one magical will be able to read that book if you write notes on your cases in it. Half of the book is devoted for your notes." Eyleneo turned and started in on his own pancakes.

She worked through her stack. The pancakes were so fluffy they absorbed the small pat of butter with the syrup riding each mouthful. Raven kept one eye on her food and the other on the goblin-breeding details in the book.

When she finished the pancakes, she sipped her coffee and kept reading. Dwarves had problems with delivery due to the size of the child versus the size of the mother's hips. Dryads needed constant water during delivery. Trolls needed something to hold onto. Breaking the midwife was a real possibility.

Elves and magic users had standard human-style deliveries with the exception of elves becoming exhausted frequently before the child made its appearance. It was a dangerous situation for both mother and child.

Eyleneo was puttering in her kitchen and she smiled as she

saw him create dish after dish while she read the book, storing each dish in the fridge or freezer. "How long are you planning on staying?"

He looked at her in surprise. "I thought you understood. I am now your handler. I go where you go, make sure that you eat, bathe, sleep and exercise if you need it. I will drive you to your deliveries, magical and mundane. You are stuck with me."

"That's impossible?" She wished it hadn't come out as a question.

"Why? You have a guest room and when you return from deliveries, you are exhausted, a danger on the roads. You don't have to pay me. I am paid by the unified councils."

"I need to talk to someone. Anyone. This is too weird for my blood."

He sighed and dusted his hands on his thighs. "Just let me pop this casserole in the freezer. I enjoy laying in supplies so that when you need it, food is just a microwave away."

Eyleno worked swiftly and finished the multilayer casserole, then he put on plastic wrap, aluminum foil and slid the works into a zip-top bag. His tidying up was just as quick. The ingredients disappeared and the counter was spotless within ten minutes.

"Let me just make a phone call and we will be on our way."

She blinked at his readiness to leave her home. "Just like that?"

"They are expecting it, plus one of the elven elders wants to be one of your clients."

That made her blink as she was standing up. "Elder? Needs me? How old are we talking here?"

He chuckled. "Read the section on elf-breeding seasons while I make the call."

Raven flipped through the book to the section on elves

and skimmed down until she got to the procreative section. Her voice rose to a shriek as she read the data on breeding seasons. "Fifteen hundred years!"

Eyleno's laughter rang through the house.

Shaken, she closed the book and checked on her hair. It was mostly dry and the goblin bites were sealing. She braided her hair and wrapped it into a coronet, grabbing some hairpins from her bedroom before she grabbed a thick sweatshirt to put on over her t-shirt and jeans.

She stomped into her own boots while he muttered into his cell phone. While he was busy, she went to restock her bags and found that they had been neatly packed while she showered, right down to her clothing and clean underwear. He was horribly efficient.

She checked her purse and her cell phone and pager were charged and ready.

As Eyleno completed his conversation in a liquid language she didn't understand, she slipped on her jacket and gloves, prepared to shovel the sidewalk. "Whoa."

The sidewalk was clear, her driveway was clear and the porch looked as if it had been licked clean.

A deep masculine voice emanated from behind her, "Did I forget to mention that the goblins threw in yard maintenance for the next ten years?"

He was laughing, but he had all of her bags with him. She was still stunned by her clean concrete against the white backdrop of snow banks and followed him blankly toward her car. He cleared his throat. "We will be taking my vehicle. Yours is not suitable for the trip."

She raised her eyebrows, but followed him behind her car to see the low-slung sports vehicle that looked odd with snow tires. Its brilliant blue shade was rather pretty and when he put her bags in the small trunk, she opened the passenger door, sliding in butt first so she could knock all the

snow off her boots before sullying his vehicle.

He stood next to her door and when she swung her legs in, he closed it carefully. He moved quickly around the car and got behind the wheel. "Don't worry about the interior of my vehicle. The goblins are on that detail as well."

She smiled and buckled up as he started the car. It warmed rapidly and despite his fancy vehicle, they didn't slip or slide on the snow-covered roads.

"This car drives pretty well. What kind is it?"

"It has no name. It was designed by dwarf engineers and has been given for your transport with the anticipation of your services." He turned and began to drive through a large park.

With the fallen snow, there was no one out and as he approached a turn, a glittering energy started skating around the exterior of the car. "What is that?"

"It is a portal. We went through one last night, but I don't think you noticed." He grinned as the sparks started and a whirlpool of energy erupted in front of them.

She closed her eyes and held her breath as they hit the glowing disk.

The car slowed rapidly and she looked up at a huge building. A manor house of majestic proportions loomed next to them and when Eyleneo opened her door, she saw their trail begin about fifty yards back out of a stand of pine trees. "We just..."

"I am a portal specialist. I open doorways between locations instantly. It is why I was selected for you." He was smiling again, his blue eyes dancing with amusement. He obtained her bags and led her into the house.

A servant was at the door and it took all of Raven's nerves to get her through the doorway. Lumps, bumps and huge, clawed hands were in a body that was seven feet tall, covered with grey skin and had burning yellow eyes. She jumped

back into Eyleno when it spoke.

"Are you the midwife, miss?" The voice was gravel tumbling through a dump truck.

She nodded as the deep voice shook her. "I am."

"I like your eyes. Very striking."

Eyleno leaned down and whispered, "That is Rodrick, our family butler. He's a troll and they value vivid eye colour. Red is prized."

She inclined her head to the troll and smiled. "Thank you, Rodrick."

Eyleno smiled and shook the troll's hand. "Grandmother is expecting us."

"Yes, Master Eyleno. I will announce you." The troll wandered off with far more grace than Raven expected.

"Your grandmother?" Her voice was a hiss that carried through the rooms.

"Yes. Cassandra Miz. She is the matriarch of the family and will interview you before any agreements are struck."

"What about *my* questions?"

"You will be able to ask them. Simply give it time. You won't be able to remember everything if you learn it out of context."

She nodded. "That makes sense. How old is your grandmother?"

A feminine voice answered for him. "Nine hundred sixty-three."

Wincing at her lack of tact, Raven turned to the elder and saw a woman with flowing golden hair who appeared to be in her early forties. Her belly was swollen and the gown she wore flowed and drifted over the mound.

"Cassandra Miz?"

The woman quirked a brow at Raven. "Yes. You are the midwife?"

"Yes, Raven Dexter. Feeling a little overwhelmed by this



whole idea." She nodded formally and grinned as Eyleno bowed with all of her bags still on him.

"Grandmother, you are in blooming health."

"Blooming is a very polite word. Come here and give me a hug. Rodrick can carry all those bags."

The troll wandered forward and Eyleno carefully handed over all the bags, including the portable monitors that she kept for ladies who did not want to see their doctors or who had had previously unpredictable deliveries.

Once he was free of her cargo, Eyleno embraced his grandmother and received a kiss on the forehead for his efforts. "I don't see you nearly enough, boy."

"You will see me regularly if you accept Raven's services."

The elegant woman held her hand out and Raven moved forward to take it, removing her mittens on the way. She shook Cassandra's hand and sparks flew from the woman's fingers. Nothing happened to Raven except a ripple of confusion.

Cassandra's face suddenly became much friendlier. "Excellent. When they mentioned you as a possibility at the meetings, I didn't believe that there could be a person devoid of magic."

"Thank you. I try." Her sarcasm wasn't lost on Cassandra, but the woman kept hold of her hand and led her off into the front room where all of her equipment was laid out. "That was fast."

The woman sat gracefully and waved her hands at the instruments. "I have additional servants who are far more subtle than Rodrick. He is wonderful, but for quick packing or unpacking, always use a poltergeist."

Raven sat across from her and debated where to start. "So, Cassandra, how far along are you?"

A challenge appeared in the woman's eyes. "You are the midwife, you tell me."

## *Chapter Three*

A low chaise doubled as a medical table and Raven measured, prodded and investigated the progress of the pregnancy. "I don't know what the conception date would be for your species, but you will deliver just before Christmas."

"Yule. We celebrate Yule." Cassandra took Raven's hands and used her to lever herself back to a sitting position. Eyleneo had left the moment that Raven flipped up his grandmother's skirt.

Raven made a few notes in her new notebook. "The baby is fine and healthy, but that isn't why I am here, is it?"

Cassandra rubbed her belly in a slow repetition that slowed the visible kicking on the surface. "No. There have been threats against my baby and you are the only one I will trust to bring it into the world."

Raven sat down next to her and looked her in the eye. "Why?"

Cassandra met her gaze for a minute before answering and that told Raven as much as she wanted to know about the willpower of this woman. Few folks could even meet her red eyes, let alone look into them. This elven matriarch had a set of brass balls.

"The nature of the threats was a curse to my child. There is only one time where the child will be vulnerable. After it has left my body, but before I can protect it. In those seconds, it will be a target and only you are equipped to protect it. Your

lack of magic will stop any curses from getting to my baby." She stroked her belly again, comforting herself more than her baby.

"What form might the curses take?"

A pot of tea floated to the table and settled down next to the set of china. Cassandra filled three cups and raised her voice, "Eyleno, you can come in now."

He took a step in cautiously, saw his grandmother was back in an upright position and sighed.

Raven looked at him, "If you are going to be hanging around with me, you had best get used to the sight of women in supine positions."

He cleared his throat, "I am aware of that, but it is my grandmother."

Cassandra chuckled. "Your mother didn't raise you to be a prude. Now come and help Raven with the rest of this diagnostic equipment. I think the sound of the baby's heartbeat has shaken her a little."

The woman was really paying attention. The baby had a heartbeat somewhere between a rabbit in a marathon and a hummingbird. It was far too fast for a human baby, but she had no idea what an elf baby's heart rate was supposed to be and she had planned to ask Eyleno on their way home.

"You caught me. What is the heart rate supposed to be?"

Cassandra chuckled and sipped at her tea, then gestured for Raven to drink her own.

The midwife sipped cautiously and raised her eyebrows in pleasure. "Peach."

