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Let Sleeping Demons Lie

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Let Sleeping Demons Lie

By Maree Anderson

TO MY READER:

While writing Even Demons Get The Blues, the first novella in my Demons series, it wasn't easy convincing a certain stroppy Felinoid Demon to back off and let the actual hero and heroine take center stage. I knew that I would eventually have to give her her own story. And I knew that she needed a very special hero, too—a man who wasn't going to take any bullshit from her, a man who would ultimately teach her that what she thinks is love, is merely a pale imitation of the real thing. She takes a heckuva lot of convincing, though, and I hope that you will enjoy her struggle as she finds her happy ever after with her shape-shifting Lion prince. Kitty vs Lion.... Watch the fur fly in Let Sleeping Demons Lie!

Prologue

"And so," Councillor Belphegor droned, "my proposal will ensure that Demonkind remain pure, unsullied."

Asmodeus, King of all Demons and currently wishing he wasn't any such thing, snorted. *Duh!* As if Demonkind weren't abominations already. Wasn't that the whole freaking point? "Good luck trying to enforce *that*, you old douche-bag."

"What was that you said?" Belphegor, belatedly remembering just *who* he had the privilege of addressing, added, "Your Eminence?"

"Merely thinking aloud." Asmodeus rubbed his jaw and gave Belphegor's proposal due consideration. Yeah. Riiight, he thought. What a pile of shit. The Toad Demon's brain must have finally oozed out his ear and pissed off to find a more worthy host.

The Councillors respected their King's preoccupation for bare seconds before they had the temerity to talk amongst themselves. Asmodeus tuned them out while he wrestled with his anger. He'd been closeted with these idiots for hours, forced to exert all his powers of persuasion to thwart one asinine fucking proposal after another. He was way past anger and bordering on furious, which was not at all an emotion he was desirous of succumbing to at present. If he acted on the rage pricking him to do what his instincts dictated, he'd rip the heads off each and every last one of these drooling half-wits and suck them dry.

Second thoughts, scratch that image. He wouldn't suck them dry. Their blood was so bland, their minds so weak and cowardly, it would not be worth the effort. He would slash their throats and let them bleed out, buff his nails while their insipid lifeblood seeped all over his lovely shiny marble floor. Maybe amuse himself by skating in it. *Oh*, *yeah*.

Unfortunately, the strictures Lucifer had placed on him were such that Asmodeus could not allow himself to indulge in such delights. Murdering Council members was a big fat no-no. Asmodeus could threaten them, maybe torture them if he was truly provoked, but he couldn't *off* them.

At least, not personally. Not overtly.

He gnawed on his lower lip with his fangs and absently licked at the droplets of blood. The time had come for him to replace these ancient Council members with more open-minded, progressive beings. It was time to usher in a new regime, one where Demons *earned* the privilege of sitting on the Council rather than being accorded it merely because they'd survived to a great age. Lucifer take them, but those present today had only survived by dint of their cravenness, always fleeing and hiding themselves at the merest whiff of a threat to their mangy hides.

And these pathetic, jabbering excuses for Demons presumed to dictate policy to him—their *King*, for fuck's sake! All personal risk to his own awesome ass aside, an "unfortunate event" was lurking in the future of each and every Council member. And he would start with the most irritating of the lot, Belphegor.

On cue, the perfect solution solidified in his devious mind. A wide grin split his face, and he beamed at the Councillors with such a blinding flash of teeth and fangs that those still possessing a modicum of intelligence reared back. "An interesting proposal indeed, Belphegor," he drawled.

The portentous lump of lard called Belphegor lacked even the intelligence to be concerned by the unholy glee glowing in his King's eyes. Fat fool.

"The Lycan Queen has requested my assistance with a minor matter, but *you* may attend her in my stead." Which was a bald-faced lie, but then, Asmodeus excelled at lying. "It will be the perfect opportunity for you to explain this proposal of yours to Queen Marlena and win her over to your excellent cause."

"But...but...." Belphegor blustered, obviously appalled by the suggestion that he get off his flabby ass and do something remotely resembling work.

Asmodeus pinned the indolent Councillor with a gaze that brooked no further argument. "You will leave tomorrow, Belphegor."

The Councillor wouldn't survive his encounter with the Lycans. The minute he opened his mouth he would likely insult one of the volatile creatures—he was just that fucking stupid. And a teensy bit of psychic tampering would prod him to commit some heinous act that would see him ripped to shreds. Thus, Asmodeus could demand reparations from the Lycan Realm, even as they rid him of a huge pain in his ass.

And he knew the perfect creature to rile up those oversexed Lycan males so they couldn't tell their brains from their dicks.

A delectable little temptation Belphegor wouldn't be able to resist either.

Of course, it would mean some major tampering so that the Lycans wouldn't suspect her as a plant. Did he dare? By Lucifer's hairy asshole, he dared! He ran his tongue over his lower lip, savoring the wickedness of it all.

Nothing was quite so satisfying as killing two Demons with one stone.

Chapter One

Brennan inhaled, testing the breeze. He was a Lion Prime, that most alpha of alphas, and his humanoid body reacted instantly to the scent. He *shifted* into his Beast form, shed the ragged remains of his clothing, and was racing toward the tree line before his brain even finished processing what he'd scented. Female. Lioness. Of impeccable lineage. In heat....

His blood sang with the need to claim her.

Her scent filled his nostrils, soaked through his skin, poured through his veins in a heady rush more potent than any drug humans could concoct. Her unique essence coated his tongue. He savored her, bittersweet and richly seductive as the Dutch chocolate that was his secret vice. The taste of her exploded in his mouth, and he swallowed her down, took her inside him, absorbed her very being.

Pakhet's paws! If her scent was anything to go by, she would be an outstanding creature.

She'd thrown herself to the Lions, and it would be a race to get to her first. A race he intended to make sure he won.

He roared a challenge to other leonine Primes who were even now tracking her and closing in on her position. But instead of a higher-pitched roar from the female in answer to the claim he'd staked, there was nothing. Silence.

Brennan slowed his headlong rush to a lope. Whiskers twitching, all senses on hyper-alert, he followed his nose, his powerful body wending through the underbrush. He paused to scent the air, confirming what he already knew.

He was first to arrive.

He padded toward the clearing, supremely confident of his welcome despite the fact that the female hadn't answered his call. He was a *Lycan* Prime. No matter what form he chose, Beast, Were-Beast or humanoid, he was a magnificent specimen. Irresistible. Any female would be privileged to mate with him.

And here was the privileged female. She'd opted for her vulnerable humanoid form and, like a trusting child, curled up beneath a tree. Asleep, apparently.

But not for much longer.

Brennan scented five males closing in. He shook his heavy mane, began with a low rumble that segued to a full-throated deafening roar as he staked his claim to all comers.

The female was his.

For as long as he wanted her.

He waited, still and alert, forelegs planted wide, shoulders hunched high, hoping one of the approaching Primes might be terminally stupid enough to interfere. A good battle would do even more for his mating drive. But the males knew from experience exactly what Brennan was capable of. They backed off and left him with the prize.

Brennan switched his full focus back to the female. Given the strength and duration of his roar, he expected her to have already shifted to her Beast form. She should be wide awake and waiting, lying on her belly with her butt in the air, flaunting her sex. Willing. Wet. Quivering with the need to take him within her body.

She hadn't stirred.

This was more than mere sleep. Had she been drugged and deposited here for who knew what twisted reason?

Brennan was Prime enough that he could dampen the sexual haze of the mating imperative and refuse to succumb to it. He wasn't that far gone. Not yet.

He analyzed her scent again. It was so tantalizingly similar to a true Lycan Lioness that it would fool most. But not him. He stroked her mind with his, probed deeper and assessed her aura.

She was Other, but just what flavor, he had no idea.

Not Angel, pure *or* fallen. He'd had the misfortune to encounter both in the past, and he'd been limp-dicked as a Demon male the rest of the day!

There was no trace of animal blending with her aura, not the slightest hint of a primary form. So nor was she Demon. Not that he would bother to toy with one of *their* females. He might have a powerful sex drive, but he wasn't that desperate.

Could she be human?

He discarded that startling notion instantly. Not even a *Damned* human female, indoctrinated to the Dark Arts from the cradle, possessed the ability to replicate *this* scent. And although humans might intentionally visit the Demon Realm from time to time, none had ever dared breech the Lycan Realm.

Her scent mantled him, seeping into his pores, fizzing through his veins, and all thought of taking the female to his mother and dumping the entire mystery in her royal lap was smothered by more pressing concerns. Like the heavy tightness in his scrotum and the almost unbearable stiffness of his cock. Like the desire to plant his seed in her, fuck her until she quickened and ripened with his young.

Who a there! The pheromones she was giving off were seriously messing with his head. No way would he intentionally impregnate an unknown quantity. But fucking her? That was a whole 'nother issue.

First, he would find out if she had drugs in her system.

Her limbs twitched. She shivered, curled up in an even tighter ball, the vulnerable knobs of her spine curving as she burrowed her head deeper in the crook of her arm, her face completely obscured by the thick, ebony mass of her hair. Her buttocks reminded him of a ripe peach. Her pouting nether-lips, rosy and glistening, invited him to lick and suck and lap.

He prowled toward her, sniffed her sex, swiped his rough tongue over her slit, tasted her.

Her taste exploded on his tongue. Sweet Pakhet! He took a deep breath, inhaled her unique aroma. Ahhh. Delicious.

And although she was ovulating, it hadn't been mating-induced, for he could detect no other male's scent mingling with hers. Nor could he detect any sign of drugs. The only taint he identified was one of extreme physical exhaustion.

She might not be what he expected, but she'd sure put him in the mood. Given the way she smelled, unconscious or not, *she* was in the mood, too. And Brennan was just the Lycan to give her what she wanted.

He shifted to his humanoid form and crouched behind her, ran a hand over her hip and down the length of her thigh, her skin—so pale, so smooth. Silky soft.

Gently, he uncurled her limbs and rolled her onto her back to admire her. He supposed her face was what humans called classically beautiful. But with her eyes closed and no emotion animating her features, she reminded him of a porcelain doll. A rather tragic porcelain doll, if one considered the bluish bruises beneath her eyes.

The rest of her was a sweet little package. She was more rounded than the tightly muscled, athletic females of his kind—not plump, merely sleekly curved. Her breasts were more than a handful, even given the size of his hands. Voluptuous, with dusky, jutting nipples just begging him to suckle. But enticing as her tits were, he knew what he wanted.

And he would take it. She was female, in heat, unmarked. The laws of the Realm decreed that Brennan had every right to mate with her.

He growled deep in his throat, anticipating the pleasure of seducing her to wakefulness and then sheathing his aching cock in her feminine flesh. And as he devoured her with his predatory gaze, he knew that no law yet written would stop him from fucking her.

Her body unconsciously responded to his need, and her sex wept for him, a creamy coating begging him to taste. He spread her thighs, buried his nose in her folds and inhaled.

She was the best thing he'd ever smelled.

Slipping his hands beneath her ass, he tilted her hips to open her more fully. He lapped and laved, suckled. Feasted.

Her stomach muscles rippled, and her thighs clenched about his head. She moaned.

He grinned and nipped her clit, hands tightening on her hips when she bucked. "You're awake. Good."

Her eyelids fluttered, flew open, her gaze bemused and dazed. With a noticeable effort she focused on him, and her body stiffened. Her eyes narrowed, flashing searing emerald-green fire. "Get. Your. Hands. Off. Me."

He sat up, still idly stroking her clit as he watched and analyzed the expressions flitting across her features.

Awareness. Desire....

Furv.

He read her intentions in the tensing of her muscles. He allowed her to launch herself at him, delighting in her sass even though his hands were abruptly full of spitting, clawing, altogether far-too-desirable female. He caught her hands before she could blood him with her sharp nails, hauled her to her feet and backed her against the trunk of the nearest tree.

She loosed a shriek worthy of a Banshee and tried to knee him in the balls.

Unsuccessfully, of course. A rank amateur when it came to combat, she telegraphed her every move. Before she could even squeak, he had her right where he wanted her, arms stretched above her head with her wrists shackled by his hand, thighs spread wide to accommodate his big body. "Mmmmm. Feisty. I do like my females lively. They taste so much better that way." He pressed his groin to the juncture of her thighs.

She froze.

"Go on," he purred, leaning in to sniff her neck and lick the delicate skin beneath her ear. "Fight me some more."

Her eyes widened as the truth of her situation smacked her. Her body was pinned by his, her feet dangling off the ground. He'd imprisoned her hands with one of his, but the other cupped her ass. If she so much as twitched her hips, he would be inside her.

She struggled to control her breathing, shivering as his lips moved lower to trace her collarbones before dipping to her breasts.

Her scent flared, intensifying as he licked her nipple.

His own scent poured from him in waves, mingling with hers to create something new, something compelling. It stroked their naked skin, commanding them to slake their desires.

And he knew she desired him. He smelled it, tasted it beading on her skin. He heard it in the abrupt hitch of her panting breaths as he drew her nipple fully into his mouth, rolling it around his tongue, teasing it until it swelled and engorged like a ripe cherry. He noted it in the sweetly pink blush of arousal painting her pale skin as he turned his attention to her other breast. He felt it in the heat of her cleft, in the creamy wetness of her feminine flesh against his skin. He grinned, knowing he was Prime, knowing no female in her right mind could resist him.

He left off suckling to gaze at her, expecting to see her features glazed with desire and lust.

She huffed a breath through her nostrils. "Hurry up then. Fuck me already! I've got important things to be getting on with."

He blinked at this unlikely response. "Like what?"

"Like figuring out how I got here and where the hell I am."

Somehow, Brennan reversed the blood flow from his cock and re-circulated it round his brain cells. "You don't know where you are or how you got here?"

She impaled him with a glare his mother would be proud to call her own. "Duh. Isn't that what I just said? Add to that, I haven't a clue where my clothes are or why you think you have the right to pounce on me. Where I come from we...." She caught her lower lip in her teeth. "Where I come from—oh, hell! I can't seem to remember where I come from." She laughed, but it was a forced, uneasy sound. "Wherever, we don't pounce on each other without an invitation. Okay?" She tried a fierce frown on for size and thrust out her lower lip, reminding him so much of a young cub making like a big bad cat that he had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing.

"Okay." Yeah. Riiight. Didn't matter where she came from. So long as there were horny males and sexy little feminine packages like her, there would be pouncing going on. It was the nature of the male beast. "And just so you know, you're in the Lycan Realm."

"Oh."

She barely reacted at all, like mention of the Lycan Realm didn't mean anything to her. He would pretty much bet his tail she hadn't a clue what Lycans were. Lucky she hadn't come to when he'd tasted her in Beast-form, or she would have freaked!

"So what's with the whole running-round-naked thing?" she asked. "You guys get off on flaunting your bits, huh?"

"Yep. See anything you like in particular? I'm more than happy to let you get up close and personal."

A crimson flush bloomed on her neck, creeping up to paint her cheekbones. But given the mixed signals she gave off, whether the blush was embarrassment or lust was hard to tell.

"What's your name?" he asked, genuinely intrigued.

"It's—" Her brows knit in a perplexed frown. "I can't seem to remember that rather pertinent fact, either. Guess I must have knocked myself silly or something."

Oh yeah? Like that explained anything. "My name's Brennan," he said.

"Oh. Thanks. I guess." She ducked her head, but not before he'd seen that lickable lower lip wobble and detected the tiny sniff of a female obviously trying not to cry.

And just like that, all his protective male instincts grabbed him by the balls and started yammering in his ear.

Shit. With a heartfelt sigh, he eased away from her and set her on her feet. He was Prime. No way could he fuck a female in trouble—a vulnerable female who couldn't even remember her own name. His painfully hard cock-stand was gonna have to take a temporary vacation until he got this sorted. "Don't cry, Kitten. We'll figure out who you are and where you came from, and then I'll get you back where you belong. I promise."

Her chin lifted. Her green eyes, luminous with tears, peered up at him through the curtain of her hair. "You're not going to fuck me?"

He grinned. "I wouldn't say that. But I'm not going to fuck you right now."

The tiniest hint of a smile quirked her lips. She knuckled away a tear and tossed her hair over her shoulder, smoothing it back from her face. "Gee. Thanks for the heads up." Her gaze slid to his groin, lingered, then took a leisurely journey back up his body before fixing on his face. Her scent thickened.

It damn near did him in.

And she was damn lucky he was strong enough to cage his baser instincts, or he'd have shoved her to the ground and been deep inside her before she could blink. "Excuse the show, but you smell too damned good for *this*"—he glared at his unrepentant cock—"to listen to reason."

"I do?"

"Oh, yeah. You really do."

"Oh. Sorry."

She didn't sound particularly sorry.

Pakhet's tender tits! He wasn't going to get anywhere like this. Her scent. Her naked body. His hard-on. Hardly gonna help him with his self-imposed role of protector and his promise to solve the mystery surrounding her.

Clothes. He needed clothes. But until he knew exactly who—and what—she was, he was reluctant to reveal the full extent of his powers. Instead of conjuring clothing, he stalked to a convenient bush and pretended to find a cache of spare clothes behind it. He bent to pull on jeans. "You're not gonna take off the minute my back's turned, are you?" He glanced back to verify with his eyes what his other senses told him, that she was still there.

She stood staring at his ass with the kind of absorbed, appreciative expression of a female who knew what she liked in a male. He hid a grin as he buttoned his fly. Appeared *he* was the kind of male she liked.

He tossed his shirt at her. "For the sake of my sanity, I'd appreciate you wearing it."

"How come?"

He bit back a groan at her unfortunate phrasing. "Down, boy," he ordered his still misbehaving cock.

"Ohhh!" Her gaze fastened on the bulge of his erection, and she blushed again.

"Not to mention at least five other males sniffing round who won't necessarily be as chivalrous as I've been, not if you flaunt your sweet little naked rear at them."

She finished the last of the buttons and tugged the shirt down over her thighs. "You trying to tell me that if you hadn't found me first, I'd be fair game?"

"Kitten, you're female." He ignored the "Well, duh!" eyes she gave him. "And the scent you're giving off is irresistible. You can hardly blame them for wanting you."

She sniffed her armpit. "Huh. Don't think I'm *that* whiffy. Or are you guys just ultra-sensitive in the nasal department or something?"

"Or something. And in our Realm, you on your own, smelling as delicious as you do, means you belong to whoever gets to you first. Count yourself lucky it was me."

"Meaning?" Her question was couched lightly enough, but the emotions chasing across her face indicated that she knew it was a loaded question.

"Meaning, I'm Prime, and I'll rip out the throat of any other male who so much as lays a finger on you."

She uttered a shaky laugh and took a step back, her gaze fixed on him as if he was a predator about to pounce if she made a wrong move.

Which he was, of course.

"Isn't that a bit of an overreaction?" she squeaked.

"You're mine, Kitten. And no one touches *my* property...except me." He smiled, luxuriating in her shiver, anticipating the coming chase. And her inevitable surrender.

Chapter Two

Some protector he turned out to be.

Brennan eyed the drooping female limping by his side and grunted. He should have gone Were, slung her over his shoulder, and high-tailed it to his den. But given he was ninety-nine-point-nine percent certain she didn't even know what a Lycan was....

Last thing he felt equipped to deal with right now was an hysterical female.

"Sit," he told her, his tone brusque enough that he hoped she'd take the hint and give in. "Rest for a minute."

"I'm fine," she insisted.

As she'd been insisting for the past hour. Mihos save me from stubborn females.

"How much farther?"

"You're not fine. And as the lion runs, about two hours."

Her eyes widened. "As the lion runs?"

"It's a saying we have." He flopped onto the coarse grass at her feet and stretched out on his back, propping himself on his elbows. "If we keep to your present pace, we won't make it before dark. Sundown will be upon us in an hour, tops."

And then, lured by her scent, all manner of other predators would come out to play. The Lions would stay away, knowing that any female Brennan had claimed was lost to them. But with the other big cats—especially the Jaguar and Tiger alphas, who continually pushed the boundaries as they tried to claw their way higher up the food chain—there would be posturing and mock-challenges and all manner of time-wasting crap to wade through before he asserted absolute authority.

As for the Hyenas, well, those ugly bitches were a law unto themselves.

Brennan was fully capable of whupping any other Lycan beastie's ass, but he wasn't stupid. While he was engaging a predator or three, some bitch-Hyena like Cass would try to steal Kitten away and claim her on the premise that possession was nine-tenths of the law.

His gaze lingered on the female, gauging her resilience. Or lack of it. She wouldn't survive a gangbanging by a bunch of perverted scumbags. Especially as Hyenas preferred to copulate in their Were-forms, all the better to inflict maximum pain on their partners.

Kitten shifted her weight from one foot to the other, trying to ease what he suspected were blisters. The soles of his own feet were like toughened leather, but hers would be a bloody mess if he allowed her to continue on foot. Which he had no intention of allowing, because she was so exhausted she could barely do more than stagger. At any other time he might have admired her pluck, but this was neither the time nor place to be stubborn.

As she gazed out over the savannah, her scent altered, trepidation dampening the lush sensuality of her mating musk. "I'm guessing you have lions round here, huh?"

"Indeed we do. And all manner of other beasties."

Fear gushed from her pores, acrid and bittersweet.

Bittersweet because it labeled her as prey.

If she took to her heels right now, he would have a hard time suppressing his instincts. Prey was prey. And his instincts would howl at him to either kill it or fuck it. She, he wouldn't kill—not intentionally, anyway, though one careless swipe of his paw could rupture internal organs.

But sure as Mihos had a mane, he would end up fucking her. From behind. With her on all fours, her luscious little ass presented in all its glory. One of his hands would be fisted in her hair so she couldn't move, the other wrapped around her hips while he fucked her with long hard strokes.

The eroticism of his vision whacked him upside the head, leaving him dazed and panting. He dug the claws sprouting from his fingers into his thighs, forced his tensed, straining muscles to relax, and shuttered his partially shifted, wild leonine eyes against her gaze. Shut *her* away, so he wouldn't react to her quivering limbs and pale, lovely face and do something he'd regret.

He wrestled for control, overrode his nature, and caged it. Again.

For now.

"I don't think I want to be out here after dark," she whispered.

"I agree." His true nature was always harder to suppress in the wilderness at night. And she was too much of a temptation.

She whirled, blinking at him, clearly startled by the frustrated longing lacing his words. She held herself poised to run. He could see it in her stance, smell it on her.

Enough pussyfooting around. He pounced, hooking her ankles with a swipe of his foot so that she lost her balance and fell on her butt. Her breath rushed out in a whoosh. Before she could scramble up, he grabbed hold of her left foot. As he'd suspected, this sole was scratched and bruised. A cursory examination of her right foot revealed a reddened raw patch where a large blister had recently burst.

