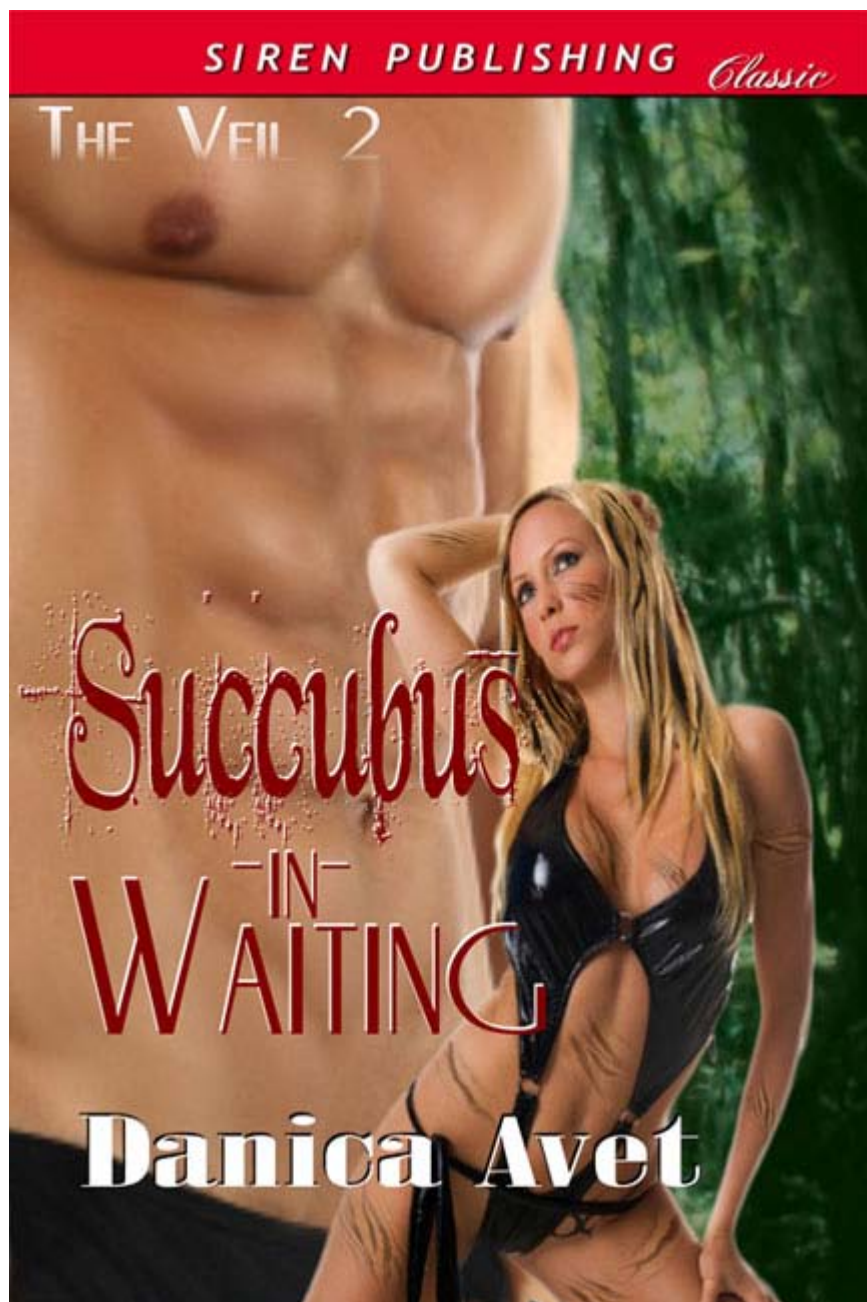


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THE VEIL 2

Succubus
-IN-
WAITING

Danica Avet



The Veil 2

Succubus-in-Waiting

It isn't easy holding onto your virginity in a succubus Pleasure House, but Piper Foxgrove has managed for decades. As a rare succubus-weretiger Halfling, Piper dreams of true love—to the consternation of her mother. Forced to work with a bad-tempered, good-looking werewolf looking for his nephew, Piper's determined to ignore his sexiness. Unfortunately, her succubus half decides he's the key to unlocking her powers while her recently awakened weretiger half thinks he's perfect mate material.

Connor Griffin's brother died because of "soul suckering" succubi, so he doesn't trust them. But Connor needs to find his nephew—the Veil can be dangerous—and worry makes him take drastic measures, like working with a succubus. But something about Piper calls to his wolf and has him doing things he never thought he'd do, like work with a succubus, lust after a succubus, and fall in love with a sassy, sexy succubus with tiger-striped hair.

Genre: Contemporary, Shape-shifter, Vampires/Werewolves

Length: 104,213 words

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Danica Avet

EROTIC ROMANCE



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DEDICATION

I have to dedicate this book to my sisters (whether by blood or by bonds of strong friendship).

Melody, you've been a great big sister, even when you and your friends tried to get rid of me because it wasn't "cool" to play with your younger sister. We've had our rough times, but they only forged us closer together. I have no doubt that we'll still snort and laugh together about commercials and complain about football thirty years from now. Love you!

Adene, you're not quite my sister, but you may as well have been. You've been as solid as a rock since I told you about my desire to write. You went with me to my very first writer's conference and let me recite my pitch to you until I'm sure you could say it in your sleep. Love you!

Angie. You've been my friend from the moment you told me my hair looked like Cocker Spaniel ears. It's been over 20 years since that icebreaker and I wouldn't trade you for the world. You've shared my passion for reading romance books, you've been my sound board for crazy ideas, and my sometimes not-so-tender critic. You're the bestest best friend I've ever had and this one's for you.

SUCCUBUS-IN-WAITING

The Veil 2

DANICA AVET

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Chapter One

Piper stuffed her novel under the mattress when her keen ears picked up the quick stride of her mother. The rapid steps told Piper that Persephone was in *Seductarian* mode, determined to get her youngest daughter's head out of the clouds and into bed with a male. She glared at the ceiling, wondering how she was going to get the succubi leader to leave her and her hymen alone. Most mothers tried to preserve their daughter's virginity. Her mother seemed on the verge of paying for someone to take care of Piper's.

Seconds later, Persephone bustled into the room, clothing draped over her arm. Piper stifled a groan. She wished her overbearing parent would let her dress herself. She was seventy-four after all.

Stunningly beautiful and built like a Playboy bunny, Persephone took her role as *Seductarian* seriously. Males of the Veil came to her house for pleasures they could never find elsewhere. Humans would flip out if they knew the creatures of legend were real, so their service for the unmated males in their secret community was a necessity. Secrecy being the highest law for all Veilerians, it wasn't like most of the paranormal males could get nookie from human women without revealing themselves. Or so Persephone reminded Piper daily.

"You need to get dressed. Your meeting is in two hours," she said,

laying out the clothing on the bed.

“Why do I have to go?” Piper mumbled, gracelessly stumbling to her feet. Inwardly, she groaned again, this time at the clothes her mother had chosen. Ridiculously high heels, a scarlet pencil skirt that would no doubt hug every curve Piper had, a frilly cream blouse, a bustier, and oh, Gods no! Piper gulped. Her mother wanted her to wear a thong. A *thong*! She couldn’t help the instinctive squirm as though her body already felt the nasty bit of lace settled in her backside.

“Piper, you’re the only one in the house who doesn’t have a full-time job,” Persephone said as she searched through Piper’s jewelry. “Penny and Posy are working on a new script, Pru is painting, and Pauline is working on a new song for Phoenix. You’re the only one available to meet the impossible male.”

Piper rolled her eyes. Like she needed to be reminded her sisters were successful in their chosen fields or that Phoenix Rai, a very distant relation, had an illustrious career as the Mistress of Metal. Piper knew she needed to find a career that would keep the family coffers overflowing, but what could a closet-romantic-wannabe-adventuress do? She’d thought about going back to college, but three times was really too much. So she worked in the house as a bouncer on pleasure nights without pay while trying to figure out what to do with her life.

“This is going to look lovely on you,” Persephone was saying, holding up the skirt and blouse. “When you’re finished dressing, I’ll fix your makeup and hair. You can take the Porsche to the meeting.”

Piper blinked. “The Porsche?” If Persephone could have parked the car in her bedroom, Piper knew she would have. Her mother was pulling out the big guns by offering the car as incentive for Piper to attend the meeting.

Persephone waved her hand. “Of course. You know, if you applied yourself to your transition, you could afford your own and always drive in style.”

“Why do I need to arrive in style? Why do I need to wear that?” Piper asked in a whiney voice as she pointed to the dreaded thong.

Her mother rolled her blue eyes. “Piper, you’re seventy-four years old and about to come into your transition. It’s time you dress and act like the seductress you’re destined to be and put away those horrid romance novels.”

Persephone stalked to the bed and pulled the novel from beneath the mattress, waving it around like a preacher would a bible during a revival. “These...books are not going to change what and who you are. Once your transition is complete, you’ll be able to live the life in these books. Isn’t that what you want?”

Piper’s “No” was cut off when Persephone sat down on the edge of her bed, looking as though she was about to impart something of great importance.

Nervously smoothing one perfectly manicured hand over her silk-clad thighs, she said, “The Alpha you’re meeting with may know something about the missing items and footprints we’ve discovered lately.”

The strange things didn’t bother Piper as much as they apparently did Persephone. Her mother believed a rival succubi family was trying to take over their territory. Things had been disturbed on the property, clothing had gone missing from the house while they were out, and they’d felt as though they were being watched.

“I’ve asked all of our nearby allies, but no one will admit if it’s one of their own doing these things,” Persephone reminded Piper unnecessarily. The entire Foxgrove family had discussed the occurrences until Piper could recite their conversations verbatim. “This has never happened in all of my years living here, and I want it stopped.”

“It could just be kids acting out, Mom,” Piper said soothingly. Young Veilerian males who hadn’t yet transitioned often tried to sneak into the house during pleasure nights. “Some of the males we turn away might just be sneaking in and taking trophies while we’re

out.” It was her and Vic’s, their half-angel, half-demon bodyguard, duty to prevent unwelcome elements from entering the house on pleasure nights.

Persephone stood and paced, always a bad sign in Piper’s opinion. “Be that as it may, I still don’t like it. I also don’t like this Alpha showing up so soon after everything started happening. And now he wants to speak with me.”

“Why can’t you go?” Piper asked sharply. Persephone never sent someone to do her own work, especially if it concerned house safety.

Persephone waved her hand. “I have an appointment with the Permits Board again. There’s no way I can be in two places at once, and this male insists on meeting me today. So, I need you to find out what he wants and what he knows.” She stopped, her face reminding Piper of the fox from which Persephone had taken her surname. “Maybe he’ll even initiate you.”

Piper nearly groaned. Not that again! Since she’d turned seventy, her mother had thrown so many males in her path she was afraid to leave her room. Piper knew she was on the cusp of her transition to full succubus—hell, apparently everyone knew—but her mother’s interference was downright embarrassing. Persephone’s determination to make Piper’s deflowering and subsequent transition pleasant enough to continue the family tradition made Genghis Khan’s warlike campaigning seem like child’s play.

Piper respected and even understood her mother’s point of view, but she didn’t want to be a succubus in a pleasure house picking out a different male every two days to feed from. She wanted to belong to one male and have that male belong to her. Was that so wrong? Love was a many splendored thing or something like that, and Piper wanted a taste of it. Except she knew there was no getting around the transition. She was going to be deflowered and become the opposite of what she wanted for herself.

Persephone’s eyes narrowed on her daughter. She knew Piper’s power would be immense once she transitioned. Piper tucked a strand

of golden hair behind one of the black streaks she'd been born with. The move revealed Piper's softly rounded face, a face that would've looked innocent except for her full, red lips. Persephone sighed. She suspected Piper would drive men crazy if she'd just step out of her shell and embrace her heritage. Her daughter's lush figure was the kind that inspired thoughts of early Hollywood starlets. All of her daughters were beautiful, but only Piper had the innate power to become a *Seductarian*.

Persephone glared at her stubborn daughter. If only Piper didn't have a romantic streak to match the streaks in her hair. Persephone had a sneaking suspicion Piper wanted to fall in love before giving up her prized virginity, but that wouldn't do. Succubi weren't made to mate to one individual. As much as she wished she could spare her daughter's tender heart, Persephone had arranged everything so she could put Piper in the path of the Alpha, Connor Griffin, who was renowned for his dislike of all things dealing with the succubi. Persephone was betting on Piper's sweet personality to warm the Alpha up enough to tempt him into ending her daughter's virginity.

Some might view her plans as being cold and calculating, but Persephone was betting Connor's feelings about succubi would prevent Piper from falling in love with him. Since she knew Connor also had the reputation of being a quietly seductive man, she suspected he wouldn't be able to resist her daughter's innocent sensuality. They'd be perfect together, sexually.

"Darling, just relax and enjoy yourself this evening. I've heard the Alpha is a handsome"—she'd heard he was drop-dead gorgeous—"cultured werewolf. You'll just be having coffee and speaking about what's going on. If you don't want it to go any further, you know how to take care of yourself." Connor Griffin was all of those things and much more, but Piper would have to learn that on her own.

In the center of the room, Piper ran a hand through her hair, tugging on the strands as though she could somehow make sense of her mother's insistence. Persephone was like a wrecking ball when it

came to her children. She wanted her girls to have successful careers as well as strive to make their home the best Pleasure House in the country, just as she had for the last three hundred years. And even though Piper thought the world of her mother, she didn't want to be like her.

"Now, take your shower and get dressed, *cher*," Persephone said, lifting the clothing in her arms before shoving them at Piper.

Not knowing what else to say, Piper headed for the shower. Things hadn't always been this bad, she thought angrily as she scrubbed herself in the steamy hot water. It didn't matter that Piper wasn't quite a full succubus. She'd been given the same advantages and instruction as her older sisters, yet she was the odd one out.

From the time she'd understood she was different from the rest of the family, Piper had come to recognize those differences and catalog them. Where the others needed to feed on male energy every two days, they didn't know how often she would need to feed since she was a Halfling. It could be more than a full-blooded succubus, or it could be less. It was yet another aspect of her coming transition she dreaded.

Her mother's chance encounter with a weretiger Kahn, had resulted in Piper's birth. She was sure Persephone had been shocked to discover her daughter had the markings of a tiger and, even more, that she had the animal's most base instincts. In spite of those differences from her other daughters, Persephone had insisted Piper learn how to be a succubus and prepare for the transition that would bring males to her bed and help the house flourish.

Piper leaned against the tile, staring at the water seeping down the drain. She didn't want something like that for herself. She wanted real passion. An emotional connection with someone. Without the stronger telepathic abilities her mother and sisters had, she relied solely on her senses to tell if a man was interested in her. And none had been. They looked, of course, they were *men*. But not one of them had attempted to go further.

Washing her hair, she wondered idly if it was the cause of her single existence. Human males would think she was trying to emulate the punk style with her tiger striped hair, while Veilerian males wouldn't want to attempt breeding with a Halfling.

She clenched her teeth. She was damned to a life of solitude because of her weretiger half and damned to countless casual encounters with males she'd never loved. Nothing she'd tried through the years had met with the slightest hint of success. Speed dating sucked, the Veilerian online dating community was filled with real trolls, and the only men she saw on a regular basis wanted sex, not a meaningful relationship.

Piper stepped out of the shower into the heavily steamed room. Habit had her moving the bottles of unscented shampoo and soaps into rows arranged by height. She couldn't handle perfumes of any kind unless she wanted to spend her entire day sneezing or fighting off headaches. Her five senses were much stronger than her sisters'. Where they used intuition and some mild telepathy to seek out prey, Piper was better served using the concrete senses she'd been born with.

She dried herself with the extra fluffy towels, trying to keep her mind blank. She'd do what her mom asked, and then maybe she'd take a vacation somewhere. Never having really gone anywhere without her family, she felt time away from them might serve her well.

With those cheerful thoughts in mind, she dressed in the clothing her mom had picked out, trying to quell her shudder of disgust as the thong found its way to her butt crack. Ugh, she thought in revulsion. The only thing she hated more than thongs were bras, which meant that either a succubus had invented them, or a man. Piper was betting on it being a succubus.

The outfit fit. Barely. The skirt did exactly what she thought it would. Hug tightly to her round backside and showcase her curvier than fashionable hips. She refused to look in the mirror after that,

instead sailing into the bedroom to let her mom have at her.

Two hours later, made up within an inch of her life, she headed to Cypress Point for her meeting. Persephone had wielded her brush and pins like a magician, styling Piper's hair into a chic French twist. Piper had argued about the pins digging into her scalp, which only earned her a wounded look from her mother. So had her comment about her makeup sliding off her face in the south Louisiana heat. Persephone's looks had the same effect as a punch to the chest, making it impossible to fight against her motherly disappointment.

Luckily, the air conditioning in her mother's metallic gray Porsche 911 GT2 kept her makeup from smudging. The car was a miracle of engineering. With sleek lines, leather seats, and the power of five hundred and thirty horsepower under the hood, Piper was tempted to let her rip, but she knew Persephone would ask around to see how the car was treated.

Except she couldn't help herself. Grinning with impish delight, she pressed on the accelerator, hearing the engine rev with a throaty growl. Her Honda Civic was boring, but this car... This one made her feel...sexy. Maybe that had been Persephone's intent. Feeling sexy was the first tool in a succubus' arsenal. If you felt sexy, you were sexy. How many times had those words been drilled into her head over the last sixty years?

Shaking her head, Piper refused to feel pressured by her mother. She was going to have the meeting, talk with the Alpha, and hopefully get to the bottom of his request and their problems. Then, she'd book a cruise. No, she'd reserve a spot at some all-inclusive tropical resort. In Puerto Rico, or Fiji, somewhere far from her mother and the hopes she had for Piper. That sounded much better, she thought in satisfaction.

She was finally going to take charge of her own life.

* * * *

Connor Griffin, Alpha of the Tall Pines Pack, paced in his room at The Hourglass, the only hotel in all of Cypress Point. In just a little while, he'd have to meet with the very last being on Earth he wanted to: a succubus.

He gritted his teeth in fury and disgust. There was nothing worse than a soul sucker, he thought. But this tiny town was the last place Toby had been seen. Knowing his nephew, it wouldn't surprise him if the younger wolf had headed to the red lights of the most infamous Pleasure House in the country.

Connor cursed darkly, checking his watch. He had better things to do than to meet with supernatural whores. His pack needed his guidance, but here he was trying to locate one missing cub. Not that Toby was that young. At fifty-two, he was way past his full transition and could more than take care of himself, except Connor had trouble letting go of the reins.

He knew he was overly protective, but from the day Toby had become his ward, he'd done everything in his power to provide a calm, stable home for the younger werewolf. Now that Toby was mature, even if he wasn't quite mature enough, he showed the same reckless, passionate nature his father had.

Connor sat on the bed, staring blankly at the tan-colored wall opposite him. His brother had been marked as the Alpha at birth and he'd lived life to the fullest, regardless of the consequences. He'd refused to mate, jumping in and out of every she-wolf's bed that was made available to him. Not even the shock of a cub, resulting from one of those affairs, stopped Jarvis's carousing. When Toby showed up at their home at three years old, he'd brought the boy home and continued living his reckless lifestyle. Connor scowled darkly at his shoes, his body tight with tension and memories. Jarvis had come to the attention of a succubus, and that was when Toby became Connor's responsibility, along with a pack of nearly thirty werewolves.

Now, Toby was the one out doing Gods only knew what, while

Connor tried to apply every logical explanation he could come up with to finding him. And logic pointed to Cypress Point.

Running a hand through his hair, he sighed deeply. He was getting too old for this crap. If Toby were anywhere near being ready to take on the responsibilities of the pack, he'd gladly hand over the reins and return to his organized library to continue writing histories of the Veil. Unfortunately, he didn't think Toby was quite ready to take on the pack, and since most were family, he feared they wouldn't listen to him anyway.

A soft beeping alerted him his meeting would start in fifteen minutes. Connor stood and straightened his clothing. He wasn't dressing up for a succubus, he thought acridly. Clean jeans, a plain T-shirt, and work boots would have to suffice for the meeting. He knew succubi were notoriously sensitive about social niceties. If the occasion called for a pink tutu and purple rubber boots, a succubus would wear it. Since this was a business meeting, he had no doubt the soul sucker would arrive in full, seductive business apparel. Tweaking the precise crease in his jeans, he had to admit it was petty to dress down, but he'd never trust a succubus after what happened to his brother. While Jarvis had been charming and would've catered to any woman's whims, Connor applied the same logic he used for his studies to his personal relationships. Toby called him cold. Connor called it smart thinking.

Locking his hotel room door, he headed downstairs. The plan was to meet the succubus at Cuppa's, a coffee shop, two storefronts down.

By the time he got away from Stella, the owner of the hotel and a nice busybody, he was running late. He kept his eyes open and his body loose as he walked the short distance. Cypress Point might be a nice little town, but he was in a new territory with only the barest approval by the local wolf pack Alpha. He walked into the shop to see no one was there other than a bored looking kid behind the counter. Connor's anger and frustration grew.

He stalked up to the counter, watching the kid do a double take at

his size. “Coffee. The biggest cup you make. Black.” Connor ground out his order, not caring if he was rude.

The worker nodded numbly and filled a cup the size of a small pitcher with heavenly, black coffee.

Connor relished the smell of fresh brew. It was his one concession to the wolf that lived within. Drawing the strong scent into his nostrils, he felt his tension slowly fade. He glanced back at the kid. The kid wasn’t paying attention to him or the coffee now spilling over the rim of the cup.

“Hey!” he shouted at the kid, who jumped like he’d been stuck by a cattle prod, his bugged-out eyes still trained on the shop’s window.

Wondering what had the teenager so freaked out, Connor turned and thanked the Gods he wasn’t holding the coffee just yet because he would’ve spilled it on himself. A gorgeous woman was trying to get out of one of the finest sports cars he’d ever seen. Even though he preferred living a sedate life, he still admired cars and knew this one was worth a pretty penny. Unfortunately, the car didn’t hold his attention for long because the woman was trying to get out of the low slung car wearing dangerously high heels. It looked as though her skirt was just a shade too tight to allow her freedom of movement. Every time she tried to place one foot on the concrete, she lost her balance, falling back in the car.

She looked up and down the street, probably checking to see if anyone was watching, before hiking up her skirt to the tops of her thighs. Connor almost swallowed his tongue as she swung her legs out of the car. With her feet planted on the ground, her knees parted just the slightest bit, offering him a view of Heaven.

Hearing a loud gulp behind him, Connor whirled and saw the kid breathing heavily, his eyes dilated, and Connor’s cup of coffee had fallen on the floor. Shrugging it off as a slight inconvenience, he joined the kid in watching the woman.

Once she stood, she shimmied to get her skirt in place again. When she bent over to grab her purse from the interior of the car,

Connor's dick leapt at the sight of her curvy bottom pointed in the air.

"Oh, my God," the teenager whispered raggedly.

For some reason, Connor was suddenly furious with this human watching the woman. He pinned the boy with a harsh glare. "Get that coffee now." The growl in his voice prompted the lust-struck teen to get it in gear.

Unfortunately for Connor, he couldn't do the same. He studied her like his wolf would study a deer. She was short, even with the heels. She'd probably only come up to the middle of his chest, but that was fine with him. She'd be closer to other parts of his body. Her hair was swept up in a tight style he didn't like, though the colors were unique; a blending of copper and black chunks. She was beautifully curved, just like a woman should be. She reminded Connor of statues he'd seen of fertility goddesses with round hips and an equally lush bust. He felt his jeans getting tighter the longer he watched her.

Once she closed the car, she stood as though trying to figure out what to do next. She looked up and down the street again, and he saw her mouth moving. Since she didn't have a phone in her hand, or an earpiece, he suspected she was talking to herself. Given the speed her sexy lips were moving, she was mad about something.

Unable to take his eyes off of her for a single second, Connor gave the kid a five for the coffee. The little sexpot threw back her shoulders and marched across the street towards the coffee shop. Connor couldn't help but appreciate the sway of her hips as she sauntered closer. He took a step forward, wanting to be the first thing she saw when she entered. She reached for the door, her blouse stretching across her full breasts, making his mouth water for a taste. The door opened. She slinked into the shop, her scent picked up by the fans overhead. The smell of honeysuckle, thick and lush, seared his nose, making his body tighten.

He backed away instantly as hatred and disgust roared through him. *She* was the succubus!

Chapter Two

Piper had to talk herself into entering the coffee shop. The minute she'd gotten out of the car, some sixth sense warned her there was a predator nearby. Even if she hadn't had the heightened sense of smell of a weretiger, her awareness as a woman would have been enough to know someone was eyeing her with hunger. She shivered, telling herself she could do this. She just needed to meet with the Alpha, find out what he wanted, and then she could leave for her escape. No, vacation. She wasn't a prisoner. Well, much of one at least. If she had to, she'd borrow money from Pru to get away. Throwing her shoulders back, she walked as gingerly as she could in the heels. She hated wearing such tall shoes. She just knew she was going to wobble and break her ankle. As it was, it'd taken her forever just to get out of the car with the stupid shoes on. How her mother and sisters did it on a daily basis was beyond her.

Cuppa's was a familiar place, though she'd never been there during the day. She came by late at night when Kali, the resident Oracle, knocked off work and when she knew Persephone wasn't going to sail in with another man in tow. Already looking forward to a Snickers crushed mocha, Piper swung open the heavy door.

Breathing deeply of the rich scent of coffee beans and creams, something prodded her olfactory nerves. It was a different scent. Heavy, musky, and edible. She licked her lips, closing her eyes to concentrate on it better. Deep, musky, not quite woodsy, almost animalistic. A hint of smoke and spices. It made her imagine tangled, sweat-slicked bodies, and rumpled sheets.

Piper followed the trail of the delicious scent, her eyesight useless

as the spices became her world. Stopping at the source, she shook her head to clear it. Opening her eyes again, she found her nose inches from a man's chest. A broad, muscular chest in a soft, worn T-shirt that begged to be stroked. She could see the tiny nubs of his nipples through the material, and she had the strangest urge to bite him there. Allowing her gaze to travel upwards, she encountered a strong, muscled neck. A sharp chin with just the barest hint of a cleft was shadowed with bristles. A strong-boned jaw clenched and bunched, keeping her fascinated for several seconds.

Lips. Oh my, she thought dazedly. Sexy, kiss-me-until-the-cows-come-home lips! The bottom lip was tantalizingly full, but not so full that it pouted, and the top lip was slightly thinner, more chiseled. Piper's heart pounded just from looking at those lips, and something foreign began happening to her body.

His nose was nice and long, making her wonder if it was true about men with big noses. Wide cheekbones gave his cheeks a hollowed look, but when she gazed into his eyes, she forgot the rest of his face.

Crystal-blue eyes, as cold as the darkest winter night, blazed at her with contempt. The blue was interrupted by flecks of green, though it didn't do much to soften his expression. Neither did the ridiculously long lashes framing those killer eyes. The man was lethal, and her long dormant weretiger self began to feel the need to assert itself.

With a gasp, she took a step away from him. The tiger never came out to play. Piper was latent, meaning she couldn't shift, but the brush of fur along her consciousness meant something was stirring. From the narrowing of the blue eyes watching her so coldly, Piper expected he sensed it in her.

"Um, hi," Piper said uncertainly, taking another step back. She even tried a shy smile.

He continued glaring as he took a sip of coffee. "You the rep?" he asked after wetting his whistle.

Blinking somewhat dazedly, Piper nodded numbly. He was the

Alpha. She'd known somehow. His scent was distinctly animal now that she wasn't impaired by her succubus.

She thrust a hand at him in greeting. "Piper Foxgrove." She tried a friendly smile this time.

Those crystal eyes looked at her hand with barely concealed distaste. She blushed from his intense contempt, the blood rushing to her cheeks in embarrassment and outrage. Who in the hell did he think he was to turn down a simple handshake from someone he'd instigated a meeting with?

She made a harrumphing sound even though she tried her hardest not to. It was a habit Persephone said made her sound like an old lady, but it suited her mood at the moment. Stepping around the Alpha, she used her friendly smile again, this time on the server behind the counter.

"Hi, I'd like a Snickers crushed ice mocha, please." She thought about the man next to her. She wasn't trying to impress him. "Large." Who cared if he thought she was overweight and should bypass the fattening drink? She certainly didn't, she told herself irately.

The teenage boy turned brick red and fumbled around with things behind the counter. Thinking he was intimidated by the Alpha, she smiled again, this time patiently and encouragingly.

It didn't seem to help the teenager as his Adam's apple bobbed on a loud gulp. The Alpha's irritated sigh ruffled the tendrils of hair that had escaped her chignon. She glared at him out the corner of her eye.

No one spoke while the teenager dropped things and stared at them. Ten minutes later, Piper finally had her drink. She gave the boy another friendly smile and a tip. He'd tried so hard to be quick fixing her drink, but the werewolf and his cranky attitude hadn't made the clerk's job easy.

Turning up her nose with a sniff, Piper led the way to a table in the corner of the shop. No sooner did they seat themselves than the teenager immediately dashed for the bathroom. Perplexed at his frightened behavior, Piper stared after him before letting her eyes drift

back to the Alpha. Her lip curled of its own violation.

“Do you have a name?” she asked snidely. He was so damn attractive and plainly uninterested he made her feel like mincemeat all without having said a single word. It was frustrating in the extreme.

Those lips parted, drawing Piper’s gaze. Just as he was about to speak, Piper was distracted by a pulse of male lust so strong it nearly threw her back in her chair. Gasping as the power poured into her, she felt her body soaking up the energy, reveling in it. It tasted sweet and innocent, like sugarcoated lemon drops.

Once the pulse faded, she blushed. *Oh Gods*, she thought in mortification. The teenager hadn’t been scared of the Alpha; he’d been lusting after *her*! The pulse had been him reaching orgasm in the bathroom. Piper didn’t know whether to feel flattered or grossed out. Her succubus nature fed on male orgasms. It was just the way it went, but there was a time and a place for everything, and two minutes after serving her coffee didn’t constitute the right time.

The boy came out of the bathroom, his eyes trained on the floor as he went back to work. He wouldn’t look at Piper and her companion. He was definitely human, so why had his orgasm affected her so drastically?

Piper tilted her head to the side studying him, going over scenarios in her mind. Succubi fed from male orgasms, but humans weren’t their preferred food source. Humans had such weak life forces they provided only enough energy to sustain a succubus for a few hours. In the days before the Council put such strict rules on interactions with humans, succubi had earned a bad rep. Some succubi had no qualms about killing human males, turning the “little death” into a fact.

She judged the worker couldn’t have been more than sixteen. A light went off. He was a *virgin*! Human virgins always produced great pulses of energy. It was like a brand-new battery being plugged in. Now she could understand why her ancestors crept into innocent pubescent males’ dreams. She felt completely sated.

A masculine throat cleared, reminding her she was supposed to be talking to the Alpha.

“Connor Griffin.”

“I’m sorry?” Piper asked in confusion. He looked even more disgusted by her than he had before. What had they been talking about?

“My name.”

“Oh.”

They sat staring at each other for long minutes. This had to be the most awkward meeting she’d ever attended, Piper thought in dismay. If her mother or sisters were here, no doubt Connor would be crawling to them on his hands and knees, but with her he looked as though he wanted to toss her in a dumpster.

“So what did you want to see Persephone about, Mr. Griffin?” Piper burst out with absolutely no tact. She nearly winced.

His nostrils flared, and Piper thought it was because she was so inept at the whole business meeting thing. He probably expected her to flatter him, cater to his overwhelming ego, and let him in her pants. Ha, she snorted to herself. Even if he was the sexiest thing she’d ever seen, he wasn’t getting anywhere near her panties, or thongs, she thought with a squirm.

“I want to know where Toby is.”

Piper had to hand it to Connor. He was a man of few words. He ground out the sentence, then sat there staring at her as though she was supposed to pull a “Toby” out of her handbag. She nibbled on her lip, her forehead wrinkling in confusion. The hostility radiating off of him was enough to make her shiver. What was up with him?

“Who’s Toby?” she asked, leaning forward and taking her straw into her mouth. Damn, this meeting stuff was thirsty work.

As she drank, she waited to hear his explanation, but when he said nothing, she looked up. He was back to staring at her, and this time the crystal-blue eyes were so hot she felt singed. Uneasy, she released the straw and flicked her tongue over her lips.

A growl reverberated through the coffee shop. It was the kind of sound a wolf made when it was hungry. As she watched, his wintry eyes faded into amber. Never having seen a change happen up close, Piper was instantly fascinated, leaning forward to see what would happen next.

“Soul sucker,” he growled in a deep bass. “You will stop using your wiles on me.”

Piper blinked slowly, sitting back in her chair. She’d heard the term before. It was kind of hard not to when every nymph in the tri-Parish area hated your entire family. All the times she’d heard the term “soul sucker” whispered by nymphs, she’d excused them because they were jealous about a succubus’ sexual freedom. Nymphs could only have one lover. Ever. For eternity.

The nymphs had their reasons. The Great Bonnet Debate of 1666 cemented their ire against succubi, but for a male werewolf to use a slur against succubi in front of one was unheard of. Hurt immediately began to well up in Piper’s heart, but she ruthlessly crushed it. He was a stranger, someone she was meeting with to satisfy her mother. His opinion of her or her kind didn’t matter in the least.

“That was a tad harsh, don’t you think?” she asked with a toss of her head.

She watched his jaw bunch as he grit his teeth. “I don’t care if you think it’s harsh or not, succubus. You will cease and desist trying to seduce me.”

“Cease and desist?” Was he joking? Her eyebrow shot up. He thought she was trying to seduce him? The eyebrow lowered again. Outraged that he could be so conceited, she couldn’t help herself. She kicked him in the shin. “I am not trying to seduce you, furball,” she growled at him, leaning closer to emphasize her point. “I just want to find out what the hell you want with Persephone, and then I’m leaving.”

One tanned, long-fingered hand grasped her upper arm, dragging her closer. He stopped with her face just inches from his. This close,

she could almost count his eyelashes. Warmth pooled in her belly, and Piper just knew she was looking at him like a girl with a crush, but did he really have to be so damned sexy?

“You’re not leaving until you tell me where Toby is,” he told her, his breath feathering over her face, causing her to shiver.

“Huh? Who’s Toby?” Piper asked absently, enjoying the sensation of his hand gripping her so strongly.

“My nephew. He was spotted in this area a week ago.” He frowned at her, his eyebrows lowering over his eyes. “Do you mind?”

“Huh?” she asked, feeling her nipples tightening in desire. She snapped out of her daze, realizing she was nearly sprawled across the table in a bid to get closer to him.

Blushing in complete horror, Piper quickly sat back and primly crossed her ankles. Connor had some major mojo. He practically oozed with sensuality, and she wanted to rub against him to coat herself with his scent.

“Um, right.” She took another sip of her mocha. Cleared her throat. “Toby. How old is he?”

Connor sat back. “He’s fifty-two, just eight years out of his transition. He left home about three weeks ago.” His gruff answer barely hid his worry and pain.

Piper was instantly sympathetic. “So young,” she murmured, thinking of her own coming transition. Though Veilerians were frozen in their perfect physical state in their twenties and thirties, each race transitioned into their powers at different stages. “Werewolves transition in their forties or so?” she asked Connor absently.

He nodded shortly, his eyes returning to their frigid state.

She paid him no mind. Tapping her fingers on the table, she thought about her upcoming transition. She seemed to be falling right between the werewolf age of forty-something and the succubus transition age of eighty-something.

Piper blinked, coming back to the present. “Surely at fifty-two, he’s old enough to journey a bit?”

His lips curled in a sneer as he scanned her. "He's still a kid, succubus. He's got this idea he's ready to experience everything life has to offer." Once again, those eyes surveyed her with contempt. "I learned from a friend that Toby was seen around Persephone's."

Aha, she thought, nodding absently. It was possible Toby was one of the pranksters messing around her home. "Do you have a picture of him?" she asked, leaning forward again. "I might have—"

He growled, snapping his teeth at her. Startled, Piper sat back again wondering what his problem was this time. "I don't want to know if you've had the boy," he snarled, pulling a picture out of his wallet and throwing it at her. "Just tell me where he is."

Piper blinked slowly. He thought she'd had sex with his nephew. He hadn't even let her finish saying she might've seen Toby while working the door. The werewolf was seriously prejudiced against her kind. Knowing there was nothing she could say that would change his mind, she looked at the picture.

Toby Griffin was a handsome young man. He strongly resembled his uncle, though where his uncle was surly and serious, Toby's face glowed with his love of life. His blue eyes were slightly darker than Connor's and they sparkled with good humor. The crooked grin on his face showed he viewed life as something to be enjoyed. Piper had never seen him before.

"I don't recognize him," she told Connor solemnly, handing the picture back.

He snagged it out of her hand. "Would you even know if you had? I'm sure the males you've had in the last week numbers in the thousands. You might've had him and just don't remember his face."

Piper felt her face blanch. Before she knew it, her hand whipped out in a sharp slap powerful enough to turn his head. Quivering in outrage, she stood. "I don't care who the hell you are, Mr. Griffin, but our meeting is over," she hissed. "The next time you ask for help, you should work on a little humility and common courtesy."

Chapter Three

Connor sat feeling stunned, staring at Piper as she glared back at him. Had he really said something so cruel? Judging by the hatred and hurt gleaming in her gold eyes, Connor knew he'd stepped way over the line.

He'd been an unmannerly asshole simply because he wanted her. Sitting across from Piper Foxgrove was like basking in a sauna. She filled his body with so much lust his skin felt blistered from the heat. When he'd grabbed her arm, the desire had shot straight to his loins, and seeing the soft look in her molten eyes nearly had him tugging her into his lap.

The succubus brimmed with seductiveness. Her every movement seemed calculated to raise his blood pressure, and Connor felt like if he didn't have her, he'd spontaneously combust. Striking out at her with harsh words had seemed like the only way to combat her appeal.

Now, seeing her wrap her dignity around herself as she prepared to leave, he knew he'd pushed her too far. He ran a hand through his hair, pushing to his feet.

"Look, succ—Piper," he amended. As much as he hated succubi, if Toby was in the area, they were more than likely going to know. "I'm—" he coughed, trying to ease the tightness of his throat. "I'm sorry."

Instead of accepting his apology, she whirled around. "I don't give a damn if you're sorry or not, *werewolf*," she spat out, her eyes blazing with fury. "I would've overlooked your surliness and bad manners because obviously you have some issues, but I won't allow you to insult me. So, good luck finding your nephew. Although if you

treat him with same contempt you've shown me, I hope you never find him!"

Shooting him another glare, she put her nose in the air and sailed out of the coffee shop. Connor knew his mouth was hanging open, but he couldn't help it. He watched her get into her car and peel away from the curb with a squeal of tires.

Scratching his head, Connor sat back down. So he was more than a little wound up over Toby's disappearance. So his brother had died in the arms of a soul sucker. Did that give him the right to verbally attack an innocent—part of him scoffed at the thought—succubus? She hadn't made any moves on him other than when she first walked in, sniffing him out with her eyes closed.

His cock jumped. Yeah, he thought sourly. When she'd walked in, scenting the air like a kitten, he'd gone on full alert in spite of her succubus smell. Having her sway right up to him, her body in slow motion, nearly had him panting. She was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. The desire on her face almost had him forgetting about his purpose here.

Connor gulped down his coffee. Something didn't feel right about the succubus. At the end of her tirade, something had flashed in her eyes. Those gold eyes had gone killer cold, like a predator's eyes.

He shook his head; he was just imagining things. A trick of the light had her eyes seeming to appear lighter. She was just a succubus. She was a supernatural harlot who fed off the sexual release of as many males as she could find. Anger began to build, not at her, but at the faceless men who'd tasted her body.

"Dude, that was awesome," a squeaky voice exhaled from the other side of the room.

Connor shot the teenager a wry glance. "Not really."

The kid nodded quickly. "She's totally into you!"

Snorting and standing up, Connor shook his head. He left the kid a tip and stepped outside. He had no idea what to do next. His whole purpose for meeting with the succubus had been to get information on

Toby, and all he'd managed was to piss her off. Now he had to start at the beginning again. It would be easier if the local werewolves had seen Toby, but none had.

Just outside the door, his cell vibrated in his pocket. Seeing the name of one of his pack's elders flash on the screen, hope crept into his heart. Maybe Toby had gone home on his own.

"Owen, tell me something good," he almost begged as he took the call.

The elder's wheezing laugh traveled through the receiver. "Ha. Boy, your brother is buried in some little thing right now, I can promise you that. He ain't coming home until he's all wrung out."

Ambling along the sidewalk, Connor's shoulders drooped in defeat. "Damn. Why are you calling me?" he asked as he passed in front of the various storefronts.

"I was wantin' to know that myself. Seems to me since you're in Cypress Point, you might let loose a bit. I heard there were a few prime females in the Oak Bough Wolf Pack. Was hoping you might've caught one of those gals for yourself," Owen answered in a smug voice.

Wincing at the thought, Connor stopped dead on the sidewalk. Was that why they'd insisted he come on this trip without enforcers? So he'd hook up with some female and return to their land a mated male?

"What the hell does any of that have to do with Toby unless they have information?"

"Boy, if you don't do something with your juices, you're gonna explode. Don't you know anything?" Owen's voice became stronger. "You're the Alpha. You need to mate and have cubs."

"I'm only the Alpha until he's ready for the job, remember? That's why I'm called Alpha *in praesenti*. Toby's the one who'll give the cubs to the pack," Connor insisted for what felt like the millionth time. The elders were almost paranoid in their belief that the revered Griffin line would die out.

“The Oak Bough Alpha called and told me you didn’t even look at his females, and neither did Toby when he was there.”

“He met their Alpha?” Connor asked incredulously. “Why didn’t the Alpha tell me? Wait, what the hell is the Alpha talking to you for?”

“Uh, he and I go way back. He was just keeping me updated on what was going on down there,” Owen said, his voice hedgy. “And that drag queen Oracle told him not to tell you anything,” he added almost defensively.

Drag queen Oracle? His eyes lit upon a tattoo shop across the street. Oh, right. Kali, the Oracle tattoo artist, lived in Cypress Point. The area was quite thick with Veilerians, what with his friend *Oculum* Lucian, the Veilerian Council Spy, living not more than ten miles away.

“What about the rest of the Veilerians I talked to? Did she tell them not to tell me anything as well?” he asked softly, his body almost seizing from fury. Bloody interfering Oracles, he thought angrily.

“Sure, the weretigers, that angel, the few demons in town, and anyone else connected with the Veil have been warned not to give you more information than she thinks you need,” Owen replied airily.

“Sonofabitch,” Connor hissed into the phone, glaring at Kali’s shop.

“Yeah, well, that’s Oracles for you,” Owen said in reply to Connor’s curse. “They don’t tell you half of what you need to know and tell you shit when you don’t want to know it.”

There had to be a reason the Oracle didn’t want him pursuing his nephew via the more acceptable Veilerian routes.

“We miss you and Toby. Of course, there’s still the matter of his punishment to discuss,” Owen continued, his voice warm with warning.

Connor didn’t want to think about that. As the future Alpha, Toby was expected to remain within the pack until he was fully trained to

take it over. By leaving without the Elders' permission, he'd set himself up for punishment.

"We'll talk about it when he's back home. I don't want the bears and lions involved," he warned. The other werewolf in Wolf Gap, Texas, believed they had the right to nose in each other's affairs. He didn't want his nephew's behavior fodder for gossip.

"Fine, fine. Meanwhile, you should have some fun while you're there. You're too damned uptight," Owen grouched.

Ignoring the Elder's advice, Connor said his goodbyes and hung up the phone. Tilting his head back, he sighed. He wasn't going to let the Elders hurt his nephew. He was reserving that pleasure for himself.

His inner wolf gave him an idea for some real pleasure, sending him images of Piper on all fours, her backside tilted upwards temptingly. Cursing, he scrubbed the image from his mind. He didn't need the distraction. He was here to find Toby and bring him home. If that meant tearing his nephew from Piper's body, he'd do it. He ground his teeth together. He didn't like the thought of his nephew pounding between Piper's thighs.

"Look it, it's the big bad wolf," a sardonic voice said up ahead.

Connor looked up and grinned. Lucian Ravenswaay, the *Oculum*, was standing in the doorway of The Hourglass. Next to him was a small boy who looked five, but whom Connor knew to be much younger. With identical green eyes, man and boy watched Connor approach.

"Lucian" he called out, slapping his friend on the shoulder. "Is this your boy?" he asked, crouching down before the young vampire.

"Yeah. Connor, this is my son, Dominic. Dominic, this is Uncle Connor," Lucian introduced them, seeming satisfied when his son shook Connor's hand.

"Man, I thought you just got mated," Connor commented, noticing how tall Lucian's son was.

A blissful expression crossed Lucian's stern features. Connor

almost shuddered at the look. For the *Oculum* to look so besotted was flat out frightening for any bachelor. Even though they'd gone their separate ways many years before, Connor remembered Lucian as being a complete hard ass at the Guardian Academy. They'd met and become friends, though Lucian's penchant for combat and war varied greatly with Connor's enjoyment of books and studying. The sappy look on Lucian's face made him wonder how much his friend had changed over the years.

"Yeah, going on three years now. Ruby's visiting with Kali right now, otherwise I'd introduce you," Lucian told him.

"So you married the Chieftain, huh?" Connor asked, still surprised at that.

Gossip had abounded about Lucian's mentor attempting to kill the Chieftain and how the Chieftain had defeated the previous *Oculum* in a duel. As though that hadn't been sensational enough, the Chieftain had also turned out to be an Amazon raised as a human. The papers had had a field day with the story.

"Yeah," Lucian answered with a quick grin that displayed his fangs.

Connor laughed. "Where you headed?" he asked, eager to catch up with his old friend.

Dominic piped up, shrugging his dad's hands from his head. "We're going to Best Burger! It's the fucking bomb!"

Lucian winced and looked over at Kali's shop. "Dominic, remember when I told you not to repeat what daddy says?"

Dominic nodded, his green eyes solemn. "But Daddy, that's what Aunt Izzy says about Best Burger."

Groaning, Lucian tugged on his hair. At Connor's questioning glance, he said, "Izzy is one of his permanent Amazon guards. Damn women almost wouldn't let me leave the house with him alone. Like I can't protect my own son." He looked so put out Connor struggled not to laugh. To Dominic, he said, "Don't repeat anything Aunt Izzy says either, okay?"

Dominic nodded solemnly, though a spark of mischief gleamed in his eyes.

To think a group of Amazons was corrupting Lucian's son as well as saying he wasn't capable of watching over his own son was so laughable Connor had to hold his breath. Lucian glared at him, knowing what he was thinking.

"You won't think it's so funny when your woman starts leading you around the nose and you realize you like it," the vampire said with a grin. "Anyway, wanna join us? Ruby's gonna be awhile with Kali. It's 'girl talk' day or something like that."

Connor nodded, walking abreast of his friend and son. Lucian had been the one who first notified him when Toby was spotted in the area and had even offered to gather the cub and bring him to Connor. He'd had to turn the tempting offer down as the Elders required Connor to bring Toby back. Since talking to Owen, he now knew why and wished he'd let Lucian take care of it.

Shaking off the gloomy thoughts, Connor followed Lucian to Best Burger, noting it was an older, homegrown restaurant. The rickety playground equipment in the front of the joint looked like it could've used a fresh coat of paint, but that didn't seem to bother Dominic as he flew up the winding slide.

"He only wants to come here for the playground. Doesn't even like the jungle gym I put together for him," Lucian said with a roll of his eyes. "Let's grab a burger or something."

As it was dusk and humans were ending their workday, the lobby was full. Connor and Lucian ordered their food and found a place to sit with a view of the playground. Dominic was playing with two other kids, all of them yelling and screaming like heathens.

"Enjoying fatherhood?" Connor asked as they sat watching.

He'd often thought about taking a she-wolf to mate, but for some reason couldn't do it. Maybe it was his distrust of women, or because he always felt like an idiot talking to them, but whatever the reason, he was quite willing to give up the Alpha's mating privileges to Toby.

"It's great," Lucian said with heartfelt sincerity. "And it's awful. I wake up at all hours of the day to call Ruby to find out if Dominic's okay, or instead of working when I wake up, I spend more time playing cops and robbers with Dominic than I do chasing Eturian generals now. Between him and Ruby, I'm gonna be old before my time."

The happy smile on Lucian's face assured Connor his friend wouldn't mind a bit if they made him old.

"He's a great kid, comes up with some hilarious shit. I'm just amazed at how smart he is," Lucian continued.

"Have you heard anything about Toby?" he asked Lucian once the male had stopped expounding on his son's cleverness.

A cagey expression entered Lucian's eyes. "Well, no. I haven't seen him around, and as far as I know, no one else has either."

"Owen told me Kali's keeping everyone from giving me information," Connor said with a twist of his mouth.

Lucian winced. "Yeah. Sorry about that. You know how Oracles are. She says there's a reason you were brought here, and until you figure out what it is, you have to stay."

Connor's hand balled into a fist.

"Look, Connor, I know how you feel. You think of Toby like a son and just thinking about someone not giving me information about Dominic when I need it would drive me insane." He shot Connor a steady glance. "Toby is going to be fine. If we haven't heard anything about him so far, chances are he's fine."

"What if he's at the Pleasure House?" Connor rasped out, voicing his greatest fear.

Compassion lit his friend's face. "Persephone isn't a monster, Connor." He raised a hand when Connor went to protest. "I know why you feel the way you do about succubi. Hell, I'd be the same way, except Persephone isn't like that and neither are her daughters."

"You know her well?" he asked, although he really wanted to ask if Lucian knew Piper well. Jealousy rose up. If his friend had slept

with Piper...

"Not like that," Lucian admonished with a fierce frown. "Persephone's one of the pillars of this community. She holds her House to the strictest rules and doesn't let anyone cross any lines."

"I was told she might know where he is."

Lucian nodded thoughtfully. "It's possible. She has a lot of connections. You should meet with either her or her daughters."

Just as Connor was about to tell Lucian he had met with one of Persephone's daughters, Lucian sat straight up, a look of horror on his face.

"Holy shit."

Wondering what was wrong with the *Oculum*, Connor followed his gaze, laughing in shock. Apparently, young Dominic felt the need to relieve himself. Realizing the playground faced the busy street, he wisely turned his back to it, unzipping his pants to do his business in the bushes. Unfortunately, he didn't realize the bushes were in front of the restaurant's windows and the entire dining area. People began to nudge each other, pointing out the little boy who was peeing in the bushes while busily looking over his shoulder to make sure none of his playmates could see him.

Connor kept laughing. Lucian's face was a combination of embarrassment and hilarity. "I'm going to kill Malachi," he whispered, his eyes on his son as the little boy zipped himself up again and went back to his play.

"Malachi?" Connor choked out.

"Oh, yeah, now that he's not trying to take over the world anymore, he's decided to be a devoted uncle by teaching my son his bad habits," Lucian muttered grumpily.

Wiping his eyes from laughing so hard, Connor collapsed in his chair. He'd needed the laughter more than he realized, Connor thought with a chuckle. His meeting with Piper had been a colossal disaster, but he was going to try it again. If Lucian believed the succubi could help him find Toby, he'd just suck up his dislike and

face them. Maybe this time he'd even be able to hold his tongue and ignore her sex appeal. Yeah, right.

Chapter Four

Piper seethed the entire drive home. She was speeding and didn't care. The jerk had insulted her so thoroughly she still felt the sting of it. Never in her entire life had she ever hit someone before, but just thinking of the way he'd talked about her like she was trash made her hands tighten on the steering wheel.

She'd just turned into the long driveway when she looked in her rearview mirror and saw flashing lights. Piper groaned loudly as she pulled over. Damn, just what she needed to top off her stellar day. A speeding ticket.

Now, if she were Persephone or any of her sisters, she'd be able to talk her way out of the ticket. But the minute the state trooper was at her window, any lessons she'd been taught were wiped out of her mind.

"Ma'am," he said, his brown eyes looking at her impassively. "Do you know how fast you were going?"

"Uh, no, Officer," she stammered.

He sighed gustily and began his spiel about her driving seventy-two in a fifty, stressing safety and all kinds of other things as he wrote her information down.

Piper zoned out. He was a cute human, not too tall, but broad shouldered. His wide-brimmed hat shadowed his eyes, giving him a militant look. Unexpectedly, fire lit her belly, surprising her.

She wasn't that attracted to him, but her body was trying to respond to him all the same. Piper squirmed, a flush beginning to infuse her skin. Fine perspiration clung to her upper lip, and she licked at it, noticing the trooper's eyes following her tongue.

Was he attracted to her? Her nipples beaded, and his eyes darted down and stayed. She watched color rise to his cheeks and heard his breath catch. He *was* attracted to her, she realized in awe.

If she were a full succubus, his lust would fuel her pheromones until she seduced him, feeding off of his orgasm. That repellent thought thrust her out of her daze. The officer was now leaning into her window, his eyes still intent on her chest.

“Um,” Piper began, leaning away from him.

“Will you go to dinner with me?” he asked, brown eyes traveling up her throat to rest on her lips. She watched his pupils dilate.

“I can’t,” she told him, taking a deep breath to try and bring her pheromones under control.

“Please?” he asked her, lowering himself to his knees on the shoulder of the road. He was tall enough that his shoulders and head were still visible over the door. “I’m begging you.”

Piper opened her mouth to tell him no again when she heard someone call her name. Prudence came sauntering down the driveway, her slender hips swaying to a primal rhythm which had the trooper hopping to his feet.

“Why, Piper, who’s this handsome man?” Pru cooed as she stepped up to him.

Prudence, like their other sisters, was almost identical to Persephone with chestnut brown hair and warm, blue eyes. Pru barely reached five feet, and she used her petite size to her advantage now.

She pressed her hands against the trooper’s chest, cooing up at him for being such a “strong man.” Piper barely kept herself from gagging at the sugary compliments her sister was shoveling in the cop’s ears, but as long as it distracted him away from asking Piper out, she was okay with it.

Pru wet her lips, looking up at the officer sweetly. “Did I hear someone mention dinner?” she asked playfully.

He stammered, admitting he’d asked Piper to go out with him. He wasn’t loyal, though, Piper thought crossly, as he immediately issued

his invitation to Prudence, who quickly accepted. Once they'd established a time and place to meet, the trooper strutted back to his cruiser, completely forgetting about the ticket he'd been about to give Piper.

Some irrational urge had Piper jumping out of the Porsche to demand her citation when Pru grabbed her by the elbow, waving to the cop. "Shh, Piper Ann! You almost seduced a cop in the middle of the road! You know Mom hasn't had a chance to get her permit extended beyond the house and private property."

Piper winced. Oops, that would've been bad. Persephone was the most capable *Seductarian* of her time, able to seduce the most impossible man, but she never remembered little things like permits. At one time, the house permit covered all thirty-five acres of land the house sat on, but over the last five years the permit had been revoked by the Veilerian Permits Board. If any succubus from Persephone's house used their talents outside of the house or some other private property, the house would be fined. Heavily.

"I didn't mean to!" Piper nearly wailed, jerking her arm out of Pru's hold. "I don't know what happened. One minute I was trying to figure out how to get out of the ticket, and the next he was eyeing me like a starving man at a buffet!"

Pru sighed with a roll of her eyes. "Didn't you just come from a meeting with some hunky Alpha?" she asked as she walked around to the passenger side and got in.

Sniffing in disdain, Piper slid behind the wheel again. "I wouldn't call him hunky."

"Uh huh."

"Okay, he was *hawt*. But he's an ass," Piper grumbled as she drove back to the house. "He called me a soul sucker and said something about me sleeping with thousands of men and—" Piper burst out, her eyes tearing.

Pru gasped loudly, horrified at the treatment her little sister had experienced. "He did what?!" she screeched. Her blue eyes began

glittering dangerously. “What’s his name, Pipe?”