"I am staying with fruits and berries I know the taste of."

"That is wise."

"Let me tell you about elf pregnancies. This is my fourth." Cassandra proceeded to describe everything from the hormones, to the cravings, to the homicidal rage that she experienced when she saw her mate in the last month.

"Oh, so there is a husband in the picture?"

"We have been wed for six hundred twenty-one years. He is off with his brethren now. After I almost impaled him before delivering Eyleno's mother, we decided it was safer."

Raven's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"Oh very serious. A friend maimed her spouse. Almost cut his left arm right off." She shook her head at the image she was obviously remembering. "It was a good thing that the little one was their last. I don't think he would have the nerve to approach her when she was in season again."

So, that answered her next question about their breeding seasons. "I do have to ask, why me?"

She was treated to surprised looks from identical pairs of blue eyes. "You haven't figured it out yet?" Cassandra seemed a little disappointed.

"No. Pardon me for being an idiot, but I am only a minimally successful midwife. I am sure that someone of your own kind can probably do a much better job."

The pregnant elf put her tea down and touched Raven's knee. A light crackling of energy occurred at the contact point. "There you have it, Raven. You cannot absorb magic. Unlike other humans who have a slight touch of magic and can be influenced through it, you are impervious. Your body has even rejected pigment, it wants nothing to colour the world around it.

"That is why you are of interest to our community. We can trust you to simply come, care for our women in their most vulnerable hours and then leave without harm or ill will coming with you."

Raven felt a little warmth blooming in her chest. She had never considered her lack of connection with the outside world to be a benefit, but Cassandra had a point. No one could influence Raven when she was caring for a mother and baby. Her mind and body focussed completely on bringing

them both through the experience as smoothly as possible.

"Why do I need Eyleno? Why can't I just come here on my own?"

Cassandra cocked her head, "You really don't catch on quickly, do you? Eyleno and his vehicle are your transport as well as your translator and cultural attaché. You cannot walk through a magical portal. You will simply pass through it as if it wasn't there. Are you familiar with a Faraday cage?"

Raven frowned. "Yes, it is a metal object surrounding something which allows electricity to pass around the outside without being disrupted."

"Exactly. The car is your Faraday cage and Eyleno calls the electricity. He is a portal specialist." The pride in his grandmother's voice was palpable.

"So I have been told. May I put this monitor on you for a few minutes?" She held out the belt with the small monitor on it.

Cassandra scooted forward and let Raven strap the monitor in place. "Modern technology, it's wonderful."

They chatted for a few more minutes while the data was collected and Cassandra answered all of Raven's questions.

"Will all of the women that I see be as forthcoming with species-specific details?"

"They will or they will not be allowed to use your services. Ever."

It struck Raven like a lightning bolt. "You have been orchestrating this whole thing."

"Very good. You do catch on. Yes. We need someone like you in our community and as long as you don't mind limiting your human patients, we will be able to keep you very busy indeed."

That stunned her, "Limiting my human patients?"

"As your practice grows and you gain more species-specific skills, you will be more in demand. That will

mean that you may be on the other side of the continent via a portal when someone back home goes into labour. Our kind will not flinch at a vortex between two locations, but the humans may not be as accepting."

"I can see your point, but I will keep the patients I currently have, at least until they deliver." She frowned. "How will I pay my mortgage? My bank doesn't accept gold as currency."

Cassandra frowned. "I hadn't thought of that. We will set you up with a bank and transfer your mortgage to the new accounts. The clans will deposit the money there. Bear with us, we are learning as we go here as well. A human has never delivered this kind of service to a variety of species before."

"You mean there have been others?"

"Lawyers, doctors, accountants, but most of the races keep their humans dedicated to them."

"No one wants to share their humans?"

"No one wants to share their secrets."

"Ah. That makes more sense." Raven turned off and removed the belt, setting the printout function. The heartbeat was incredibly fast, but it was steady and strong.

She opened her notebook and jotted down what she had learned. The grandmother and grandson caught up on family matters while she wrote, confirmed and placed the readout onto the patient record.

"Do you know what the sex of the child is?"

"No. Nor do I want to know."

"Would you be amenable to coming to my office for an ultrasound?"

Cassandra smiled gently. "No."

Raven shrugged. "I had to ask."

Eyleno was looking relieved that the meeting had gone so well. "I will try and convince her to come by while you are home, Raven, but without Arcos with her, she doesn't like to

leave the house."

"Arcos is your grandfather?"

"Yes. He is half of the calls that I receive, checking up on her." He elbowed his grandmother gently and she reached out to pinch his ear.

"Ow. Ow. Sorry, Nanno."

She released his ear with a flourish, "You bet you are sorry, youngling. Oh, Maityen is coming by today, will you stay?"

Eyleno was packing Raven's kit faster than she could see. He was a blur of movement.

"Who is Maityen?" She didn't need to whisper, she was sure that Eyleno had a roaring in his ears.

"His mother. They have a difficult relationship and he avoids her when he can, like now."

She eyed her keeper warily, "What kind of difficulty?"

"She tries to set him up at every opportunity. She won't take the seer's word for his true match lying outside his social circle."

That made a certain sense. Many men avoided their mothers when pairing off came up. Mothers had funny ideas of what was suitable.

"I am ready. Shall we go, Ms. Dexter?" He was being horribly polite, but she couldn't blame him. Her relationship with her mother was probably no better than his.

"Raven, please. And yes. Cassandra, if you need anything, you have Eyleno's number." Raven got to her feet and bowed, helping the pregnant elf to stand.

"Thank you for coming, Raven. I believe that this will be a moment in our history that we will not forget." Cassandra leaned forward and placed a kiss on her forehead. "I will see you soon. My due date is only two weeks away."

"I know. Again, anything and I will have your grandson haul me here immediately."

She chuckled. "I promise. Have a good trip home."

Rodrick assisted them to the car, opening doors and the trunk to help Eyleno's flight.

Raven nodded politely to him and slid into the passenger seat while he held her door open. Trolls. Trolls and elves. She looked down at her arm where the throb reminded her that goblins were real as well. This was a whole new world and she was only beginning to see it.



## Chapter Four

Raven checked in with three of her clients when she got home, updating her records with all new symptoms and events in their lives.

Eyleno was back in her kitchen, puttering around, creating a series of fascinating scents that crossed blueberry muffins with chocolate. It wasn't a scent that she would have normally found interesting, but it caught her attention today.

When she rounded the corner to see her counters and sink covered with baked goods of every description. She stared. "Whoa. What is all this?"

"The magical community will greet you more warmly if you come bearing sweets. We are all nuts for sugar." He finished the batter he was working on and spooned it into muffin tins.

"Do I have that many muffin tins?"

"No. I brought these along. My cousin opened a bakery and has been teaching me the rudiments of the culinary arts." He grinned at her and she reached up to swipe the smear of flour off his cheek.

The electricity that jumped between them at the contact made her blink. It was very different from what she had felt when she touched Cassandra. The energy along her skin when she touched Eyleno's skin had a much more personal reach.

They both stood vibrating with tension until his cell phone

went off. His hands were rinsed and he answered as if he wanted to break the fleeting intimacy they had enjoyed.

"Yes, yes, elder. The utmost solemnity. I will let her know." He was nodding while tidying up her kitchen with peculiar speed.

He closed the phone and returned it to his shirt pocket. "You are needed at the birthing of a dryad." He kept cleaning her kitchen as she watched from the safety of the doorway.

"When will we be needed?"

"She is in the beginning stages now, her family is surrounding her, so we have a few hours, why?"

"We need to hit the sporting goods section of the mall. I need a few items and they will be easiest to find there."

"Like what?"

"A camelback. Baby receiving blankets wrapped in plastic." She had done her reading. "A few other choice items that I might need."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I think I see where you are going with this. That is very sneaky."

She grinned. "Thank you. I will get my bags. You finish cleaning this up and selecting something that a tree would enjoy."

He held up a plate with a triumphant smile. "Blueberry muffins it is."

Chuckling, she retrieved everything she needed for a standard birth and then anything she could think of for a birth in the woods.

By the time she was ready, so was he. "Your chariot awaits."

"It had better not be a chariot." She was muttering to herself as she took the muffins and he took the bags. "Let's hit the mall."

Their shopping trip was short, Eyleneo mercifully put on a knit cap to hide his ears and he cleverly distracted the sales

clerk so Raven could make her purchases. Wool and cotton blankets wrapped in plastic made for the perfect un-enchantable baby gift. She bought enough for nine babies and simply smiled when the clerk made clever comments. The camelback was out of season, so she got it on sale, the ideal item for a mother that needed constant watering.

"Do you have everything you need?" Eyleneo crooked one brow at her.

"I do. Let's get going." She straightened her coat and gloves.

He took her parcels and stowed them in his car. Despite the appearance of a sports car, his vehicle had an enormous storage capacity.

She placed the tray of muffins back into her lap as soon as she buckled up. If he was going to go through a portal again, she didn't want to take chances.

He put the car into drive and pulled smoothly into traffic. "We will arrive in a warmer climate, don't be surprised. The high elder is attending this birth, so she will expect a certain protocol."

"Like what?"

"Don't touch any of the dryads who are not your patient. Be polite when you ask for even the smallest item. I cannot stress how important that is. I cannot enter the birthing area, so make sure you bring all items you need with you."

Raven swallowed. Alone in an enclave full of dryads. She didn't even know what a dryad looked like.

Before she could work up a good head of panic, a spiralling light formed in front of the car. Static coated the exterior and they went from bright winter snow to lush green forest on a sunny afternoon.

Eyleneo hit the brakes and Raven gripped the muffins tightly as the car swung to a stop. Her seatbelt worked like a charm.

With shaking hands, she unbuckled the harness and Eyleno stopped her and squeezed her hand. "It will be fine. Ora is a calm dryad, a good one, she will help you as much as she can while you bring her daughter into the world."

She grinned. "Just give them the muffins first."