"Stubborn little bitch," he grumbled, ignoring her efforts to free herself. "See what you've done?" He waved her feet in the air until she gave up struggling and sank back on her elbows.

"I'm fine," she protested.

"Sure you are. And after a few more hours of walking, you'll be even more fine, won't you?"

A glance at her cutely outthrust lower lip was all the answer he needed. "You've got two choices."

"Oh? And what might those be?" She'd crossed her arms over her chest, more pissed than defensive. She might be scared of lions, but she wasn't scared of him.

If only she knew.

"I carry you."

"Or?"

"I knock you out and carry you." He didn't mention option three, waiting till she passed out from sheer exhaustion. One way or another, Brennan always got what he wanted.

Her lips quivered with what he thought was reluctant amusement. "I guess you carry me."

He grinned. "Figured you'd see it my way."

She snorted in a most unfeminine manner. "Is there any other way?"

His grin widened. "Nope." He scooped her up in his arms, careful to ensure that her shirt covered her butt. And other intrinsically feminine things. He had only so much control right now.

He began to lope along at a steady pace. She weighed barely more than a cub and didn't slow him at all.

She cuddled into his chest, suppressing a yawn. "Where are we headed?"

"Somewhere safe." Far safer than dumping her with his mother and subjecting her to the casual brutality of the Lycan Court.

"Oh." She yawned again and promptly drifted off to sleep, apparently lulled by the heat of his body and the rhythm of his stride.

Brennan gave her an entire five minutes to ensure that she was deeply asleep before going Were and increasing his speed to a flat-out sprint.

In his bipedal Were-form, a form which combined the best attributes of both lion and human, his speed was unmatched by any other predator. Within fifteen minutes, in sight of his den, he slowed his breakneck pace as he approached the treacherously steep path. He considered shifting back to his humanoid form in case the female cradled in his arms woke, but the need to get her to safety buffeted his already strung-out instincts. He bounded up the path, the combination of the flexible pads of his paws and retractable claws ensuring that he barely disturbed the coating of fine gravel scattered over the uneven ground.

The entrance to his den was hidden by what appeared to be an impassable rock-fall. With a swipe of his tufted tail, he launched a pebble in the air. It pinged off a nondescript rock wedged four feet from the ground, indistinguishable from all the other rocks and debris piled about the place. The rock emitted a barely audible hum as it moved upward until it protruded about an inch from its original position. Its top flipped open to reveal a smoothly flat, oily-grey surface.

Cradling his female easily in one arm, he brushed a paw pad over the surface, activating the gland in his pad so that it secreted a substance unique to him. The instant the secretion was correctly identified, his complex security system deactivated and a door materialized amongst the rocks. The sensor pad hissed as it self-cleaned, erasing all trace of Brennan's DNA before the cover flipped closed and the rock retracted to its original position.

He strode to his den and the door whooshed shut behind him, hiding him from the outside world and the demands of his royal blood. Not even his mother knew the exact location of this place. And if she did sense the spell hiding it from view and found a spell-caster talented enough to unravel it, Brennan's DNA-based security system ensured she would be denied entrance.

Gotta love modern technology.

He checked his burden just as her eyelids flickered open. She blinked once, pupils dilating as she focused, and closed her eyes again.

Shit.

He muffled her face against his chest and shifted to humanoid form so rapidly that his vision blurred as his brain fought to compensate for the change in body mass. He thought he'd gotten away with it for a moment, but then she uttered a terrified yowl and began to flail her limbs, desperate to escape his tight embrace.

"Ssshhh," he crooned, sinking to the ground and curling her onto his lap as he might a frightened child, one hand rubbing soothing circles over her back. "It's all right. You're safe. There's nothing here to harm you."

Her heart thumped madly beneath his restraining arm. She tensed, pushing away from him to raise her head. She gazed up at him, pupils dilated with residual fright as she searched his face for answers.

He offered no explanation, waiting for her unconscious mind to rationalize what she'd seen.

As the tension seeped from her body, she relaxed in a loose-limbed sprawl across his thighs and sucked in a huge, shuddering breath. "For a moment, I—I thought you were something else." She ducked her head in an endearingly embarrassed fashion. "It must have been a trick of the light."

"Mmm." He remained still, content to hold her for as long as she needed comfort. And when she'd calmed enough to wiggle restlessly, that sweet torture combining with the allure of her

scent became too much to endure. He surged to his feet and placed her carefully down, testing her balance before releasing her completely.

"Bet you're hungry," he said.

"Mmmhmm."

She was fully occupied with examining her surroundings, so he took that as an affirmative. He sauntered through to the kitchen, leaving her to explore, wondering whether she would be as intrepid in her explorations as he anticipated and hoping she wouldn't disappoint.

He cracked eggs in a bowl and whisked them, grated a wedge of tangy cheese, chopped herbs and vegetables. And as his body performed the mundane tasks, his thoughts dwelled on her. He'd never brought a female to his den, never desired such an invasion of his privacy. Such intimacy.

Now, with *this* female, the mere thought of her investigating his private space, fondling his collection of carved lions with tentative fingers, snuggling into one of the huge cushions he'd strewn about the living area, gave him a hard-on of monumental proportions.

He groaned. There'd be no relief for him tonight, so he was gonna have to deal. "You like ham?" he called.

"Yes." The huskiness of her voice curled round his balls and squeezed.

Sighing, he opened the fridge, grabbed the leg of ham and wished the frigid draught of air would cool his cock as efficiently as it chilled the meat.

This was gonna be a long, painful, frustrating night.

A quarter hour later, he slipped the omelet onto a plate, grabbed cutlery and brought everything through to the living area. He hadn't heard a peep from her and half expected she had given in to fatigue, as she'd done earlier.

He found her lying on her stomach, chin pillowed in her hands, absorbed in a book she'd liberated from the shelves.

Interesting she'd chosen that particular cushion, a six-foot-wide marshmallowy mass he'd covered in autumn-toned plush. It was *his* cushion, the one he lounged on when reading, listening to music, or watching the latest black-market DVD he'd had shipped from the human world. He wondered if she'd scented him on the cushion and chosen it because his scent attracted her, or if the selection had been purely accidental.

His cock twitched, telling him that his body preferred the former explanation and rationality could go to Hell. "What're you reading?"

She gave a startled squeak and jerked, almost dropping the book.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you." He approached her as if she were a startled animal. Cautiously, with undue care, as though any second she would flee. "I made you an omelet." He waved the plate beneath her nose.

She inhaled the enticing aroma of sautéed vegetables, ham and cheese. "Wow. That smells amazing."

So do you, he wanted to say. Instead, he waited for her to scramble to a sitting position. It took all his willpower not to pounce when he caught a tantalizing glimpse of her pussy before she pressed her legs together and tugged his shirt down her thighs.

Mihos give me strength. He handed her the plate and cutlery. "What about something to drink? Wine? Beer? Juice?"

A tiny frown chased across her brow. "I'd kill for a Coke."

"Huh. Because you actually remember killing for one? Or because you just remembered you like drinking the stuff?"

He'd meant it as a joke. Of sorts. But her frown deepened to a v-shaped groove, and she appeared to be taking his question very seriously indeed.

"The latter," she finally said.

"I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere."

She rolled her eyes. "Like I'd know where to go." She forked up a bite of omelet and chewed.

He hovered in the kitchen doorway, watching, holding his breath, anticipating her reaction.

"God, this is heavenly!"

"No need to sound so surprised," he said. "It's hardly flattering. I—" His grin faded as she groaned and clutched her head, her cutlery clattering to the floor.

He reached her in a bound, just in time to prevent the plate from sliding off her lap. He set it safely aside on the floor and knelt, gently but firmly prying her fingers away and tilting her chin upward. "What's wrong?"

She squinted up at him, her eyes shiny with tears. "My head felt like it was about to explode there for a moment. It's gone now. Thank God. Ahhhh, crap!" She squeezed her eyes shut again, jaw clenching as she rode the pain, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes to track shiny trails down her pale cheeks.

What the fuck? Brennan didn't like the suspicion blooming in his brain. He inhaled her scent, took it deep inside him, analyzed it minutely. Again. Simultaneously he probed her with all his senses, searching for the slightest trace in her aura's signature, going as deep as he dared.

And still he found no marker that would identify her.

But now, if he had to make any sort of judgment call, he'd say the complete and utter lack of any identifying marker was far more suspicious than the tiniest hint of one.

Ever since humans evolved to a desirable form, all manner of Others had fucked them. And fucked *with* them. It wasn't at all unusual to find traces of Demon or Lycan—or even Angel—embedded in human DNA. Of course, the humans put it down to genetic deformities, never realizing the truth behind the "deformity," never understanding why some humans were physically stronger, more gifted, more intelligent and just plain *more* than the average human.

Mihos and Pakhet help us all if the humans ever do figure it out.

Someone extremely gifted and incredibly powerful had tampered with this female, but not even he—she? it?—had been entirely successful at subduing what she was. Sooner or later, Brennan believed, her true nature would reveal itself.

She slumped forward with a relieved sigh. "It's gone now," she whispered. "Whatever it was."

He scooped her into his arms.

"Where are we going?"

"To bed."

She managed a wry smile. "Ever heard the saying, "Not tonight dear, I have a headache"? I don't think I'll be much use to you in that capacity right now. Sorry."

"I'm putting you to bed. You'll finish your meal. Then you'll sleep."

She opened her mouth, but he cut in before she could say anything else that might provoke another killer headache. "You've had a rough day, and you need to rest."

There would be time enough for experimentation tomorrow, after she'd recovered some of her strength. He had a reputation for being a ruthless SOB when the situation called for it, but he didn't get off on torture.

He strode through to his bedroom, yanked back the bed covers, and lowered her onto the mattress. "Get comfortable," he instructed, plumping the pillows behind her before pulling up the covers and tucking them beneath her armpits.

"But my feet are filthy!"

He shrugged. "They're only sheets. They'll survive a little dirt."

She looked small, fragile and innocent, lying propped up in his vast bed. And, damn it all, desirable. Eminently fuckable.

By the time he returned, bearing a tray with her plate, clean cutlery and a glass of Coke, he knew his suspicions hadn't damped his lust for her one iota.

He still wanted to fuck her—real bad.

He wanted her. Whatever she turned out to be.

And it surprised him that he felt none of his usual apathy at the prospect of consorting with a non-Lycan female. "I'm taking a shower," he said. A cold one. To numb his blue balls.

So he didn't press her back against the pillows and fuck her till she begged for mercy.

Chapter Three

She awoke to the memory of a dream. A huge, black-maned lion had been licking the soles of her feet. She'd giggled and wriggled, and the beast had admonished her, insisting that licking her feet would help heal them.

A voice interrupted her bizarre reverie.

It was a truly sexy voice, with one of those smooth, chocolaty timbres that would have girls dropping their panties in a flash. A wonderful voice to wake up to, if it hadn't been so royally pissed.

Awareness seeped into her brain. She hadn't the faintest idea who she was or how she'd ended up in this place he'd called the Lycan Realm. She wore a borrowed shirt, and she had no possessions. She was in *his* bed. Entirely at *his* mercy.

That knowledge stroked her with lush promises, moistened her sex and warmed her belly with ardent anticipation. Her nipples crinkled as if he'd plucked them with his rough, masculine fingers. Somehow, she had enough presence of mind to shuck off her sensual haze. For now, anyway. At least, so long as she was alone. And his intensely sexy amber gaze wasn't licking her with that "I want to eat you for breakfast, lunch *and* dinner" gleam.

She wiggled out from under the covers and tiptoed to the bedroom door.

"I wouldn't care if Councillor Belphegor was the King of fucking Hell itself, Mother." Brennan's voice was a harsh growl. "He's a lard-assed, shit-for-brains dickhead. And if I were you, I'd be wondering what the hell possessed Asmodeus to send him here in the first place."

She opened the door a crack wider and risked a peek.

Brennan prowled up and down the living room like some big twitchy cat, his brows knitted in a fearsome frown. If he'd had a tail, he would be lashing it about now. He kicked viciously at a cushion, launching it across the room. It landed with a sad, squishy *poof*, belching feathers from a burst seam.

She shivered, thankful he wasn't directing his considerable ire at her. And thankful that he was talking on a mobile so she had only *him* to deal with and not some other stranger as well. Brennan was more than enough for her to cope with right now.

Oh boy. Was he ever.

"Don't be naive, Mother," he said, spearing fingers through his hair. "Asmodeus always has an agenda. He's a Demon. It's fucking genetic."

A *demon?* What the hell was he talking about? Was he crazy? Demons were the stuff of nightmares, not reality. A chill skittered down her spine. They couldn't possibly be real. Could they?

"And just because you and Asmodeus enjoyed a romp or three in the past, doesn't mean he wouldn't screw you over and fuck with the balance of power in your Realm if he got half a chance."

Asmodeus.

A faint ripple of recognition pricked her, but it dissipated before she could grasp hold and wrestle anything useful from it. And despite its elusiveness, the memory left her with a belly-churning uneasiness. Whoever this Asmodeus might be, he was not one to trifle with.

Brennan roared so loudly her knees turned to water. "All right, already! Enough with the lecture. I know my responsibilities better than anyone, including that unbearably smug little bastard you've taken for your Consort. Honestly, Mother, I thought you had better taste than to settle for dick over brains. Okay, okay!" He rolled his eyes ceiling-ward. "I'll try my utmost not to upset anyone. Yes, I'll be there in time for the formal luncheon. But I'm warning you, unless you want a diplomatic incident on your hands, you'll seat that terminally stupid toad of a Councillor as far away from me as possible."

He disconnected the phone and tossed it aside. "Fuck. I sooo don't need this right now."

She drew back from the doorway, whirled and tiptoed toward the bed.

"I know you've been eavesdropping." His words were like an unexpected slap on the rear. She bit back a startled squeak. "Come on out and face the music."

Oh shit. Her pulse beat a frenetic tattoo.

"Chill, Kitten. I won't bite. Unless you want me to."

The underlying amusement in his voice encouraged her to venture from the bedroom and hover in the doorway.

"So," he said, eyeing her between lazy, half-slitted eyelids, like he didn't mind at all that she'd listened in on a private phone call. She wasn't foolish enough to be deceived, though. She'd crossed a line and felt like a child expecting to be reamed for disobeying its parent.

"Did you overhear anything that rang any bells?"

She chewed her lip, replaying the conversation. "Not really."

"Not really?"

She smoothed her features in an effort to appear as casually unconcerned as he did. She thought about lying, but some instinct told her he would sense it. "I thought I recognized a name, but the instant I thought that, the memory vanished like a popped bubble."

"What name?"

"Asmodeus."

Her voicing of the name gave it life. It rose up like some vast slavering beast and sank its fangs into her psyche. It fed, sucking out her life-force, her will, what little remained of *her*, and left a quivering, withered husk of a creature huddling on the floor. She didn't know why she feared the owner of the name. She only relived the fear. And the agony.

She had no knowledge of *why* this Asmodeus had made her suffer, or what she might have done to deserve it. Her brain bred scenario after scenario, each more nightmarish and appalling than the last.

Something brushed her arm. She howled her fear, heels churning as she sought purchase on the polished wooden floorboards. She skidded backward on her ass, whimpering as the knobs of her spine hit the wall and she realized she had nowhere else to go.

A warm hand settled lightly on her calf. And merely rested there, riding her flinching muscles, refusing to be shaken off but not demanding anything, either.

"Kitten. Sweetheart, it's Brennan."

"B-Brennan?"

"I'm here."

"Brennan!" She sobbed his name, allowed him to press closer, gather her up and banish the nightmares with his capable hands, his whispered words. With himself. She breathed him in, using his overwhelming masculinity to fight free of the fear and ground herself in reality.

She'd barely gained a modicum of control when another maelstrom of emotion caught her completely by surprise.

His barely suppressed lust mantled her, sank into her chilled flesh and warmed her. Her body craved him, her mind cried out for him. And because he *hadn't* fucked her when she'd been helpless and disoriented and couldn't have stopped him if she'd tried, she gave up fighting her own lust and surrendered.

She hoped that he detected the change, the pliancy of her body as she molded herself to him, the eager suppleness of the limbs she entwined about him. She hoped he'd take advantage of her offer and not reject her. And as he shivered beneath the delicate pressure of her lips against the bare skin of his collarbone, she finally banished her demons. A smile curved her lips, and knowing that she would get her way, she gave it full, triumphant reign.

He rose onto his knees, taking her with him, cupping her chin in his big hands, forcing her to look at him. "You sure about this, Kitten?"

"Oh, yeah," she breathed.

"Cuz if this is your way of thanking me for rescuing you from a bunch of randy males and providing you with clothing, food and shelter, I'd do the same for any female. I'm not interested in using it as leverage to take advantage of you."

"Oh, yeah?" She stroked her hand over the impressive bulge stretching the fly of his denim cutoffs.

"Stop." He released her chin to bat away her hand. "I can't think logically when you do that."

"I know." Just as she knew that if she changed her mind, backed off and refused to finish what she'd started, he would respect her decision. Not that she was going to change her mind. Hell, no! Whatever she'd been in her past life, she was pretty damned certain she hadn't been a cock-tease. She couldn't remember having sex, but given the way her pulse thrilled and her body tingled in response to this particular male's interest, she suspected that she'd liked it. And lots of it.

Brennan was hot. His fiercely masculine features were softened by the slightest fullness to his lower lip. She wanted to bite that fullness, inflict a tiny pain and lick it better. His mane of hair, the thick locks varying from the palest sun-bleached blond to auburn and burnt caramel, teased her. She couldn't help but imagine how it would feel if he swept the soft strands over her naked skin. Those intelligent, knowing amber eyes missed nothing and promised everything. His big, boldly solid body, the rippling muscles and killer abs, the tight ass—tanned just as golden as the rest of him—made her want to mark him with her nails, announcing to everyone that he'd been hers.

She'd fought the simmering potency of her attraction to him the instant she woke to the shocking intimacy of his face buried between her thighs. She'd been fundamentally dishonest when she reacted by screaming and lashing out and pretending outrage at the liberties he'd taken. She lied to herself, and to him, when she pretended disinterest and boredom at the prospect of him fucking her.

She'd wanted him then. And she'd have taken him, too, if commonsense and the need to get her bearings and protect herself hadn't prevailed.

She wanted him now. Bad. So bad that she ached. *She* held the power now, and it would take only three little words for her to have him right where she wanted him.

That certainty turned her on still more. But first, she would play with him awhile. For as long as she could bear it.

She wiggled away from him. And although he let her go, his gaze never left hers.

She stood and leaned against the wall, watching him watch her as she flicked open the buttons of the shirt he'd lent her. She shrugged it from her shoulders. She cupped her breasts, playing with her nipples, rolling them between her fingers until the sensitive nubs plumped.

Her fingers drifted lower, over her belly button and the slight swell of her stomach.

His gaze left her face, inexorably drawn to follow the progress of her hands. The heat of his wanting licked her skin.

She ran a finger through her cleft, moaning softly as the exquisitely engorged flesh thrummed to her touch. She parted her labia with her fingers, opening herself in the most intimate way to his gaze. She rubbed her clit with the forefinger of her other hand, flicking and stroking, catching her lower lip with her teeth to keep from voicing her demand.

Not yet. Not quite yet.

The rhythm of her finger increased. A thready moan escaped her lips.

Brennan's nostrils flared. "Kitten," he said huskily, "you're making this very hard for me."

A smile curved her lips. "Good. Because I want it hard."

He sucked in a sharp breath. She could see the muscles of his arms and thighs quivering as he fought for control. The material of his pants strained across the bulge of his erect cock.

Time to put him out of his misery. Time to have him where she wanted him. Inside her. Right now. "Fuck me, Brennan."

He pounced, grabbing her hips and holding her in place against the wall while he buried his face in her pussy. His rough tongue oh-so-tenderly flicked her clit.

Again.

Ahhh....

And again.

Her hips jerked toward his mouth, but he held her still and the waiting—the anticipating each delicate touch—reduced her to a quivering mass of wanting.

Just when she thought that she could bear no more, just when she was about to scream and beg and demand, he lapped her slit. And worked a finger inside her. Two fingers, thrusting deep, withdrawing slowly, teasing and tantalizing her entrance, then thrusting deep again.

The swipes of his warm, wet tongue maddened her. She welcomed the invasion of his fingers. She reveled in the knowledge that he'd wrested control from her, that he had her completely at his mercy, and more, that she loved it. Her skin bloomed with warmth. She strained against his grip, grinding her hips down in time with each upward thrust of his fingers. Her vaginal walls fluttered, spasmed. Almost there, almost....

She sobbed when he withdrew his fingers from her cunt. "Brennan, please!"

"Patience, Kitten. We're just getting to the good stuff."

Through a haze of frustrated lust, she watched him unbutton his fly and yank down his pants.

He'd been commando. No surprises there. Something they had in common, because she didn't wear underwear most of the time, either—"Oh!"

His gaze whipped to her face. "You okay, Kitten? Please tell me you're not having second thoughts."

"I just remembered I prefer going commando, too."

His eyebrows quirked upward.

She gave him a tiny grin that she hoped looked as wicked as it felt. "Especially with a skirt."

He stilled, his attention so focused on her that she almost came on the spot.

"A reeeeeally short one."

His amber gaze darkened.

"Black leather."

His pupils dilated, and his breathing quickened.

"Worn with six-inch, fuck-me-big-boy heels."

He manacled her wrist with his hand, yanked her away from the wall and had her on all fours, facing away from him, before she could utter a sound.

And she couldn't adjust her position because of the hand he'd fisted in her hair, his arm wrapped around her waist and his big body covering hers.

The blunt head of his cock probed her folds. He pushed inside her slowly, so slowly. He was so thick and long she felt herself stretching to accommodate him. And she whimpered, but not with pain. He was too skilled a lover to hurt her.

Unless she asked him to.

As though he'd somehow divined her thoughts, he wound his fist tighter in her hair and pulled her head back so far that she was forced to arch her back. He nuzzled her, then nipped her throat just hard enough to break the surface of the skin. The instant she squealed and bucked against the small pain, he thrust inside her as far as he could, so far that his cock butted her cervix.

"More," she purred, grinding herself backward to take more of his cock, gasping when he responded by clamping a big hand down on her neck, pushing her down, forcing her to turn her face aside so her cheek rested against the floor.

He filled her completely, rocking inside her, barely moving. And just as she was savoring the anticipation, wondering what he'd subject her to next, she felt his cock pull out of her.