Wiping her nose on the back of her hand, Piper laughed wetly. “It’s okay, Pru, I’ll probably never see him again. I just don’t understand what happened with the cop.”

Piper parked the car in the garage and sat there staring out the windshield. Pru patted her arm. “It sounds like you began the first step of transition, sis. It happens when we first get sexually aroused.”

“But I thought the transition caused the pheromone problem.”

Pru laughed softly. “No, they say that so we use caution the closer we get to transition. Um, of course some of us jump-start it by stealing kisses,” she said with a guilty flush. “The transition happens in stages. The first stage is what you’re experiencing now. Your first sexual arousal triggers the release of pheromones. Kissing begins the second stage. The pheromone surge increases and your sexual urges will become stronger as the transition tries to push you to completion. Once you actually engage in the act, the transition is complete, and you come out a succubus.”

“Kissing?” Piper asked softly imagining Connor’s sexy lips. She’d have loved to kiss him, she thought sadly. Too bad he was a jerk.

“If you don’t complete the transition when it’s upon you, you could end up with men trailing after you like the Pied Piper,” Pru stated baldly. “Pun intended.”

Piper shuddered in disgust. She didn’t want this! She was torn between what her body needed and what her mind decided it wanted.

“It’s not so bad,” Pru said as they sat in the car. “You don’t even think about it after a while. It feels great, and the men enjoy it, so it isn’t like we’re doing something they don’t want.”

Shrugging her shoulders, Piper got out of the car. She looked at Pru over the roof. “Did you want to have your transition?”

Pru smiled softly. “I was ready for it. I love the attention from men, and they love the attention from me. It’s a win-win situation, Piper.” When Piper still looked skeptical, she continued. “It isn’t like we’re enticing the males away from their mates, you know. Mom had

that ward put on the house preventing mated males from entering when it was built, so we don't even have a chance to see them."

"I guess. It just seems so wrong, Pru." Piper looked around to make sure they were alone. "I don't want to be a succubus," she whispered with an agonized expression.

Pru's expression was faintly pitying. "I'm afraid you don't get a choice, hon. Once you transition, you'll crave the energy."

"But what about, you know. The weretiger thing?"

Her sister's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "It shouldn't be a 'thing,' Piper. Your weretiger genes are much weaker than the succubus genes."

"I know that, but there's something—I don't know—*different* lately. I'm feeling things I don't normally feel." Piper knew she sounded panicked, but dammit, she *was* panicked!

"It's probably just the transition," Pru said soothingly, walking around the car to give Piper a quick hug. "Just calm down, and we'll get you through this." She led Piper into the house. "If you want, I'll let you have the police officer. He looked like he'd be gentle."

Laughing somewhat hysterically, Piper shook her head. "God no, I really wasn't attracted to *him*."

"You're attracted to the werewolf," Pru inserted calmly though the tension in her body belied her tone.

"Don't do anything to him, okay? He's got issues, and I'm sure I'll never see him again," Piper stressed, hoping her sister would give up the slightly evil plan she was no doubt developing. It wasn't that Pru was vindictive, but she, as well as all of Piper's older sisters, wouldn't allow anyone to upset their little sister. If Pru brought in the other three, Connor Griffin wouldn't stand a chance.

"Don't worry about it," Pru said without giving Piper her promise. "You definitely won't be seeing him again."

Wincing in sympathy for Connor, Piper just let it go. She doubted she'd ever see the Alpha again and if she did, it wouldn't matter. She wouldn't allow herself to be attracted to a sexy stick-in-the-mud

werewolf.

* * * *

Snout low to the ground, he moved swiftly through the darkness. He was here for one thing and one thing only, and nothing would get in his way. Pausing inside a building filled with cars, his keen sense of smell found the person he was searching for beneath the stink of metal and fuel.

Cold amber eyes studied the room, noting the expensive vehicles the man inside him would love to explore. However, he had a mission to complete. The wolf wasn't swayed by the shiny cars. He'd caught the scent of succubi, weeding out the flavors for the one who tantalized him.

Honeysuckle, musk. The scent led a trail from a small car into the house. He couldn't open the door. He'd have to get inside some other way.

Loping out of the building again, his eyes cut through the darkness like a knife. He circled the house, searching for a way in. There. A crack in a door. Pressing his nose to the crack, he sifted through the air currents, detecting no one present in the room. He nudged the door open.

Easing into the room, the wolf studied it warily, crouching down to make sure he remained unseen if anyone walked in. The man was stunned at the décor. His questions registered in the wolf's mind. Questions that went unanswered as the wolf caught his prey's scent. Eager for the hunt, he crept across the room, ears swiveling as he picked up sounds of movement.

He was undeterred. Her scent called to him like a siren. Primal instincts shouldered aside the man's misgivings and distrust. The wolf didn't care what she was. It only mattered what she was to him.

Shadows crept closer. The wolf knew he was going to be seen. It didn't matter. His prey was close. He smelled her.

He put one paw on the bottom step, a predator in a house full of lambs, and he was after the most tender of them all.

* * * *

Piper had locked herself in her room all week. Luckily, Persephone had given her three consecutive nights off when she'd thought to set up the meeting with the Alpha, and now Piper had a little time to herself. Not that she did much of anything but lie in bed and try to read.

Books had always been her solace growing up. She feathered the pages of the novel she was holding with a soft smile. Being so much younger than her sisters, she hadn't had a lot of friends. Pauline, the next youngest, was an even thirty years older than her and had been on her way to learning to use her succubus wiles when Piper was born. They hadn't made her feel unloved or unwanted, they just didn't understand each other well.

The feelings she'd experienced upon meeting Connor were so unlike what she'd been led to believe were normal she didn't know how to respond. Yes, she was powerfully attracted to Connor, but it was more than that. She remembered the brush of fur against her subconscious. It wasn't normal for her, nor did she really think succubi felt that when they were nearing transition.

Something was going on in her body, and Connor's proximity brought it to the surface. The real question was should she approach him to find out what would happen, or should she be glad she hadn't jumped him or the cop and end it there?

While she pondered this, she heard a ruckus downstairs. Feminine voices were raised in fury and if she wasn't mistaken, a howl ripped through the air.

Shoving off her bed, Piper hauled ass out the door. As she raced down the long hall of their home, she prayed she could stop at the landing and not go sliding through the large picture window at the end

of the hall.

Slowing down as she reached the staircase, she slid down the hall like Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*. Peering down the stairs, she saw all four of her sisters poised for a fight at the front door, and a massive wolf crouched on the first step leading to the second floor. Her breath caught in her throat.

He was magnificent. She knew it was Connor because, once again, she felt fur brush inside her skin like a cat awakening. His heavy coat was russet-colored with specks of grey here and there. Those crystal-blue eyes were now fully amber and feral.

“What are you doing here?” she gasped as he began to stalk up the stairs. He couldn’t answer her, of course, but that didn’t stop her from asking the asinine question.

As he moved ever closer, Piper backed up until she ran into the wall behind her. Within seconds he was up the stairs and in front of her, his eyes watching her closely. She shook her head, trying to gather her thoughts.

In this form, his head was level with her chest. She’d known werewolves were the size of ponies in their wolf form but hadn’t given much thought to what it meant. Staring at the wolf in front of her, she wondered if he planned to kill her.

In her periphery, she saw movement and knew her sisters were coming up the stairs as well. They slinked closer, their faces filled with fear and rage. They deemed him a threat to their little sister’s health and, at that moment, Piper would’ve agreed with them.

“What in Lilith’s name is going on here?” Persephone cried from the third floor landing. She stopped at the top of the stairs, her hand clasped to her throat at the sight of Piper backed against the wall by a wolf. “P–Piper?” she called down in a quivery voice.

“This is Connor Griffin, mama,” Piper answered her softly, her gaze returning to the wolf. “I, um. I don’t know what he’s doing here.”

“He won’t be here for long,” Pru growled as she crept closer.

Connor's ears swiveled back as he heard her approach. He growled in warning, never taking his eyes off Piper.

"Pru, no. I—he wants me for some reason," Piper breathed as he came closer.

"We won't let him hurt you," Penny seethed through clenched teeth, her normally placid face etched with fury.

"I don't think he'll hurt me," Piper said with more confidence than she felt. "But I need y'all to give me some room here."

Without looking away from Connor's eerie eyes, she sensed her sisters look up at their mom. Persephone obviously gave them some kind of signal because they began to ease back down the stairs, none of them taking their eyes off of the wolf with their sister.

Taking a deep breath as Connor's body relaxed slightly, Piper asked him, "What do you want?"

He eyed her warily before turning his head to look down the hall, where her room was.

"You want to go somewhere private?" she asked, feeling like an idiot for talking to a wolf, but when he looked at her and down the hall again, she knew he wanted privacy.

"Um, do you want me to go first?"

He took a small step back from her, giving her room to move away from him.

"Piper, don't you dare bring that beast to your room!" Persephone hissed from the landing above them.

"I won't know what he wants unless he changes back, and he apparently isn't going to do that here on the landing. I'll leave the door open. If you want, call for Vic and tell him to stand guard outside the door," Piper shouted back, frustrated at her mother. She was the one who'd brought this male into her life, and even encouraged Piper to sleep with him, and now she wanted to act outraged that he was here and going to her bedroom.

Piper rolled her eyes with a huff as she led the way to her room. The click of claws on the hardwood floor assured her Connor was

following. The soft tread of a footfall at the top of the landing made her glance over her shoulder.

Behind Connor, she saw Vic appear. The demon/angel Halfling was massive and frightening to those who didn't know him. He was a complete marshmallow. A gentle giant, he hated violence and because of his frightening visage, he rarely had to resort to it. What he would do against an Alpha werewolf, Piper didn't know, but if it relieved her mother, so be it.

Taking a deep breath, Piper led Connor to her room, leaving the door open so Vic could watch for violence. She waved her hand, urging Connor in, and tried to see the room through his eyes.

Piper winced. She wasn't much for neatness, and when she read, which was all the time, she tended to drop one book and pick up the next as soon as she read the happily ever after. She'd been collecting books since she was in her thirties and as times changed, the books got hotter, the stories more incredible, and she read even more. She barely repressed the urge to start tidying the books piled on the floor, windowsills, and floor.

Biting her lip, Piper sat on the edge of her bed and watched Connor as he looked over her room. She wondered if he was planning to change and talk to her. No sooner had she thought it than he was enveloped by a soft glow. The motes of light danced around until the wolf shape morphed into that of a fully clothed man. Never having witnessed a change before, Piper was transfixed by the sight. The transition was beautiful and appeared peaceful, though Connor had a pained expression on his face when he looked up.

"Does it hurt?" she asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

He raised one silky eyebrow, his eyes once again blue and sharp. "No. It does when you first learn, but once you're past full transition, it just makes you a little dizzy at first."

Piper nodded, not sure what to say now. The big, bad wolf was in her bedroom now, and he looked like he wasn't planning on going anywhere soon.

Chapter Five

Connor glanced at Piper, noting her curious, yet wary expression. He couldn't blame her for being concerned about his purpose here. When he came up with the idea of visiting her on her own turf, he hadn't planned accordingly. He simply showed up at her home because the wolf couldn't resist her scent.

Looking around Piper's bedroom, he found himself pleasantly surprised. He'd always imagined a Succubus Pleasure House looking like the whorehouse in *Beetlejuice*, with females hanging out of windows and red lights. Instead, Persephone's Pleasure Palace was an old antebellum home sprawled in the center of majestic oak trees. Three stories high, it was graceful and exquisitely cared for. The interior was decorated in modern meets *Gone with the Wind*. Antiques were nestled next to gadgets. It was a curious blend of then and now, making him wonder about the women in the house.

Connor's gaze wandered over the piled novels all over the room. He wanted to peek at the titles, but didn't want Piper to realize how intrigued he was by her. He hadn't wanted to meet with anyone but Piper. She was his contact now, and though he wasn't completely comfortable with her, she was his ticket to finding Toby, he just knew it.

"Um," she said tentatively as Connor simply stood in the middle of her room, taking it in. He'd expected her room to be thick with the scent of sex and male. Instead, he was enveloped in the scent of honeysuckle and musk.

The wolf wanted to explore, to follow the scents and roll in them to carry around at all times. The man was surprised yet again that no

male had recently invaded her private sanctum. It appeared there was more to the succubus than he'd thought. She also looked decidedly uneasy to have him in her room. Connor supposed that was to be expected considering how they'd ended their meeting.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, finally pushing the words out in a rush.

Connor's ears detected the soft brush of cloth rustling and knew the house bodyguard was standing outside the door. He didn't want his conversation overheard. Without asking for permission, he kicked the door closed, making Piper jump in surprise.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Connor leaned against the door, using his weight to keep the Halfling out. He puzzled over his sudden aggressiveness. It was well-known throughout the Tall Pines Pack that Connor, although he was the Alpha *in praesenti*, didn't have the requisite severity needed to remain in charge. He wasn't supposed to have been Alpha of the pack, but with his brother's death, there had been no other male available to take the position until Toby reached maturity.

Since he'd met the succubus, something had been nagging at him, eating away at his natural reserve and levelheadedness. His gaze trailed over Piper, taking in the Pepé Le Pew lounge pants, thin T-shirt, and loose hair, and he *wanted*. He wasn't a male to attack without provocation, nor did he lust after every woman he saw. Not that he lusted after every woman now. Piper seemed to be the catalyst to his sudden surge in desire. Something about her called to the feral wolf in a way he'd never experienced before. He both dreaded it and wanted to study it.

Standing in her bedroom, surrounded by her scent and seeing her looking like the hot girl next door he used to dream about as a teenager, Connor suddenly felt every inch an Alpha. He felt masterful and dangerous, the perfect foil to her delicate femininity.

"You left before we could talk business," Connor said as he relaxed against the door. The Halfling was strong and was trying to

push open the door without breaking it, but Connor had werewolf bone density, which meant he easily wedged the door shut.

Piper sniffed, her face relaxing slightly. She folded her legs under her on the bed. Connor ignored the part of his psyche that thought she looked adorable.

“That was your own fault,” she answered him, primly straightening out her clothing. “I didn’t deserve to be insulted.”

Connor could feel his cheeks burn with embarrassment. How could he explain he was so hot for her his only defense was to keep her angry at him? He couldn’t, so he didn’t even try. He also couldn’t bring himself to flat-out apologize.

“I was out of line,” he admitted through clenched teeth. “You...provoke me.”

Her eyebrows went up. “I provoke you? How? I was just trying to answer your questions about your nephew, whom I’ve never seen before, by the way.” She folded her arms. “Maybe you should move on.”

“He’s still in the area,” Connor answered confidently.

“And, what’s that got to do with me?” she demanded, looking endearingly angry.

Holy Hells, *endearingly*? Was he really letting the little succubus entangle him in her web? Connor scoffed mentally, unable to fathom such an occurrence. He was attracted to her, but she was a succubus, so it was a given to be attracted to them.

Then again, he hadn’t been attracted to her mother or sisters, who were well-known even in Wolf Gap as sensual powerhouses. Masking a grimace, Connor accepted that fact. The scent of the other succubi hadn’t caused him to feel the fire of an arousal so violent he felt torn asunder by it. He’d actually felt a little sickened by their smell until he’d caught a whiff of Piper. She alone called to him.

“Well, *werewolf*?” she demanded again, standing up when he didn’t answer her. “If your nephew is still around, why aren’t you out there looking for him?”

“He was last seen in this area around your house. You have to have seen him,” he said, trying not to let his eyes wander over her cute little figure.

“I told you I didn’t recognize him. How do you know he’s still around here anyway? Where are you getting your information from?” she asked with wildly flailing arms.

Gritting his teeth, he bit out, “I do have some friends in this area. They told me he was around.”

“You don’t like me, you don’t want to be near me, but you broke into my house to continue talking to me about your problem when you already have people helping you. It doesn’t make sense.”

Connor knew it didn’t make sense, but dammit, he needed to have her help him on this. His gut was telling him not to let her get away from him just yet.

“His father was succubus-struck,” Connor finally admitted, referring to those males who hunger for a succubus and tend to become addicted to their special blend of lust. “I think he’s here to learn more about your kind.”

“Oh.”

He nodded.

Her face screwed up in concentration. Her puckered lips and furrowed forehead tempted him to smooth out the lines and kiss the pucker away. Connor felt sweat bead on his temples.

“You’re sure he’s in Cypress Point?” she asked, as though not wanting to give credit to his admission. She obviously cared for her family, and he couldn’t blame her for wanting to think they were innocent of any wrongdoings.

“My contact knows the local shifters in this area, and none of them have seen him,” was all Connor replied.

“You’ve contacted all the weres?” she asked slowly.

“Of course I have. The wolves haven’t seen Toby at all, and they would’ve been the first he’d visit. The tigers haven’t replied back, but I’m guessing they haven’t seen him either.” He watched her closely.

Her face had tightened minutely when he mentioned the weretigers. She almost looked fearful, but the expression faded too quickly for him to assess.

“Why are you afraid of the weretigers?” he bit out, his fists clenching. Her fear brought to life protective instincts he’d only felt for his pack and nephew, never for an outsider. Feeling them for a succubus almost made him feel ill.

“I’m not afraid,” she said, her chin lifting in defiance.

Connor barely restrained his snort of disbelief. He’d ask Lucian about Piper and her family. If he couldn’t hear it from her, he’d learn it from the *Oculum*. Lucian would tell him what Piper was avoiding.

In the meantime, he still needed her help. “Do you think any of your sisters have seen him?”

Piper met his eyes again with a shrug. “It’s hard to say. For the most part, we all stay here unless we’re shopping or something.”

It was the “or something” that caught his attention. Feeling like he wasn’t getting the information he needed, he moved away from the door. The Halfling had given up trying to pry it open several minutes ago, so Connor deemed it safe to leave it unprotected.

Crossing the room to stand in front of Piper, he cursed his heart, which began to thud almost painfully. Being near her was like jumping out of a plane with no parachute. It was thrilling in a way he couldn’t understand. When he raised his hand to her face, he noticed the fine tremble in his fingers and growled.

Hooking his finger under her chin, he raised her face to his. He heard her breath catch in surprise, saw her beautiful gold eyes darken with desire. Her scent deepened and changed slightly, musking up a bit in lust. Connor briefly closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. Gods help him, he’d never expected to feel so much attraction for the very being he loathed.

Unable to help himself, he leaned down, bringing his face closer to hers, watching her eyelids grow heavy and droop. When her tongue swept out to moisten her lips, he growled louder, his desire beating a

wild tattoo through his body. He felt drugged by his lust, and all he wanted was one kiss.

* * * *

“Piper? Oh hey, didn’t know you were about to get some nookie,” a familiar male voice intruded upon Piper’s first kiss.

Groaning in defeat, she watched Connor’s face close, the desire wiped away as disgust took its place. She’d been on the verge of having her first kiss, and Fallon had to show up.

Connor’s sexy mouth curled as he took a step back, looking at the man who’d invaded her room. Knowing what he’d see, Piper sank on the edge of her bed, glancing at her favorite distant cousin.

Fallon was sex personified. As the Master of his den, Fallon was the premier incubus in South Louisiana, although Piper had heard he was one of the finest specimens in the world. Standing at an even six feet tall, he was shorter than Connor by several inches, and though he was leaner than the werewolf, he still had a commanding presence. His unruly white blonde hair gave him a deceptively angelic air. Deeply tanned skin was startling against his hair and silver eyes.

He was a fine male and would’ve been a perfect initiator for Piper’s transition, but they were best friends and didn’t want to ruin that with sex. Persephone hadn’t been pleased to learn her youngest daughter refused to be initiated by the local incubi leader, but hadn’t let it stop her from finding someone else to do the deed.

“You weren’t interrupting anything, Fallon,” she said with a resigned sigh. He usually popped in for a visit when he was between women.

“That’s not what it looked like,” he told her with a teasing grin, his attention continuously going back to Connor.

Piper had to admit the werewolf looked impressive. His entire body radiated thwarted lust and anger. He was such a potent male, and Piper’s hormones fluttered wildly at the thought of having him

even if it wasn't what her mind wanted. He was a study of contrasts, hot and passionate, yet he denied his passions, burying them under a coolly professional mask.

Fallon shrugged, walking over to where she sat on the bed. Showing complete disregard for the werewolf who appeared to be quivering with fury, her friend leaned over and placed a familiar kiss on the corner of Piper's mouth. It did nothing for her. Fallon wasn't a sexual being to her, but the growl reverberating throughout her room showed Connor didn't share the belief.

Giving her a sly smile, Fallon sprawled next to her on the bed. "You wanna introduce us, *cher*?" he asked in an exaggerated Cajun accent.

Piper rolled her eyes. "Connor Griffin, Fallon Plaisance. Fallon, Connor Griffin. He's looking for his nephew."

"That right?" Fallon asked, bringing his hand to Piper's nape massaging the tense muscles there.

This was familiar territory for her. Although several years separated their ages, they usually hung out together at gatherings. After all that time they were completely comfortable with each other's idiosyncrasies. Fallon was a toucher. He couldn't be around people he loved without touching them in some way. It was his way of grounding himself. If he was doing it in front of Connor, he'd either had a bad night or thought she had.

Connor, being the uptight Alpha he was, apparently didn't like to see the incubus touching her at all. He'd tensed when Fallon kissed her, swelled up when Fallon sprawled out next to her, and now looked on the verge of exploding. He probably thought Fallon was here for a quickie or something considering his opinions of her were so low.

Remembering their angry words from earlier and that he'd almost kissed her in spite of them, Piper allowed herself to relax into Fallon's hand. She wouldn't let Connor and his ill temper come between her and her best friend.

"So if you're not giving Piper some nookie, why're you here?"

Fallon asked bluntly.

Connor flashed his teeth in something that would never ever be called a grin. “Don’t worry, Fallon,” he sneered. “I wouldn’t dream of touching a succubus. I just need her to tell me the truth about my nephew.”

Piper bristled. The man was an idiot! “I—” she began but stopped when Fallon gave her a warning squeeze.

“The succubus has a name,” he said softly, his silver eyes boring into Connor’s, which were going wolf again.

She groaned. Gods, these men were prepared to have a pissing contest and were going to use her as the reason.

* * * *

Connor did not like the incubus sitting next to Piper. He felt his muscles tense aggressively. Seeing Fallon rub the back of Piper’s neck brought out the territorial wolf and, from the smug look on Fallon’s face, the incubus knew it.

He didn’t know what the incubus had against him, but he wasn’t going to let the two of them play kissy face in front of him. Without even realizing what he was doing, he snatched Piper off the bed and pushed her behind him. The incubus just raised an eyebrow and dissolved out of sight. Within a second, Piper was across the room behind the incubus’ back.

Connor growled, advancing towards them. The incubus didn’t poof away again, but instead came to meet him in the middle of her bedroom. They would’ve clashed like warriors, and from the anticipation on Fallon’s face, Connor knew it was something they both wanted. Needed. Except something between them squeaked, smashed between their chests.

“Stop it!” Piper demanded, wedging her shoulders between Connor and Fallon, forcing them a step back so they wouldn’t hurt her. “Don’t be an idiot, Connor. Fallon, if you don’t stop provoking

him, I'm gonna tell Persephone you thought she looked old in that blue dress."

Fallon paled and backed away. "Shit, Piper, I was only joking! You know she'd kill me if I so much as hint she looks a day over twenty-five!"

Connor smirked, deciding to ignore Piper calling him an idiot. She was still pressed up against his chest, their first full contact, and he was enjoying it too much to take offense to anything she said. His heart was thudding so hard he was positive the incubus could hear it across the room.

He expected Piper to move away from him, but she turned towards him, resting her hands on his chest. His wolf snapped, wanting to get out and roll in her scent, but he held back. He didn't want her to know what kind of effect she had on him. If she did, she'd chew him up and spit him out. Connor felt his face stretch into a grin. Come to think of it, that wouldn't be a bad way to spend some time.

"I don't know what you're smiling about, buddy. Fallon is my friend, and he's welcome here," she stated, fisting her hands on her hips, her jaw jutting out at him stubbornly.

Connor felt his grin fade as a scowl took its place. Of course, he wasn't as welcome as the incubus. He'd done nothing but insult her since the minute he met her. Now her friend was here and she preferred him over Connor.

The wolf snapped at the thoughts. Rationality faded as the wolf swam into consciousness. Without thinking beyond his strangely possessive feelings towards her, he pulled her into his body, lowering his head for a claiming kiss.

Chapter Six

The instant Connor began lowering his mouth, she forgot everything. She forgot Fallon was watching. She forgot about Vic outside the door. She forgot her family was no doubt standing guard with him. She forgot she was a succubus on the verge of transition. Her entire focus was on Connor and the feelings he evoked in her.

Piper had dreamed of her first kiss and always imagined it would be sweet, but his lips were demanding and aggressive against hers. It was hot, wet, and erotic. There were no teasing laps at her lips like she'd read about in her many romances. He came at her with one purpose: to conquer.

Her lips parted under his, molding to the lines of his mouth as his tongue dipped between her teeth. The sensation sent shivers down her spine, causing heat to pool in her belly. He surged into her mouth with all the finesse of a marauding Viking.

Helpless against his invasion, Piper slid her hands into his hair, her tongue quickly learning to rub, slide, and tangle with his. Her nipples hardened as she moved restlessly against him, a tiny moan captured by his mouth as she rubbed against his erection. His hands found their way to her butt, squeezing the twin globes with strength as he pulled her deeper into his body.

A muffled masculine laugh reminded her that Fallon was looking on and finding this amusing, but any anger she felt at her friend washed away beneath the skillful strokes of Connor's tongue.

Connor's mouth ate at hers, every stroke branding her with desire. Piper had never felt anything like it, had never expected such passion existed. She wanted more, needed more.

She felt the brush of fur inside her body, but this time she welcomed it, feeling it spread. When Connor's hips began to rock against her stomach, the beast spilled out.

* * * *

Connor groaned as he felt claws sink into his shoulders. His world spiraled down to the feelings in his body and Piper. That was, until he heard a strange sound and realized those really were claws digging into him.

Breaking off the kiss, he lifted his heavy lids and gaped. Piper's desire soaked eyes were citron yellow, and the sound he heard was purring. Real purring, like a cat. The claws in his muscles were kneading gently.

"What?" she asked him, her voice deeper, huskier and sexy as hell.

Movement caught his eye, and he glanced up to see Fallon leaning against one of the bookcases, watching with unabashed interest. When the incubus saw Connor noticing him, he grinned.

"Don't mind me, *t-frère*," Fallon said as he shrugged his shoulders. "I'm enjoying the show." The incubus eased away from the bookcase and approached them, gently pulling Piper away from Connor. "But you've seen something you shouldn't have. Something that could bring danger to Piper."

He bristled at the patronizing tone in Fallon's voice and having no idea what the incubus kept calling him, Connor's words were harsher than he meant them to be. "She's half of some kind of werecat." He winced when he saw hurt cloud Piper's golden eyes.

Fallon drew Piper closer to him, and she immediately cuddled into his side, looking like a scared little girl. It bothered Connor that she felt she needed protection from him, especially since she sought it from the incubus. Shaking his head at his inner musings, he thought about the implications of her genetics.

As in the human world, there were bigots who believed *different* meant *abomination*. They wanted to erase Halflings from existence. They would destroy Piper because her parents were from different races. Though he was far from fond of what Piper was, he couldn't imagine someone hurting her because of her heritage.

Then there were scientists who would want to study her like a lab rat. Connor's own academic mind was striving to understand the importance of his discovery. She was an anomaly, a beautiful reminder that the gods worked in mysterious ways, and because of that, she faced the danger of being tested upon. That she'd retained wereanimal traits in spite of being a succubus would make her a genetic wonder.

Connor felt torn. His body wanted her while his mind was filled with possibilities of using her secret against her. She was evidently hiding out, and this discovery gave him leverage over her. He knew what he had to do, even if he didn't like it one bit. He'd protect her from repercussions while using her knowledge of the surrounding area to find Toby.

Guilt lingered, making his stomach churn. He wouldn't allow her to get hurt. He'd hold her secret close, yet make her think he would expose her. She would be frightened, but he could deal with his conscience later, when Toby was home safe.

Fallon's eyes were on his, and Connor suspected the incubus was aware of the conclusion he'd reached. "Don't do it." Connor read the warning in the incubus' eyes, but he couldn't avoid it. He needed to find Toby before Connor became more embroiled with Piper and her secrets.

"I'm guessing no one knows what you really are, Piper, so I propose a trade. I'll keep your secret if you help me find my nephew."

* * * *

Piper sucked in a deep breath, cowering into Fallon's side. What

had she done, she thought desperately. He was blackmailing her with her greatest nightmare. She feared discovery from her father's family. Weretigers were notoriously territorial, and if word got out she was the daughter of a Khan, a weretiger leader, her life would be forfeit. His other children would kill her before she could make it known she didn't want to lead.

She knew he hated succubi, but for him to hold such an important secret over her to gain her cooperation was a blow to her chest. Especially after he'd kissed her senseless! She was still tingling from that kiss, heat roiling through her blood. Belatedly, she remembered what Pru said earlier about a kiss being the second stage. Oh, crap.

She slumped further into Fallon's side. His familiar, strong arms tightened around her. He felt comforting, and she basked in his warmth. She was doomed.

Piper met Fallon's eyes, seeing in them her own hopelessness.

"I could kill him for you, *cher*," he said only half-jokingly.

Connor bristled, edging closer. "I'd like to see you try," he growled, pulsing with aggression.

Fallon tensed as well, but stayed himself when Piper gently touched his arm. "I don't want anyone hurt. You know that, Fallon," she said softly, feeling her affection for him swell in her chest. Sometimes she wished they could've taken their comfortable friendship to a more intimate level, but she knew Fallon wasn't for her. "I have to help him."

Anger glittered in the silver eyes that pierced Connor. "*Fils de putain*," he spat out. "If you hurt this woman, I'll skin you alive."

Looking unimpressed, Connor crossed his arms over his chest with a mighty frown. "Translation? Is that some kind of prissy ass way to say you don't agree?"

Fallon spewed forth another burst of Cajun French so blistering Piper felt her ears turning red. Some of what he said she didn't even understand, which proved just how angry Fallon was.

He finished his tirade against Connor and his entire pack and

turned to Piper with a sad look. She smiled up at him bravely, or at least as bravely as she could. Her Cajun incubus was the best friend a girl could have.

“You be careful with that—” he told her with a nod of his head towards Connor “*loup-garou*. I’ll be watching you, *bébé*.” He hugged her close the way a brother would a sister. “*Donne-moi un petit bec doux, cher.*”

Piper kissed his cheek as instructed, and then he was gone with one last evil look at Connor. Left alone in her room with the werewolf who’d just taken over her future, Piper was swimming in hurt, confusion, and a blaze of anger. Her body clamored for his even while she knew she could never trust him not to reveal her to society. If her father’s streak found out about her, her life was over.

“I don’t like that incubus. He’d better not hang around while we’re trying to find my nephew,” Connor said sulkily.

If Piper were feeling the least bit generous, she’d think the werewolf appeared guilty, but since he’d chosen this avenue of attack, he could suck it. She turned her back on him and crossed to her bedroom window.

Her stomach churning from a mix of anger and fear, with a healthy dose of frustrated passion, she rested her head against the glass. Looking out the window at the dark night helped calm her nerves a little. A silvery moon lit up the landscape. For one brief moment, she wished she could give into her newly awakened inner beast and stalk the night. But that wasn’t meant to be. The fact that she was feeling the transition coming on meant her succubus half was in command.

“I’m sorry for putting you in this position, Piper, but I need to find Toby and bring him home.” He crossed his arms, dropped them to his sides again. Damn, he was nervous! The guilt he was certain he could deal with later nearly overwhelmed him. She looked so lost staring at the night he wanted to hold her. A ridiculous instinct, considering he’d been the one to cause her hurt.

Piper let out a bitter laugh. “You’re sorry for getting your way, you mean? I don’t think so, Connor. The really sad thing is you didn’t have to resort to threats to get me to help you.” She turned around to face him. “I was going to help you anyway. Not because I like you or anything, but because I can see you care for your nephew. But you weren’t going to give me the chance to make the offer. Your prejudices against succubi—which really suck, by the way—make you think we’re all out for our own gain, and you’re afraid you might be snapped up.”

He opened his mouth to retort but was prevented by Piper’s bedroom door slamming open. Persephone appeared in the doorway, looking like a miniature tornado.

“You threatened my daughter?” she shouted, storming in with Piper’s sisters on her heels. “I can’t believe your nerve! Do you have any idea what I could do to you?”

“Mom!” Piper shouted just as loudly to get her mother’s attention. Persephone was in mama bear mode and, when that happened, people got hurt. “I was going to help him anyway.”

Persephone stood firm, her arms crossed over her chest, the black and gold kimono she wore making her look like a little China doll. “I forbid it. I thought this male had some honor, but he’s got his head stuck so far up his ass he can’t see daylight!”

Piper and her sisters all gaped at their mother. Persephone never used profanity. She conducted herself as a lady and always reminded her daughters that swearing was ugly. She frequently lectured that ugly would wear off on their faces when they weren’t looking.

Connor proved unmoved by Persephone’s language. “I need her help, and she’s going to give it to me. If you had taken the initiative and dealt with me yourself, then I wouldn’t have to deal with your daughter. You brought her in the picture, and now I’m making sure she stays there.”

Whoa, Piper thought, looking between Persephone and Connor. Her mother wouldn’t take kindly to being reminded she’d given her

daughter carte blanche to be deflowered by the male standing in front of her. If there was one thing Persephone was, it was always right. Piper and her sisters liked to joke that their mother should've been a physicist because she altered reality to suit her needs.

"What happens in my house and with my family is my business, young man," Persephone said, looking up at him with a sharp glare. "You will leave Piper alone and never speak of"—she waved her hand, casting Piper a flustered look—"never speak of Piper's background to anyone." Her tiny body quivered with rage, her hands curled into white-knuckled fists.

Connor was already shaking his head. "No can do, lady." He took a quick step forward, grabbed Piper by her arm, and, ignoring her protest, tugged her back against him. "If you come across any information, contact Lucian Ravenswaay."

"What—" Piper began before letting loose with a shriek as Connor pulled her across the room and through the window of her bedroom. The closed window. Piper barely had time to squeeze her eyes shut and throw an arm over her face to protect it from flying glass. Then they were sailing through the air, Piper's screech piercing the quiet night as they fell.

Chapter Seven

Connor knew he should've thought things through. He usually did. But this time, he'd let recklessness guide him to do what had to be one of the dumbest things he could ever remember doing. He'd thrown Piper and himself out the window before he thought about the important things. Like the landing.

Even though it was only a two story drop, and he knew they'd survive it, he panicked when Piper pushed away from him, her scream ringing in his ears.

The next second, he was on the ground, the breath knocked out of his lungs. Somehow Piper had twisted her body and landed on her feet. Definitely a werecat of some kind, he thought, as he performed a mental check of his body. Everything seemed to be in working order, or would be as soon as he could move. Piper didn't seem to be suffering from her fall, and he idly wondered what kind of cat she was. Judging by her hair, he was guessing weretiger. His musings were cut short because she turned on him with a snarl.

"Are you insane?" she screeched as she ran to his side. She fell to her knees next to him, her hands moving over his body as her face creased into a frown.

Connor was perfectly fine, but allowed himself the pleasure of having her hands run over his body looking for injuries. This probably wasn't the best time to get a boner, but the minute her hands touched his chest, he was instantly hard.

"You could've killed us!" she shouted down at him after she satisfied herself he was going to live.

"You landed on your feet," he pointed out once he caught his

breath. Easing himself to his feet, he noted with glee that she looked shocked.

Evidently, even though she knew she was a shifter, she didn't utilize her abilities often. Connor wondered why that was, but didn't give it more than a passing thought. His keen ears picked up the sound of running feet in the house.

Grabbing her hand, he yanked her across the lawn to his waiting truck. Glad his unwilling passenger was a wereanimal, he pushed himself, running as fast as he could. Piper easily kept up with him even though she tugged at her hand with increasing strength.

"You don't have to drag me anywhere, dammit," she cried out as they reached his pick-up. "I'll work with you. You don't have to friggin' kidnap me!"

Not bothering to answer, Connor tossed her through the driver's side door and followed her in. She got caught on the gear shift and ended up straddling it, which was fine with him. The closer she was, the easier it would be to keep her in the car.

"This is ridiculous, Connor," she said almost pleadingly. "Let me pack a bag, and I'll come with you on my own."

"No time to talk," he gritted out, shoving the key in the ignition. His truck wasn't the fanciest thing, but it could move when needed, and he suspected he was going to need it.

Piper grunted at him and tried to lift her leg over the gearshift so she could sit completely in the passenger seat. Connor grabbed her thigh, pushing it back down so it pressed up against him. Desire zinged through him at the contact. Immediate heat infused his body from where his hand was pressed against her leg. His heart stuttered then, galloped wildly. Without conscious thought, his fingers curled into the soft skin. He heard Piper's breath catch, then the sweet perfume of her desire scented the close confines of the truck.

"Don't move," he ordered, ignoring the lust. He threw the truck in drive and spun through the yard, turning back towards the road.

"If Persephone doesn't kill you for kidnapping me, she'll kill you

for messing up her yard,” Piper said with vicious glee.

Not bothering to respond, Connor kicked the truck into gear and hightailed it down the driveway. Glancing in the rearview mirror, he saw lights pulling out from the back of the house. If Persephone came after them in the Porsche, his truck wouldn’t stand a chance of outdistancing her. At best, he could force her off the road.

“You do realize this is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever had happen to me?” Piper said conversationally. “And that’s counting the time I fell and broke my leg during burlesque lessons.”

Connor snapped his head around, his mind immediately filled with visions of Piper with nothing but two huge feathers covering her naked body. “Burlesque lessons?”

“Uh huh. Mom made all of us take them. I’m not naturally graceful though, so when I went to remove my panties, I got caught up in it, fell off the stage and broke my leg. That was ridiculous, but this has it beat hands down.”

His eyes closed in supplication. Gods help him, he couldn’t catch his breath. His mind kept picturing Piper removing tiny bikini bottoms, her ample curves swaying and shimmying in time with a risqué song. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his erection was rubbing against his zipper with every bump he hit.

“Um, do you want me to drive?” she asked suddenly, her voice hesitant, her body suddenly tense.

Opening his eyes again, Connor cursed as he saw he’d driven them off the paved drive and onto the shoulder. If she hadn’t said anything, they’d have ended up in one of the sugarcane fields.

“So, this is totally weird. If you hadn’t insulted me within Mom’s hearing, she’d have invited you to spend the night,” Piper continued. Under her breath, she said, “In my room.”

He jerked the wheel again. “Stop saying things like that!” he shouted at her, his blood like molten lava.

She blinked innocently. He wasn’t fooled. The succubus was lethal with her big gold eyes and kissable lips and her stories about G-

strings and bedrooms.

Feeling completely overwhelmed by his lust, Connor punched the gas, sending the truck roaring through the night. The headlights followed but began to fall farther and farther behind.

A niggling doubt crept into his mind. To his way of thinking, if Persephone had been hell-bent on catching them, she would have. Instead, the headlights disappeared completely as though the driver had given up the chase. Frowning, he stared at the road, filled with the belief that something else was going on.

* * * *

Piper frowned at the windshield. She didn't know what she was supposed to be feeling right now. She was almost positive she wasn't expected to feel excitement and an insane urge to laugh. Shouldn't she be screaming and crying or something? Instead, she felt as though she'd been freed from prison.

Not that she would ever classify her life at Persephone's as a hardship. Other than the lessons in seduction and sex, life was good. It was a heady sensation knowing she was on her own with the exception of the sexy, maddening werewolf next to her.

She winced in embarrassment. She hadn't meant to blurt out the horror story about the burlesque lessons. That was something she promised herself she'd never mention again, but she'd just blabbed the entire story to the one man who made her body quiver. He'd seemed distant since then. His body tensed, and his face twisted in a grimace. She was almost positive he was aroused. One peek at his lap had shown her an impressive bulge under his zipper, but he hadn't looked at her since her confession.

Piper sat back with a huff. *Hmph*, she thought with a glare at him. If he disapproved of her, that was his problem. She was a succubus and needed to know the tricks of the trade for when she transitioned. That was that.

Unable to hold a grudge for long, she leaned forward and fiddled with the radio. She wasn't exactly comfortable straddling the gearshift, but every time she made to move away, Connor just dragged her back. It was playing hell with her nerves. Her body craved him like it did chocolate once every four months with her cycle. Their kiss had done a number on her, and even with the emotional turmoil and unexpected kidnapping, she still wanted him. How sick was that?

She pondered her body's response as she watched the scenery pass. Was she drawn to him because he was so stubbornly against her kind? Perhaps her weretiger personality was more to blame than anything else. She knew if there was one thing a cat wanted, it was the attention of someone who disliked it thoroughly. Was that why she wanted him so badly...because he didn't want her? Oh, he did want her, but not to the point of forgetting her genetics.

Finally finding a station that picked up, Piper sat back to enjoy some good Cajun music. There was just something about the mournful Cajun French and accordions and fiddles she found soothing. She may not have understood everything about the songs, but they still spoke to her.

Connor winced at one particularly nasal note. "What in the hell are they saying?" he grouched, but didn't turn the radio down.

Piper leaned back and listened. "Um, okay, sounds like he went away to work," she paused and listened some more. "He was gone for a long time, and when he came back, he found that his *cher* had died." She tapped her foot. "He lost his heart when he lost his *cher*, he'll never love another."

She sniffed. It was sweet, she thought. Humans had such short lives and felt so strongly she sometimes wished she could find herself a nice, human male and settle down. Although, she would end up killing him if she attempted to be faithful to him. Succubi weren't meant to mate, but especially not to humans.

"It's a bit melodramatic," Connor mumbled, looking as disgusted

as any male when confronted with a broken heart song.

“It’s a Cajun French song about death and ill-fated love, of course it’s melodramatic,” she told him easily.

“Was that what the incubus was speaking in?” he asked tersely, his hands clenched on the steering wheel.

Piper tilted her head to study him. He looked...put out, she thought in surprise. Was he jealous of Fallon? Nah, she thought. He was probably just doing the Alpha thing and not liking any other Alpha in his vicinity.

“Yeah, Fallon’s Cajun through and through. Well, not really. He’s originally from Ireland, but he came to Louisiana in the early 1800s and adopted the way of life and the language. Now he speaks their brand of French as well as any of the natives do.”

“What did he tell you before he left? He gave you instructions on where to meet him or something?” Connor concentrated on the road, though she sensed his attention was resting squarely on her and her answer.

She blushed. Fallon was a sweetheart and a flirt, but he never meant anything by it. He’d always told her to view him as a brother and she had, so why did she feel embarrassed by their easy affection?

Piper cleared her throat. “He, uh—ahem. *Donne-moi un petit bec doux, cher*, means ‘give me a sweet little kiss, darling.’”

Emotion swirled around the cab of the truck. Connor didn’t reply, but she could feel his fury and jealousy. She bit her lip and kept quiet. She had a feeling Connor was hanging on by a thread, but she didn’t know if it was because of jealousy or his own confusion about his feelings.

Piper didn’t fool herself. She knew he lusted after her. He just hated it so much that it overthrew any other emotion. She decided it was time to take his mind off of Fallon.

“So, you know, kidnapping is a crime,” she said conversationally. He didn’t answer.

“Where are you planning to take me? I mean, you’re not from

around here, so it isn't like you have a house to bring me to. Not to mention, if you brought me to your hotel, Stella would be on the phone with Mom in a heartbeat." She knew she was babbling, but she couldn't help herself. Nervousness was taking its toll on her. He still hadn't calmed down, and the tension in the cab actually seemed to be thickening.

She almost slapped herself in the forehead. If there was one thing she knew about men, it was that they hated having the holes in their plans brought to light.

* * * *

Connor didn't answer any of Piper's questions. He couldn't. He had no idea where he was going. She was right that he couldn't bring her to the hotel. Not only would her mother find out immediately, but it would be way too tempting to make use of the king-size bed in his room.

He shifted a bit, hoping to relieve the erection pressing against his zipper. It was a good thing he was sort of an Alpha, he thought ruefully. If he'd been less powerful, then he would've shifted from wolf to human and come out buck naked. That would've gone over well, he sneered at himself.

The female made him lose his normally unshakable cool. Never in his many years had he ever done something without thinking it through first. Yet in the twelve hours he'd known her, he'd alienated her with his harsh words and hot temper, and now kidnapped her, without further thought.

She brought out the primitive male in him, and he wasn't so sure that was a good thing. His wolf howled, wanting out again. It had liked stalking her, forcing her to submit to his will. It enjoyed the layers of scent that made Piper who she was, and it was intrigued by the hint of wereanimal it sensed.

Again, his wolf howled, but this time it was in triumph. She was

all his for the time being. Primal satisfaction thrummed through his body. His civilized side, the cold and calculating part of his mind, reminded the wolf she was a soul sucker. The wolf didn't care. It wanted a taste of the female next to him.

Checking the rearview mirror, he saw the road behind them was dark and empty. They were just outside of town now and so far, they'd managed to lose her family. He felt himself relax minutely. He just had to figure out where to bring his captive.

Chapter Eight

“You’re kidding, right?” Piper asked in blatant disbelief. He couldn’t be serious, she thought with a panicked look around her. He couldn’t possibly think this was the perfect hideout.

“Just get out, or I’ll carry you out,” he growled.

Piper took another look at the derelict house he’d driven her to. It sat in the middle of a humongous sugarcane field. There were a few lights on inside, so she knew it was inhabited. What worried her was the sound of a full-scale battle taking place within its walls.

A loud crash reverberated through the house, making it shake. There was a short silence and then loud laughter. Whoever was in there was crazy as all get out, and she wasn’t going to have anything to do with them.

“Nuh-uh,” she said, crawling to the opposite side of the truck cab. “I’m not going in there.”

She heard Connor sigh in aggravation before she felt his hands close around her ankles. A screech of terror froze in her throat. Even though she kicked as hard as she could, he dragged her across the truck bench. Piper managed to wrap her hand around the steering wheel, holding onto it with all of her strength. Her heart pounded, and a sour taste invaded her mouth. The sounds coming out of that house intimidated the hell out of her. It was reminiscent of a documentary she’d watched on the Hell’s Angels several years ago.

Loud music, shouting, screams, and raucous laughter spilled forth with menace. And this crazy assed werewolf was trying to take her inside! Her muscles quivered with the need to run, hide, to protect herself.

“Woman, relax!” he snarled trying to pry her hands open.

Feeling more than a little dramatic as she thought about what could happen to a plump, innocent succubus in that house, she shouted back, “By the immortal Gods, I will not move!” moving to wrap her arms around the steering wheel column.

Surprised laughter caught her attention, edging her out of her panic. Connor was laughing! At her! Instantly pissed off, she let go of the steering wheel, whirling on him with a hiss.

Connor just caught her in his arms, holding her in an unexpectedly comforting gesture. “Relax, kitten,” he murmured, stroking her back soothingly.

“You’re going to drop me off with bikers!” she accused him with a snuffle.

His shoulders shook as he chuckled, his breath warm as it huffed over her temple, stirring the fine hairs there. “Those aren’t bikers, Piper. I’m guessing those are the Chieftain’s relatives having a wrestling competition or something.”

“The Chieftain?” Piper asked as she struggled to clear her mind. Being held against Connor in such a gentle fashion was making her head fuzzy. He was warm and her body felt perfectly aligned with his despite their height differences. “This is the Chieftain’s house?” she demanded incredulously, her mind finally shaking free of the seductive fog he’d wrapped her in. She’d known the Chieftain lived in Cypress Point, but not exactly where.

“Yes?” he answered her, sounding more than a little uncertain. Connor’s arms tensed around her as though he expected her to take off again.

Piper wasn’t going anywhere. This was just too much, she thought with an inward growl. The man had absolutely no sense of decorum.

“You did not just bring me to the Chieftain’s house in my pajamas, Connor. Tell me you didn’t.”

Those broad shoulders shrugged. “So?”

Leaning back, Piper slapped her hands on his shoulders glaring up

into those sexy blue eyes. “Men are idiots!” she shouted at his startled face. “You don’t bring a woman to meet one of the most important beings in the Veil in nothing but her cartoon pajamas, Connor! It just isn’t done, dammit!” She dug her fingernails into his biceps, giving him the evil eye.

* * * *

Connor looked down at the disgruntled female in his arms as his erection grew. She was glaring up at him with those gold eyes. He wanted nothing more than to toss her back in the truck and have his wicked way with her. Or let her have her way with him. Either one worked.

The soft honeysuckle scent of her skin compelled him to anchor Piper to his body, molding those soft curves into the hollows of his own. Piper paid no attention, narrowing her eyes on him.

Her crossed arms pushed her breasts together and he could see the shadowy cleft formed through the V-neck of her shirt. Her hair was mussed from their little scuffle, hanging into her face, the thick black and gold strands stirring in the slight breeze. She looked good enough to eat, he thought with an inward growl.

Unfortunately, she was pissed off. He cracked a smile. He was starting to think that having a pissed off Piper was lots of fun. If only Toby could see him now, he thought with a grin.

“Well, werewolf?” she asked, not seeming to notice he held her suspended off the ground, her pelvis nestling his erection. She tapped the fingers of her right hand on her left bicep as she waited for his answer.

“What was the question?” Connor husked as he stared into the molten gold eyes so close to his own.

She sighed hugely, rolling her eyes at him. He didn’t mind. “You’re not taking me into the Chieftain’s house without proper clothing.”

“You’re wearing clothes,” he pointed out, seeing nothing wrong with her cute lounge pants and T-shirt. In fact, he much preferred her looking like this than the way she had in the vamped out business suit.

“These are pajamas, Connor. I don’t go out in public in my nightclothes!”

He shrugged. “You look cute.”

Her mouth fell open, her eyes wide as she stared at him. Connor felt heat climb his cheeks but refused to bring her attention to it. Alpha werewolves didn’t blush.

“I swear, you men don’t have the sense God gave a gnat,” a voice said from the house, causing Connor to whirl around, pushing Piper behind him with a snarl.

The tall, voluptuous woman on the porch raised an eyebrow. It was nearly impossible to tell which one of them she was looking at as her eyes were completely blacked out. She had an impressive tattoo curling from her temple down her cheek and jaw, where it formed a torque around her neck. This was the Chieftain Ruby Ravenswaay, Connor thought in awe.

“You kidnapped a woman, brought her here, and now you tell her she’s cute in her PJs. Jeez-sus,” she muttered, blowing out air that lifted her bangs. “C’mon in. Lucian said you might stop by, but he didn’t say anything about you bringing a strange woman in pajamas.”

She waved a hand, inviting them in the house. “Don’t mind the mess. We were just doing some demonstrations.”

Connor nodded shortly, pulling Piper behind him as they made the porch. Ruby peered behind him, her eyes lit with amusement and annoyance.

“Do you want me to find you something else to wear?” she asked gently.

Piper clutched the back of Connor’s shirt, causing his stomach muscles to contract. “If you aren’t offended by my clothing, Chieftain, I’d rather stay as I am,” she answered hesitantly.

Ruby grinned, flashing a great deal of teeth. “No problem, I like

being comfortable too.”

“Thank you, Chieftain,” Piper said, her voice slightly awed.

Connor understood Piper’s awe, but for some reason it bothered him that she considered herself less important than the Chieftain. It shouldn’t have mattered how she felt, but it did, dammit.

“Don’t mind the outside of the house,” she was saying as they entered the foyer. “Lucian had it warded several years ago to look abandoned. It saves us having to worry about interlopers, and now that Dominic is mobile enough, that’s of utmost importance.”

Connor sensed Piper taking in their surroundings and beginning to relax. Did she really think he’d bring her somewhere she wouldn’t be safe? He gritted his teeth. Probably, considering he’d acted like an ass from the minute they’d met.

The interior of the Chieftain and *Oculum*’s home was nice. It wasn’t as homey as his house in Texas, but it was close. It had a perfectly decorated foyer and dining room that seemed wrong for the Chieftain, but it was nice. Classy. The dining room table was piled high with take-out Chinese food cartons, though no one was eating. A whiff of the spices and meat had his mouth watering.

“We’re hanging out in the back,” Ruby said as she led the way through the house.

Connor kept Piper behind him and didn’t think she minded in the least since she had a stranglehold on his shirt. He heard the frantic beating of her heart and wanted to stop to comfort her. Gritting his teeth to hold back the urge, he barely paid attention to the rest of the small house until he got to the den. It was packed with women. From wall to wall and every space in between, women took up space. Tall women, short women, athletic women, plump women, they all stopped what they were doing to study the newcomers.

Knowing he’d just intruded on some kind of Amazon get-together, Connor froze. The veiled dislike and distrust in the many eyes turned towards him told him these women weren’t as easygoing as Ruby and the other few Amazons he’d met over the years.

“Y’all, this is Connor Griffin and his captive,” Ruby said blithely as she picked her way back to one of the overstuffed sofas.

Connor bared his teeth in what he hoped was a relaxed smile, when all he wanted to do was strangle his friend’s mate. The minute she’d said “captive” the women who were closest had tensed, their eyes nearly roiling with hatred. Oh, hell, he thought, pushing Piper back to the wall. These women might make a sport out of kidnapping men, but they were vicious when they thought an innocent woman was in danger.

* * * *

When Piper felt Connor moving her into a position where her back was protected, she knew he felt threatened by whatever was in the room. Because he was so tall and she was directly behind him, she couldn’t see what was going on, but the air was heavy with menace. That Connor was determined to protect her from it told her more than anything he could’ve said to her.

He might not like her, and he might be repulsed by his unwanted reaction to her, but he wouldn’t let her get hurt. Relief and something nauseatingly close to adoration made her limbs feel boneless. Unfortunately, now wasn’t the time to be a weenie.

Releasing his shirt, she poked her head around one massive shoulder taking in the room in a single glance. Women. Lots and lots of lethal women who looked like they wanted nothing more than to carve their initials in Connor’s gonads. Not good. Piper saw the Chieftain had taken a seat on one of the sofas and appeared to be waiting for something. When the Chieftain saw her looking, Piper caught her breath at the wink sent her way. What could the woman be up to? Piper wondered.

Two women began to slide forward, their eyes intent on Connor, menace flowing off of their muscled bodies. Piper felt Connor’s growl before she heard it and knew without looking up at him, that his eyes

had gone wolf.

What to do? she wondered as she looked at the group of women. Piper didn't fool herself. She had zero combat ability and the closest thing she'd ever come to a fight was when Penny had eaten her stash of chocolate. Somehow she didn't think standing up to these women would be the same as windmilling on her older sister.

She didn't know what to do, but she felt compelled to speak or distract them, or something to keep them from hurting Connor. He was an ass who'd kidnapped her from her house in her pajamas and expected her to prance around in front of the Chieftain like that, but he did think she was cute.

"Um, he sort of kidnapped me, but I was gonna go with him anyway," she clarified from Connor's armpit. When she'd attempted to stand next to him, he'd shifted with her keeping her behind him.

Placing her hand in the middle of his back, she stroked him gently, hoping to calm him down. His body was rigid with barely suppressed violence. She knew he'd feel awful if he fought these women who were friends of the Chieftain. For some perverse reason, she didn't want him to feel awful.

"How can you be sort of kidnapped?" someone asked from the back of the room.

Pressing against Connor's back, she shoved her head under his arm so she could see who she was talking to. She sensed Connor looking at her incredulously, but this was serious business, she thought irately. She was saving his life!

"He came to talk to me, we argued, and then Mom burst in the room. I think Connor thought she'd keep me from helping him, so he threw me out the window."

Connor tensed as several bodies tensed. "You're not helping me," he hissed at her, his hands flexing at his sides.

Piper patted his stomach. "It's okay. I didn't get hurt. Anyway, he took me away from my house, but I had already decided I was going to help him. He just jumped the gun a bit," she lied through her teeth,

which were bared for everyone in a parody of a smile. He hadn't just jumped the gun, she thought with a pinch to his ribs. He'd jumped a whole damn cannon. Persephone was going to be so pissed.