"Give them to the elder."

"How will I know who is the elder?"

"You will know. Now get going. They won't come to you while you are in the car."

She nodded and opened the car door. Raven slid from the car and held the muffins carefully, placing them on the roof of the car while she dug in the trunk for her kits and the specialty items. She was wishing for an extra hand when a set of chestnut brown hands reached out to assist her.

*Be polite.* "Thank you."

The woman had an elegant figure, bark-like skin and green hair. The coronet of oak leaves was the clue to her status. "Thank you, Elder."

The crinkling of the old dryad's skin helped Raven relax. The smile was genuine, for all it seemed foreign to the creature. "Welcome to our forest, Raven."

"Thank you, Elder."

"Mothwing. Ylen Mothwing. You may call me Elder Ylen."

Raven smiled and stood straight. Somehow, it seemed more appropriate than bowing to a tree. "Thank you again, Elder Ylen."

"You are very welcome, Midwife Raven. This way please." The elder shouldered one of the bags and began to drift into the forest.

Raven quickly gathered the bags and the muffins and followed. Eyleno could close his own car trunk.

The oaks gathered around her, the dark scents of leaf litter, mulch and rich dark earth were everywhere.

A wide circle of huge oaks was lined with women in a variety of ages and stages of dress. In the center of the circle was a hugely pregnant woman, kneeling and swaying. Her nut brown skin was completely exposed and she looked to the elder with huge dark eyes.

"Ora, this is Midwife Raven. Raven, this is my daughter, Ora." The elder put the bag down near the woman and brushed her fingers across the labouring dryad's brow.

The woman was swaying in the throes of a contraction, rocking and nodding. Her voice was husky. "Welcome to our forest, Raven. You come highly recommended."

Raven carefully lowered her bags and offered the muffins to Elder Ylen. "A gift for the witnesses to the birth."

The delight in her expression as she took the sweets was something that Raven was going to pass along to the baking elf waiting for her back in the car.

"Elder Ylen, is there a water source nearby?"

Ylen looked a little surprised that Raven didn't immediately jump at the patient that she was presented with, but she played along. "Rasi, please lead our midwife to the spring."

"Thank you, Elder Ylen, Rasi." She scooped up the camelback and followed the young dryad who stepped forward. "Ora, I will return in a moment. You look a little dry."

Relief flared in Ora's eyes as her mind focussed on the word dry. Water was coming, the hope was in her eyes.

The path was relatively short. The spring looked refreshing in the light that flickered through the leaves. Raven knelt at the stream and before she lowered her item into it, she looked to Rasi. "May I use the water?"

"Yes, you may. Good thing you asked, the spring can close at will. Naiads are temperamental."

Raven raised an eyebrow and slowly lowered the bag into

the water, filling it. She removed it from the spring and poured the water around the base of the trees. They probably had all they needed, but it didn't hurt to water the local sentient plant life.

She returned to the spring and lowered the bag again, this time sealing it. "Rasi, can you lead me back to Ora?"

"Someone briefed you on etiquette." Rasi was smiling, but helped her to her feet.

"It's a steep learning curve. I am doing the best that I can. The variety of societal traditions is rather intimidating."

Rasi smiled and put her arm around Raven's shoulders. "You will get through it. You seem to have all the right instincts."

"Why didn't anyone water Ora?"

"The Elder ordered us not to, as a test."

Raven kept a smile on her face and stifled a curse internally. A test. So, this was the way it was going to be.

She hoisted her water bag and re-entered the circle. Ora was still swaying, so Raven walked up to her with the bag, pulled the tube out, opened the spigot and let a cool spray of water flow over Ora's face.

With a blissfully relieved look, Ora opened her mouth and took the tube into it. She drank thirstily and a murmur of relief went through the crowd. The dryad's skin started to shine, her hair brightened and her swaying picked up speed.

The circled closed in.

"Elder Ylen, is there one who would be able to hold this bag so that she can continue to drink?"

Ylen beckoned and Rasi stepped forward again.

"Thank you, Elder Ylen, Rasi. Rasi, hold the bag here and here. Ora will be able to take in what she wishes." Raven closed the hose with the clip to allow only a steady trickle of water through. She tucked the hose between Ora's teeth and then turned to tend her patient.

She snapped on nitrile gloves and laid out her supplies. Finally ready, she extended her hand, then paused. "Ora, may I examine you?"

The nod sent a ripple of relief through her. She quickly checked dilation and she was able to fit four fingers in the vaginal canal. The baby's head was also coming quickly. It was going to be quick.

"Ora, you might know this, but you are doing great. The child is almost here."

Ora smiled and spoke through clenched teeth. "Thank you for the water. My labour was stalling."

"I was given enough of a briefing to know you needed it. If I read the book correctly, once the baby is born, the afterbirth will be taken to be planted in the woods, becoming her tree?"

Ora nodded. "You study quickly."

Raven smiled and kept one hand measuring progress while the other massaged Ora's belly, finding and making sure that all the limbs were pointed in the right direction.

"After being bitten by an infant goblin, study was first on my list before attending another paranormal birth."

Ora was swaying faster. Raven was flat on the ground and when the baby dropped, she was ready. A fine healthy girl landed in her palms and after she rubbed the baby lightly, a gurgling cry started.

She handed the baby to Ora with a grin. "Congratulations."

The dazed mother put the baby to her breast and after some snuffling, it latched on to nurse.

Raven massaged Ora's belly and the placenta fell into her hand. "Elder Ylen, I believe that your tradition requires this."

The elder took the afterbirth and walked off with several older dryads.

Raven was busy with the mother, making sure that her

bleeding slowed to almost nothing before she asked to see the baby again. With a grin, she wrapped the baby in one of the leaf green cotton receiving blankets.

"I don't think you need blankets, but it is my tradition. Besides, it suits her."

"May I lie down?"

"Of course. Rasi, would you help me, please?"

They each took an arm and helped to ease Ora to her back. A hillock of grass rose under her, turning the ground into a couch. Raven chatted with Ora for a half hour. Her body healed rapidly, all signs of birthing gone in a fraction of the time labour had taken.

"You did very well for your first dryad birth." Ora was smiling brilliantly. Her body recovered and the camelback almost completely depleted.

"Thank you. You did excellently as well considering the experiment. How long would they have let you go on?"

"Only until sundown. That was the agreement. We needed to be sure that you would abide by our traditions and be able to assist our females even when there was no elder available to steer things along."

"And I did well?"

"You did very well. What is this thing? Each dryad enclave should have one or something like it." She patted the camelback with one hand.

"It's called a camelback. Used by hikers and cyclists to give them large amounts of portable water."

"It's wonderful."

"I will see about having one delivered after I am gone, in case your next pregnant dryad does not want my company."

Ora chuckled sleepily and caressed her daughter's cheek. "I doubt that. You managed to do the job that normally takes four of my kind. You stay with me while the afterbirth is planted so I don't feel so alone. It's a very good set up. I will



recommend you to all the trees in this hemisphere.”

Raven tried not to blush—she knew it looked horrible. “Thank you. May I ask where is your tree?”

Ora chuckled. “It is next to the spring. You watered it before you returned to me. The gesture is very much appreciated.”

Rasi grinned. “See, I told you, you have the instincts for this.”

Raven grinned and reached for Ora’s hand, only to see the glove still in place. “May I touch you without the gloves?”

“Thank you for asking. Yes.”

She stripped off her gloves and checked Ora’s pulse, then peeked in on the little one’s already healing belly button. “How long until you name her?”

“She already has a name. It will be announced when she meets her tree. Tradition.” Ora yawned.

The elder returned and laid a hand on Raven’s shoulder. “Your job here is done. Well done, Midwife Raven. We will call on you again when we have need.”

“I look forward to it, Elder Ylen.” She stood up and cleared all of her scattered materials. In the heat of the moment, she simply grabbed and used, she did not pause and assess. A flicker of text ran through her mind. “Would you like to dispose of the bloody items, Elder Ylen?”

“Yes, thank you. Bundle them and we will destroy them in a safe and traditional manner.”

Following orders, she created a tight bundle of bloody swabs and gauze. Her gloves were included. They would not burn, but she hoped that the dryads would not take offence to them.

She collected her bags and left after giving her farewells to the elder, the mother, baby and Rasi.

The sun was setting and she was stumbling through the dimming light, sighing in relief as she clapped eyes on her

companion's car. The trunk released as she approached and she dumped her bags in with a sigh. Exhausted and cranky, she sat next to him, grinning tiredly. "Hey, Eyleno. Did you keep busy?"

"I have an ereader on my cell phone. Can we go?"

"We can. I really need a quiet evening and a hot bath."

"No luck on that. You have been called again. There is a troll in labour and she wants you."

Raven said the only thing she could. "Balls."

## Chapter Five

The troll community had a certain pungent aroma.

“Does it matter that we don’t have muffins?”

Eyleno smirked and elbowed her in the ribs as they were led into the house of the labouring troll. The racks of meat hanging in the kitchen and halls were indicative of a high-protein diet.

The trolls were a fascinating people. Some were grey, some green, some a sickly yellow. Most of them sported jutting teeth, tusks or blistered flesh.

Raven kept her back straight and held onto her bags, hoping that she had enough supplies to get through this day. “Can you come in with me?”

“Into the labour room? Yes. The trolls actually have drinking contests that culminate as the contractions progress. Every time she screams, they take a shot.”

Raven’s mouth tightened, but traditions were traditions.

A troll moved to block their path and a scream echoed from the other side of a closed door. “Is this it?”

Eyleno nodded. “This is the midwife.”

“She doesn’t look like much.”

Raven heard a moan from the other side of the door and stepped forward until the troll backed away. They had predominantly yellow eyes, so her red eyes must have stood out as she glared at him until he opened the door. The door itself was huge, five feet wide and ten feet tall, easy access for

even the tallest trolls.