"Nooooo!"

"Don't move, Kitten," he rumbled.

"But— Ohhh!" His thumb swiped through the silky moisture weeping from her pussy, teased her clit until she quivered, then moved upward to her butt. And he pushed his thumb just inside the tight little opening of her anus. His cock settled again at her vulva and pushed in half an inch. She moaned, the muscles of her thighs straining, wanting, wanting, needing. He thrust hard. She screamed. And as her muscles spasmed around his cock, milking him, holding him inside her, his thumb worked deeper into her ass, stretching this smaller, tighter entrance, possessing her there as well.

She loved having him inside her, filling her, invading her, demanding and taking. And giving. She inhaled their mingled scents, the heady musk of sex and lust and elemental male-female joining. Her awareness of her own body's wants and needs heightened, nerve-endings and engorged tissues shrieking as she climbed toward out-and-out sensory overload.

She fought her need. She wouldn't allow herself that pleasure. Not yet.

She shimmied her ass backward, craving more. And he gave her more. He fucked her with his cock and his thumb, screwing hard and deep, anchoring her to him with one hand on her hip when he realized that she wasn't going to move from her head down, ass up position, had no intention of moving because it felt too good being fucked this way.

The speed of his strokes increased, and the unbearable pressure building inside her intensified, passing beyond pleasure and leaving her to teeter on the edge of glorious pain.

Her inner muscles pulsed around his cock and his thumb, clenched powerfully, and then she tumbled into orgasm.

He surged into her, paused, and then she felt him come in a hot heated rush. Another pause from him, as though he wanted to wring every last pleasure from her body, and then he pulled her back in close to his chest and collapsed with her, over onto his side.

The nip he'd given to the side of her neck flared with painful heat. "Ow!" She clapped a hand over it, feeling the skin throb beneath her fingers, wondering how such an insignificant wound could hurt quite so much.

"Let me see." He brushed her hair back from her neck, tucking it back behind her ear.

"It's nothing," she murmured.

He peeled back her fingers. She felt the warmth of his breath against her neck as he examined the nip, and dammit if she didn't feel horny all over again.

She felt him stiffen, arms suddenly caging her rather than gentling. His fingertips, strangely soothing given the tenseness of the rest of his body, traced the wound. "Shit."

"What?"

"I marked you."

"So? It's just a love bite. It'll fade eventually."

"That's where you're wrong." He surged to his feet.

She rolled onto her back, only to see him stalk from the living room without a backward glance.

What the—?

So much for basking in the afterglow. "Fuck you, too, you moody SOB!" she yelled after him.

By the time she'd hauled herself up from the floor, scrambled into her shirt and stumbled after him, he'd gone. And because there was no visible handle on what appeared to be the sole external door, she couldn't for the life of her figure out how to open it and follow him.

He didn't know how lucky he was. If she caught up with him now, she'd bust his nose and rake furrows down his face.

Bastard. How dare he fuck her and leave her like... like... this! With his cum glistening on her thighs, his teeth-marks tattooing her neck, and a huge gaping hole in her soul that only he'd been able to fill.

She dashed the tears from her cheeks and blew her nose on the hem of her shirt—*his* shirt! It smelled of him, dammit. She ripped it off and methodically tore it to pieces.

How fucking dare he.

Chapter Four

Damned if she would sit here like some abandoned puppy, waiting for that...that...man to return. She kicked the door, wincing when the solid metallic surface bruised her bare toes. Again.

Who the heck required a door constructed of freaking *metal*? Did Brennan need it to keep things out or keep them in?

He might have stuck her with a pathetic little-girl name like "Kitten," but no way was he keeping her prisoner. And he'd better hope he didn't get back before she escaped, or she would geld him with a spoon.

She put her shoulder to the door and shoved. Pointless. The bloody thing had to be at least a foot thick.

"Let me out!" Frustration and humiliation and a lurking fear she didn't want to confront all spewed from her in a boiling, dizzying rush. She stalked back to the sitting room and let loose, charging around the room, grabbing all manner of ornaments and tossing them in the middle of the rug. A couple of lampshades and even a small side-table joined the growing pile. She dragged the rug toward the door and proceeded to lob everything she'd collected at it. To no avail, of course. But the destructive frenzy helped clear her mind.

And when she'd run out of things to throw—the remaining chairs and the bookcases were too difficult to move and the cushions were obviously not worth the effort—she'd calmed enough to try a more logical approach.

She ran her hands over the door's surface, fingers probing for depressions or raised surfaces. Nothing she could discern...Wait!

Not believing her own eyes, she stepped back to squint at it. To the right, about where a handle would normally be attached, the silvery metallic tones deepened into a slightly darker panel.

She pressed her palm firmly over the area, and the door swung open.

Without stopping to think, she dived through the gap, arms raised and fists clenched in triumph. "Yes!"

And then, as the door clanged shut behind her, the reality of her situation smacked her like a stinky wet fish. She had no clothes. No shoes. No food or water. No idea where she was or what to do next.

She shaded her eyes with a hand and peered out at the vast rolling landscape of grass, grass and more grass. Oh, and golly gee whiz, just for effect, the occasional tree. "Awww shit. Of all the lame-brained, dumbass things to do!"

The path Brennan had taken was not immediately obvious, but she spotted the faint imprint of footprints on the path. Not that she was an expert tracker or anything, but it appeared he'd gone barefoot. In fact, come to think of it, she'd not seen him anything other than barefoot. Which meant he was either a freaking idiot, or the going wouldn't be as tough as she imagined.

At the very least, his actions suggested she didn't have to worry about snakes. Which was definitely a plus. Snakes were waaay down on her list of favorite critters.

She followed his tracks down the pathway, such as it was, picking her way across the treacherous scree. And when she reached the bottom where the ground's surface was relatively level and lightly grassed, she deliberately set off in the opposite direction to the one he'd taken.

Her feet didn't bother her as much as they had yesterday. They appeared to have miraculously healed overnight. Not that she cared about the state of her feet. She would walk until they bled and then crawl if she had to. Such was her desire to get as far away from Brennan's damnably intoxicating presence as quickly as humanly possible.

Kitten had been walking for what seemed like hours when the mind-numbing cacophony of birdsong, crickets and other harmless denizens native to the area was infected by a single barking hack. She froze.

It came again, closer this time. And was answered by a high-pitched series of yips, which sounded far too like hysterical human laughter for comfort.

The fine hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention. Adrenaline surged through her veins, pricking at her muscles, urging her to action. She bolted for the nearest decent-sized tree, racing over the ground as if her life depended on her ability to do a sub-four-minute mile. The giggling hiccoughs dogged her heels, spurring her to greater effort. She didn't dare glance behind her for fear she'd trip and the creatures chasing her would pounce.

Chest heaving with exertion, she slowed marginally as she came within spitting distance of the tree. Gathering herself, she leaped for the lowest branch, arching her back and stretching out her arms.

She didn't make it. She smacked the ground in an ungainly sprawl, and the harshly painful jolt of her landing, right on top of the flat-out run, depleted the last of her meager reserve of energy.

On hands and knees, she backed up until her rump hit the tree trunk, then crawled wearily to her feet to face whatever had targeted her as prey.

She couldn't see them, couldn't see any movement bar the slightest rippling of long grass in the light breeze. So she allowed herself to imagine she'd been mistaken, that the stress and the upset of the past day had taken its toll and she'd merely been spooked by some harmless animals' calls.

But no. To her horror, they surged to their feet, revealing themselves as hunched, human-beast amalgams, horrors ripped straight from nightmares and made real.

These must be the demons Brennan had spoken of. Five of them, hooting with manic glee, black-furred muzzles gaping, tongues lolling.

Although their bodies were covered in pale yellow, black-spotted fur, their sexes were obvious. The largest creature had definite breasts, while the others displayed the heavily muscled chests of male predators.

A glimmer of hope flared in her chest. She might be able to reason with the female, plead to be left alone, beg—

Oh. My. God.

Not even the sudden pain scouring her skull and blearing her vision could convince her she was hallucinating. All five of the creatures—even the female—sported erect phalluses.

Appalled fascination gave way to clammy fear. Yep, it was still likely she'd be the main course. But being gangbanged by these monstrosities was gonna be the appetizer.

They fanned out, closing in around her, cutting off any avenue of escape. Not that she was foolish enough to try and run. They would cut her down in seconds.

They edged closer, nostrils dilating as they inhaled her scent.

"C'mere, pretty thing," the pseudo-female cackled, "and let Cass take a good look at ya, hmmmm?" She noted the direction of Kitten's gaze and giggled. One clawed hand tugged the tip of her phallus. "Ya like, huh? A bad case of clit-envy, I'll bet. Us Hyena females got the best of both worlds, I reckon. My clit's bigger'n most dicks and whoooeee! lemme tell ya, after I stick it up ya, ya'll be a convert for sure."

Kitten's stomach curdled, and she curled her hands protectively over her middle, trying to quell the urge to vomit up her guts. *Hyenas?* This...*Realm* of Brennan's was seriously skewed. If *these* things passed for hyenas, what the hell did all the other creatures look like?

One of the males grunted something derogatory, and the one called Cass rounded on him, claws flashing out and scoring his cheek. "If ya don't wanna be last in line to have her, keep ya opinions to yaself."

"Don't worry me none," the male said, swiping at the wound with the back of his paw and lapping at the smears of blood with his tongue. Apparently unconcerned by the blow, he leered at Kitten. "Don't much care whether she's got any fight left in her."

"Corpse-fucker," one of the other males snarled.

He shrugged. "So long as there's a couple of nice juicy holes left intact for me to stick my dick in, don't matter to me whether her heart's still beating. 'Sides, if she's carked, she won't kick up a fuss if I get a bit peckish."

"You and your fuckin' love-bites! I likes my meat whole when I'm fucking it, so you're takin' your turn after me."

"No fucking way."

"Fight you for it!"

While they were bickering, she should bolt. And when—inevitably—they caught her, fight tooth and claw in the hope that they would accidentally kill her. A swift death had to be far less agonizing than what they had planned for her. But Cass's malevolent black gaze never wavered, and its calculated intent sucked all will from her limbs. Heedless of the bark scraping her skin, Kitten slid down the trunk of the tree and wrapped her arms about her bent knees, biting her lips to keep from whimpering.

Cass gave a sharp, low-pitched grunt that effectively silenced the males. She raised her muzzle and sniffed, nostrils dilating. "Can't ya smell it? She's lion-pussy."

The smallest of the males let loose a girlish giggle, and the short mane lining his thick neck stood on end as his gaze darted left and right. He giggled again, finally subsiding when one of the others cuffed him about the head.

"Whaddya think, boys?" Cass cocked her head to contemplate Kitten. "This little pussy worth the risk?"

"Fresh meat's always worth the risk," said the male who'd spoken of tearing off a hunk of her flesh to feed on while he fucked her.

"She's not just any lion's pussy," a rich, melodious voice intervened. "She's *Brennan's* pussy."

A tall, lean woman, clad in khaki pants and a cream tank top, stepped from behind the tree. She smoothed back her sun-streaked blonde locks, twisted them in an elegant knot at her nape, and leaned against the trunk to examine the sole of one bare foot. "Damned prickly things," she muttered, plucking out the offending thorn and flicking it to the ground. "She's his *mate*, to be exact. Which means she's practically family."

"Leonore," the female hyena-thing said. "Haven't seen ya round lately. Rumor had it ya'd carked. We was planning on sniffing out ya carcass, though, just to make certain."

"Sorry to disappoint, Cass. Guess you'll have to wait a few more years before you slurp the marrow from my old bones and pick over my remains." She smiled at the males. "Hiya, boys. Still hanging round hoping for Cass's leftovers? Pity. I had such high hopes for y'all."

"If that slut daughter of yours had any sense, she'da had one of her l'il fuck-buddies strangle ya the instant ya gave up the throne." Cass jerked her chin at her posse, snarling to bring them to heel. "Make tracks, boys. We'll have'ta find another pussy to play with."

"What's your name, sweetheart?" the woman asked, completely ignoring the disgruntled hyenas.

"Brennan calls me Kitten."

"Kitten, huh?" The woman—Leonore—snorted her appreciation. "Sure is apt for a soft little thing like you. Come on then, Kitten. Let's get you away from here before other beasties come sniffing round. I'm not in the mood to fend off a second bunch of randy Lycans." She extended her hand.

Kitten ignored the gesture, her wary gaze fixed on the departing hyenas.

The quintet of bipedal monstrosities appeared to blur, and the gut-churning fusions of human and hyena became proper animals, *normal* hyenas. They loped away, squealing and grunting amongst themselves.

Her brain was so numb from what she'd just witnessed that she accepted Leonore's hand and allowed herself to be hauled to her feet. "Guess I'm totally screwed now, huh?"

"What makes you say that?" Leonore's brows formed little peaks of genuine confusion.

"If those fucked up monstrosities believe *you're* bigger and badder and way nastier than them, I reckon I haven't got a hope in hell."

Leonore patted her hand. "Lucky for you, Kitten, this isn't Hell. So there's always hope."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Have you heard that old children's rhyme about the pussy cat, Kitten? We're going to visit the Queen."

Chapter Five

Through lazy leonine eyes, Brennan gauged the sun's position and snarled at nothing in particular. He scared the shit out of an adolescent jackal who'd encroached on his territory to kill a jackrabbit, but it did nothing to lighten his mood. Not even a snooze in an alcove shaded by an overhanging slab of rock could ease his turmoil.

He'd blooded her. *Marked* her. It had been a careless thing to do and as Prime, he should have possessed greater self-control. The wound ought not be have been anything more serious than a love-bite given in the throes of passion. Above all, it should not have marked the female he'd nicknamed "Kitten" as his mate.

Brennan was the Prime of his natal pride. With the specific intention of forming a pride of his own, he could select a suitable Lioness to be his mate. During their first mating, he would bite her, and an enzyme in his saliva would sear his mark into her skin. But only when she had truly accepted him—and everything he had to offer—with her mind, body and soul, would the mark morph to resemble a lion's paw-print tattoo. Only then would she be his for life.

Only then would he truly be hers.

He hadn't met any female that interested him enough to compel that kind of commitment. Until now. He could see himself spending the rest of his life with Kitten, surrounded by their children, and hear her giggling as she shared in their childish delight. He could imagine growing old with her.

But Kitten wasn't Lycan.

Nor had he intended to breed with her. As a Prime, he could afford to be selective about his breeding partners. He chose only females of superior leonine lineage who'd petitioned him for the express purpose of bearing his offspring. Fucking was different matter, kept entirely separate from breeding. He had the capability to render his sperm sterile, so it was easy to ensure he fathered no unplanned offspring. Intention was everything. Shooting blanks when he was fucking for mere pleasure was something he did without consciously thinking about it.

So he shouldn't have been able to mark her. He shouldn't have been able to impregnate her.

That he'd achieved the former was painfully obvious, given the state of the wound on her neck. And he didn't much like his chances of having avoided the latter, though it was too soon to know.

He'd never lost control before. So why her?

He was hardly starved for sex. Nor so bored that he sought stimulation from other species. For a bit of variety, he did engage in mutually pleasurable couplings with females of the big cat variety, but nothing turned him on like the females of his Breed.

Until Kitten.

As an added complication, if his mother found out he'd life-mated without her approval, she wouldn't just have *metaphorical* kittens, she would have *his* Kitten. For breakfast. And the mere thought of Kitten being harmed filled him fury.

Sooo not gonna happen.

"She's mine!" he roared, startling a flock of vultures who'd been eyeing the jackrabbit carcass.

He would keep Kitten safely hidden away until he sorted this mess. And to help sort it, he needed his grandmother's advice. Leonore was well versed in Lycan history. If any Prime in years gone by had accidentally found himself life-mated to a non-Lycan creature, she would have a record of it.

Unfortunately for Brennan, Leonore had tired of Court life a decade ago and retired to some secret lair to continue her research in peace. Or perhaps she'd grown weary of Marlena's sarcastic jibes. Marlena had always been jealous of Leonore's popularity and—

Marlena. *Shit*. He was beyond late for his mother's formal luncheon. She'd commanded his presence, and he was obliged to pay lip-service to that command if only to present a united front during this visit from the Demon King's emissary.

Brennan bounded from his rock, shifting in mid-leap to Were-form.

It took him half an hour at full speed to reach the outermost boundaries of the royal pridelands. When the Court was in sight, he shifted to humanoid, obeying yet another ridiculous law that badly needed to be scrapped in his not-so-humble opinion. His mother had decreed that everyone—including visitors—must remain in humanoid form whilst on Court grounds. She insisted that it put Lycans, Demons and Angels at equal disadvantage.

Equal disadvantage. Yeah, riiight. No Lycan, no matter how accomplished in combat or spell-casting, was a match for Rezon, the Drakon Demon who had once been Asmodeus's lieutenant. The Drakon would be even more deadly now that he'd been reborn as a Sentinel. And even in their humanoid guises, Angels were just plain scary mothers. He'd not want to go one-on-one with an Angel of any kind.

Let the Others show themselves in their true forms if they preferred. At least then everyone would stop pretending to be civilized and cut through the posturing and the bullshit. But Marlena would slit her own throat before taking anyone's advice.

Brennan conjured black pants and a silky deep-gold shirt. He didn't bother with footwear. Not even to satisfy his mother's sensibilities would he stoop to wearing shoes.

The guards identified him by his scent and granted him unhindered passage to the inner sanctum of the royal Court. He slid through the doors and merged with the groups of courtiers and Breed representatives. His older sister, Cherise, was nowhere in sight, doubtless holed up somewhere private and enjoying her Panther lover's attentions. Brennan could hardly blame his sister for finding some place better to be.

He greeted people he knew, nodded at acquaintances, even engaged in whole conversations. But while his body automatically performed the niceties of social interaction, his mind filled with images of Kitten.

Her delicately featured face. Her deep green eyes, defiant and challenging, then lust-hazed and sultry. Those lush, pouting lips he'd tasted and savored, and would dearly love to feel wrapped around his cock, tasting him as he'd tasted her.

His body remembered the way hers had felt in his arms, how she'd fitted like she belonged there. His cock hardened and throbbed. His nostrils filled with her scent, ripe and luscious and ever so slightly forbidden, like a treat he had to indulge in even if he would suffer for it later. The memory of her was so powerfully real he could almost believe if he turned his head, he would see her walking toward him.

He yearned to blow off this meeting and head back to his lair, back to her.

She would be furious with him, of course. And if he knew females—and he did—she would be devising ways to punish him. His cock twitched again. The make-up sex was going to be mind-blowing. Explosive.

"Brennan!" His mother's voice sliced through the chattering groups of courtiers and Breed representatives. "I've been waiting for you."

He blinked. He was standing in the middle of the room, one hand wrapped around a glass of some beverage he didn't remember taking. His mother gestured at him, her stiff back and compressed lips proclaiming her fury.

Shit. He had it bad.

He'd never let a female interfere with the important stuff before. And inter-Realm politics was as important as it got. He couldn't afford to be distracted by thoughts of the woman he'd walked out on. He pushed all thoughts of her to the back of his mind and locked them tightly away. Time to get his head in the game. Whatever the game might be.

He handed his glass to a passing waiter and sauntered over to the cluster of lounging chairs that had been placed before massive floor-to-ceiling windows to take best advantage of the view. Sunset would wash the surrounding pridelands with brilliant crimson and golden hues, haloing them in a fiery glow of unparalleled beauty. Today, the view was ruined by Councillor Belphegor's fleshy face, complete with hair-studded wart decorating his nose. Not to mention his grossly distended belly.

"Mother." Brennan nodded briefly and chose a seat as far away from the Demon as possible. He flopped onto his chair, stuck his hands behind his head, and stretched out his legs, crossing his ankles. "Councillor."

"Prince Brennan." Belphegor greeted him with a smelly belch and a leer. Lunch had obviously been to his liking. Obviously, Brennan's package was also to his liking.

In his dreams. "Brennan will do, Councillor. I don't like to stand on ceremony."

Belphegor's slug-like tongue protruded from his mouth to moisten his lips. His next words were directed at the Lycan Queen, but his gaze remained fixed on Brennan's groin. "Such a big strapping boy you've spawned, Marlena." When he finally turned to his hostess, his froggy face split in an obsequious smile. "He must make you very proud."

"Lycans do not spawn, Councillor."

The Councillor patted her arm. "No offense, Marlena. Merely a slip of the tongue."

She shook off his arm. "Please, do call me Queen Marlena."

Councillor Belphegor, ignoring the warning implicit in the Lycan Queen's sugary tone, apparently didn't know his brain from his asshole. "Shall we get down to business, Marlena?"

"And speaking of business," Brennan cut in to divert his mother before she could deprive the terminally stupid Demon of an appendage he might find useful, "where's Tarrant?"

Marlena blinked, and the acrid stench of her anger receded. She lolled back against the settee. "My Consort is otherwise engaged." She waved a hand at Brennan, giving him permission to begin the pussyfooting that would eventually lead to the point of this meeting.

Huh. Seemed there might be trouble in paradise. That's what his mother got when she chose dick over brains. Brennan turned his attention to the Demon. The rank odor rising from the Councillor suggested considerable fermentation going on inside that fat gut of his.

For his own part, Brennan couldn't stomach being in the same room as the Demon a moment longer than he had to. He wanted out of here.

He wanted Kitten.

"Let's cut through the bullshit. Why are you here, Councillor? Would you like some advice about the best way to approach a Lycan fuck-buddy?" He looked the Demon up and down. "I'm sure one of the less fastidious Breeds would be more than willing to oblige."

Marlena's gaze narrowed, shooting fury-filled daggers at him for his bluntness.

He quelled her with a searing gaze of his own, a gaze that said, *You wanted me here, you ceded control to me, now fucking deal with it.* She subsided into her chair with an audible huff barely disguised by fussing with her voluminous skirts.

Belphegor guffawed. He swiped a gob of mucus from his nostrils with the back of his hand. And cleaned it off by smearing it on the nearest cushion. "Ah, the young," he said languidly. "Always so impatient, are they not?"

"Get to the point, Councillor," Brennan said. "I have things to do." Like soothing a savage Kitten. His cock twitched as he vividly imagined stroking his hands down her body and hearing her purr with pleasure.

The Demon harrumphed and cleared his throat, drawing Brennan reluctantly back to the here and now.

"Very well," Belphegor said. "I'm sure you share my concern about the proliferation of Demon-Lycan Halflings. I'm sure you feel as we do, that this abominable practice must cease!" He punctuated his statement by clawing the air with his sausage-like fingers.