"So you don't mind being with him?" another voice asked from somewhere nearby.

Piper felt her face heat up. This wasn't turning out to be an easy conversation for her. "He's okay, I guess. I do want to help him," she admitted grudgingly. She really did want to help him find Toby. He loved his nephew, and she was a sucker for happy endings.

"Well, hell, we don't get to have any fun anymore," someone muttered loudly causing the tension to dissipate as if it'd never been there.

Most of the women went back to what they were doing, arm wrestling, playing some video game, playing pool, or just talking. The Chieftain talked briefly with one of the women before getting up to join them at the door. Her mouth curved into a sly smile as she approached them.

"I don't know what it is about these Veilerian guys kidnapping women, but I have half a mind to talk to Lucian about it. This could easily turn into an interracial war," she told Connor as she came to stand next to them.

Up this close, Piper could see the Chieftain was the same height as Connor, and she was filled with awe. She had free reign of Cypress Point, but she hadn't been around three years ago when her mom befriended the current Chieftain. She'd been at a romance reader's convention with Vic and had missed the most exciting three weeks in Cypress Point's history.

"I'm Ruby Ravenswaay, the Elk Fire Chieftain," the Chieftain said as she put her hand out for Connor to shake.

Just as Connor's hand closed over the Chieftain's, Piper saw that Ruby's palm was adorned with a complicated wreath tattoo. She wondered if it had hurt when she got the work done.

Their hands met, and Ruby's body went rigid, her black eyes

filling with the same color amber as Connor's did when he went wolf. It only took a heartbeat, but in that moment, Piper felt Ruby knew everything about Connor and his entire family.

"Lucian told me a lot about you, Connor," Ruby said in a calm voice. "I'm glad to see he wasn't overexaggerating your good qualities."

Piper found herself looking at Ruby's hand. She didn't want to shake it. She wasn't a coward though, she told herself sternly. She was Piper Foxgrove. Foxgroves had grit, or so her mom always said. She would shake the Chieftain's hand.

Carefully, as though she were reaching out to a rattlesnake, Piper shook Ruby's hand, feeling nothing more than a slight tingle from the contact. Ruby's hand convulsed around her own, though, causing Piper to look up in surprise. The Chieftain's eyes were bright gold, her eyelids fluttering like a hummingbird's wings.

Piper yanked her hand out of Ruby's, clasping it in her other hand, not sure what to make of the Chieftain's reaction.

Connor pulled Piper into his side, offering her comfort and protection. Feeling grateful, she sank into him, waiting for the Chieftain to come out of her trance.

Ruby blinked as though waking out of a dream. Her eyes were back to normal and she stared at Piper in surprise. "You're a Kahn," she whispered softly so that only Connor and Piper heard her.

Piper shook her head. "No, I'm not. I'm a *Seductarian*. Sort of. One day."

Connor had tensed next to her holding his breath. She sensed his head swiveling to look at her, but she refused to meet his gaze.

Ruby nodded shortly. "You're a Kahn, Piper. I've seen it. You're also in a lot of danger."

Piper shook her head again, refusing to believe it. Her weretiger half had only begun to awaken, but she knew that her succubus transition would bully it out of the way. It had to. She'd at least trained to be a succubus. She had no clue how to be an animal!

* * * *

Connor kept his arm anchored around Piper, trying to digest what Ruby just told them. That she was a weretiger wasn't all that surprising. He'd begun to suspect that's what she was, but knowing that she was the equivalent of an Alpha floored him.

"It's impossible, Chieftain. I'm a succubus. There's no way I'm a Kahn. I'm latent, for crying out loud!" Piper told Ruby, her voice almost pleading.

He hated the fear in her voice, her shaken composure. Connor felt responsible for opening this particular can of worms, but there had been no other place for him to go. Lucian's house was the most secure for him.

"What do we do?" Connor found himself asking. He didn't want to involve himself in Piper's problems, but he couldn't just leave her hanging.

"What about your nephew?" Piper asked him, her voice shocked. She looked up at him, her gold eyes melting his heart on the spot. She looked so young and vulnerable, he thought as he brought his hand up to stroke her soft cheek.

"We'll find him," he told her confidently. "There's nothing saying we can't protect you and get the boy too."

"Save the cheerleader, save the world'?" a deep voice said from behind them.

Connor turned his head to see Kali, the Oracle, standing behind them. He knew Kali from several Veil functions and nodded to the drag queen. His scientific mind understood Kali was a woman trapped in a man's body. It made sense. Oracles were always female, but somehow biology had messed it all up. Connor was well-used to her classy style. She wasn't the first drag queen he'd run across in his life, and she wouldn't be the last.

Tonight, Kali was dressed in some kind of fluttery sundress in

bright orange. Her hair was platinum blonde and both colors looked well enough on her. She stood behind them in a pair of platform heels that put her over Connor's head.

"Is that your succubus?" Kali asked, pointing at Piper.

Connor's mouth gaped open as he tried to decide how to answer that. He didn't own Piper. No matter that she roused his protective instincts and he wanted her body so much his need nearly brought him to his knees. She was a succubus, and they were off-limits.

"Uh," he stammered at a complete loss.

"No, I'm my own succubus, thank you. Hey, Kali," Piper said, sounding far more composed than Connor would've guessed.

Kali squealed as best as she could considering her vocal chords weren't meant for high pitches. "Piper, I almost didn't recognize you, you being with a man and all! But, darling, those clothes!"

Before Connor knew it, Piper was whisked away from him and escorted to some other part of the house. Feeling more than a little conspicuous in a room full of potentially violent women, he headed for a quieter, less estrogen filled room.

* * * *

Evan Walsh scented the air, his weretiger senses on alert. There was something different in the summer night. There was a scent he'd never expected to encounter in his part of South Louisiana.

It was a mixed scent he'd only come across once before in his nearly ninety years of existence. The sultry perfume of succubi pheromones rode the air, but under that scent was the musk of cat. Earthy, potent. It was possible a weretiger had rolled around with a succubus. He'd done it himself a few hundred times.

Stretched out in his massive tiger form, his tail twitched lazily as he contemplated the smell. There was a house of succubi about fifteen miles from the compound his streak of tigers used. But he didn't know them, and neither did his people. They never mingled with the

denizens of Cypress Point.

Evan kept an iron grip on his streak. The group of nearly two dozen weretigers was grateful for his leadership and if they weren't, he made sure they were punished appropriately. He wasn't the official Kahn, but it was just a matter of time before he was given the role. His Kahn was weak and dying. The only way Evan would be passed up for the position was if an heir emerged. And since he'd personally seen to the deaths of the Kahn's six children, he knew that wasn't going to happen. As soon as the Kahn died, he'd own the streak.

He lifted his head, his gold eyes nearly closed as he scented the air again. There was something there, he thought curiously. Something that wasn't quite formed yet, perhaps, but it was something that roused his territorial urges.

Getting to his feet, he stretched his massive body, his ears twitching as he listened to the swamp. It was silent, just as it should be with a predator of his magnificence in residence.

Chapter Nine

Piper was shaken up. Ruby hadn't spoken loudly, but Connor had heard and that was enough. The Chieftain wasn't known for being wrong about who was meant to be a leader, but in this instance, Piper knew there was a mistake.

She allowed Kali to lead her upstairs to a guest room, letting the Oracle dress her in one of the Chieftain's caftans, and generally mother her to death. Piper had known Kali since the Oracle set up shop in Cypress Point. Whenever she was in town, she ended up at Kali's tattoo parlor and watched her work. Persephone didn't mind her spending time with the Oracle as the area around her shop was neutral territory. No one crossed an Oracle by stealing or attacking someone they shouldn't.

"Ruby told you, didn't she?" Kali said as she sat Piper down in front of a vanity.

Piper snapped out of her daze. She saw Kali had dressed her in a sundress similar to the one she was wearing except on Piper it looked more like a tent. The Oracle was brushing her hair in long, soothing sweeps of the brush. It was almost hypnotic.

"Yes," Piper whispered, closing her eyes. Fear rose inside her in a cold tide. She wanted to scream at the injustice of it all, wanted to find some cubbyhole to hide in for the next, oh, eternity. For years, she'd managed to forget about her true heritage, passing off her heightened senses as just a little *lagniappe* to go with her succubus transition. However, Ruby had stripped that away from her. Piper felt exposed, her weretiger instincts wanting to burst out of her in a flurry of fur and snarling teeth.

The tiger didn't like feeling threatened. It felt it could defeat any who dared take its place as Kahn. Piper knew differently. She wasn't a predator, no matter if she was a succubus or not. She wasn't built to kill or hurt others.

"I cry for Humane Society commercials, for Lilith's sake!" she squeaked as the thought settled in her mind, her eyes watering. "I'm a weenie, Kali! I can't be a Kahn! Hell, I don't even know if I can be a *Seductarian*."

Kali's big hands smoothed over Piper's hair gently. "Shh, girl. You're gonna be just fine, ya hear? There are things going on that are gonna make sure you do fine."

Piper let out a watery sniff. "Whatever," she said, strangling on her words. "I'm on the verge of my transition, and now I've been named Kahn! I've never even seen a weretiger in person. How the hell am I supposed to lead a whole streak?" she asked hysterically. Jumping from her chair, she began pacing the floor. Her entire body shook as though she stood buck naked in a snowstorm.

Kali made tsking sounds as she gently hugged Piper to her chest. "Honey, if Ruby saw it happen, it means you're the best weretiger for the position."

"God help them then, 'cause I don't know how to be a weretiger, Kali!" Piper knew she was screeching, but this situation seemed to call for it.

"Piper Ann, I've never heard you sound defeated before!" Kali scolded, her dark eyes meeting Piper's. "Your mama taught you that you can do anything you put your mind to, and this is going to be one of those things." She pressed her lips together as though she wanted to hold something back. "You know I love your mama like she was my sister, but she didn't do right by you, Piper."

Opening her mouth to defend her mother, Piper closed it suddenly, realizing what Kali was saying. Throughout her entire seventy-four years of existence, Persephone had acted like Piper was a full-blooded succubus even though she knew it wasn't true. In doing

so, she'd weakened Piper, keeping her from learning more about both natures. Now, if she was confronted by a weretiger, she'd be mincemeat. Succubus pheromones would only work if she went up against a male, but even then some males were immune. Like Connor.

"You should've been learning how to get in touch with the tiger, baby girl, but you don't know what to do. You're gonna be like a kitten facing down a den of lions," Kali told Piper straight. "You gotta get you some experience shifting and learn how to fight."

Piper caught one of Kali's hands, gripping it tightly. "Do you see something, Kali?" she asked earnestly. As an Oracle, Kali frequently had visions about the Veilerians in her territory.

Kali went still, her eyes unseeing. After several minutes, she shook her head. "No," she breathed. "I don't see anything. But I know you'll be fine."

Piper stared in the mirror, seeing the flash of the tiger behind her eyes and knew it wasn't going to be fine.

* * * *

Connor found Lucian and Dominic hiding in the attic. It was one of the few places Connor knew they'd be safe from the women. Since the last time he'd visited Lucian's home, the *Oculum* had moved in a big, comfortable recliner and sofa set. He'd also added a sixty-three inch flat screen on one side, and a foosball table in the corner. It was a perfect man cave.

Lucian and Dominic were watching *300* when he walked in, barely acknowledging his entrance. On the big screen, King Leonidas had just kicked the Persian emissary into the well. Connor grunted. He was going to prove Leonidas had been a werewolf one day, when life calmed down a little and Toby finally took over the pack. It was about time he got back to his real job. It was time to get back to the sane world of historical research and fact finding.

"Hey, what're you doing here?" Lucian asked as he finally noticed

Connor standing next to the sofa.

Connor raised an eyebrow before sprawling in the recliner. Lucian and Dominic were cuddled up together on the sofa. The little boy was out cold, mouth hanging open and drooling on Lucian's chest.

"I could've kicked your ass before you even noticed me," Connor commented as he turned his attention back to the screen.

Lucian grunted. "Ruby would've kicked your ass before you got that far," he replied, his attention returning to the television too. "Do you really think I have to worry about security with her relatives here?"

Connor snorted, crossing his hands over his stomach. "Are they here a lot?"

He sensed Lucian shrugging. "Albreda, Ruby's aunt and the queen of the Blood Maidens, keeps a constant rotation of guards for Ruby. I thought it would piss me off having all these women take over the house, especially since they're like a combination of *Animal House* meets *Little Women*, but they grew on me."

Connor couldn't imagine that. The Lucian he'd once known liked to leave the women outside of his personal domain, not invite them in. They'd been alike in that aspect, although for different reasons.

"Any word on Toby?" he asked quietly.

Lucian sighed. "Nothing, Con. The latest information I have is that he was seen about five miles east of Persephone's last week. I've asked Marie's pack, Father Ignacio...hell, I've even asked the demonic twins if they've seen him and nothing." He channel surfed until he found *Kung Pow: Enter the Fist*.

They both said "sweet," laughing at each other. It was really the dumbest movie either of them had ever seen, but it made them laugh like kids.

"Did you talk to Persephone like I told you?" Lucian asked while they watched the Chosen One tumble down a mountain.

Connor squirmed. "She didn't come to the meeting. She sent her daughter, Piper."

Lucian's head turned slowly, eyes wide. "What's that?"

"What's what?"

His friend's intense green eyes narrowed. "That. That guilty tone in your voice. What'd you do?"

Connor coughed, trying to think of how to make it seem like he hadn't kidnapped Piper. "Well—"

"God, that sounds familiar," Lucian muttered, interrupting Connor.

Frowning at his friend, Connor straightened in the recliner. "Okay, so I kidnapped her, but she said she was gonna help me—"

Lucian laughed uproariously. "Wait, let me get this straight. You kidnapped the daughter of the local *Seductarian*. Oh boy, you're in so much trouble!"

"You kidnapped the last Chieftain!"

Lucian stopped laughing. "Yeah, but she was my mate. I know you're never gonna mate Piper. She's a succubus. You hate succubi."

Connor shifted in the chair again. His body liked Piper just fine, but he wasn't going to mention that to his friend. "She's going to help me with finding Toby, and I'm going to keep her safe."

"Safe from what? You're the one in trouble. If Ruby finds out you kidnapped that girl, she's gonna tear you a new one." Lucian looked back at the screen. "Where'd you stash her?" he asked absently.

Connor was silent for several long minutes. Long enough for Lucian to turn and look at him again. He felt his cheeks warm and cursed himself. "I brought her here."

"What?" Lucian shouted, waking up Dominic.

"Daddy?" the boy mumbled with a frown.

Lucian smoothed a hand down Dominic's back. "Shh, go back to sleep." He glared at Connor. "I can't believe you brought your kidnap victim *here*. Do you have any idea what those Amazons are going to do to you if they find out?" he hissed angrily. "Do you have any idea what they're going to do to *me* if they find out?"

"It's kind of late for that, baby," Ruby said from the doorway,

flanked by three other women.

Lucian groaned and flopped back on the sofa. “Ruby, I had no idea he was going to do something like this, I swear.”

Ruby rolled her eyes at her husband, walking over to place a kiss on her son’s cheek. She then leaned down to place a much longer kiss on her husband’s mouth. “You’re not the one in trouble, sweetie. This one is,” she told Lucian with a tilt of her head towards Connor.

“I did what I had to, Chieftain,” Connor mumbled, feeling like a schoolboy being reprimanded before the classroom. “She said she would help me, but Persephone wasn’t going along with it.”

“Yeah, we know. She called about five minutes ago to tell us how you first insulted her youngest daughter, and then threw her out a window. Let me tell you, bub, she isn’t a happy succubus right now. She’s thinking about petitioning the Agency for a few Guardian Elites to track you down,” Ruby told him, her hands on her hips and a little smirk on her face.

“You threw her out a window?” Lucian roared, covering his face with his free hand. “Jesus, Connor.”

“She’s fine!” Connor yelled back, shooting to his feet. He already felt bad about how he’d treated Piper, and now they were making him feel worse. Ruby sent a pointed glance to the drooling Dominic. Wincing, he lowered his voice. “She landed on her feet like a goddamn cat and then started yelling at me. You’re acting like she’s some shrinking violet or something, but that succubus has more balls than some of the males in my pack!”

“Aw, that’s so sweet,” one of the other Amazons said, feigning a swoon.

Connor snarled at her, making her chuckle. Damn Amazons, he thought blisteringly. They were the most sarcastic, irritating females in the Veil.

Ruby was chuckling, too, though she quickly stifled her humor to give him a mock serious expression. “What do you propose Lucian and I do, Connor? He’s got a duty to his Council position to alert the

GEs that you kidnapped the poor girl if her mother demands action.”

Connor stomped away from the group, heading to the windows to look out at Lucian’s property. He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to ease the headache forming behind his eyeballs. His whole purpose was to keep his troublesome nephew out of trouble, not start a war himself. But that seemed to be where he was heading. If Persephone pushed the legal channels, Connor would have to give into whatever punishment Council came up with. Then where would Toby be?

“It wasn’t meant to be this way,” he mumbled in a low voice. “She...does something to me.”

“I’m sorry,” Piper said softly.

Whirling around, Connor saw Piper had joined the discussion, Kali at her back. She’d changed from her pajamas into a deep brown sundress a few sizes too big for her, but still managed to look adorable. Something caught in the vicinity of his heart as he took in her saddened expression.

The woman had been kidnapped and just found out she was destined to become a Kahn of a streak of tigers when she had no idea how to be a tiger. The few times he’d seen the tiger rear up in her eyes, she’d looked panicked. It didn’t take a genius to figure out she didn’t know anything about that part of her heritage.

“No, I’m sorry, Piper,” he finally said, uttering words he never thought to say to a succubus. But so far, Piper hadn’t attempted to intentionally seduce him, behavior he’d come to associate with the race.

She walked over to him on bare feet, her stride somehow different. When she moved closer, he finally realized what he was seeing. It was the tigress approaching him, her gait unconsciously sinuous, making her hips sway as she slinked across the room.

Standing in front of him, she looked up, her gold eyes innocent of guile. “I will help you, Connor. I made a promise, and I keep my promises.”

He nodded curtly, not wanting to breathe in the spice of her pheromones. Unfortunately, he couldn't hold his breath that long. He inhaled deeply, taking in a deep whiff of her. Honeysuckle, musk, succubus, tiger. All mingled together to create a powerful bouquet that reached right down to his balls and squeezed.

Connor never even noticed when the attic cleared out. His attention rested squarely on the enticing woman in front of him. He watched her eyes dilate until all that remained of gold was a thin rim around her pupils.

"I'll call Mom and tell her this is something I want to do, so don't worry about it anymore," she told him earnestly.

A groan ripped from his throat. He was powerless against her, he thought in panic even while he snatched her close. Burying his hand in her thick hair, he held her while he plundered her mouth. The wolf growled in satisfaction, and the man was desperate to find a reason for this all-consuming need for her.

Chapter Ten

Piper's breath caught in her throat as Connor kissed her. The instant their lips met, any thought of resisting faded away like a bad dream. His mouth was hot and wet, his tongue rough against hers as they dueled. With him holding her head still, she couldn't maneuver as much as she would've liked, so she used her hands to seduce.

Feeling the blistering hot skin through his T-shirt, she curled her nails into his shoulders, clawing them lightly. Connor's free hand cupped her bottom, squeezing and urging her against his growing arousal. She moaned as she felt him thicken against her belly.

She couldn't think, couldn't do anything but feel as desire coursed through her body. Without conscious will, she absorbed his lust, feeding from him. Her pores felt as though they opened wider, soaking up the male heat he emanated.

He growled low in his throat, clutching her tighter to him, his hips rubbing against her with slow, purposeful movements. The heat built higher. Piper was helpless against his seduction and falling slave to her own powers.

That thought forced her to break the kiss. Attempting to push away, she fought more than Connor. She fought herself. She wanted to finish what they'd started, wanted to feel him moving deep inside her. Connor obviously had the same urges because his hips continued thrusting against her as he sought out her mouth again.

"No, Connor," she gasped, pressing the heels of her hands against his shoulders to hold him at bay. Her hormones called her an idiot, while the tiger swiped at her with its claws. At least both halves of her were in agreement about something, she thought sourly as she dodged

Connor's lips. "Connor, we can't."

"Yes, we can," he growled, his eyes blurring to amber. "I want you."

"No you don't," Piper grunted as she tried to get through to him. "You hate succubi, remember?" she threw out the question in a desperate attempt to get him to listen.

He stopped gripping her, stopped grinding his hips, which made her heart twinge with disappointment. She'd sort of been hoping he wouldn't stop so she could fulfill her own desire.

His eyes had gone full wolf when she looked again. He was royally pissed.

"You used your powers on me," he snarled, thrusting her away from him.

She paled. "No, I didn't—" she began.

"Yes, you did," he growled, pushing away from the windows. He ran a hand over his hair as he stalked across the room. "I don't know if this is going to work."

Piper threw her shoulders back, tilting her chin up stubbornly. "You kissed me."

The nasty look he gave her made her want to gloat. He was trying to push all the blame on her when he was the one to instigate their intimacy.

"It doesn't matter," she told him just as he opened his mouth, no doubt to deliver another accusation or call her a filthy name. "You want to find your nephew. I want to help you find your nephew, then get you out of my life. So, just keep your lips to yourself, werewolf."

She whirled around, leaving the room with as much dignity as she could manage. Her body still clamored for his touch, but she'd get over it, she told herself. She felt like she had a fire lit from within. She had an uneasy suspicion the transition was gaining force. She had fed from him, and it had felt wonderful, but she wouldn't take what wasn't freely given no matter how badly her body ached for it.

Piper clutched a hand to her stomach as she made her way

downstairs. If Pru was right, then she'd begin to crave sex more than she needed air. Should it get that bad, she might even grab the first male she saw to slake her lust. She shuddered hard enough that she staggered into the wall on the staircase.

Gods help her if she couldn't find someone she cared for to finish her transition, she thought helplessly. Even if she didn't want to become a succubus, it seemed her body was determined it was going to happen anyway.

The tiger snarled with feral fury. Piper closed her eyes. This could not be happening, she thought almost hysterically. The tigress wanted a mate. No, it demanded a mate. It didn't want just any male to take her.

A gurgle of laughter escaped her, the sound making her eyes pop open. Her face immediately heated as she found herself the focus of curious eyes. She'd somehow made it downstairs and stood in front of at least sixteen Amazons, Kali, Ruby, and the *Oculum*.

"Men make me sick too," a feminine voice piped up from the side of the foyer. It was an Amazon with dark eyes and an impish face. "Want us to kick his ass? We could call it a public service."

Several women chuckled while Lucian looked vexed. He peered over Piper's head, giving whoever was behind her a dark look. When she felt the hum of energy at her back, she knew it was Connor. She could almost smell his anger, yet another way her tiger was manifesting itself, she thought with an inward groan.

"Izzy," the Chieftain said admonishingly to the dark-eyed Amazon. Her lips were twitching as though she wanted to smile, but she valiantly held it off. "We don't attack guests."

"Often," Izzy said with a repressible grin.

"That's nice," Connor rumbled behind Piper. "We need to talk."

Since his mouth had found its way to her ear, Piper was sure he was talking to her. She just didn't want to talk to him right now. She was torn between wanting to jump his body and wanting to smack him good for being an ass.

She shrugged her shoulder before continuing down the stairs. “I need to call Mom and tell her to call off the man—I mean, wolf hunt. May I use your phone?” she asked Ruby, keeping her head lowered slightly in a show of respect.

Ruby’s head tilted to the side as she studied Piper. “I’ll show you where it is,” she offered, giving her mate a kiss on the cheek before leading Piper out of the room.

They passed through the lines of Amazons, leaving Connor on the stairs.

Ruby led her into the kitchen, which was the best room she’d seen in the house as far as Piper was concerned. Bright red walls set off the blindingly white counters and cabinets, while stainless steel appliances gleamed dully beneath the fluorescent lighting. There was a phone sitting on the island, which is where Ruby placed her.

Piper had her hand on the phone when Ruby’s hand, gloved this time, landed on it. She glanced up, wondering what the Chieftain was up to.

“I just wanted to tell you that you don’t need to scrape and bow to me. I’m just a woman,” she said, clearly uneasy about having to bring it up.

Her face heated up, but Piper met the Chieftain’s eyes. “It’s a sign of respect, Chieftain. You’re not just a woman. You’re the Chieftain, and you’re mated to the *Oculum*.”

Ruby blushed, her hand falling away from Piper’s. “Yeah, so? I’m just another person, Piper.” She leaned on the cabinet, crossing her arms over her chest.

Piper blinked. Didn’t the Chieftain realize how important she was to the Veil? “You’re the last Chieftain! Your powers can lead the Veil into the next great age,” Piper babbled as coherently as she could manage.

A rueful grin crossed the Chieftain’s face, making the tattoos on her cheek twist. “I’m just another woman who has issues. We’re not that much different, you know.”

“Uh,” Piper said not sure what to say. She didn’t dare agree or disagree. Either way seemed paved with trouble.

Ruby laughed at Piper’s uneasy expression. “Let me clear it up for you. You’re going to be the next big thing in your race, both your races. People are going to expect things of you that you aren’t sure you’ll be able to handle. That’s how I felt when I inherited this power. It’s overwhelming, and you don’t want any part of it. No doubt you just want to be left the hell alone, right?”

Piper knew her mouth was hanging open, but couldn’t seem to close it. “How—how did you know?”

“I was a human hermit before I became the Chieftain. I’m sure your mom told you the whole story,” Ruby nodded when Piper made a sound of agreement. “I bumbled my way through the entire thing, not knowing which way to turn, who to trust, or where I was headed, and then Lucian kidnapped me.”

Connor came to mind, and Piper nodded slowly. “I see where you think we’re alike,” she murmured softly.

“It’s something about these guys, I guess. Kidnap-happy or something. Anyway, I had to learn everything about the Veil, and about the person I was supposed to become. You’re going to have to do the same. I have a feeling your mom hasn’t let you embrace that weretiger half of yours, right?”

Piper nodded dumbly. Persephone had acted like Piper was a full succubus except when it was impossible to ignore her weretiger side. Like at the big succubus family reunion when she had the unfortunate distinction of being the only succubus to be riveted by a laser pointer. She winced at that memory.

“Your mom can’t help you be a weretiger because she doesn’t know what it’s like to be one. You can either talk to another weretiger, which I wouldn’t suggest since I have a feeling there are some serious problems in your dad’s streak, or you talk with another wereanimal.” She stopped expectantly, like a teacher waiting for her student to keep up with her.

“You mean Connor.”

Ruby beamed. “Bingo. He’s a werewolf. I talked with Lucian—not about you!” she hurried to assure Piper. “No, I asked him what kind of man Connor is, and he’s supposed to be patient.” Piper snorted loudly. “Levelheaded.” Piper choked. “And honorable.” Silence. Ruby cocked her head, looking at Piper. “Okay, so at least he’s shown you his honorable side,” she muttered under her breath.

“I’m already going to be with him,” Piper said, not really wanting to get into how much of Connor’s sides she’d seen.

“Good. Call Persephone then, tell her the good news, and if she still doesn’t want to calm down, I’ll talk to her.” Ruby sounded confident she could get Persephone to chillax.

Piper shrugged and called her mom. Persephone picked up on the first ring.

“Chieftain,” she began.

“Nope, it’s me, Mom.”

There was a moment of silence. “He brought you to the Chieftain? At least he’s almost thinking,” she muttered evilly. “I’m getting my purse now. I’ll be there—”

“No!” Piper shouted into the phone. Persephone sounded frantic which was completely unlike the cool-headed succubus. “I’m going to help him find his nephew. I promised him, and I keep my promises.”

Persephone’s sigh was forceful enough to ruffle Piper’s hair over the phone. “Piper, baby, I know you like to keep your word, and normally I’d tell you that’s the only way to be. However, this...male has insulted you! I knew he’d be difficult, but to insult my baby? When I chose him for y—” she stopped suddenly.

Piper could hear her mother breathing and could almost picture the look of chagrin on her face. Things began making sense now. Persephone had wanted Piper to meet with Connor because she was going to get her daughter to lose her virginity whether she liked it or not. “Did you know he hated succubi?” Piper asked softly.

She could picture Persephone squirming. “Well, yes. Yes, I knew,

but I also knew no one could dislike you! You're wonderful. Everyone likes you. He just isn't what I thought he was, so you come on home, and we'll find you a nice incubus to take care of that little problem. Maybe Fallon—"

"Fallon is *not* taking my virginity!" she shouted into the phone, disgusted by the thought.

Persephone fell silent, and Piper noticed all sound had died in the house as well. Cringing at her outburst, she hunched her shoulders, tucking her head down to speak more quietly into the phone. "I'm not going to transition on a schedule, Mom. I'm going to help Connor find his nephew, and then I'm taking a vacation."

"A vacation?" Persephone positively screeched. "You can't take a vacation in the middle of a transition! Are you insane? Piper, honey, we'll figure something out. I have a bad feeling about this Alpha."

"Then you should've thought about that before you picked him to deflower me, huh?" Piper said knowing she was being mean, but unable to help it. "Don't worry about it though, he's not interested and doesn't even like me. He won't be plucking this flower."

She hung up to glare at the phone. For her mother to throw her in Connor's path and then want to back out because she didn't like him was unbelievable. Connor wasn't so bad when you took away the snarling dislike of succubi, she thought somewhat defensively.

"A virgin?" the not-so-bad male said from behind her, his voice vibrating with some strong emotion.

Piper wasn't really concerned. It seemed Connor had nothing but strong feelings around her whether it was lust or dislike. Knowing everyone in the house had heard her announcement, she took a deep breath before turning around.

His eyes were crystal blue again and extremely puzzled. "You're a virgin?" he asked again, his eyes going over her as though he were looking for proof.

She tilted her chin up, propping her hands on her hips. "So?" she asked challengingly.

She could see Ruby edging her way out of the kitchen while several other Amazons were trying to get in. There was a small scuffle at the doorway as she tried pushing them and they crowded her. Eventually, Ruby must've given up because she turned around with a helpless shrug as the others peeked over her shoulders.

Shock widened Connor's eyes as they zeroed in on her defiant expression. "You're a virgin," he stated. "A virgin succubus."

She was getting impatient with him. "How many times are you gonna say it? Yes, I'm a virgin. Yes, I'm a virgin succubus. So what?"

Lust flared in his eyes, which he closed immediately as though he were in pain. "This isn't going to work," he said more to himself than to her.

Piper took immediate exception to his statement. "Oh great, I'm not good enough to sleep with because I'm a slutty succubus, and then I'm not good enough to sleep with because I'm a virgin succubus? Sheesh, you're a picky son of a bitch," she snarled. Her hands curled into fists. "You know what, Connor? Screw it." She flung out a hand. "Screw all of you! I'm going to...to Fiji."

She spun around and headed for the doorway leading away from the kitchen and everyone in it. She was getting sick and tired of him wanting her, then not wanting her. Piper was sick of her mother both smothering her with love and thrusting her into the world. Neither one of them seemed to understand, or care, that she already felt torn in two directions without their interference.

Piper was just passing through the doorway when Connor's hand caught her elbow. The tiger chose just that moment to wake up and be active. Fangs and claws sprouted in a quick burst of pain. Piper's hand—no, that was a paw—was caught by Connor's strong hand as it attempted to slice him.

"Calm down, kitty cat," he told her as he easily captured her hands. "Take a deep breath."

Stunned that she'd tried to attack him, Piper did as he said, closing

her eyes and taking a deep, steadying breath. She inhaled Connor's scent, pulling it deep into her lungs where it seemed to spread throughout her body. She did it again, breathing deep and taking his essence into her.

"Now, relax," he ordered with a small shake. "You can't let the beast control you. You have to control it."

Piper just nodded, still gulping down Connor-scented breaths.

"You have a quick temper, Piper," he said in an amused tone of voice.

Peeking at him, Piper saw he was almost smiling. That was good, right?

He saw her looking, ducking his head down to peer into her face. "I didn't say it was a bad thing that you were a virgin. I don't think it'll work because I want you too damn much to keep my hands off of you."

* * * *

Connor watched Piper's eyes widen in surprise. Did she really think he didn't want her? Shaking his head at her, he almost laughed. His erection pointed him towards her like a compass every time she was in the vicinity. Learning she was a virgin made his lust for her burn hotter.

He'd tormented himself in thinking about her with Fallon, but knowing she'd never been with any male made him want to howl with relief and possessiveness. Connor and his wolf were in complete agreement for the first time since he'd met her. They both wanted her anyway they could get her.

"Ruby, you always have the best parties," one of the Amazons said in awe, making Connor's head jerk towards the voice.

The women had followed him after Piper, and they all stood in the kitchen. The microwave dinged, bringing the smell of freshly popped popcorn with it. The door opened and the bag was passed around.

“She does have the best parties,” someone else said towards the back of the group. “Remember when she was in labor?”

Lucian, who’d just entered the kitchen, ducked right back out again, leaving Connor on his own.

“Do you mind?” he asked stiffly, feeling Piper cringe in embarrassment against him. That bloody inconvenient instinct to protect raised its head and demanded he get the female out of the room.

Without giving it any further thought, he swung her curvaceous little body into his arms. Ignoring her startled gasp and the fake swooning of the Amazons, he led her through the house. He still didn’t know where he was taking her, but he hoped there wasn’t a bed in the vicinity.

* * * *

Piper felt Connor carrying her through the house and was glad for it. She didn’t see anything wrong with leaning on someone stronger than her at the moment. She’d just suffered immense embarrassment in front of some of the strongest women in the Veil, not to mention Connor. It seemed suitable he was carrying her away from the site of her humiliations.

She heard him say something to Lucian, but was too entranced with the sound of his strong heartbeat thudding under her ear to pay attention to what he said. Piper felt warm and secure nestled against Connor’s chest. It was a lovely place to be, she thought dazedly.

The humid night air caught her nose. She was bundled into his truck, and he climbed in next to her. With a slam of the door, he closed them in the quiet stillness of the vehicle. Piper mourned the loss of his arms around her, but figured she could handle it now that they were alone.

“You’re aware that virgin succubi are pre-transitional,” she began as conversationally as she could. This wasn’t going to be pretty.

Piper sensed more than saw him angle his body towards her. She smelled the musky spice of his personal scent, dragging it into her lungs for courage.

"I'll be seventy-five this year," she continued, staring out the windshield at the quiet night. There wasn't much to see other than sugarcane fields. Everyone had remained in the house, and it sounded as though the party had continued. "As soon as I lose my virginity, I'll pass into full transition. It's something my mom's been waiting on for years."

"What does that have to do with me?" he asked her blandly.

Piper sighed gustily. She didn't want to tell him what she suspected, but it wouldn't be fair to keep him in the dark about it. Unfortunately, they were in this together.

"Somehow my mom figured you would be the perfect male to relieve me of my virginity."

It was utterly silent now, like the world was waiting for him to explode. Piper swiveled her head around to gawk at him as he began chuckling. He was, oh, he was so damn sexy when he laughed, she realized in dismay. How was she going to keep away from him now that she knew what he looked like when he was amused?

"What's so funny?" she snarled petulantly.

He just laughed for several more minutes, his shoulders shaking with his amusement. "How did your mom come up with this plan?" he asked, wiping the tears of laughter from his eyes.

Piper sniffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "Because you don't like succubi."

He paused, the laughter fading from his face. "Your mom sent you to be a virgin sacrifice to a male who hates what you are?" he asked evenly.

Something in his voice made her turn back to him in time to see his jaw bunching and his eyes glittering with anger. The man was moodier than a nymph on hormone supplements, she thought. "What now?" she sighed.

“Do you realize how badly you could’ve been hurt, Piper?” he rasped, one of his hands cradling her jaw. “What if I had been a dishonorable bastard and used you badly? What if I had hurt you?”

Her eyes wide with shock and surprise, Piper tried to ignore the melting going on in her chest, but she couldn’t. Not with him looking at her so solemnly, as though she mattered to him.

“I’m sure she investigated you,” she whispered back.

He shook his head, edging closer to her on the truck bench. She could feel his heat nearing her and wanted to press up against it so badly she practically hummed.

“You never truly know someone, Piper. She could’ve investigated me until Armageddon and wouldn’t have learned everything there was to know about me.” He was close enough now that his breath wafted across her face, his eyes almost glowing in the dimness of the truck. “I can’t believe she’d put you in danger this way.”

Piper wanted to defend her parent, but Connor’s proximity and the way he kept grazing her jaw with his thumb made any words fly straight out of her mind. Unable to help herself, she scooted a little closer.

“I’m really not in any danger,” she told him breathlessly. He was starting to lean closer, and her body was all for it.

“I think you could be.”

“No, I’m not,” Piper husked against his lips which were just centimeters from her own. She wanted his kiss more than anything. Her body grew damp with need.

“Why?” Connor seemed to sigh against her mouth as he brushed those sexy lips against hers.

“Cause.” He kissed her, his lips dragging against hers, the friction tearing the words from her mouth. “I’ll be a—” he pressed another kiss on her, stealing her breath—“full succubus when—” His tongue flicked against the seam of her lips, causing her nipples to tighten with need. She groaned. “I lose my virginity,” she moaned in a rush as his tongue surged into her mouth.

Her hands were in his hair, her breasts pressed against his chest just as soon as their lips locked together. Hot. It was so hot Piper began sweating almost immediately. Her desire perfumed the thick air, their body heat fogging the windows. For the first time in her seventy-four years, Piper was the one making out in a truck, fogging up the windows in a parked car like the sexual teenager she'd never been.

Connor paused, his hands coming up to her shoulders. "What do you mean you'll be a succubus when you lose your virginity?" he asked harshly.

Bemused, and more than a little aroused, Piper rested her hands on his thigh, stroking her way up to his groin. "The transition began the first time you kissed me," she confessed, her tongue darting out to capture his taste lingering on her lips. "The powers will surge higher and higher until I lose my virginity."

Shock lit Connor's face, shaking her out of her half-crazed state.

"What exactly does that mean?" he asked in a low, ominous voice.

Stifling a wince, Piper flipped her hair over her shoulder. "It means I'll, um, well, I'm not exactly sure, to be honest. I think it means I'll start sending out pheromones."

He was silent for several seconds. Then, she thought she heard him say, "Gods help me."

Instantly offended, she glared at him. "I doubt it'll be a picnic for me either, bud," she shot back, her voice tinged with hurt. "It isn't like this is something I can just stop, you know."

Connor ran a hand through his hair. She was going to become even more seductive? Gods, he would go insane if he had to stick around for that. She shifted on the seat, sending a subtle waft of her scent to his sensitive nose. He bit back a groan. He was never going to forget her, as much as he would like to.

"Look, if it's too much, I can stay behind. Obviously, your prejudices against succubi will just cause more problems," she was saying, frustration evident in her tone.

He slashed an impatient hand through the air. He didn't want to let her go. Not yet. There was something at work in his the recesses of his psyche that demanded he keep her as close to him as possible.

He thought deeply. The full moon was in two days. If he could hold it together for two more days and use Piper's contacts to find Toby in that time, he might be able to make it without taking her. Nodding to himself, he took a deep breath. Her scent flooded his brain.

Connor's hands gripped the steering wheel tightly, his frustration palpable. "Two days," he snarled without looking at Piper. "Just two more days."

"What's in two days?"

He visibly tensed before turning those eerie amber eyes on her. "I'll find Toby in the next two days and go home."

Hurt slashed through her. Was he so eager to be rid of her, then? She'd thought they had come to some kind of truce. Hell, they'd played tonsil hockey enough in the last three hours to give her the idea he didn't think she was as bad as he'd originally suspected. Even the tender way he'd carried her from the house seemed unimportant now.

"So you don't need my help after all," she said as she scooted to the far side of the cab. "Maybe you could just drop me off back at home?"

His knuckles turned white on the steering wheel and Piper wished she'd just kept her mouth shut.

"Not yet," he rasped softly without looking at her.

She spluttered. "But why? You don't want me here, dammit, and I'm tired of being treated like I have the plague after you kiss me!"

"Don't push me, Piper. Please," he whispered as he started the truck. "Just—sit quietly and don't move for a little while, okay?"

She wanted to shout "like hell" and jump out of the truck, but common sense prevailed. It told her even though she was starting to feel the tiger awaken more and more, she didn't want to tangle with a

wolf just yet.

* * * *

Connor practiced deep breathing to force his body to relax, but wasn't having any luck. His body practically hummed for Piper even while his head told him to leave her alone, that she was lethal.

If he understood correctly, she was going to keep giving out those pheromones the closer she was to transition. Having never been around any of the sexual races during their transitions, it wasn't something he'd ever contemplated. Now, he was thinking about it a whole hell of a lot.

He wondered what would happen if she went back to her mother's house. Would her body still send out signals until some other male came along to relieve her of her virginity? The wolf growled at the thought. The wolf was gripped by possessiveness, but no less than the man was.

Having a time period to work with soothed his scientific mind. It liked having a set goal. The lust he felt for the woman sitting next to him powered through everything else, making him feel crazy. The wolf had the insane idea she belonged to him and him alone, that he could mark her as his. The man wondered if he'd be able to make love to her enough times to get her out of his system.

Every time she moved, his body went on alert. Her desire and confusion peppered the air, making the primal male want to beat his chest in triumph. He had her stumped. She had him by the balls. It seemed like a fair trade to his mind.

Connor drove back to Cypress Point. His only thought was to get away from her for a little while with no mothers, or incubi, or others around to make him feel protective or jealous.

Parking in front of The Hourglass, he shut off the truck. The fifteen minute ride had taken place in absolute silence. Glancing at Piper, he saw she looked a little lost and droopy. She was clearly

exhausted but hadn't said a word.

He pushed his admiration to the side and opened the truck door. Grabbing her hand and guiding her across the truck bench, Connor had a clear view of her sundress inching up her legs as she moved across the seat. He should've been a gentleman and looked away, but he wasn't stupid. No sane male would ever give up the chance to watch world-class legs coming his way.

The sundress dropped back down to nearly her ankles when she was on the sidewalk. He stared at her feet wishing he could just yank the whole dress off and study her nude body.

"Bad idea," he muttered under his breath.

Piper looked down at her feet. "What is?" she asked him, looking adorably confused.

Connor snapped out of it. "Nothing." He took her elbow and steered her into the hotel.

Stella was at the desk, her eyes widening as she realized who'd just walked in. "P-Piper!" she exclaimed, coming to her feet. "Child, where have you been? Your mother's been calling all night!"

Connor had to admire Piper's calm as she smiled at the warmage. "Hey, Stella. I know. I talked to Mom a little while ago. Everything's fine. We were visiting Lucian and Ruby."

Using their first names gave Stella the impression nothing untoward had happened all night, which made Connor want to laugh hysterically. She hadn't mentioned the window, the kisses, the virginity bombshell, or the near emasculation by Amazons. She was the ultimate diplomat.

"We're gonna need to get Piper a room, Stella," he interrupted the warmage as she was about to start asking questions.

"Of course, Connor," she chirped up at him instead.

"Close to mine," he added without looking at Piper. He wanted her as close as possible without her being in the room with him.

Stella's eyes flicked between Piper and Connor quickly, taking in the tension and Piper's reddened lips. A sly smile crossed her face.

“The room right next door is available. Is that okay?” she asked sweetly.

Connor nodded quickly, signed the form and assured Stella that he’d be paying for the room and knew where it was. As soon as Piper was handed her key, he led her up the stairs, stopping only when they reached the door of her room.

“You’ll be okay tonight?” Connor asked even though he knew she would be. He wasn’t going to sleep a wink on the other side of the wall from her.

She gave him a subdued nod as she opened her door. Darting a quick, unsure look at him, she whispered good night and locked herself in the hotel room.

Connor thumped his head on the wall next to the door and tried the deep breathing exercises again. He was stronger than his lust, dammit. He was!

Chapter Eleven

Piper looked around her room. It was nice. She'd visited Stella here since she was little but had never been inside any of the rooms.

Charming without being overdone, the walls were painted soft yellow, and the bedspread had a floral pattern to match. Pressing her hand to the mattress, she felt how soft it was. A small television sat on top of the dresser in the corner of the room. The small bathroom had an antique tub she wanted to sink into immediately, except she had nothing but the clothes on her back.

She had no idea what to do. She wasn't tired yet. There was too much to think about. If this had been a planned escape, she'd have brought a bag of books with her. As it was, she could watch TV, but even that didn't hold much interest for her.

Peeking out the window, she saw Connor had managed to get her one of the few rooms with a balcony. She stepped outside and sighed with relief to see a small chair propped up against the wall. The view wasn't anything new, but at least it alleviated some of the boredom.

Bayou Lafourche trickled by, looking black in the darkness. Piper heard light traffic passing through town at the front of the hotel, but for the most part, it was peaceful.

Taking a deep breath of the night air, she felt herself begin to relax and turned her attention to Connor's nephew. For some unknown reason, Connor wanted two days to find his nephew. What difference two days would make she couldn't imagine.

Piper figured Toby was just sowing some wild oats, but she understood Connor's apprehension. The world wasn't always kind to the different. No doubt Toby had been pampered and sheltered by his

pack all of his life. But in the mundane world, he couldn't lose his temper and go wolf without attracting attention. Gods knew she'd feared doing something to attract human attention the entire time she'd been in college. It hadn't been easy, especially as her body began to mature. If Toby were half as wild as some of the young men she'd met, he'd probably keg it up as much as possible, which could lead to him losing control of his wolf.

A distant sound attracted her attention, making her frown. It sounded like someone was knocking on her door, softly, hesitantly. She got up from her chair, her heart pounding. Had Connor decided he needed her more than he disliked her?

Anticipation building, she crossed the room and threw open the door. Then her jaw dropped.

A gorgeous man stood in the doorway, his bedroom eyes nearly devouring her. Somewhere around five ten, he had thick brown hair that looked stylishly disheveled. Twinkling, dark brown eyes were so heavily lashed she almost hated him for them. He was sunkissed and leanly built, but powerful looking. All in all, he was rocking the whole package, and Piper was woman enough to admit she was affected by him. Her heart thudded when he turned those dark eyes on her.

"Hi," he said in a deep voice, his eyes traveling over her and back up again. "You're Piper."

"Y-yes," she stammered, feeling a blush crawling up her cheeks. He was sexy, her body nearly shouted. Those treacherous succubus hormones began pulsing through her body. "Who are you?"

She watched his nostrils flare as he caught her scent.

"Mmm," he breathed out. "I'm Malachi Cromwell. My brother said you might need my help."

Piper had to lock her knees together to keep from falling at his feet. This succubus thing was beginning to really embarrass her, she thought vaguely. She knew who he was and couldn't afford to get too distracted. Malachi had once led the Eturi, the faction of the Veil that

had broken off hundreds of years before. The Eturi didn't want to live in secrecy anymore. They wanted to dominate the human world, and Malachi had been their leader since its formation.

She studied him closely. She knew he was Lucian's half brother, though they looked nothing alike. When Lucian had taken his place on Council, Malachi had foresworn his leadership of the Eturi, refusing to battle with his brother any longer. He didn't look evil, and he definitely didn't look like a monster, but the gossip! She suppressed a shiver. Even though it had been revealed that he wasn't behind the bloody attacks against the Veil, most Veilerians avoided him like he had the plague.

"Your brother told you I needed your help?" she asked stupidly, still trying to figure out why Malachi was at her door.

He surveyed her again before meeting her gaze. His dark eyes had dilated, a red glow beginning to form around the pupil. His tongue darted out to wet his lips, drawing Piper's eyes to them. The succubus wanted to purr. His lips were full, sexy, scrumptious.

Malachi's eyes became hooded as he leaned towards her. Piper was all for that. Distantly, she thought she had to be a complete slut for wanting to crawl all over Connor one minute and aching to kiss Malachi the next, but she couldn't help herself. The succubus *wanted*, and she was quickly becoming helpless against the pull.

Just before Malachi's luscious lips touched hers, two things happened simultaneously. The tiger woke up inside her, angered to see another male attempting to touch her without being tested, slashing Piper's soul with one mighty claw, and she was yanked to the side by a strong male hand.

"What the fuck!" Connor snarled, pushing Piper behind him and growling as he towered over Malachi.

Piper stared in a daze at Connor's back, which was now bare. Sometime between dropping her off at her door and now he'd showered, because he wasn't wearing anything but a towel. His muscled back was just the slightest bit damp, tempting Piper to trace

her tongue along his spine.

Her hormones went into overdrive at the temptation in front of her. She moaned as she leaned forward and grazed her lips against his skin. Connor jolted like he'd been shocked, growling again.

"Not now, woman!" he snarled over his shoulder. To Malachi, he grated, "What are you doing here?"

Malachi seemed to be amused at Connor's reaction. "Lucian sent me to see if I could help y'all. Something about a lost werewolf." Those brown eyes flicked to Piper as she peered around Connor at him. "I didn't expect to meet such an entrancing female."

"Leave her alone," Connor muttered, leaning forward aggressively. His upper torso seemed to swell before her hungry eyes. "We don't need your help."

"You might not, but she may want it," Malachi replied with a jerk of his chin at Piper.

"What the hell does that mean?" Connor roared in outrage.

Malachi shrugged almost innocently. "She's a pre-transitioning succubus. She needs sex," he told Connor, his eyes darting back to Piper almost apologetically, although the blaze of desire in his eyes spoke of how un-sorry he really was. "I can help you out if you like, love. It would be...a pleasure."

Piper felt something jerk in her stomach at his words. Her hormones were all over the place, and she hated it. She didn't want to be a slave to her body, needing male desire to survive, but the succubus was trying to force the issue.

Her rational mind scrambled for a reason for her abrupt about-face. It had to have been that first kiss she'd shared with Connor. She wanted him, but his hatred was never far from her mind because she was beginning to hate what she was too.

"You won't be touching a hair on her head, Cromwell," Connor growled in a deep, deadly bass. "Walk away right now. Call me tomorrow, and I might talk with you about Toby."

Without looking at his face, Piper knew Connor was about to go

full wolf. Even though she knew Malachi was a vampire/demon Halfling, she believed he wouldn't fight Connor. She'd heard he was trying to repair his image in the Veil. Fighting with an Alpha wouldn't help him much.

Malachi's brown eyes looked at her almost longingly before they cut back to Connor. "See that you take care of her needs, wolfboy, or I'll ignore your words and do it myself."

Piper had just opened her mouth to protest them talking about her needs as though they were any of their business when she heard footsteps pounding up the stairs. The hair on the back of her neck rose. Instinctively, she knew what was coming up those stairs, and she wasn't happy about it.

* * * *

Connor gripped his towel, keeping Piper at his back as he moved her against the wall. He heard the sounds of feet stomping up the stairs behind Malachi.

When he'd caught the first scent of Piper's honeysuckle musk floating through the air, he'd thought she was trying to seduce him, only to open his door and see her with Cromwell. Her arousal had scented the air so strongly Connor nearly climaxed into his towel.

For Lucian's Halfling brother to threaten to "help" Piper with her transition filled Connor with rage. His wolf hovered just beneath the surface, all primal possessiveness and rage. Lucian was one of his best friends, but at that moment, he would've gladly beat him into a bloody pulp for sending his brother to them.

"Oh, no," Piper whispered, her breath brushing his back as the footsteps came closer. The wolf's ear twitched at the sheer horror in her voice.

Wondering what she knew that he didn't, he glanced over his shoulder, making sure to keep Malachi in his peripheral. "What is it?" he meant to ask, but was stopped by a sudden pulse of desire so strong

he fell to his knees.

He vaguely heard the footsteps stop for a moment then saw Malachi hit the floor as well, his face raw with lust. Connor's body twisted with desire and had a feeling his own face reflected it.

The shockwave passed. He glanced back at Piper. She slid down the wall, her body soaked with sweat as she panted. Her eyes were wide with fear, shock, and stark hunger. The pulse was her, Connor realized dazedly. She was putting out waves of lust, her hormones calling men to her and, judging by the stomping on the stairs, they were coming in droves.

"Shit," he rasped out, fighting to get to his feet. He had to get her out of here. The wolf felt panicked. It wanted to protect her and fuck her all at once.

"Connor," she said pleadingly, her mouth swollen with desire.

"You have to help her, wolf, or she'll suffer and someone will get to her, eventually," Malachi gasped warningly, his face dark with want.

Connor knew Malachi wouldn't mind being the one to help Piper but couldn't even maintain enough jealousy to punch the bastard. Instead, he scooped her into his arms, stopping for a moment to steady them as he was racked with another blast of lust.

Piper whimpered, twisting in his arms. He got a good grip on her and stalked into her room, kicking the door closed. Balancing her in his arms, he managed to lock it. He carried her into the room, dropping her on the bed.

There was the sound of shouting and grunts in the hallway. He headed back to the door but was stopped by another jaw-clenching wave of lust. Piper was suffering. She needed him.

Without thinking about the door again, Connor advanced on the bed where Piper lay writhing. Her sundress had ridden up, giving him a good glimpse of the toned length of her legs. With his cock leading the way, he stopped at the side of the bed, wanting nothing more than to push up that dress, drop his towel, and slide into her.

But he couldn't. She was a virgin. She was a succubus. His hands clenched at his sides. His mind warned him not to fall into a succubus trap while his wolf and his body strained towards her. Compromise, he thought raggedly. He didn't have to take her virginity. He refused to bring her through her transition, but he could give her relief. With a silent nod to himself, he climbed in the bed.

* * * *

Piper felt mindless with want. Her body was sensitive in ways she'd never thought possible. Her hair brushing against her shoulders made her nipples bead up. The air kissing her thighs had fire licking through her lower stomach. She wanted with a furiousness she had never experienced before.

Her hands clenched and unclenched on the bedcovers. She tossed her head back and forth as her lust climbed to a fever pitch. She felt movement next to her and sensed the male lust that perfumed the air. Her body tightened with need.

Nearly out of her mind with desire, she turned to the warm body, stroking her hands over solid muscle and silken skin. The desire pulsed stronger, craving his orgasm, needing it. The succubus demanded sex, and Piper complied. Eyes clenched shut to concentrate her other senses on the body next to her, Piper's mouth followed her hands, trailing over a male nipple, which earned her another wave of lust.

Her tongue swept out to taste salty skin, and her nostrils quivered at the scent of raw male musk. Ears straining, she thrilled to the sound of a tortured growl. Falling completely on instinct, she moved her mouth over his chest. Connor, the sane part of her mind reminded her, this is Connor. The succubus crushed sanity, pouring need into her. Her hands led the way as she tasted his skin, pausing here and there to nip his taut skin.

"Piper," he rasped, his hands coming up to grip her shoulders,

holding her still. "Let me ease you."

"Yes," Piper whispered back, unable to stop herself from tasting his skin, his lust sinking into her pores, fueling the fire of her need.

Connor's strong grip tightened as he attempted to pull her up his body, except with a sudden strength she'd never before shown, Piper broke away, shimmying down his body until she was face to groin with him. She saw his cock twitch beneath his towel. He sat forward to pull her away, but at that moment, she pulled away his scant protection.

Her mouth watered the instant his erection was revealed. Instinct guiding her, she gripped his shaft gently but firmly, stroking him in a slow, hypnotic movement. He was thick and long, heavily veined. Languid heat swept through her. This part of his anatomy liked her just fine. Seed pearled at the tip of his blunt head, drawing her gaze. She licked her lips, suddenly wanting to taste him.

Piper leaned forward, her eyes coasting up Connor's torso with rigid stomach muscles and bulging biceps as he tried to hold back his desire. She met his burning blue eyes deliberately as she lapped at his essence.

Cheekbones flushed with color, his face stark with lust, she watched Connor as she rubbed her open mouth over the tip of his cock over and over again. She coated her lips with his seed. Licking her lips, Piper's body exploded with sensation. Connor's scent was strong, wild, and musky, as was his taste, and she wanted it all. His hands shredded the sheets as she slowly engulfed the head, using her innate skills to billow his flame higher.