Raven drew in a sharp breath, but strode forward, through the crowd that melted as her white hair caught the breeze from the open window. Her hair swirled free of the braid she put it into while delivering Ora's baby. Her all-black clothing provided stark contrast as well as a convenient camouflage for bloodstains.

With her bags and the glowing elf at her heels, she obviously was projecting something that her human patients didn't see. The male trolls muttered and backed out of her way, finally allowing her to see the woman seated in the birthing chair.

It was definitely a woman, a sack of loose clothing was draped over her shoulders and she strained to push the infant out of her womb. The woman seemed young and no one was helping her.

With all the carousing going on around them, she was sure that no one really gave a rat's ass about the woman giving birth. Women were drinking along with the men and as soon as the mother-to-be groaned, everyone called out and drank from tankards.

She dropped her bags next to the woman and touched her forehead. The grey skin was cool and Raven had no idea if that was normal. "Hello."

The yellow eyes were bloodshot and the woman grunted. "Who are you?"

"The midwife. I was called. My name is Raven. What is yours?"

"Caleg."

"Pleased to meet you, Caleg. Is this your first?"

The troll grunted. "First and last. This isn't working."

Raven had to stop her somehow. "Stop pushing, Caleg. Wait until I examine you and we will see what is holding up the process."

Caleg looked as if it was a struggle, "I will try."

"Good. Save your strength. We will try and get this show on the road." Gloves smacked into her palms as Eyleno was laying out her kit.

She gloved up and then knelt next to the birthing chair, reaching up and finding a foot where a head should be. Damn it. "Caleg, your baby is coming out backward. I need for you to not push. Do you hear me? Don't!"

Eyleno looked at her. "What do you need?"

"Lube. This isn't going to be fun."

As she covered her hand in the slick stuff, she noticed the audience out of the corner of her eye. "Fuck 'em."

Caleg's eyes widened and she laughed.

"Now, Caleg, I need you to breathe in short pants. This might hurt and I don't want you to tense up. Relax, breathe normally and then short pants. Okay?"

"Yes, Raven, and, Raven?"

She looked up from between the grey scaly thighs, "Yes?"

"Thank you."

The genuine relief at not being alone shone in her eyes. It was the look that had driven her to be a midwife, seen in the eyes of a friend when she was a teenager.

Sunny had been a statistic, a mother at seventeen. Raven had been the only friend who answered her panicked call when her water broke. She had accompanied Sunny to her room while they waited for her parents and when her tiny son had made his way into the world far too early for the doctor's rounds, Raven had been the only one there.

Nurses had ignored the teen's escalating screams, one had murmured about pain being punishment for sin. The baby had been a little blue, but Raven had rubbed him with a blanket and when he squalled and turned red, she ran for a doctor.

Sunny had kept her son, had three more when she married

her high school sweetheart five years later, but named her firstborn Dexter Hartford.

Raven was seeing that same look of hope and pain in Caleg's eyes that she had seen in Sunny's.

With determination, she reached up and felt around for the partner to the little foot. She found two. She asked casually, "Eyleno, how many feet do trolls have?"

He nodded. "Caleg, who is the father?"

"A goblin. Gregack."

"Yes, Raven, it's perfectly normal."

She exhaled in relief and lowered the third leg into position. With its legs pointing downward and fully lubed up, the little one was ready for its exit.

"Caleg, push when you need to. Now it's all you."

A ripple across her belly forewarned Raven. She kept chanting encouragement to Caleg as the little feet made their way into the world. As soon as they slipped free, she spread her fingers to catch the little one.

It was a day for baby girls. Three legged or not. This baby was not breathing. She slipped her finger into the mouth to clear it. Tiny teeth grazed her glove and she quickly withdrew it. "The bulb."

She used the bulb to suction out the nostrils and then turned the little girl onto her stomach. She rubbed the back and patted it until a cough broke the silence. A shock of blood red hair crowned the tiny girl and as her fists waved and feet started kicking, Raven knew she was crying as she handed that precious bundle to her mother. "Caleg, your daughter."

"A girl? Oh thank the gods." She sighed in relief and took the baby into her arms.

Raven quickly tied the cord and cut it, tugging gently to release the afterbirth.

A red-haired goblin who seemed to have been on the

wrong side of a beating pushed his way to their side.

"Gregack, I presume?"

The trolls were looking confused.

"I am. Thank you for coming. They were going to let her die." He stroked Caleg's hair and she leaned back against him.

"Can you take her somewhere safe?"

"Now that the child is obviously mine, yes. Her family was refusing my claim, but now it is irrefutable that this is my child." He lowered his fingers and caressed the tiny mouth, wincing as she bit down on his fingers for first blood.

"Thank goodness. One goblin bite per week is all that I am allowed." She winked at Gregack and he let out a barking laugh.

Raven leaned forward and checked the bleeding situation. The dark blood was moving sluggishly, but steadily. "She should be fine, but there may be some damage. She needs a...healer...I guess?"

Gregack was watching Caleg coo and caress their daughter. "The healer at my village is good. We will carry them home."

The *we* he referred to was half a dozen goblins of almost human size. They stomped through the silent trolls and reached Caleg and her baby.

Raven cleaned Caleg up as best she could to ease her travelling. The goblins took the afterbirth and threw it into the fire, causing hissing from the trolls.

Eyleno leaned forward, "The troll fathers eat the afterbirth. This is a statement that the child is goblin."

She packed up everything she could reach and Eyleno got the rest. This was not a happy collection of birth witnesses. Raven watched the goblins turn a blanket into a stretcher and slowly they paced out of the troll-filled room without a word. Gregack held his daughter and once she was sure that they

were safe. Raven stood, lifted her bags up and walked behind them.

She put her anger at the near-death of Caleg and her daughter into her eyes. Trolls melted out of her way. Eyleno directed her back to the vehicle with light nudges on her arm or back.

Raven was beyond exhausted, but she still took the time to scrub the blood and fluids off her hands before she got into his car. When she was done, she closed the trunk and took her place in the passenger seat. "Home, Jeeves."

He snorted. "Yes, madam." He put the car in gear and slung gravel as they drove back through a portal and cruised through her hometown as if the day had been filled with regular births.

Her home looked remarkably calm, an oasis in the weirdness of her day. The residual scent of baking filled the air and she didn't speak, just headed for a shower.

The hot water coursed over her and she let the tears fall. Caleg's daughter had been on the edge of death and Caleg had not been far behind. Prenatal examinations might have identified the problem of the third leg, but with troll traditions being so vile, Raven felt overwhelmed.

She scrubbed the last of the blood off her arms and the tops of her thighs. A loofa to her spine was the indulgence that she needed, but why were her hands on the tile wall and a slow scrub moving down her spine and buttocks?

"Eyleno, this is a little weird."

"You have had a rough day. You need some assistance and I have no objection to giving it." His voice was low and calming and she sighed as he swapped the loofa for a soft puff.

She stood quietly as his hands roamed all over her, tending her carefully. When she was spotless, he lifted her from the shower, stood her on the bathmat and turned to



shut off the water. Eyleno wrapped her in a towel and dried her carefully. There was heat in his touch, but she was too tired to do more than enjoy the prickles of warmth that his fingers caused.

She yawned and let him lead her to the bedroom where her bedding was lying in tidy order. She knew she hadn't done it. She never had time to make her bed. The phone rang and off she went.

She never slept naked, but he tucked her between the sheets and pressed a kiss to her forehead. Her stomach rumbled, but she was too tired to be concerned. In moments, she slept.

## Chapter Six

She didn't have a teddy bear or other stuffed animals in her bed, so why was she curled up against something? When that something snuffled and shifted, her eyes opened to see Eyleneo's nicely muscled chest under her cheek and hands.

The column of his neck was even more impressive when he wasn't wearing a shirt. His pecs led to the column and from there the line of his jaw pointed right up to the tip of his pointy ear. Unable to resist, she used a finger to caress his ear softly, testing the strength of the tissue under her touch.

His brilliant blue eyes were looking at her the moment she made contact. The sheet tented as well and she made the connection between ear contact and the sudden erection. She sat up and snatched her hand away. Her voice was husky with sleep, "Sorry about that."

He reached out and took her fingers in his own, bringing them to his lips. He kissed and sucked the tip of each finger until she was squirming for freedom. Each tug caused an answering twinge low in her belly. As soon as he relinquished her fingers, she blushed furiously. "I am sorry. I won't touch your ears again."

Eyleneo chuckled. "It wasn't a punishment. Merely tit for tat. The same sort of reaction that you have when parts of you are sucked is the same reaction I have when *you* touch my ears in that manner."

"Why are you in bed with me?"

"The temperature dipped and I don't know where your thermostat is."

She sighed and flipped the sheet away so she could get her legs out of bed. She was still nude, but he had already seen what she had to offer and her chalky magnificence obviously did not stir him to mind-blanking passion.

The heat was indeed set low. It was on a timer for the times when she was gone for more time than a timer cycle. Raven manually turned the heat up and then skittered back into bed with Eyleno, pulling the sheets over them both, followed by the large fluffy comforter she kept on hand.

He spooned against her back and it felt so nice she let him. With his body against hers and the heat increasing in the house, she slept like a log.

Four hours later, Raven sat in her office with her feet up on the desk while she talked with a patient that was due in three months.

"No, Miranda, it is nothing that you have done, I simply think that your needs would be met better by a midwife closer to your home. Cynthia is very good and comes highly recommended."

The strident voice on the other end of the line hit a high pitch.

"No, Miranda, I have a family matter to attend to. It interrupts at odd times and it isn't fair to my clients or their families. I am very sorry, but once you meet with Cynthia, I will transfer the fees you have already paid to me to her. Including your files." Raven sighed. "No, it won't cost extra. I am simply sending my clients to the most competent midwives I know in their area. All fees and retainers will be forwarded."

Miranda got reasonable and asked for the new midwife's number. Raven smiled and gave her what she needed. The

three midwives she had contacted were all ready and willing to take on her few patients.