Brennan shrugged. "All Halflings are banished to the Demon Realm before they reach adulthood and become a potential threat to the established hierarchy. It's hardly an issue for us. If that's all you came to say, Councillor, I'm afraid you had a wasted trip."

He surged to his feet, his mind already envisioning the woman waiting in his lair. Would she welcome him? Would she be as eager to reclaim his body as he was to reclaim hers? Or would she challenge him, perhaps even lunge at him and try to best him physically before she again surrendered herself?

He rather hoped for the latter. A bit of a tussle before he exerted his dominance would make for excellent foreplay.

His cock rubbed painfully against the zipper of his pants. He sucked in a shaking breath, fighting for control. If he gave in to his base desires, he'd go Were and hightail it back to his lair, leaving his mother's asinine laws about retaining humanoid form to take a flying fuck!

Hang on. There was an even quicker way to get to Kitten than going Were.

A spell. It would be risky to transport himself such a distance, but the prize waiting for him would be worth it.

His eyelids drifted closed as he imagined Kitten naked, her luscious little body spread out on his bed, the lips of her cunt glistening with her need for him. And he groaned, frustrated by his unslaked need, frustrated by his inability to recall the exact words and intonation of the spell that could transport him to her.

Belphegor's hand snaked out to grasp his arm. "Did you not hear what I said, Prince Brennan? Are you feeling unwell?"

Brennan choked back his desire to rip the Demon's limb from its socket and toss it into the crowd of onlookers. "I'm fine," he snarled. Deliberately avoiding his mother's curious gaze, he shook off the Councillor's hand and sank back into his seat.

"As I was saying," the Demon said, "our two species must remain pure."

Pure? That was rich. Demonkind, by their very nature, were impure. Their DNA was such a twisted, unholy mess that it was impossible to untangle. Lucifer must have been seriously tripping when he created them.

"Your own King has sampled the *delights* of our Realm." Marlena raised her arms over her head and stretched luxuriantly, showcasing her own particular delights. She finished off her little performance with a sigh so deep her breasts nearly popped from her bodice.

Belphegor's eyes glazed, and that slug-like tongue moistened his lips.

So much for all his crap about maintaining the purity of their species. Given half a chance, he'd fuck Brennan *and* his mother. Horny little bastard.

But the Councillor wasn't the only horny male present. Another seductive memory of Kitten swamped Brennan's senses. He recalled the satiny soft skin of her full breasts as he weighed them in his hands, the ripe hardness of her nipples as he rolled them between his fingers. In his mind he heard her breathy moan, an oh-so-feminine sound that told him she was as hungry for him as he was for her.

Damned if his cock wasn't throbbing and twitching and so painfully fucking hard that he wanted to throw back his head and roar his need to the world. The blood circulating round his brain had gone so far south it was almost impossible to concentrate on this meeting. He shook his head in an effort to erase Kitten from his mind.

"Demons make frequent visits to *our* Realm to search out sexual partners," Marlena finally said when Brennan neglected to comment. "King Asmodeus apparently finds me—our *Kind*—especially intriguing."

"Yes, precisely!" Belphegor crowed, as if he'd made some brilliant point that couldn't possibly be denied. "Your Kind's bestial sexuality tempts even our King! I shudder to imagine the abomination that might result from such a sordid union! And I," he drew himself up in a pompous pile of flab, "intend to put a stop to all future fraternization and ensure the purity of our Kind is maintained. I intend to enforce a ban on Demonkind visiting the Lycan Realm. Moreover, all Halflings will be expelled from the Demon Realm and repatriated to the Lycan Realm."

The Lycan Queen glowered at the Demon. Claws sprouted from her fingertips as her hands shifted to lethal leonine paws.

Chapter Six

Brennan lunged. Only his superior speed and strength prevented Marlena from ripping Belphegor a new orifice to breathe from.

"Mother. I'm sure the Demon King's emissary didn't intend to be quite so insulting. Did you, Councillor Belphegor?"

The Demon, belatedly realizing his peril, gazed at the Lycan Queen's claws and turned a gangrenous shade of green. His collapsed onto his chair and promptly loosed a ripe fart.

Marlena shook off Brennan's grip. "It would behoove you, Councillor, to mind your tongue before I have one of our *bestial* Kind tear it from your mouth."

"Mother." Brennan held up a cautionary hand.

She rounded on him. "I will not tolerate that...that...thing!" She waved her paw in the cringing Councillor's direction.

A whimper escaped Belphegor's fleshy lips. The raw, enticing stench of fear oozed from his pores to perfume the air.

Marlena's nostrils flared. Her focus cut back to the Demon. The amber hue of her eyes intensified, and she ran the tip of her tongue over her lips. "Prey," she whispered.

"P-p-pray?" Belphegor squawked. "B-but I'm Demon! I can't pray!"

Brennan didn't bother to enlighten him. "We'll continue this conversation tomorrow, Councillor." He clicked his fingers at the two nearest bodyguards, who were doing their best to appear as if they hadn't been eavesdropping. "The Councillor would like to return to his suite. Immediately."

Brennan could only feel relief that this travesty of a meeting had ended. Pakhet forgive him, but the needs of the Realm paled in comparison to his need to fuck Kitten senseless and possess her in every way known to an experienced and lustful male.

But he wasn't free to leave just yet.

From the smell of his mother, she was close to the edge. If he left her now, she would lose it. No matter what she did, because she was their Queen, no Lycan would dare lay a finger on her. The last time his mother had lost it completely, she'd jumped an adolescent leonine male and fucked him senseless—literally. The kid's mind had broken under the onslaught, and the fact that Marlena left him comatose but alive could hardly be considered an act of mercy. Knowing his mother's proclivities—as Brennan unfortunately did—she could as easily decide to chase a weaker Lycan down and treat him as prey. In other words, tear him to shreds and eat him.

The mere thought of dealing with the political fallout from such a crime was enough to set Brennan's teeth on edge. Not to mention he would have to hunt down his volatile sister and convince her to give up her Panther lover and take the throne. Either that or—Mihos forbid—take the throne himself. He would lose any chance he might have of securing Kitten as his mate in the aftermath of such a disaster.

He would have no choice but to let her go.

The two guards had hoisted the lax-limbed Demon from his seat and were "assisting" him from the room so efficiently his feet didn't touch the ground.

The scent of Marlena's anger intensified as her prey slipped away.

"Control yourself, Mother." Brennan kept his voice calm, inflectionless. "Those guards will never make it out the door with him if you lose it now."

And indeed, all conversation and activity had dwindled, and all eyes turned on them in watchful anticipation. The guests would take their lead from their Queen. If she lost control, Demon emissary or not, Belphegor would pay the price.

The Queen's facial muscles rippled, the hint of a muzzle disfiguring her perfect features.

"If you rip that toad apart," Brennan said, "his stench will permeate the flooring. The servants will have the Devil's own job cleaning it. They'll bitch and moan for weeks."

The canines protruding over her lower lip receded.

"Besides, I've never found toads to be particularly appetizing. They're slimy, and they leave a disgusting aftertaste in your mouth."

Marlena's lips twitched upward, and the hungry wildness leached from her eyes.

When the massive doors clanged shut behind the Councillor, a spattering of conversations mantled the hungry atmosphere with a veneer of civilization. Brennan exhaled a slow, cautious sigh.

His mother finally composed herself enough to shift her paws back to hands. She eyed him from beneath her lashes. "Spit it out. You know you won't be content until you've said your piece."

"Fine. You asked for it. This can't go on, Mother. Your temper is more volatile than it's ever been. If your Consort is not satisfying your needs, you should consider—"

"Speaking of *needs*," Marlena purred. A sly smile graced her features. "Brennan, darling, I have someone I'd like you to meet. Her name is—Pakhet's milkless tits!" Her vulgarity shocked even Brennan. "What's *Leonore* doing here? And dressed like that? And who is that insipid little creature she's got with her?"

Even more startling than his grandmother's presence at Court after an extended absence was seeing the woman she'd brought with her. A woman whose green-eyed gaze locked with Brennan's and savaged his heart.

Kitten.

How in the Realm had she managed to open the door of his den?

Shit. He didn't need to be psychic to know Marlena had set him up with some nubile young Lioness. She wouldn't take kindly to being thwarted. The focus of her rage would be the most vulnerable person involved.

Kitten.

Brennan's Beast urged him to neutralize the potential threat to his mate, even if that threat happened to be the Lycan Queen.

He caged his instincts. If he played this right, his mother might believe he'd only taken Kitten as a lover, not a mate. And then he could spirit Kitten to safety and take his sweet time to convince her that she was his in every way.

Kitten's scowl and fisted hands clearly signaled that she would be overjoyed at the opportunity to emasculate him with the nearest blunt instrument. The heat in her eyes said she would dearly like to do other things, intimate things. Brennan got an instant cock-stand the size of the frickin' Earth continent of Africa. He grabbed a cushion and plunked it in his lap.

And to make his life even more complicated, the mating bond between Brennan and the woman he'd imagined safely locked away from harm flared. It pulsated with such insistence that not even the weakest Lycan present could fail to sense it.

Or know its significance.

Marlena gasped. She turned to Brennan, her nostrils flaring, her disgust obvious to anyone with half a brain. "Her? Are you insane?"

Her scorn should have lashed him like a barbed whip and provoked him to retaliate, but he fixed his gaze on Kitten.

She was clad only in an ill-fitting singlet top, Leonore's at a guess. Her face was smudged with dirt-streaked tears, her hair a bird's nest of tangles. She grimaced and rubbed the side of her neck

The mark. Shit. Mihos only knew what it was doing to her. He surged to his feet and bounded over to snatch her from Leonore's side.

"Mine!" He growled, daring anyone to dispute the fact, proving it by enfolding Kitten in his arms and planting a savage kiss on her lips. When she wound her arms around his neck, his Beast rumbled approval of her surrender. One of his hands dipped down to caress the silken skin of her bare thigh. He lifted her, wrapping her legs about his waist. Her intoxicating scent mantled him, stroking his senses and enticing him to shed his clothing, grasp her hips and impale her hot feminine core upon the rigid length of his cock. He wanted to stake his claim for all to see. Here. Now.

But he retained enough presence of mind to realize how giving in to his lust would affect the other guests. Unwilling to incite a full-on orgy, he headed with his mate toward the nearest exit, hunching over to protect her from being jostled and snarling at anyone who got too close as he pushed his way through the curious throng.

"Brennan!" His grandmother's tone was so curt, so profoundly censorious, that he halted and cringed like a scolded cub.

Only Leonore possessed the power to make him feel like a naughty child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. And how freaking humiliating that she'd chosen a public arena to do so. He was a leonine Prime, for fuck's sake!

"What in the Realm possessed you to leave a defenseless creature roaming round the savannah?" Leonore said. "Cass and her boys found her. Merciful Pakhet knows what would have happened to her if I hadn't intervened!"

Hyenas?

The mere thought of what had befallen Kitten since she'd left the safety of his den was enough to quench the pricking heat of his lust. If those animals had so much as laid a paw on her...

He sniffed her neck.

They hadn't. There was no hint of their stink on her skin. He pressed his lips to the mark he'd inflicted, then swiped his tongue over the wound. She shuddered and went limp in his embrace.

"If Pakhet were a merciful goddess," Marlena said, not bothering to lower her voice or moderate her tone, "that hyena bitch *would* have eaten her and done you a huge favor."

Brennan stilled. He darted a savage gaze over his shoulder at the Lycan Queen. "Watch your tongue, Mother. This female is under my protection." The feral fury darkening his gaze dared her to dispute the fact.

Marlena clamped her lips shut, belatedly realizing she was the subject of avid, calculating eyes and at least some discretion was advisable.

Kitten moaned. Brennan swept her into his arms and pressed a kiss to her brow. Her eyelids were fluttering, and her skin felt hot. Too hot. His gut clenched, and it was with profound relief that he watched his grandmother cross the floor to approach him. "Leonore, she needs a Healer. I should—"

Leonore threw up her hand. "No Lycan Healer possesses the skills to succor this child, Brennan. She's not in immediate danger, though. I promise."

Brennan held his grandmother's gaze and finally nodded.

"Good boy. Now go sit down, and we'll attempt to discuss this rationally with your mother."

Leonore waited until he carried Kitten back to his seat and settled himself with her nestled in his lap. Then she turned to address the goggle-eyed guests. "Everyone!" She clapped her hands. "I'm sure you all have better places to be."

She hadn't ruled the Realm for two decades, but her air of authority ensured that guards, servants, and Breed representatives all bolted for the nearest exit. She waited until the room cleared before she started in on her daughter. "Even as self-absorbed as you are, Marlena, surely it hasn't escaped you that Brennan has chosen a mate and marked her?"

"You don't say." The Lycan Queen raked her critical gaze over Brennan's choice of mate, the woman he knew only as *Kitten*. Her features arranged themselves in an "I'm sooo looking at something I've scraped off my foot" sneer.

His hackles rose as anger at the insult warred with anxiety.

His Kitten was a sorry sight indeed. But outward appearances weren't everything. Anyone who knew Marlena could attest to that. His mother was a stunningly beautiful female. Shame about the toxic personality.

He smoothed Kitten's hair from her brow and combed it with his fingers.

Marlena confronted him, unable to hold her tongue. "From what refuse pile did you drag this pathetic little creature? You...you've done this purely to spite me, haven't you? I had a suitable mate all picked out for you!"

"It isn't always all about you, Marlena," his grandmother said.

"When I want your opinion, I'll ask for it, old woman!"

Leonore quirked an unimpressed eyebrow. "And we all know that'll be when Hell freezes over. Or your Consort grows a set of balls."

Marlena lunged at Leonore with claws fully extended. Mid-slash she halted, poised like some lifelike statue created to portray vengeful fury. Then she slowly toppled to the floor and lay there, stiff and helpless, unable to enunciate anything more than a strangled gargle.

Brennan teased another tangle from Kitten's hair and quirked an amused eyebrow at his grandmother. "Nice binding spell, Leonore. She'll have your guts for that, though. Mark my words."

Leonore bent to pat Marlena's cheek, ignoring the impotent fury seething in her daughter's fixed gaze. "She can try. And as for you, Brennan, I hope you know what you're doing. Are you aware that your Kitten isn't what she seems? She's not one of us."

Brennan gazed down at the feverish woman he held in his arms. His mate. "Yes, thank you, Leonore. I'm well aware of that pertinent fact. And you must know I didn't *intend* for this to happen. It just...did. And my mark hasn't morphed to its final form yet. She's fighting it."

Leonore's eyes rounded as the implications of his statement hit home. "Unintentional bonding. I see."

"I'm glad someone does," he muttered.

Part of him wanted to roar defiance at the gods who had tempted and entrapped him, deprived him of his right to choose his own Kind as a mate. He wanted to leave all the trappings of civility behind and fully embrace his Beast. He wanted to flush some worthy prey and run it to ground. He wanted to slash and tear. Kill.

And the intrinsically alpha male part of him needed to protect the woman he held in his arms. That part of him was proud to have chosen a worthy mate, was eager to know her fully, make her his in every way, explore and exploit the bond they shared. And that part of him cuddled her closer and didn't want to relinquish her. Wouldn't relinquish her. Ever.

Leonore perched on the arm of his chair and squeezed his shoulder. Her hand moved to the back of his neck and she dug her fingertips into the tight muscles, massaging away some of his tension. "Before you go off half-cocked, let's find out what we can about her." She gave his neck a final pat and released him. "We should go."

"Mother's gonna be beyond furious if you leave her there like that."

Leonore spared a disdainful glance for the Lycan Queen, the daughter of her body, if not her heart. "Sometimes I find it hard to believe she's my child. It'll teach her some much-needed patience and humility. And if *you're* so concerned about your mother's state of mind, *you* release her. You're almost as talented as I in spell-casting. In fact, were you not so enamored with electronic gadgetry, you'd surpass me."

"I don't think so. Suits me to know exactly where she is for now."

Leonore's brows rose to her hairline. "You really think she'll be that vindictive?"

"My loving mother?" Brennan snorted. "Yeah. Especially if she has a suitable mate all lined up for me. I can only imagine what she's already promised the girl and her family. Reparations will have to be made. My mother's never been big on reparations."

Leonore stroked Kitten's cheek and laid the back of her hand on her forehead. "Poor little thing. Someone's reamed her mind and made mincemeat of her memories. I'd have to go deep to retrieve anything of use. Given how fragile she is and how adversely your mark is affecting her, I don't dare. Have you any clues as to her origins?"

He stood, cuddling Kitten close to his chest, bending his head to nuzzle her hair. As her scent curled through his nostrils, some of his anxiety eased. "I have a clue, all right. I don't know how it's possible, but it's gonna make a heap of Lycans very unhappy."

Funny how *he* no longer considered it an insurmountable problem. He was more worried about the problems their mating bond would cause for Kitten's sake than for his own. "There's someone I need talk to before I do anything more," he said.

Curiosity brightened his grandmother's eyes. She stood and smoothed her pants down her thighs. "You mean, there's someone *we* should talk to. No way are you leaving me out of this. Got it?"

Brennan cut his gaze to his mother. Doubtless her ears were burning. "Got it. But let's not discuss it here."

Leonore favored him with a mischievous grin. "Oooh, a mystery! I love mysteries." She nudged Marlena's hip with a toe. "I'd suggest you try to enjoy your next few hours of forced introspection, dear. Don't waste them by planning some petty revenge. Brennan and I have always been more than a match for you."

"You shouldn't taunt her like that," Brennan scolded his grandmother as they departed the banquet hall.

"Awww, spoil an old woman's fun, why don't you?"

"You? Old? That'll be the day."

"Happens to us all, eventually. Brennan, shouldn't we take this poor child back to your lair before we go trolling for information? I can cast a spell to ensure she remains unconscious until we return."

He tightened his arms around Kitten. "I'm not letting her out of my sight again!"

"All right, all right. Keep your fur on. I was only thinking about what's best for the poor girl."

"What's best for her is that she remains with me." With a nod, Brennan dismissed the guards standing outside one of the guest suites, eased his mate to a one-armed grip, and rapped perfunctorily on the door.

Leonore wrinkled her nose. "Pakhet's paws! What's that stench?"

"Councillor Belphegor," Brennan called, when it became evident the Demon wasn't going to bother to answer his door.

His grandmother's face scrunched into a disgusted scowl. "No Demon's wiped the floor with Old Stinky yet? Damn. I had high hopes Rezon might gobble him up and do both Asmodeus and the Demon Realm a huge favor."

Brennan snorted. "I think your best hope for getting rid of Belphegor is Asmodeus. The Demon King's never been one to suffer fools." He raised his hand to rap on the door again, but Leonore grabbed his arm.

"I've got a bad feeling about this. Are you certain it's a good idea to bring your Kitten to the Demon's attention?"

"My gut tells me it's necessary." Brennan rapped on the door again.

His grandmother blew out a dramatically gusty sigh. "Only for you, dear, would I put up with that...that—"

"Shhh! Here he comes. Behave, Leonore."

"Who is it?" a highly disgruntled voice whined.

"It's Brennan, Councillor. I have someone I'd like you to meet. It's rather important, or I wouldn't have presumed to bother you without an appointment." He hated the necessity for diplomacy, when all he wanted to do was to barge in and strangle the answers that he needed out of the Demon with his bare hands.

"Oh, very well." The door flew open. "What's this all about?" the Demon demanded, his eyes bulging more than usual as he took in Leonore's lack of shirt.

"Yes, Brennan, what's this all about?" Leonore clothes-pegged her nostrils with her fingers.

Brennan ignored them both and strode into the Councillor's quarters as if he had every right to be there. His tolerance for brown-nosing only went so far. He laid Kitten on a settee in the sitting room, arranging her limbs sedately and doing his best to ensure she was decently covered. He didn't want any male leering at her, let alone a disgusting piece of dung like Belphegor. It took every ounce of will he possessed to step aside and give the Demon a clear view of her. His Beast's yowl echoed stridently in his mind, voicing its displeasure that Brennan would leave his mate unprotected.

"What can you tell me about this female, Councillor?"

Belphegor cast such a disdainful glance at Kitten that Brennan's hackles rose. With one swipe of his claws, he could disembowel this morbidly obese waste of oxygen and—

Leonore's hand squeezed his arm, her nails digging into his skin, grounding him so he could control his protective instincts and review the situation with clear eyes and a clearer head. He slid a gaze her way, wordlessly conveying his thanks.

"You can't possibly be suggesting that *I* had anything to do with the state she's currently in," the Demon blustered.

"I'm not suggesting anything of the sort. Tell me if you recognize her."

Belphegor's eyebrows rose to his greasily receding hairline. Then his lips curved in such a self-satisfied smirk, Brennan knew without doubt the Demon was imagining Brennan obligated to him.

Belphegor could imagine what he liked. Until the Demon provided Brennan with the answers he sought. And afterward, Brennan would have great delight in puncturing the Councillor's sordid little fantasies.

Belphegor, supremely unaware of the undercurrents flowing around him, waddled over to leer at the supine woman. "What have we got here, then?" His nostrils dilated and his fleshy lips parted slightly as he sucked in a breath. His tongue darted out. He appeared to be tasting Kitten's scent.

Brennan tensed, his body vibrating with the clawing need to grab the Councillor and dispose of him like the sack of shit that he was.

"A pretty thing beneath all that dirt." The Demon leaned forward to squint more closely at Kitten. He prodded her shoulder with a stubby finger, and then he grasped her chin to turn her face toward him.

Brennan locked his muscles in an effort to remain motionless. He clenched his jaw against the enraged roar burgeoning in his throat. And he waited.

Belphegor abruptly released Kitten's chin and reared back, his arms wheeling as he sought to keep his balance. His jaw sagged. "Naamah?" His voice was a strangled gargle. "Here? Masquerading as a human? How can that be? What in Hell's name is she playing at?"

Chapter Seven

Naamah. Brennan rolled the name around his tongue, testing it.

Naamah. It was exotic and sexy—like her.

It fit her far better than "Kitten."

Belphegor slapped Naamah's face. "Wake up this instant, you little bitch!"

Brennan shook off his grandmother's restraining grip and lunged, only to be pinned by her binding spell. Which he unraveled in thirty seconds flat. Thus allowing him to claw back just enough rationality that he didn't immediately dismember the Councillor.

"Leave her alone, Belphegor!" Leonore's "she who must be obeyed" tone stayed the Councillor's raised hand. "The poor girl is unconscious. No amount of slapping will bring her 'round."

Brennan's Beast demanded vengeance for the hurt done to his mate. *Patience*, he instructed. *Let's see what else we can learn before we exact retribution*.