Piper took him into her mouth as deep as she could, until the head of his cock nudged the back of her throat. She rejoiced in the harsh growl that rumbled from his chest. A hand touched her hair, tangling in the strands. She paused, wondering what he would do. His hand cupped the back of her neck, gently guiding her in the movement he wanted. She moaned as he stroked in and out of her mouth in a slow, smooth cadence.

He growled and groaned, his hips arching up on her every downward stroke. She burned hotter, sweat trickling down her spine.

“Piper,” he gasped as his body drew tight with his impending orgasm. She rubbed her tongue on the tender underside of his shaft. Then she began to suckle.

He tried to push her away, pulling at her hair strongly to get her to release him. Piper just drew on him with more determination, wringing a cry of anguished pleasure from his throat as he came in great bursts.

The succubus subsided. Her body felt swollen and near to bursting with the power she gained from Connor’s climax. She wouldn’t be surprised if she glowed with the surplus of energy she now had.

She relaxed against him, her head resting on his thigh. Orally pleasing a male had never seemed like such an erotic thing before, but now she understood it was about giving pleasure as well as taking. Her ears still rang with the sounds of his orgasm, even while her own body pulsed with arousal. She frowned. It wasn’t the same as before. This arousal came from her, not the succubus. It had nothing to do with power, and everything to do with attraction.

Connor’s chest heaved with his harsh breathing, his penis flaccid and resting against his leg. He was a magnificent sight, bathed in perspiration, his scent wafting through the room. Piper rested her hand on his leg, enjoying the texture of his hair roughened skin until he jerked away from her.

“Oh, Gods,” she whispered softly, finally shaking off the rest of the succubus’s lust-induced trance.

Chapter Twelve

Connor struggled to control his breathing. This wasn't exactly how he'd planned to help Piper out, he thought wryly, but apparently it had worked since the pulse of lust trickled away. The only scents remaining were the musk of arousal and the sharp, acrid smell of fear. The fear wasn't his, but he couldn't find it in his heart to calm Piper's distress.

His rational mind was in place, and it was pissed. She'd subdued him as easily as an adult with a child, giving him pleasure so intense he'd been unable to break away. Not that he'd tried all that hard, he thought with an inward sneer.

The satisfaction of a powerful climax still coursed through his system, making the wolf feel lazy, but the man was disgusted. Her sinfully skilled mouth had become his whole world and in that moment, logic fled and all he wanted was to keep her. Except no one kept succubi. They were one of the few races who didn't mate, logic reminded him.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered softly, her words almost drowned out by his still harsh breathing.

The mattress dipped as she climbed out of the bed. The shuffle of her feet across the carpet sounded loud to him. Her fear stung his nose and his sense of honor. He wasn't a monster, no matter how he'd acted towards her.

Thumps against the door and walls in the hallway forced Connor to open his eyes. Reaching out with his senses, he knew Malachi was still out there, but he'd been joined by others. They were trying to get into the room.

Leaping out of bed with a sudden surge of energy, Connor threw a sheet at Piper, covering up her tempting nakedness. “Hide.”

The command went unanswered as she wrapped herself up and ran for the door. Not knowing what would possess the little Halfling to face a hoard of lusting men, Connor lunged after her, and missed her as she used her own preternatural speed to evade him. Piper threw open the door and the sounds of fighting increased.

Connor cursed loudly, catching up with Piper and thrusting her behind him, unmindful of his nakedness. Chaos reigned in the hallway as men from nearly every sector of the Veil battled it out to get to Piper. Malachi had his hands full with a couple of demons while others were just trying to get rid of the competition.

None of them noticed Connor or Piper standing in the doorway but just continued to fight with an intensity normally reserved for mating rituals. They’d tear her apart, Connor thought apprehensively.

“Stop!” Piper’s command sounded like a feral cat’s scream, echoing down the hallway and stopping every man in his tracks. Connor sensed her cat was close, giving power to her voice.

As one, heads swiveled to Connor and Piper, giving him a glimpse of the crazed lust in their eyes. But just as quickly, the lust trickled away as though it never existed.

“What happened?” one of the men, a Satyr by the looks of him, said in a daze. He was holding his ribs and blinking in confusion. “What am I doing here?”

Malachi, bloodied and tired, slumped against the wall. “Nothing, just go home,” he panted as he wiped blood off his face.

One by one, the crowd of nearly twenty men wandered off, leaving only Connor, Piper, Malachi, and one man behind. The remaining male was untouched by violence, but the lust hadn’t left the green eyes avidly watching Piper.

Connor’s wolf didn’t like the man’s attention and snarled. “Leave.”

The man ignored Connor as though he wasn’t even there. His nose

caught the stranger's scent and flashed a warning to his mind. Weretiger. Hair standing on end, Connor advanced on the other male.

"Connor," Piper said softly, her fingertips brushing his back as he moved away.

"You're a Kahn," the weretiger said to her, his voice a husky rumble of male appreciation and wariness.

"No, I'm not."

Connor heard the fear and apprehension in Piper's voice, the worry that someone had found her out. The wolf's protective instincts roared to the surface. He attacked.

When Connor was able to pull the wolf from the forefront of his mind, his hand was wrapped around the weretiger's throat, crushing it. Then he felt Piper's hand on his shoulder, urgently tugging him away from the other male.

"Please, Connor. No. You don't want to do this for me," she said pleadingly. "I'm just a succubus, remember? You hate us."

"Don't hate you." He fought to get the words out in a deep growl.

That took the wind out of her sails and her voice faltered as the scent of confusion replaced her fear for the weretiger.

"C'mon, werewolf, leave the kitty cat alone, and let's all talk about this," a jovial, yet tired voice said in the background. Malachi.

The Halfling was smart enough not to approach from behind, moving around so Connor could see him out the corner of his eye.

"The tiger was just showing a little appreciation for the lady," he said, stressing the word *lady* as though he knew exactly how much Connor hated succubi.

"What's going on here?" a woman's voice pierced the tension in the hallway, power preceding her. He recognized the voice as belonging to Stella, the hotel owner. "Connor Griffin, let Elijah go this instant!"

Stella's words no sooner left her mouth than Connor's hands began to burn with her spell. Pain forced him to release the weretiger, but he refused to move. He leaned in close, growling at the tiger

standing before him.

“What’s going on here?” Stella demanded again, keeping her distance from them, a wise move for a warmage with limited physical strength. “Where are your clothes?” she asked Connor even as she ogled him.

He didn’t bother answering, braving any embarrassment to keep the tiger away from Piper.

“It’s my fault,” Piper whispered. “I lost control...”

“Oh, honey, are you the reason why all those men came charging in here?” Stella asked sympathetically.

“Everything’s under control,” Malachi inserted with a charming smile flashed at the proprietress. “We’re just going to talk with Elijah for a bit.”

“Any time you’re involved in something, Malachi, I know trouble’s coming,” she told him sternly, though her face flushed at his attention.

“It is okay,” Elijah, the weretiger, said haltingly, with a beseeching glance at Piper that made Connor’s wolf snarl in warning.

Piper didn’t know what to do. Connor was acting so strangely, as though he was possessive of her when she knew it wasn’t true. Malachi was too jovial for her comfort and kept shooting her quick, assessing glances. Elijah, whom she’d never seen before, just stared at her as though he was a prisoner with a glimpse of freedom. He didn’t make her feel endangered, just uneasy.

He was a handsome enough man, slightly shorter than Connor, but stocky with broad shoulders and a thick chest. His dark blonde hair was just a shade too long, but it suited his face, which was strongly chiseled and sunkissed with gold freckles dusted across his nose and cheekbones. Piper’s tiger stretched lazily, padding forward to view him. It noted that his light green eyes had a hint of yellow to them. Piper knew his tiger was looking out at her.

She wasn’t comfortable standing in the hallway, especially since those other men could come back at any minute. Her inner beast

batted at Piper's mind, raking her with sharp claws. The cat wanted to find out what the other tiger wanted. She wasn't pleased to be faced with another predator that wasn't mate material.

"I think we need to talk about this," Piper said, feeling the cat trying to force out a rumble. Her vocal chords vibrated with the need to let the cat speak for her.

Connor must've sensed her difficulties because he cast a quick look over his shoulder. The heat in his eyes reminded her of what she'd done just moments before and she blushed. The wolf crept into his blue eyes, looking at her warmly, almost with approval.

"Dress," Connor growled as he snapped a look at Malachi and Elijah.

Piper had forgotten she was wearing nothing more than a sheet and turned beet red.

* * * *

"You should dress too, my friend," Malachi said when the door slammed shut behind Piper, leaving the men in the hall. "I'll have to gouge my eyes out if I look at you naked much longer."

Connor snarled at the snarky Halfling, not wanting to lose his position of power in front of the weretiger. Yet at the same time, he was viscerally aware that Stella was staring at him appreciatively. He took a deep breath. Forcing the wolf to the depths of his soul, he growled. "My room. Now."

* * * *

With only Kali's sundress to wear, Piper dropped the sheet and attempted to put it on. Even though it was huge, her hands were shaking so badly, she had trouble getting the neck hole over her head. Why was she so nervous? Was it Connor, or the weretiger?

Since the succubus was fully sated, she had retreated to the depths

of Piper's mind, leaving plenty of room for the tiger to come out. The tigress paced around, rumbling loudly. She didn't want the other weretiger near her. He wasn't deserving. The wolf she would accept before the other male. The wolf was dominant. The weretiger was weak.

Taking a deep breath, Piper forced her body to relax. The tiger was strong, but she still hadn't truly made her presence known yet. She'd loaned her power to Piper to calm the males, but she was still a shadowy figure in the grand scheme of things. Piper could handle her, she hoped.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Piper, we're meeting in my room," Connor called through the door, his voice deep, but calmer.

"O-okay," she stammered, her voice shaky and weak-sounding. She hated it.

The tiger apparently hated it, too, since she snarled in the back of Piper's mind. The males were waiting for her, and she needed to prove to them she could stand on her own.

Five minutes later, she was in Connor's room with three males. Malachi sat on the dresser across from the bed, Elijah was sitting on the floor between the bed and the wall, and Connor was a commanding presence in the center of the room.

The minute she'd entered the room, all three men had looked at her with different expressions. Piper instinctively drew her shoulders back, forcing up her chin. She was a succubus. She was not a coward. The tiger roared in her head, making her cringe.

Okay, she was a succubus-weretiger, and she wasn't a coward.

"What's going on?" She was proud her voice was calm, even though she knew they could smell her trepidation.

"You called those men here," Connor seethed from between clenched teeth.

He'd dressed in a pair of cutoff sweatshorts and nothing else. Piper tried not to think about the body she'd seen naked as the day he

was born, but it was near impossible. She'd tasted this man, and he still couldn't come to terms with her succubus.

"It wasn't intentional."

"No, we know that," Malachi said soothingly. "It was a very impressive display."

She blushed.

"You called me from the hunt," Elijah said softly, his eyes trained on Piper as though he couldn't stop looking at her. "That's never happened before."

Connor made an abrupt movement, like he wanted nothing more than to break something, but restrained himself with what looked like a great effort.

"Um, I'm sorry?" she told the tiger, not sure what he meant.

"Elijah said his tiger recognizes you as its Kahn," Connor accused, his eyes hot on her.

"That's impossible," Piper spluttered, shooting Elijah a mean look. She wanted him to go back where he'd come from. She needed time to come to grips with what she'd done to Connor. "I'm latent."

Elijah moved to his knees, putting his head even with her stomach, something her tiger didn't like at all. Piper's body became the tiger's as she rested lightly on the balls of her feet in preparation of an attack. "Kahn, no. I will never attack you," he said almost worshipfully. "You are the last of your line, my queen. I can smell your father's scent on you. I—we need you."

A low growl sounded, but it didn't come from Piper. Connor inserted himself between Piper and Elijah, his back to Piper. "Back off."

Hands held high in surrender, Elijah backed away.

Muttering something that sounded suspiciously like, "Gods save me from hormonal animals," Malachi clapped his hands sharply.

"Children, if we could get back to the issue, please?" he asked them snidely. "This succubus/tiger is a time bomb." He pointed at Piper with a wink. "She's also *the* bomb, but we're not going there.

Elijah here is going to follow her wherever she goes because his tiger recognizes hers as dominant. Men are going to follow her wherever she goes because she's a succubus in the throes of her transition, not to mention a total babe." He winked again at her blush. "What are you going to do about it?"

Piper's mouth was hanging open by the time the Halfling finished talking. She was a time bomb. Just like Pru said, she was a Pied Piper drawing men to her with her powers. Whether as a succubus or a tiger, they would come.

"I don't have time for this," Connor hissed, glowing amber eyes cutting to Piper with anger and something else.

Since she knew he was worried about his nephew, Piper didn't take offense to his words, but Elijah did. Launching himself off the floor, he went for Connor's throat with a roar.

"You will give the Kahn the respect she deserves," he roared, his eyes gone completely tiger. "She is a Queen."

Fur flowed and fangs sprang forth as they grappled. They both gently nudged Piper against the wall, away from the fight as though even then they couldn't bear hurting her.

Malachi sighed deeply and leaned back.

"You ever feel like you're beating your head against a wall?" he asked no one in particular.

Piper looked at him curiously.

He shrugged. "This isn't the first time I've had to watch a male become an utter idiot because his hormones are all out of whack," he told her with a small smile.

Knowing she was the cause of Connor's loss of control brought Piper low. What had she done to him? Everyone insisted he was a logical, levelheaded werewolf, but since she'd known him he was fiery and volatile. And utterly attractive.

Shaking her head at the girly sigh she'd just breathed, Piper looked around for something to get their attention. She didn't want Connor fighting and didn't want Elijah getting hurt for taking on the

Alpha.

Spying a pitcher, she grabbed it and looked for an opportunity.

Chapter Thirteen

Connor didn't know why he was fighting. Rational thought had fled before the weretiger's protective attitude towards Piper. The wolf had to assert his authority over this tiger. When his wolf came, he accepted the gift willingly, shifting easily and tearing into the tiger.

Elijah's tiger outweighed Connor by a hundred pounds easy, but he didn't let that bother him for one minute. He'd fought in enough dominance duels to hold his own.

Connor used his smaller size to get behind the tiger, not an easy task considering the cat was whipping around like a tornado. Gripping the cat's hind leg between his teeth, he nearly snapped it in half. Blood gushed, fueling Connor's primal instincts to continue the fight.

Roaring in pain and fury, the tiger whirled, lashing out with a massive paw. Connor let go of the tiger's leg to avoid the blow but wasn't quick enough to miss the second swipe. The attack caught him across the shoulders and sent him rolling across the floor until he hit the wall.

Leaping to his feet again with a quick shake of his head, he met the tiger head-on. Ending up beneath a five hundred pound tiger wasn't on his list of favorite places, but he used it to his advantage, digging his hind claws into the tender skin of the tiger's belly. Just when he could almost taste victory, he and the tiger were drenched with ice cold water.

"Stop it, dammit!"

Sound returned to him in a rush. Piper was screeching vague threats and warnings. Looking over at her, Connor saw her face was tight with anger or some other strong emotion. He scented it out. It

was fear. She was scared, but why?

The tiger let go of Connor, slinking low on the floor before his Kahn. The angry twitch of his tail said he wasn't any happier to end the fight than the wolf. Connor shook the water off his coat before changing back.

"What the hell did you do that for?" he growled at Piper, taking the pitcher out of her hands. She looked entirely too capable of breaking it over his head.

"You're both idiots!" she yelled back, fisting her hands on her hips.

"She has a point," Malachi said mildly from his seat on the dresser. He held his hands up innocently when Connor glared at him. "Hey, I was all for letting you guys kill each other to leave me with the fair Piper, but she didn't like seeing you bleed."

Surprised, he looked back at her. Her gold eyes were warm and searching. She was mad at him, yes, but she was also frightened. For him? Smug satisfaction filtered through his body. The wolf approved of her worry.

"I just want to talk about this and get some sleep," Piper muttered as she walked away from them.

Elijah had changed back to his human form and was watching Piper reverently again. Connor couldn't blame the tiger, but he didn't have to like it. When her back was turned, he punched Elijah in the back of the head.

"God, between you and Lucian, I don't know who's more lovesick," Malachi said disgustedly. "Get your hormones under control, Connor, and figure out how you're going to help Piper stay alive." He stood up and walked to the door. "I'll be staying at the hotel tonight." The Halfling paused, turning back to shoot Elijah a loaded glance. "Elijah, join me for a drink?"

Looking sullen and reluctant, Elijah sent Piper one more worshipful glance before following Malachi from the room.

Connor rotated his head left and right, easing the kinks in his

neck. He hadn't planned on any of this when he went to Persephone's house earlier this evening. In fact, nothing was going as planned. But that didn't seem to matter at the moment, he needed sleep and he...needed Piper to sleep next to him.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, interrupting his thoughts.

He cocked his head to the side, studying her as she stared out the window. "What for?"

Connor could practically smell her blush as it burned through her body.

Her shoulder hunched. "For what happened in my room."

His heart stopped cold and sped back up. She couldn't be sorry for giving him more pleasure than he'd ever experienced in his life. He craved to do it again and again even though he knew he should be disgusted by her feeding off his lust. Except it had been the most amazing sexual experience of his entire life.

"I don't know what happened," she went on, sounding so lost he wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms. "I thought you'd come back to talk to me, and when Malachi was there instead, it was like the succubus didn't care who fed it."

"You talk about the succubus like she isn't you," Connor commented mildly. He sat on the bed with his elbows on his knees.

"She isn't me!" Her voice came out in a muffled scream. "I don't want this, Connor. I hate it."

The agony in her voice called to Connor. She was so unlike what he'd expected. She constantly surprised him. Piper was one of the most seductive women he'd ever met and wanted nothing to do with it.

"Can you stop the transition?" he asked curiously, his scientist's mind wondering if studies had ever been done on the sexual races.

Piper let out a bitter laugh. "The transition's going to happen whether I want it to or not. Men are going to follow me around until one of them takes my virginity. It's going to happen."

The wolf howled in the back of Connor's mind. "What happens

after?" he bit out angrily. He wouldn't think about the act.

"What do you mean?"

"What happens after the transition? Will men still flock to you?" He was sure they would. She'd attract attention even without those heady pheromones.

Turning around, she rested her hips against the sill with her arms wrapped around her torso. Gold eyes met his with uncertainty. "I don't know. I don't think the pheromones will be as bad, but it's hard to say. Mom seems to think I'm the next *Seductarian*, which will give me more power and control if I'm strong enough to take her place." She nibbled on her lush bottom lip, making Connor's blood race. "After what the Chieftain said though, I'm not sure what will happen after my transition. I suppose it all depends."

"On what?" he nearly growled.

She shrugged. "On what I was trying to do. Either the tiger or the succubus will come out on top." She shuddered visibly. "It's terrifying not knowing. I don't know how to be a tiger, I only know what my family has taught me. And that was only about sex."

Connor tried to imagine being so blasé about gaining sex education through her family and couldn't. It wasn't because weres were prudish, but they tended to do things more privately.

How she came into her powers and how she used them would be interesting to witness, he supposed. A thought entered his mind, an idea so strange, he barely entertained it. Did it matter who took her virginity? Perhaps in a full-blooded succubus it wouldn't matter, but in a Halfling, was there any influence from the male? If she were initiated by an incubus, would her succubus rise? If she were initiated by a wereanimal, would her tiger take over? It was intriguing and baffling. "So you wouldn't have men clamoring after you all the time if you weren't a virgin," he concluded, logic lending him a path to follow.

She shrugged again.

He clenched his hands into fists, irritation and exhaustion battling

for control. “Look, let’s just get some sleep and talk about this in the morning,” he suggested. He wondered if he could talk her into sleeping with him to appease the strange need to be close to her. “You can stay with me if you’re worried about anyone bothering you tonight.” That was so lame.

Looking hopeful, yet wary, she held her breath for a moment. “Really?”

Swallowing hard, he nodded like it was no big deal he was inviting the big, bad succubus into his bed. “Sure, no problem. If it’ll help you get some sleep...”

* * * *

Piper wasn’t sure she’d get any sleep in a room with Connor, but she wasn’t going to let his offer go unaccepted. She couldn’t imagine going back to her room. She didn’t want to risk another pulse of pheromones that might call men to her door.

Straightening her shoulders, she looked into those crystal-blue eyes and said, “Okay.”

As though he’d been waiting for her to say just that, he stood up and began pulling the covers back on the bed. “You can take the left side,” he said as he drew back the crisp sheets. “I’ll sleep closer to the door in case we have any visitors.”

“Um, I thought I’d sleep on the floor,” she said hesitantly. He wanted her to sleep in the bed? Was he crazy? Her heart pounded at the thought.

She thought she’d sleep on the floor? Was she crazy? Connor wondered. He hadn’t shown her any of his manners so far, but he wasn’t so ungentlemanly as to make her sleep on the floor. “No, we’ll share the bed. It’s big enough,” he finished mildly. He also hadn’t been born yesterday. The wolf wanted to curl up with Piper’s scent in his nose, and manners or no, he wasn’t going to put his back out by sleeping on the floor either.

She approached the bed hesitantly. The tiger was nearly purring in satisfaction. It was pleased to share the wolf's bed. It wanted to roll in his scent, hold it to her, and sleep.

Connor looked over at her as he fluffed the pillows. "Are you sleeping in that?"

Looking down at the wrinkled sundress, Piper shrugged. "You sort of kidnapped me earlier, remember? I didn't have time to grab clothes."

"Oh." He stood with his hands on his hips, frowning at her. He hadn't thought of that. Damn, he was horrible at this kidnapping business. "You can wear one of my shirts." In fact, he wanted to insist she wear one of his shirts. It would cover a lot of her while also putting his scent all over her. He tampered the wolf's howl of delight.

He pulled a shirt out of his suitcase, tossing it to her before she'd even formed a response. Piper, never one to boast about athletic abilities she didn't have, missed it and the shirt settled over her head. "Thanks," she squeaked before she ran for the connecting bathroom.

Nearly slamming the door shut in her panic, Piper rested against it. Deep breaths, deep, deep breaths, she told herself. In and out. Bad thought. She groaned.

"You okay?" his muffled voice came through the door.

"Fine! I'm fine," she assured him. She heard him move away from the door and began lecturing herself as she took off the sundress. "You are not okay, Piper Ann. You're about to sleep with a werewolf who hates succubi. You're about to sleep with a man you practically raped not an hour ago."

Roughly pulling his T-shirt over her head, she shivered. The cotton was well-worn and thin, and Connor had worn it at some point. Heat pooled in her belly. Not the succubus this time. It was all her. This lust was from her attraction to him, not what he could do for her, the tiger, or the succubus.

Getting herself under control, Piper opened the bathroom door again, peeking out to see Connor already in bed. On his back with his

hands stacked behind his head, he was the sexiest thing she'd ever seen in her seventy-four years. That was including the all male reviews she'd gone to with her sisters.

Hesitating in the doorway, she noticed Connor's eyes slowly bleed to amber. The wolf surfaced, looking at her with hunger. Suppressing a shiver of anticipation, she clicked off the bathroom light and sped to her side of the bed, burrowing under the covers like a virgin. Which she was, she reminded herself primly.

Not sure she could trust herself if she faced him, and not wanting to give him her back, she lay on her back with the sheets tucked so tightly against her throat it was hard to swallow. She could feel him looking at her, but he said nothing as he turned off the bedside lamp.

Darkness spread throughout the room. Silence followed as they lay next to each other.

Piper stared at the ceiling, wanting to turn her head to look at him so badly she almost shook with it. She was in bed with Connor Griffin. *You were in bed with him earlier when you were sucking his co—*

"Can you sleep like that?" he suddenly asked, making Piper jerk so hard she ripped the sheet.

She gulped loudly. She was growing physically stronger. It had to be yet another manifestation of her impending transition.

The bed shook as he let out a soundless chuckle. "Calm down, Piper."

"S-sorry," she stammered, blinking widely at the darkness. "I guess I'm not sure why you'd want me to stay with you after what happened. You know, earlier." She cringed. Why did she have to keep reminding him of her impromptu blow job? She winced again at the thought.

A hand touched her shoulder making her jump again. "Piper, you didn't do anything wrong," he assured her, his deep voice reverberating in the dark room. "I'm not gonna complain about it, that's for sure." There was humor in his voice along with a deep well

of male satisfaction.

“But you didn’t want it,” she whispered, feeling a blush work its way up her body at the memory. He hadn’t wanted it, but she had, and she couldn’t even blame it all on the succubus.

“I’m an idiot sometimes. You didn’t do it on purpose or to manipulate me, right?”

How could she tell him she might’ve done it accidentally on purpose? She wasn’t even sure herself. “N–no.”

He sighed, his breath washing over her in a warm puff. “Then don’t worry about it. We have a lot of things to do tomorrow, so just get some sleep. Things’ll look better in the morning.”

“You promise?”

He let out a little huff of laughter. “Promise.” He turned on his side away from her. “Goodnight, Piper.”

Slowly, she began to relax. He didn’t seem angry or put out. His body acted as a furnace, pouring out heat in waves. She sighed soundlessly. It was...nice, she thought in surprise. Several long minutes later, she heard him breathe deeper as he fell asleep.

This had turned out to be one of the strangest days she’d ever had, and that was saying something, considering her family. Sighing softly, she turned on her side away from Connor. Who would’ve thought when she woke up that morning that she’d be going to sleep with a werewolf in the most platonic of ways?

Chapter Fourteen

Warmth and security. Piper woke up slowly, her mind fuzzy and sleepy. She nestled her head deeper into her pillow. Her internal clock told her it was close to eight. Figuring she'd stayed up late reading again, she wondered why Persephone hadn't come in to wake her up.

"Did you know you purr when you sleep?" a deep rumbling voice said under her cheek.

Eyes popping open wide, Piper blinked rapidly at the mounds of smooth tanned flesh she was resting on. Oh, gods. She'd forgotten she was sleeping with Connor. Her skin heated as a flush flowed up from her toes. Sometime during the night, she'd evidently curled up on him like she was prone to doing on her spare pillows at home.

Wondering if she could avoid talking to him if she pretended to sleep, Piper held her breath and prayed.

"I'm not really complaining. It's just different," he continued, one big hand coming to rest on the small of her back.

He was gently rubbing her spine in small circles, making her purr more unintentionally. His chest shook as he chuckled softly.

"Definitely different."

"Um," she began, the blush glowing hotly. "I'm sorry. I'm not used to sleeping with anyone."

As if he didn't already know, considering she'd shouted her virgin state to the world the night before, she mumbled to herself. As subtly as she could, she moved away from him. Sitting up with her knees tucked under her, she got her first view of a newly awakened Connor, and her heart melted.

Sleep had softened his face, leaving him looking more youthful

and sweet than she would've expected. The lines of worry on his face had eased, and his beautiful blue eyes were drowsy and warm.

Those eyes drifted over her as she sat there in his T-shirt, and they warmed considerably more. His tongue swept out over his lips, making Piper's breath catch in her throat. He was so sexy.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked her, completely at ease waking up next to her. Or rather, underneath her. He'd slept like a baby, he thought drowsily. For once since Toby left, his mind hadn't swirled with dire thoughts. The wolf was pleased as well as it gave a mighty stretch.

Piper rubbed the sleep from her eyes, nodding solemnly.

His eyes trailed over her again. She was sleep rumpled, her hair sticking up in odd directions, tiny impressions on her face from his chest hair. "You look cute in the morning," he told her with a small smile. Droopy gold eyes peered out at him in confusion.

Piper stared. Was that a dimple peeking out at her? She stared at the crease in his cheek. The damn man got sexier every time she looked at him. It just didn't seem fair.

Suddenly she frowned. Cute? She looked cute in the morning? Her eyes widened as she realized what that meant. With a yelp, she leapt from the bed and raced for the bathroom. Slamming the door shut behind her, she leaned against it. She heard a painful groan from the bedroom and figured it had to do with her appearance.

Flipping the light on, it was her turn to groan as she caught sight of herself in the mirror. If there was one thing Persephone stressed in her household, it was that her girls never sleep all night with a man just in case they weren't able to repair their looks before morning. Seeing the poofy, tangled mess that was her hair and the creases on her face, she knew her mother was right. Women should always wake up before men.

A knock sounded on the door. She jumped, clutching her brush to her chest like a cross.

"Hey, are you going to be long? I have to use the bathroom too,"

Connor called through the door, his voice just slightly disgruntled.

"I'll just be a minute," she promised quickly turning the shower on.

Masculine grumbles sounded on the other side of the door, something to the effect of "women are never just a minute in the bathroom." Huffing at the sexist remark, Piper hurried through her shower, pleased to note Connor used the same brand of soap she did.

She was surprisingly well rested. She'd slept hard, secure in the knowledge Connor wouldn't let anyone hurt her. Usually when she didn't sleep at home, she felt on edge, restless. Even if Vic came with her, she couldn't rest. With Connor, she'd let down all her defenses and trusted he would keep her safe. Then her mind drifted to what it would be like to shower with him.

The pit of her stomach warmed up thinking of his muscled body covered in soap, but she told herself it was hunger. Once she was out of the shower, she quickly dried off and wondered how she was going to brush her teeth.

She threw the bathroom door open to see Connor leaning against the opposite wall. His shorts were held up by his hipbones, and it didn't look as though the fight against gravity would last much longer. The thin trail of hair leading down from his navel disappeared under the band of his shorts, making Piper's mouth water. She was hungry, she told herself firmly. For food. She wanted food, not sex.

"May I?" he asked politely as she blocked the bathroom doorway.

"Um."

"Thanks," he said as he hustled by her, closing the door.

Less than a minute later she heard the toilet flush. Blushing wildly, Piper wanted to slap herself. Of course, he'd been waiting to pee, idiot! The faucet ran for a few more minutes, and Connor opened the door again, looking sexier than before.

"You can use my toothbrush if you want. I'll take you shopping to pick up a few things before we head out," he informed her as he stepped around her, heading back to the bed.

“Where are we going?” Piper asked as she wondered if it was too intimate to share his toothbrush or not. Stupid, really. Considering where her mouth had been just the night before, she shouldn’t have any compunction about sharing his toothbrush.

Wanting to demand an answer to the leaving comment, she followed him. He dropped his shorts. She dropped her jaw.

The early morning light peeked through the curtains, bathing Connor’s muscled body in gold. Taut backside bunching with his every step, he walked across the room to get some clothes out of the dresser. Hello, Nurse! When he leaned over to pick something up, she spun back around, practically running for the bathroom.

Piper stared at the mirror for a long time, her ears attuned to every sound in the room next to her. She heard the rasp of Connor’s zipper, the soft sigh as his shirt settled over his torso. It was erotic as all hell. Stripping in reverse, and she wasn’t even watching. Her body burned for him all the same.

“Piper?” he asked softly, calling her attention back to him. He came to stand in the doorway, leaning one shoulder on the doorjamb. “You okay? You haven’t talked much this morning.”

“Uh,” she thought frantically. Brush your teeth so you don’t have to talk! She hurriedly grabbed his toothbrush and squeezed way too much paste on the bristles. Dipping her head, she began brushing her teeth like her life depended on it.

* * * *

Tilting his head to the side, Connor wondered what was wrong with Piper this morning. He knew she was probably a little nervous with him, especially having awakened on top of him, but figured she would’ve calmed down by now. He’d even acted like she was no more than a roommate when all he’d wanted to do was join her in that shower.

Now, watching her use his toothbrush, the domesticity of the

scene warmed him from the inside out. She was still wearing his T-shirt, and it rose in the back every time she leaned forward to spit into the sink. The backs of her knees beckoned his tongue and the soft skin at the back of her thighs begged for his teeth.

At some point during the night, Connor had turned to her and she'd come to him. He'd bathed in her scent, fighting his arousal and the growing tenderness in his chest. He couldn't let himself be distracted by her. Toby was his priority. He had to be. He would help Piper as much as he could, but as soon as Toby was in his custody, it would be over. It had to be.

The wolf ignored his logical ultimatum. It was pleased with this female using his toothbrush, finding it a step in the right direction. Connor shushed the wolf, not wanting to think of how it thought Piper would fit in their life.

Several minutes passed. Piper was still scrubbing her teeth furiously. She brushed. And brushed. And brushed, avoiding his eyes in the mirror.

"Do you normally brush your teeth this long?" he asked when five minutes had passed.

The brushing stopped and she raised her eyes from the sink. Those beautiful gold eyes looked wary and slightly timid. Her gaze slid away as she continued brushing.

He frowned. Something about her submissiveness struck a painful chord in him. She was acting like he was going to jump her, and not in a good way. Connor's throat tightened just the slightest bit. He'd made her so wary of him she couldn't even look him in the eye.

The wolf was not pleased. It wanted its mate to be bold and strong. As though she heard the wolf speak, Piper's eyes clashed with his again, this time defiantly. The wolf gave a rumbling growl of approval. She was strong. She was a good mate.

The entire time the wolf was contemplating Piper, Connor had listened with half an ear, staring blankly at her in the mirror. Only when the wolf thought she was a good mate did it sink in. He

blanched. That was impossible. She wasn't his mate. She was a succubus weretiger.

If she were one or the other, he knew how to handle it. Succubi weren't mating material, so it was a moot point. Weretigers were a different species and could be mated, though not easily. With both strains running through her, Piper was an unknown. His scientific mind couldn't wrap around the possibility that his wolf recognized her as its mate. It was wrong, he thought adamantly as he turned back to the bedroom. The wolf was just entranced by the succubus.

Said wolf snapped at Connor's mind as he finished dressing. It wanted to watch over its mate. Connor jerked on the reins of his willpower. The wolf had never opposed him so strongly before, and he wasn't sure he liked it.

Piper came out of the bathroom in a cloud of mint-scented air from her aggressive brushing. Wrapping her arms around her waist, she stood there waiting.

Connor blinked. He'd been staring at her again, trying to see the succubus or weretiger hiding in her skin. He only saw Piper. Young, vulnerable, sexy. Her skin was flawless in the morning light and looked as soft as velvet. His hands itched to stroke her like the cat she was.

Instead, he cleared his throat. "I'll call Stella and see if she has something you can w—" he said, but was cut off by a rapid knocking on the door.

Protective instincts rising to the surface, Connor gently pushed Piper back in the bathroom and closed the door on her stunned face. Wincing because he knew she was going to be pissed when he let her out again, he stood for a moment in front of the hotel door trying to get a sense of who was on the other side. He grimaced. Malachi and the weretiger were knocking on his door. Not sure if he was ready to face them in the morning light, he let out a gusty sigh. Better just get it over with.

Just as he opened the door to speak with them, the bathroom door

flew open and an enraged Piper emerged, gold eyes cold and alien. The tiger had awakened, and she wasn't happy.

* * * *

Piper's fury spiked and spiraled out of control. He'd just locked her in the bathroom.

It was her own fault, she knew. She'd acted submissive and timid with him from a sense of embarrassment and uncertainty. Now he thought he had the right to treat her like a little, helpless woman. Her teeth clenched as the tiger roared for retribution.

Stalking out of the bathroom, Piper only had eyes for Connor as he stood in front of the hotel room door. Malachi and Elijah looked from Connor to Piper and back again, their confusion and wariness scenting the air.

Ignoring them for the moment, Piper advanced on Connor, allowing the tiger full access to her body. In movement so smooth Connor didn't have time to react, Piper's hand whipped out and back before she turned to greet Malachi and Elijah.

Both men were looking at Connor with shocked expressions and when Piper followed their gazes, she almost smirked. Connor looked just as shocked, although the wolf was beginning to peek out at her with approval and planned revenge in its eyes. Shrugging at him, she admired her work.

The tiger had wanted to show Connor she wasn't a tabby cat, and Piper agreed with it. How to show a bossy male she was serious? Give him an inkling of how quick and deadly she could be. In this case, she got her point across by swiping her claws through the fly of his jeans, shredding the material and the metal teeth of the zipper.

Proud of herself and her control, Piper noted Connor was wearing boxers. Three almost delicate slices across the crotch of Connor's jeans revealed black cotton. An inch more and she'd have cut through those as well, but the tiger had absolute control. It had made a cold

decision to show the male she wasn't something to be trifled with.

"Did we come at a bad time?" Malachi asked in his usual jovial voice. His dark eyes darted back and forth between Piper and Connor.

Piper turned to the Halfling with a smile. "Not at all. Good morning," she chirped with forced ease.

She wasn't quite sure she would've taught Connor a lesson quite that way on her own, and the succubus, who'd been noticeably absent, was horrified. The succubus didn't want that prime piece of flesh injured in any way, shape, or form until she'd had more of it. The tiger assured the succubus she knew what she was doing and, yes, they would have the male soon.

Flushing at the debate taking place in her mind, Piper stepped back to allow Elijah and Malachi into the room. Connor continued to stand still, looking down at his crotch in stunned disbelief.

Once Elijah and Malachi were further in the room, Piper closed the door, leaning against it with her arms folded. Connor stood right beside her, making the entry way seem airless. "Are we going to have a problem now?" she asked, wondering when she'd grown balls.

Crystal-blue eyes bled to amber as Connor met her gaze. One slow blink and the wolf appeared in full force. "Don't ever do that again," Connor warned Piper in a low growl.

If Piper had been in her right mind, she'd have just ducked her head and apologized. Unfortunately, she wasn't in her mind. The succubus and tiger were, and they didn't like the threat in his voice. Feminine outrage poured through her body, fueled by both succubus and tigress.

"Don't ever presume to hide me away again. I am not a little girl, and I don't belong to you," she answered him, her voice cold with fury.

She was tired of being told what to do by him, by Persephone, by her sisters. It might've been her transition looming, or it might've just been maturity finally grabbing hold of her, but Piper had had enough of being treated like a child.

Giving him another cold glare, she sauntered into the bedroom where Elijah and Malachi had taken the same places as they had the night before. Elijah was still looking a little worshipful, though fear lingered in his green-gold eyes. Her tiger was pleased.

Malachi's handsome face was arranged in fake sympathetic lines as he glanced over her shoulder at Connor. "Rough night?" he asked, humor dripping from his every word.

Rolling her eyes at him, Piper sat on the bed, wrapping the comforter around her. She might be coming out of her shell and becoming more assertive, but that didn't mean she was completely comfortable strutting around in nothing but a T-shirt and panties.

Finally arranging herself so nothing but her head showed, she met Connor's glare. Borrowing the tiger's confidence, she raised an eyebrow and tried to ignore the glow in his eyes.

"So, what are we doing today?" Malachi asked with a sharp clap of his hands, breaking Connor and Piper's connection.

"We already know who she's in danger from," Malachi announced when no one spoke, folding his arms over his chest. "Well, I know who she's in danger from and so does Elijah. Because we can talk like adults, not like some people I know," he added with a dark glare at Connor.

Meeting Piper's eyes again, this time challengingly, Connor opened his mouth. He was no doubt going to say something to piss her off. She narrowed her eyes in warning. "We'll just have to find her father and see if he can help us keep her safe."

Yup, that pissed her off. Piper rose from the bed, the comforter trailing behind her. "No. I don't want anything to do with the streak."

Movement out the corner of her eye had her looking at Elijah. His eyes were pleading. "Please, Kahn. You have to save them from Evan."

"Who's Evan?" Connor asked, his eyes boring holes in Piper. He didn't like her challenging his authority.

Too bad.

“Evan is the one leading the streak while our Kahn is bedridden,” Elijah said, his eyes never wavering from Piper’s face.

“What’s wrong with him leading the streak?” she asked petulantly. “He’s a weretiger and obviously strong enough to protect you.”

“He’s a monster!” Elijah nearly shouted, his tiger springing to the surface. He seemed to struggle for control, his breath speeding up. “I know he killed the Kahn’s other children, but I have no proof.”

“This is bad stuff,” Malachi said with a pitying look at Elijah. “He and I spent most of the night talking about what’s going on.”

“What does that have to do with me?” Piper asked loudly. The tiger wanted to find this Evan and deal with him while the succubus warned Piper to stay the hell away from them. “I’m not a weretiger. I can’t protect them!”

Connor came to stand before Piper, his eyes fully wolf and understanding. Leaning down until they were face-to-face, he whispered, “You have to protect them. They belong to you.”

Chapter Fifteen

Connor was sure he'd never forget the panic that spread across Piper's face when he told her the streak belonged to her. Her already pale skin had blanched completely, revealing tiny freckles across her nose. Her lush lips had thinned and turned down. He hated to see her so scared, but as a leader, fear had to be thrust aside. It was something she needed to learn.

After her impressive demonstration with the fly of his jeans, Connor knew the tiger was progressing rapidly. Just as rapidly as the succubus was. Although her fragrance wasn't as strong as it had been when she had called men to her, Piper's body was pumping out pheromones that made Connor want to let his wolf loose.

The other two men didn't seem to be affected by it, so he could only guess the addiction was beginning. He wanted her with a passion he couldn't begin to comprehend. Even though she'd proven she could emasculate him in a heartbeat, he and the wolf wanted her writhing under him, over him, next to him. His cock hardened at the images of Piper's soft body at his disposal. But she didn't need his lust right now. She needed his support and understanding. Who better to understand the fear of being responsible for others' lives than an Alpha who wasn't meant to be Alpha?

"The streak belongs to you, Piper. If you weren't capable, Ruby wouldn't have seen it," he reminded her gently, placing his hands on her shoulders.

She was trembling. He wanted to hug her to his chest but knew she wouldn't appreciate it. She was trying her damndest to be strong in front of Malachi, Elijah, and himself. The tiger was forcing her to

prove her mettle.

“Elijah told me some of what goes on in his streak, and I’m tempted to contact Lucian about it,” Malachi said solemnly, his dark eyes flinching. Considering the things the former Eturian leader had seen in his lifetime, Connor would bet this Evan character was a monster.

“Why won’t you?” Piper asked, her heart thudding in fear.

The look Malachi gave her was full of pity and anger. “Because even though Council has laws set in place, nothing protects a streak from an internal dominance challenge.”

“The cubs,” Elijah whispered, his voice hoarse with torment and pain. “Oh, gods, the cubs.”

Connor felt Piper stiffen under his hands. Gold eyes flashing fire, she swiveled her head in a catlike movement that gave him chills. “Cubs?” she asked, her voice dipping into a husky feminine growl.

Elijah nodded, his hands covering his face. “He killed all the cubs and took the females for his own. Hannah, my wife—” He gulped loudly. Connor felt dread crawling over his skin as the weretiger fought to control herself. This wasn’t going to be good. “My wife tried to protect our cub while I was out hunting. Evan killed her and our son.” His hands fell, exposing his red-rimmed eyes. “I left the streak, going solo, but they continue to hunt me.”

Piper’s face was a mask of fury. Connor wasn’t sure he’d ever seen her so enraged and he couldn’t blame her. The Veil was brutal in some ways, but children were revered. All weres took pride in not carrying their animalistic urges too far. It was mostly the cat races who fought against their animals the most, but they did it. This Evan was a monster using his animal to commit heinous crimes.

“Why hasn’t anyone heard of this before?” Piper asked softly, her voice cold.

It was Elijah’s turn to tremble, and Connor knew why. Piper’s voice was filled with power. It was the kind of power that raked along the spine and grabbed the back of your neck to get your attention. He

wasn't a cat and he felt it. He could only imagine how strong it felt to Elijah.

"He kills anyone who opposes him. The females are locked up, and those who do follow him torment the others," Elijah admitted with shame. "I ran instead of letting them kill me."

"What is the Kahn doing? Doesn't he see what's going on?" she demanded in rapid bursts of air.

"No, Kahn. He is ill, and when he leaves his bed, it's with one of Evan's enforcers tagging along. When it became obvious he would never walk again, Evan was nominated as his second, and he trusts him implicitly."

Connor didn't like the sound of this at all. Yes, Piper was the rightful Kahn, but she didn't know how to fight as an animal. She claimed to be latent, and she was supposed to take the streak from a monster of Evan's stature? He and the wolf didn't like it at all.

"Where's the streak located?" she asked softly. Her gold eyes remained on Elijah, compelling him to answer her. The power was still in her voice, oozing from every word like a promise.

Elijah apparently felt it because hope dawned on his face. The worshipful expression deepened into awe and love. It was the love of a weaker person finding someone to lend them strength. Piper was the Kahn, and Elijah was relieved he had someone to fight for him and his lost family. Connor saw it in the way his face relaxed.

"You're not going yet," Connor inserted, not wanting Piper going off half-cocked.

Hair flying as she whipped her head around, Piper glared at him. No, not Piper. The tiger. The tiger wanted revenge on Evan for harming those cubs, for taking her father's streak over. "I'll go when I'm damn well ready," she hissed at him, drawing her upper lip back from her teeth.

Connor nodded. "Yes, when you're ready. You're not ready yet." He spoke calmly though his heart was pounding fit to burst out of his chest. He couldn't blow this. If he stepped the wrong way, she'd run

off without him and get herself killed. That was the last thing he wanted. “We’ll make you ready,” he promised softly.

The tiger faded slightly as Piper regained some control over herself. She nodded shortly.

“Since that’s settled, what are we gonna do now?” Malachi asked from his perch atop the dresser.

“We’ll need to let Piper practice with the tiger,” Connor said to all of them. He knew he wasn’t getting rid of Elijah now. The weretiger wasn’t going anywhere without his Kahn. Malachi was a different story. The demon Halfling had no stakes in the streak, but perhaps he could be convinced to help Connor find Toby. “We’ll need a place without distractions and people.”

Piper nodded again. “I don’t want to hurt anyone,” she whispered, her eyes downcast.

Barely resisting the urge to stroke her cheek in comfort, Connor looked at Malachi.

Dark eyes glowing with unholy amusement, Malachi said, “I know the perfect place.”

* * * *

Malachi’s grand idea involved him going to speak with the Chieftain. Since Piper still had nothing to wear, she and Connor stayed in town to find clothing. It was, Connor thought, one of the strangest days of his life.

He’d never gone shopping with a female before. His interactions with females didn’t include buying clothes, so when he found himself in a small boutique, he felt very out of place. Piper was immediately set upon by the owner, who seemed to know her. The male fairy shot Connor outraged glances when Piper mentioned item after item of clothing she needed.

Finally, the fairy and his assistant took Piper in the back, leaving Connor to cool his heels in the store. He wandered around looking at

frilly, feminine clothing he'd give his right arm to see Piper in.

The hair rose on the back of his neck. The wolf lifted its head, scenting the air. Connor's head whipped around to the store windows. No one was there, but he had the strongest sense someone had been watching him. Following his instinct, he stepped outside, pulling in the scents. He smelled several species, but one scent smelled strangely familiar.

"Connor?" Piper asked from behind him, startling him out of his contemplation. "What is it?"

Rubbing the back of his neck, he turned around. "I'm not sure. I could've sworn I—"

He almost swallowed his tongue. He knew his eyes were bugging out, but a male had to have some warning when he sent a hoyden into a store and got a siren in return. She wore a pair of curve-hugging jeans. He couldn't help his eyes tracing the display covetously. Mouthwatering. That's what she was, he thought. The T-shirt she wore should've been nothing special, but the deep V-neck gave him a teasing glimpse of the valley between her breasts.

"What could you have sworn?" she asked him when he just stood there staring at her.

He stared at her unable to spare an intelligent thought. He knew the wolf was peeking out at her because he saw a returning gleam of interest from her tiger. His stomach clenched with need.

"Connor?"

He blinked, jerking out of his lustful daze. It wasn't the easiest of feats, he thought. Her face had softened, a soft flush mounting her cheeks. She was attracted to him, but whether that was because of her transition, or herself he didn't know.

"I thought I smelled Toby out there," he finally said, breaking off thoughts of them giving in to their desire, transitionally induced or not.

Her eyes lit up. "Are you sure? Let's go look for him."

He shook his head. "I lost the scent just as soon as I caught it. It

probably wasn't him, but one of the other wolves in the local pack," he answered. Which didn't make him feel any better.

The fairy stepped forward with several bags. "Are you finished shopping?" Connor asked, taking the bags from the other male. He frowned down at them. She hadn't bought much, which bothered him for some reason. "Is this all you're getting?"

Piper nodded slowly, a frown furrowing her forehead. "I need at least two more pairs of jeans, but I don't have my purse," she explained to Connor. "I'd charge it to Mom's account, except I don't want her to know where we are."

He shrugged. "So? I'll buy whatever else you need." He looked at Savio, who was hovering behind them. "Get her whatever else she needs."

Savio, ever the opportunist, began pulling clothes off the racks with zeal.

Piper stopped him. "Connor, no. I can't accept clothing from you," she protested strongly.

"Why not?" he asked, planting his large hands on his hips. She had one of those looks on her face as though she was trying to humor him. "It's my fault you don't have your clothes."

"Because it goes against everything I believe in. We're not in a relationship. We're 'frenemies' who had a couple of make-out sessions. That's all," she insisted, her hands going to her hips. "I don't need anything else."

Connor eyed her carefully. Was this some kind of female trick? he wondered warily. "You'll need clothes to work out in," he reminded her. Was she going to make this difficult for him? And what the hell did she mean by frenemies? They were...well, he didn't know what they were exactly, but not enemies.

"I'll wear jeans," she replied testily.

He studied her closely. So closely in fact, she shifted on her feet as though uneasy. Then he shook his head. "Two more pairs of jeans, and some of those," he told Savio.

Those turned out to be yoga pants. She turned to look at him as though he was crazy. “No,” she told the designer as he grabbed three of the pants.

“Piper,” Connor said in a warning voice. He pointed at the pants again. “Stop being stubborn and let me buy them for you.”

“But why would you want to buy anything for me?” she yelled at the infuriating male.

He roared back, “Because I want the clothes you wear to come from me!”

* * * *

“Oh!” Savio gasped from the other side of the room, drawing Piper’s gaze. He clutched three pairs of the yoga pants to his chest, eyes wide with avid curiosity.

She frowned back at Connor. A tic beat in his jaw. He held himself so rigidly, she knew he regretted his words. He wanted her to wear clothes he bought, she mused. Did that mean he wanted her beholden to him? Or did it mean he wanted to provide for her? It was too confusing, she thought with a flash of some indescribable emotion.

Suddenly, his posture changed, relaxed. He ran a hand through his hair, sighing deeply. “Just...let me do this for you. Please.”

It was the “please” that changed her mind. He said it grudgingly, but with a hint of uncertainty, as though he wasn’t even sure why it was so important to him. Perhaps, she thought as she nodded to Savio, he was just as lost as she was. Maybe he was finally realizing she and her family weren’t monsters.

“Thank you.”

* * * *

Connor looked down at her. The wolf pressed the matter, wanting

her to wear clothing he'd purchased. It wanted to provide for her, showing her how a wolf cared for its mate. It was illogical, potentially dangerous, and oh so tempting to go along with the wolf's wants. And right now, the wolf wanted to taste her. It didn't care that they were in the middle of a store.

He lowered his head, breathing in the honeysuckle scent he would always associate with her. Piper's eyes drooped until he saw only a hint of gold. Her tongue swept out to wet her lips, earning a soft growl from him.

His lips met hers in a quasi-chaste kiss. Just mouth pressed to mouth, yet it sent fire racing through his body. That changed in a heartbeat as she drew a deep breath. Her breasts brushed his chest, and all thought left his mind. One arm snaking around her waist, he pulled her into his body, molding it to him and guided her to a small alcove next to the dressing rooms. It didn't offer complete privacy, but it was enough for the moment.

When their lips met the second time, he devoured her, his tongue plunging into the delicious warmth of her mouth. Her hands crept up to his chest, kneading gently as their tongues tangled together. He was hard and aching. Pressing his erection into the soft curve of her stomach, he rubbed against her.

Purring erupted from her throat, loud and sexy. Those kneading hands slipped around his waist to stroke his back. His own hands slipped to the round derriere that tempted him so much. Hefting her into his hands, he lifted her until his cock was nestled into the V of her thighs. The kiss exploded out of control.

"Ahem."

Connor ignored the annoying person who was trying to interrupt this all-important kiss. Piper was willingly pressed against him, her mouth just as hungry as his. If they were anywhere private, he'd have her flat on her back. It wouldn't matter that she was a virgin. His heart stuttered to a grinding halt. It was as though the word "virgin" flashed in neon colors in his head. He couldn't take her, not here. He came up

for air.

* * * *

“Do you suppose you could stop mauling my sister for five minutes so I can kick your ass?” a sweet, feminine voice said from behind them.

Piper felt color bloom in her face. Oh, gods! She’d just kissed Connor in the middle of the most visited boutique in the Veilerian fashion world. Shock and embarrassment helped her spring from Connor’s embrace.

Whirling around, she saw Pru standing behind them with her arms crossed over her ample chest. She was tapping the toe of one of her spike-heeled boots. As usual, Pru was dressed like the fashionista she was in skinny pants and a graffiti print tunic with a deep V-neck collar.

Pru’s eyes narrowed on Connor with malicious intent. Before she could do more than open her mouth though, Piper threw her arms around her older sister. “Pru!” she cried happily. “What are you doing here?”

Her distraction worked as Pru returned Piper’s hug. “I’m here to shop. What are you doing here?”

Piper’s face went up in flames. “Um.” She sensed Connor shifting to move next to her.

Waving a hand in dismissal, Pru shot Connor another dark look. “Nevermind. It’s obvious what you were doing, but my real question is why with him?”

“Prudence, that’s rude!” Piper admonished her older sister, though her cheeks still felt hot.

“He kidnapped you. I’m within my rights to kill him.”

Mimicking her posture, Connor raised one eyebrow. “Kill me? I’d love to see you try,” he said softly.

“No one’s killing anyone,” Piper exclaimed, her gaze bouncing

between Pru and Connor. They looked like gladiators about to take the Colosseum. “It was a misunderstanding, Pru. Connor, um, didn’t mean to kidnap me.”

* * * *

He was still trying to understand how their mother could’ve named a succubus Prudence, but he wisely held back. Piper was upset enough as it was, except he wasn’t going to let her act as though he didn’t know he his own mind.

“Yes, I did,” Connor protested in a mild tone. “I had every intention of having your sister with me, regardless of how it came about.” He wasn’t about to bow down to some uppity little succubus, no matter who she was related to.

Piper’s indignant face had him fighting a smile. She didn’t understand that this confrontation wasn’t about her so much as establishing authority. Her sister was battling against him for the right to protect Piper. He almost admired the red-faced Prudence for it. It was a very wolflike attribute.

In Prudence’s defense, she didn’t rise to the bait, though a sly look came into her blue eyes. “Interesting choice of words, furball. *Having* my sister. Does that mean you’re going to suck up your bad attitude and see to her transition?”

“Pru!” Piper all but shouted, her cheeks flaring scarlet red as though she was completely mortified. “I’m helping him with his problem, and he’s helping me with one of mine. That’s all there is to it.”

Pru’s eyebrow shot upward. “Helping each other, eh? Is that what they’re calling it these days?”

Connor wouldn’t have cared what the succubus said to him. He expected them to be vulgar and depraved, but Piper looked as though she was about to implode. Her gold eyes seemed to glow with temper and embarrassment. He wouldn’t stand for her to be hurt in anyway.

“You’ll hold your tongue, succubus,” Connor rumbled in a deadly voice. He placed his hand on Piper’s shoulder. “Your sister has enough to worry about without you embarrassing her.”

That shut both of the females up. Two sets of eyes stared at him, three if he counted the designer, in varying degrees of surprise.

“Well,” Pru said, her tone thoughtful. She shook her head. “I want to talk to Piper. Alone.”

Connor inclined his head before taking five large steps back to give the women privacy. The fairy designer pretended to be studying the register. “How much?” he asked Savio.

A white-toothed smile glowed in his swarthy face. “That was some of the best entertainment I’ve had in years,” the fairy said as he placed the items in bags. He named a total and leaned over the counter to watch the sisters talk. “It’s just too bad I won’t be able to tell everyone about this,” he continued with a regretful sigh.