When the call was over, she stretched and looked around her. "Well, Eyleno. My practice is now a human-free zone. I don't want any of them to stumble in here if I have a paranormal in for a check-up."

He was prepping breakfast and when she took her spot at the table, he loaded up her plate. "You didn't eat yesterday."

"I think a chunk of muffin flew down my throat when we landed in the dryad forest."

He snorted. "That doesn't count." He scooped fluffy scrambled eggs onto her plate next to the bacon. "Now, if you said that you swallowed a blueberry, I would reconsider."

She watched him putter around the kitchen and noticed how genuinely happy he seemed. "You like working in the kitchen, don't you?"

"Yes. When I grew up, we always had servants of the troll or goblin persuasion. Many taught me to cook their traditional dishes, but I enjoy human cooking. It's both complex and appealing." He assembled his own plate and sat next to her at the small, round table in her kitchen.

She pondered the differences in their races for a moment while she stuffed her face. Unlike most males of her own race, Eyleno could cook. Raven stood and retrieved her supplements, taking some iron and a multivitamin with her orange juice.

"Why do you take those?" He seemed genuinely curious.

"With the albinism comes pernicious anaemia." She grimaced as she swallowed.

"How do you take to being so different from the rest of your species?"

Not many had ever asked her that question. "When I was little, I was called a spook and a variety of other creative

names. My parents were confused by my condition and it was only when I became a teen that they seemed to realize I was not going to grow out of it."

Eyleno snorted and shook his head at that. "I understand that better than you think. I specialized in portals because I wanted to get away from my family. They always wanted me to join a council, work in politics. By the time they realized that it was not in my path, there was almost a century wasted."

That made her blink. "How old are you?"

With a lusty twinkle in his blue eyes, he lifted one of her hands to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "Old enough."

"That isn't an answer."

"It's all the answer you are going to get today."

She scowled at him. "Fine. What do you do for fun?"

He tilted his head. "Out in the human world? I have no idea."

She drummed her fingers on the table and tried to think of her options. "We could go ice skating or tobogganing."

"The first involves steel blades?"

"It does. The second involves jumping on a wooden or plastic sled and hurtling down a hill into a snow bank."

His eyes brightened a little. "That sounds fascinating."

"Do you have some insulated boots, thick gloves and a parka?"

"I do."

"Then let's go. There is a great hill two miles north of town."

She stomped into her own heavy boots, got her thick outer gear out of the closet and opened her garage. Eyleno was behind her, wearing earmuffs and black winter gear. His hair seemed blindingly gold in the daylight. *Damn he's pretty.*

Shaking off her dazed admiration before he noticed it,

Raven reached up and grabbed her sleds. It was strange for a single woman her age to have sleds, but to hell with it, she liked sledding. With an evil grin, she grabbed the snow disk and the Crazy Carpet. If he wanted to know what rocketing down a hill was like, spinning out of control at incredible speeds would do it.

"Is that all or did you want to bring the rest of the garage with you?" Eyleneo took the sled, toboggan and plastic sliders to his car.

With a gleeful grin, she took what she was now thinking of as her place in his car. Buckling up, she waited for him to get behind the wheel and start his car.

"Now, where am I going?" He started the car and smoothly backed out of her driveway.

She gave him directions to the park with the hill and they parked near, but at her suggestion, a decent distance from the sliding area.

"Why did we park so far when there are spaces right there?" His breath formed a cloud of fog as he spoke.

"Watch that toboggan full of kids." Five kids were piled onto the aluminum sled and as Raven and Eyleneo watched, they came down the hill, across the flat area where most of the children stopped, up the side near the parking area and into a parking spot.

"Oh. I see. What should we use first?"

Raven took the toboggan. "Take your pick."

She walked up the hill with the string tugging with every step. The air was just cold enough to remind her it was winter, but the sun warmed her face as she walked.

Eyleneo sprinted past her up the hill, waiting until she arrived to take his seat on the disk. Pink bloomed under his golden skin and quite a few women with children threw him sighing glances.

"You sit on the disk, grab the handles and scoot forward

until you start to slide down the hill. When you stop, you come back to the top and do it all over again.” Raven positioned herself on the toboggan, but waited to watch him as he followed her instructions and slowly made his way off the flat top and down the hill.

His laughter rang out, catching the attention of every female ear in the vicinity. Heads turned and watched as he spun and spun on his way down.

Raven took her turn, revelling in the wind on her face and the speed of the trip. When she slowed to a stop, Eyleno walked over to her, helped her to her feet and pressed a smiling kiss on her lips.

“What was that for?”

“Introducing me to something new.” He took her toboggan string from her and hauled both their conveyances up the hill with a loping stride.

He went down twice more on the disk before he noticed that most toboggans were shared and told her so.

“Fine. We can ride down together. Put your disk in the car.” She was huffing a little as she hiked up the hill, but he caught up to her just as she reached the top.

“Who goes in front?”

“It doesn’t matter. The person in back is responsible for shoving off though.”

“You sit in front then.”

Raven winced, but moved into position. “Sit behind me. Wrap your legs around my waist and after you push off, wrap your arms around me. If you don’t, we will separate when we hit that bump in the middle of the run.”

She could feel the evil grin running across his face. If he hadn’t looked so cutely dorky in those earmuffs, she would have smacked them off his head.

“Is this a common human activity?”

“Yes. But it doesn’t mean anything.” The anything she was

referring to was now firmly pressed against her tailbone.

"I beg to differ. This is more fun for the sake of fun than I have had in a long time." He wrapped his long legs around her waist, wrapped one arm across her chest and when they started sliding, the other arm held her tightly against him.

The feel of him was her focus. She didn't notice the pack of kids that went flying as their added weight gave their toboggan momentum that they would not otherwise have had sliding far into the *safe* range. When they skidded to a stop in the parking lot, she was breathing heavily and so was he.

They had been sitting in their entwined tableau for over a minute when a child's shriek broke their introspection. Eyleno unwrapped himself and helped her free of the sled.

"I think that's enough for today."

He nodded wordlessly.

They tramped back to the car, dusted off the excess snow and were on their way back to her home in a matter of minutes. Schoolchildren were out on holiday break and they were everywhere.

When they arrived at her home, she took half the sledding gear and put it back in her garage. Eyleno completed her collection. She took her coat and gloves off with shaking hands, the laces of her boots frozen solid.

Everything was focussed on the minute tasks at hand. Raven knew that if she looked at Eyleno, all would be lost. She bit her lip as one bootlace finally came free. She was about to reach for the other when he was there to help her. Their fingers tangled on the laces and that peculiar electric shock ran through her, heating but not hurting.

As he looked up at her in surprise, his cheeks still flushed from cold, she brushed her hand along one of those high cheekbones for the pleasure of the tingle against her skin.

His fingers worked without him watching and he soon



drew her boot from her foot. The moment she was free, he surged to his feet and kissed her, pressing her back against the wall and lifting her at the same time.

She wrapped her legs around his hips in a parody of their earlier position and hung on for dear life.

Her clothing fell at random as Eyleno worked to free her from it. He walked with her to the bedroom and left her nothing but skin and her long white hair. His own clothes disappeared in a whisper, magic at work.

A condom was an anachronistic addition to her elf, but he stood before her, letting her look her fill. When she reached out to touch in a very sensitive area, his growl preceded his tumbling her to the bed by seconds.

The tingling where their bodies touched was pronounced. When he entered her and they found their rhythm, it became a visible spark as they rubbed and stroked.

His hands touched and he shifted position to bring her sensation after sensation. As his fingers stroked between them, she heard her own voice cry out and the sparks flew to a frenzied pitch. He followed her into climax with a hoarse shout and a shudder that seemed to go on forever.

Part of her snickered and as he relaxed and turned to watch her, he asked, "Why the smile?"

"Definitely old enough."

His chuckle was warm in her ear, but when she turned, he was gone to the bathroom to tidy up with the condom. He was back in less than two minutes and snuggled against her. He held her tightly and wrapped one well-muscled thigh around her hips. "This was all I could think of on the way down that hill."

She rocked her hips back against him, feeling him twitch. "Me, too."

A voice from the open bedroom door made them jump. "Isn't this cozy? Midwife, I hate to interrupt, but there is an

emergency.”

A small woman stood in the doorway, her body sheathed in fabric covered with metal and there was a definite tang of metal and fire around her.

Raven groaned. “A moment of privacy and I will be right out.”

Eyleno closed his eyes. “Does that happen often?”

“To midwives...yes. The babies come when they come. Do I have dwarves standing in my hallway a lot? No. Not until I met you.” She flipped the bedding back and looked for her clothing. The outerwear was still in the hall, so she decided on a change more suited to a delivery.

What did one wear to meet with dwarves?

## Chapter Seven

Inside her living room, Raven watched the dwarf woman as if she was a bomb. "What do you mean we have to go without the car? I don't think that will work."

The woman who had identified herself as the Royal Healer of the Rocky Mountain dwarves bowed. "I have heard of your conditions. We have created a net to assist you. Gather your supplies. Time is of the essence."

Eyleno quickly gathered the bags from her office. "I am ready."

"You were not invited, elf." She managed to make the term *elf* sound like it had four letters instead of three.

"I am the midwife's attendant. She does not travel without me." He crossed his arms over his chest, his muscles threatening to tear through his t-shirt.

"Yes, I have seen how close you two are."

He asked the smaller woman, "What is your name, Healer?"

"Magatha. Now. Stand together and I will throw the net."

Eyleno scowled. "I will place the net over Raven and carry her through the portal. If it is as urgent as you say, we don't have any time to lose."

She looked like she wanted to argue, but handed him a ball of silver.

"Raven, keep still, I have to cover you with this to make it through a portal with you."

"Faraday cage. Got it." She held still as the glittering mesh covered her from head to foot. It didn't have any weight, but she could feel light snagging on her hair.