His vicious, biting need to render and tear and shred receded to a controllable level, but he knew he hadn't deceived Leonore. She held her hands clutched at her sides, face impassive, instantly ready to cast another spell if Brennan showed the slightest sign that he'd lost control.

He sucked in a deep breath through his nose, held it, then let it slowly out. "You know this female, Councillor?"

"Know her?" The Demon snorted a nasty little phlegm-laden laugh. "Of course I know her. Naamah is one of Asmodeus's most talented Beguilers."

Leonore clapped a hand over her mouth, but the gesture didn't quite muffle her giggle.

Brennan shot her a quelling glare. He'd heard far too many tales from randy Lycan males about the "talents" of Beguilers to find this revelation amusing. Not that he gave a shit how sexually gifted his mate happened to be. But if her Beguiling talent became public knowledge, it would make her assimilation into Lycan society far more difficult. Any male with an itch to scratch would come knocking on her door. He huffed a disgruntled sigh, knowing he'd be forced to make a brutal example of a number of randy young males before they got the message.

"A Beguiler." Well, it certainly explained her enthusiasm for fucking.

"Or she was," Belphegor said, "until she tattled on the Lizard and got herself banished. Last I heard, she had been demoted to the Hatchling Division."

"The Lizard?"

"The Drakon. Rezon." The Councillor sneered. He prodded the unconscious woman's shoulder with a pudgy forefinger. "Wiping Demonlings' bottoms. Quite a come-down for you, eh, Naamah? No more than you deserve, though. Asmodeus isn't the only one who thinks you were getting a bit too big for your paws!" He belched a guffaw at his own cleverness and clutched his quivering belly. "Haw haw haw! Too big for her paws. Get it, Brennan? Haw haw haw!"

"I'm afraid I don't," Brennan said, struggling to keep his voice even. "Are you insinuating that her primary form is feline?"

"Clever boy!" Belphegor's breath wheezed through his yellow teeth. "She's a Felinoid. And by all reports, a pussy with a very talented pussy—" he waggled his caterpillar-like eyebrows

"—if you know what I mean." He raked his gaze over Naamah's prone body, and his amusement rippled into a black scowl. "Not that *I've* had the pleasure. Whenever *I* approached her for sex, she—"

His eyelids fluttered, and he shook his head as if to rid himself of some irritation. His features twisted in a pained expression, and fat globules of sweat pearled on his forehead. He blinked once and then appeared to come back to his senses. A calculating gleam rippled in his sludge-brown eyes. One hand snaked down to clutch his groin. "You may leave her with me, Prince Brennan," he said, panting. "This is between Demons."

Belphegor flapped a hand at Brennan and his grandmother. "You are both dismissed. Immediately!" He gave an immense groan, morphed to his primary form and flopped his grotesquely obese body atop Naamah's.

Brennan was conscious of nothing but the bloated toad-thing groping his mate's breasts. His vision was stained with a blood-red haze.

Demon.

Rapist.

Scum.

The Demon fumbled atop Naamah, struggling to part her thighs and position himself.

Brennan's Beast roared, and this time he embraced it. As he shifted, his Lion form slipped through Leonore's binding spell as if were water instead of a powerful incantation. He leaped at Belphegor.

Leonore's shriek lanced through his mind, but he brushed aside the warning. He no longer cared about the consequences to himself or to the Realm. His entire focus was protecting his mate.

He exacted retribution with a precise swipe of his claws below Councillor Belphegor's swollen belly, tearing through material and flesh.

The Demon's half erect penis flew across the room. But emasculating the Demon was not enough to satisfy Brennan's Beast. A second, almost instantaneous swipe sliced through the flabby roll of skin just beneath the ribcage, and with an upward thrust of his claws, he pierced the Demon's heart. With the claws of his other paw, he sliced beneath the Demon's drooling, widelipped mouth.

The entire attack lasted mere seconds. But it was devastating. And fatal.

Councillor Belphegor stiffened. Pond-scum-green blood spewed from the wounds. With nauseating slowness, the Demon's head flopped to one side, attached to his body by nothing more than a flap of warty skin. The corpse collapsed in on itself and dissolved in a noxious puddle of ooze.

Brennan's triumphant roar faded to a pained snarl. In death, Belphegor had exacted his own retribution, for his blood soaked through Brennan's fur and wherever it touched his skin, it burned. Brennan's Beast wanted him to lick the backs of his paws and groom his fur in an effort to rid himself of the irritant.

But he went Were. The half-human, half-Beast was the most resilient of his forms. His skin still burned, but at least it was bearable. He shrugged off the pain to concentrate on more important things.

The Toad Demon's blood had also splattered Naamah. Being Demonkind might afford her some protection—he hoped. He tried to wipe the muck from her skin with his paws, but his efforts only spread the blood even more. "Fuck!"

"Fuck, indeed!"

His grandmother's voice made him start in surprise. He'd been so focused on Naamah that he'd entirely forgotten Leonore.

She reached for him, spearing her fingers through his mane and yanking his head 'round to hers. "Brennan, listen to me. You need to wash that stuff off your skin right now! A Toad Demon's blood is caustic. It will eat into your flesh *and* your soul!"

Brennan bit back a snarl. "Like I give a shit about what it'll do to me! This is hopeless. I'll never get it off her. And I can't think of a spell to fix this. Any ideas?"

His grandmother's face creased with concentration. "Ah...."

"Hurry."

"I'm thinking! Give me a minute." She chewed her lip. "Got it! If I Vanquish his ass, his blood might well disappear with him."

Brennan grunted. "Good thinking."

Leonore chanted the highly illegal—and purportedly lost for countless centuries—spell over Belphegor's remains. The toad-like ambassador would now holiday in oblivion until his essence was tagged for rebirth. He'd be no more harmless than frogspawn for a good few centuries. Which was far better than his being reconstituted back to the Demon Realm, where he'd waddle straight to Asmodeus and bleat about being offed by the Lycan prince.

"Did it work?" Leonore asked. "Shit. No, it didn't. I must have mispronounced some vital word."

Brennan licked his paws and frantically swiped them over Naamah's belly, trying his best to remove the blood.

Her eyelids fluttered open. She copped one look at the blood-splattered Were-Lion pawing her stomach and screamed.

His grandmother winced, clapping her hands over her ears as Naamah inflated her lungs and scored a truly impressive high note.

"The river," Leonore yelled, sounding so uncharacteristically panicked that Brennan felt his own panic escalating.

"Let's go." He scooped up his hysterically shrieking mate, her shrieks of terror now laced with pain. His heart clenched. And yet, although this entire situation had turned into a disaster of monumental fucking proportions, and even through the scorching pain of the Demon's blood that coated his skin, still his body responded to Naamah's closeness. He yearned to bury his cock in her hot little cunt and claim her for his own. He yearned to prove that this female, Naamah, the Demon Beguiler he'd known only as Kitten, was still his in every way. No matter what her name might be. No matter who she was, or what manner of Other she might be.

He cursed his own animal instincts, those same instincts that had shouted at him to fuck her and pleasure her and brand her as his own again, despite the very real danger to them both.

Holding her squirming body tight against his chest, he ran as if he were being pursued by the hounds of Hell.

Kitten struggled but could not break free of the monster's embrace. She shrieked until her throat hurt, and then thankfully, she was plucked from its grasp, only to be heaved through the air with such tremendous force that she could almost believe she'd sprouted wings.

With a resplendent *sploosh*, she smacked butt-first into a large body of water and sank, snatching a quick breath before she went under. Spluttering and choking, she bobbed to the surface and managed one deep breath before sinking again and continuing to sink.

For ten whole seconds, the cool water soothed her burning skin, and she felt a degree of relief. Then the reality of her situation pierced her oxygen-deprived stupor.

Panicking, she flailed her limbs. When her efforts didn't propel her upward as she'd expected, she was forced to conclude that she'd never bothered to learn to swim.

Awww, crap.

Her head buzzed and black spots cavorted amongst the watery blur of her fading vision. She closed her eyes and gave up thrashing about. What the devil was the point? The need to breathe seared her brain, but she clamped her jaw shut, clinging to life for an instant more.

The water around her surged and swirled, plucking at her limbs.

Shockingly, amazingly, hands cupped her chin. Her eyelids popped open as lips pressed hard against hers, forcing her to open her mouth.

Brennan.

She clung to him. His breath was like a drug. She sucked it deep into her lungs as his powerful legs propelled them toward the surface. She stole all the oxygen he had to give, but it wasn't enough.

Pressure built in her lungs. She ripped her mouth from his, pressing her lips shut, watching tiny bubbles of oxygen leak from her nose. Glancing up, she saw light filtering through the surface of the water, the glossy circular herds of wild water-lilies, a gnarled and pitted branch looming overhead. So close. So very close....

She wasn't going to make it.

The desire to breathe was all-consuming, reason warring with instinct and losing.

Brennan grabbed her hips and heaved her upward with such force that she speared through the water. To her astonishment, her entire torso cleared the river's grasp. He surfaced and snagged her before she sank again. With his forearm tucked under her chin, he towed her to the bank, his powerful legs propelling them both through the current with ease. He stumbled slightly as his feet hit solid ground, plucked her from the water as if she weighed nothing at all, and waded to dry land.

"I'll take her now," someone else said.

Leonore...?

Brennan responded with a fierce growl. "What? So you can fucking drown her again? Touch her, and you'll lose a hand."

"How was I to know she couldn't swim?"

"Fuck me," Kitten heard him mutter. "Use your brain, Leonore. She's a Cat Demon. Demonkind display similar character traits to the animals their primary forms mimic. So what are the odds she's got a thing about deep water and has never learned to swim? Only like, ridiculously fucking high."

She had no idea what he was going on about. Either her brain was too waterlogged to function properly, or he was certifiable.

"And what if there'd been a Croc lurking about?" Brennan said to his grandmother. "Did you think of that before you tossed her in the bloody river? Did you even think at all?"

Silence from Leonore. And then, "You know, we could have doused her in the bath in Belphegor's suite."

"Or even the shower." Brennan sounded very subdued.

"It was hard to think logically with everything that was going on, though."

"Yeah."

"It might be best if we don't mention it again." Leonore reached out to tweak Kitten's toe. "How are you feeling now, dear?"

She coughed and cleared her throat. "I'm fine. Er, thank you for dunking me in the river, Leonore." The burning sensation on her face and torso had eased considerably. And now that she wasn't in danger of drowning, she could afford to be a little magnanimous. It was damn nice to have two people so concerned for her welfare.

Even if one of them was Brennan.

She hadn't yet forgiven him for screwing her witless and then taking off. She would make him suffer, of course. *After* she thanked him by jumping his bones and fucking him senseless—which she would definitely do once she calmed down and got her strength back.

Brennan's grandmother favored her with a huge smile. "You're very welcome, Naamah," she said.

Kitten jerked in Brennan's arms. She stared at Leonore, and a chill of presentiment iced her spine. "Naamah?"

"That's your name, sweetheart. And if memory serves, in the Demon language it means 'seductress.' Apparently you are an exceptionally talented Beguiler, so your name seems entirely appropriate. Don't you think so, Brennan?"

He grunted something incomprehensible.

Naamah. She tossed it around in her mind. Could be worse. "So my name is Naamah and you both know who I am?"

"Who you are and what you are," Brennan said.

The quality of his voice, the deliberate flatness, warned her that she wasn't going to like what else he had to say. She turned her face upward to meet his gaze. "You mean I'm not just a woman who's lost her memory?"

"You're not a woman at all. You're a Cat Demon. A Felinoid, to be exact."

"A demon? B-but I thought you said I was a beguiler."

"That's your *job*. Beguiling humans."

"Beguiling?"

"Seducing them so they end up doing things that put their souls at risk," he elaborated.

"And they go to Hell," Leonore put in helpfully. "Demons must collect souls to fill their quotas, so they all put their individual, umm, *talents* to good use. Yours was Beguiling. And you've certainly beguiled my grandson!" She grinned at her witticism, apparently unconcerned by how her horrifying revelations were being received by an amnesiac formerly known as "Kitten," who'd imagined herself human. And hadn't realized there were other creatures in existence to choose from.

"I'm...I'm a d-d-demon?" She shivered. And once she'd started, she couldn't stop. "B-but there's no such thing as demons!" She blinked, recalling exactly what manner of creatures Leonore had recently rescued her from. Serpentine coils of horror and dread tightened around her, wringing all hope from her body. "I'm one of those hyena-things? L-like Cass? No! I can't be!" She struggled to escape Brennan's grip. "I'm not like them. I'm not!"

Chapter Eight

Brennan caught her against his chest, holding her so tightly she couldn't move except to breathe. And so she breathed him in and drew comfort from the familiarity of his scent. Pity she couldn't draw any comfort at all from finally knowing her true name and who she was. *What* she was.

"You're not like them at all, Naamah," Brennan said. "They're Lycans. Hyenas, to be exact. For starters, Hyenas aren't the most attractive creatures. In their Were-forms, they're pretty damn *fugly*."

"Fugly?" Leonore said.

"Fucking ugly."

Leonore burst out with a huge belly-laugh that, under other circumstances, would have made Naamah smile. "I hate to break it to you, Brennan, but Were-Lions wouldn't be a particularly hot item in the beauty contest stakes, either. The only ones who think we're pretty darn sexy in our Were-forms are other Lions." Leonore's face softened to a dreamy cat-got-the-cream expression, and a slight flush painted her cheeks. "And perhaps some of the more intelligent big-cat Breeds."

"Like the Panthers, perhaps?" Brennan drawled.

"Oh, yeah." Leonore finally appeared to realize her grandson was teasing her. She scowled. "Not that I would personally know anything about Panthers."

"Of course you wouldn't."

Naamah stared at Brennan's grandmother in horrified fascination. How could this elegant, beautiful woman not be human? "You're a *lion*?"

"Yes. And so is Brennan."

"Of course he is," Kitten-Naamah whispered in a strangled little voice, shivering in Brennan's arms like a captured bird. "You're lions, I'm a demon, and this is a freaking nightmare!"

He pressed a kiss to her brow, and she shivered again. Though not from fear this time. Damn it, when she was trying to deal with all this other shit, a mere kiss shouldn't have the power to make her want to melt in his arms and let him do whatever he wanted with her!

"I don't feel like a demon," she said, unaware that she was speaking aloud. "And aside from my supposed sexual expertise—"

"Nothing supposed about that," Brennan muttered.

She ignored the compliment. If indeed it *was* a compliment. Perhaps he was pissed about this whole beguiling thing. Tough. If she truly was a demon-whore who pimped souls, then he would have to get used to it. Just as *she* would have to get used to it.

"I sure as hell can't do anything amazing," she said. "If I could, don't you think I would have zapped myself out of your den instead of trashing the place trying to escape?"

His arms tightened about her. "You trashed my den?" Then he turned his attention to Leonore. "Do *you* happen to have a clue about how she escaped? My lock's DNA coded. She shouldn't have been able to get out."

Leonore shrugged. "You've marked her. Your system probably scanned her and opened without a qualm."

Naamah ignored them, too immersed in her rant to care what they were going on about. "If I was a demon, don't you think I would have saved *myself* from those hyenas? And don't you think I would be able to at least conjure myself some freaking clothes?" She knew she was working herself up to a complete tizzy, but she'd didn't give a shit. Anger felt damn fine. Far better than the helplessness and confusion that had dogged her since arriving here.

She caught Leonore exchanging one of those not-sure-how-much-we-should-tell-her glances with Brennan. Indignation seethed through her veins. "Put me down right now, and come clean." Her tone sliced through their wordless communication, so cold and inflectionless and inhuman, that Leonore actually gaped at her. "Or else."

Leonore snapped her mouth shut. Her arched brows signaled a dawning respect.

Good. About bloody time someone in this Realm didn't see her as a weakling child to be coddled and cosseted and kept ignorant for her own protection.

Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for Brennan.

"No," he rumbled.

"No?"

"No, I won't put you down."

"Why?"

"Because you've had a huge shock and you need to be held. And I like having you in my arms." His tone implied, *Deal with it*.

Naamah crossed her arms over her chest and glared up at him. "I'm waiting."

"Someone screwed with your brain and wiped your memories. More than that, somehow fundamentally altered you. There's no trace of your primary Demon form. In fact, when I first encountered you, you were exuding ovulating leonine female scent so convincingly that you almost had me fooled."

"You thought I was a lion, like you?" That explained why he'd been so damned eager to fuck her. Inwardly she snorted. So much for her beguiling ability.

"Yep. But then I realized you were a clever fake. And despite your curious lack of genetic markers, I began to suspect you were Demon when you couldn't swear without giving yourself a killer migraine."

"Huh?" Confuse me with a totally out-there change of subject, why don't you? "I can swear. Fuck. Shit. See?"

"How about saying the Big Guy's name?"

"God?" A scalpel-sharp pain pierced her skull. "Owww!"

"Demons can't even *hear* that name without it affecting them. And saying it aloud hurts like Hell." He grinned down at her. "By all reports."

She massaged her temples with her fingertips. "You can say that again."

"Sorry. But now you know what to avoid. Stick to all things Hellish when you swear and you'll be fine."

Naamah tried to process everything in a logical fashion. Faced with the quality of their belief and a gut instinct they weren't lying—had no reason *to* lie—she was forced to accept their reality as her own. "I'm really a demon?"

"Seems highly likely," Leonore said. "You sure aren't an Angel. That I do know."

"How come?"

"Angels are big-time creepy sons of bitches," Brennan said, his voice throbbing with heartfelt conviction.

Leonore winked at Naamah. "Being near an Angel—pure *or* fallen—tends to give all our males dick-droops. And Brennan sure isn't suffering that particular problem. In fact, quite the opposite."

Tell-tale crimson flushed Brennan's cheekbones.

Naamah smothered a smile. She'd never seen him blush before. And she'd dearly like to make him blush again. In private.

"So there are angels and demons and you guys?"

"We're Lycans. Lycanthropes. Creatures with multiple forms, like Demons, only you Demons are a bit more flexible than we are." Leonore's tone was all breezy lightness as if she was discussing what to have for dinner rather than the stuff of nightmares. "Aside from your primary and humanoid forms, you can assume any form you care to imagine. We're limited to three, our humanoid, our Beast, and a mixture of the two."

Nightmares.... Naamah dared peer intently at Brennan, trying to see past the handsome man to the *other* him. "The creature I saw in that room, the one with the black mane and the wild amber eyes and the lethal looking teeth, the one all covered in smelly goopy stuff. That was you?"

"Yep. Impressive, much?"

"Wow."

"Wow?" He frowned down at her. "No 'Eeek! Put me down, you freaking monster'?"

Now it was her turn to frown as she strove to remember precisely how she'd felt when she'd first regained consciousness and laid eyes on him.

She'd been in pain, disoriented and terrified. And she'd truly believed he was a monster. But now, when she visualized him in that form, a stirring of envy coiled in her belly. His monster form was quite magnificent. She hoped that her Felinoid form would turn out to be equally impressive but she suspected she'd never be able to top his.

She didn't want to reveal how scared she'd been of him. In the first place, she didn't truly understand *why* she was so scared of his Were-form. She was a demon, surely a frightening creature in her own right. She ought not to be terrified of a Lycan Were. So she lied. "It was the pain and disorientation made me react that way. Oh, and because of that stuff we were both covered in. I thought it was blood."

"It was," he told her. "And the blood happened to be corrosive."

She blanched, gulping down nausea. "Whose?"

"A particularly nasty Demon who was trying to have his particularly nasty way with you," Leonore said, dismissing Naamah's gory recollections with an elegant wave of her hand. "And his demise is no great loss to the universe, is all I can say. With any luck, he'll be reborn as something slightly less obnoxious next time round."

"Another demon? Did he know me? That's how you found out my name, isn't it?"

"Yes." Leonore beamed at Brennan. "She's no dummy, is she?"

"Of course she isn't. Do you truly think I'd *mark* an airhead?"

The wound on Naamah's neck pulsed and flared with heat. "Oooh," she whimpered. "This love-bite you gave me is giving me hell."

Hang on....

"What do you mean 'mark'? Is this some weird Lycan shit?" She narrowed her eyes at the man, er, Lycan who cuddled her to him and wouldn't let her stand on her own two feet.

His gaze slid away.

"Brennan!" It was a threat.

"You should continue your discussion somewhere a bit less exposed," Leonore said, to Brennan's transparent relief.

Hmm. Her so-called beguiling skills might come in handy. She'd extract the truth from him. Sooner rather than later.

"A certain Lycan Queen will be up and about shortly," Leonore advised, "if she's not already been discovered and freed from the spell. You two ought to make yourselves scarce, and I need to get back to my lair and check through some old texts. I'll contact you when I have something for you." Leonore's body blurred, and before Naamah could rub her eyes, she'd morphed to a lioness. Her bra and trousers lay in a tattered heap on the ground.

"Sheesh! This shifting lark is obviously hell on clothes." Naamah could almost swear that the lioness rolled her eyes in agreement. She butted her head against Naamah's thigh as if to say farewell and then loped off.

"We would make better time if I shifted to my Were-form," Brennan said. "If you can stomach the thought of being borne by such a creature."

She snorted indelicately. "Evidently I'm an evil soul-stealing demon. Who turns into a cat. Like I can judge *you*." Despite the brave words, she wasn't quite ready to get up close and personal with his Were-form. "What I'd really like," she said, peeking out from under her lashes at him, "is to see your lion."

"You can ride on my back, then. If you're game."

She sucked in a deep breath and nodded. He carefully lowered her to the ground, cupped the back of her neck and gently butted his forehead against hers. She bit her lip. Now that he'd let her go, she wanted back in his arms. She wanted to plaster herself against him and let him shelter her from the world. And especially from the reality of what she was.

He backed off, his hands sliding to her forearms as he stared critically at her.

"What's wrong?"

"You're practically naked and you'll chafe all your girly bits on my fur. Not to mention at the speed I run, you'll probably catch a chill."

Her cheeks heated. "Ahhh. I could make a pad out of Leonore's tank-top to sit on." She plucked at the garment, not at all confident it would do the trick. And then there was the whole bouncy, bare-breasted aspect. Sooo not comfortable.

"Take it off," Brennan said, his voice husky.

She shucked the top, her chilled skin heating as his gaze licked her. A gentle, soothing warmth rippled over her skin, and the unexpected weight of clothing startled her so much that she loosed a squeal. She glanced down, raising her eyebrows at the form-fitting soft suede pants and equally well-fitted shirt she now wore. Both ink-black, her favorite color, as were her soft leather ankle boots.

"Not quite as much fun as thigh-high boots and a leather mini with no panties," he said. "But under the circumstances, rather more practical."