“Yeah,” Connor agreed wryly. He handed over his credit card and a very generous tip. “That’s too bad.”

* * * *

“I can’t believe you’d embarrass me this way!” Piper hissed at Pru. Her face felt as though it were permanently blistered from her blush.

Pru smirked, her eyes flicking to Connor. “He’s *hawt*, sis! I hope you’re planning to get some of that.”

“Pru...For Lilith’s sake, if you don’t stop,” Piper warned, her voice a low growl.

Something in her face must’ve registered because Pru’s face went from amused to concerned in a matter of seconds. “What is it?” Her sharp gaze studied Piper closely. Her eyes widened. “The transition?” she whispered the question. “You started it?”

Piper gave a sharp nod.

“That’s...that’s just wonderful, Piper!” Her cry was loud and

joyful. "Mom will be so happy!"

Piper froze. She hadn't thought about Persephone at all. What would her mother say? she wondered. Would she be smug because Piper was finally feeling urges? Or, would she be irate because Piper hadn't listened to her and stayed with Connor?

"She doesn't need to know just yet," Piper hedged.

Planting her hands on her hips, Pru pinned her sister in place with a gimlet glare. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Ah," she hesitated. How could she tell her full-blooded succubus sister that the tiger was making itself known?

Brows lowering in a forbidding frown, Pru gave Piper The Look. It was a look that didn't bode well for younger sisters. Piper inwardly cringed, while her tiger puffed up in arrogance. It wasn't ashamed of what she was becoming. It was proud to finally move forward in Piper's life.

"Piper, what's going on?" Pru asked in a serious tone, her gaze flicking back to Connor. "Has he hurt you?"

"What? No!" Piper answered without thinking. "He's been very nice."

"Stockholm syndrome, much?" was Pru's response.

"It isn't Stockholm syndrome," Piper bit out angrily. "Mom has been trying to pimp me out for four years now. She practically threw me to the wolves! I mean, threw me at Connor. None of this is his fault," she finished, her chest heaving.

The tiger prowled just beyond her consciousness. It was not pleased with this conversation. Her sister was pushing buttons that were better left untouched.

"Mom is not pimping you out!" Pru immediately countered. "She's only done what she needs to do to get you through your transition. You shouldn't be so ungrateful." Her hands flapped in the direction of Connor. "That wolf is nothing but a lay, Piper. He'll pop your cherry and move on, and so will you."

That did it. There was no hesitation in the tiger, just instinct,

razor-sharp and deadly. Claws extended, Piper surrendered to the call of the tigress.

Chapter Sixteen

“Shit!” Connor shouted, springing in front of Piper as she went for her sister’s throat. One second they’d been standing there talking, and the next thing he knew Piper’s tiger emerged.

He grunted as Piper’s claws collided with his chest. A snarl of feline fury escaped her throat. Pinning her wrists together with one hand, Connor jerked her head back with the other.

“Piper,” he said calmly, despite his thudding heart. “Piper, come out of it.”

“What’d you do to my sister?” Prudence screamed from behind him. “Oh. My. God! What’s wrong with her?”

Caught between the two females, one who was verbally abusing him, and the other who was trying to shred his chest, Connor lost all patience. “Shut up!” he roared.

Prudence went quiet, but Piper struggled harder. Feral growls in the back of her throat told him just how thoroughly pissed the tiger was. He shook her gently. “Piper, don’t let the tiger control you.” He forced his voice into a soothing cadence.

A hiss was his answer. The tiger was getting closer and closer to reaching full transition. He could smell the wildness on her even as she struggled to free herself from his hold. Just like other shifters, Piper’s body would shift with her emotions at first, but eventually she’d learn to control it. With his help, she could control it faster.

Gods, he thought with amusement. Who would’ve ever thought a wolf would try to calm down a cat? Yet here he was, using his best moves to smooth her ruffled fur.

The wild light in her gold eyes made her look wholly different.

Even her features appeared altered, giving her face a more feline cast. She wouldn't shift until she went through her transition, but that she was so obviously close was telling. Her body was leaning more towards the tiger. Something eased in his chest. He could handle the weretiger. The succubus still scared the shit out of him.

"C'mon, kitty cat," he murmured softly. He stroked her hair, taking extra care to trace the curve of her ear.

* * * *

Piper slowly swam through the mass of fur she'd been buried beneath when the tiger emerged. Sinking back into herself, she mentally assessed where she was. There was hardness pressed into the front of her body. Heat and hardness. Her olfactory nerves delighted in the familiar scent of smoke and spices. Connor. Opening her eyes, she had to blink several times to clear away the blurriness.

When she could finally see, she was captured in Connor's crystalline eyes. He was frowning into her face, some indescribable emotion passing through his beautiful blues.

"What happened?" she croaked. Ick, she thought with a grimace. It almost felt as though she had fur on her tongue.

"The tiger went for your sister," Connor said softly, concern evident in his tone.

Panic set in. "Pru?" she gasped, struggling out of Connor's hold. "Is she okay? Did I—? Oh gods, did I hurt her?"

"No," Pru said gently from behind Connor. She stepped into view, her face white as a sheet. "Your wolf...protected me from you."

"Oh, Pru," Piper wailed. "I'm so sorry! You know I'd never hurt you!"

Tears glinted in Prudence's eyes. She gave Piper a watery smile. "Of course I know that, baby girl."

Yet when Piper attempted to go to her sister, Pru's leg moved back as though she wanted to keep out of Piper's reach. She checked

the telling movement, but Piper saw. Pain ripped through her chest. She knew Pru had done it instinctively, but it still hurt. Her sister was afraid of her!

Pru's mouth trembled. "Does Mom know?"

Pain twisted into illness, the taste of bile filling Piper's mouth. Persephone couldn't know, not yet. Not until she was better able to control the tiger, Piper thought frantically.

"No," she whispered, shaking her head adamantly.

A frown creased Pru's face. "She needs to know, Piper. She's been counting on you taking over the house after your transition. If you're...you know," she said lamely, flopping her hand at Piper. "Then she deserves to know you can't follow through."

Connor pulled Piper into his side. "This isn't her fault," he growled at her sister "She has enough to deal with right now without having your mother making her feel like a second-class citizen."

Stunned, Piper looked up at Connor, not sure what to make of his sudden defense of her. It was undeniably sweet and shocking. This werewolf, who hated what she was, was taking up for her. If it hadn't been such a horrible situation, she might've hugged him. As it was, it felt as effective as putting a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound.

Pru drew herself up to her full height. "We've never treated Piper like a second-class citizen! We love her," Pru said fiercely.

"You love her so much no one ever taught her how to be what she is. A succubus-weretiger!" Connor retorted hotly. "You all ignored the other part of her genetics, pretending she's only a succubus, but all you've done is hinder her."

Pru's face was pale, her eyes stricken. She looked at Piper with uncertainty. "How did we hinder her? We've kept her protected all this time."

"I've been recognized as Kahn of my father's streak," Piper admitted in a low voice.

One of Pru's hands crept up to her throat. "That's—that's impossible!"

Piper smiled without humor. “The Chieftain ordained it herself.”

Neither Piper nor Connor were prepared for Pru’s eyes rolling to the back of her head, though they made a valiant effort to catch her before she fell.

* * * *

Yet again, Connor found himself in a new position. This time, however, he had nothing but his big mouth to blame. First, he’d let the wolf talk him into defending Piper to her sister, in front of a gossiping fairy, of all beings. Then, he’d taken the succubus out of Piper’s arms when she struggled to rise with her sister.

He had no idea what he was doing. He was so far out of his depths he knew there wasn’t a chance in the nine Hells a lifesaver could bail him out. Life was much easier when he was reading over historical texts, not dealing with troublesome females of the succubus kind.

Piper ran ahead of him clutching her bags in her hands. She kept looking back over her shoulder as though to make sure the big bad wolf hadn’t made a meal out of her sister. He didn’t know what they looked like walking down Main Street, and didn’t even want to speculate, because the minute they reached The Hourglass again, Stella let out a little shriek.

“What’d you do?” she demanded of Connor when he walked into the hotel with a limp succubus in his arms.

Grousing moodily, Connor growled, “Nothing. Piper did it.”

She gasped loudly, whirling around. The bags banged into his shins. “I did not! I don’t know what happened. She was standing there, and then she was fainting,” she spluttered to Stella.

“Well, put her in here,” Stella ordered, directing him and Piper into the office behind the counter.

A television was blaring out the soaps. There was a small brazier in the center of the room, no doubt where Stella practiced spells while waiting for customers. Connor strode to a battered sofa pushed against

the wall across from the television, placing Prudence on the cushions.

The three of them stood looking down at the unconscious succubus.

“She’s never fainted before,” Piper whispered, wringing her hands.

Shifting slightly, Connor pressed his shoulder into hers, offering her silent support. She sniffled loudly, then threw herself in his arms. He pulled her close, stroking her back.

He closed his eyes, dipping his head to breathe in her honeysuckle scent. His body reacted to her nearness, though what he felt wasn’t sexual in the least. The wolf was pleased that Piper turned to him for comfort. Hell, Connor thought, placing a barely-there kiss to the crown of Piper’s head, the man was pleased she’d turned to him for comfort. It felt natural and right to hold her in his arms, to ease her worry.

Why was that? he wondered idly. He’d never wanted to comfort a female in his life. With an accident-prone cub to look after, he’d never let any female close, or at least closer than a quick, cold coupling. Yet here he was pleased that he was able to ease Piper’s hurts. And she was a succubus to boot!

Stella eyed them curiously, though she said nothing when Connor gave her a warning glare. He knew it was useless to hope this little scene wouldn’t make it to the grapevine, but she could at least pretend she wasn’t absorbing every little detail.

With one last sniff, Piper turned to look at her sister, though she made no move to leave his arms. “What should we do?”

“Well,” Stella began, looking at the unconscious succubus. “It depends on why she fainted. Is she pregnant, you think?”

* * * *

Piper went still, the hair standing on the back of her neck. Was Pru pregnant? It wasn’t impossible, she supposed. But there was no

way for her to know for sure. This wasn't exactly something her Mom had prepared her for. Out of all the sex talks she'd suffered through, pregnancy had never been mentioned. What she did know came from the romance books she'd read over the years. Yet she'd never given it another thought. Something stirred in her soul, a yearning for her own child.

Connor shifted behind her, his arm tightening around her waist. The tiger forced a purr out of her throat. It liked Connor, liked his commanding nature. Connor could give her a child, it knew. A mating between a dominant wolf and tiger would make for strong offspring.

"Piper?" the strong werewolf said, his breath brushing past her ear.

Shivering from the sensation, she pulled away slightly. The tiger wanted to mate with him in spite of his hatred of her other half. The succubus was presently trying to take over again, wanting to get closer to the male lust shimmering under Connor's iron-clad control.

Thankfully, Pru's eyes fluttered open before Piper could do something stupid like give into the demands of both the succubus and the tigress and pounce on Connor. She leaned forward instead, to better see Pru. If it also happened to thrust her backside into Connor's groin, that was accidental. Sort of. Okay, not really.

"Pru?" she asked, ignoring the succubus who wanted to wiggle into the sudden ridge of flesh pressing against her.

"Piper?" Pru murmured softly, her eyes slowly blinking open. "What happened?"

"You fainted."

Her sister scoffed. "I don't faint."

"Well, you did," Piper insisted, taking a step forward. The heat at her back was scorching, and she could feel her body preparing the pheromones that would drive Connor insane. She didn't need that right now, she told the succubus firmly. "Are you pregnant?" she asked, unable to help herself. If Pru was pregnant, she'd be an aunt!

"Huh? Pregnant?" Pru's eyes were wide-open now, the color

slowly draining from her face. “Ohmigod!”

“You are pregnant!” Piper nearly shouted, her excitement rising. “Oh my gods! I’m going to be an aunt!”

“Shush,” Pru ordered, a flush climbing her cheeks. “Gods...that werewolf...”

The hair on the back of Piper’s neck bristled. “Werewolf?”

A dreamy look entered Pru’s eyes. “Mmm, yes. Handsome little bugger. Young. Lots and lots of stamina.”

“TMI,” Piper groaned, her stomach giving a lurch. She had a bad feeling about—

“Is this what he looked like?” Connor asked, thrusting the familiar picture of Toby into Prudence’s face.

Her sister glared at him before turning her attention to the snapshot he held. Piper watched Pru’s eyes go from angry to slumberous. Her face softened, glowed.

“Oh. My. Gods,” Piper breathed.

Shock seemed to hold Connor immobile for several heartbeats. Piper could just imagine what he was thinking. Toby, his nephew, the son of his brother who’d died to a succubus had bedded one *and* gotten her pregnant.

“Did you hurt him?” he demanded harshly.

Prudence’s eyes left the picture. She blinked. “Hurt him? Are you kidding me?” she scoffed, sitting up. “I’m tempted to build a bloody shrine to that male!”

Connor frowned down at Pru. “A shrine?” he asked in disbelief.

She shivered, her eyes going to Piper. “Girl, he can do things with his tongue you would just not believe!”

Blushing hotly, Piper shook her head at her sister. She didn’t want to hear about Toby’s sexual skills, and judging by the tension in Connor, neither did he. “How did you meet him?”

This time it was Pru who blushed. She also twiddled her thumbs. “Um. Remember when Mom went to the Permits Board meeting a couple months ago?”

Piper nodded, frowning slightly. She did. Persephone had gone to the meeting, which had lasted for five days. The House had remained closed the entire time as their permit was in danger of being revoked. Penny, Posey, and Pauline had called some of their favorite incubi over to sate their needs, but Pru had gone partying after swearing on her favorite pair of heels she wouldn't use her pheromones to hunt.

None of them had told Persephone about Pru's partying, nor how long she'd been gone. Pru had disappeared for three days, only to return with a special glow. She'd passed it off as the result of a new beauty treatment, but since she wore the same glow now, Piper suspected her sister had fallen in love. With Toby Griffin.

* * * *

"He's my nephew," Connor bit out, unable to believe this turn of events. His nephew had been with a succubus and may have even impregnated her. "How do you know it's his baby?" he demanded.

Piper shot him a dirty look that warned him he'd hear about her displeasure later. He shrugged. He wasn't going to take the word of a succubus even if she was related to Piper.

"Um," Prudence said hesitantly, a furious blush climbing her cheeks again. "I haven't, um, you know...with anyone else."

"Impossible. You're well-fed," he retorted, praying she was lying. Please, don't let this succubus be carrying my great-nephew, he prayed to the Gods.

It was her turn to scowl at him. "Of course I'm well-fed. I just don't have to have sex to feed. Idiot."

"You've been siphoning from a distance?" Piper asked, obviously horrified. She glanced at Connor and answered his unspoken question. "Siphoning doesn't give nearly as much power as sex does." She glared at Prudence. "Are you insane?" she shouted.

A mulish expression crossed her sister's face. "I've only done a little kissing, maybe some touching, but no full-on contact. I'm fine!"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I just didn't want any of them, okay?"

Connor growled. "You're not sinking your claws into my nephew," he warned in a deep bass.

Pru shot to her feet, planting her hands on her hips. "I don't have my claws in him. And besides," she continued, glaring up at Connor. "He's the Alpha, and once he gets his pack in order, he's coming back for me!"

* * * *

Silence descended on the office. Stella, who'd retreated to the other side of the room, gasped softly. Piper's jaw dropped. Toby was trying to get the pack in order? He was coming back for Prudence?

A deep rumbling sounded from Connor. Not sure what it was, Piper eased away from him. Then, it burst out of him. Laughter. Great whoops of laughter spilling out of his chest and filling the room. He laughed until tears ran down his face. Piper didn't know what to do. The laughter wasn't joyful. It was bitter, angry.

Prudence looked puzzled, stepping away from Connor with her arms wrapped around herself. "Toby didn't say his uncle was crazy," she muttered.

Finally, Connor's laughter died. It ended so abruptly, Piper cringed. He straightened, his face dark with anger and hurt. Oh, gods, his face was etched with inner turmoil. She wanted to wrap her hands around Toby's neck and throttle him. How could he have done this to his uncle? she wondered angrily.

"That's what all of this was about?" Connor asked in calm voice. "Leadership of the pack?"

"What's he talking about?" Pru asked Piper, her tone confused.

"Toby's been missing for over a month. Connor's been worried about him," Piper told her sister while Connor stood as still as a statue next to her. She imagined she could feel his pain and betrayal beating

at her. This had to be killing him, she thought with sympathy and anger. “Toby isn’t the Alpha. Not yet. Connor is.”

“I don’t understand,” Pru said with a furrowed brow. “He told me his uncle would come looking for him, and when he did, Mom was going to have a surprise waiting for him.”

Now Piper felt like the one who’d been sucker punched. Persephone was in on this as well? The blood rushed from her head, leaving her dizzy. Gods, she thought as darkness encroached. Persephone and Toby were working together to meet their own goals. Toby had an agenda to become Alpha, and Persephone wanted to jumpstart Piper’s transition, and in working together, they’d completely messed up Connor’s and Piper’s lives.

Chapter Seventeen

Connor caught Piper as she sank to the ground. He didn't want to touch her, didn't want to be reminded of how easily he'd been led astray from his purpose. But he couldn't let her hurt herself in her faint. Besides, the wolf told him now that his nephew had betrayed him, he had no one but Piper on his side.

He ignored the wolf, scooping Piper into his arms. Her sister's eyes were clouded with confusion and surprise. "What's going on?" she asked him, concern replacing the surprise on her face as she looked at Piper.

Snorting loudly, he ignored her. He left the office, carrying Piper upstairs to her room. They both needed to get away from Prudence for a little while. He figured the succubus would either remain at the hotel until she saw Piper, or she'd return home to tell their mother where Piper was. Either way, he'd be seeing her again, he was sure.

Once inside Piper's hotel room, he placed her on the bed. He felt strangely reluctant to leave her, so he followed his instinct and sat next to her. She looked too pale, he thought with a rough sigh. Her mother hadn't just aided his nephew, but she'd also ruined Piper's life.

If not for this entire farce, there was a chance Piper's tiger would have remained dormant. She wouldn't be fighting to control a beast inside her. She'd be awaiting the right male to take her virginity and usher her into her transition. That thought made the wolf's hackles rise. No other male would touch her, the wolf threatened.

He shook his head. What happened to Piper didn't concern him. What Toby had perpetuated did. His nephew, his pack, had betrayed

him. They'd schemed together, he realized with a pang. Owen, one of the few people he knew who was honest as the day was long, had lied to him. Were they all so keen to get rid of him then? he wondered. Was he that bad of an Alpha that they couldn't confront him with their true wishes?

Self-doubt, something he rarely ever indulged in, filled his mind. He'd tried being a good replacement. He'd sacrificed several years of his life and research, pouring all of his energy into raising Toby into the kind of Alpha the pack would be proud of. He would have never suspected any of them to have a hand in his current pain. He loved his pack, trusted them. He loved Toby even more, as a father would his son. The pack knew he hadn't wanted the leadership, not even temporarily, yet he'd taken it at their insistence. And this was how they chose to treat him.

He swore softly, raking a hand through his hair. Pain lacerated him.

"Connor?" Piper murmured in a soft voice.

Looking down, he saw that her eyes were open, the lids heavy giving her a slumberous look. Unwelcome tenderness welled inside him. "You okay?"

She propped herself up on an elbow, shaking her head. "Did I faint, too?"

A crooked smile crossed his face. "Yeah, you did."

"Gods," she muttered, a soft blush encompassing her face. Her eyes widened. "Are you okay?"

"Sure, why shouldn't I be fine?" he asked in a harsh voice.

He made to stand up, but Piper grabbed his hand, tugging him back to the bed. "Talk to me," she urged gently.

Connor stared down at their hands. He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to open himself to her. But she is a worthy mate, the wolf insisted. She squeezed his fingers.

"I don't know what to feel right now," he muttered darkly.

"Anger, maybe?" she said with a wry smile.

He laughed harshly. "Yeah, I'm pissed," he admitted. "I never thought my nephew could hate me enough to send me on a wild goose chase just to get the pack leadership."

"I don't think he hates you," she told him, squeezing his fingers to get his attention. When he looked at her again, she implored him to listen to her with her eyes.

"Maybe not, but he still betrayed my trust. The whole pack did. If you understood what I gave up to step in after my brother died..."

"Would you have believed him if he told you he was ready for the position?"

He shot her a dark look. "He did ask, several times. He isn't ready. He's too impetuous, too young for the responsibility. Look how he got the position! A prank!" he was shouting, but Connor couldn't help himself.

Piper sat up completely, tugging Connor into her body. He tensed to move away, but she wrapped her arms around him. Resting her head on his shoulder, she stroked his back.

He held himself rigid in her arms. He didn't want her pity. He didn't want to be soothed like a child. He wanted...he didn't know what he wanted, he admitted in defeat. His pain was too raw to deal with now, the betrayal too fresh.

She didn't attempt to tell him things would be okay, which earned his respect. She simply held him, the stroking of her hand over his back easing some of his tension. It was soothing, but not the way a mother would a child. Slowly, he relaxed into her embrace. His arms came up and around her to pull her closer.

Something eased in his chest at the feel of her pressed up against him. He still felt like a raw and exposed wound, but Piper would be the soothing ointment covering it. The pain was there, just dampened.

"This whole thing shouldn't have happened," he muttered into her hair.

Snuggling against him, Piper sighed soundlessly. "If it hadn't happened, then we wouldn't have met."

Connor laughed with genuine amusement. “That would have been a good thing though,” he said, ignoring the pain in his chest at the thought. “Right?”

She shook her head, her gold and black hair spilling around her shoulders. Piper looked up to meet his eyes. “Meeting you has changed my life,” she said, continuing before he could agree. “For the better.”

Thick eyebrows rose in surprise. “For the better? Are you sick or something? I kidnapped you, remember? Insulted you, berated you. I treated you horribly. How can that be a good thing?”

“Because without you, I wouldn’t have found out about Elijah, or the streak, and they’d have to keep enduring Evan. Without you, I wouldn’t have met the Chieftain or found out that my destiny doesn’t lie in the Pleasure House.” Her eyelashes swept down, concealing her expression. “Without you, I wouldn’t have known what it was like to feel real desire.”

The last was said so softly that if Connor hadn’t had superior hearing, he wouldn’t have heard her. Suddenly, their semiplatonic embrace became something else. He’d felt her soft curves against him but hadn’t let his mind dwell on them. The stroking hand on his back began to take on a new meaning.

Reaching up to cup her cheek, he feathered his thumb across her lips. “You feel real desire for me?” he asked huskily.

Piper swallowed hard. “Yes,” she whispered against his thumb. Her tongue slid over her lips, brushing against his skin. That single taste sent a jolt of desire through his system. Her eyes darkened, swirling into dark gold. Then she nibbled on his finger.

A growl gathered in his throat. Anger and betrayal had morphed into desire. He replaced his thumb with his mouth. Heat poured into him from the taste of her lips. Their tongues dueled, lapping, twirling, thrusting. Hands went from stroking to grabbing.

* * * *

Piper's mind whirled with Connor's taste. Dark and sinful, it infiltrated her pores, sinking into her bones. The succubus and tigress were ignored as she dived headfirst into the desire she felt for this male. She sank her nails into his shoulders, purring at the moaning gasp he made.

Breaking off the kiss, Connor trailed his mouth along Piper's jaw. His tongue dipped into her ear, making her shiver. Her nipples stabbed into his chest and she shivered again with a primal thrill.

When one of his hands slid around to cup her breast, she arched her back, thrusting it into his palm. She gasped when he thrummed her nipple through the material of her T-shirt. She couldn't stop the soft murmurs of appreciation that left her mouth as she tugged at his hair. She felt his lips curve against her and felt an answering sense of erotic joy.

Her shirt was pulled up and tossed across the room, leaving her in her bra. Connor didn't bother wrestling with the clasp. He simply tugged down the cups to bare her breasts to his hungry eyes, leaving her arms trapped at her sides. She felt like a sacrifice bared for his pleasure.

Dipping his head, he swirled his tongue around one delicious nipple. He growled.

Piper felt frantic with need. The velvet stroke of Connor's tongue over and around her nipple drove her wild. She wanted—no, needed—more. She fought free of her bra, giving him full access to her breasts. A dark chuckle met her eagerness, thrilling her.

Now both of his hands were cupping her breasts with his tongue teasing one nipple while his thumb stroked the other. Pleasure streaked through her body. She moaned throatily.

His mouth opened. He suckled on her nipple. Her nails became claws. Shredding his shirt, she purred as the tugs on her nipple echoed in her womb. She'd never known such pleasure.

* * * *

Connor turned his attention to her neglected nipple, giving it the same treatment as the other. He couldn't get enough of the sweet purrs of pleasure escaping her, nor the taste of her skin. Her hands were clutching his shoulders, tiny claws sinking into his skin. His cock jerked with need.

He pulled back to take her mouth in a deep, wet kiss. When he paused for air, he muttered, "Take those jeans off. Now."

"You too," she commanded in a husky voice.

Shoes were kicked off. His eyes remained on her as she contorted her body to pull off her shoes and wiggle out of her jeans and panties. The wiggling made him growl, but it was the curls at the apex of her thighs that made his cock twitch. He needed her like he needed air.

She lay back on the bed, her hair fanned out around her, arms over her head. The siren's smile she gave him made him pause. There was something he should be remembering, he knew. It niggled at the back of his mind, trying to thrust past the haze of lust and desire. No, the wolf howled, take her. She's ours. It threw itself against his willpower, shredding it to ribbons.

* * * *

Piper licked her lips as Connor removed his clothes. He unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans slowly, letting her look her fill. Her breath caught in her throat as the pants and boxers came off, revealing Connor in all his naked glory. She well remembered the taste of him on her tongue. Her womb rippled with need.

He kneeled over her, legs straddling her hips, hands holding her wrists down.

"The wolf wants to brand you," he growled in the deep bass she'd come to recognize as his beast emerging. "He wants to fuck you like an animal, hard and fast. Do you want that?"

Did she want that? What kind of question was that? she asked herself. Was he insane? “Yes!”

He nuzzled her throat, nibbling on the soft skin with teasing bites. “The man wants to lick you from head to toe, wants to make you beg. Do you want that?”

Sweat popped up all over her body. “Yes,” she moaned, trying to get closer to him, but he wouldn’t let go of her wrists. “Please, Connor.”

His free hand stroked over her breasts, weighing them. She purred, arching her back for more. “You’re not begging,” he scolded. That same hand slid over her abdomen, his index finger swirling around her navel.

She whimpered, straining for more. “Connor,” she cried. She attempted to spread her thighs, but they were trapped between his knees. “Please. Please touch me!”

A wicked chuckle greeted her plea, but he did shift his hand lower, grazing the curls at the base of her abdomen. “Are you wet, kitty cat?” he growled.

“Yes, Gods, yes!” Piper tilted her hips, trying to encourage his hand to touch her where she needed it most.

He hummed in the back of his throat. The sound was similar to a purr, which set her to purring as well. His callused fingers stroked through her curls, edging closer to the source of her need. She was mentally pleading with him, begging him to bring her to completion.

* * * *

Connor kissed her, uniting their mouths with deep, frenzied strokes of his tongue. His hands were shaking with the need to be inside Piper, but he wanted her just as crazed for him as he was for her. He needed it more than anything else. His mouth ate at hers. There was no worry that she was frightened because her claws were raking down his back, her tongue dueling with his.

That was when he slid his finger through the wet silk of her slit. He groaned. She was so wet and so hot he nearly came just from touching her. She whimpered into his mouth, her hips twisting to encourage his hand to move.

Male pride swelled along with his cock. With practiced care, he found her clit. He pulled away from the kiss. He and the wolf needed to see her pleasure. Circling the tip of his finger, he caressed the nubbin of rigid flesh. His fingers were instantly coated with her wetness.

“Connor,” she breathed his name, eyes drowsy with desire.

“You want more, kitty cat?” he asked huskily. Gods knew he wanted more. He wanted to plunge into her sheath, feel her come around his fingers.

She mewled when he found a spot that sent shards of sensation through her body. “More!”

* * * *

Her breath hitched when his finger slipped lower, circling the entrance of her body. She was so wet she should’ve been embarrassed, but she was too far gone with pleasure to care. His finger slid into her tight heat, earning him a groan of need.

“Gods, Piper,” he groaned over her, his finger beginning a slow thrust into her passage. “You’re fucking tight.”

A second finger joined the first, stretching her inner muscles deliciously. Piper’s hips moved with his thrusts. The slippery tight feel of his fingers moving inside her set a high flame to burn in her womb. Then he used his thumb to circle her clit. Her breath sped up, her heartbeat escalated.

“Come for me,” Connor growled against her lips. “I want to feel you come against my fingers, kitty cat.”

His words, coupled with his actions caused the world to splinter. Her back arched as her inner muscles clenched around his fingers.

Raking her claws down his back, Piper screamed her fulfillment. She soared to the heavens, her mind apart from her body.

* * * *

Connor growled as he watched Piper bloom with her orgasm. The sensation of her little sheath clasp him so possessively brought forth all of his most basic instincts. He needed her. Now.

Coming over her, he made room for himself between her splayed legs. She was limp, and her chest with those magnificent cherry-red nipples rose and fell in great bursts. He licked his lips as his gaze trailed down her sweat dewed torso until he could see her most intimate flesh.

His cock throbbed, a pearl of seed gathering on the tip. Her folds were swollen and wet. The scent of her desire filled his nostrils in a delicate blend of honeysuckle and musk. Lifting her, he positioned her on his thighs. Her legs spread wide, she was a banquet of sex. His banquet, he growled.

Piper moaned when Connor's fingers danced over her nether lips.

He dipped his fingers into her, stroking gently. She moaned again, and Connor answered with a soft laugh before his fingers retreated. "Piper," he growled.

He waited until her eyes opened, lifting slowly as though weighted down. He waited until she was focused on him before bringing his drenched fingers to his mouth. Connor tasted the dew of her arousal, lapping up every drop and watched Piper's eyes grow darker, heavier.

"Mmm, kitty cat," he moaned. He closed his eyes, savoring the taste. "You taste like honey." His hands fell back to her hips, adjusting her on his lap. "Next time, I'm going to make a meal out of you, but right now, I can't wait anymore."

His face felt like a mask, it was so tight. His admission was fact. He wasn't sure he could hold back, but she didn't seem to mind if the

coy slant of her eyes was any indication. He wanted to be inside of her so much, his cock throbbed with the thought.

She relaxed in his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist. He hissed as she stroked a hand down the center of her body and back up again. He couldn't take his eyes away from the sight of those little fingers caressing her flesh and he thought he'd cum right there as she brushed her nipple.

"I want you inside me, Connor."

The growl started at the back of his throat. His eyes intent on her wandering hand, he set his cock at her seeping entrance. Forcing himself to take his time, he entered her. Tightness surrounded the head of his cock. He gnashed his teeth. The urge to spill now was nearly overwhelming, but he fought it. He wanted to feel her clutching him. He wanted her total surrender.

* * * *

She gasped when he entered her. He was much, much bigger than his fingers, she thought in trepidation. He nudged forward, sliding inside another inch. Her inner muscles protested by flexing around him. His groan told her he enjoyed the sensation. She was beginning to enjoy it as well when he pressed forward another inch, then another. She felt too full, and he wasn't even all the way inside her.

"Relax, kitten," he husked in a deep bass that rocketed through her.

Easy for him to say, she thought with a grunt as he slid in another inch. He wasn't the one being torn apart. She wasn't finding this as enjoyable as she thought she would. He was simply too big. She was on the verge of telling him to stop when she felt him trembling against her.

Piper studied him carefully. His entire body was tense. Sweat dripped from his forehead to splash onto her stomach. The lines of strain around his eyes had expanded to include his mouth. He was

fighting so hard not to hurt her that he was hurting himself. Something softened in her chest.

Her desire for him was still there, though it wasn't as rampant as it had been. Wetting her lips, she thought back to her lessons. The idea that came to her was decidedly wicked and shameless, but it might be enough to help them come together.

Chapter Eighteen

“Gods, I’m sorry,” Connor groaned. He knew he was hurting her. The tenseness in her body wasn’t from impending orgasm. Feeling like a complete ass, he fought the need to lunge into her. No, he needed to pull out, he told himself. The wolf snarled at him. He wouldn’t hurt Piper for anything, not even a brief moment of lust.

Opening his eyes, the first thing he saw was where she was impaled on his cock. He wasn’t even halfway inside her yet. He felt like a monster. He looked into her face.

A soft, sexy smile curled her lips. As he watched, she lifted one dainty finger to her mouth. Those luscious lips opened, and her finger disappeared inside. His stomach clenched. Gods, was she trying to make him insane? he thought frantically.

Her finger slid out of her mouth again, glistening with her saliva. He watched, dumbfounded, as her hand crept down her body. When that finger touched the tiny bud at the top of where they were joined, Connor swore the top of his head blew off.

He watched, enraptured, as she stroked herself, her thin finger circling and stroking her clit. His lungs billowed as he strove to breathe. Gods, this was the hottest thing he’d ever seen. Amazingly, her body softened around him, growing wetter. He moaned, easing into her two inches this time. He panted, the blood draining from his head to pool in his cock.

Piper moaned as well.

“Gods, Piper,” he whispered hoarsely as he came into her completely. “Gods!” The sensation of her tight channel surrounding his cock made his mouth go dry. He wanted to thrust, fuck her

mindlessly, but he wouldn't until she was ready, although he feared he might come simply from being inside her tightness.

"Oh!" she cried when he nudged deeper, the head of his cock nestled against her womb. It was a pleasure/pain, and it sent shockwaves through her body.

"Let me know when you're ready, kitten." Connor was proud his words were steady, because he was shaking like a naked man in Antarctica.

She didn't speak, just tightened her legs around him. She still stroked herself, though her movements had slowed. The puzzled look on her face made him want to laugh, but he held back. The movement would kill him, he suspected.

"What is it?" Please don't let her say she didn't like it, he begged the heavens.

She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and nibbled on it before she said anything. The pucker between her eyebrows said she was thinking. Not a good thing at a time like this, he thought desperately.

"You're so big," she whispered. "I feel...full, but I want more."

There was no way he was going to pass that invitation up. Growling with feral need, he grabbed her hips and withdrew. He rocked back into her, wringing a gasping cry from her throat. Her hand slid away from her clit. He repeated the motion, closing his eyes at the sensation of his cock dragging against her tight walls.

"More!" she cried as he thrust harder.

When he withdrew again, she pushed herself up. Wrapping one hand around his neck, she pulled herself all the way into his lap forcing his cock inside her to the hilt. Her head went back.

Connor shouted. He was balls deep inside her, his hands filled with the luscious curves of her ass. Flinging away worry, he began to thrust into her with his full power. She ground down on his every upward stroke, her inner muscles caressing every inch of his cock.

He pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses to her exposed throat. The urge to close his mouth over the tender area nearly overwhelmed him.

The wolf wanted him to assert his dominance and brand her as his mate, but he fought against it.

Her head rolled forward, her mouth latching onto his shoulder. Delicate claws dug into his back, raking his skin. The pain mingled with the pleasure they gave each other.

Moans filled his ears even while groans were wrung from his chest. The bed shook, the frame thudding against the wall with Connor's aggressive movements. Sweat blossomed between them, making their bodies slide against each other.

He felt the tension in her body, knew she was about to come, and it took all of his self-control not to let go. But he held back until he felt her explode. She let out a little sob mere seconds before her spine went rigid and her mouth opened on a silent scream.

The sting of her claws goaded him into one last powerful lunge until he was buried as deep as he could go. He roared as he felt Piper's silken walls clench around him. His cock jerked inside her snug passage, emptying his body of seed. Shuddering from the strength of his orgasm, he fell to his side with Piper still clinging to him.

He was still trying to catch his breath when he felt Piper's body heat up. Gently easing her onto her back, he pushed her hair away from her face. She was more beautiful to him in this moment than she ever had been. Her skin was flushed from orgasm, her lips full and reddened from their frantic kissing. His heart clenched tightly. She was magnificent.

Suddenly, her eyes opened. He drew back in surprise. The gold he was so familiar with was changed. Her eyes glowed hotly as she stared up blindly. His heart pounded. What was happening?

"Piper?" he called gently. No answer. Her body was rigid, and he could feel heat pouring off of her in waves. Fear sucker punched him in the gut. Something was wrong with her, but what?

Ignoring the small voice in his head that urged him to get as far away from her as he could, he reached out to touch her. Hissing, he

drew his hand back as his fingers sizzled against her skin. She wasn't hot. She was on fire! "Piper! Wake up, what's happening?" he fairly shouted at her.

* * * *

Piper heard Connor talking to her, but the words were drowned out by the blood rushing through her veins. Power filled her body until she felt overripe. She couldn't see anything and couldn't feel anything outside her own body. The tiger roared in her mind, and the succubus basked in the sensation of her power awakening. Abruptly, the tigress and succubus rose to the surface, becoming ethereal beings in the air above her. They swirled together in a duel for power, for sway over the body they belonged to. They danced closer and closer together until their wispy forms crashed into each other in a bright burst of light.

The fever in Piper's body grew until she imagined she was putting off steam. The light from her two halves colliding settled on her skin, sinking into her pores, easing into her veins. The power built. Then it exploded.

Piper flung her head back from the force of her power releasing. Hair whipped around her as she felt herself lift off the mattress to levitate above the bed.

Connor was still talking, but the roaring power wouldn't release her. It crawled over her skin like a thousand ants, burned like fire through her veins, and seized her heart. She screamed from the force of it expanding. What felt like brands lashed her from head to toe. She arched her neck in pain. Then she fell to the bed in a crumpled heap.

* * * *

Piper panted, her body aching inside and out. No one had told her the transition would hurt so friggin' much, she grouched silently. She

couldn't see anything and for a moment, she panicked. Had she gone blind? Waving her arms around, she smacked something that grunted.

"Connor?" she called out softly, then cursed herself for being stupid. Of course it was Connor. She'd recognize that bad-tempered grunt anywhere. "Are the lights off?"

"No."

She slapped her hands over her face. "Ick!" she shouted. There was some kind of dry substance on her face, mostly around her eyes. Whatever it was, it peeled away easily. She separated it from her skin and eyelashes. Finally, she was able to open her eyes. She was facedown on the bed, her hair hanging in her face. Something felt wrong.

Movement out the corner of her eye drew her attention to Connor who sat on the very edge of the bed. He sat facing her, his eyes narrowed. His skin was slick with sweat that glistened on every bulge and hollow of his body. A purr rumbled in the back of her throat. He was so sexy, and she wanted another taste.

"Connor," she sighed, her voice raspier than usual. She cleared her throat, pressing a hand to the sore area. "What happened to my throat?"

If anything, his face darkened more. His eyebrows lowered, forming a V over his nose. "You were screaming bloody murder."

"Oh."

She sat up, pushing her hair back. She paused. Was it just her imagination, or was her hair longer? Pulling it forward, her hands caught her attention. Her fingernails were gone. In their place were dainty little black-tipped claws. Her heart pounded harder. Eyes widening, her gaze traveled up her arms. Lean triangular bands of black lined her arms in even increments.

Horror pushed bile up her throat. She looked down. And screamed.

* * * *

Connor lunged forward as Piper screamed. He didn't know what he planned to do, but he couldn't bear to stand by while she screamed in fear. Hell, he was scared too, but his protective instincts were demanding he help her.

"Shh, kitten," he murmured, gathering her into his arms. She was shaking like a leaf.

When the proverbial smoke had cleared, Piper had come out changed. He hadn't been able to see the transformation take place because as soon as her temperature had skyrocketed, she'd been surrounded by a nimbus of blinding light. Now though, he saw the results. Stripes had appeared all over her body. They curved down from her shoulders, under and around her ribs like they were trying to draw his attention to her breasts. As if he needed more encouragement. They curved over her stomach, hugging her hips in big bands.

Her hair was still black and gold, though there were strands of pure white in the mix. It was also considerably longer than before. It trailed over his arm, pooling on the bed behind her like a living thing. She looked the same, yet vastly different. It was disconcerting, to say the least.

Her head tilted back to look into his face. "What happened to me?" she asked, tears glinting in her eyes.

He pushed her head back on his shoulder so he wouldn't have to look her in the eye. "Your transition...changed you a bit," he remarked mildly. A transition he'd helped her through.

Piper groaned, putting one of her hands to her head. "I think...I think I need to lie down," she whispered.

Connor eased her to her back, pulling the covers over her. She looked small and defenseless, her hair spilling across the bed. Her beautiful eyes were rimmed in black just like a natural tiger, giving her a sleepy appearance. "Rest," he urged.

She caught his hand before he climbed out of the bed. Caught by

surprise, he could only watch as she kissed his knuckles. “Thank you,” she whispered with a sleepy smile. “Thank you for taking care of me, and for, um, you know.”

Her fiery blush told him exactly what she was thanking him for and though he fought it, he puffed up with male pride. “It was my pleasure,” he answered wryly. “Now rest.”

Curling into a ball, she gave him a shy smile. Swearing under his breath, he dressed as quickly as he could. Before he left, he looked back one last time. Piper’s back was to the door, affording him a view of a solid band of black that crept down the length of her spine connecting to the other bands on her torso. He itched to trace it with his fingers, his tongue, but she was exactly who he’d always feared she was.

A black fury descended on him then. He stalked out of the room closing the door silently behind him. The wolf fought him, wanting to stay at Piper’s side, but Connor was beyond the animal’s instincts.

Once inside his room, he began pacing. What had he done? he thought in frustration. Muttering under his breath, he traversed the room, back and forth, back and forth. He’d slept with a succubus. To top it all off, his nephew had betrayed him. Gods, when it rained, it poured.

His phone rang. He didn’t bother looking at the display.

“Yeah?” he barked into the receiver as he paused in front of his hotel room window.

“Uncle Con.”

He closed his eyes as pain lanced his chest.

“Toby.”

“I got a call from Persephone,” Toby said, his voice calm, yet wary.

Connor grinned fiercely at the window. “I believe congratulations are in order, Alpha.”

Silence.

“What? You don’t have anything to say, Toby?”

“Uncle, let me explain,” Toby said, his voice shaky.

Hand cutting through the air in a gesture of frustration and anger, he hissed. “There’s nothing to explain, Alpha. You should be proud. I fell for you and your pack’s plan.”

“It wasn’t like that,” he responded sharply.

“What was it like, Toby? You accidentally left home without word, refused to answer my calls, and then somehow found yourself the Alpha?” Connor asked sarcastically. He couldn’t hide the hurt in his voice, didn’t even attempt to.

“You were smothering me!” Toby shouted into the phone, causing Connor to flinch with renewed pain. “I’ve been ready to take over the pack for eight years, Uncle Con. Eight years! I know you were trying to prepare me, I understand that. But no matter how hard I tried to prove my worth, no matter how much the others hinted that they were ready for me to lead, you ignored them, ignored me.” A sigh came across, long and heartfelt. “I wanted you to come back and see how well I was handling things,” he asked, his voice sulky.

“And I ruined your little surprise. Oh, but I forget, there was another surprise planned for me, wasn’t there? Who cooked up that little plot, you or Persephone?” Connor asked in a silky voice.

“Ah, um, well,” Toby stammered, unease clear in his voice. “We sort of worked it out together. Persephone wanted an honorable male to initiate Piper, and I wanted to give you time away from the pack.”

Connor barked out a laugh. “An honorable male? Time away from the pack?” he scoffed. “You helped dangle ass in front of me and waited for me to snap at it. Oh, and while you were at it, you got a piece of ass for yourself. Nice going. So what, did you get a family special? Two succubi to go, or something?”

Terse silence followed his rapid-fire insults.

Toby growled, a sound reaching through the phone lines to wrap around Connor’s wolf. He winced, amazed at the power in his nephew’s voice. “Don’t ever speak of them that way again,” Toby said in an eerily soft tone.

“Or what, Toby?” He laughed. “Did you forget what they did to Jarvis? Did you forget what they are? They’re supernatural sluts! And this baby, how do you even know it’s yours? Not that it matters, though, right? It’ll end up being a freak anyway.”

Some sense had him swinging around. Piper stood in the doorway with Malachi at her back. His heart raced. Her face. Gods, he’d never seen such naked pain on someone’s face before, but there it was. Her beautiful face was leached of all color, making her gold eyes seem huge.

“Godsdamn you,” Toby snarled in his ear. “I’ll fucking kill you if you spew your vile at Prudence. I swear it. I’m coming down there, Uncle, and when I do, I’m going to kick your ass from here to Sunday.”

The phone clicked, but Connor was too dazed to care. Piper didn’t say a word, though the glittering eyes spoke volumes. Agony, humiliation, and hatred formed a melting pot of emotion that made his throat close up. What had he even said? he thought frantically. Most of what he’d said was to get a rise out of Toby, as well as gaining a little well-earned revenge, but the cold voice of logic told him it was nothing less than what he’d always thought.

“Piper,” he said, reaching a hand out to her.

He was an ass. He’d never intended to hurt her, couldn’t even remember half of what he’d said because he hadn’t meant it. Right? She’d forgive him. Piper wasn’t the type of woman to hold a grudge.

Yet when he was close enough to touch her, she flinched away from him. Self-loathing filled her eyes and he knew she was berating herself for showing him any reaction.

“Piper, that wasn’t—” he said in a rough voice. “Gods, that wasn’t meant for you to hear.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Right,” she said coldly. “Malachi came to tell us the Chieftain is allowing us the use of her cabin. In light of...” Her voice trembled. She paused to steady her emotions. “In light of this, I’ll be going alone with Elijah.”

The wolf snarled with primal possessiveness. It understood the pain in Piper. Its animal heart bled for her, but it wasn't going to let her go. "No," Connor said harshly. "I promised to help you, and I will."

A cold smile touched her face. Her eyes were like chips of gold ice. "I don't remember asking your permission, wolf," she said in a frigid voice. "You may have enjoyed a—what did you call it? Oh, yes, two succubi to go service, but that gives you no power over me." She looked at him as though he were scum beneath her shoes. "I will reimburse you for the clothing when I get back to Cypress Point."

She turned to leave, and something snapped in Connor. He reached for her again, wrapping his arms around her, trapping her arms against her torso. She went from cold fury to spitting cat in a heartbeat. It took all of his considerable werewolf strength to contain her.

"You're not going to learn anything from that submissive tiger," he spat out. He cursed as one of her heels connected with his shin. "You need me."

Her mouth opened on a feline scream, showing off her new dainty fangs. The sight made his cock throb with want. He shook his head. He'd screwed up royally with this female. He couldn't compound the problem by letting her think she was nothing but a lay to him.

"Let her go," Malachi, who had been silent so far, said in an easy voice. "You're just pissing her off more by confining her."

Connor shot the Halfling an evil glare, reluctant to let Piper get away from him. Malachi just shrugged his shoulders, his eyes solemn. Connor released her and stepped back.

* * * *

Piper whirled around, spitting mad with claws at the ready. She lunged for him, but was caught and dragged back by Malachi. Hissing in fury and hurt, she turned on the Halfling who ducked her swiping claws.

“Easy, kitten,” he said easily, sidestepping a quick jab to the face. “You can’t kill him, no matter how mad you are, because he’s right. You need his help if you’re going to get your streak back. Remember the streak?”

Malachi’s words sank into her primitive brain. It took several seconds before the tigress paid attention to them. She wanted blood for this insult. The succubus was just as furious. She was the one who’d given Piper the strength to appear emotionless. They’d worked together to help Piper keep her pride in front of the bastard werewolf, except now this other Halfling was telling them they had to work with Connor.

“Find someone else,” she snarled. She refused to look at Connor. “I won’t work with him.”

“You have to. Not many know about you, remember? And you’ll need the element of surprise if you’re going to defeat Evan,” Malachi said soothingly.

Gold eyes soaked in the expression of reluctant sincerity on the demon-vampire’s face. She knew what he was saying was correct, but it felt like pouring acid on an open wound. She’d have to work with him. She laughed bitterly. It seemed she was always being forced into contact with the one male who’d never accept her.

She spun around to face Connor again, taking in his ragged expression. Her lip curled. “Fine. I’ll work with the wolf. But he’d better watch his back.”

Spinning around on her heel, she stalked out of the room, leaving two very silent, very uneasy males behind.

Chapter Nineteen

Connor and Piper barely spoke on the ride from Cypress Point. The tension between them was thick and sizzling. Piper had wanted to ride with Elijah in his Yaris, but one look from Connor and the male tiger had mumbled something about needing room for groceries.

Not wanting to appear cowardly, Piper had reluctantly climbed in Connor's truck. She sat as far away from him as she could, which meant she was pressed up against the passenger door. It was uncomfortable, but it was better than being next to him.

She shouldn't have been so surprised to hear his words to Toby, but she was. Had she really thought sex would change his views regarding her kind? She snorted. Now, she wanted as little to do with him as possible. Unfortunately, Malachi's words of wisdom meant she'd have to be very close to the bastard.

The wonderful experience she'd had with him was forever stained by his words. Though her body still yearned for more intimacy, she'd never allow him near again. For once, the succubus and tigress were in close agreement with her.

Malachi had arranged for their move to Sugar Swamp, the small community where the Chieftain's cottage was. It would take them roughly three hours to get there by car. Malachi had warned them Ruby hadn't been there in months, so they'd have to pick up nonperishables before they went in.

Connor had just shrugged. He was sure he and the two weretigers could find fresh game if they needed food. He cast Piper a surreptitious glance from the corner of his eye. She was pressed against the passenger door, her face turned away from him.

His regret burned like coal in the pit of his stomach. Her body's natural response had been to take what his body could give it. He understood that, and he didn't blame her. But he just couldn't forget that Toby and Persephone had moved them around like pieces on a chessboard.

Only one of the three hours of the long trip had passed with not a single word said between them. He should apologize. He should beg her forgiveness, but dammit, there were just some things a male couldn't do! So he was bitter about an entire race. One of them had killed his only brother. Wasn't he entitled to a little bitterness? He didn't see what the problem was.

The problem is you attacked our mate, the wolf growled. Connor grimaced. Yeah, he'd hurt her. Bad. Especially after a meaningful experience with her that had taken up a constant rotation in his head. His mind, always so quick to remember facts, had stored up images of Piper in the throes of orgasm, the scent of her body, the sounds of her cries.

He shifted in his seat, keeping his eyes on the road. At the rate he was going, he'd be able to steer with his dick he was so hot for her. It was a wonder she hadn't scented his arousal, he thought with embarrassment. He could smell her, that honeysuckle scent wafting across the cab to tease his nose.

"Do you think I'll be able to defeat Evan?" Piper asked suddenly in a low voice, her gaze still trained at the passing scenery.

That she'd spoken first took some of the weight off of him. Connor took a deep breath. He didn't know how to answer her. Having never met the weretiger, he couldn't judge Evan's strengths or weaknesses, and though Elijah had told them what he knew, as a weaker tiger, he wouldn't have been able to defeat Evan anyway. Piper, having no idea how to be a shapechanger, much less a fighter, wasn't going to have it easy.

"We're going to try to make sure you do," was all he told her. The wolf snapped at him. It wanted to kill the tiger itself and hand the

streak to Piper.

My female, the wolf insisted. Connor shook his head. He couldn't let himself get wrapped in the wolf's primitive instincts to mate. It wanted Piper, the tiger, and the succubus and was trying to force Connor's acceptance of all three.

"My mother tried to do her best with me," she mused, her fingers drumming on her thigh. Her voice was toneless. "She just didn't expect me to be so different." Her head turned towards him, her gold eyes drilling him. "She didn't expect a freak."

Hearing his own words thrown back at him made him blanch. He couldn't believe he'd said something so cold, something so barbed it would draw blood. His palms grew damp. "Piper, when I said that, I wasn't thinking about you," he said earnestly.

She stiffened. Not the reaction he was aiming for. "So you think all Halflings are freaks?" she shot back angrily.

"What? No! I was trying to piss Toby off, that's all," he mumbled, raking a hand through his hair. He didn't talk about his feelings with anyone, yet he knew he had to if he was going to be able to work with her. Yeah right, he just wanted to "work" with her. Between the sheets maybe. "I was...hurt, and I lashed out."

Piper was silent. He knew she didn't want to believe him. The way he'd said what he had, the way he'd treated her the entire time they'd known each other, all would all make a case against him. Maybe not about all Halflings, but definitely about succubi.

"Mom didn't even know I was a Halfling until I was about three. That's when my hair started growing," she told him out of the blue. When he gave her a curious look, she continued. "Up until then, they thought I was like the rest of my sisters. I was never treated differently from them. I was never treated like an 'other' by them."

Unlike how he'd treated her, Connor finished her thought.

"Did the tiger ever show up during those times?" he asked quietly. "Were you any different from them?"

She shrugged again, tugging her shirt back on her shoulder. "I had

a better sense of smell than anyone else in the house, better night vision, reflexes, all that mess. But it never spoke to me like it does now.” Piper shivered, clutching her midsection as though in pain.

“She talks to you?”

Nodding, she turned to face him in her seat. Having the full focus of her attention caused his erection to swell. Connor just barely managed not to squirm.

“She and the succubus used to argue all the time about what they wanted me to do. Now that I’ve—” she paused, taking a deep breath. “Now that I’ve transitioned, they’re almost in accord, although the tiger still fights me.”

Without hesitation, Connor reached over and gripped her knee, steering with one hand. “It’s natural, Piper. Shapechangers have to communicate with their animal. You just happen to have two powers struggling inside you.”

He’d touched her reflexively. For a moment, she seemed to accept his comfort, but then she shifted her leg away again.

“My mother doesn’t have this problem though,” she continued, turning back to the window. “The succubus isn’t a separate entity in her or my sisters. It’s who they are. There’s no personality division. I fought with the succubus, who wanted to have sex, and the tigress, who just wanted a worthy male.”

Connor gulped. The succubus told her to have sex, and the tiger was okay with that. He took a deep breath and tried to ignore his cock which had begun to throb. “What about you, Piper? What do you want?”

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She didn’t answer right away. How could she? She’d just opened a can of worms by mentioning the bickering factions residing in her mind and soul. The musky scent of aroused male filled the cab of the truck.

With her newly awakened senses, she could distinguish all the flavors that were Connor: pine, smoke, and something deeper, a musk that was all wolf. It was a compelling scent, and it caught her attention. She breathed deeply, letting it fill her lungs.

Would he even believe her if she admitted she wanted him without the insistence of succubus and tiger? Probably not. She was part supernatural slut, after all, she thought with bitterness. However, she wasn't going to let him think she was ruled by the succubus or that she'd intended to feed off him.

Her desire had everything to do with Connor and nothing to do with feeding off of him.

He was going to help her learn how to be a weretiger and that was all. He was simply fulfilling his promise to her, and probably paying her back for her agreement to help him find Toby. She winced inwardly. She still couldn't believe her mother's nerve. Not only had she set up Connor, but she'd thrown Piper in as a little extra. But why him? she wondered, peeking at him through her hair. Was it because Toby had come to her with the idea, or was there some other reason behind her actions?

It didn't really matter in the end though, she told herself. Connor felt betrayed by his family and pack and looked upon her and her family with suspicion.

"Piper?" he prompted when she was silent for so long.

He sounded uneasy, as though he really wanted an answer, but would he even believe her?

"I want to live my life without the succubus or the tiger. I don't want to have to live on male lust," she told him firmly. The succubus was yawning. She'd heard this far too many times to be bothered by it.

"You want to...mate with one male?" he asked her in surprise.

Shrugging, Piper began to play with a lock of her hair. "If the gods saw fit to lead me to my destined mate, then yes. I would like to mate one male and have a family some day," she whispered, voicing

aloud her heart's only desire.

"I thought succubi didn't have mates," Connor muttered.

She saw his knuckles turn white on the steering wheel. Of course he was pissed at her again, probably for presuming to think she was worthy of a mate. *We don't mate. Even the werewolf knows this*, the succubus said snidely.

Tigers mate, the tiger told Piper smugly.