When Eyleno took her in his arms, the prickle of sensation rippled between them, but only a slight smile crossed his lips as she settled in.

He cleared his throat. "We are ready."

"More than ready if my guess is correct. Come along." Magatha raised her arms and opened a glowing disk right there in Raven's living room.

They stepped through the portal into a tight-fitting tunnel. Magatha led the way with a short gesture.

Eyleno stopped in a taller hallway to remove the netting. "Sorry about that."

"It's okay. I understand. Your grandmother was very thorough in her explanation." Raven patted her hair into place and the harsh clearing of a throat got her attention. A male dwarf who looked like he chewed his way through the rock next to them scowled at her.

"You are the magic-less midwife?"

"Yes. Raven Dexter. You are?"

"King Eighator of the Rocky Mountain Dwarves. My daughter is in distress with her first child and we have been told that you are the best at what you do."

She bowed at the compliment. "Take me to her and we will see."

He nodded. "Good answer. This way."

She followed him through hall after hall in the underground village. "These are Nadith's private rooms. She has refused to see anyone today and we are worried. You go in and then come out to tell me what is wrong with her."

Raven raised her eyebrow at that. "Your healer hasn't had any luck?"

"Nadith refuses to talk to her."

Raven nodded. "Can you open the door for me?"

"It isn't locked."

She blinked and took her bags from Eyleneo. "Wait for me here."

The door eased open and Raven took a few steps into the dim room. She closed the door behind her and dropped one bag against it.

"Hello? Nadith?"

"Go away." The voice came from the depths of the large canopied bed.

"I can't do that. I live far away and can't get there without help."

A small face peeped out of the covers. "You are human."

"I am."

"You don't look right."

"I am an albino. I have no magic and the magic does not stick to me. Apparently, this makes me a good candidate to work with pregnant paranormals."

"Really?" The small figure shifted under the sheets.

"Nadith? How pregnant are you?"

"I am seven months along. I will give birth in the next month or so if..."

This was the crux of the matter. "If what, Nadith?"

Tears burst from her. "It stopped moving. I think it is dead inside me."

"Oh, Nadith. May I examine you?"

The young dwarf woman nodded and sat up a little in the bed.

"May I use some of my monitors?"

"Whatever you like. What is your name?"

She fished out her monitors and stethoscope. "Raven Dexter. You can call me Raven."

Nadith was small, but her heartbeat was strong. As she strapped on the monitor, Raven asked, "When did you last

feel it move?"

"Two days ago. Its father left and it stopped moving. Is it all right?"

Nadith's pulse was strong and so was the baby's. "It's fine. Babies can sense when you are upset. How long will the father be gone?"

"He promised to be back when the baby arrived, but I don't know how long he will be off on the assignment my father sent him on." Nadith stroked her belly with one small hand. "Oh, it kicked!"

"It was just waiting for you to calm down." Raven did a full examination with Nadith in a relieved and receptive mood. "Do you want a boy or a girl?"

"A little boy would be nice."

During the exam, Raven found a few interesting things out about dwarves that were not covered in her book. As in the smaller humans, the internal organs shifted, but in the case of dwarves, they shifted completely. Lungs were high, the heart was under the collarbone and the majority of stomach and intestines were also tucked under the ribs, leaving the entire abdomen for the baby.

The kicking became wild, showing on the skin of its mother.

"Ow...I am guessing it likes you." Nadith chuckled.

"Will you come out and reassure your father and the healer?"

"Can you help me into clothing?"

"Of course. I am a full-service midwife." She winked and helped the mother-to-be out of bed.

It took them a few minutes, but as Raven finished slipping the shoes on the feet of her patient, she sat back happily. "There, you look wonderful."

Nadith beamed. "Thank you. I haven't been able to reach my feet in months."

"It happens. No matter what the species, women lose their feet eventually." Raven stood and used a brush to tidy the dwarf's hair.

She moved her bag out of the way, heaving it onto her shoulder as she opened the door to the front room.

Eyleno and the King were scowling at each other, but they broke up as the ladies entered the room. The king rushed forward and held his daughter's hands. "Nadith, is everything all right?"

"Yes, Papa. Raven's touch woke the baby up. Apparently, my distress over Rendor's leaving upset it. It stopped moving."

Eyleno took the bags from Raven with a low whisper, "Is everything really all right?"

"Yes. The baby is small but healthy. The mother is fine as well." Raven elbowed her companion and nodded as the healer entered the room. "Magatha. All is well here, but can I speak with you for a moment?"

The healer nodded and met her out in the hall. Raven leaned against the wall and looked down at the healer. "Why did you send for me?"

Magatha scowled. "The king insisted. I suspected that it was a state of depression, but I wasn't sure without examining her and that she would not allow."

"You knew there was nothing wrong."

"As I stated, I could not be sure without an exam. I have to admit, I have been a little busy lately and was not able to build a rapport with her. She is young and insecure and this is her first. She needed more attention than I could give her and when her husband was sent off, she didn't have anyone to turn to."

It wasn't uncommon. The personal touch was what drove many women to midwives. "Can I keep the netting?"

Magatha grinned. "Yes. We will always send a messenger

though. Underground communications are spotty at best."

"I understand. You can send for me whenever Nadith needs me. I expect her to deliver early. The baby is heading into birthing position already."

Magatha looked surprised. "Is it?"

"It is. It's still floating and flipping, but it is head down and low in the pelvis." She smiled. "Keep an eye on her. Is there anything you can do to retrieve her husband?"

"I will work on it."

Raven winked. "Good, so will I. I will be prepared for a messenger, but please, don't send it into my bedroom. Knock first."

Magatha chuckled and patted her hand. "Will do. That is a sight no self-respecting dwarf every needs to see."

Snickering, Raven returned to the front room of Nadith's chambers. The young dwarf was sitting with her father holding her hand.

"Your Majesty, I believe that your daughter would do much better with her husband nearby. Is there any way to bring him home? The likelihood of an early delivery would be reduced if she was no longer under this kind of stress."

The corners of his mouth tightened. "I will consider it."

"As your daughter's health is at stake, I am glad." Raven looked to Eyleno. "I believe that my work here is completed for the day."

The king's voice was harsh. "I don't think that you should leave my daughter. She trusts you."

Nadith nodded hopefully.

"And I am grateful for it. But the truth is that if the communication restrictions are in place by being underground, there could be another woman in distress right now and I wouldn't know it. Being without contact could injure someone."

Nadith nodded sadly. "I understand. I just wish I didn't



feel so alone.”

“That is usually what a husband is for.” She placed her hand on Nadith’s shoulder and squeezed lightly.

The king frowned, but Raven stepped back to Eyleno. “Take me home.”

While the dwarves watched, Eyleno draped the metal mesh over her again. He scooped her into his arms and opened a pulsing gateway of light in front of her. He stepped through with her held tightly to his chest.

They both breathed a sigh of relief as her home formed around them. “Dwarves are intense.”

He chuckled and peeled the mesh from her, giving her a kiss that scorched her toes. “You have no idea.”

“Is there some dwarf-elf tension I should know about?”

He chuckled as he wadded the netting up, placing it into one of her travel bags. He disappeared into her office and she heard him restocking her bags.

Sighing, she wandered into her kitchen and took one of the casseroles out of the fridge to pop into the cold stove. As the oven heated, she made notes in her book on the size, shape and pulse of a gestating dwarf.

Her life’s turn for the weird was taking on a perverse regularity and as Eyleno joined her at the table, she had to admit that she had never been happier.

## Chapter Eight

After eight days of postnatal calls, prenatal calls and three deliveries, Raven had given in to the ridiculousness of her new situation and the astonishing amount of money that was building up in the account Cassandra had set up for her.

Eyleno slept in her bed when she had time to sleep and spent time in her bed when she needed together time.

They were in a steady, complementary rhythm and it was when Eyleno got his grandmother's call that things went sideways.

Raven was decorating the Xmas tree, putting the gingerbread men that Eyleno had crafted into a number of poses and shapes on the tree. She had the gingerbread men chasing gingerbread women around the tree. He had baked them with candy melted into their bodies in heart- and diamond-shaped patterns. Stained-glass gingerbread people.

Eyleno was watching her from the couch when his phone rang. "Grandmother? Started? We will be right there."

"We are ready to go?" She stood and brushed cookie dust off her jeans.

"I am if you are. Does it bother you to go out for a delivery on Christmas Eve?"

Raven crinkled her eyes in a smile. "Babies come when they come. Cassandra is in labour?"

"Yes. It has just started."

"Why is there such a fuss being made over this child?"

"This is her first boy. All the others were daughters."

She geared up in her winter togs. Trips to Cassandra's were always done by car, no direct transport was allowed inside the building.

They had their routine down to a fine science. Raven dressed herself on the way out and Eyleneo stripped her when they got home, shepherding her into a shower. What happened after that depended on her energy level.

She zipped up her coat, put on her gloves and followed him to the car.

The trip to Cassandra's took only minutes, but this time when they arrived, the house was decked out for Yule celebrations.

"Hey, Rodrick. How is it going?" Raven handed her coat to the troll butler and he took it with a smile and a nod.

"It is going very well. The guests will start arriving in a few hours and the log is ready for lighting."

Eyleneo grinned. "Is Grandfather here?"

"He is on his way. Now, both of you are expected. She is in the front room."

With a wink, Raven patted Rodrick on the shoulder as she passed. She came to a complete halt in the doorway to the front room at the image in front of her.

It seemed almost forever since she had run into a woman who called her during the onset of labour. "Hello, Cassandra, you look lovely."

The elf finished fussing with the greens and herbs on the mantelpiece and turned with a smile. "Merry Yule, Raven. It seems this child does not wish to miss the festivities."

Cassandra's deep green gown was edged with a thick layer of embroidery and gemstones. A flicker crossed her face as a contraction ran through her.

"How far apart are they, Cassandra?"

"A minute or so. Plenty of time." She smiled and

welcomed them with a tray of hot tea.