Naamah blushed, again, and wrinkled her nose. She'd have to make a concerted effort to break herself of the habit. Surely demon seductresses didn't suffer *that* particular affliction. "You Lycans can do magic, huh?"

"Not all Lycans. Just a few of us. It's hereditary, passed down through generations. Leonore is one of the most talented spell-casters in the Realm. I prefer to adopt a low profile and keep the extent of my abilities secret, sooner than rubbing my mother's nose in it. Marlena doesn't like to be reminded of her lack."

He cast a critical eye over Naamah's attire and moved closer. Too close. The heat of his body wafted the aroma of big bad desirable male over her. The essence of him curled through her senses, weakening her knees and making her head swim.

He hooked a forefinger in the neckline of her shirt and peered down her cleavage. "Is the bra comfortable?"

A wave of sexual awareness rolled lazily over her already sensitized skin. "Yes, it's fine!" She batted his hand away. Much as she would love to jump him, she wouldn't do it here. Not when the threat of Cass and her boys loomed so vividly in her mind. Not even a sex-pot demon like she supposedly was could be that stupid.

Brennan grinned. "Good." With a flick of his fingers, his clothes and the ones Leonore had discarded vanished. "Wouldn't do to have them lying around for certain creatures to scent."

He shifted, with only the merest ripple of the air around him marring a near-instantaneous transformation from man to lion.

Naamah's breath caught. As a lion he was huge. Majestic. Magnificent! And when he shook his head and his glossy black mane ruffled, she realized he was preening beneath her awe-filled gaze. Typical male.

He waited for her to clamber astride. Which took some doing. He was far larger and far outweighed any natural lion bred on Earth. Her feet dangled a good two feet from the ground, so she gripped a hunk of mane in both hands.

Once she was settled, he bounded off.

And surprisingly, her fear of sliding from his back and coming a cropper was no match for the heady exhilaration of the ride. She tossed her hair back, and it streamed behind her as the vast grasslands whirled by in a tawny-hued blur. She caroled with uninhibited abandon, delighting in the freedom of not thinking, not worrying, just enjoying the moment, being *in* the moment.

His speed increased the instant she communicated her delight. Instinctively she leaned forward, and with the shift in weight, she became conscious of another sensation.

The rocking motion of his gait, combined with his powerful muscles bunching beneath her thighs, relentlessly stimulated her feminine core. She quivered, nerve endings singing with preorgasmic glee. The instant Brennan halted and let her down from his back, she was sooo gonna have her wicked way with him. And, she promised herself, he would learn just how *talented* she was

By the time they'd neared Brennan's lair and he slowed to a walk, her pussy was wet, her breasts ached, and her whole body thrummed with want. She was more than ready to fuck him to within an inch of his life.

Caught in a web of desire, she barely noticed the hum of something airborne whizzing toward her.

Or the sharp prick as it pierced her arm. She swiped absently at it, confused by a world that was now wavering like a heat-induced mirage. She blinked, her lashes drooping and raising again slowly, so very slowly. Her head buzzed. Her body and limbs felt heavy. She closed her eyes and slumped forward, pillowing her cheek upon the dip between Brennan's shoulders.

Chapter Nine

Brennan caught a blur of movement from the corner of his eye. He shook off the waves of sexual heat that Naamah had wrapped about him and tossed her from his back with one sinuous twist of his flexible spine. He leaped after her, bringing her rolling body to a halt with one careful paw before tucking her between his forepaws to protect her.

But the threat had manifested in such an unexpected form he couldn't protect anyone, let alone himself. He snapped at the dart piercing his shoulder. And the one piercing his chest. He pawed at them, trying to dislodge them.

He was in trouble, serious trouble. He summoned an ear-splitting roar, but it conveyed more furious despair than challenge. His brain was so muzzed that he couldn't even summon a shift, let alone cast a protective spell.

As the drugs took hold, he swayed and slowly toppled onto his side. He stared at Naamah's unconscious form, his leonine eyes glazed with hopelessness. And to his dismay, his body betrayed him still more, slowly shifting and reverting to humanoid, just like the weaker Lycans did when they slept.

He fought the insidious lethargy and poured all his remaining strength into staying conscious. Knowing precisely who and what he was dealing with was his only hope of keeping Naamah and himself alive.

All was quiet. Too quiet. He kept his breathing slow and steady as he worked to expel the drug from his bloodstream. It shouldn't have taken this long, but he suspected that the Toad-Demon's blood had affected him physically *and* psychically. Leonore had been correct when she said it corroded souls.

A tingle of magic goosed his embattled mind. He hadn't sensed it before, a fact that made him even more wary. The spell-caster was obviously no amateur.

The tingle eased as the incantation cut off. When an all-too familiar stench flooded his nostrils, his blood ran cold in his veins.

Hyenas.

And, almost hidden by the reek of Hyenas, he detected another stink. The stink of a traitor. Tarrant, the Queen's Consort.

Brennan sorted through the different scents, identifying each one.

Cass. Yeah, that fit. According to Leonore, the alpha female Hyena was certainly skilled enough to cast a spell that could effectively hide so many.

Her four male submissives—no surprises there. They accompanied her everywhere.

Tarrant was alone. Which was very atypical. The cowardly bastard never ventured anywhere without a quad of guards to watch over his precious hide.

A scuff of footsteps alerted Brennan to the alpha Hyena's approach.

Cass nudged him with her foot, then kicked him a couple of real good ones in the ribs to see if he was faking. Summoning his wits, he made sure his limp body betrayed no tensing of muscles nor instinctive attempt to avoid the blows. Not the merest grimace nor indrawn breath betrayed him.

Even so, Cass was no dumbass. She hunkered down and peeled open Brennan's eyelids. Her breath smelled of putrefying meat.

Brennan prayed to Pakhet, Mihos, and every other deity he could think of.

"He's out cold," the Hyena said, and moved away.

The burn of her stench in Brennan's nostrils eased. But the rank stench of Tarrant's fear intensified, indicating to Brennan that he'd ventured nearer.

Cass obviously smelled it, too. "Oooooh! Lovely. Pretty-Boy, I gotta say that ya smell better'n the bestest perfume. Sure makes me wanna jump ya and eat ya all up. Are ya up for some fun?"

"Er, thank you for the offer," Tarrant said. "Regretfully, I must decline. Marlena doesn't approve of me playing around outside my Breed."

"Pussy-whips ya, does she? Typical. Well, if ya changes ya mind, just gimme a shout out. Ya can piss off now. And I'll be takin' my rewards."

Brennan didn't dare open his eyes, not even the merest slit. The drug was still affecting him, leaving him severely weakened—too weak to take on so many enemies and prevail. In the confines of his mind, his Beast roared, working itself into a bloodthirsty frenzy. He caged it, calmed it, promised that its turn would come. If he'd been alone, without Naamah, he would have fought to the death. But he had to think of his mate, and the only way he could truly protect her was to let himself be taken. And be patient.

"Wait," he heard Tarrant whine. "Are you sure the spell hid me sufficiently that Brennan couldn't sense me?"

"Ya looks like ya's about to piss ya pants," Cass said. "Hard to believe ya pansy-ass rocks Marlena's world. What the fuck is the royal family comin' to? Sheesh! The whole Realm is goin' to the dogs." Her loud cackle set Brennan's teeth on edge. "Goin' to the dogs. Gettit?"

Her boys wheezed with laughter.

"I can cast a decent hide-me spell," she assured him. "Believe me, Brennan didn't have a freakin' clue ya was here. Now, take ya hand off me, Pretty-Boy, or ya'll lose it."

"I didn't mean to offend you," Tarrant said.

"Sure you didn't. And if ya's so worried about Brennan coming after ya, why doncha just leave him for the Hyenas? Oh, wait. Ya already is." She gave a series of snorts, obviously highly amused by her joke.

At least now Brennan knew what had been planned for him. And even for his mother, this was fucked up. But Marlena's sanity—or lack of it—was the least of his concerns right now.

"Don't ya worry none, Pretty-Boy. By the time I've finished with 'em both, there'll be nothin' left. Promise I'll even suck the marrow from their bones before I crunch 'em up. That do ya?"

Brennan heard someone dry retching. Tarrant, no doubt.

"I'm thinking I'll have the Prince for a main course. And for dessert, I'm gonna eat me a fine piece of pussy." Cass made an obscene slurping noise.

"She's a fine piece, all right." Tarrant's shaky tone indicated he was trying his utmost to quell his fear.

Brennan could smell it, though. His Beast snarled, and he had to expend energy that he could ill afford to calm it again.

"But Marlena wants her gone." His mother's Consort loosed an exaggerated sigh. "Pity. If Brennan hadn't found her first, I would have had her myself."

"Speaking of our cunt-for-brains Queen, I can't imagine Marlena wantin' to off her precious son, no matter how irritatin' he might be."

"She didn't," Tarrant said. "That was entirely my idea."

The bastard sounded inordinately proud.

Cass tittered. "Whoowee! Maybe ya's got more balls than I thought."

Tarrant wouldn't have his balls for long. Not once Brennan got his paws on him.

"Better fuck off now, Pretty-Boy. Before I decides I want an appetizer, too."

Brennan scented Tarrant's shift to Lion. And heard the scrabbling of his paws as he sprinted off.

"Got a surprise for ya, Prince Brennan," Cass said.

His eyelids flew open as a binding spell slammed into him, cocooning him securely in its magically woven bonds. He found himself gazing into Cass's evil yellow eyes.

"Good try," she chortled, spraying his face with spittle. "But ya ain't that good of a faker."

He struggled, but her spell was so tamper-proof that even his grandmother would have been impressed. It would take time to unravel it. And Brennan knew that he'd just run out of time.

"Bet it warms ya little ole heart hearing it aint' ya Mother who wants ya dead, huh? Not that I gives a shit what that cunt wants." Cass grabbed Naamah by her scruff and dragged her away from Brennan. She clicked her claws at her boys.

The Hyena males edged forward, their gazes bright and eager. Hungry.

"Go for it, boys," Cass said, settling back on her haunches to watch the fun. "Make sure y'all leave enough for me to have a good time. I've always wanted to try me some lion prick. I hear they're very tasty."

The Hyenas pounced.

They beat the crap out of him. They used their teeth and their claws to rip and render and tear. Finally, with their cackling hoots ringing in his ears, blackness claimed him.

And his nightmares began.

Chapter Ten

Someone's voice resounded through Naamah's skull, delivering the mental equivalent of a bucket of cold water in the face.

"Wake up!" the voice screeched. "Cass'll be back soon, and if you want to get out of this mess alive, you need to be all systems go!"

"Huh?" She peeled open her eyelids, and the world spun. Flopping to one side, she vomited up foul-tasting bile. She clutched her stomach and bit back a whimper. Sweet Lucifer's long white fangs. She'd been pummeled with a mallet. Wielded by a particularly aggressive individual. With great attention to detail. Even the soles of her feet and the tips of her ears throbbed.

"I'm sorry I had to be so rough, but Asmodeus has really done a number on you." The voice was softer now, easier to bear. "You remember Asmodeus, don't you?"

"Who the Hell are y—?" Naamah choked on that pertinent question as a tidal wave of memories gushed through her mind. And once she'd integrated those, she did remember Asmodeus. She remembered everything.

Everything except the events that had occurred in the Demon King's throne-room.

Visualizing Asmodeus's face brought back recollections of suffering agonizing pain and being more terrified than she'd ever been in her life. But she still couldn't recall what he'd done to her. It was like a section of her past had been excised from her brain.

She sat up, fury dampening her dizziness and nausea. "Asmodeus did this to me! *He* sent me here!"

"Yep. He used you to further his diabolical little scheme to get rid of Belphegor. And boy, when I get my hands on him, I'm gonna—oooh! Suffice it say, he's gonna wish that he'd never been spawned!"

"Who are you? Tell me!"

"A friend. Who needs you to quit fretting and get your ass up off the ground. Now would be good."

Naamah finally focused her wayward vision. She crawled to her feet and glanced around the gloomy cave, noting the shackles and cuffs attached to the walls. And the racks of whips, chains, studded paddles, masks and other devices.

"Lucifer's luscious loins!" As much as Naamah enjoyed using sex toys and indulging in a bit of rough stuff, she got the feeling that Cass's particular brand of sexual pleasure leaned more toward snuff movie endings than mutual turn-ons.

Cass

Her stomach flip-flopped and her heart began to pound. Raw terror crawled up her spine. This was the Lycan Realm. And Lycans meant Were-forms. She shuddered, wrapping her arms around her middle, trying to stave off panic. Even now, nearly a half a millennia later, she vividly recalled the terror of being forced to watch as a Were-Demon Halfling tore her littermates apart. In her nightmares, she still heard their agonized screams and the Halfling's insane cackling as he rendered them limb from delicate limb, cracked their bones and sucked out the

marrow. And she saw his crimson, hate-filled eyes as he turned toward her. You next, my pretty....

Rez had saved her. He'd burst into the nursery, moving so fast he was a blur. The Drakon hadn't even bothered to morph to his primary form. He merely twisted the monster's head from its shoulders with his bare hands. From that day on, she'd worshipped him. And when she'd matured and become a Beguiler, she repaid him in the only way she knew how. For centuries. But not even when he'd been at his most appreciative of what she offered, not even when he'd been at his most inventive during their sexual encounters—and the Drakon was most inventive indeed—had Rez been able to banish her nightmares.

Only one man had been able to do that.

Brennan.

"That's more like it!" the voice said. "Starting to remember, huh?"

Naamah's head whipped around, her gaze darting about the cave as she sought the owner of that husky, come-get-me-lover voice.

"Quit fucking with me and tell me who you are!" she grated from between clenched teeth.

"I'm Leisa."

Naamah collapsed to the ground as though she'd been punched upside the head. "Leisa? Rez's Leisa?" Oh no. Please no.

"Yep. That Leisa."

Dread churned in Naamah's veins. She'd once assumed Leisa's form in an effort to seduce Rez and entice him back into her arms. He was bound to have let that little tidbit slip to his new mate. The mate who'd once been a mere human woman but was now one of the most powerful entities on Heaven, Hell *or* Earth. Any punishment Asmodeus might devise, any tortures that Cass had planned, paled to insignificance in comparison to what Leisa was capable of inflicting upon her.

The Sentinel was gonna obliterate her. Because that's what Sentinels did—obliterate beings who upset the balance of Heaven, Hell and Earth.

Or, as in Naamah's case, did something to personally piss them off.

"I-I didn't mean it. I'm sorry." She rose to her knees, clasped her hands and prepared to grovel for her life.

"Lucifer's hairy balls and other Devilish parts. Get the fuck to your feet, will you? You sure as Hell *did* mean it. Look, I understand, okay? You had a thing for Rez, and you truly believed it was luuurve. I can be magnanimous. The Drakon is pretty darn irresistible, so your reaction was perfectly understandable. But now you've met Brennan, you know the difference between lust and love, right?"

In love with Brennan? A Lycan?

"So suck it up, babe," Leisa's disembodied voice went on. "Quit panicking, and get your shit together. Cass will be here soon."

No way, Naamah thought. No freaking way was she in love with a Lycan. In lust maybe. But not love.

Leisa's sex-pot laugh swirled through the air, lightening the dank atmosphere of the cave. "You'll see. He's here, by the way. Can't you sense him?"

Naamah sucked in a breath. She tasted blood and pain and terror, the remains of Cass's past victims that had leached into the stone walls and corrupted them.

"Try harder, Naamah."

She cringed at the edge in Leisa's voice. The Sentinel was growing impatient. She took a deep breath, rolled it around her tongue and took it inside her. And she smelled Brennan's uniquely delicious scent, which had always made her feel protected and safe. Even when she was drowning in lust.

He was here.

But where?

"He's hidden by Cass's spell," Leisa said. "Breathe him in, absorb him. Then you'll be able to find him."

She did as she was told. And as she scanned the cave's interior, she caught a faint whiff of a familiar scent.

A previously blank section of wall caught her attention. She concentrated harder, narrowing her eyes, extending all her senses until she could see the tightly woven threads of the casting. She narrowed her senses into an arrow-like shaft and shot them toward the spell. She pierced it. She was through!

Once she could see him, she couldn't un-see him. He was naked and in humanoid form. He'd been placed in a mock-crucifixion pose, with his chest and face pressed hard up against the stone. A large metallic band around his waist kept him in place, along with smaller restraints round his neck, wrists and ankles, all of which were fixed to the wall. The skin of his back, buttocks and thighs had been reduced to a bloodied mass of raw, oozing wounds, interspersed with the bluish black shadows of severe bruises.

"Brennan!" She lunged toward him, but her muscles seized, and she was swept up on tip-toe and shaken like a rag-doll by some unseen force.

"Listen to me!" Leisa snapped. "Cass is on her way. You won't be able to free Brennan in time. If you want to save him, you need to get your head in the game."

"But--"

"You're stronger than you think, Naamah. All you have to do is believe in yourself. *Believe* you're not a victim. *Believe* you're worthy of being loved. Trust me, you'll do just fine."

And then, silence.

"Leisa? Leisa!"

No answer.

Great. Obviously too much to expect the Sentinel to free Brennan and spirit them both away.

Just as she was getting the hang of what it meant to be a Demon, she had to go up against one scary bitch of a Hyena.

A scuffling sound outside the cave's entrance ripped her from morose introspection. She inhaled, reeling when a barrage of information smacked her heightened senses. With a jolt that spasmed through her body, she understood that her sensory perception was now purely Demonic, no longer limited like a mere human's. She smelled Cass, the rank musk of her Were-Hyena form, her eager lust.

And realized that the Hyena had come alone.

Hope bloomed in Naamah's chest. She was almost fully restored to herself. And though she'd always relied on her sexual allure, never bothering to test the full extent of her Demonic abilities, she was Felinoid. Time to hear her roar.

This time, she wouldn't cower in a corner, waiting to be rescued. This time, she would face the monster, and she would fight. And if—when—she saved Brennan, he would realize she was no gentle kitten to be protected and pandered to. Dammit, she was his equal.

"If you can hear me, Brennan, I'm gonna get us out of here, okay?"

She didn't dwell on the possibility she might fail. Or that he might be so badly hurt he would never be able to heal himself. That way lay a paralyzing anguish she couldn't afford to indulge in.

She would save him.

And he would live. He had to.

Chapter Eleven

Cass stalked into the cave, a seven-foot-tall, fur-covered nightmare. Her grossly protruding clit acted as a pseudo-phallus, and it had swollen to massive proportions. The prospect of a brutal torture session had obviously put her in a state of high sexual arousal.

Naamah sank to her knees and pretended to cower.

"Awake, huh? Gotta surprise for ya." The Were-Hyena clapped her paws, and Naamah's Demon senses allowed her to watch the invisibility spell dissolve.

She feigned astonishment.

Cass grabbed Naamah's arm and hauled her upright. The Hyena dragged her along with her as she sauntered over to Brennan. Obviously confident that Naamah was too cowed to be a threat, Cass released her and turned her attention to other more worthy victims. She cuffed Brennan's face until his head lolled to one side, and he opened one swollen eyelid.

The Hyena leaned against the cave wall so that Brennan could see her clearly. "Hiya, gorgeous." She waggled her pseudo-cock at him, cackling when his gaze followed the movement. "Want some?" she crooned. "Promise ya it's better'n any bitch-Lioness's twat. Everyone who's tried me can't get enough."

He mumbled something Naamah presumed was vulgar.

Cass cuffed him again. "Where's ya manners?"

"Fuck off," he said, and peeled his lips back from his teeth in a grotesque smile.

"Oh, go on, be a Devil. With this," Cass yanked on her clit, "I can swing *both* ways, yanno? It's so hard I can fuck ya real good. And if ya's a good boy, I might let ya put ya cock in this little opening right here." She inserted a claw-tipped digit in the slit in her genitals and wiggled it round. "You can stretch me reeeeeal tight and fuck me. It's like nothing ya've ever felt before. Trust me."

Naamah morphed to her Felinoid form, groomed her tail with her claws, and waited for Cass to notice her.

"Betcha I can get ya in the mood," Cass crooned, still focused on Brennan. "How's about I fuck ya up the ass to get ya all primed and ready. Then ya can watch me play with ya little Kitten and—"

The Hyena's nostrils flared as she sniffed the air. She turned slowly around. And blinked, shaking her head as if trying to clear a fog. "Who the fuck are ya?"

Naamah examined her claws, huffed on them and buffed them on her fur before examining them again. "Who the fuck do you *think* I am?"

When Cass didn't immediately respond, Naamah said in a bored tone, "Turns out I'm a Demon. Of the Felinoid persuasion. Haven't you seen one of my Kind before?" She sauntered over to lean against a shelf of sex-toys, still pretending to be more interested in the state of her manicure than in Cass.

"Felinoid, eh?" Cass cocked her head to one side. "Did the Lion know?"

Naamah's claws retracted with an audible *snick*.

Cass shivered.

"He didn't have a clue. Neither did I, at first. It was one of Asmodeus's tricks, you see." Naamah glanced up lazily, eyelids half-shuttered as she returned Cass's frankly admiring gaze. "I'm sure Brennan will be disgusted to learn he's been fucking a Demon. Not that I give a shit what the Lion thinks. He's a little too vanilla for my taste."

She didn't dare glance at Brennan for fear of seeing what he felt about her Demonic form etched on his face.

She levered herself upright and wandered over to Cass. "Mmmmm," she purred, trailing one of her paws down Cass's muscled arm. "Nice. Very nice. How 'bout we play a little? I have some interesting, um, tricks. If you're game, that is."

It surprised her how easily she slipped into the role of seducer. Perhaps she truly was the Demon King's most talented Beguiler. She hoped so. Right now, it was the only weapon she had to use.

Cass shivered, her eyelids drooping. She inhaled deeply, drinking in the seductive scent oozing from Naamah's Felinoid's pores. "What's ya name?" she said huskily.

"Naamah." She moved behind Cass, plastering herself against the Were-Hyena's back, reaching 'round to cup her breasts. She kneaded the firm mounds roughly with the pads of her paws.

The tiny part of her that had not yet fully embraced her Demonic heritage rebelled, revolted by her actions. But her Demon-self rejoiced at the familiarity, the *rightness*, the feral thrill of knowing that she could so thoroughly Beguile her victim.

"My name means 'seductress'," she purred, and then pierced Cass's nipple with one of her needle-sharp claws.

The Hyena moaned and pumped her hips.

"You like that, huh? Thought you might." She tracked her claws down Cass's belly, pressing firmly enough to score her tough hide. "You know what would make this even better?"

The Hyena's breaths wheezed in and out with short, sharp gasps. "Wh-what?"