Piper gasped, blinking blindly at the windshield. The tiger was correct. Tigers mated just as other shapeshifters did.

"Piper?" he prodded, taking his eyes off the road to shoot her a quick glance.

Licking her lips, she turned her head to stare at his profile. Gods, was this what the problem was after all? Was she drawn to him because the tiger wanted him as a mate?

"Um, no, succubi don't mate," she said hesitantly while the tiger pushed to reveal this stunning information.

They were both quiet for a long stretch of road. Piper wanted to tell him she thought the tiger recognized him as her mate, but didn't want to take that step. He still didn't trust her and thought of her as Veilerian trash.

"You want a mate, not the succubus or tiger," Connor said aloud, his voice musing. He glanced at her again. "That's...interesting."

Piper nearly cringed. She didn't want to be interesting. She wanted love and happiness just like other women found.

"It makes me a freak," she told him bluntly.

He opened his mouth to argue, but snapped it shut again.

"See? You can't even argue about it. I'm an unnatural succubus."

"Did she make you—" He coughed into his fist, making Piper look at him in surprise. The tip of his ear was bright red as well as the crest of his cheeks. "Did the succubus make you seduce me last night?" he asked directly, his eyes meeting hers steadily before sliding back to the road.

Oh! Piper's face went up in flames. She wanted to cover herself,

hide away from the question, but he deserved an honest answer. *Right*, she asked herself frantically. Right? But what was the truth? That the succubus had given her the skill and shoved the desire into Piper, but that Piper had wanted to touch him from the first minute she'd sniffed him out?

"I—she—" Piper stammered, gnawing on her bottom lip. "She filled me with the desire. But-it-wouldn't-have-worked-if-I-hadn't-been-attracted-to-you." She said it so fast her tongue tripped over the words.

Once again, there was silence except for the steady purr of the engine and the whine of the tires on the road. Piper held her breath, she couldn't believe she'd blurted that out, but part of her was relieved to have said it. The chances of her and Connor being mated to one another were next to impossible. It took some Veilerians hundreds of years to find their life mate and some never did, but Piper had a feeling no other man could compare to Connor. Even if they were mates, their chances of a happily ever after were nil with his attitude towards her species.

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Connor released a deep breath. His heart pounded. The wolf was howling madly, wanting a piece of the succulent female sitting next to him. *His* female, the wolf insisted, and Connor wasn't sure he could argue against it.

Piper had been attracted to him before the succubus pressed for more. He'd hoped, but that still left him in a quandary. She wasn't likely to recognize him as her mate even though she claimed to want one. Not only had he screwed up royally by being so cruel the night before, but he also had a score to handle with her mother. It didn't make for the best of situations.

"Connor?" she asked softly after several long minutes.

He shot her a distracted look, his thoughts swirling round and

round. He had two avenues to explore. He could try to try to work something out with her, perhaps build a life with her, or ignore his wants, his needs, and let her go when this was all over.

“What happened to make you hate succubi?” Piper asked almost soundlessly.

Grief seized his heart, making his body tense. “My brother, Toby’s father, was killed by one when Toby was a cub.” He stated the facts, coldly, simply, though his body churned with repressed rage.

Piper’s shoulders jerked in surprise.

He saw her jerk, saw the color leech from her face as shock dilated her eyes. He shook his head empathically.

“No, Piper,” he said adamantly. “You’re not to blame, and I don’t blame you or your family anymore. I—I was wrong for punishing you for what someone else did. Understand?” he nearly shouted at her, his voice harsh with intensity. “You’re nothing like I imagined. I’m sorry, so godsdamned sorry, for hurting you.” He clenched his jaw in self-hatred. “You’re a sweet, kind female who was betrayed just as much as I was. I want to try to be your friend.” It was an idiot thing to say. He felt like a schoolboy with a crush, but from the touched expression on Piper’s face, maybe it had been the right thing to say. “What do you say?”

Chapter Twenty

Friends? With a male she'd had sex with? She wasn't sure it was possible. Fallon was her friend, but he was safe and nonthreatening. Connor was anything but. Sure, some of her anger had faded, but a little part of her wondered if this was part of some plan he had in mind.

Biting her lip, she thought hard about his proposition.

"Can you really forget I'm a succubus?" she asked slowly.

Connor's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "I—I don't know." She drew in a shaky breath, trying to deny the pain his words caused her. "I'm going to be honest with you, Piper. I can only try not to be prejudiced against every succubus I meet."

She took another deep breath. His answer was what she'd thought it would be. "That's fair enough."

"But that doesn't mean we can't try to get along," he insisted.

"After what happened earlier?" she scoffed.

He shifted, turning his eyes back to the road. "I know I was an asshole. I'm sorry. How can I convince you how sorry I am, Piper?"

Rolling her eyes, she wondered why men were so obtuse. "Not that, although I'm still not happy about it. I'm talking about the other thing that happened. You know, where we—" Rocked the bed like a hurricane, she wanted to say, but bit the words back. "When we had sex."

A hush fell over the cab. Instantly regretting her bluntness, Piper frowned out the window. Did he want to sweep what they'd experienced under the rug?

Connor cleared his throat. "Was it...that bad?" he asked

hesitantly.

Swiveling around to gape at him, Piper didn't know how to respond. Bad? It had been the single most intense experience of her life. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. His arousal still scented the air, but it was mingled with something else. Fear? Nervousness? She couldn't tell. It would take a while to understand what her nose was telling her, but for now she had to guess.

He was still waiting for her answer. Fingers drumming on her thighs, she battled herself. She didn't want to lie. If they were going to try to get past their problems, they needed honesty between them, but this was embarrassing.

"Gods, it *was* that bad!" he muttered darkly.

"No, no, it wasn't," she answered him. Fire scorched her face. "It was...um, great."

A bitter laugh escaped him. "Yeah, the enthusiasm is just pouring off you."

Temper rising, Piper glared at him. "This is embarrassing, okay? I asked you about it because I don't think we can be friends after...that, not so you could rate your performance." She crossed her arms. "It was amazing, mind-blowing, earth-shattering, and anything else you can think of, but it can't happen again. I don't want you accusing me of seducing you to feed from you."

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Connor's heart had soared during her assessment of their lovemaking only to crash when she said it couldn't happen again. Logic agreed with her. Bedding her again would only lead to more inner turmoil. However, his logic was at complete odds with the wolf, and his libido. He wanted her. He craved her.

A grunt escaped him. Did she think he wasn't good enough to feed from perhaps? Realization was slow to dawn. She was going to be with him and Elijah for two days. Surely she would have to feed in

that time. If she wasn't going to feed from him, was she planning to feed from Elijah?

The truck came to a screeching stop. He'd snagged Piper's wrist and dragged her across the seat before the smoke from his peeling tires cleared.

* * * *

"What the—" she shrieked, only to be cut off by his mouth.

The hard kiss he pressed on her lips did more than stop her words. It stopped her breathing for several seconds. It wasn't an impressive kiss by any stretch of the imagination. He wasn't trying to deepen it or even to make it seductive. The press of his mouth was hard, possessive, and angry.

When he finally lifted his head, Piper was swimming in confusion. "What did you do that for?" she demanded breathlessly. Pushing away from him, she slid back to her side of the truck. Her heart was pounding.

He grunted and started driving again. Piper shook her head, and went back to staring out the window. If she didn't know better, she would think the male was plumb crazy.

The rest of the journey to Ruby's cottage was spent in total silence and rising tension. She wanted to know more about the succubus who'd killed his brother, but wasn't sure it was wise to broach that subject so soon. Instead, she turned her attention the implications of her transition.

There was no doubt in her mind that her family had felt the shockwave of power she'd expended, but had anyone else? Since she'd never had close communication with any of the local weres, she didn't know if there was a similar repercussion within their packs. It was one of her chief concerns. If her weretiger half had sent out a calling card, would Evan and the rest of the Shadow Claw Streak have felt it? Could they be looking for her even now?

Connor could answer her question, she knew, but after that bizarre kiss, she didn't want to talk to him. He was forever blowing hot and cold, and for now she'd had enough. Two days was all she had to learn how to be a tiger. It was barely enough time to learn to fight, much less try and dissect a confusing male mind.

Fingers pressed to her head in an attempt to stave off a headache, she pondered what Persephone would make of her radical change. As far as she knew, her transformation wasn't normal in anyway. It was extremely rare for weres to bear such close resemblance to their animal halves while in their human forms. She stared at her claws. The only good thing she could see about her change was that her markings could be passed off as tattoos in the human world.

Her mother would have a fit when she saw what the transition had wrought, Piper thought with a sinking heart. Now she looked like the freak of nature she was. On top of her mother's impending emotional meltdown, she'd have to deal with her mother's treachery. How Persephone had managed to get embroiled with Toby, Piper wasn't sure she wanted to know, but there had to be some way to fix things between Connor and his nephew.

"Who will you feed from over the next two days?" Connor's voice broke the silence, startling Piper out of her thoughts of matricide.

"Pardon?" she asked guardedly. What did he care who she fed from as long as it wasn't him?

"Who are you going to feed from?" he asked again, his voice coming out from between clenched teeth.

One of her eyebrows shot up. "I don't see how it's any of your business as long as it isn't you," she told him coldly.

The truck stopped again. She had to brace her hand on the dashboard to keep from hitting it. Really, she thought in aggravation, this male was going insane!

"What is your problem?" she shouted.

He was in her face the instant the words left her mouth. Wolf yellow eyes glared at her with feral intensity. "You will not feed from

Elijah,” he growled in a voice gone bass deep.

Barely refraining from rolling her eyes, Piper wedged a hand between them to push him back. To her surprise, he moved a couple of inches, giving her a little breathing room.

“Who the hell will I feed from then?” she demanded. “It isn’t like I can *not* feed, Connor. I’ll die if I don’t.”

“You will feed from me,” he snarled, a flush lining the crests of his cheekbones. The scent of his arousal peppered the air, filling her lungs. “You’ll feed from me, and you’ll damn well like it!”

With that said, he threw the truck in gear again. Piper stared at him for at least five miles in complete shock. She couldn’t even begin to understand him, she thought. He had to have some kind of chemistry imbalance with the way he flip-flopped from calm to crazed, from cold to red-hot.

“Multiple personalities,” she muttered, shooting him a look out the corner of her eye. Her mother would set her up with a crazy wolf.

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Connor frowned at Piper. She was muttering something about personalities. He figured she was talking about him. So she had a front row seat to his mental breakdown, so what? She’d probably enjoy watching him go insane with lust for her, the contrary female. Maybe he *was* going crazy, he thought with an inward sigh. He didn’t want to think of her feeding from any other male but him. The wolf prowled in his body, wanting out. It snarled in fury, wanting nothing more than to mark her as his.

“Did you talk to your family yet?” he asked her, trying to drown out some of the thick tension between them.

Her head swiveled towards him and his skin burned with the intensity of her glare. “When would I have been able to do that exactly?”

Burying the flare of guilt he felt at her words, he bit out, “You

could've called them."

He saw her shake her head before turning to look out the window again. "They know the transition happened, just not..." Her hand rose to wave at her body. "Not this. Mom is going to die."

Personally, Connor found her transformation sexy as hell. She was a tigress. Heat poured through his veins at the thought of what he wanted to do her newly transitioned body. He wanted to lick her from head to toe, especially those intriguing stripes. Wait, what? "What do you mean they know about the transition?" he asked her, thoroughly confused.

"When succubi transition, they send out a wave of energy to their Houses. Sort of like a calling card saying, 'Here I am!' So they already know I've come into my powers. They just aren't prepared for the results." She was quiet for several seconds. "I'm guessing weres don't have that?"

Connor frowned at the highway. "No, as far as I know none of them do." Her shoulders slumped in what could only be relief. "But I don't know about your streak," he admitted, hating to bring the tension back to her body. "Your transition wasn't exactly traditional, and neither are the results. Normally, the clan is around to witness the change, sort of like cheerleaders." He snorted at the idea of some of the mangy wolves in his pack pumping pom-poms. "But even if you're not at the ceremony, we can feel when one of our own joins the pack. It's like blood calling to blood. We won't know who it is exactly, but we'll feel the presence of another packmate." He shrugged. "In your case, because you weren't raised with the streak, you might show up as a blip on their radar, but nothing substantial. I really don't know."

"So we could be in danger from Evan and his goons," Piper mumbled, crossing her arms over her chest. "This would've been better if I could've kept the element of surprise."

Feeling his ears begin to burn, Connor kept his eyes averted from her. It was partially his fault she'd transitioned at all, except he

couldn't be sorry about it. How could he, when he wanted to do it again, and again?

"You'll be fine," he finally mumbled, shifting slightly to ease the pressure of his zipper pressing against his hardening cock. He needed to get his hormones under control otherwise he'd jump her in the truck.

Thankfully, he saw the turn off to the driveway leading to Ruby's home. The bumpy trail had his truck bouncing, as well as parts of Piper's anatomy, he couldn't help but noticing. He almost ran into a tree when he saw her breasts swaying beneath her T-shirt. Swearing under his breath, he pulled up in front of the small cabin, throwing the truck in park.

They sat in the cab for several minutes, staring at their home for the next two days. Malachi hadn't lied when he warned them the house was small and hadn't been used in a while. The exterior wasn't promising. Peeling paint on the porch and walls showed just how long it had been since the Chieftain had been here. Piper didn't say a word, though her hands were clenched together in her lap. Apparently she also realized they would be sharing close quarters.

Stifling a grimace, Connor turned off the engine and climbed out of the truck. He grabbed their bags from the bed and started for the house. Wood creaked as he ascended the porch steps, but there were no sagging or weak spots as far as he could tell. He approved. The house might be old, but it was well built.

He unlocked the front door, peering over his shoulder at Piper, who sat unmoving in the truck. Wondering what she was waiting for, he wedged open the door and stepped into the dark interior of the house. The air was stale, though not unpleasant. Crossing to the window on the far side of the living room, he threw it open to get the air flowing.

"How long has it been since Ruby's been here?" Piper asked from the doorway.

Turning to see her hovering on the threshold, Connor shrugged.

“Nearly a year, I think.” He surveyed the living room. It was comfortable looking with simple furniture meant for comfort, not style. Dust lingered on the scarred surface of the coffee table and end tables. The room didn’t feel cramped, but that was more due to the lack of furniture than anything else. Other than the few tables scattered throughout the room, there was only a sofa and a loveseat.

The soft whine of an electric motor caught his attention. Piper turned in the doorway, looking into the front yard. “That’s Elijah and the groceries,” she said, darting back outside.

Connor sauntered to the porch, taking note of Piper’s enthusiastic greeting to Elijah. The male tiger appeared baffled and pleased at her obvious pleasure at his arrival. Connor snorted, which earned him a glare from Piper. She had her arms piled with grocery bags when he finally strolled over to them.

“Need help?” he asked easily, striving for a harmless friend vibe when he wanted nothing more than to snatch her away from the tiger.

Elijah looked between them, his green eyes wary. “I think we have it,” he replied slowly. He hadn’t been with Malachi to witness Connor’s stupidity, but he knew the tiger felt the tension between the three of them. When he’d seen Piper, his eyes had nearly bugged out of his head. It had taken a lot of will and determination to keep from punching the tiger in the face for looking at Piper.

Shrugging to show it didn’t matter to him if the tigers needed his help or not, Connor closed the car door. Elijah shot him a dirty look when the car rocked from the force of his push.

Since they didn’t want his help, he didn’t offer again. He fell back a bit as he watched Piper try to see over the bags in her hands and climb the porch. The sway of her hips called to the primitive wolf and man inside him. A growl gathered in his throat, but he swallowed it down.

He spun on his heel, heading in the opposite direction. Night was falling, and he felt the need to let the wolf run. He also needed time to find his composure. Piper’s life depended on his ability to treat her as

a pupil, not a vessel for his lust. Striding into the deep thicket of trees at the edge of the property, Connor eased into the swamp, letting the sounds of nature soothe him. She'd made it abundantly clear she didn't want to be friends with him, didn't think they should be friends, and that sex between them was not happening again. The growl emerged this time, silencing the animal life.

The scent of earth, stagnant water, and the musk of prey filled his nose. Breathing deep, Connor called to the wolf, urging it forward. As usual, the wolf was eager to play, bounding to the surface in a burst of light. The change came quickly. Stretching his four legs and back, the wolf shook out his fur.

Ears swiveling in each direction, he took in the strange environment. Scenting the air, he caught a whiff of her, his mate. The man tried to take the reins back, tried to compel the wolf to go deeper into the woods, but control had switched over. The wolf was in command now, and he wanted to see his mate.

Slinking through the shadows towards the cabin, he closed his eyes as he caught another whiff of her honeysuckle and animal fragrance. The tigress called to him whether the woman knew about it or not. It didn't matter to either animal that they were different, that their other halves were at war. Their souls were melding.

The front door of the cabin opened, spilling light into the darkened yard. It was the female, still in her humanoid form though the tigress yearned to escape. She called to him, pacing behind the prison of her more "civilized" half. Tilting his head back, he howled.

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Piper shivered, fighting back the tiger's insistence. She'd been helping Elijah put groceries away and start dinner when she felt a strange compulsion to come outside. She hadn't seen Connor since they carried the groceries inside, and though she'd tried to tell herself that was for the best, part of her had wanted to go out and find him.

The crazy male he'd been on the drive to Ruby's cabin had aroused her curiosity. And her body, she admitted with a quiver.

A dark frown crossed her face. Yes, Connor aroused her on nearly every level, and it was evident he still desired her, but none of that mattered as long as he saw her only as a succubus. And now she knew he had a very good reason for his hatred of her kind. His brother had died because of a succubus. There was no way he'd ever get over that, or her heritage, no matter how hard he tried.

So why was she standing in the doorway looking for him? she asked herself. It was sheer stupidity that had her scanning the darkness for a glimpse of a male she craved with every fiber of her being. The tigress stalked the cage of her body, tail twitching in preparation for a rush to the forefront. The succubus was still basking in the pleasurable rush of the transition.

A mournful howl sent a quiver of anticipation through her body. The tiger roared, wanting out. Using the door for support, Piper fought the compulsion to rush into the night. Movement in the woods across from the house caught her attention. Amber eyes glowed at her with intent. Her nipples hardened. Connor, her heart breathed. The tiger slammed against the boundary of Piper's body.

Claws curling into the wooden frame of the door, Piper blocked the charge with fierce determination. The tiger roared at her, batting at her. Arching her head back, the tiger's feral scream was ripped from her throat. It. Wanted. Out. It wanted the wolf. It wanted to run, to stretch its legs, and mark its territory. It wanted out of the weak shell of a humanoid body it was currently trapped in.

"Relax," a soothing male voice said from behind her. "You need to let her out." It was Elijah. Piper recognized his scent before she did his voice. "Fighting her will only make her angrier, and she'll spring when you're too weak to control her."

Harsh pants rasped from Piper. Her body was racked with pain as muscle and bone attempted to rearrange themselves at the tiger's urging. Agony, ten times worse than the pain she'd experienced upon

transition, caught her in its grip.

“Let it go, Piper,” Elijah urged, his voice thick like the rumbling of a big cat.

Instinct told her he was close to shifting, caught along in the wake of her tiger’s power. She continued to fight it until her knees went weak. A scream burst out of her as the tigress continued pounding at her defenses. Tears flooded her eyes, making the landscape waver.

Suddenly, the musk of wolf flooded her senses. Tears trickled down her face, giving her a better view of the wolf as he padded closer. He whined softly, his head cocked to the side. He wanted her to change, to stop hurting. Piper wasn’t sure how she knew this, but it was calling to her as well as the tiger.

“*Let go, mate. Relax,*” he seemed to say, his amber eyes filled with pain.

So surprised to hear the wolf’s voice in her mind, she relaxed her guard. And the tigress took advantage. Blinding pain swept through her body as it raced forward, diving into her consciousness.

Chapter Twenty-One

Piper was vaguely aware of falling forward, but agony took over. Bones popped, muscles contracted. Shrieking with pain, she curled up. Claws tore at her clothing. Fire swept through her body, burning every single inch of her. The tigress forced her way out, forced Piper's human body to accept the change. Her last scream of pain ended in the tigress' triumphant roar.

Awkwardly rising to her feet, she stretched out all four limbs. Weaving slightly, she shook her head to clear it of the residual dizziness from the change. The female had fought the change with a strength that surprised the tigress. She'd lived inside that weak, humanoid body for seventy-four years, and there had never been a hint of such strength before. Dismissing the female for the moment, she studied the two males watching her carefully.

The male tiger kept his head lowered to her, his tiger form slightly smaller than her own. She preened. He knew she was his Kahn. Soon, the time would come when the rest of the streak would realize the same. The wolf, however, stared her in the eye without backing down. He was an Alpha even though he no longer had a pack to lead. His amber eyes studied her solemnly. The female wanted the tigress to leave, to run, but she couldn't. This was her mate. She recognized him, just as he recognized her.

Instinct rose, crowding out the irate female voice. Quick as a shot, the tigress bounded across the porch and into the woods. Night creatures went silent as they sensed her approach. With the two males on her heels, she raced into the swamp. Freedom, she thought. She was finally free of her human cage.

The wolf nipped at her tail, spurring her to run faster, harder. The male tiger was swiftly outdistanced, leaving the wolf and tigress to crash through the heavy woods together. Joy sparked like a flame in her heart. This was what she was destined to do. She and the wolf were meant to be together, to run side by side.

After a while, they slowed to a walk. A small clearing in the swamp provided the perfect resting place. She rubbed her cheeks along the trunks of the trees, leaving her scent on them. The wolf rested in the center of the clearing, his amber eyes glowing with canine pleasure.

Padding over to him, she threw herself on the ground next to him. Together they lay there, great chests heaving as they caught their breath. She closed her eyes, a rumbling purr sounding across the wood. No conflict, no human emotions to confuse her. Just her and her wolf. Just peace.

* * * *

The tiger known as Evan studied his streak carefully. Two hours before, they'd gathered for feast when a sudden pulse of power rippled through the compound. The weakest of the streak were the first to change shape, and as the pulse continued, the strongest began to fall until finally even Evan had reverted to his tiger form.

Now, his tigers were bunched together like scared rabbits, their fear stinking up the great room. He'd checked on his uncle, but he was the only one in the streak who hadn't succumbed to the power wave. The Kahn had been sleeping, still weak and helpless, so the power hadn't come from him. But who could it have been? he wondered as he coldly surveyed his streak.

Stretching, he shifted to his humanoid form. His loyal guard did as well, leaving the weaker tigers huddled together. Motioning his followers, he entered the mansion. Something was going on, and he wanted to get to the bottom of it.

He sauntered to his desk, perching on the edge. “Find out who’s threatening my territory,” he told them without preamble. “Find them, and bring them to me.”

All six of his guards bowed deeply before hurrying from the room. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Streaks were bound by blood and magic. Evan had worked hard to phase out the former Kahn’s blood lines, reinforcing his hold over the streak with the strength of his personality and fear. Those who were too powerful were killed. The only ones left were tigers too weak or scared to leave and he felt each and every one of them through the ties of magic binding them together. This power hadn’t come from within the circle of tigers in his hold. The power backlash hadn’t felt intentional. In fact, it had felt more like a Kahn forcing the change. Interesting, he thought coldly.

An unstable Kahn was an easily disposed of problem. He felt no worry over that. His followers were too weak to back anyone, and his own guards were loyal to a fault. It would take James coming back to full health or the old Kahn’s blood kin to rouse any spirit in the rest of the streak. And those were two possibilities he would crush before they bore fruit.

* * * *

Connor reclined on the sofa back at the cabin. The wolf was content for the moment, having run with the tigress for hours. He’d wanted to stay in wolf form and spend forever with his mate, but Connor had forced his way back to the surface. Piper was far too new at changing to remain in animal form for too long.

The walk back to the cabin had been less joyful. After coaching Piper to rise over the tigress, he’d had to loan her his T-shirt. Sometime during her shift, she’d shredded her own clothing, leaving her naked. His mouth had gone dry, and his cock had hardened in an instant, but the sad, solemn look on her rounded face had stopped any thoughts of seduction. She’d looked lost, frightened, and vulnerable.

They'd returned to the cabin where Elijah was already waiting with a big meal. Piper had picked at her food even though Connor knew she had to be starving. If there was anything all weres had in common, it was a voracious appetite after shifting. Yet, she'd pushed her food around her plate and excused herself once he and Elijah were finished eating.

The wolf had wanted to follow her, but Connor had stopped that impulse immediately. He was confused about the compulsions he felt for her. He couldn't even deny the connection they had. She had quickly come to mean something to him. He liked her sass and her quirky sense of humor. He even loved her loyalty to her family, but there could be no future for them.

He wiped a hand over his weary face. Why couldn't she have been just a normal werewolf who'd mate him and give him cubs to protect? Why did she have to be a power unknown to him?

Resting his head on the back of the sofa, he cursed at the ceiling. He hated not knowing the answers to anything. It was why he was a scholar. He liked cracking open old texts and deciphering the true meanings within them, solving mysteries humans were too blind to see. It was his lifeblood. But the thought crept into his mind, that if he kept Piper forever, then he'd always have something new to discover about her.

Enough, he told himself firmly. He wasn't going to keep her. He was going to teach her how to fight as a weretiger and how to shift faster, and then let her go her own merry way.

The hair rose on the back of his neck at the thought. She'd go on to find other males to feed from. Other males would touch her, they'd trace those exotic bands on her skin. They'd burrow deep into her tight wetness and bring her release. Sudden pain broke his train of thought. Looking down, he saw that his fingernails had lengthened into claws, which he'd dug into his legs.

Releasing a deep breath, he glared at the opposite wall. So he didn't want any other males touching her. He knew that already. He

also knew they'd have to. She'd have to feed somehow. A growl rattled the back of his throat. No, he wouldn't think about it. He had more important things to consider.

Like what he was going to do about Toby. Now that his nephew had taken over the pack, there wasn't any reason to go back. The betrayal of pack and family cut deep. Wedging the pain deeper was the knowledge that his nephew was fathering a child in a succubus, even after what happened to Jarvis.

An image of Piper swollen with child flashed across his mind. Leaning forward, he buried his face in his hands. Gods, he thought in wonder. She would glow with life, her lush form ripe. Yearning claimed the soul of the man. Visions of boys with her striped hair and girls with her round face and gold eyes clamoring for her undivided attention filled his heart with want.

A soft sound grabbed his attention, yanking him away from dreams that would never, could never, come true. It was only a breath of sound, but it seemed to echo around the house. Standing, he swiftly made his way to the back of the house where the bedrooms were.

By mutual agreement, he and Elijah had given Ruby's former bedroom to Piper. Since Connor could sleep anywhere, he'd left the guest room for the male tiger. Elijah had known the real reason behind Connor's generosity, the further away he was from Piper, the better.

Pausing in the hallway between the two rooms, he listened carefully. Elijah was snoring heartily, making Connor glad the tiger had left the door closed. There was no way anyone would've gotten sleep with the sound of his growling snores. Piper's room was quiet, except for—there it was again. A hitch in her breathing, then a soft whimper.

Without pausing, Connor entered the dark room. He saw her huddled under the covers, her small shoulders quaking. His heart melted.

Crossing the room in three big strides, Connor sat on the edge of

the bed. Piper wiggled away slightly as though not wanting him anywhere near her. With her back to him, he couldn't see if she was sleeping or not, but some innate sense told him she was wide awake and in pain.

Instinct bade him to lie next to her and curl his bigger body around hers, which he did. Her honeysuckle scent went straight to his head, even while his arm wrapped around her waist. She stiffened against him, tension radiating from her body.

"What's wrong?" he whispered against the delicate shell of her ear.

* * * *

Piper sniffled, cursing herself for crying. She'd hoped she was quiet enough not to alert Connor or Elijah, but luck had apparently abandoned her. Now the snarky werewolf was in her bed, trying to act like some great confessor. Squeezing her eyes shut, she ignored him. Once again, she was drawn in two directions. Part of her wanted him to let her go, while the other part wanted to burrow into him, borrowing his strength, if only for a little while.

She could make him move, she thought crossly, except his warmth helped ease the shudders she'd felt for the last few hours. The alien sensation of being in her body but not being in control wouldn't leave her. She kept seeing flashes of the tigress' cold practicality, or how much she wanted the wolf to become her mate. More tears leaked down her cheeks.

"What's wrong?" Connor asked again, his breath warm on her cold skin.

Sniffing louder, Piper shook her head. How could she possibly explain how scared she was of her inner animal? He'd grown up knowing he was going to be a wolf some day. He'd probably even looked forward to it. He wouldn't understand how much her loss of control frightened her.

A rough thumb stroked over her cheek, catching a stray tear. “Piper, it’s okay,” he whispered, his arms tightening around her. “Everyone’s scared the first time they shift.”

She let out a surprised snort. Inelegant, but eloquent, she thought. “You weren’t,” she muttered thickly.

A huff of breath coasted over her hair as he laughed softly. “Of course I was. I was excited about it, but it’s still terrifying to be trapped in a body you can’t control. It gets easier though.”

Piper thought about what he said. Even though the pain had been excruciating, and she’d been scared out of her mind, part of her had thrilled at the tigress’ prowess and strength. The world had looked so different through her eyes. Things were less complicated, yet deeper. But she wasn’t sure she was ready to let the tiger out whenever she wanted.

“I’m just...scared,” she admitted in a whisper. “I don’t know how to handle her. She’s so strong, and she just pushed right through. She wanted—” Piper broke off. Should she tell him the tigress had fought for a way out to be close to his wolf? Would that freak him out and send him into another one of his weird moods?

“She wanted out. She wanted freedom,” he finished for her knowingly. Stupid male, she thought smugly. His arm slid up from her waist to right under her breasts. “The tiger wants to do what’s natural for her; you want to keep her from doing that. That’s why you fought. It’ll be easier once she realizes you’re the one in charge, not her.”

“How long before I can control it?” she asked in a small voice.

She felt him shrug, the movement of his chest against her shoulder blades making her nipples tighten. Damn the man, she thought irritably. He could light her fire quicker than kerosene.

“It all depends on how determined you are to corral her,” he said calmly. “She’s strong now because you don’t know the warning signs, but once you do, you can head her off before she gains more power.”

“You can teach me that? Or Elijah?”

Connor tensed. He had been trying to ignore his body's response to her nearness. However, her words smacked him right in his masculine pride. That she could think about the tiger while he was holding her was too much for his possessiveness. Possessiveness he had no business feeling for her.

"I'll teach you that," he growled against her ear. Her heart was pounding hard and fast. He felt the thuds against his chest where it was pressed against her back. Fingers curling under her ribs, he fought the urge to slip his hand up to cup her breast.

Piper apparently didn't feel the same, because she continued talking, her voice soft. "It would probably be better for him to teach me. That way we're not together so much."

Was she trying to drive him insane? he wondered angrily. "I'm teaching you. End of discussion."

She huffed out an aggrieved breath. Hands balling into fists, she physically restrained herself from punching him. She was giving him an out, and he was too thickheaded to take it. Who was he trying to fool? He didn't want to teach her. He just wanted to make sure she didn't kill Elijah with what he no doubt thought was her insatiable lust.

"Fine," she muttered. "Whatever."

"Fine," he agreed, his voice just as curt.

They lay there in silence, Piper doing her best not to think how the heat of his body made her feel protected and safe. He was the most aggravating male she'd ever met. The succubus and tigress were quite content to remain in his arms. They were shameless hussies, both of them, she thought. So what if their bodies were perfectly aligned like they were made to go together? So what if his scent calmed her and aroused her at the same time? He was the enemy. He hated what she was and what she'd done to him.

Her eyes grew heavy after a while though she fought the urge to close. There was no way she was going to sleep with him again. No way in all the nine Hells.

Connor drowsed, his lust taking a backseat to the comforting feel of Piper in his arms. He knew she was pissed about his edict, but she could just stay in a snit for all he cared. There was no way he was letting Elijah get close to her.

Her scent wrapped around him, and it was only as he cuddled closer that he realized she'd fallen asleep. Breathing even and deep, she began purring. The soft rumble vibrated against his chest and his arm, warming him in the vicinity of his chest. It was an adorable quirk, and something that made him want to crush her to him.

His wolf was content as well. When he closed his eyes, Connor could see the wolf reaching out to the tigress and as he fell asleep, he saw the tigress reach back to the wolf.

Through the night, the wolf kept the connection with the tigress. Their human halves might be conflicted, but their beasts weren't. Determination burned in amber and gold eyes while animal hearts pounded in unison. Soon, they promised each other. Soon, they would slip their physical forms and bond spiritually.

* * * *

Persephone threw back a large measure of fifty-year-old scotch. It seemed a perfect waste of the perfectly aged spirit, but desperate times called for desperate drinking. She couldn't believe Piper had left Cypress Point with the werewolf after her transition.

The shockwave of power had nearly sent Persephone and her daughters to their knees. In all her years, she'd never felt a transition so strongly. It could only mean Piper was the *Seductarian* just as Persephone had always suspected.

"Mom?" Pru asked from the doorway of Persephone's boudoir. "I need to talk to you."

Spinning around, Persephone smiled hugely. "Of course, *cher*," she told her second oldest daughter. Waving her hand to the comfortable chairs in front of her bay windows, she sat and waited for

Prudence to sit before leaning forward. “Have you heard from Piper?”

Her daughter nibbled her bottom lip, looking uncertain. “I ran into her at Savio’s,” she finally admitted after several seconds.

“What was she doing there? When did you see her?” The questions came out like machine gun fire. Piper rarely shopped for clothes. Could her youngest have finally embraced her succubus heritage and bought some appropriate clothing? Persephone’s heart raced at the thought. It was what she’d always dreamed—

“She was shopping with that werewolf.”

Hope fled like a thief in the night. “She was shopping. With the werewolf.” Her voice was deadpan and robotic, but really, how was a mother supposed to react when she found out her daughter was fraternizing with a male only suitable to take her virginity?

“Yes,” Pru said slowly, drawing the word out. “It was so strange, but I think her tiger half is trying to take her over.”

Ice formed in Persephone’s chest. “W—what?”

Pru squirmed a bit. “I said something that upset her, and she came at me with claws. Real claws.”

Horror drained all the blood from Persephone’s head. “Are you okay? She didn’t hurt you?”

“Of course not,” Pru replied, sitting back with a sigh. “The wolf helped her control the tiger, but I’m worried about her. We all felt her transition, and even you have to admit it was stronger than any other we’ve felt before. What if the tiger has more of a hold on her than the succubus and she can’t take your place as *Seductarian*?”

That was Persephone’s greatest fear. “I—impossible,” she finally said with a shaky laugh. But something in her screamed at the thought of her baby girl falling prey to those vicious tigers.

Once Prudence left the room, Persephone hurriedly called the only male she truly trusted to care for Piper as much as she did. If there was anyone who could get Piper to listen to reason and come back home where she was loved, it would be he.

The phone rang and a brisk male voice answered.

“Fallon, I’m worried about Piper.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Piper's eyes sprang open, and she stared up at the ceiling. She was alone in the bed, though the mattress still held Connor's heat. She wanted to curl up in that warm spot and breathe his scent in, but she wouldn't. She couldn't. She wouldn't allow herself to become dependent on him, not when he had every intention of leaving just as soon as she could protect herself.

Today she'd begin her training. She was one day closer to being matched up against Evan. With dread clinging to her, she sat up in the bed. Her senses seemed sharper. She could smell Connor in the house and knew Elijah had been there earlier but wasn't now. She could also smell Ruby, though the scent was older.

Weak morning light filtered through the window, and she wanted to bask in the warmth. The tigress stretched in her mind, waking up with her. Taking a moment, she studied the room she'd ignored when she came to bed. It was simple and plain with pictures lining the dresser and walls. Either the Chieftain hadn't spent a lot of time decorating, or she had cleared out most of her belongings, since the pictures were the only accessories.

Piper's ears picked up the sound of someone moving down the hallway towards the room. The soft steps indicated a shapeshifter, but the scent preceding them told her it was Connor. She didn't want to see him yet, not after sleeping with him again. Slipping out of bed as silently as she could, she was out the window before he opened the door.

Listening to her instinct, she headed into the woods. Even in her human form, her senses were more powerful than ever. The rich

scents of earth, moss, and prey singed her nose. The rich colors of the swamp seemed to explode before her eyes. It was beautiful. Strange, yet comforting because she didn't feel threatened.

The tiger pacing her mind told her she was the biggest predator in these woods. Not even the alligators would come near her. Walking without a care in the world, she appeased her need to mark something, scraping her claws against a tree trunk with a purr of satisfaction. It was funny how good that felt, the tug of the bark against her claws relaxing her more than anything else. She almost couldn't wait to do the same thing in tiger form. Moving on, she soundlessly picked her way through the swamp until she found a tree perfect for her.

She climbed, finding a perch on a limb thirty feet above the ground. Reclining, she twirled a twig in her fingers, wondering how she was going to go back to being Persephone's daughter after this. Her mother would never understand Piper hadn't chosen to become this. She'd only see that her succubus daughter had the markings of a tiger.

Without intending to, she relived the lively sex she'd had before her transition. Never in all her life had Piper expected the passion Connor had exposed her to. Not that it mattered now. He wanted to train her, and get away from her as soon as possible. He'd tapped her ass, and now he would beat tracks. Piper caught the scent of her own bitterness and waved a hand in front of her nose to clear it.

"It won't be a problem," a male voice sounded from a tree further away.

Hissing, Piper whirled around, peering through the leaves concealing her. "Elijah?"

"Yes, Kahn," he rumbled softly, moving until she could see him through the thick limbs. "You worry too much."

Knowing he was correct, Piper said nothing, just settled deeper into the crook of her tree limb.

"The werewolf is confused," he continued as though she'd asked. "He knows you're different, and werewolves don't adapt as easily as

we do. He will come around, and things will work out.”

“Is that what you think?” Piper asked harshly. “He hates me for making him the one who set off the transition.”

“I do not think so, Kahn,” Elijah said softly, easing closer to where she sat. “The wolf wants to protect you. I’ve seen it happen. It’s only the man who hesitates.”

Piper shrugged and played with her twig. “It doesn’t matter, though, does it? He’s going to teach me what I need to learn and take off. I may be a tiger, but I’m also a succubus.”

“Do succubi gain markings with their transition?” he asked curiously, head tilted to the side like a kitten trying to understand something.

Lips curving at the idle thought, Piper shook her head. “No. I had similar markings when I was young, but they faded over time.”

They were quiet for a while, simply listening to the sounds of the swamp. It was peaceful in a way Piper would’ve never expected. Her tigress enjoyed the carefree moment, and even the succubus found beauty in their surroundings.

“Have you changed yet today?” he asked softly.

Shrugging again, Piper tossed her twig away. She wasn’t sure she wanted to. She studied the claws peeking out of her fingertips. They gleamed like little daggers. She knew if she stretched her powers, the claws would lengthen. She wouldn’t have to shift into tiger form to tear someone apart with those little beauties.

“You have to try, my Kahn.” His voice was deep and soothing in the near dark of the woods. “You don’t want to wait for the tigress to force the change.”

Piper glanced at him, at his green-gold eyes and saw how much he wanted—no, needed—her to be his Kahn. She didn’t want to disappoint him since he seemed like a really sweet guy. Heaving a huge sigh, she turned to face him.

“How?”

* * * *

Connor frowned at the open window of the Chieftain's bedroom. He'd heard Piper wake up, but she'd darted out the window before he could talk with her. He knew she was disappointed in him and his response to her change. How could he explain his disappointment and uncertainty to her? She'd think he was disgusted by her, not understanding he knew the succubus had pushed her buttons, forcing this on them both.

The bedroom was saturated with her scent even with the window open, and Connor took a deep breath. The wolf was pissed at him. It wanted to mark Piper, wanted to make sure she and everyone else knew they were bonded. Connor pinched the bridge of his nose.

Swearing under his breath, Connor traced his steps back to the living room. Piper was outside. Though he suspected she could more than take care of herself, instinct had him chomping at the bit to follow her and make sure she was safe.

Standing in the Chieftain's bare bones living room, fisted hands at his sides, Connor glared into space. It was time for some hard decisions. If there was the slimmest chance Piper could mate, he wanted it to be with him. His damned logic pointed out that the probability of such a thing happening was next to impossible. Even if the weretiger could override the succubus' non-mating instinct, chances were it would choose a tiger mate. Connor wasn't sure he even cared anymore. He wanted Piper. The wolf aside, he needed her. She brought lightness to his world, unexpected laughter to his heart. And he'd never wanted another female as much as he wanted her.

Chest expanding with his deep breath, Connor forced his body to relax. He was going after her, but not as the man. The wolf was going to find his mate again.

In a burst of bright light that lit the living room, Connor gave over to his wolf. Amber eyes lit with eagerness, and the wolf loped out of the house, scenting the air for his female's direction.

He caught a trace of her in the swamps and took off like a shot. Nothing was going to get between the wolf and its mate. He arrowed after her like a dark flash, his image just a blur to any prey peering out at him. He tracked her deeper in the marsh.

Nose to the ground, he followed her, growling when her scent intersected with the other tiger's. They were moving together. The wolf seethed with possessive ire. The male tiger was intruding on his territory. It would pay.

The blinding flash of light ahead ripped a howl out of his throat. His woman. He knew it. He sensed the air thickening with shape-shifter magic.

Bursting through the brush, the wolf skidded to a halt, hackles rising. The male tiger was there, but not paying attention to him. Its green-gold eyes were focused on the tiger panting in the clearing. It was the female. She was resting on her side, her tail twitching nervously.

Edging closer, the wolf cautiously scented her. Beneath the scent of tiger, he caught a familiar whiff of honeysuckle. A scent he recognized as belonging to his female. There was no scent of confusion or pain this time, unlike the night before. She'd welcomed the change, accepted her tigress.

She studied him almost coldly, and her right ear swiveled as she listened to the swamp behind her. She was majestic, larger than he and the other tiger. Her colors were bold and striking. She was beautiful.

Knowing she needed to release energy from her change, the wolf nipped at her tail, earning a disgruntled hiss. Sharp, deadly teeth made for a menacing display he ignored. Another nip, this time at her hind legs, brought her to her feet. Swiping at him with a massive paw, she crouched, her ears laid back in anger.

The wolf crouched down as well, tail swinging left and right with playfulness. He wanted to chase his mate around the swamps. He wanted to play with her. Bunching his muscles, he lunged forward,

snapping his jaws closed right before he reached her unprotected throat.

Screaming in fury, the tiger swiped out again before dashing away through the brush. The other tiger followed her at a slower pace after looking back at the wolf with a cryptic expression. Not willing to let his mate get away from him, the wolf leapt after her. The male tiger didn't run directly behind her, moving further away from the two of them as though he knew he wasn't welcome.

The wolf chased the female through the swamps, coming close enough to nip her heels a few times, earning himself a couple slashes with her claws. With a quick burst of speed, the tiger got ahead of him, managing to disappear in a thick patch of brush. He raised his head, scenting the air. She was near, though he couldn't find her.

Pausing to listen to the swamp, the wolf heard only the wind wafting through the trees and grass. All was silent, though instinct made him wary. Where was the female?

* * * *

She watched the wolf search for her from the safety of a tree limb. He was wily, circling and circling the base of her sanctuary. He paused, raising his head to scent the air. She admired his healthy pelt and heavy muscles. The wolf had run without stopping, always on her heels.

He was a worthy male, she decided as her tail twitched slightly. She was not conflicted as the Piper female had been. She had recognized this male from the moment she first scented him. He was hers and hers alone. With him at her side, they would rule her streak after defeating the imposter.

She waited patiently, knowing he would sense her gaze soon. The timing had to be just right. Silently, her heavy muscles tensed, her eyes narrowing on him. When his head turned, she sprang.

He snarled as she landed on him, pinning him to the ground. He

struggled, and she fought to hold him. He was strong. She liked that. He pushed her off of him with his strong back legs.

Landing on her feet, she crouched as they circled each other, teeth bared and monstrous sounds echoing around them. He fainted to her right. She swiped out with a claw, barely missing him. Round and round they went, getting closer together.

Then, in a burst of bright light, the wolf was a man with ice blue eyes. She leapt for him, bursting into a million pieces, landing in his arms as a woman with streaked hair.

Connor kissed her, his mouth fusing to hers savagely. He clutched her close to his chest, their dueling tongues continuing the fight for dominance. Piper curled her fingers in his hair, tugging on the strands and scoring his scalp. They were both panting when he raised his head.

"I don't care," he rasped, his lips trailing over her cheekbones, her eyelashes. "I don't give a damn if you're a succubus, Piper. You're mine."

Piper nipped his throat. Some hidden well of hope that he would accept her as she was overflowed at his words. She knew her eyes had gone soft when his face lit with wonder. He looked at her as though he didn't know what to make of her but was thanking the gods she was his.

His head dipped, shielding his face from hers. Nibbling on the line of her jaw, finding his way to her wildly fluttering pulse, he held her tighter. Strong white teeth closed over her pulse, making her freeze in place. It was a vulnerable spot for all animals. He could rip out her throat, but she trusted him to do her no harm. He bit down slightly, growling, "Mine," into her skin.

Stunned, Piper leaned her head farther back, letting him ravage her skin at will. Dazed eyes watched a cloud float across the azure sky. This felt destined to be. Connor felt like home, like...a mate.

Connor breathed in the scent of his woman, his body fueled from their fight and her proximity. He needed her. It was time to mark her.

Gentling his teeth, he sucked on her pulse, feeling it flutter against his tongue. Easing Piper to her feet, he kept his mouth on her throat, pressing his bulging erection against her soft belly.

Without moving his mouth from her skin, he shredded her clothes, tearing them from her body with a savagery that left her gasping. He lifted his head, gazing down at the pale beauty in his arms.

Sunlit shadows touched her skin lovingly, bathing her in gold. A gaping maw of desire opened up in Connor, a desire ruled by mating instinct. His hands nearly shook from the force of his need, and he knew there would be no holding back. He was going to take her as only a beast would.

Piper gasped loudly when Connor spun her around and plastered her back to his front. The friction of his clothing against her soft, sensitive skin made her nipples tighten with sudden need. Arousal dampened her folds, and she couldn't help rubbing against the erection pressing into her from behind.

Resting her head on his chest, she closed her eyes. Connor was moving behind her, tearing at his own clothing until they were both skyclad. Roughly, he pulled her back into his body, causing them both to hiss at the initial contact.

His teeth clamped on her nape as he eased them to their knees in the woods. The scent of earth was sprinkled with the spice of their arousal, lending the hushed air a pagan feeling. He guided her to her knees before him, pressing her down to her hands until her torso was flat to the ground with her ass raised. Only then did he release her nape, rising up over her.

Piper turned her head to the side, pressing her cheek to the earth. A rumbling growl was all the preparation she got before she felt his fingers stroke her clitoris. Gasping, she tried to squirm away. It was happening too fast. Her brain wasn't quite ready although her body was already slick and hot for him. One hard hand clamped to her shoulder, keeping her still for the skillful fingers that coaxed a response from her. She swelled under his expert touch. Mouth gaping

as she struggled to breathe, Piper stared across the clearing as he prepared her body for his invasion.

When she was lifting her hips for him, he let out a sinister chuckle that ended on a growl. Still holding her shoulder down, he used his other hand to position her hips, making her arch her back almost uncomfortably. Just when she would've protested from the position, he thrust.

Piper screamed, her claws tearing into the ground. His flesh speared through her with one expert push, dragging along her sensitive inner walls. Eyes squeezing shut from the pleasure/pain of it, she screamed again when he retreated and surged forward. She was wet and growing wetter by the second as he plunged at his own pace. Piper's hoarse cries and Connor's pained growls echoed throughout the woods.

Just when she thought she couldn't take any more, he bowed low over her, hips churning against hers. His position changed the angle of his thrust, finding a spot inside her channel that made her eyes widen in shock as he repeatedly stroked it with his cock.

"Co-Connor!" she screamed when she felt the first tensing of her inner muscles.

He thrust harder, slamming into her. Then, his teeth sank into her nape once more. Fangs slid through the skin, effectively holding her in place while his body pounded into her welcoming sheath. Her body clenched like a vise, locking around his cock. Her cry of completion ended in the triumphant scream of a tiger. Connor released her nape, gave one last thrust of his hips, throwing his head back as he howled in pleasure and jubilation. His seed shot into Piper's still clenching body, wringing yet another cry from her.

Connor clutched her hips, refusing to let her go until the aftershocks of her orgasm faded and she lay panting before him. He maneuvered them until they lay side by side with his cock still buried inside her. She was physically marked as his now, the bite on her neck evidence for all to see.

He hugged her to him with a grunt. Once they melded emotionally, the tiger and wolf would complete the spiritual bond. But only when they loved each other. Smoothing a finger over the silky skin of her hip, Connor wondered if she felt any of the tenderness he felt for her. She might not yet. But she would. He would make damned sure of it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dusk found Connor and Piper sleeping in a tangle of limbs. Connor savored the memory of each time he'd taken his mate. Sating her every time.

They hadn't bothered returning to the cottage. They both knew Elijah would respect their privacy but wanted no one but Mother Nature to witness their mad scramble to have each other.

Connor winced as he moved slightly. Piper's claws had torn through the skin on his back so many times he had no doubt he'd probably lost a pint of blood. Smiling at the memory, he figured it was well worth it. He'd been mad for her, and she'd shown no hesitation in showing how much she wanted him.

Letting loose a gusty sigh, Connor squinted at the darkening sky. He'd been amazed Piper had learned how to shift so easily, but he knew it was because she'd finally stopped fighting the tiger. He'd also been surprised not to catch a single whiff of succubus pheromones throughout the day. Piper told him it was probably because he was keeping her so sexually satisfied, her succubus wasn't hungry.

Smiling broadly, he cushioned his head on his left arm, pulling her closer to him with the other. Piper murmured something as she snuggled closer, one thigh draped over his hips. Lazily tracing her stripes with his fingers, he closed his eyes again.

He'd spent over an hour tracing those stripes with his tongue, driving Piper out of her mind with want. She'd begged him to come to her, to make the ache stop. He'd been only too happy to comply. She'd paid him back by giving him a tongue bath that'd left him babbling incoherent phrases and thrusting into her mindlessly. She

was everything he could've hoped to find in a mate: lusty, funny, and sassy.

Ears attuned to his surroundings, Connor sensed no one other than a few squirrels and possum were lurking in the undergrowth. Though he was loath to leave their nest, Piper needed to learn how to fight if she was going to take over her streak. His body tensed in sudden fear.

Dominance challenges weren't regulated by the Veilerian Protection Agency. If Piper died trying to take over the streak, there would be no justice for her, nor could she petition for Evan's removal as Kahn. It had to be a fight to the death. There was no other option unless her father regained his health and retracted his second's power. His wolf snarled ineffectually at the restraints he was under. Connor understood its dislike and terror. They could lose her so easily.

The only option Connor had was to make sure she was ready for the fight. He'd ensure she won. He wouldn't let his compulsion to protect her weaken her stance in the streak.

Connor frowned. He hadn't really thought about what would happen after Piper took over her streak. His pack had betrayed and rejected him, so there wasn't much to return home to. There was no denying he and Piper were bonded, though the mating ritual wasn't complete yet. Their spirit animals hadn't connected yet, even though he'd taken her over and over, leaving his mark on her. The mark would stay there until the end of their days, but that last crucial step had been missing. She belonged to him by her own desire, but he wasn't a tiger. Her streak could reject him as an unworthy mate. They could reject her as a traitor to their species. It wasn't unheard of for a collection of shifters to overthrow their leader and wait until another was located. Her streak could kill them both.

"I'm going to tell you, just like Elijah told me, you worry too much," a sleepy feminine voice husked next to Connor.

Opening his eyes and looking down, he met her gold eyes. He didn't bother fighting the smile. His female was looking decidedly rumpled and sated. Her skin glowed like a soft pearl under the bands

of black, her hair tousled and spilling over his chest.

“I worry about you, female,” he growled down at her, closing his eyes in contentment. He yelped when her sharp fangs snagged his nipple. Opening his eyes again, he glared at her.

She steadily met his gaze, drumming her fingers on his chest.

“Why shouldn’t I worry about you?” he finally asked sourly.

She sighed before resting her chin on his pectoral. “Because you’re going to teach me how to be a strong leader and how to defeat Evan,” she said smugly, her eyes nothing but gold slits.

His arm tightened on her compulsively. She had such faith in him and his ability to teach her. He prayed to the Gods he could live up to her belief. “If you lose—” he said, but was cut off by her fingers pressed to his lips.

Piper’s eyes were serious when he looked at her. “If I lose, then it will be because I failed, not you. Before we go into this, you have to promise me you won’t castigate yourself if something bad happens.”

Suddenly furious, Connor jerked his mouth away from her fingers. “Impossible! You’re mine. You’ll belong to me forever, and if you lose, it’ll be because I didn’t teach you enough.”

She reacted with a sharp slap to his stomach that made his breath leave him in a huff. Cursing a blue streak, she jumped to her feet and glared down at him. With him on his back and her standing over him, Connor had a good view of her secrets, his body responding by rote.

Stamping her foot when she noticed where his eyes shifted, Piper shook her fist at him. “You will not take responsibility for me, Connor. I mean it! You’re mine as well, and I won’t have you torturing yourself if something happens to me.”

Her little fists landed on her hips as she stood over him undaunted, unembarrassed, and highly pissed off. His tiny mate was fierce in her bid to protect him from himself. Connor nearly chuckled, but the wolf howled mournfully. This wasn’t turning out like he’d wanted after their furious lovemaking, but now was as good a time to teach her as any.

Quick as a snake, his hand caught her ankle, flipping her to her back. Before she could sputter out a protest, he was on her, his teeth at her throat.

“If I were Evan, you’d be dead,” he growled in her ear, feeling her heart pounding against his chest. “He won’t wait for you to fight fair. He’ll be on you in any form he can just to get the edge. You always have to be ready.”

She nodded, swallowing hard. Connor leaned back to see her face, eyes wide, pupils dilated in surprise. He softened. His poor mate—Crunch! Connor saw stars, his hands loosening as he tried to assimilate what his *poor* mate had just done.

She rolled him off of her and heard her moving further away from him. Finally, the black spots faded, and he felt his nose. She’d broken it by slamming her forehead into it. He gave her a feral smile. This was going to be fun.

Piper nearly cringed when Connor gave her an evil smile. His nose had bled freely for a few minutes, and he hadn’t bothered to wipe it off. He looked lean and dangerous as he slowly got to his feet.

When he’d been over her, her first instinct had been to submit, but when he’d looked at her almost pityingly, she’d snapped. She wasn’t going to be the weak link in their relationship. Piper was determined to be a full partner, not the one who needed constant protection.

They circled each other warily. Piper watched his eyes, trying to see his intent. He lunged at her so fast she almost didn’t catch it. She spun to the right to avoid the tackle but was caught before she was completely out of range.

His big arms banded around her arms, effectively cutting off one of her most powerful weapons in her human form, her claws.

“Now what?” he rasped into her ear, keeping his head tucked close so she couldn’t clock him again. “He’s bigger than you in this form. He can rip out your throat with his teeth if you’re in this position. What do you do?”

Piper forced herself to calm, thinking through this dilemma.

Suddenly she knew what to do. She let her legs fold, forcing Connor to change the position of his arms. With just the little wiggle room she had, she hammered her fist back at his groin strongly, but not as hard as she could. His breath whooshed out, and his arms loosened even more. Not giving him time to catch her again, she spun around and backed away.

He gave her an incredulous look that would've made her laugh if she wasn't trying to anticipate his strikes. Letting out a howl that sent a shiver down her spine, Connor came at her like a freight train. Backpedaling frantically, Piper fell.

When he lunged at her, she instinctively planted her foot in his stomach and used his own momentum to kick him over her head. Scrambling to her hands and knees, Piper let out a pained grunt as she was tackled again. This time, he had her facedown on the ground, his entire weight on her, squeezing the air out of her.