"You aren't having any?"

"Not this close to delivery. So, Eyleno, how has Raven been doing on the job?" Cassandra eased her way to the couch and sat on the edge.

"Well, I have been keeping track of the curses and hexes thrown at her and with nineteen thrown at Caleg's labour alone, she is doing perfectly fine." Eyleno sat next to his grandmother on the couch while Raven examined her eyes and touched her belly.

"So that was that weird tapping that I felt," she muttered as she tested the position of the infant.

"Yeah, some of those hexes were nasty, but your peculiar abilities were proved beyond a doubt."

Cassandra grinned at Raven. "And I have heard that you and my grandson have formed a working...partnership."

"Good word for it. We have a schedule and a routine when we go out on call."

"And when you get back? How is your routine then?"

Raven grimaced up at Cassandra, "We work it out on a day-by-day basis."

Eyleno was grinning on the other side of his grandparent, a warm twinkle in his eyes. "Sometimes several times a day."

Cassandra snorted and then inhaled sharply as her belly contracted.

"You are speeding up, Cassandra. How long do you want to stay down here?"

Cassandra closed her elegant blue eyes and sighed. "Fine. We can make our way to my bedchamber. The wards are already in place and I am braced for anything."

There was an expression on her face that Raven knew all too well. "You are trying to wait until Arcos is here."

"I am trying. This may be the son that he is desperate for."

"Eyleno, can you check on his ETA?" Raven concentrated

on helping Cassandra up the stairs.

"Yes, Raven. I will return in a few minutes." He walked outside and a flash of light came through the stained-glass windows.

"See? Eylene is on it. Rodrick, can you bring those bags upstairs?"

"Yes, midwife."

Cassandra looked down at her fondly, "You have a flare for ordering men around, don't you?"

"It comes and goes."

They reached the top of the stairs and were halfway down the hall when Cassandra's water broke. "Rodrick..."

"I see it, miss. Just let me get your supplies into the chamber and I will take care of it." He moved past them carefully and then held the door open for the two women to enter the bedroom.

There was a birthing chair, a suspended swing and the inflatable ball that Raven had suggested. "So, where do you want to hang out?"

"The swing. I have fond memories of the swing. This little one may have been conceived on it." She chuckled, a rich noise that warmed the room.

Cassandra went through her contractions, sitting and swinging at random. Picking up a harp and plucking a few strings, then setting it down. Two hours passed and Raven got nervous. Eylene still hadn't returned.

Rodrick poked his head into the room and gestured for her to come out into the hall.

"Excuse me, Cassandra. Count down from thirty and I will be back."

Raven quickly moved into the outer room and gasped at what she saw. "What happened?"

"The dwarves intercepted their portals and tried to hold them hostage for your presence. They got away, but not

before they had been tortured."

Raven ran to Eyleno's side and blotted at the blood above his eye with her sleeve. "Oh, sweetie. What did they want?"

"Nadith is in labour early and they say she will only accept you."

Raven sighed. "Damn. I can't be in two places at once."

Rodrick was working on the elf that must be Arcos. Both men were bloody, but intact.

"Bring her here, Rodrick."

He looked up at her, surprise in his yellow eyes. "You want me to bring a dwarf princess here? Tonight?"

"Yes. I will run it past Cassandra, but I think she is just about beyond caring."

A cry from the other room had her up on her feet. "I don't care, get her here and bring a dwarf-sized birthing chair ASAP."

Eyleno looked to his grandfather and they both shrugged.

Raven returned to Cassandra and rubbed her back. "Arcos is here, but it looks like he ran into a wall."

"I don't care if he is humping a water buffalo...get him in here." Her voice grew hostile and Raven grinned at the tone.

"There will also be a guest in here with you. The princess of the dwarves is also in labour and she wants me to attend her."

"Fine. Whatever. Just don't leave me."

"Gotcha." Raven went to the door and called out for Arcos. He came forward with a limp and one closed eye, but his features still were a frighteningly similar configuration to Eyleno's.

"Pleased to meet you, Arcos."

"You as well, Midwife Raven. My grandson speaks highly of you." He moved past her and took his wife in his arms.

Cassandra sobbed with relief at having her husband in her embrace. "Not long now, Arcos."

A knock at the door brought everyone's head around and as Raven opened it, Arcos stiffened when the dwarves came through, holding their princess. They deposited her on the small bed that Rodrick pushed in.

The bed was across the foot of Cassandra's and Nadith was scowling at the others in the room. "Raven. I need you."

Raven cleared her throat and jerked her head for the other dwarves to leave the room. Only one tried to hang back. "You are her husband?"

"I am."

"And you have had to deal with this brat during your marriage?"

He grinned at her, taking Nadith's hand. "It is mostly worth the effort."

"Good, keep her calm. I have to deal with Cassandra."

The young man scooted in behind his wife and massaged her back, mimicking Arcos. Nadith's pouting gaze caught Raven's and she flinched as the albino put all of her lack of sympathy into her gaze.

Nadith had a normal pregnancy, had a city full of servants, but she wanted to have her child birthed by the new midwife.

Cassandra was rocketing to the finish, her new baby only minutes away. "Sweet, where do you want to have it, in the bed or the chair?"

Cassandra groaned as the pain piled on top of pain. "Chair."

"Arcos, can you help her to the chair between pains and arrange her gown so I can get at her?"

He nodded and winced as he helped his wife to the birthing chair, a contraption with a horseshoe-shaped seat so that the baby could emerge while the mother's body was supported. "Are you well enough for this, Arcos?"

"I am. No dwarf battalion will get the better of me." He

grimaced as he helped Cassandra into the chair and settled her carefully. He raised the rear hem of her gown and got her settled as she started huffing.

"Excellent." Her hands pressed gently on Cassandra's abdomen and then she reached under to measure dilation. Any moment now. The baby was just up at her fingertips.

She stripped off her gloves and put on a fresh pair. "Now, Nadith, let's see what is up with your imminent arrival." She felt the contractions and her eyes widened. "Nadith, how long have you been in labour?"

"It started yesterday." The young dwarf winced as another ripple of tension ran through her.

Raven sat back and sighed. "Why didn't you call me?"

"My father didn't want you there. He wanted Magatha to deliver the baby, I didn't." She grimaced at the pain and breathed deeply.

"Your child may be here before Cassandra's. Just hold still for a moment. There. Let her lean up against you, Rendor. Nadith, do you remember what I told you about breathing?"

Nadith started to take controlled breaths until she got to a contraction and then she panted through it.

"Arcos, how are you doing over there?"

"Fine, Raven. You have a few minutes."

"Nadith, do you want to deliver in the chair or the bed?"

She hissed and arched in place.

"Bed it is."

The head was crowning and easing into the world. "Push, Nadith, push." The young dwarf woman clutched her knees and groaned. Two hard shoves and there was a new dwarf male in the world. Laughing, Raven took the blanket that Eylene handed to her and wrapped the tiny fellow up. She cut his cord after tying it off and handed him to his astonished parents.

"Please greet your son."



A light tug on the umbilical cord released the placenta and she had only enough time to start tidying the new mother up when a cry distracted her.

"Raven. Get your ass over here."

She started to strip of her gloves and replace them. "Rendor. Keep an eye on Nadith to make sure the bleeding is not excessive. She seems to be fine, but we will still watch her, right?"

"I have a son."

Yup. He was a new father. She did a final check and sprinted over to the chair where Cassandra was battling with nature.

The child was almost out, but Cassandra's breathing was erratic. "Come on, Cassandra, a dwarf just delivered without any trouble not a dozen feet away. You can't be outdone in your own home."

"You are one very annoying human." Cassandra's growl was inhuman.

"Thanks, I do try." Raven felt a crackle of magic skid over her skin. "I am not going away, Cassandra, save your magic."

The head was in her hand, slipping free until the cord around its neck brought it up short. Instead of panicking the parents, she beckoned to Eylene and he brought her the kit. With the head supported, she eased the cord from around its throat and clipped it free of the baby. Unrestrained, he slid into the world and Raven's hands. She quickly tied the umbilical cord off, trimming it to a reasonable size.

She wrapped the baby in one of the blankets and looked up into Cassandra's dazed eyes. "You have your baby, ancient one."

Arcos was grinning and he helped his wife bring the baby to her breast.

Looking down between Cassandra's thighs, she felt a

surge of panic. "Eyleno, are the guests here?"

"Yes."

"Is there a healer?"

"Yes."

"Get them. Now."

He was out the door faster than the human eye could see.

Bleeding was excessive. Cassandra was in danger. The placenta was not separating properly and this was a job for someone with healing skills. She massaged the abdomen, trying to get it to expel the afterbirth on its own. It helped somewhat with the bleeding, but it wasn't fast enough for Raven.

"Out of the way, human." The hands that shoved her aside were harsh, but Raven was content to let someone else take over.

She went and attended to Nadith, cleaning her, changing her gown and making sure she was comfortable with her new son nursing at her breast.

The bedding was changed, the dwarf princess was clean and her husband and child were with her. It was time to return to the drama on the bed.

"I don't understand. She should be healing."

An idea suddenly came to Raven and she shoved the healer out of her way. Her hands pressed on the abdomen and as she felt the small flutter, she gestured to Arcos. "Sit her up. There is another baby in there. It was high and to the side, I didn't register it."

Cassandra handed her son to a woman who came into the room. "Take care of him, Maityen."

"Yes, Mother."

Raven held out her hand and the lube was slapped into her palm. Eyleno was on the job. "This will not be easy, Cassandra, I have to go in and find your second one. Are you all right with that?"

"Yes. I did wonder at the flurries of kicks." Her golden skin was tinged with the orange of fatigue. "Do what you must, Raven."

Raven blew in and out through her mouth before timing her insertion to the still-fluttering muscles. She almost missed the little one on her first pass, but she grabbed a tiny foot and tugged gently. It kicked and she sighed in relief. She found the other foot and slowly withdrew the new elf into the bright light of the world.