"If you went humanoid. If you let me dominate you. I bet no one's ever done that for you before, have they? Not even your boys."

"N-no."

"Pity you can't ever let them truly pleasure you. They would think they were the boss of you, and they would never respect you again. But I'm not like them. We're equals, you and me. Except I know how fucking incredible it feels to cede control and take whatever punishment is dealt to me. And I know how much you crave that, too."

Something akin to hope glistened in the Were-Hyena's yellow eyes.

"Would you like me to hurt you, Cass? Would you like to be my sub?"

"Oh, yeah." The Hyena's Were-form shimmered, and a pretty blonde humanoid female took its place. She appeared almost human. Only her bestial yellow eyes suggested otherwise.

Naamah risked a glance toward Brennan. His gaze burned into her, so intense it felt like flames licking her body. But whether he was repulsed and disgusted by what he was witnessing, or brimming with pride at the extent of her duplicity, she couldn't tell. And she couldn't afford to care what he might think about her tactics. She was a Beguiler. Seduction—whether a sensuously slow glide of sweat-slicked naked bodies or a down 'n dirty quickie in some malodorous back alley—was her talent. She had to play this through to the end.

Snaking a hand 'round Cass's waist, she pressed the woman's back against her own body. "I promise I'll give you everything you deserve. Would you like that?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Please!"

Naamah's wandering paw found Cass's sex and cupped her mound. Her humanoid cunt wept moisture, and she pressed her thighs together, trapping Naamah's paw with her inhuman feral strength.

"Do you think I'm well named?" Naamah's lips moved over Cass's nape, and she suckled her earlobe, her fangs grazing the tender skin. "Do you think I'm seductive?"

She inflicted twin pains, one claw to Cass's nipple, the other needling her clit. Cass shrieked and writhed, overwhelmed by pain-laced pleasure.

Naamah slung her to the ground and straddled her thighs. She laid both paws on Cass's bare stomach, her claws fully extended, the tips just touching the skin. She dug them in, watched the blood bead. And then she raked her claws slowly down Cass's belly.

Cass screamed and pressed her thighs tightly together.

"Wanna play some more? Rezon used to love it when I did what I have planned for you."

Cass stared up at her, completely enthralled. "Ya fucked the Lizard?"

Naamah's cruel laughter bounced off the stone walls. "Many, many times. I was his favorite before he became a Sentinel. I kept him satisfied for centuries."

"Ya were the Drakon's favorite?"

Naamah smiled widely, displaying her lethal Felinoid fangs. "We liked to play games. I liked to drive him wild, make him lose control and go half-Drakon on me. Then lie back and let him fuck me until he ran out of steam. Oh, it hurt so good!" She leaned forward as if to confide a secret. "That's the best thing about being Demon, you know. We can take whatever's dished out because we heal so very quickly."

Cass's ragged breathing hitched. Her eyes glazed.

"You know what I like most about you, Cass?"

"Wh-what?"

Naamah shimmied her hips. "The huge clit you have when you're in Were-form. It's just like a cock, only better. Lucky me. I can hardly wait."

"Shall...shall I shift?" Cass's breath came in harsh pants as she immersed herself in the role Naamah had devised for her.

"No. Not yet. I need to have some fun with you first. And then, if you're very good, I'll lie back and let you have some fun with me." She sat on her heels. With one paw, she batted roughly at Cass's breasts, then thrust the other paw between Cass's clenched thighs, rubbing and scratching, working her so skillfully that Cass writhed and convulsed and finally lay limp.

Naamah envisioned a large metallic dildo and hoped that she'd managed to hide her astonishment when the device promptly appeared in her paw. "Open your eyes, Cass. See what I've got for you. Do you want it?"

Cass cast her gaze upon it, whimpered and jerked her hips. "Oh, yes."

"Yes, what, you sniveling cunt?"

"Yes, please!"

Naamah thrust the device up Cass's vaginal orifice.

The monster masquerading as a human woman shrieked with agonized pleasure as she came.

She was still in the throes of her orgasm when Naamah's claws tore through her skin and thrust up beneath her ribcage.

"Well, fuck me," the Hyena whispered, her eyes hugely wide with shock.

"I just did, sweetheart," Naamah crooned as her claws shredded the Hyena's heart. "Was it good for you, too?"

The half-smile on Cass's lips as she died told its own story.

"That wasn't the kind of death I planned for the heinous bitch."

Naamah glanced over her shoulder. "Brennan!" She surged to her feet and took a grand total of two steps with her arms outstretched before reality smacked her a good one. Her paws fell to her sides. Her joy shriveled.

She dragged herself over to him and used her claws and her Demon magic to pick the locks of his shackles. "One of the Sentinels gave me back my memory. And, well, other things," she finished lamely as she managed to unclasp the restraints.

Her heart twisted as the raw, weeping patches of his skin were revealed. "Fuck."

"Cass infused the restraints with a powerful spell." Brennan rotated his shoulders and stretched out his cramped muscles. "That's why I couldn't shift to heal myself or escape."

"Will you be okay?"

"Yeah. Once I shift."

Naamah hopped from one foot to the other like a fretful child, unable to stop herself even when he focused all his attention upon her.

She gazed at him, examining every nuance of his expression. But his face was cast in stone, inscrutable even to her Demonically enhanced senses. What the Hell was he thinking? Was he grateful that she'd rescued him? Appalled by her methods? Sickened to have witnessed firsthand what she truly was?

"So this is the real me," she said, hating how her voice rose at the end like a begging question instead of a confident statement of fact.

"I can see that," he said, his tone so carefully neutral that she wanted to scream, if only to provoke a reaction from him.

"Oh. Right. Yeah. I guess you can." She ducked her head, unwilling to let him witness her misery. Now that she'd proven she was his equal, he was going to cast her aside. He didn't want her. He wanted *Kitten*, not Naamah the Demon Beguiler. Damn him.

"Look at me, Naamah." His tone was gentle, coaxing.

Meeting his gaze was the hardest thing she'd ever done.

He shifted to his Were-form. The change was slow enough for her to note the elongation of his limbs and the distortion of his facial characteristics as his muzzle formed, even the thick clumps of fur that sprouted into his mane. And her Demonic senses told her that although the shift had helped to heal his injuries, it would be awhile before he regained his full strength.

He stretched his arms over his head, interlinked his paws and arched his back, thrusting out his hips. His thick erection thrust from between his thighs, curving upward, its ruddy head nudging the sleek fur of his heavily muscled belly. "What do you think?" he asked, his voice harsher and more guttural than usual because of his leonine muzzle.

Her breath caught in her throat. He was Lycan. This form was part of the real Brennan, both savage and magnificent. Just like his Lion. And his man.

So she looked at him, truly looked at him. And searched deep within herself for the answer. "Beautiful," she whispered.

"Come here, Naamah." He held out his arms to her.

And she went willingly, without hesitation, because she believed she loved him in all his forms. And she could tell by the way he held her and kissed her, muzzle to muzzle, his paws stroking the fur down her spine, that he believed he loved her, too. Whatever form she chose to take.

And speaking of forms....

She made her own Felinoid form taller, matching the height of Brennan's Were-form, so that they would come together as equals in every way. She wound her arms around his neck and widened her legs, inviting him to grind his cock against her mound.

The tufted end of his tail brushed the crease of her buttocks. Her own tail lashed the ground and then curved around his torso to caress the strip of thick fur running down his spine.

Leonore barreled into the cave. "Thank Pakhet I've found you!" She skidded to a halt when she saw Naamah in Brennan's embrace. And it had to be obvious he was a hair's breadth away from fucking her.

"Awww," she squealed. "Your cubs are gonna be sooo cute!"

"Go away, Leonore," Brennan said with a growl. "We're busy." He ran a paw down Naamah's flank, cupped her ass and speared his claws through her pelt so that he could mold and squeeze her flesh.

She wriggled, pressing herself more firmly into his grip.

He licked her neck, gently biting the sensitive skin where he'd placed his mark on her. The mark flared, heating her skin, heating her blood, making her want him even more. Her breath hitched and a tiny mew escaped her lips.

"Gee," Leonore said. "Marlena will be thrilled to itty bitty pieces with the way this has turned out. Not."

"My traitorous bitch of a mother can go fuck herself." Brennan's snarl turned into a groan as Naamah nipped his lower lip and then soothed the small hurt with her lips and the rasp of her tongue.

Leonore's laughter abruptly cut off. "Uh oh."

"Uh oh, what?" Brennan demanded, the exasperation in his voice eliciting a genuine smile from Naamah. She loved that he was so eager to fuck her, and she intended to show him just how appreciative she could be. Just as soon as—

"Cass's boys are on their way," Leonore said.

"Shit!" Naamah's frustrated wail echoed a stream of vile imprecations from her mate. Lucifer's loins, Brennan was seriously pissed. Well, a little frustration would only make the sex more explosive. She reached down between their bodies and fisted his cock. "Never mind, darling," she purred. "There's always tomorrow."

"No fucking way are we waiting till tomorrow!"

And before she could so much as squeak with astonishment, he grabbed her by both arms, caught her up against his big body, and chanted a spell.

The last thing that Naamah saw before the interior of the cave wavered and faded was Leonore's startled face.

Chapter Twelve

Brennan chased a sleek lioness through the grasslands. He was gaining on her. When he caught her—and he would—she would be entirely at his mercy. But his mate wasn't inclined to make it easy for him. She swerved, heading toward a stand of trees. Mid-stride, she blurred into her Felinoid form and launched herself at the lowest branch. She was agile and sure-footed. By the time he reached her, she'd climbed halfway up the tree and gone out on a limb. Literally.

Her mocking laughter greeted him.

Brennan shifted to Were-form. "Not fair."

"Tough." She peered down at him, a sumptuously furred cat-eyed Demon with pointed ears, sharp canines and lethally sharp, retractable claws.

His balls tightened. He loved the sensation of her fur caressing his body. And the things she could do with her claws and teeth blew his mind.

"Aren't you going to climb up here and get me?" she asked.

"Nope. That run wore me out."

"Pity." She pretended to ignore him completely as she groomed her tail with the claws of one paw. "I had big plans for you this afternoon. But if you're too tired...."

He grasped the tree trunk and shook the Hell out of it. Naamah squealed as she lost her grip and had to scrabble for purchase.

Brennan put some real effort into it.

She leaped. Straight into his waiting arms.

"Cheater!" she yowled, hooking a deceptively strong arm around his neck and batting his chest none too gently with her other paw.

"All's fair in love and war."

The mock-fierceness of her expression softened. "And is this, you know, *love*?" Her tail whipped back and forth as she waited for his response.

He unhooked his arm from beneath her knees, and the instant her paws touched the ground, she rubbed up against him, butting beneath his chin with her forehead like a housecat demanding attention. He combed the tips of his claws through the fur of her back and applied just enough pressure to lightly scratch her skin.

She shuddered. "Harder." And she pressed her flexible spine against his paw until he had no choice but to blood her.

"Yessss," she hissed. "Mark me."

He held her motionless with his claws as he thrust his hips forward and let her feel his erection pressing into the juncture of her thighs. She whimpered.

He inhaled the musky scent of her arousal and groaned with purely masculine satisfaction. "Oh, yeah," he said, withdrawing his claws from her skin. He cupped the nape of her neck with his paw and pressed his forehead against hers. "This is love."

"Humanoid or Were?" she breathed.

"What do you want?" A sensible question to ask, considering how very inventive she could be.

"You," she murmured, and sank her fangs into his shoulder. He jerked, and she laughed softly. She suckled the wounds she'd inflicted and then raised her muzzle to lick his cheek with her raspy tongue. "I want you. Any way I can have you."

"Were it is, then." He backed her up against the trunk of the tree and with a jerk of his hips, positioned his cock against her furry mound and pushed into her tight, hot cunt.

She gasped, stilling, barely breathing as he slowly screwed himself into her. Then, when the tip of his cock butted against her cervix, she tilted her hips so that he could fill her even more. Her breath released in a slow, satisfied exhalation. "Aaah."

"Tell me what you want, Naamah."

She shoved her claws through his mane and yanked hard enough for him to wince. "Fuck me," she purred. "Fuck me hard. And don't you dare stop until I come."

Brennan gave her what she wanted. It was, after all, what he wanted, too. He grasped her hips and thrust into her, withdrew and thrust in again. And again. And again.

The savage grip of her inner muscles milked his cock so fiercely that he threw back his head and roared his pleasure. He loved her humanoid form, and the lioness she became for him, but he especially loved the suppleness of this form, her Felinoid form. Her *true* form.

As a Cat-Demon, even when she took humanoid form, she was far more resilient than a human. But when she took her Felinoid form, he could lose control completely, knowing she would take whatever he dished out. Like now.

He pistoned his hips faster still, ramming his cock into her, and she clutched his shoulders, her sharp claws digging into the thick fur. She clenched around him, her cunt gripping his cock so tightly that he bellowed.

"Did I hurt you?" she purred against his throat.

"Fuck yes. Do it again."

She peeled back her lips to bare her fangs. "You asked for it." This time, her inner muscles contracted so brutally around him that he sucked in a breath and let it out with huge grunt of satisfaction.

And then it was his turn to provoke an outburst. He thrust into her so powerfully, so fully and completely, that her feral yowl startled a flock of foraging partridges into flight.

"Sweet Lucifer!" she said. "That hurt sooo good. Now that we're done with the foreplay, quit fooling around and really fuck me."

He pounded into her, and she met him thrust for thrust. Their coupling was so vigorous that the tree's branches shook and shivered, showering them with leaves.

He surged into her, felt his leonine cock swell until it filled her so completely that it locked him inside her cunt. He throbbed inside her and came with her name on his lips.

She ground herself down onto his throbbing flesh, paused, and then shuddered, the intensity of her orgasm making her fur stand on end. "Whoa," she whispered, prying open her eyelids to gaze at him. "It just gets better, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yeah."

She actually rolled her eyes at him, and her lips widened to a feline grin.

"What did I do to deserve that?" he complained.

"It was that whole primitive rumbling growl thing you had going on. So typical of a male who's just shot his load."

"And you, my kitten, sound just like a female who's been thoroughly pleasured."

A contented purr rumbled from her throat.

When his cock softened, he withdrew from her and wrapped himself around her, caging her with his body and his claws. She nuzzled his chest and heaved a sigh.

Brennan stroked a paw down her back, smoothing the silken fur. And paused. He turned her so that he could examine her back. "Shit. There's a bald patch."

She explored the offending area with her paws. "The tree bark must have rubbed it off. Lucky I wasn't in humanoid form, or I'd be rubbed raw."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. I heal quickly regardless of what form I take. It's a Demon thing. And when I was a Beguiler, it came in pretty darned handy. Those human males can be quite brutal."

His snarl rent the air. "Mine!"

She answered with a hiss and a swipe of her claws across his nose. "Idiot!" She leapt from his arms, landing on all fours to confront him. Her fur bristled, and her tail whipped back and forth. "As if I'd let another male lay a hand on me!"

Brennan wiped the blood from his nose with his paw and licked it clean. He knew anything he said would only piss her off more. He dropped to the grass, stretched out on his back and offered her his vulnerable belly.

She pounced, landing lightly beside him. "Fucking stupid male," she said, but the words held only affection and love. "If you don't know by now that you've ruined me for any other male, there's no hope for you at all." She lay down beside him and snuggled into the crook of his arm. Brennan?"

"Yep?"

"We can't hide away forever, you know. We have to do something about Tarrant. And your heinous bitch of a mother."

He heaved a sigh. "Yeah. Not to mention Asmodeus. I'd like to rip his balls off and feed them to him for stranding you in the Realm."

Naamah stroked his arm. "Awww, that's so—"

"I'd like to see you try, cat," a masculine voice rumbled.

The air directly in front of them shimmered. A door opened from another dimension, and a blindingly blond male stepped through.

Chapter Thirteen

"Asmodeus!"

It sounded to Brennan as though the Demon King's name had been ripped from Naamah's throat. Through the hot haze of their mating bond, the cold chill of her fear iced his mind. He exploded into movement, surging to his feet and yanking Naamah up with him. He put her behind him, protecting her from the Demon King's piercing regard.

Her arms came around him, and she held on tight, plastering her shivering body against his back as if he was her sanctuary and she wanted only to crawl inside him.

A growl rumbled deep in his throat. Demon King or no Demon King, if the Satan-spawned bastard laid one finger on his mate, there would be Hell to pay!

"Brennan," the Demon King said. "Long time, no see."

"Tell me, Asmodeus. Are you here in your official capacity as King of Demonkind? I ask because I would like to know exactly what the repercussions will be when I dismember you and deliver you back to your Realm in very small pieces."

Asmodeus quirked his eyebrow, his only reaction to the pure loathing lacing Brennan's clipped tone. "Pity I'm not in the mood to take you on. I hardly ever get the opportunity to kick anyone's ass these days. Here's an idea, cat. Fuck off and go groom your whiskers, or whatever it is you Lions do, while I talk to Naamah."

Naamah pressed herself even closer and dug her claws into Brennan's abs. Her frightened mew was all the answer he needed.

"Talk all you want, asshole, but I'm not leaving her alone with you."

The Demon King raked a hand through his hair. "Sheesh! Chill, Brennan. I'm not interested in fucking with your little pussy. Besides, a certain Sentinel would use my guts to enhance the décor of her living room if I so much as laid a finger on her."

"Cut the crap and get on with it, Asmodeus!" a truly pissed-off feminine voice screeched from thin air.

The Demon King actually hunched his shoulders, scrunched his face and cringed like a naughty child expecting a cuff around the head. He quickly straightened when he caught the shocked expression on Brennan's face. "Ah, the joys of being the plaything of an omnipotent being," he said.

"So you finally did something to piss off a Sentinel, eh?" Brennan curled his upper lip, displaying his fangs. "I hope she puts you through Hell. And then some."

"Believe me, she's making my life a misery. When it comes to Sentinels, the female is definitely deadlier than the male."

He sounded so fervent that Brennan relaxed slightly. Leisa had helped Naamah back in the Cass's lair, so if the female Sentinel was keeping an eye on Asmodeus, then it was highly unlikely that the Demon King would try any of his more dirty tricks.

Naamah had evidently reached the same conclusion, for she moved to Brennan's side, insinuating herself beneath his arm.

He cuddled her close. "Say what you've come to say to Naamah. And then fuck off, Demon." "How are you, Naamah?" Asmodeus asked.

She began to play with the fur on Brennan's biceps. "Very well, thank you."

Brennan frowned at the false tone he detected in her voice. Did Asmodeus know something? Could it be that Leisa hadn't completely reversed what he'd done to her?

"I'm glad," Asmodeus said. "I'm here to, uh, apologize for what I did to you."

Naamah's head snapped up. "Apologize? You? Is this a joke, because excuse me if I don't find it very funny!"

Asmodeus had the grace to appear abashed by her disbelief. His mouth turned downward in a perfect childish pout. "She's making me."

"And a piss-poor job you've made of it so far!" Leisa's disembodied voice dumped a shitfuck ton of scorn on the Demon King.

"Lucifer's hairy balls." Asmodeus closed his eyes and sucked in a few deep breaths. Then he threw back his head to yell at the blue-on-blue cloudless sky. "Cut me a fucking break, Leisa! I've never apologized to any creature in my entire life. So excuse me if my idea of an apology isn't quite up to your standards, okay?"

Naamah uttered a choked sound. Brennan glanced down at her and saw she was trying not to laugh at the Demon King's predicament. A good sign that she was putting her fear of her former ruler behind her.

Now if only the Demon would leave. Immediately. So that Brennan could stroke his mate and soothe her and use his body to make her forget that Demon Kings—and Sentinels—existed.

Just thinking about fucking her, even imagining her raking furrows down his back when he plunged into her or recalling the ecstasy on her face and the way she screamed his name when she came, made his cock twitch and harden, and his balls tighten.

As if he'd read Brennan's mind, the Demon King said, "All fucking aside, I can't leave until I restore what I took from Naamah."

"What do you mean?" Brennan growled his unease at the thought of Asmodeus giving anything to his mate. The Sentinels might be okay with this turn of events, but *he* didn't trust the Demon to restore so much as a split end on Naamah's humanoid form's head.

"Naamah's memory has a gap it. I can help her to remember exactly what I did to her so that she'll finally be whole again." Asmodeus focused his full attention on Naamah.

Brennan's hackles rose.

"Naamah, listen to me," the Demon went on. "You're like a rape victim who was drugged. You know that something bad happened, but your mind has blanked it out. And until you face your memories, you'll never be free of them, and you'll never truly heal."

To Brennan, Asmodeus's words sounded stilted, as if he'd been forced to memorize them and repeat them word for word. "This is fucking shit!" he snarled. "Leisa gave Naamah back her memories, so why—?"

"Maybe I don't want to remember." Naamah's whispered words sank like lethal claws deep into his soul. "Maybe I like not knowing. Maybe I'm happy the way I am."

Asmodeus appeared to have found his balls again. His sneering voice lashed out like a barbed whip. "Don't be a coward, Puss. Brennan deserves better."

Naamah gathered herself to leap, but Brennan grabbed her before she could get up close and personal with Asmodeus. "Don't presume to tell *me* what Brennan deserves, you evil fucking prick!" she shrieked over Brennan's restraining arms.

"What's it to be, Naamah?" Asmodeus challenged, unmoved by his former subject's fury. "Blissful ignorance that will come back and bite you on the ass when you least expect it? Or full disclosure?"

Brennan's heart stuttered. He held his breath, unwilling to push her but hoping desperately that she'd pluck up enough courage to choose the latter option. The one he knew would heal her fully. The one he knew would allow the mark he'd placed on her to change into its final, irrevocable form.

She sagged against him. "I guess I need to know the truth."

"So mote it be," the Demon said. And promptly vanished, leaving nothing but an aching silence to mark his passing.

"Fuck! 'So mote it be'—what the Hell is that supposed to mean? Could he be any more vague?" Naamah's Felinoid form blurred to humanoid. She tore herself from Brennan's arms and stumbled away from him, arms wrapped around her middle and her shoulders hunched.

It tore Brennan's heart to see her so vulnerable. He didn't know what to do to succor her, and for the first time in his life his Were-Lion form felt wrong. Inadequate and clumsy. "Naamah? Sweetheart?"

She turned a tear-streaked face toward him. "I'm fine! I felt like a good cry and in my Felinoid form, I can't cry—ohh!" Her eyes widened, and she sank to her knees.

He didn't think. In a swift motion, he snatched her up in his arms. And the instant he touched her, he formed a connection with her. This connection went far deeper than any mating bond, for now he shared Naamah's thoughts, saw what she saw, heard what she heard, felt everything she felt.