She struggled to fight her way out from underneath him, but it was no use. The longer he held her down, the less air she got until she was seeing spots.

"No!" He growled in her ear. "Think, Piper. You don't have to fight him just in human form. If you get in this position, you shift and let him try to take the tiger."

He eased off her body, and she gulped in air. Resting her head on the ground, she shuddered. She wasn't sure she could do this, she thought in panic. Connor didn't want to hurt her, and he'd almost choked her out. If Evan got her in the same position, she'd be toast.

"Baby," he crooned in her ear, kissing her cheek. "You have time to learn. You did well. You clocked me good, and I don't think I'll have to worry about cubs for a while."

Letting out a watery laugh, Piper turned her head to meet his eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered. He kissed the tip of her nose.

"We're in training. It's okay. Just maybe pull your punches next time, okay?" he asked her wryly, the crease in his cheek peeking out at her.

“Want me to kiss it better?” Piper responded impishly.

His eyes darkened just as she knew they would. He responded to her so honestly she wasn’t sure how she’d never noticed before.

“Do you think you two could tear yourselves away from the mating dance long enough to eat?” Elijah called from several yards away.

Blushing bright red, Piper’s head jerked around so fast she almost gave herself whiplash. She couldn’t see Elijah, but she could smell him. He’d stopped far enough away that they couldn’t see each other.

Connor chuckled silently next to her, his chest jerking with his breathless laughter. Shooting him a deadly glare, Piper jumped to her feet.

“We’ll be back at the house soon.” She looked down at her naked state, then at Connor’s. She blushed harder under her dirt, making Connor laugh even harder. She aimed a kick at his ribs which he dodged by rolling away. Piper shouted back, “Why don’t you, um, go for a walk for about ten minutes?”

A bark of laughter was her answer. Then Elijah’s scent faded away.

“Quick!” she hissed at Connor who was getting to his feet. “Hurry to the house before he gets back.”

Laughing until tears streamed down his face, Connor took a moment to collect himself and wipe his cheeks. “Babe, he knows what we were doing out here.”

Piper huffed playfully and started for the cottage at a run.

Connor jogged lightly behind her, making comments about streaking and jiggling bottoms, which she ignored as best she could. By the time she reached Ruby’s cottage, her ears were red and her breath was fast. That damn werewolf knew just how to get her worked up.

Elijah wasn’t there when she burst through the front door, a concession to privacy Piper was only too glad to accept. Darting through the living room to the Chieftain’s bedroom, she grabbed some

clothes and sped for the shower.

Within minutes, she was sopping wet and washing her hair when Connor slipped into the shower with her. Shooting him a glare as she scrubbed her scalp, Piper tried to ignore him, which was next to impossible. He took up the entire stall, crowding her in the corner with a wolfish smile.

“You need someone to wash your back, kitty cat?”

She stuck her tongue out at him before rinsing her hair. Opening her eyes, she stilled. His eyes were full-on amber, and his cock was pointing straight at her with purpose. He watched the suds slide over her shoulders and down her torso. His tongue darted out to wet his lips and then she was pinned in the corner, his mouth suckling her nipple.

Helpless against his passion and her own desire, Piper arched her back and hooked one leg over his hip. When he thrust into her, she was more than ready, her body primed from the fight and his lustful words on the way back to the house. He rode her hard and fast, growling out words of praise and swallowing her keening moans with his mouth.

They climaxed together in one blinding burst of lust as the shower poured water over them. Connor slowly sank to his knees in the tub, dragging Piper with him.

“You’re gonna kill me if we keep this up,” he rumbled lazily.

“At least you’ll go with a smile,” she shot back, purring as he soaped up his hands and scrubbed her.

By the time they exited the bathroom, scrubbed head to toe, Elijah had food on the table. Piper tried to let go of Connor’s hand before Elijah saw, but her werewolf was having none of that. He gripped her firmly and gave her a look that suggested she just better get used to it.

A happy blush infusing her face, Piper ducked her head and sat at the table next to Connor. Elijah just sat back, eyebrows raised and a smirk on his face.

He waited until Piper had just taken her first bite of food before

leaning forward and asking, “Had fun?” with a waggle of his eyebrows.

Piper, who’d just taken a bite of food, sucked in a shocked gasp. Unfortunately, a single grain of rice flew straight into her windpipe, choking her. Her face turned red with embarrassment and lack of air, but Connor was there to pound on her back, all the while glaring at Elijah with unholy retribution in his eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Connor wanted to be pissed at the male tiger but couldn't help his own chuckles. The look on Piper's face had been priceless. His not-so-innocent-any-longer mate had looked as though she'd been caught with her pants down.

Rubbing her back soothingly, Connor mused that they'd certainly made up for her lack of experience in the last eight hours. He frowned. He should keep his hands off her. She was no doubt sore as all hell, though she hadn't complained once. Just thinking about how she'd initiated some of their matings made his unscrupulous cock stand at attention.

"Don't pick," he warned Elijah who just shot him a wry glance.

"Did you get anything settled?" Elijah asked once Piper managed to collect herself.

Connor nodded, helping himself to a big helping of each dish. The weretiger had cooked a big meal of grilled chops, green beans, and dirty rice. He wasn't sure if it was because Elijah had been bored, or if it was just something he did. Whatever the case, the tiger had some serious cooking skills.

"She'll need to work on her shifting some more. But our girl's got some good instincts," Connor said with a quick smile at his mate.

Glowing from his praise, Piper ducked her head again. "Mom makes all of us take self-defense classes every couple of years. She said just because we're succubi and can seduce males doesn't mean we shouldn't learn how to protect ourselves if we need to."

Connor found himself agreeing with the *Seductarian*. He didn't want to think about what problems those women would have if they

had unruly males in the house. He frowned. What had Piper done there if she hadn't been taking males?

When he posed the question, Piper beamed at him like he'd asked her something smart. It left a warm feeling in his chest, and he wondered why he'd ever thought he could resist her.

"I worked the door on *Pleasure Nights*," she said after swallowing a big gulp of water. He'd probably kept her out in the woods too long without sustenance and he cursed his greediness.

"So, what, you took numbers or something?" Connor asked, genuinely perplexed. Having never been to a *Pleasure House* as a client, he wasn't sure what went on other than sex.

She gave him a dirty look. "No. Vic and I made sure no underage or bonded males tried getting in. We have a strict policy at *Persephone's*, and it includes following all *Veilerian* codes of conduct. No bonded males, no pre-transitioned males allowed, and absolutely no incubi unless it's Fallon."

The incubus' name struck a jealous chord in Connor and he just barely held back his possessive growl. "Why Fallon?" he bit out between clenched teeth.

She waved her fork. "He's the Master of the local Den and one of my best friends. We sort of grew up together. Mom was hoping he'd be the one to—" she waved her hand again with a blush. "You know. But he and I were always more like brother and sister. I just couldn't see him that way."

Relief surged through his body. She didn't want the incubus. He sent a prayer to the gods, thanking them for that small blessing. "Why did she want him to set off your transition?"

"Uh, well you know. Incubi and succubi are supposed to only be able to breed together. He and I would've had powerful children. It just didn't work out the way she wanted," she answered with a rueful shrug.

Children. Connor's nails bit into his palms. He'd always seen them as anonymous little cubs sometime in his future. Now though,

he wanted them desperately. With Piper. Their children would have one hell of a genetic code though. Would they be dual shifters? Or werewolf succubus shifters? Or weretiger succubus shifters? He didn't know and didn't care. As long as they were with Piper, that was fine with him.

"So we need to get her trained in shifting and some more offensive skills," Elijah said, cutting into Connor's private thoughts. The weretiger sat back, head tilted back as he stared at the ceiling. "Evan can partially change, like Piper. I've seen him use his claws in human form."

Connor went cold. He'd been hoping Piper's ability was an anomaly, but apparently that wasn't so. "Is that a weretiger trait?"

Elijah shook his head. "Nah. I've only seen the most dominant tigers do that. Three of James' children had the ability. His line has been leading that streak for the last five generations."

Piper frowned at her plate. That was when Connor realized she didn't know anything about her father other than his species and designation within the Veil. She knew nothing about her heritage, and that bothered him.

He scrapped back his chair. "I'm gonna call Malachi. Why don't you give Piper more information on James and the streak?" he asked in careful tones. He didn't want Piper to think he pitied her.

Elijah studied him and nodded. "Sure, no problem."

Pausing to press a warm kiss to the crown of his mate's head, Connor breathed in her scent. "I'll be back in a few," he promised with a gentle squeeze of her shoulder.

* * * *

Piper lifted her head to watch Connor walk from the room. She knew he was giving her a few minutes to learn about her father, and the warmth in her heart expanded to encompass her whole body. Her male was intelligent and sensitive. Two traits she wouldn't have

thought he possessed yesterday.

“He’s a good male,” Elijah told her, agreeing with her silent assessment. “He’ll be a good consort for you, Kahn.”

Turning her attention back to the weretiger, Piper gave him a shy grin. “He’s amazing.”

“Your father is an amazing male as well,” Elijah mused, studying her carefully. “You should have seen him in his prime.”

Piper was silent, not sure what to say. She didn’t know James and didn’t know much about him except that he was Kahn. Her mother hadn’t expected Piper to retain weretiger traits, so she hadn’t bothered telling him about his Halfling daughter. But even if she had known him well, she wasn’t sure she would think him an amazing male if he’d let Evan take over his streak.

“You wonder about his choices,” he said slowly, making Piper blink in surprise. He shrugged. “I have a touch of telepathy.” He leaned forward, his face earnest. “James was an amazing leader. We prospered for years under his rule. Evan is his nephew. About seventy years ago, there was a fight with another streak and Evan’s father, James’ brother, was killed. James took Evan under his protection and finished raising him.

“James never mated, but when his cubs began showing up on his doorstep, he took them in. He treated his children well, raising them to do the right thing should any of them take over the streak.” He sighed. “Evan was jealous. We could all see it, but James just shrugged it off as oldest sibling syndrome or something. He couldn’t see how much Evan hated his cousins. When the first of James’ children died in suspicious circumstances, James never once looked to Evan as the cause. Then we went to war again and the others died. Evan is a consummate actor and played the role of grieving cousin so well that when James was injured, he entrusted Evan with the streak.”

“Why hasn’t anyone told James about what Evan’s been doing?” Piper asked gruffly. She didn’t want to feel sorry for her father, but gods, he’d lost all of his children except for her, and she wasn’t sure if

he knew of her existence.

“Any time it looked as though someone might break Evan’s gag order, they were executed. In the most horrendous ways,” Elijah told her, revulsion plain in his voice. “After watching your fellow streak members die, you just give up or leave. Evan tells James everything he wants to hear and does what he wants.”

Twisting a lock of hair around her finger, Piper bit her lip and stared into space. She could see how the other tigers would become brainwashed into thinking there was no hope for their continued survival if they spoke out. “How long has James been bedridden?”

“Fifteen years. The only reason we knew he was still alive is because we could still smell him and sometimes hear him talking with Evan. Gods, the things Evan tells him!” Elijah hissed banging his fist on the table. “He’s painted this picture of a cohesive streak, and James buys it! He loves that male like a son, and you can smell how desperately James wants the streak to accept Evan. He tells James everything’s fine and makes up excuses as to why none of the others has been to see him.”

The hopelessness in his voice nearly brought tears to Piper’s eyes. She reached across the table and touched his fist. His hand unfurled, gripping her hand tightly. “I’ll try to make things right,” she whispered softly, hoping she wasn’t giving him a false promise.

“You can do it, Kahn. If the others knew about you...” he breathed, hope springing to his eyes. “If they knew James’ daughter was a Kahn, it would change the entire dynamics of the streak. You’d give them something to fight for.”

Squeezing his hand, Piper tried to find the right words. She wanted to help him and the streak, but she was scared about the fight with Evan and repercussions of it.

Elijah rested his forehead on her hand. “Please don’t be afraid, Kahn. The streak will accept you with open arms. James, too.”

“Does he know about me?” she blurted out and cursed herself for the telling question.

Lifting his head, he slowly shook it. "He thought all of his children had found him. I'm sure he didn't expect a cub from your mother," he admitted with a red face.

Piper chuckled. That was an understatement. She was sure her mother hadn't expected it either. "What's he like?" she asked softly.

Elijah smiled broadly. "He's massive! James is six feet seven inches of pure tiger male," he told her proudly. "You look a lot like him. Same hair, same eyes, but you know, shorter."

Making a face at the weretiger, Piper released his hand and sat back. Elijah's pride in his former Kahn was telling. He boasted of the male as though James was his father.

"He could shift faster than any other weretiger I've ever seen. When he fought, it was with his heart. He never went to battle against a weaker streak but didn't let any of them take advantage of his kind heart. I don't want you to think we were constantly at war," he said hurriedly. "Before the Territorial Act of 1968, if you wanted to expand your territory, you fought for it. Now, boundaries are in place, so the chances of war are less. The only fighting done these days is over mating, dominance, and bad manners."

Piper sat thoughtfully. She was glad there were laws in place. She didn't exactly relish the idea of fighting for territory, although that wasn't strictly true. She distinctly remembered having to share a room with Penny and staking her claim on one side, and woe be to her sister if she crossed the line. Surprised laughter made Elijah glance at her.

She shook her head. "I just realized my tiger has been toeing the line for years, not just recently," she said and explained the fighting she used to do with her sister over her "territory."

Elijah nodded. "We're territorial, but within the streak we're one big family. I mean, we were." His tone was sour, but he brightened. "You'll bring new light to our streak."

"Has there ever been a female Kahn before?" she asked curiously. As far as she knew, it wasn't common. Males tended to be much more aggressive than females and naturally took the leadership roles.

Elijah surprised her by nodding. “Your grandmother was Kahn. Fatima was hell on wheels from what my father used to tell me. She was fiercely protective of the streak, and if she caught anyone fighting within it for petty grievances, she punished them severely. Just like a mother,” he said with a smile.

“So if I beat Evan, the streak wouldn’t have a problem with a female Kahn?” she asked, wanting to be certain.

“I can promise you they’ll adore you. You are the true Kahn, daughter of our favored Kahn—”

“Who is also a succubus and mated to a werewolf,” Connor finished from the doorway, his relaxed pose not fooling Piper for a moment. She could see the tension in his shoulders and face.

“Do you think they’ll have a problem with that?” she asked him worriedly.

Elijah was quiet for several minutes. “There might be some who disapprove,” he hedged, looking away from Piper.

Her heart froze. So, she might be rejected yet again, this time by the people she’d be saving. Her jaw set. Whatever. She’d help them out, and if they didn’t want her, they could kiss her ass.

“Has Malachi found anything out?” she asked Connor, changing the subject. She’d deal with everything when it came time. Worrying about it now would solve nothing.

He grimaced. “He spoke with Lucian, and they suspect Evan might be mixed up with the Eturians somehow.”

It was another worry added to his already crushing concerns for Piper. If Evan Walsh was an Eturian, then he wouldn’t care how he won a challenge because he wouldn’t fear repercussions from the Veil. The Eturians were notorious dirty fighters. That, coupled with Evan’s already brutal tendencies, had Connor breaking out in a cold sweat for his mate.

She must’ve read some of his concern on his face because she gave him another bright smile. “You guys ready to kick my ass again?”

Connor smiled slightly, letting her know he hadn't missed her concern. He kissed her lightly on the cheek and pulled her out of her chair. "Since you're so eager..."

* * * *

Evan stepped out of the Kahn's room and the bright smile he'd worn for his uncle faded from his face. The godsdamn Kahn wouldn't die!

Cursing the witch who'd promised him glory, Evan tossed his uncle's "medicine" across the room. Shoving a hand through his thick blonde hair, he stalked across his plush living room. If he thought he could get away with just tearing the old tiger's head off, he would. He knew though, if there was anything suspicious about James' death, the streak would turn against him with feral smiles.

Standing at the window of his manor home, Evan watched the tigresses walk around the compound. They were all fine females with sleek, hot bodies, and none of them wanted anything to do with him. They were repulsed by him, and he loved it. It made his power over them taste that much sweeter. They wanted to keep the weaker men safe, so they sacrificed their bodies for Evan and his men.

He shifted his cock in his tailored slacks. Tonight he'd probably take Katina. She was a good fuck since she fought harder and her pride was mountainous. Grinning at her as she walked by with her chin in the air, Evan pictured what the night would bring.

A phone rang and he heard one of his men answer, but ignored him. If it were important they'd pass the message along.

"Sire," his follower said after hanging up the phone. "One of the scouts reported that Elijah was seen near Cypress Point yesterday."

Hissing, Evan turned around, slashing the male with bared claws. "Why wasn't I told of this yesterday?" he demanded of the male lying on the floor in submission.

"He was only told of it this morning, sire."

Kicking at the male's ribs, Evan tried to be as quiet as possible. When the male rolled away from the foot aimed at his torso, the dominant tiger caught him, dragging him up to his face. "You find that fucking traitor, and you bring him here. Alive."

He nearly threw the useless male across the room. Fucking Elijah was a pain in his ass. The weaker tiger had managed to evade Evan and his men for nearly ten years, and now he was in Cypress Point?

Rubbing his chin thoughtfully, Evan thought it sounded like something the idealistic tiger would do. Elijah had always had his head in the clouds or up his female's ass. At least before Evan had taken a nice big chunk of that fine ass. He chuckled in memory. Hannah hadn't been the best lay he'd had as Kahn, but she'd been nice and cooperative when his men threatened to kill the cub. Yup, she'd serviced all eight of them with a smile and then watched in horror as they dashed the cub's head on the floor.

Evan rubbed his hands together with glee. If Elijah thought he'd bring in some dominant tiger to take the streak back, he had another think coming. This was his streak now.

Seeing Katina walking back the way she'd come, Evan knocked on the window to get her attention. When she saw him and the cock he'd pulled out of his slacks, she jerked her chin up. She put her shoulders back, but she came anyway. They always did.

Chapter Twenty-Five

For the next day and a half, Connor and Elijah put Piper through her paces. She spent hours with Elijah learning how to shift faster and faster until she could change in a split second. Connor drilled her on fighting maneuvers. She and her mate went to bed covered in bruises. They spent hours kissing and making everything all better.

When it was time to return to Cypress Point and the real world, Piper knew she was a lean, mean mini-fighting machine, and that Connor was the best thing since the printing press. He pushed her relentlessly, but it was with the upcoming fight in mind. He didn't shower her with compliments, but managed to convey just how beautiful and important she was to him.

Little things he did, from finding the most perfect water lily to put on her pillow when she woke up to making sure she didn't skip a meal no matter how tired she was, all totaled up to show his devotion. They didn't talk about what the future might hold, but she prayed that hers included Connor. When they weren't training, they talked. She learned more about his intensely logical mind and how he couldn't wait to return to his chosen profession of Veilerian historical researcher and writer.

Connor seemed interested in her life, asking her questions about her upbringing and dreams. She'd never felt closer to someone.

Elijah was just as interesting. He regaled them for hours with stories of the Shadow Claw Streak. She learned more about her father from those stories than she would have asking questions. James seemed to have been the perfect father figure for the three dozen tigers in his streak. He never forced dominant males to leave if they

desired to stay, and as long as they observed his laws, he never caused trouble for them. His six children had all been purebred, birthed by lone female tigers throughout the years. Apparently her father was something of a ladies' man, or had been before his illness.

The illness was troublesome. She frowned into space. It didn't sit right with Piper and what she'd learned about the old tiger. He'd been fit as a fiddle for two hundred and forty years then, all of a sudden, he was stricken with an illness that left him paralyzed. She hoped she had a chance to find out more about it, but didn't hold her breath.

Stretching, she sighed. She'd also learned a lot about herself. She'd always been stubborn, but apparently her transition had brought that trait to a whole new level. When Connor had her in a painful armlock, Piper wouldn't tap out. She refused. Tears could run down her face and she could be near to fainting, but she wouldn't tap out even with Connor screaming at her to. Instead, she'd take the pain and figure out a way to win. It didn't always work and a few times she'd actually passed out, only to wake up with a very pissed off Connor bathing her face with cold rags. They'd argue about her hardheadedness and do it again, but she refused to surrender.

Piper also learned she had a great capacity to love. She loved Connor with all her heart, but hadn't told him yet. Something told her to hold back some part of herself even while she gave him all of her body. He hadn't expressed his feelings either, and she wondered if they were both waiting to see what the fight with Evan would bring.

So far, her succubus powers were under control. She hadn't had a single moment of pulsating lust unless she counted every time she looked at Connor. Piper suspected it had more to do with the constant sex she and her mate had been having. Her body didn't have time to crave male lust as it was fully sated.

Her tiger instincts were sharper than ever. She could disappear into the swamps, leaving Connor and Elijah tracking her for hours with no luck. When she was ready to be found, she would pounce on them, which always led to a chase. Shifting into the magnificent cat

freed her from everything. She was comfortable in her beastly skin. The tiger had simple needs and wasn't afraid to fulfill them on its own terms. If it wanted food, it hunted. If it was tired, it slept. There was no conflict, no timetable to follow.

Sitting on the front steps of the porch, she gazed into the swamp. Connor and Elijah had gone into town to get cleaning supplies. They were leaving for Cypress Point that evening, and they'd grouched when Piper insisted on cleaning the cottage top to bottom. She'd stood firm though, wanting to leave the house in good shape as thanks to the Chieftain for letting them stay there.

She was actually going to miss the little house. It had quickly become a haven of sorts. With the cell phone signals iffy, there was no phone to answer, but the Chieftain had one helluva satellite system. The two movies they'd watched had been action-adventure flicks with lots of helpless women and buff men. Piper hadn't minded. It tickled her fancy when Connor got jealous because she was ogling one of the sexy actors.

Smiling in remembrance, she didn't hear the footsteps until they were on her.

* * * *

Connor was on edge.

He hadn't expected Elijah to be one of the most thorough shoppers he'd ever met. The male looked at every ingredient in the products they needed and dismissed them as environmentally unsafe. Two hours later, they finally had things the weretiger approved of and were headed back to the cottage.

They would clean the house and get back to Cypress Point tonight. Hopefully Toby would already be there and he could put that problem behind him, hopefully clear the air with his nephew so he could move on with his life. With Piper. He wanted to concentrate on prepping Piper for her meeting with Evan, and he didn't want Toby as

a distraction.

In two days, Piper had come to mean so much to him. She'd breached his emotional walls and nestled right into his heart, becoming an integral part of him. She was a fascinating woman and a powerful tigress. She was everything to him.

"She's amazing," Elijah said absently, staring out the window of Connor's truck.

Having grown used to the weretiger's touch-and-go mind reading abilities, Connor just sent him a sour glance.

"When are you going to tell her you love her?" the tiger continued.

Cold dripped down Connor's spine. Tell Piper he loved her? Could he do it? He shuddered. He wasn't sure. He'd shown her he held her in high esteem in many ways, but couldn't imagine getting touchy-feely about it. Instead of answering Elijah, he hunched his shoulders.

The wolf was completely at ease with sharing his love, but of course, the wolf was never conflicted. It had its mate, and it was pleased. Connor was the one who wasn't sure he could tap into his emotions. He knew he loved her, but opening up about it was too big a risk for the man to take.

"You should tell her," Elijah whispered, turning haunted eyes on Connor.

Wincing at the pain in the other male's eyes, Connor tightened his hands on the wheel. The tiger was right, his wolf told him. If he lost the chance to tell Piper how he felt, he'd never be able to live with himself.

"I'll tell her." The "eventually" echoed around the cab of the truck.

"You don't want regrets, Connor. The day before my Hannah died, we fought. We argued about recycling. Can you imagine?" he laughed harshly. "She was big into conservation, and she found a can I'd thrown away instead of putting in the recycling bin. So we fought,

and then she was killed before I could apologize. I'll never forgive myself for not telling her every day how much I loved her." Anguish dripped from Elijah's every word burning like acid in Connor's soul.

Okay, so yeah, he needed to tell his mate he loved her. He could do it. He'd faced down a succubus and ended up finding a prime female who complemented him in every way. She deserved the words.

Decision made, he turned down Ruby's driveway. The truck bounced over potholes, kicking up dust as they rattled to the cottage.

"Stop," Elijah hissed, eyes closed as he leaned out the window to scent the air. "Gods, no!"

That was when Connor smelled it. Blood, lots of blood, and the complete absence of his mate's presence. The wolf howled savagely.

Connor threw the truck in park and was out the door before Elijah got out of his seatbelt. He was a blur of movement as he ran the last hundred yards to the cottage. No wildlife stirred, no sound greeted him. Just eerie stillness like the swamp was holding its breath.

He saw the front of the house. Stopped dead in his tracks. Blood everywhere. Pooled in thick puddles on the steps. Dripping off the porch into the yard. Bloody handprints streaking down the sides of the house and on the porch railings. His mate's blood. The blood of strangers.

Connor threw his head back, he and the wolf howling vengeance to the still sky.

* * * *

When Evan saw the female being carried in by his men, he knew who she was. He could smell it on her. She was James' daughter. How the fuck had this one gotten past him? She was post-transition and...were those stripes on her body?

His men followed his unspoken orders and brought her to a small room with steel reinforced walls. It had no windows or furnishings.

Just a small grate in the center of the floor for hosing away messes.

The female landed on the floor, her body streaked with blood, bruises, and those intriguing stripes. He sniffed the air. Definitely a tiger, a child of James, but there was something else. Something strange. He just couldn't place it.

He looked at his men. They were all dripping blood. One was missing.

"Where's Mike?"

The men shifted uneasily. Price, the only one who came close to being dominant, spoke. "She killed him. We dumped him in the bayou."

Impressed and more than a little intrigued, Evan looked back at the female. She was delectable. Full breasts, lush ass, and that riot of black and gold hair. Her jeans molded to her ass and thighs. The T-shirt she wore had been white before the altercation with his men. Her face was pretty in an innocent way. His favorite type.

"Who is she, and where's Elijah?" he asked, turning away from the female. He'd be back later for her.

Price stepped back, filing out of the room with the others. "We tracked him to a cottage, but he wasn't there. We found her instead. We figure she's a friend or lover of his."

Evan shot Price an irritated glance. "Idiot. Do you smell his scent on her?"

The other tiger slowly shook his head.

"Did you use the masking potion?"

Price nodded.

Satisfied that they would have time before anyone would come looking for her, Evan tapped his chin, thinking through possible scenarios. It was possible Elijah had come across her accidentally, but it was more likely the renegade tiger had gone out looking for James' last heir. The others had been males, easily killed. Females were a little more difficult, especially the dominant ones, which this female was. Look what she'd done to Mike.

An idea sprang to his mind, and he turned it over carefully. The streak wouldn't know she was there, so he could keep her hidden for a long while. Maybe even long enough to find out who she was and what she'd been to Elijah. Then he might just be able to turn this little problem to his advantage.

Satisfied with his plan, he gestured Price over to him. The male approached slowly and with great trepidation.

Casually, Evan smashed his fist into Price's pretty face. The male fell to the floor, blood pouring from his mouth to mingle with the stains on his body. "That's for getting your ass handed to you by a girl," Evan stated, eyeing them all coldly.

Slowly, so as not to provoke him further, they backed out the room, leaving Evan to think on his plan some more.

* * * *

Elijah finally got Connor calmed down enough so they could look for clues. It had proven futile. The only thing they did know was that weretigers had attacked and taken Piper. Blood from at least three different males coated the porch, while a small puddle carried Piper's scent. Death wafted in the air, hovering over the small plot of land.

Nostrils flaring wide, Connor tracked the scent to the water's edge and found the body of a male. The weretiger was missing great chunks of tissue from his throat and was the reason for most of the blood. Piper had taken one of her attackers out, but where was she now?

Elijah slipped up next to him and hissed. "Gods!"

Whirling on the weretiger, Connor backed him into a tree. "You know him." It wasn't a question. It was a statement and an accusation. "Who is he and where is my female?"

Face pale and eyes wide, the weretiger looked at Connor with guilt and fear. "He's one of Evan's enforcers," Elijah rasped. His throat worked compulsively. "If he has her, he'll kill her. He won't

wait for a challenge.”

Connor’s vision darkened with his fear. “Where is the streak?” he asked, his voice eerily calm.

Elijah shook his head. “I haven’t been part of the streak for ten years. I don’t know where he might’ve moved it.”

The weretiger was on the ground with two hundred plus pounds of pissed off werewolf on top of him in a heartbeat. Connor’s blue eyes melted into feral amber. “You are going to help me find her,” he demanded harshly, face stark with fear.

“Of course I will. She is my Kahn, Connor.”

Something in his face must’ve reached the werewolf because his weight was suddenly gone and a large, callused hand was thrust in Elijah’s face. “I’m going to call some people to help us search for her.”

Taking the hand offered, Elijah allowed the werewolf to pull him to his feet. “We’ll find her, Connor. She’s smart, and she has skills. She’ll be fine until we get there.” He hoped.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Piper woke to a throbbing head and a battered body. Keeping her eyes closed, she frowned. What had happened? She'd been sitting on the porch steps waiting for Connor and Elijah to return from town, and then she'd been surrounded by strange males. Five males in differing sizes and coloring, but all of them had bristled with menace.

She carefully turned her head to take in her surroundings, but even that small movement caused throbbing in her skull. The room she was in was bare of everything, with dark brown walls and a stone floor. The only interesting thing about the room was the small drain in the center of the floor.

Easing up to a seated position, she took stock of her body. Her chest was sore and looking at it, she saw ten deep gouges slowly leaking blood. She was healing, although slowly. Her head hurt like a mofo, and her shoulders felt like they'd been wrenched out of the sockets.

A soft sound reached her ears. She was panting. Little whimpering pants of pain were escaping her. Gods, her body hurt! Had the men beat the shit out of her while she was out?

Raising her shirt, she saw her ribs and stomach sporting an array of colors. Yup, they'd pounded on her a lot. Her jeans were still on, so they hadn't violated her, but her knees and thighs ached, so she was guessing they hadn't stopped at her torso.

Scooting herself backwards until she reached the wall, Piper leaned against it wondering what she could do now. She couldn't hear anything moving outside the room, but that didn't mean people weren't out there. But who were they, and what did they want with

her?

She eyeballed the door. Could she bust through it or claw her way out? Testing her aches and pains, she creaked to her feet, pausing when her vision blinked in and out. Several deep breaths later and she could see perfectly fine. Her nose picked up the scent of weretigers and blood, but considering she'd been kidnapped by shifters and was bleeding, she didn't have much to go on.

She bit her lip, judging the distance to the door. That door was the only way out, and she needed to test it to be sure there was no escape. She just had to get to it. The room was no more than ten feet across, but it may as well been a mile. There was no way she could walk the entire way with nothing to hold on to.

Instead, she walked around the room using the wall as support. Every step caused pain to ricochet up her body. Clenching her teeth, she forced herself to keep going. Fresh blood dripped down her torso from the cuts on her chest and, she looked at her arms, the slashes on the inside of her arms.

Leaving a trail of blood as she made half a circuit of the room, Piper leaned against the wall next to the door. She took a moment to blink the sweat out of her eyes. The effort of moving across the room had weakened her severely. Her hand lifted to the doorknob and she twisted. No surprise. It was locked. If she were feeling a hundred percent, she'd probably be able to twist the knob until it broke, but in her present condition she barely moved it at all.

She slid down the wall. Vision blurry, she forced herself to crawl back across the room. She wasn't staying next to the door. She wanted to see them when they came in.

Piper squeezed her eyes closed, trying to shift. Maybe shifting would help her heal some, or at least give her a chance to protect herself against whoever might come through the door. Except nothing happened. Her head pounded. Stars burst behind her closed eyes. She couldn't concentrate enough to shift. Not good.

Carefully curling on her side with her back to the wall opposite

the door, she rested, tears of pain and hopelessness escaping her. All of her training hadn't done a damn bit of good. She was trapped in a tiny room with no means of escape.

* * * *

It took two and a half hours for their search party to show up. Connor had followed tracks far from the cottage, trying to pick up Piper's scent, anyone's scent, but for some reason was unable to find where they headed from the cottage. Elijah hadn't had much luck either. It was as though the weretigers had simply disappeared.

Connor stood in the middle of the yard contemplating how to organize the rescue party when he heard a rhythmic thumping growing louder and louder. He wasn't surprised to see the black SUV tearing around the curved driveway, kicking up dust. It skidded to a stop just a few feet from him and if he'd been a weaker man, he probably would've fallen to his knees in relief. Instead, he raised an eyebrow sardonically.

Ruby vaulted out of the vehicle, the pounding bass out of place in the quiet swamp. "You lost her?" she asked incredulously as the driver killed the engine.

Connor scowled at his friend's wife. "No, I didn't lose her. She was taken by weretigers."

"That's only a little better," the driver said as she opened her door. It was the snarky Amazon from the other night, the one who went by the name Izzy. "I never thought the day would come when a dog would lose out to a cat."

"Izzy, if Ocean heard you say that, she'd cut out your tongue," another woman said from the passenger side. She looked nearly identical to Ruby except for the eyes. "I'm Saga, the sane one in the group," she introduced herself to Connor as she propped herself on the front fender of the SUV.

The Amazons were wearing leather pants and their customary

halters, all in dark brown with knee-high boots. They were also loaded for bear with knives on every limb, swords on Izzy and Saga's backs, and a whip wrapped around Ruby's waist.

"Thank you for coming," Connor began, cutting off his words as a 1968 GTO barreled up the driveway. "Who else did you call?" he demanded of Ruby.

The Chieftain looked left, then right, and then shuffled her feet a bit and coughed. "Um."

"Where's my daughter, you worthless excuse for a male?" a strident voice demanded as the muscle car ground to halt with an angry roar.

Connor closed his eyes. Why? Why would Ruby call Persephone? He opened his eyes to shoot her a deadly glare. The Chieftain shrugged, completely unrepentant. "I didn't call her. She called me."

"Damned straight I called!" Persephone said as she struggled to get out of the car.

The succubus was wearing a black catsuit and packing so many guns she looked like a heroine in a really bad action-adventure movie. It was obvious she wasn't used to carrying that much hardware, but she still managed to look chic. She stomped over to Connor on six inch wedges, putting her almost to his chin.

"What happened?" she demanded with her hands on her hips.

"Nice threads, 'Seph!" Izzy shouted, interrupting Persephone as she was about to light into Connor.

Persephone turned a beaming smile on the Amazons. "Darlings!" She smoothed a hand over her thighs. "I got this from Savio's. Isn't it just fabulous?" she gushed to the Amazons, who were all oohing and aahing at the outfit.

Connor ignored them as the driver's door opened and the incubus, Fallon, emerged. He was wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt with no visible weapons. Leaning against the hood of the car, he looked like an ad for jeans.

"Yummy," he heard Izzy said under her breath, earning her an

elbow in the ribs from Saga.

Connor pinched the bridge of his nose. "Piper was taken by weretigers. That's all we know as of right now."

"This is exactly why I didn't want her to get mixed up in tiger politics," Persephone said forgetting about her outfit and shoving a perfectly manicured fingernail into Connor's chest. "Furthermore, when this is all over, I'm filing a complaint with the VPA about you."

Just then, a sleek Maserati came up the drive, barely avoiding Fallon's car as it screeched to a halt. Malachi threw open the door, his face as dark as a thundercloud. Connor frowned at the Halfling, trying to figure out what was wrong with his face other than the death-to-all scowl on it.

Elijah solved the puzzle for him. "Where are your eyebrows?" the weretiger asked incredulously.

The Amazons tittered while Malachi bared his teeth.

"He fell asleep during our *Rocky Horror Picture Show* drinking game," Saga volunteered, not looking the least bit impressed by Malachi's murderous look.

"Christ," Connor muttered under his breath. "Is this everyone?"

Ruby looked around. "Yup, I think so. Lucian wanted to come, but I didn't want him extra crispy."

"Fine." Connor led the way to the cottage, ignoring Persephone as she let out a menacing growl. "Elijah and I were trying to locate Piper through scent, but whoever caught her has some kind of masking agent because we lost the trail at the water's edge."

Persephone was muttering as she followed closely behind Connor. He didn't need to listen to her words to know they weren't complimentary. He refused to get into an argument with her while Piper was in danger. His female meant more to him than any slap on the wrist he'd get from the Veilerian Protection Agency.

The group crowded into Ruby's living room, which wasn't big enough for eight. Connor and Elijah took up position on the right of the front door while Malachi and Fallon took the left. The women

spread out on the sofas, making small talk about pedicures and shoes. Connor shook his head. This wasn't what he had been hoping for when he'd called Ruby and her family in.

"They're supposed to be fierce killers?" Elijah asked Connor under his breath, his eyes glued to the Amazons.

"If you don't believe it, look at Malachi," Connor replied with a smirk.

Malachi glared at them. "I didn't fall asleep. Those damn women spiked my drink and then did this," he muttered with a wave of his hand to his eyebrowless face.

"It's a good look for you, *t-frère*," Fallon said with a chuckle. "You look like Marilyn Manson, except not as pretty."

"Let's get started," Connor sighed when Malachi went for Fallon. He stepped forward, raising his hands to get everyone's attention.

He rolled his eyes as his keen ears picked up the sound of another car racing up the drive. "Who else is supposed to be coming?" he asked the room at large and with great impatience.

Throwing open the door, he scowled at the Honda Civic. It looked completely lost in the field of exotic and classic cars. The door opened, giving Connor a whiff of scent and causing him to pale.

It was a werewolf, a male. Toby, his wolf growled.

His nephew appeared none the worse for his disappearance. If anything, he looked good. He'd filled out some more in the month he'd been gone, his shoulders broader and his chest thicker. His boyish face had chiseled out, and he looked so much like Jarvis, Connor felt like he'd been kicked. His nephew, the cub he'd raised as his own, was standing in front of him looking entirely too relaxed considering he'd betrayed his uncle.

"What. The. Fuck." Connor's voice was low and deadly. He felt cold.

A tiny figure appeared next to him. It was Persephone. "What took you so long?"

Toby shrugged, his muscles bunching under his My Chemical

Romance T-shirt. "Traffic's a bitch," he answered her with a wry twist of his lips.

"Your uncle here was just about to explain what happened to my daughter," she told the younger werewolf as he sauntered across the yard.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Connor demanded in the same deadly tone.

Toby shrugged again, stopping at the foot of the steps. "I told you I was coming down here to kick your ass."

Red was all Connor saw as he roared. Flinging himself off the porch, he wrapped his hands around Toby's neck, pinning him to the ground. All the fear, betrayal, and heartache came back to him as though his mate had never helped ease his pain.

"You think this is funny?" he rasped at his nephew.

"No, I think it's time you stopped treating me like a kid," Toby shot back, his face red. He clipped Connor's throat with the side of his hand. "And show some bloody respect for your Alpha!"

"Let him go," Persephone demanded from the porch, her voice clipped and angry. "It was my idea."

Connor threw Toby away from him and turned on the succubus. "Your idea? You just wanted someone to fuck your little girl, is that it?" he asked, his voice mean and ugly.

Persephone's face paled and her hand climbed to her throat. "Don't talk about her like that," she whispered shakily. "My daughter means everything to me. Don't ever disrespect her!"

"Disrespect her like you do?" he asked silkily. "You were pimping out your little girl for power, Persephone. Why should you care how I talk about her?"

"I never did any such thing!" she shrieked.

Connor ignored everyone but Toby and Persephone. They'd planned this, he repeated to himself. "So what was I supposed to get out of it, Persephone? I shagged your little girl. Don't you owe me something?"

“Stop it,” Toby demanded tightly. “She was doing what she thought was best for Piper, and to help me out.”

“Best for Piper?” Connor echoed incredulously. “She threw her at a male she barely knew and expects him to treat her honorably?” He looked between the two of them. “You’ve got to be kidding me. This was a play for power, just what I’d expect from a succubus. You gave your daughter to a male who hates succubi. How could you have known I wouldn’t hurt her? Or kill her? You treated her like a whore!”

Persephone’s face went scarlet red, but Connor’s tirade was interrupted as someone flew out of the house to tackle him. Connor and Fallon rolled around the yard trading blows, both males snarling with fury.

“Never, *never* talk about Piper that way,” Fallon demanded with a brutal right hook.

Connor headbutted the incubus and smiled grimly when he heard a satisfying crunch. “I hope I broke your nose.” He was panting and trying to get a good grip on Fallon to deliver more pain. “You all treat Piper like she’s too stupid to know who she is, and then you throw her to the wolves, literally!”

Fallon answered him with a knee to the breadbox, air leaving Connor’s lungs in an angry whoosh. “If she would’ve accepted me, you would’ve never come into the picture, dog,” Fallon grunted, delivering another savage kick to Connor’s torso.

Connor went livid. The picture forming in his mind of the incubus with his Piper sent him into a frenzied state. Claws punched through his human fingers, a howl erupting from his throat as he fought Fallon with everything he had. Piper was *his*. If this male thought to take her away from him, he would die.

“Hot damn, where’s a camera when you need one?” one of the Amazons—it sounded like Izzy—said with glee.

Connor let fly with several furious punches, hearing cartilage crunch and bones crack under his fists. Fallon retaliated with a flurry

of punches to his abdomen and ribs which were already cracked.

“Oh! Not the face!” Izzy screeched at Connor. “Damn. Well, it’s a good thing I love men who look as though they’ve gone ten rounds with King Kong.”

He ignored her. He ignored everyone except the warm body he was tearing into with every ounce of his strength. The wolf wanted blood. It wanted this male’s death. He took numerous hits to the head and torso but shook them off as insignificant. He wouldn’t lose his focus. He took out his rage at Toby’s betrayal and fear for Piper on the incubus.

A sharp jab aimed at his jaw caused him to bite through his tongue. He shook his head. Blood dripped down his face. Still, he fought for his female. Never show weakness. Go for the throat. He did just that. His hands wrapped around Fallon’s throat and he squeezed, enjoying the sight of his opponent’s face going purple beneath the mask of blood.

“Stop it,” Ruby said from the edge of the battle. “Connor, stop it!”

Ignoring everything but Fallon’s imminent death, Connor tightened his grip with a feral grin.

“Do you think Piper would thank you for killing her best friend?” Ruby shouted. Her voice sounded closer. The wolf wanted to snarl at her to leave them to the fight, but Connor’s logical mind urged him to listen. “She loves Fallon like a brother, and if you kill him, she’ll never forgive you.”

“He wants her,” Connor snapped, his hands barely relaxing around Fallon’s throat.

“But does she want him?” Ruby asked him almost gently.

She touched his shoulder, something most Veilerians knew not to do during a battle for mating rights. Connor almost attacked her. Only knowing she was Lucian’s mate kept his claws and teeth from tearing into her flesh. Logic finally, slowly, won over the wolf.

Piper had been given numerous chances to mate with the incubus but hadn’t taken them. It would’ve been easier on her as Fallon knew

who and what she was and what she needed, but she'd dismissed his interest. It was true she looked upon Fallon as a friend, not a lover. With Connor, she was insatiable. His perfect mate.

He dropped Fallon on the ground and stood, breathing heavily. Blood poured down his face, his body was bruised, and he had several broken ribs, but he'd never felt freer.

His eyes opened and honed in on Toby's face. His nephew looked shocked and more than a little afraid. "Satisfied, my nephew?" Connor asked on a soft exhale. "You got your wish. You want to be treated like an adult, and that's exactly what I'm going to do." He moved with purpose to his nephew, violence preceding him like a heat wave.

Toby backpedaled, his eyes widening at his uncle's uncharacteristic rage. "Wh—huh?" he spluttered, looking young and oh so clueless.

"You betrayed me, lied to me, and manipulated me," Connor said almost pleasantly. "If you had come to me and voiced your concerns like a rational adult, I would have listened to you. Instead you stabbed me in the back, and that's something I can't forgive. Consider me a lone wolf."

"B—but the pack—" he stammered but was cut off by Connor.

"The pack is yours." Connor's eyes never shifted away from Toby's as a wolf before his Alpha would. "I will return to the house to pack my things once I've seen Piper to safety. After that, what you and the Tall Pines Pack do is none of my business."

Satisfied, Connor turned to Persephone, who'd helped Fallon to his feet. She raised her chin at him defiantly. "I apologize for speaking harshly about Piper," he told her honestly. He hadn't thought of her in that light since he first met her, and he shouldn't have used it as a weapon against her mother.

Persephone looked shocked at his apology. Fallon spit out a tooth while glaring and muttering in French.

"She's mine now. If she decides to live as a succubus, she and I

will discuss it. You have no say in her future.”

“You can’t do that!” Piper’s mother shouted, leaving Fallon to wobble on his own as she stalked to Connor. “I’m her mother. I love her. You just want to own her!”

“You don’t know what I want. You never did, just like you never knew what Piper wanted,” he hissed dangerously. Something in her eyes made him pause and reconsider. “You did know what she wanted,” he breathed in shock. “You knew she didn’t want to live as a succubus, but you tried to force her into the role.”

Persephone glared at him. “She was going to become one whether she wanted to or not. I love my daughter, but she’s too weak and dreamy to face cold, hard facts. She is a succubus. She will be the *Seductarian*, and nothing you do will change that.”

Ruby cleared her throat. “Uh, I have something to add to this since we’re discussing Piper’s future.”

Whirling around with a grateful look, Persephone said, “Anything, Ruby. I know you’ll understand.”

Grimacing as though she didn’t really want to talk about Piper to her mother, she said with a shrug, “Piper won’t be the *Seductarian*. She can’t. She’s a Kahn.”

Connor caught Persephone as she fainted dead away. Looking at the female who would one day be his mother-in-law, he sighed and carried her in the house.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

A sound at the door jerked Piper's head up. It creaked open to reveal a handsome male with aristocratic features. Dark blond hair gleamed like antique gold in the dim light of her cell. His face was all angles, the kind you saw on runways in Paris with sultry green eyes. He was tall and filled up the doorway.

Piper went cold as he looked at her. This was Evan. She knew it as surely as she knew he would kill her. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but soon. The threat was there in his eyes. No, not a threat, she thought wearily. It was a promise.

"So you're Evan," she said as casually as she could, bleeding and beaten down as she was.

He bowed, entering the room and closing the door behind him. "I'm honored," he replied, his voice smooth and deep. He would've been a wonderful politician with a voice and physique like that. "And who are you, my beauty?" he asked, tracing her features with his eyes. "I know you're James' daughter, but not where you came from."

It was nearly impossible for her to keep her face blank. He'd been able to smell her bloodline. Not cool. He probably knew she was also the most likely candidate to lead the streak.

He made an impatient sound as he leaned against the door. His Brooks Brothers suit looked out of place in the dank cell, but he wore it easily. "Let's start this off another way. What is your name?"

Piper licked her lips. Her body was tensing up in preparation of a fight, but he looked as though he just wanted to talk. She could do that. "Piper."

His eyes gleamed. "Piper. Interesting name, Piper." She watched

his nostrils quiver as he breathed in her scent. “What are you?”

“I’m a weretiger,” she said softly. Could he tell she was a succubus? If not, there was a chance she could seduce him to get out of here. She nearly vomited in her mouth at the thought.

He shook his head. “You’re some kind of Halfling,” he said confirming her suspicions. “What else?”

Piper didn’t answer him. Her succubus power was her ace in the hole. If only it would wake up, she thought angrily. Connor had left her so sated she couldn’t even draw on it when she needed it.

“Okay, then don’t answer me. I’ll find out eventually,” he said with a flash of brilliant white teeth. “Why were you with Elijah? Are you his lover?”

Time to start lying. “I don’t know him. I was just there to consult with him about putting solar panels on the house he was staying at.”

Evan’s eyes gleamed as he focused on her chest and thighs. “It’s a good thing you didn’t tell me you were his lover.” His nostrils quivered again. “But you’re someone’s lover. I can smell him all over you.”

She blushed. She couldn’t help it. “It isn’t Elijah,” she blurted out.

He laughed loudly. “No, it isn’t. Another male, a more dominant male, has marked you,” he told her as he moved away from the door.

He walked closer, and Piper turned redder when she saw he was aroused. Gods, she thought in panic. Please don’t let him touch me!

Evan put his hands on his hips. “I’m going to find out more about you, little Piper,” he crooned, one of his hands dipping into his pocket.

When Piper saw the dart and dart gun, she tried to scramble out of the way except he was close enough not to miss. The sting of the dart was in her hip, and she quickly pulled it back out. Too late. Whatever drug he’d given her was sweeping through her system and shutting down all of her motor skills.

Floundering on the ground, Piper tried to stay aware, but her vision blurred. Evan came closer, and she felt his hand stroking her

hair and face. No, she shouted in her mind. His satisfied smile was the last thing she saw as the world went black.

* * * *

The house was silent. Persephone had awakened and escaped outside, looking tragic. Connor felt an edge of sympathy for the succubus. She'd raised her daughter to be a succubus only to find her daughter would never take over the family business and was now in the hands of the very people she'd tried to protect her from. She'd pled with Ruby to tell her who would take over her house, but Ruby hadn't been able to answer her. Persephone had cloaked her tattered dreams around her and left, saying she needed time to think.

Connor had watched her go, wishing he didn't feel the conflicting need to comfort her and shake some sense into her. Piper may not have been the intended *Seductarian* after all, but that didn't make her a lesser being.

"It won't be easy for Persephone to take," Ruby said solemnly. "Even I thought Piper was going to be the next succubi leader when I first touched her."

"The transition woke the tiger, and the tiger won out, but she still has her succubi powers," Connor said with a shrug.

Toby blinked at him in surprise as though astonished his uncle was okay with his mate having such tendencies.

"This is all fascinating. Really. But shouldn't we be out trying to find her?" Saga said sarcastically. "Between the dick measuring contest Fallon and Connor, then Connor and Toby, had, I think it's safe to say we all know Connor's is the biggest, and Piper loves it."

"You're such a charmer," Malachi remarked snidely.

"I know," she told him with false modesty. "Don't be jealous 'cause no one bothered trying to measure your anaconda."

Everyone looked at her.

She cleared her throat. "So we should be setting up a grid, get

some boats out there, and try to find their tracks.”

Malachi sat back, his brown eyes gleaming with challenge. Connor did not want to know what was going on between him and the Amazon. Really, he didn’t.

“I have two pirogues in my shed, and we could probably make a couple more if we needed to.” Ruby dropped the offering into the deep well of silence that held everyone spellbound.

“Ah, yeah, that’s good,” Connor told her with a respectful nod. He was beginning to see why Lucian had mated her. Ruby was smart and seemed to have no problem with hard work. “I already know they didn’t take her by land. Elijah or I would’ve seen tracks. They had to have gone by water.”

Elijah nodded, finally tearing his eyes away from Saga. “Yes, Evan’s enforcers have a lot of toys at their disposal. I wouldn’t be surprised if they hadn’t taken a chopper back to the compound.”

“Any idea where this compound is?” Saga asked him sharply, focusing all of her attention on the weretiger.

Elijah blushed deeply, his eyes bleeding to emerald green. “Ah.” He stalled, looking a little confused.

Izzy whistled, slugging Saga in the arm. “You got some serious mojo going on there, old lady. He’s in shock.”

“Stuff it, Izzy,” Saga snarled, her face heating into a blush.

Connor looked back and forth between Saga, Malachi, and Elijah. Talk about a bizarre love triangle. He shook his head again. Don’t think about it.

“Um, no. I haven’t been back with the streak in ten years. I’m sure Evan has changed its location since then, but we can send someone there to make sure,” Elijah finally said, his voice deeper.

Fallon shifted, drawing Connor’s attention. The incubus looked as bad as Connor felt, not that he let it show. They were both covered in bruises and scrapes, the blood washed away after separate trips to the bathroom.

He didn’t want to ask Fallon if he could find Piper. Didn’t want

the male to be near his female, but her life was at stake. Possessiveness wouldn't save her.

"Can you find her?" he asked Fallon abruptly. If there was a chance the incubus could materialize with her, he would take it.

Fallon stared at Connor with a cold, calculating look.

"I think I just wet my pants," Izzy whispered loudly to Saga.

He blinked. "No. I can only materialize to places I've been before unless I'm summoned." The harsh regret in his voice told Connor if Fallon had been able, he would've had Piper out of danger hours before.

Damn. He'd really been hoping Fallon could teleport to her. "Okay, so we split up into the swamp. If someone picks up the trail, let the others know."

The door opened again, showing Persephone framed in the doorway. Connor shook his head in disbelief. The female somehow always managed to find just the right light to stand in, posing in such a way to show her best side. She looked stunning standing there, in a very Mrs. Robinson kind of way.

"I'm teaming up with Connor," she announced to everyone.

Barely fighting a sneer, Connor nodded. She probably wanted to lay into him some more, and that was fine. He wouldn't mind a few minutes to rip her to shreds. Not literally, he warned the wolf, who howled in agreement.

"Fine," Ruby said with a sigh. She no doubt knew what Persephone and Connor would be doing but decided not to argue. "So we've got two pirogues. Two people to each. I'll take one with Malachi. Connor, you take the other with Persephone. You do know how to canoe?"

Connor rolled his eyes. "Yes."

She nodded. "Elijah, I want you and Isola to go to the old weretiger location, see if it's moved and where it might've been relocated if it was. Saga, you and Fallon take one of the cars and head to Highway 665. There's a small boat landing they might've stopped

at. Someone might've seen them."

"Why don't I go with Fallon? I uh, have great communication skills." Izzy suggested with a twinkle in her eye that told everyone just what kind of communication she was talking about.

Saga gave a long-suffering sigh. "There was a time when she didn't think with her libido." She paused, her face wrinkled in concentration. "I think."

"That works for me," Connor inserted before the two Amazons started brawling. Stepping up to Persephone, he nodded. "Let's go."

"What about me?" Toby asked from the corner he'd hidden himself in.

Connor turned around to look at his nephew. When they came inside to discuss plans, Toby had quietly sat on the far side of the room though he'd seethed with frustration.

"You're staying here," Connor informed him harshly. "You're base."

Before the younger wolf could offer up a protest, Connor was out the house and striding to the shed. His only mission was to find his mate before she died by Evan's hand.

He and Ruby pulled the fifteen foot pirogues from the shed and dragged them to the water's edge. His nose told him the dugout canoes were made of cypress. They didn't look stable, but their shallow bottoms made them necessary in the muddy waters of the marsh.

With a nod, Ruby and Malachi were in their pirogue, paddling south. Connor watched them a moment. They moved together fluidly, neither shifting their weight, and the small cypress craft skimmed down the bayou with ease.

"Get in," Connor practically barked at Persephone, who'd followed them to the bank.

Persephone gingerly stepped in the pirogue, gripping the sides tightly as Connor pushed it into the water. He jumped in, making her yelp as the pirogue rocked from side to side.

"I will kill you if you get me wet," she bit out, her knuckles white from her hold on the rails.

"Honey, the last thing I want to do is get you wet," he told her crudely. He tossed her a paddle. "Take the starboard side." She picked up the paddle like it was contaminated. "And don't make any sudden moves."

Facing forward, Connor guided the pirogue north, his eyes trained on the far side of the bayou. Persephone was awkward with the paddle, splashing more than she rowed, but she didn't say anything.

They were paddling for a small island in the center of the bayou when he heard her breathing start getting choppy. He glanced over his shoulder and closed his eyes in disgust. She was crying.

"Stop it," he muttered.

Her voice quivered. "I can't believe I hurt her so much," she said in a voice thick with grief. "She's my pride and joy and I hurt her, made her feel like less because she wasn't a full-blood."

Sighing hugely, Connor didn't pause in his rowing. Grumbling to himself, he had to admit he and Persephone were working in sync despite their differences. He could even understand her since he'd raised Toby.

Maybe it was something about the serene cooing of marsh wildlife or the rhythmic motion of putting paddle to water, but he suddenly felt at peace. He was still frantic to find Piper, but he saw things a little more clearly now.

When Persephone let out a strangled sob, Connor hunched his shoulders. He had a hard time dealing with a woman's tears, especially when they were from a female who would soon be part of his family.

"Look, you made a mistake. You're just, um..." he trailed off.