It gasped and cried as soon as the air smacked its wet little body and then the rest of the birth went according to textbook behaviour.

The new baby was also a boy, dark of hair and eyes. He had the look of his sister Maityen. Cassandra was crying softly with her newest child in her arms while the expelling of the afterbirth now went according to plan.

Cassandra was exhausted, but the healer asked respectfully to attend her and Raven stepped aside.

Eyleno was waiting for her, hot water and towels ready for her personal cleansing. Blood covered her up to the forearm and it flowed pink when she soaked in the basin. Elf and dwarf blood mixed and mingled as she scrubbed her skin back to chalky white.

The mothers were cooing at their infants and when Raven left the room to speak to the dwarves, she asked them to transport the entire family in one unit. "And they should not be separated for the first month or so."

One of the burly dwarves nodded with a relieved grin. "As you wish, Midwife. Will you be returning to our demesne during the next few weeks?"

"I will, so please allow me and my escort to pass unmolested. My job is to bring new life into the world, a peaceful occupation. The king will owe not only my escort but his grandfather restitution."

"Understood. May we take the princess now?"

"Yes." Raven opened the door and led them to the new family, cooing and making soothing sounds to the new baby.

The dwarves lifted them, bed and all, carrying them out into the hall and down the stairs.

"Oh, right. No portals in the house."

Cassandra's tired voice was amused, "A small ward, but an important one. When Eyleneo stayed here during the summer, he would pop in and out everywhere. It drove me nuts." Her new sons were having their first meal, snuffling as they ate.

Even from her vantage point, Raven admired the tiny pointed ears.

Eyleneo had packed up her bags and came around behind her to wrap his arms around her waist.

Maityen looked them over and smiled. "My son, there is a lady downstairs that you have to meet. A charming female from the highest family."

Raven looked at the elf in astonishment while Arcos started chuckling.

## Chapter Nine

“Mother, I am not interested in any of the elven females downstairs, upstairs or at your committee meetings. I was destined for a human female and I have one who is all I could desire.”

Raven was glaring at Maityen, too tired to do anything else.

“That thing? She is barely human by human standards.”

There was a calculating gleam in the woman’s eyes that Raven couldn’t figure out.

“She is my choice, my match and an asset to the paranormal community.”

Arcos chuckled. “Give it up, daughter. You have always known that he was not destined for one of our own.”

“What do they mean by that?” Raven finally found her voice.

“Didn’t my grandson tell you? Our family has a thick vein of seers in it and each child is assessed for their future mates when they are still in their teens. Maityen heard that Eyleneo was destined for a human and she flipped. She has been throwing females at him ever since.”

Cassandra chuckled and shifted sleepily. “It is why he chose to come here so often.”

Maityen stomped her foot. “This human is a servant. Nothing more.”

Eyleneo smiled and whispered, “Trust me,” before

addressing his mother. "She is proof from magic. Take your best shot."

He released her and stepped away from her for a moment while Maityen grew a fireball with one hand and flicked it toward Raven without any hesitation. It struck her shirt and flared, then struck her skin and flickered out.

"That was a new shirt." She patted out the few embers that were heating her skin. The fire may have been magical, but the burning of her shirt had been physical.

Maityen stood with her mouth opening and closing in shock.

Cassandra and Arcos started laughing. "You don't think we would endorse Eyleno chasing just any female, do you?" Cassandra yawned and drifted off to sleep in her husband's arms.

"Do you want to finish the Yule celebration here or at home?" Eyleno knew her answer. He had the bags over his shoulders and was standing in the doorway.

"Home. Definitely home. Tell Cassandra I will be here in a few days to check on her and the babies. Call me if you need me." It was a hushed whisper.

Arcos winked in response and nodded, his family in his arms. Maityen was still frozen with shock.

Rodrick was guarding the door and nodded to them as they passed. Only family would be getting past him, no one else would dare try.

They left the troll, the house full of revellers and the new babies behind them, stepping into the crisp air of the snow-covered night.

Their car was parked on the edge of the lot and it gleamed in the light that spilled from the house. It had never looked so welcome.

She buckled into her seat and sighed as Eyleno took his seat next to her. The car roared to life and drove through the

night. They didn't say a word as the portal opened and swallowed the car.

Raven's street was full of blazing holiday lights. Her house alone was dark. They entered the house and when she flicked the light on, she screeched in surprise.

Boxes, parcels and things wrapped in ribbons covered her living room and threatened to strangle her tree. "Someone broke in and left stuff."

He came up behind her and peeled her jacket off. "I don't think you will believe it is Santa?"

"Um, no. No, I don't think that is possible."

He tugged her boots off as she stood staring in shock. "How about magical Christmas creatures?"

"Nope, not that either."

He removed her shirt and pressed kisses along the pale skin that had been heated by the fireball. "I owe you a shirt."

She grabbed his hair and pulled him upright until her lips were locked on his. "You owe me a lot more than that."

"I intend to pay up. I swear." His grin took the sincerity out of his tone.

He lifted her and carried her to the bedroom, falling with her to the bed. They wrestled out of their clothing, bra and jeans flying around as stripping while horizontal went from a theory to an art.

They rolled around on the sheets, setting the bedsprings to squeaking before their bodies connected and Raven was revelling in the sparks skittering along her skin. Fire started inside her and by the time it exploded into release, she was quite sure that poor Eyleneo was deaf.

His roar as he climaxed certainly rang her ears.

They lay tangled together as they caught their breath. "You have to open those presents, Raven."

She groaned. "All of them?"

"All of them."

She grunted and wrapped her arms and legs around him. "What if I want to stay like this for the whole night?"

"I will have to wear you under the tree so you can open your presents." He leaned back on his arms and took her with him.

She wasn't going to get out of this. She sighed. "Let me get a robe."

He pushed away from her. "Wait here a moment."

She sat up and brushed her hair out of her face, grimacing at the sticky residue between her thighs. "Damn it."

"What?"

"You forgot the condom."

"Oh, well, don't worry. We are not destined to have any children." He handed her a long box and looked at her expectantly.

"We are not..." She had never thought of children of her own, but to hear that he didn't want any either was both comforting and disappointing.

"The seer told me that I would find a human woman who had no magic at all, but we would live in a situation that was surrounded and yet never filled by children. It is why my mother was so opposed to our partnership. Open your present."

She opened the box on her lap and blushed a hot pink at the peignoir set in unrelieved black silk. "Oh."

"Try it on." Eyleneo was watching her with hot anticipation in his eyes.

She stood and let the gown slither down over her head until the hem brushed her feet. The robe slipped over her shoulders, covering her in a heavy silk that allowed her full freedom of movement, but shifted and slithered as she moved.

He stared at her before he grabbed for his own black silk robe. "You look...amazing."



"Thank you. I have never owned anything this lovely before." She didn't know what else to say.

"It's a spider goblin design. She does amazing work." He grabbed her hand and hauled her to the pile of presents.

"Is it my imagination or are there more than there was when we got home?"

"They will continue to come until Yule is complete at dawn. These are from all the families you have served and all those who will seek your services in the new year." He grabbed a shiny silver package off the top of the pile. "Start here."

She worked her way through the presents, everything from nutcrackers to ball gowns. As the night wore on, she used a knife to work through the wrappers. Finally, she remembered. "Eyleno, on the top shelf of the closet is a box, can you get it for me?"

Raven was swamped in a puddle of wrapping and gifts. There had even been three assassination attempts. Apparently, some folks didn't believe she was magic-proof.

As Eyleno sat down and tried to pass her the package, she blushed, "It's for you."

His cheeks darkened, "For me?"

"Yes. I don't know if it will do you any good, but I thought it might be useful." She fussed with a wrapper on a parcel and watched.

The first thing he removed was the book on being a doula, someone who works with a midwife or doctor as a birthing coach. The second thing was an apron with *Elves do it in the Kitchen* emblazoned on it. Next was some Spanish saffron, Mexican vanilla and some Twinkie pans. Last was the card that thanked him for extending his services to help her do a job she had never even imagined.

His eyes teared up. He waded through the presents and pulled her onto his lap, sitting them on the couch. "In all my

years I never imagined a woman like you.” He sighed and pressed his forehead to hers.

She reached up and caressed his cheek. “And though I am not touched or affected by magic, I now believe in it.”

He kissed her gently. “I am so glad. Magic is an excellent word for what happens when we touch.”

“I am glad it is not just me there. Joyous Yule, Eyleneo.”

“Joyous Yule, Raven.”

They twined together on the couch and the presents kept coming. The morning would be soon enough to examine all the gifts. For now, it was time to analyze and experience... magic.

## *Author's Note*

Thanks for joining me for Raven's story. She was one of my favourite characters from the Nexus Chronicles and I am glad to bring her out for the holiday season.

Eyleno is her handler, a selfless elf with a domestic streak, a great guy with a loving disposition.

The tobogganing run was one of my own memories, only it was a friend and I and we took out three kids on the way down the hill. We yelled for them to get out of the way, but all I saw after that was legs flying and folks running. Ah...memories.

Merry holidays to one and all.

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## *About the Author*

Viola Grace was born in Manitoba, Canada where she still resides today. She really likes it there.

She has no pets and can barely keep sea monkeys alive for a reasonable amount of time. Her line of day job tends to be analytical which leaves her mind hopping to weave stories. No co-worker is safe from her character analysis.

In keeping with busy hands are happy hands, her hobbies have included cross-stitch, needlepoint, quilting, costuming, cake decorating, baking, cooking, metal work, beading, sculpting, painting, doll making, henna tattoos, chain mail, and a few others that have been forgotten. It is quite often that these hobbies make their way into her tales.

Viola's fetishes include boots and corsetry, and her greatest weakness is her uncontrollable blush.

Her writing actively pursues the Happily Ever After that so rarely occurs in nature. It is an admirable thing and something that we should all strive for. To find one that we truly like, as well as love.