And as she re-lived her lost chunk of the past, so did he.

Chapter Fourteen

Naamah sank to her knees before Asmodeus's throne and bowed her head, awaiting her King's pleasure. And it appeared that his pleasure required her to wait.

For an interminable period of time. The icy-cold black granite tiles compressed her knees and calves and ankles until, thankfully, her lower limbs went numb. She didn't dare try to ease the tight ache in her shoulders. She ground her teeth and cast aside the biting pains in her lower back to concentrate on another pain. A more personal pain.

Bastard Drakon. How dare Rez deny her! How dare he fall in love with a *mere human*! Angry tears pooled in her eyes. She widened them, determined not to let the tears fall, wishing she dared to assume her true form right now. Her Felinoid form could not shed tears, letting her maintain a semblance of dignity.

The suffocating silence abruptly grew heavier, smothering, provoking her to shoot a glance at her King beneath her lashes. She stilled. The expression on his Hellishly handsome face effectively quelled the hurt fury thrumming in her veins. A predator eyeing a particularly delectable snack, with *Naamah* featuring as the choice morsel.

Hellfire. When Asmodeus's summons reached her, she'd been jubilant, certain that he meant to reassign her to the Beguiler Unit where she most definitely belonged! But now....

She yearned to be back at the Hatchling Division tending the particularly obnoxious new clutch of Demonlings she'd been allocated.

Asmodeus flung himself onto throne so abruptly that she recoiled. On your feet, Naamah." She lurched ungracefully to her feet and her double Ds spilled out of her bodice, but he neglected to raise his usual appreciative eyebrow. Nor did he voice some deliciously lascivious comment when she spooned her breasts back where they belonged and tugged her skirt down over her ass.

Circulation coursed into her lower limbs in a pricking, painful rush. She swallowed a cry of pain. How could she possibly have imagined that this human guise might sway him?

"Do you know why I've summoned you?"

She schooled her face to careful nonchalance. "No, my King. I do not." Despite her efforts, she knew she sounded false.

"Really?" He quirked one perfectly arched, utterly supercilious blond brow.

She licked her lips. "My apologies, my King, but I truly have no idea at all!" Her pitiful repudiation shrieked through the chamber.

And died a pathetic, unnoticed death when Asmodeus threw back his head and laughed. The soulless echoes caromed around the chamber and became a shaft of malice that pierced her, draining her last vestiges of hope. She couldn't tear her gaze from the unholy glee sparking in his eyes. He knew how she truly felt about Rez. He knew what she'd done in a fit of vengeful fury. He knew everything.

The terror coiling in her belly grew fangs and struck, loosening her tongue so that a whimper escaped.

"Chalk-white's hardly a flattering look for you, my dear. It's far more suitable for frightening young humans at Halloween than Beguiling. And speaking of Beguiling...." Asmodeus tapped his forefinger on his lower lip.

Her gaze followed the movement like a mouse watching a serpent, waiting for the inevitable strike.

"Perhaps your current duties bore you." He smirked when she opened her mouth to respond, and then shut it with a snap. "Ah. Some discretion at last. Jolly good." He raked her head to toe with his penetrating gaze. "Let's see what you've got for me."

And Naamah felt her control slip. She fought, tried to claw it back, but his will sank into her pores, washed through her and claimed her absolutely. She shimmered, reverted, stood before her King in her Felinoid form. And perhaps her loss of control wouldn't have been quite so shameful if every hair on her hide weren't standing stiffly on end and her tail didn't resemble a bottlebrush.

"Hmmm. I have a mind to bestow your considerable charms upon the Lycans," he said.

Her heart stuttered. Fear danced a Demonic jig before her eyes. Lycans—male and female alike—were renowned for their brutal enthusiasm when the mating frenzy was upon them. Many high-ranking Demons enjoyed such rough sport and willingly volunteered themselves as sexual prey. Naamah had never been such a one. After so nearly becoming a Were-Demon Halfling's snack, the thought of being at the mercy of a lust-driven Were made her want to curl up in a ball and shriek her lungs out for all Eternity.

"I have many fond memories of a month I spent with a certain Lycan female," Asmodeus drawled. A smile played on his lips as he absorbed Naamah's distress. "She was just as ferocious as the males, bless her furry little hide. I know that the feline males especially would adore a lovely pussy like you to play with."

All her muscles abruptly went lax, and she collapsed in a mewling heap on the floor.

She felt him probing her mind, knew that he was pleasured by its graphic images of being captured and held down while a pride of males took turns at her. Knew that he basked in her terror.

She crammed back her fear and forced herself to move. She crawled to her knees, bowed her head. "My King, I am completely content with my current assignment. But I like to think that I used to be an asset to the Beguilers." Her voice rose at the end of her little speech, making the statement more a question.

"You are one of my best Beguilers, Puss. You're quite wasted on a bunch of smelly squalling infants." He waited for her rigid muscles to unlock, for her pelt to smooth until it lay sleek against her form. He waited for her to be ensnared by hope and dare to believe that she might be safe. She should have remembered he preferred it that way.

He sniffed, nostrils flaring. "You are no longer in heat. Come here."

She froze, throwing up a mental barrier to shield herself from the threat that she sensed. He crushed her paltry effort as easily as he'd crush an eggshell. The overwhelming weight of him burst into her mind, usurped full control, forced her body to do his will.

She climbed gracefully to her feet, walked toward him and halted. He slapped his thigh, inviting her to sit. She perched on his knee, bent her face to his. Let him kiss her—an oh-sogentle brush of his lips against hers.

Outwardly she smiled, exhaled a breathy sigh, shivered pleasurably because *he* made her smile and sigh and shiver. Inwardly she begged and pleaded and shrieked and writhed as he deprived her of her will, controlled her body and her mind, manipulated her hormones and shoved her cycle into premature mating heat. And because she was Felinoid, and in that form incapable of crying, she bore the agony of that brutal psychic rape without shedding a single tear.

"There," he said, releasing her from his mental grip. "All done."

She slithered off his lap and collapsed in an ungainly heap at his feet. She curled up in a tight ball, clutched her belly, and tried not to vomit as her abused reproductive organs contracted and convulsed.

"Oh, I almost forgot. I know how much you love your human guise, so I'm going to give you a gift, Naamah."

He was inside her mind again, and oh, he burned!

"I'm still waiting for you to thank me."

It took forever for her to pry open her eyelids and make her vocal chords form actual words. "Th-thank you, my King," she whispered. An ominous wetness dribbled from her left ear. She swiped at it with her hand and glanced down, shocked to see pale, delicate human fingers and obsidian black nails. But still more shocking than realizing that he'd changed her form again, were the smears on her fingertips.

Blood.

"What's the matter?" Asmodeus asked. "Cat got your tongue?"

She moaned. What had he done to her? "Please! I—"

He stomped both feet heavily on the marble floor, his boots a bare inch from her nose, and he lanced all thought of further protests with his deadly smoldering glare. "Be thankful, Naamah, that I have chosen you to assist me with a small problem, rather than punishing you as you so richly deserve. If I didn't have a better use for you"—he held her gaze and stroked his long-fingered, elegant hands over the armrests—"I do assure you that sumptuous fur of yours Rez used to so admire would even now be adorning my throne. That will be all."

Something burst in her brain, a white-hot flare of agony, and then nothing....

Brennan clutched his mate to his chest and vented his pent-up fury in a full-throated, deafening roar.

"Hey, you're squishing me!" Naamah squirmed in his arms.

"I'm so sorry." He loosened his grip. And backed away from her, unwilling to subject her to any further trauma. "Mihos's mighty jaws, I had no idea your fear of Weres bordered on phobic. And that one of my kind tried to eat you? Fuck! If I'd known I would *never* have revealed my Were-Lion to you."

She shrugged. "Being nearly eaten as a kit can do that to you. And it was just as much one of my kind as yours."

"I'll change," he said. "I'll subdue my Were side. I promise that you'll never see me in that form again. I'll—"

Her laughter stunned him. "Don't be an ass, Brennan. I *love* your Were-form! Rez was right, I should have Beguiled a psychiatrist and put myself through a course of free therapy."

His relief took palpable form. He slumped, feeling as drained as if he'd just run a marathon. "I can't believe you're taking this so well," he muttered.

She cocked her head, frowning at him. "Whyever not?"

"What about what Asmodeus did to you?"

"That?" She waved a dismissive hand. "Asmodeus has always bent the rules."

"Bent the rules? He took away your memory and stranded you in the Realm," Brennan ranted. "He took away your ability to take other forms, to do magic, to protect yourself! He altered your DNA and practically made you human! That's so fucking against the rules that I'm astonished the combined forces of Heaven, Hell and Earth haven't smeared him all over the ass-end of Oblivion!"

Naamah blinked at him. "Oh, fuck Asmodeus!"

"Over my dead body. I'm gonna gut him and string him up for the crows for what he put you through."

She snorted. "Forget about him. Besides, if I know Leisa, Asmodeus will get his comeuppance. You can bet she'll do a much better job than you or I ever could."

Approaching him, Naamah reached up to spear her fingers through his mane and pull his leonine muzzle down until they were eye to eye. She planted a smacking kiss on his lips. "Let it go. I'm fine. I feel, well, whole. Complete. Fan-fucking-tastic, if you want the truth!"

Brennan shook his mane and growled. She was smiling at him, her eyes shining with glee as if she'd just been given a gift instead of being subjected to a harrowing experience that would make most males want to curl up and howl. Women. He'd never understand—

He frowned and gently tipped her chin to examine her neck.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing." He couldn't help the wide grin that split his face as he met her questioning gaze. "So long as you don't mind having a lion paw-print tattoo on your neck. My mark has taken its final form."

"Oh, that!" She traced the raised edges of the mark with her fingertips. "I felt it change when I finally accepted in my heart of hearts that a Demon and a Lycan can love one another. Form doesn't matter. Love transcends all forms."

He gaped at her. "Oh, that," he repeated. "Only the most profound declaration I've ever heard, and you dismiss it like a kid's nursery rhyme?"

"Would it make you feel better if I dissolved in tears?" She rubbed her smooth-skinned cheek against his furred one. "I'm too damned happy for tears. I want to celebrate me finally getting my shit together! Hey, I know something we haven't tried yet. How about this?" She leaned in to whisper in his ear.

Humanoid and Were-Lion? Brennan was about to demur when she dropped to her knees to grab his cock and lick it. And take as much of him as she could into her mouth.

He swallowed a groan as his brain went south. "Oh yeah. I'm, uh, definitely seeing the possibilities." If he was careful, he could even—

She jerked her mouth away and dug her sharp fingernails into the tender flesh of his testicles. "You'd better not be *that* careful. I'm a Demon, or had that slipped your mind?" Her smile was so very wicked, and her eyes so dark with the promise of delights to come, that his cock surged, nudging her cheek.

Taking the hint, she licked his length. "Mmm. Tasty." She teased the tip of his cock with her lips, swirling her tongue over the broad glans, nibbling and licking until he wanted to roar and thrust his cock deep into the warm cavern of her mouth. He resisted the impulse, knowing she would reward him for his patience. Eventually. He felt his eyes crossing. Mihos, let it be soon!

She curled a hand around the bottom of his shaft and deep-throated him, taking so much of him into her mouth that he half expected her to choke. She increased the suction, and he realized his fears were groundless. He shuddered and loosed a groan of satisfaction. His perception narrowed to a world of pure sensation. Her mouth and lips and lightly scraping teeth. His rockhard throbbing flesh. The growing coil of tightness in his balls. The flexing of the muscles of his buttocks and abs as he strained not to release himself into her mouth.

She took him halfway down her throat, sucked him so incredibly hard and for so long that he could not resist. She had him at her mercy. And he came.

"Fuuuck!" His hips jerked with each convulsive swallow that she took.

She released him and laid her cheek against his trembling thigh. "Mmm. Can't wait to have that lusciously long Were-Lion tongue of yours return the favor. Later on we'll have to be just a little more restrained, but for now...." Her hand drifted down to rub her stomach.

"You're pregnant?" He sent his sex-befuddled senses scurrying along the mating bond. "And you're carrying quadruplets!"

She grinned at his slack-jawed shock.

"When?" he managed to ask through the huge lump in his throat.

"The first time. When you marked me."

He threw back his head and roared his joy to the Realm.

"I take it you're pleased, then," she said.

He grabbed her forearms, yanked her to her feet and swung her 'round until she collapsed in a giddy, giggling heap in his embrace. He smoothed her mussed hair from her face with a gentle paw, his heart threatening to burst from his chest. He'd gotten everything he'd never known he wanted.

You're welcome! Asmodeus's voice echoed in his mind. You can name your firstborn after me.

Fuck off, Asmodeus, Brennan thought back. But he didn't much care whether or not the Demon King obeyed. Brennan intended to make love to his mate, and if the Demon King wanted to perve at them from whatever hole he was hiding in, then so be it. Maybe the soulless bastard would learn a thing or three.

Brennan cupped his mate's face in his paws and told her how he felt about her. "I love you, Naamah."

She went all misty-eyed. "I love you, too, you big idiot."

He proceeded to kiss her senseless, and then he laid her down on the ground and put his long leonine tongue to very good use indeed.

About The Author:

The great thing about being an author? Having a valid excuse to read voraciously—all in the name of research, of course ;-). When Maree Anderson isn't "researching", she's dreaming up new ways to put her heroes and heroines through hell before giving them their Happy Ever After—she's a complete sucker for a happy ending, BTW.

Maree lives in Auckland, New Zealand, with her real-life hero, a man who is rapt to bits and beyond that she's finally achieved her dream of becoming an author. He's also a website designer extraordinaire, and even better, he works for hugs and kisses! Feel free to visit Maree at www.mareeanderson.com and drop her a line. She'd love to hear from you!

Special Bonus Section

Glossary
Ten Questions with Cynthia Eden
Cynthia Eden's Rum Truffles
"Even Demons Get the Blues" by Maree Anderson

Glossary of names and their meanings

Asmodeus—Destroyer, prince of vengeance

Belphegor—Sloth, vanity

Leisa—God's promise, God's oath

Mihos—Lion God, "He who is true beside her"

Naamah—Seductress

Ornias—Harassment

Pakhet—Lion Goddess, "She who snatches and tears"

Ten Questions With Cynthia Eden

1. Hi, Cynthia! When not writing, what do you like to read?

Sexy paranormal romances. Dark, gritty romantic suspenses. And lots and lots of research books.

2. Did you ever think you would be doing what you do?

I hoped I'd be able to write for a living. I prayed that I would, but I don't know that I actually believed I'd ever have the opportunity to live my dream—not until I got that first publishing contract in my hands.

3. Of all the heroes you've created, which is your favorite and why?

Slade Brion. He's the hero from "Blood Hunt"—a Secrets novella due out next December (in Secrets, Volume 25: Wicked Delights). Slade doesn't want to be a hero, he doesn't want to be a good guy—and I really liked that. I didn't want him to be perfect. I wanted him to be flawed, human—and, well, that's exactly what I got. One tough guy with a serious attitude—sexy, strong, and so not ready for the love that finds him.

4. How many times were you rejected before you sold that first manuscript?

Oh, jeez...honestly, I don't think I counted! The first few rejections hurt, but then, I realized I was going to have to develop a much thicker skin. I wanted to succeed, so I knew I had to keep submitting my work. When I got rejections, I read them, got depressed for about ten minutes, then I threw the rejections away and went back to work writing.

5. Any advice that you think would benefit newbie writers?

Learn the industry. Research the publishers out there. Find the publishing house that will be right for you. I think it is so important to research a publisher before submitting material—and definitely before signing a contract!

6. Is there anything you want to say to your readers?

Yes, thank you! Thank you so much for reading my stories. Thank you for the kind emails and letters. Thank you!

7. Please tell us a bit about yourself:

I'm ridiculously normal. I live in the Deep South. I have one son. I love snorkeling—oh, and I have an addiction to really bad horror films. In the past, I've worked as a college counselor, a recruiter, and even a Catholic school teacher. I'm also a member of Mensa. Since I've been writing, I've discovered that many of the most intelligent women I've ever met—are romance writers. What can I say? Smart women read and write romance. ©

8. What are your plans for future books?

I'd love to keep writing paranormal stories. More werewolves, some demons...perhaps even a djinn story. I'd also like to try my hand at a sexy romantic suspense.

9. Do you remember the first romance you read?

Yes! It was THE ASKING PRICE by Amanda Browning. I think I still have that book on my keeper shelf. After I had my first taste of a romance novel, there was no going back for me. I was hooked—and still am, actually.

10. You write great heroes. What do you think makes for a great hero?

A great hero is, first, undeniably sexy. He makes a heroine want, he makes her yearn. He's smart, strong (physically, mentally, emotionally), and he's the guy the heroine wants next to her when things get...ah...rough. A great hero has a wild side, but, when he finds his lady, he can be tamed—a bit, anyway.

Cynthia Eden's Rum Truffles

Okay, let me just admit it—I love things that have rum in them (and by things, I mean food!). Ever since I had the pleasure of traveling to Grand Cayman several years ago—and then discovering the true wonder that is rum cake—I've loved rum in my desserts.

To make rum truffles, you'll need:

4 ½ oz/125 g of semisweet chocolate (Oh, chocolate—another one of my favorite things!)

Small pat of butter

2 tbsp rum (Doesn't sound like much, does it?)

½ cup dry unsweetened coconut

Scant 2 cups cake crumbs

6 tbsp confectioners' sugar (I've long believed that confectioners' sugar makes everything taste better.)

2 tbsp unsweetened cocoa

Now, to make the rum truffles...

Break the semisweet chocolate into pieces and put them in a bowl with the butter. Place the bowl over a pan of gently simmering water. Stir until the chocolate and butter are melted and combined.

Remove chocolate/butter from the heat and mix in the rum (beat briefly). Stir in the dry unsweetened coconut, cake crumbs, and two-thirds of the confectioners' sugar. Beat until combined. Add a little extra rum (often my favorite part!) if the mixture is stiff.

Roll the mixture into small balls and place them on a sheet of baking paper. Chill until firm.

Sift the remaining confectioners' sugar onto a large place. Sift the cocoa onto another plate. Roll half of the truffles in the confectioners' sugar until well coated and then roll the other remaining truffles in the cocoa (again, until well covered).

Place the truffles in candy cases and chill until you wanna eat 'em!

This recipe should make about twenty rum truffles. Happy eating!

Even Demons Get the Blues

If you enjoyed this story, you might also enjoy Maree Anderson's first story in this series!

by MAREE ANDERSON

Rezon was the Demon King's lieutenant for four thousand years but even the most badass Demon in Hell gets jaded, so Rez joined the Beguilers. Only trouble is now he's been beguiled by Leisa, a tormented human woman who's captured his heart. When Leisa picks up one loser too many, Rezon's provoked into whisking her off to his lair to show her what a real man—uh, make that Demon!—can do for her. Leisa's been tagged by a Destroyer and her soul is forfeit, so when she inadvertently shatters Rez's defenses and bonds with him there'll be Hell to pay—literally.

Excerpt:

He cupped her face in his palms and stroked her hair back from her damp, flushed face. She smiled at him, her pleasure shining in her emerald eyes. He'd never seen a human so beautiful. Even the stunningly gorgeous Beguiler females he'd known paled in comparison.

Rez kissed her long and deep, inserting a desire for sleep into her mind.

It'd taken every ounce of will he possessed to protect her from him at the moment he'd released his essence inside of her. He felt curiously drained, as though she'd sucked all his vital energy from his body. He needed to rest, to examine this experience in minute detail.

But Leisa somehow resisted his compulsion and kissed him back, wrapping her body around him. And her mind.

He felt her essence seeping into him, insidiously infusing his veins with everything she was. Before he could take steps to protect himself he'd absorbed her—her hopes, her deepest desires. Her pain.

He knew her.

And unconsciously, instinctively, not knowing what it was she was doing, Leisa began to draw knowledge from him. Desperately he fought her, exerted his will and battled her relentless desire to know all there was about him, to bond with him as no creature had dared attempt before. Finally his compulsion won out and sleep swept her away.

But it was too late. She had the knowing of him.

Amediel. My Amediel.

Intimately linked to her mind and body, still, Rez heard his true-name echoing in Leisa's mind as clearly as though she uttered it aloud.

Panic engulfed him, countless ice-cold shards piercing his body, crystallizing around his heart. He unsheathed himself from her body and flung himself from the bed, backing up until he hit the wall. All his senses heightened, becoming preternaturally alert. His pupils dilated,

elongated. His hands became talon-tipped claws. His body bulked, muscle mass increasing to battle-ready proportions. His skin became armored with iridescent, impenetrable scales. He crouched, coiled, tensed and poised to battle.

Rezon teetered on the verge of fully transforming into his primary form and becoming Drakon, a form he hadn't found it necessary to revert to since becoming a Beguiler. But Leisa threatened him. Not physically—no mere human could ever do him physical harm—but fundamentally, and his reactions were instinctive. Some part of him viewed the vulnerable weak human female he'd just fucked as if she'd suddenly morphed into the ultimate Demonic predator, a predator whose sole desire was to consume him as prey.

She'd named him Amediel, the name bestowed upon him at birth by some nameless elemental presence. The name which had blossomed in his mind the exact instant he'd burst from the egg. The name he'd struggled to be worthy of and finally earned in blood and pain and sacrifice. The name no other creature on Earth, Heaven or Hell knew. Not even his King.

He was Amediel, Bonecrusher, last of the Drakons.

And this vulnerable human female had somehow wrenched the gift of his true-name from the innermost recesses of his powerful mind.

Amediel. She cried out to him in her sleep, reached for him with blindly searching hands, reached out to him again with her mind. He fielded her call, cloaking himself from her. And when she could not find him, she curled herself into a ball and whimpered piteously.

He could not deny her. Rezon's shields disintegrated. His essence—his soul—shattered into a trillion tiny pieces, each one shrieking Leisa's name before melding together into a new, stronger whole.

Leisa. The mate he'd longed for. The human woman who'd captured his heart and made it her own.

For the first time since he'd been a youngling, alone and struggling to survive, Rezon felt that unwelcome clenching in his gut, that clammy sweat oozing from his pores, that tell-tale dryness of his mouth. Fear. True, paralyzing fear.

It took far too long for him to quell it. Even longer to prod his mind toward logical thought and finally let go of the pseudo-Drakon form he'd assumed. Rez prided himself on being a creature that inspired fear, not succumbed to it and he was not at all impressed.

In fact he was damned—Hell, they both were.

Asmodeus was not going to be at all pleased.

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