"Human?" she barked out with a loud sob. "I'm not human, and neither is Piper. Neither are you! We're all monsters," she muttered under her breath.

"No, we're just not perfect, Persephone," Connor told her calmly.

“Have you ever raised a Halfling before?”

She was silent for several minutes. “No,” she admitted.

He shrugged his shoulders. “Then how could you know what to do? You tried raising Piper like you did your other daughters. Did you give her the same options and things they had growing up?”

“Yes,” she answered hesitantly.

“Then you did your best. There are a lot of things you could’ve done differently, but it’s in the past. The only thing that matters now is how you’re going to treat her in the future.”

They were both silent as they coasted to the tiny island. Connor beached the pirogue, hopping out to study the ground and sniff the foliage. Nothing. His hands tightened into fists. He turned back to the pirogue to see Persephone studying him like a bug under a microscope. Ignoring her intense regard, Connor shoved them off again.

“I knew your brother,” she said softly, breaking the silence.

Connor swung around in shock, making the small craft rock like a ship in a hurricane. Persephone squawked, dropping her paddle on the bottom of the pirogue to grab the sides again. Dammit, now wasn’t the time to get distracted. Turning forward again, Connor steadied the pirogue.

“I wasn’t the one who drained him,” Persephone added with a grumble. “I knew who she was though.”

“I do not want to talk about this,” Connor bit out angrily, a tic in his jaw.

“You should. We’re not all bad, you know. Just like all shifters aren’t bad.”

“Shifters don’t suck the life out of a person for sex,” he shot back. If she was determined to have this out, then they would. His body braced for the fight.

“Don’t you want to know why I chose you specifically?”

“Because you didn’t want Piper to grow attached to me. Everyone knows that,” he grunted as he guided the boat down a side canal.

“That was part of the reason, but there’s more.” Her voice sounded calm and collected as though she’d worked something out in her mind.

Connor didn’t want to ask. He didn’t want to know what other fucked up reason she’d have to hand her youngest daughter off to a stranger. They would have to try to get along later for Piper’s sake. It wouldn’t do to kill her because she pissed him off.

“You’re not the least bit curious?” she asked with a huff.

“Dammit, I don’t want to fight with you!” His roar caused birds to scatter from the trees overhead. “I want to find Piper and get the hell away from you!”

Persephone continued as though Connor hadn’t decided to blow up. “I met Jarvis when Piper was about twenty. He’d stopped by the House for some company. Piper was working the door. She was fresh out of college and full of her romantic dreams,” she explained in a soft voice. He could hear the smile in her voice. “They hit it off like they’d been friends forever. She has that effect on most people. But later, he told me he could see her with you. He suggested you could aid in her transition. He knew you’d treat her well, that you’d be gentle with her.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

When Piper came to again, she kept her eyes closed, listening closely to her surroundings. She knew she wasn't in the cell anymore. The softness of the blanket under her attested to that. Keeping her breathing slow and even, she could hear people talking somewhere nearby as though through a door or wall. She didn't feel as though she were being watched, so she cautiously opened her eyes.

No one was in the room, but that didn't ease her fears. Her clothes were gone. She'd been stripped of every item of protection she'd been wearing, leaving her in nothing but bruised skin. Blushing head to toe, she pulled the blanket around her. She wasn't restrained, thank Gods, but that was cold comfort.

The massive room was filled with heavy, expensive furniture, making it seem like a showroom for wealth. The bed she lay on was a four-poster with decadent sheets and thick, luxuriant fur covers. Her little brown blanket clashed with her surroundings, which were colored in shades of grey and blue. It was like being in a cloud.

Wincing as her still throbbing ribs protested movement, Piper eased to her feet. The bed was so tall she had to hop to the ground, her knees buckling when she made contact with the hardwood floor.

There were three doors in the room. One across from the bed and two side by side on the left side of the chamber. She headed for those doors.

Still wobbly from whatever drug Evan had given her, the walk across the room seemed to take forever. She stopped five times to lean against the furniture, her head spinning with every step.

Opening one door and then the other, she discovered a closet, then

a bathroom. She locked herself in the bathroom, sinking to the floor. It was a large bathroom, nearly the size of her bedroom at home. White, ceramic tiles lined the walls and floors, and granite countertops, cleared of anything that could be used as a weapon, gleamed in the near darkness. She hadn't bothered turning on the light since she hoped it would buy her some time when they came to look for her.

Sitting on the tile, freezing her ass off, she wondered what she should do. She was too weak to fight Evan at the moment and considering she was buck naked, she wasn't prepared to sit in the other room.

Focus, she told herself firmly. Piper closed her eyes, concentrating on the tiger. It came to her, sluggish and weak, but with a long solid pulse, she shifted. Groaning as her body began to light up with the change Piper choked back a scream of pain as the tiger burst forth.

Lying on her side, the tiger's tail twitched in annoyance. Her sides heaved with her panting breaths, but she felt better than her humanoid body had. Resting for a moment, the tiger breathed deep, scenting the air. She caught only one male's scent. It was the imposter's smell clinging to every surface of the room, but underlying that were the scents of female tigers. At least fifteen females had come into this part of the building, and all of them smelled of hate and fear.

The tiger's eyes opened with sudden intensity. She knew what happened in these rooms. It was the ultimate power play, taking the females of the streak against their will. Almost able to see what happened, she knew the females only did it to protect the weaker males of the streak. The imposter was raping her streak.

Silent as a whisper, she got to her feet. Her body was tender, but she was slowly gaining energy. She pawed the faucet on, lapping at the water as it poured into the sink. She didn't want to change back to her weaker, humanoid form, but she didn't want the imposter to know she was growing stronger. He'd never come up against a female Kahn, and she planned to make him suffer for it.

* * * *

Standing next to James' bed, Evan wondered if he should've double-dosed his Kahn. The old weretiger still looked far too vibrant to be dying as Bianca had promised when she gave him the vial of potion. Fifteen years of wasting away had caused James to lose a lot of muscle mass, but his eyes were still too lively to suit Evan. Oh, sure, his age was evident in the lines on his face and the streaks of gray blending with the gold and black, but his mind was still lively.

"I smell something strange," James told Evan as he lay there, completely helpless before his successor.

"I'm sorry, Uncle? Something strange?" Evan asked even though he knew the Kahn was scenting his daughter in the air.

If he'd had more space, he would've put Piper in a room further away from James. He wanted the female close enough to scent her father. It was one way to ensure her cooperation. Just thinking about what he planned to do with the dominant female made his mouth water and his cock strain his slacks.

"I smell a female, smells almost like one I knew years ago," his uncle told him, eyes trained on the door in anticipation.

"I'm sure it's probably just a scent carried on someone's clothes. The females have been out shopping," Evan evaded smoothly.

"Why would they be around a succubus?" James asked in confusion, his gold eyes meeting Evan's straight on.

Barely able to keep his face from showing his disgust, Evan smiled tightly. "They like to shop at one of those Veilerian stores, and no doubt a succubus had been there. You know how women are," he finished with a helpless shrug.

Satisfied, James relaxed in his bed. "You're going to need to learn more about females before you mate, my boy." His hand, now nothing but big-knuckled skin clenched on his sheet. "Damn this sickness!" he suddenly roared.

“Uncle James, calm yourself. I told you the healers have a new remedy for you to try,” Evan said, soothing his impatient uncle.

He worried the potion was wearing off after so many years of dosage because James had begun twitching his toes in his sleep. The infrared cameras hidden in the room recorded everything said and done in his uncle’s room, and he watched them in his free time. He wanted to be sure there would be no way for James to recover, but lately he hadn’t felt secure with his current plan.

If only that stupid bitch hadn’t gotten above herself and ended up banished from the Veil, he thought as he prepared James’ dose. She’d been the only one he trusted to prepare the tincture, and it had done exactly as she promised. It’d incapacitated James almost instantly, paralyzing his body and eating away at him with no medical reason. It had been Evan’s hope James would die soon, but the bloody Kahn’s will was too strong to just give up.

“Here’s your medicine. I gave you a little more this time because the healers think a higher dose is needed.” He carefully placed the precious cup of bloodred potion to James’ lips.

Long seconds passed with James glaring stubbornly at Evan and Evan staring back just as calmly before James opened his mouth, allowing his nephew to pour the liquid in. Evan eased back and watched James’ face twist in disgust. The potion was a bitter brew, but it had done the job so far.

“Get some rest. I think a couple of the ladies are coming by to visit,” he said as he always did. He loved the idea of getting James’ hope up about a visit from one of his tigers and watching the crushing disappointment when they never showed up. Those were the images he jerked off to when he’d finished with whatever female he used for the night.

Leaving his uncle’s room, he nodded to Price to stand watch at the door. He never left the room without a guard. He didn’t want anyone in the streak sneaking in and alerting James as to what was really going on. Not that James could do anything, but it would make things

so much easier without his interference.

Stalking across the marble floor, Evan mused over his conversation with James. The elder tiger had smelled succubus in the house. Was it possible Piper was also a succubus? He shuddered. He abhorred nothing more than a freak of nature, which this female possibly was. Halflings should be destroyed, he thought in disgust. If she was one such being, he would kill her. He'd scrap his plan to mate her and simply take the streak through a dominance challenge. Although it wouldn't be much of a challenge, he thought with a smirk.

His eyes lit with unholy anticipation, he headed for his room. He'd left her there after stripping and bathing her. His hands had been all over that curvy body and if he had to kill her, he'd have a little more fun with her first.

* * * *

Connor and Persephone paddled the waterways, keeping in touch with the rest of the group through cell phones. Saga and Fallon were still driving to the boat landing, so they hadn't checked in.

After Persephone's bombshell, Connor hadn't spoken again. How could it be possible his brother had pointed Piper out as perfect for him? Had Jarvis known how lonely Connor was? It seemed implausible, but there was truth to Persephone's words. He knew Jarvis had been in and around Cypress Point for years, though he hadn't suspected he would have made small talk with Persephone.

"He was nice. I liked him," Persephone spoke up after nearly an hour of silence. She sounded thoughtful and slightly winded.

Connor steered them to the bank. They'd been paddling nonstop since he guided them into the smaller channel from the main bayou. There were far too many little canals and offshoots to catch them all. He just prayed to the gods the weretigers hadn't taken one of the ones he missed. Jumping out of the pirogue, Connor pulled it up the bank

so Persephone could get out.

“Rest up a bit,” he said gruffly, pulling his cell from his pocket. No missed calls. He bit off a curse. He’d been hoping someone had found something, but so far nothing.

Persephone brushed off a fallen tree and sat down looking as though she were taking tea in her parlor. “Jarvis was a smart, interesting werewolf,” she continued as though Connor had asked her for more information. “He never entered the house for more than conversation.” She smiled at the surprise on Connor’s face. “I know you probably don’t believe me, and who could blame you after what happened to him? But I do know he never had relations with me or any of my daughters. He was a great help to me when I was pregnant with Piper, kept the house from falling down around our ears.”

Connor leaned against a cypress, arms crossed over his chest. “You knew him that far back?” he asked her doubtfully. He was sure Jarvis would’ve told him about Persephone, but he never had.

She shrugged on fragile shoulder. “We met in 1901 at one of the Fairchilds’ many charity auctions. He was charming, and I was mad at my date for the night. He’d already started his affair with Ophelia then.”

His face tightened. “She was the one—”

She nodded. “Ophelia was old-school when it came to feeding. There was a time when it was perfectly acceptable to draw on males until they were nearly dead,” she said shamefully.

“Have you ever...” Connor began until he realized just how rude a question it was.

Persephone shook her head. “No. My mother taught me if we killed off our food supply, we’d die. Ophelia was much older than me when she hooked Jarvis. She didn’t think any of the rules applied to her.” She tucked a strand of brown hair behind her ear, looking young and vulnerable even though Connor knew she was nearly three hundred years old. “Once Jarvis and I became friends, I tried to explain to him what Ophelia was doing, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“He wouldn’t listen to anyone,” Connor amended, not liking the guilty look on her face.

“You’re right. He was an Alpha and we all know how *they* are,” she replied with a grin that quickly faded. “What I’m trying to say is he wanted you to be happy. He talked about you a lot, so I knew what kind of male you were before I even met up with Toby. Your nephew is like Jarvis in many ways because his only concern was your happiness.”

“But neither of you expected me to mate Piper,” Connor reminded her with a wolfish grin. It felt good to get one up on her considering what she’d put him through. “You realize it nearly drove me insane? Wanting her so much but hating what she was?”

“I knew it would. I also knew you’d see beyond her bloodlines to the woman.”

Connor knew his mouth was lifted in a dopey grin, but he couldn’t help it. Yeah, he saw through Piper to the woman beneath. He just needed to make sure she understood what she meant to him.

A sudden vibration in his pocket broke him out of his daydream and he snatched out his phone. “Yes?” he barked into the device.

It was Fallon. “We caught up with a couple of dryads who were fishing around the landing,” his voice sounded cold, yet hopeful. “They saw the weretigers head north. One of them said she overheard one of the males say they were meeting up in Homestead. Saga and I are headed there now.”

“How far is that from Ruby’s cottage?” Connor asked impatiently. He wanted to be there when his mate was freed.

He heard Saga saying something, but the road noise was too much to decipher exactly what she was telling Fallon. The incubus got back on the phone. “It’s about forty-five minutes from Ruby’s house. When you get back to the house, take my car. I’ll call the others.”

Fallon disconnected, and Connor grabbed Persephone around the waist, throwing her into the pirogue. “They know where the weretigers were headed,” he said in a rush, pushing the craft into the

water again. “We need to get back ASAP.”

Persephone nodded, picking up her paddle and finding a fast rhythm with him. Connor knew he was pushing her endurance, but he also suspected the succubus would keep going until she reached her daughter. As he guided them back to the main bayou, Connor had to wonder how he’d come to think almost kindly of the female. She was still a succubus, and still the female who put Piper at risk by practically giving her to an unknown male, but something had changed.

Throwing a quick look over his shoulder and seeing her determined, yet strained face, he knew what it was. She loved Piper with all of her heart, just as he did. They were united in their feelings for his mate and their resolve to save her.

Turning forward again, Connor grinned fiercely. Evan wouldn’t know what hit him.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Supine on the bed again, Piper rested her eyes. She'd shifted back to her humanoid body after a quick rest in tiger form. The change had done wonders for her energy levels. The drugs were cleared out of her system when she shifted back, though she made sure she occupied the same position she had before.

She shivered, goose bumps breaking out all over her naked body. She hadn't wanted to get back on the bed without clothes on, but the element of surprise was more important than modesty. If he saw her wrapped up in a blanket, he'd know she was conscious.

Little by little, she tested her body. Her ribs were now just sore, the numerous bruises had faded to yellow, and the cuts had scabbed over. Wereanimal healing was downright amazing, and she thanked Lilith she was able to shift when she woke up. If not, she'd have been nothing but a sitting duck. Kind of like she was now, she thought inanely.

Just then, the door opened and Evan entered. Piper forced her body to remain limp and calm. It took everything she had not to open her eyes as he closed the door and came closer to the bed. She was splayed out before him in her birthday suit, and she wanted nothing more than a Hazmat suit because she could feel his disgusting eyes on her.

He drifted near, his footsteps ghosting over the floor. Something brushed her face and coasted down her neck. His hand, she thought somewhat frantically. Panic rose in her throat as he palmed her one of her breasts, his soft hands squeezing the tender tissue roughly.

"Such a pretty package," he murmured softly, letting go of her

breast to pinch the nipple. Hard.

She almost jumped and whimpered in pain, but the tiger gave her the strength to play this game. The tiger watched impassively as Evan's hands slid down her torso to the curls at the juncture of her thighs. He tugged at them sharply before moving away again. Piper almost breathed a sigh of relief she was so glad he'd stopped touching her.

She wanted a scalding hot shower and the biggest bottle of bleach she could find to cleanse his touch from her skin. The bathing would have to wait as she listened to him move around the room, opening and closing drawers and doors. She hadn't spent time searching the room since she wasn't sure how long he'd be gone. Now she wished she had. Something felt very wrong, and she quickly learned what it was when her hands were handcuffed together and fastened to one of the posts.

"Wake up, my dear," he said cajolingly, even while he slapped her face hard enough to turn her head to the side.

Piper wasn't going to let him just keep slapping her, so she opened her eyes. He smiled widely, charmingly. Her skin crawled.

"Good evening, dove," he cooed at her as he took his jacket off. "I trust you slept well?"

Her glare was the only weapon she allowed herself for the moment. She wanted to appear scared and helpless.

"Ah, I just love it when a female doesn't talk. There are so many other things they should do with their mouths," Evan said approvingly, unbuttoning his shirt to reveal a wide chest and sculpted abs.

It was just wrong that he was put together so perfectly but was a bastard through and through. His skin was the color of honey and almost glowed with health. He was a vibrant male in the prime of his immortality. She hated his guts.

"You look better," he said approvingly while removing his belt. "You heal well for a Halfling."

Surprise rippled through Piper. He knew? Shit!

“Ah, yes, your father smelled you. I thought your scent was different, but having never personally met with any of your slutty sisters, I couldn’t place the smell. However did your mother manage to have you?” he asked almost curiously.

Piper just shrugged. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing her mother hadn’t expected to have a Halfling. Startled, Piper realized her succubus powers were reacting to his rising lust. She didn’t feel the need to feed deeply, but she could draw enough from him to completely heal herself, she thought almost desperately.

“I hope you’re as good a fuck as my females are,” he commented casually. He unzipped his slacks, revealing black briefs hugging his erection. “Although I suppose it doesn’t really matter. I’ll just slash you up anyway.”

“You’re disgusting,” Piper growled, unable to hold her tongue any longer.

“You think so?” he asked acting surprised. “Let me show you just how disgusting I can be, little one.”

Handcuffed as she was, there was no easy way to avoid Evan without revealing how healed she was. He straddled her body, his gold eyes fixed on the soft flesh of her chest. His hands landed on her body and squeezed the pale globes of her breasts. Piper forced back the urge to vomit, instead drawing a little of his lust into her, feeling it fill her body up with power. Evan’s lust tasted vile, thick and sour, like rancid lemons, sticking to her psyche.

Revulsion flooded her system. There was no way she was letting this bastard continue to infect her with his corruption. Quickly making up her mind, Piper let the tiger overtake her, seamlessly shifting. During the change, her hands slipped free of the handcuffs, her paws batting them away as her whole body transformed.

The tiger enjoyed the look of surprise on Evan’s face but didn’t let her guard down. He was still dangerous to her. With a vicious screaming roar, she sank her back feet into his torso, thrusting him

away from her and across the room.

He shifted before he hit the wall, his tiger form near to her own size. Crouching on the bed with her ears back, she waited for him to make his move. It didn't take long. He launched himself at her, his big paws landing on her shoulders to pin her beneath him.

Her claws extracted, digging deep into his chest as she held him away from her throat. His fangs grazed her fur, his snarls of fury nearly deafening her. They rolled across the bed, each trying to gain the dominant position until they fell off the edge and landed apart.

The door flew open, and two males in humanoid form stood there as though waiting for orders from her enemy. She backed against the wall, finding a spot that allowed her to see both the doorway and the male tiger, who seemed unsure what to do next.

A gasping cry came from behind the males. Her nose dragged in a new scent. The newcomer's scent was tinged with sickness, though there was another smell, something familiar. Family, she affirmed as the men parted to let the sick male through. He sat in a wheelchair, his arms forcing the chair through the narrow doorway.

"Evan! What's the meaning of this?" he roared, his dominance obvious in the way the two males winced as though to avoid a beating. The male's gold eyes rested on the female tiger with wariness and hope. "Is this...who is she?"

A snarl came from the male tiger's throat. The sound seemed to galvanize the two males around the Kahn. They lifted their hands to administer blows to him. Disregarding the other tiger, she sprang at them, knocking them away from the ailing male.

With fury guiding her, she killed them quickly, efficiently. She remembered them from her capture. There were three others who wanted death, but they would wait. Just as she brutally dispatched the last male, she was knocked down by the other tiger.

She screamed as his jaws locked around the back of her neck. Scrambling to get away, she inadvertently tore herself more. Blood poured in great gushes as he ripped her up. Unwilling to die beneath

the filth of the imposter, she used all of her strength to roll.

He screamed in fury as he lost his grip on her, pushing to his feet to finish her where she lay. Gathering her feet under her, she tensed. She could feel her life's blood spilling from her wound and knew she didn't have much time. She had to finish this.

* * * *

Connor's body went ice cold when he heard the snarls of tigers. They'd followed a tip from one of the dryads about a military type compound situated on the outskirts of the tiny town of Homestead.

Elijah shifted and slipped into the base, blending with the shadows until he reached the first building. When he came out, he had another tiger with him. The two tigers had split up and gathered four more on the outskirts of the mansion their tiny homes were grouped around.

He reappeared in front of Connor, flashing back to his human form. The other tigers did as well, revealing four females and one male. They looked at Connor's party with hope and trepidation. "They said they want to help us. They want their Kahn safe."

Connor nodded shortly, not really caring if they joined the fray or not just as long as they stayed out of his way. Another roar shook the still air. There was no time.

"Let's go," he told the others as he shifted.

Persephone had agreed to stay behind although it hadn't been an easy argument. She'd wanted to join them in finding and protecting Piper, but they'd pointed out she didn't have their battle skills.

She gave the wolf a sharp look, demanding her daughter back in one piece. He acknowledged her command with a short nod.

Turning on his back legs, he raced through the compound, the Amazons easily keeping pace with him, Fallon teleported in short flashes to scout ahead. Malachi brought up the rear with the tigers, and he just hoped his trust in them wasn't misplaced.

Every door they passed opened with startled shrieks and flashes of

light as the weretigers shifted. Soon Connor was leading twelve adult tigers as they advanced on the mansion.

One male stood at the door looking arrogantly confident in his ability to hold his position. Then Saga reached him, her serrated sword carving into his skin as a distraction while her double-edged sword cut his head clean off.

The wolf was impressed by her deadly force, but not enough to be distracted. She opened the door, and he sped through the door, the scent of his mate's spilled blood tearing a howl from his throat. He followed the sounds of screaming tigers through the house, finding them fighting in front of a humanoid in a wheelchair.

If it wouldn't have been for the blood, the wolf would've had difficulty telling the tigers apart as they fought. The male was just slightly injured, but his mate was bleeding heavily and losing energy quickly.

The others crowded behind him, silently watching the fight. The male in the wheelchair was shouting for the fighting to end so he could get some answers. Saga sauntered up and dragged him away from the battle.

The wolf paced back and forth, his eyes never leaving his mate as she fought for her life. The male was fast and he was vicious, pinning her beneath him time and time again. But the wolf's mate had tenacity. She rolled the male off of her every time, not giving him a chance to sink deadly teeth into her again.

They grappled, snarling and roaring intermittently until his mate got a lucky break. The male tried to push off to spring at her, slipping in a large puddle of her slick blood pooled on the floor. He stumbled, and then she had him.

Powerful jaws clamped around his throat, digging deep and holding him until his thrashing stopped. She withstood the claws that raked over her sides, slashing deep enough to expose bone. Still holding him, her head drooped. Her chest heaved as she appeared to struggle with wanting to fall down and making sure he was dead.

The wolf slinked up to her, sniffing at the male in the wheelchair on the way. He smelled similar to his female. Family, he thought as he brushed up next to the tiger.

She dropped her heavy burden as soon as her mate touched her, the male's body flopping to the floor before it disappeared in a burst of light, the tiger becoming the man. He looked at peace now, although the deep bruising and gouges in his throat belied that belief.

Exhaustion and blood loss weighed heavily upon the tiger. She slumped to the ground wearily, letting her mate lick the blood from her face and shoulder. He huffed at her wound, nuzzling the torn skin delicately.

When someone approached, he snapped at them, standing over her protectively. Someone gently urged him to calm down. The wolf melted away, leaving a naked Connor crouched over the tigress.

Hands gently burrowed through her fur. "Piper, come back to me," Connor said softly yet strongly. "Shift, baby."

Her eyes opened to look into his, the wolf peeking at her worriedly. She tried to shift for her mate. She really did. She didn't like seeing the anxiety on his face, but her body wouldn't cooperate. Keeping her eyes on the male, she tried to convey her feelings, cursing her body for giving up on her. There was so much she wanted to tell him but was unable to as the blackness swallowed her whole.

Chapter Thirty

Connor's heart stopped. Gods, no! Clutching her to his chest, he lifted her as he pushed to his feet. He staggered under the deadweight of a fully grown tiger but continued on. His mate needed medical attention. She needed something.

People were talking around him, but he ignored them all. His mate needed help. Didn't they understand that? The wolf used Connor's throat to let out a warning growl as the others closed in around him.

"Connor! Oh gods!" a woman's voice shrieked from somewhere in her peripheral. He saw people moving as an unseen force barreled them out of the way. Persephone appeared on the wall of people surrounding him. Her face was white as snow when she caught view of the tiger in his arms. "Is she..." she began in a weak tone.

His teeth snapped at her in warning. Piper was alive, and he was going to make her better. "I'm putting her on the bed." His legs and back ached under the weight of her, but he refused offers of help. Every step took forever as each jostle of her body in his arms caused blood to flow.

Persephone followed in his wake, the scent of her tears like spring rain. She was already mourning for her daughter. Connor wouldn't. He was going to save her. Somehow.

"P-Persephone?" an incredulous male voice said weakly.

Connor ignored him, placing his mate on the bed and stroking his bloody hand over her face. She was beautiful to him even in her tiger form. Grabbing one of the pillows, he pressed it to her shoulder where the biggest wound was. She didn't react.

"Is she? Who is she?" the male asked in a flustered voice.

“James,” Persephone breathed softly. “Yes. She’s your daughter, our daughter.”

Glancing at James, Connor saw his hands clutching the arms of the wheelchair. “She killed Evan,” he said hoarsely, his eyes trained on the tiger lying so still.

Elijah entered the room, head bowed submissively. At his back was the entire streak, all of them looking solemn. The Kahn looked shocked to see him.

“You died,” he breathed, looking from Piper to Elijah. “He told me you died. Katina? You’re here? He said you moved to another pack.” James’ voice was losing its weakness. Red stained his face as his anger washed away his disbelief. “What is happening in my streak?”

The tigers fell to the floor in unison before the fury of their Kahn. Piper’s ear twitched, though she didn’t awaken. Connor dropped the blood-soaked pillow and replaced it with another. Her bleeding was slowing, though not enough to suit him. If they couldn’t get her mended, she’d bleed out.

“Kahn, no disrespect, but there are more important things to deal with right now,” Connor said coldly to the elder shifter. “I need someone to sew Piper up. She’s losing too much blood.”

Fallon appeared in the doorway, a little black bag in his hand. He pushed through the tigers and Amazons, his gaze intent on Piper. The fear in his silvery eyes was enough to sharpen Connor’s own. The incubus fell to his knees next to the bed, his hand running over her uninjured side. Connor wanted to snap at him, but the love the other male had for his mate made him bite his tongue.

With calm efficiency, Fallon pulled supplies from the bag, quickly sewing the torn skin of her shoulder and several points on her ribs. “I’m not a healer, but this should do it,” he told Connor roughly.

“What do we do now?” Connor asked harshly, looking into the still face of the massive cat. She hadn’t opened her eyes once the entire time, hadn’t twitched a muscle when the needle pierced her

skin.

Fallon shook his head. "We wait and hope she starts healing," he muttered harshly, leaving the room streaked with Piper's blood.

The room emptied of everyone except Connor, Persephone, and James. He ignored the other two, resting his head on the pillow next to his mate. Persephone moved closer to the bed, her eyes dark with worry and guilt. She rested a hand on Piper's head, stroking the fur tenderly.

"I never expected to see her like this," she whispered. "She's magnificent."

Connor nodded, turning his gaze back to Piper.

"Why didn't you tell me?" James said in a choked voice. He pushed himself closer to the bed.

Never looking away from Piper, Persephone answered, "Your other children died, James. I didn't want to lose her because of streak business."

"My other children died in accidents," he said firmly, though there was a hint of uncertainty.

Connor snorted, drawing the weretiger's attention. "You're a blind fool if you believe that."

"Who the hell are you?" James asked with icy dignity.

"I'm Piper's mate," Connor said with enjoyment, watching the tiger's face drop in shock.

"That's impossible!" he thundered, one emancipated hand banging on the arm of his chair. "Tigers and wolves do not mate!"

"It's funny how everyone's telling Piper the things she can't do, but she manages to do it anyway," Connor mused out loud, his eyes meeting Persephone's in understanding.

"Let's leave them alone for now, James," Persephone said firmly, going around the wheelchair to push it from the room. "You can tell me what happened to you."

Connor heard James arguing, though he let the succubus push him from the room. Letting out a loud sigh, he scooted closer to Piper. Her

muscles were quivering from shock and blood loss. He let out a curse. She needed warmth.

In an instant, he was in wolf form, pressing against her spine, lending her his body heat. With great care, he wrapped himself around her so as not to bother her wounds. It was harder to do than said since her body had several slices and gouges. He nuzzled her ear, lapping at the strangely delicate tissue.

He closed his eyes. It was Heaven and Hell having his female so near, but unresponsive. He could smell the other tigers prowling in the next room, but he felt no fear or uneasiness. For now the danger was over. It was time for her to heal and for him to determine how they were going to be together from here on out.

The wolf wasn't sure how much time passed as he lay next to his mate, willing his life into her. There was no change in her condition. Her chest rose and fell quickly as she panted through her pain.

She'd stopped shivering. He pressed his nose against her throat and felt heat radiating through her body. Fever. Shifting back to his human form, Connor got up to find water. She would dehydrate if she didn't take liquids.

He found the bathroom and looked around for something to hold water. Feeling helpless was something new for him, and he braced himself on the counter to keep from falling. Piper needed him to save her somehow, but he was no doctor, and he wasn't even sure the best Veilerian witch could help a hybrid weretiger succubus with mortal wounds.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Connor squeezed his eyes shut as the heat of unshed tears burned them. He wasn't going to give in to despair. Not yet. There had to be some way to heal her without resorting to potions and spells the witches were bound to use.

"Think, dammit," he cursed himself. Piper was a weretiger and shifting would be one way for her to heal most of the wounds, but she couldn't do that while unconscious. She was also a succubus, though those powers seemed secondary now that she'd embraced her tiger

heritage.

That was it! Raising his head, Connor looked at himself in the mirror. She was a weretiger, but she was still a succubus, which meant she could feed off of male lust.

Hoping his idea wasn't too outlandish, Connor quickly disrobed and reentered the bedroom. He locked the door and crawled into bed with the tiger. Feeling distinctly perverted, he rested on his back next to Piper and closed his eyes.

He wasn't really in the mood to jerk off while his whole being concentrated on Piper's every breath, but if this could save her, he would. Forcing himself to think back to the hours he spent loving his mate, Connor's body began to respond in the typical manner. It didn't take him long to get lost in the images.

Piper's black-streaked hair falling around her face as she rode him into oblivion, her breasts jiggling with every energetic wiggle of her hips came to mind. Remembering the feel of her body gripping him like a hot, silky fist, clamping and stroking his cock, made his balls tighten.

He reached down, his fist closing around his erection and stroking as he imagined her soft, purring pants as she rode herself to climax. Beads of cum pearled at his tip with the remembered feel of her claws digging into his chest as she flipped into orgasm, her channel milking his cock with hungry pulls that had him coming as well.

Connor moaned softly, stroking faster. His skin glistened with sweat as he desperately reached for climax. His mate needed his lust to feed. She needed his orgasm. The thoughts became a litany as he strained for release, the soft click of his hand moving on his erection timed with his panting breath.

Just as he felt the tingle start at the base of his spine and his balls draw up, a soft tongue swiped across the head of his cock, startling a shout from him. Eyes flying open and mouth opened to roar, he looked down to see his mate crouched at his feet with a wicked smile on her beautiful face.

* * * *

The lust that had drawn her out of her deep sleep was thick in the air, forcing her eyes open. She recognized Evan's room, and for a moment, she feared he was the one lusting. Her nostrils flared as she breathed in the scent of male. Body nearly liquefied with relief, Piper turned her head to see her mate stroking himself almost desperately.

He was magnificent in the dim light, his nude body sprawled on the furs covering the bed. His eyes were squeezed shut as he concentrated on the picture in his mind while his hand stroked his impressive cock. Piper was sure she'd have found something like this highly disgusting and embarrassing days before, but now it seemed like a great honor. It didn't hurt that he groaned her name with every downward stroke.

She'd watched him for a long time, silently admiring his heaving chest and skin that'd grown shiny with his efforts. Her powers drew his lust into her, smoothing out the wounds until there wasn't even a line of pink to show. Watching him struggling for release lit a fire in the pit of her stomach. Piper knew she loved this male, and watching Connor give his lust so selflessly proved he did care for her.

So she'd done what any self-respecting woman would do when she watched her male fight for orgasm. She decided to help him. Connor was so lost in his mind he didn't even feel the bed move as she arranged herself near his ankles. It was only when she leaned over and swiped her tongue across the tip of his glistening cock that he opened his eyes.

He froze, his hand halting at the base of his erection as his eyes popped open in surprise. When he saw her crouched at his feet, the anger gave way to jubilation.

"Piper!" he nearly shouted, his hands moving for her to clutch her to him.

Except Piper had other plans. Her male was on the cusp of climax,

and she was going to make sure he went over the edge. She reached up, lacing her fingers through his, and lazily lapped at the delicate tissue of his scrotum. His back arched as he roared with pleasure, his seed spilling on his stomach.

Deftly jerking her body over his, Connor pulled her down to meet his lips. He kissed her so ferociously, his teeth tore into her lips, but she accepted the pain just as she accepted the tongue forcing entry into her mouth. They kissed as lovers who almost lost each other could—mindlessly, desperately, straining to reconnect through taste.

His hands shook from hers to stroke over her body, assuring himself that she was whole all the while he kissed her. He gently probed at her shoulder, finding no broken skin. He groaned loudly into her mouth.

Connor grabbed a handful of her hair, pulling her away from his mouth with care. Her eyes were slumberous, her eyelids heavy and he'd never seen a more beautiful sight in his life.

"Piper," he breathed, his eyes tracing over her face as though he'd never expected to see her again. "Oh, Gods, Piper." His voice was harsh with barely restrained emotion.

"Baby," she whispered, kissing him gently "Thank you." She kissed him again. "You saved my life," she said against his lips.

Connor could barely breathe as he realized Piper was healed. His heart pounded as he was bombarded with a maelstrom of emotions—joy, love, pride, residual fear, and hope. She seemed perfectly fine if a little tired. Her eyes were droopy, but her skin glowed with health.

Unable to express what he was feeling, he wrapped his arms around her, crushing her to his body. As her familiar curves and scent seeped into him, the wolf finally began to relax. She was here, and she was fine.

Her head fit into the crook of his neck and she pressed tiny, healing kisses to the pulse that beat a rapid tattoo in his neck. Slowly, his body assimilated to the knowledge she was healthy.

"Thank you," she said again, her breath teasing his skin.

Connor tightened his arms around her, his eyes closed as he savored her touch. Their hearts slowed and found a matching rhythm.

“How did you know to...you know?” she asked hesitantly, her hands moving up to stroke through his hair.

Blood rushed to his face. He still couldn't believe he'd masturbated next to his unconscious mate. It felt like sacrilege, but it had helped her, so who was he to complain? “I didn't know. I hoped it would work,” he grumbled, ignoring his blush.

The soft expulsion of air she made against his neck told him she was chuckling at his embarrassment, but he didn't care. Gently stroking his hands over her satiny, black-striped skin, he reacquainted himself with her body. She was plastered to him from head to toe, her head under his chin and toes tucked between his calves, and he still didn't feel close enough to her.

“You didn't have to finish me off,” Connor rumbled softly, delighting in the little shivers she gave as he trailed his fingers up and down her spine.

“I wanted to,” she whispered shyly.

Grinning hugely, he kissed the top of her head. She was one of a kind, his mate was. She moved and he felt the result of his orgasm pasting their bodies together. “Let's take a shower, and we'll go out to meet your father,” he suggested gently.

Her head popped up so fast, she nearly clipped his chin. “My father? He's alive?”

Connor nodded, stroking her downy cheek. “Apparently you saved him from two of Evan's enforcers.” The remembered story made him frown darkly. He'd listened in on Elijah's little recounting and heard James' input. Connor grabbed Piper's arms and gave her a little shake. “If you ever scare me like that again, I will paddle your ass!”

She had the nerve to look offended as she sat up, straddling his waist. He couldn't ignore her nudity and didn't even try to hide his admiration. Those black stripes were so exotic and tempting he

wanted to bathe them with his tongue. After, he promised himself. After she promised never to do something so insane again.

Crossing her arms with a severe frown of her own, Piper replied, "I did what I had to, Connor. It isn't like I planned on being kidnapped. I won't go deliberately looking for trouble, but if it finds me first I'm going to deal with it."

Not liking the sound of that, he matched her frown. "You're going to let me deal with any problems. You're my mate. That's my job."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Oh, sure, so I'm going to just sit at home and let you handle everything. Ha!" she scoffed when he nodded solemnly. "If you don't know me better than that, then we've got a bigger problem than me getting in trouble, Connor Griffin."

"What's that mean?" he shouted as she leapt off the bed and stormed into the bathroom. He stomped after her. "You're my mate. You know it's my duty to take care of you."

The water in the tub came on, quickly filling the room with steam. She got in the tub and slammed the glass partition closed. Infuriated, Connor opened the door and closed it behind him, crowding her under the showerhead.

"What problem do we have, Piper?" he asked her with a menacing growl.

Flinging her hair over her shoulder, she glared up at him. "I don't want to be a duty, Connor. I want you to treat me as a partner in your life, not a burden you have to carry with you everywhere."

He gaped at her, barely seeing her as she angrily scrubbed her body from head to toe. She thought she was a burden to him? The wolf snapped angrily. How could she possibly think she was anything less than his life's partner, a companion to ease the lonely days of his long life?

Piper spun away from Connor, not wanting him to see the hateful tears in her eyes. She didn't want to be treated like a child again. Everyone was just going to have to get used to this new Piper because she liked who she was. She was strong; she'd fought three male tigers

on her own, and won. Yes, she'd almost died, but what was life without risk? It didn't mean she was going to start cruising around the Veil looking for trouble.

Connor was dead silent behind her, no doubt looking at her as though she'd lost a screw. She glared at the white tiles. Damned werewolf, she thought with a grunt. He was so not going to treat her like an idiot. She was seventy-four years old, for crying out loud!

Large hands settled on her shoulders, squeezing gently. A masculine mouth came to rest against her ear, while his voice whispered, "You are my mate, my heart, my future. I don't want you hurt."

Turning around to face him, Piper looked into his eyes and saw the truth in his words. Anxiety and fear battled with, could it be love? Clasp his face between her hands, she pulled him down to meet her mouth for a brief kiss.

"Connor, I love you, but sometimes you're an idiot," she said mildly. "How could I ever be hurt if you're at my side protecting me?"

Surprise, joy, and possessiveness gleamed in his eyes before he lifted her for another kiss. She squeaked as he crushed her against his chest in a tight hug. Struggling to move her arms, she finally freed them from between their bodies and wrapped them around his neck. She stroked his nape gently, holding him to her. Her strong werewolf was trembling slightly, his breathing harsh in her ear.

"I love you," he whispered into her neck, the words almost painful for him. "I'm sorry, I—" He gulped. "I've never told someone that."

Piper's eyes watered. His soft, hesitant declaration was all the more precious to her because he'd never said it to another. This strong man had opened his heart to her, and she was going to treasure his love for the rest of her life.

By unspoken agreement, they stood in the shower with the water pounding them for a long time, neither of them speaking, just relishing their closeness. It almost felt as though they were the only

two beings in the world as they hugged each other. It wasn't sexual or a prelude to sex. They built trust and comfort between them. Piper could feel their bond growing as she listened to the steady thump of his heartbeat under her cheek.

A frantic knock sounded on the door along with Persephone's terrified shouting. "Connor? Connor! Is Piper okay?" she called through the door, rattling the doorknob.

Sighing heavily enough to fell a house, Connor smoothed his hand over her hair. "Your mom's been worried about you," he whispered so Persephone couldn't hear them.

"What's she doing here?" Piper whispered back, surprised her mother hadn't been at her bedside.

"Let's finish this shower and get some clothes on, and I'll tell you," he promised before pressing soft kisses to each of her eyelids.

Smiling softly at Connor, Piper quickly washed him before they both stepped out of the shower. Drying each other while trying not to stir desire proved next to impossible, but with Persephone on the other side of the door, they didn't act on it.

Connor wrapped Piper in a bath sheet, making sure she was fully covered before draping a towel around his own hips. "Ready?" he asked, kissing her temple.

Piper nodded and he opened the bathroom door.

* * * *

Connor watched as Persephone sobbed, throwing her arms around Piper to hold her tight. Watching them together, he felt something ease in his chest. He'd never be able to keep Persephone from her daughter, even if part of him still cursed the succubus for her part in Piper's injuries. It was water under the bridge, so to speak, and looking back would only cause everyone pain.

Both women were crying and talking, babbling without making much sense, but understanding each other nonetheless. It was one of

the most fascinating family interactions Connor had ever experienced.

Movement in the doorway brought his attention around to see the Kahn watching Piper and Persephone with a strange expression on his face. It looked like longing, but also disapproval, when James' eyes met Connor's. He tensed. The male was giving him a look suggesting he didn't approve of either Connor or Piper, or both, and Connor didn't like that one bit.

He held the weretiger's eye, purposefully showing the other male he wasn't some cub to be sent away with a scolding look. James seemed to grow before his eyes even though he didn't move. Connor felt a spark of challenge light in his soul. The Kahn was challenging him. For what, Connor wasn't entirely sure, but he wasn't about to back down.

"Come meet your father," Persephone said, breaking Connor and James' staring contest. He saw Persephone wipe tears from her cheeks as she led Piper over to James. "James Walsh, this is your daughter, Piper Foxgrove. Piper, this is your father."

Piper and James stared at each other as though weighing the truth of those statements. Connor saw the resemblance as clear as day. With the exception of her boldly striped skin, Piper was the spitting image of James from her hair to her facial structure.

When James just stared at her with a deadpan expression, Connor tensed. The bastard had better not even imagine hurting his mate's feelings, or he'd twist him like a pretzel, wheelchair or no wheelchair. He even took a step forward to beat some sense into the weretiger when James' face softened.

Raising one trembling hand up to Piper, the Kahn whispered, "Daughter?"

Piper glowed, her eyes overflowing with tears again, reaching out to grasp the bony hand offered to her. She clutched it almost desperately, falling to her knees in front of the chair. "I'm so sorry I killed Evan," she whispered to him through her tears.

He shook his head, shaggy multicolored hair flying with his

adamant refusal to accept her apology. “No apologies,” he told her, voice gruff and raspy. “Elijah told me what happened. You saved my life without even knowing me. Thank you.”

Smiling tremulously, Piper just stared up at him, her gaze searching. Then she seemed to remember Connor. Her head turned so fast, she winced. “This is my mate, Connor Griffin, of the Tall Pines Pack,” she introduced him, one hand extended to Connor while the other held onto her father’s.

He wanted to take that step towards her. His body nearly screamed with the need to race to her side, but the look on her father’s face stopped him dead in his tracks. Revulsion filled those gold eyes so similar to his mate’s.

Piper’s smile faltered when Connor remained by the bathroom door. She looked confused by his refusal to meet her father. “Connor?” she asked him, her voice seeming to beg him for this.

Gritting his teeth because there was no way he would refuse his mate this small concession, Connor strode across the room. Taking her hand, he kissed the knuckles and pulled Piper to her feet. He wrapped his arm around her waist in a move James couldn’t fail to recognize as possession.

“James Walsh,” Connor said coolly, daring the other male to break Piper’s heart. “It’s an honor to meet my mate’s sire.”

The flinch was barely discernable, and the smile was false and hearty. “Wonderful,” James said, baring his teeth. “I’ll find someone to get clothes for the two of you. If you’ll excuse me.”

With an expert spin, the wheelchair sailed out of the room, leaving a confused Piper, a wary Persephone, and a pissed-off Connor behind. He tightened his arm around his female’s waist, cuddling her close. He didn’t want to give her up for anything.

Chapter Thirty-One

Piper didn't know what was going on and didn't like it one bit. From the minute James appeared in the room until they entered the sitting area, Connor had been standoffish and quiet. He still smiled at her and kissed her, but he was reserved. Even Persephone hadn't done more than give Piper a quick, empty smile before vacating the room.

Standing in the large sitting room with her father's streak sprawled all over it, Piper wished she could've returned to the shower with Connor. Twenty-some odd tigers crowded into the room, all looking at her with hope and trepidation. Connor and his rescue team were in another room, giving the streak privacy. Only Persephone and Malachi remained with her, although they were standing far enough away that she felt alone.

James sat in the center of the room, his presence commanding even though he was in a wheelchair and pajamas. He was a handsome male, Piper thought with daughterly pride. Some more meat on his bones, and he'd look even better. She was amazed at the difference shown him by the streak who all looked between James and Piper with surprise and hope.

There was no hiding the remarkable stripes on her skin in the baggy sundress James had found for her. The weretigers looked over the stripes with curiosity, but none would meet her gaze except for James and Elijah.

"This is my daughter, Piper Foxgrove," James announced in a deep voice. The tigers shifted restlessly. "She defeated Evan in a dominance challenge, earning the right to lead this streak."

Murmurs broke out as the tigers discussed the ramifications of her

win. Piper glanced at them, wondering if they were afraid she'd be like Evan. She wanted to fit in here, wanted to belong somewhere. If they didn't accept her, she didn't know where she'd go, since living at the Pleasure House with Connor wasn't possible.

"Is she going to stay with the streak?" a male tiger asked, standing up to address the others. He was maybe five foot eight but had the barrel chest and broad shoulders of a much taller man. Russet colored hair fell down his back in a thick curtain.

James looked at Piper inquiringly. She bit her lip. "Um, perhaps. I'd like to get to know everyone first," she amended as James' face fell.

The male nodded. "Why do you smell of werewolf?" he asked boldly. His eyes traveled up and down Piper's figure hotly. "We have no need of dogs for mating purposes. I would gladly mate you."

Piper's eyebrows rose as color flooded her face. This was something she hadn't expected. She'd hoped they would just accept her choice of mate, but it didn't appear things were going to happen that way.

Fury began to build in Piper. "The werewolf is my mate!"

Gasps of shock and horror filled the room making Piper's face burn with anger. James didn't say anything, just stared impassively at Piper.

"We will never accept a werewolf as consort to our Kahn," one female said loudly, her face a mixture of revulsion and anger.

"I'm not your damn Kahn yet," Piper growled, hands fisted at her sides.

"You defeated Evan. Of course, you're our Kahn," another male spoke up. "But a werewolf will never fit in our streak. It's unnatural!"

Several voices echoed his last words in agreement.

"She cannot have a werewolf consort," the same woman continued. "We have always been a streak of pureblood tigers, if the two had cubs..." her voice trailed off, shuddering with disgust. Several other tigers did as well, though Elijah just looked sad and

resigned.

James raised his hands and the voices fell silent. “My daughter has not yet bonded to the werewolf,” he said, making Piper stare in shock. How could he know they hadn’t completed the bond? “Perhaps she just needs time to know us before she does such a thing. Will you do that, Piper? Will you stay with us without your wolf to learn more about your family?”

She wanted to shout “hell no” and walk out with Connor. The tiger urged her to think about it carefully. This was her streak, she’d fought for them. Yes, the wolf was her mate. Perhaps she could work on them to accept him as consort, and if it didn’t work then they weren’t worth her efforts. She had a responsibility to these beings. They needed her, while she needed Connor.

Her fists clenched. This was unbearable. Her heart told her to march out of the room, fling herself into Connor’s arms, and leave the weretigers to their problems. But she knew if she left, her father would never forgive her, and she’d have lost the chance to know him better. She did have one ace up her sleeve though. They wouldn’t accept her if they found out she was a Halfling. She could go about her merry way with Connor at her side.

“If you have a problem with possible half-wolf, half-tiger cubs, then you’re gonna love my genetics,” she snapped at the tigers grouped around the room. They looked blank, except for James, who was looking uneasy.

“What do you mean?” the first male asked, looking her over carefully.

Piper’s mouth stretched into a nasty grin. “I’m half-succubus,” she told them smugly, watching their faces bleed into horror and shock.

“But—” the male said, his mouth gaping open. “That’s impossible. Our tigers recognize you as Kahn!”

They all started babbling again while she sat back with a triumphant smile that barely managed to mask her heartbreak. She’d just given away her one chance to be part of a group. She knew she

was a freak and now so did they. They'd just have to suck it up and find someone else to lead them.

The words were on her tongue when Malachi spoke up. "I'm sorry to add to your burden, Piper, but there's something you all need to know."

Everyone looked at the Halfling as he came to the center of the room. Malachi, looking strange for some reason she couldn't fathom, stood with his hands on his hips.

"I didn't want to bring this up, but since it could determine whether or not Piper remains with the streak, I can't sit on this information." He gave Piper a twisted grin that couldn't hide his seriousness. "Fallon and I believe Evan was involved with Bianca Bridges and another witch, or using Bianca's old potions to control the streak."

Shouts of disbelief rang out. Piper gaped at the half vampire-demon. Was he kidding her? "What does this mean?"

"It means that unless he was working completely alone, there's a good chance his partners may be coming back to try to take over the streak," Malachi said in the sudden silence.

James met Piper's eyes, the worry in his gaze enough to cause the air to leave Piper's lungs. This streak had been abused for fifteen years, and there was a chance more trouble would come even though Evan was dead? She couldn't wrap her mind around it. If this was true, she couldn't leave them. They'd be without a strong, capable leader. Easy pickings for anyone who came along, Evan's cronies or not.

"There's more," Malachi said. "But this is better news. I think Evan was slipping the Kahn a potion to disable him. If I can find someone to test it and come up with an antidote, there's a chance he'll recover fully."

She watched the tigers gasp and look at James with hope. They loved him and wanted him to become their leader again. The looks they gave her were slightly less welcome, though no less needy.

Weight pressed down on her shoulders. The tiger knew the health of the whole was greater than the health of one. Duty had come calling. The streak needed her.

* * * *

Connor listened to the conversation going on in the next room and knew the instant Piper accepted her burden. He couldn't believe she'd intentionally attempted to sabotage her chances of being accepted by bringing up her less than pure bloodlines, but it wouldn't matter now. If there was the slightest chance another could come in and take over the streak, she'd stay to protect them.

Fallon met his eyes across the kitchen, looking disgusted and angry. Connor completely understood. Piper was now lost to him as a mate unless the streak changed their views on purebloods. He wasn't betting on it though, since they were obviously not happy James' heir was a Halfling herself.

Ruby and her Amazon guards looked uneasy, not meeting his eyes. His lips curled in a sharp smile. He was a wolf mated to a Kahn who was going to have to give him up. He was an object of pity.

"Connor," Piper said softly from the doorway.

Dark, gold eyes met his gaze. The hopelessness there almost crushed his heart, but he held on. This separation was for the best. She needed to organize and protect her streak. He was certain there were things he needed to do back in Texas. Brooding, growling, snapping at anyone in reach, nursing his broken heart, getting drunk. Yeah, getting drunk sounded like a sound plan to him.

He gave her a quick grin, making her eyes blink slowly. "It's all good, Piper. We had fun, right?" he said with a lightheartedness he didn't feel.

She looked stunned. "You—you don't care?" she asked in shock.

There was a sharp pain in his chest begging him not to break her heart, but if it helped her move on, he would do it. He loved her. He

could do anything for her future happiness.

Forcing another grin, he bussed her cheek, savoring the soft velvet of her skin under his lips. He pulled back and chuckled her on the chin playfully. "Take care, kid."

He strode out of the house with the sounds of the tigers discussing the trouble ahead. Fallon shot him a look filled with pity, but he didn't take umbrage at it. He was pitiful. He was going to let her go without a fight. He loved Piper enough to let her go.

Connor walked with care until he reached the vehicles over a mile away. Since no one was around, he let loose with the howl his infuriated wolf had been aching to bellow. It echoed around the marsh, quieting the wildlife. Mournful and angry, it was only a shadow of the pain he felt.

Chest heaving with his agony, Connor got in one of the cars, not caring whose it was and took off. There was a lot of alcohol somewhere he needed to be drinking.

* * * *

When Connor walked out of the mansion, Piper felt like he'd taken her heart with him. The light went out as quickly as a snap of her fingers. The words of her streak whirled through her head, but she couldn't comprehend them. Her life mate had just walked out on her without so much as a "So long, sucker" or "Thanks for the horizontal dance...maybe we'll do it again sometime."

Anger quickly filled the hole where her heart had been, putting a temporary patch over it until she could mourn in private. There was a lot to do before she could give the streak back to her father.

Malachi approached her, his dark eyes soft and apologetic. "Piper, I'm sorry things turned out this way—"

She cut him off rudely. "Show me the evidence, and we'll work out a strategy."

He looked nonplussed for a moment. "Um, I can't stay here," he

said in a solemn undertone.

Piper raised an eyebrow at him imperiously. "Oh?"

"Ah, well," he hedged, looking around covertly. "I just got a phone call from a friend. Apparently the Guardian Elite know I'm in the area, so I've got to run." His face darkened. "I didn't want to cause trouble, but if Evan did have ties to Bianca, someone a lot worse will show up to take over this streak. They need someone strong to lead them."

She shook her head. "Just show me the damn evidence and potion you found. I'll take care of the rest," she told him in disgust. Was everyone going to abandon her today? Her eyes sharpened on him. "What the hell happened to your face?"

Ruby laughed softly as she came up next to Piper. "That's what happens when men try to act big and tough with Amazons," she said with a playful wink at Malachi.

Muttering under his breath, he produced a small vial from the pocket of his slacks, slipping it into Piper's hand. "Ask around to find a good witch for the antidote." He leaned forward to whisper for her ears alone. "Evan kept a log book filled with payments and dates that coincide with a lot of Bianca's activities. Hold onto that book until it's to your advantage." He stepped back, his face deadly serious. "Do you understand?"

Piper nodded shortly. She didn't understand completely, just enough to know she'd gone from one shitstorm to another. "Take care, Malachi," she said earnestly. "Be careful. If you need anything, call me, okay?"

He gave her a lopsided smile before darting forward to kiss her cheek. "Don't do something stupid like let your mate go, 'kay?" he said cheekily before disappearing through a swirling portal.

Persephone appeared at her elbow. "Baby, you're tired. Why don't you get some rest?" her mother suggested, worry clear in her voice.

"There's too much to do. I need to meet everyone, organize a

watch schedule, and look for that evidence,” she told her Persephone tiredly. Pain was beginning to throb between her ears as the mother of all headaches began.

“We’ll take care of it for the first night,” Ruby assured her, nodding to the two Amazons who immediately grabbed cell phones to place calls. “The Blood Maidens will guard the compound tonight and tomorrow. Get some rest and get better.”

Deciding not to argue with Ruby, Piper spun on her heel and headed back to the bedroom she’d awakened in earlier. Her ears told her someone was following her, but without malicious intent. Her nostrils detected the scent of her father, and she barely held back a growl.

“This is for the best,” James announced once she was inside the room. “A wolf doesn’t belong in a tiger streak.”

Whirling around to confront the man she’d dreamed about meeting all her life, Piper hissed at him, pleased by the surprise lighting his face. “That wolf is my mate.”

“Wolves and tigers don’t mate. He’d never fit in here,” he told her loftily.

Raising an eyebrow, Piper looked down her nose at him. “And you think I do? A succubus tiger Halfling?”

“Obviously you’re more tiger than succubus,” he stuttered almost hopefully.

“Nope, sorry. I feed like a succubus in spite of my appearance.” Piper gave him a feral smile. “Not so happy about having an heir now, are you? Maybe this’ll teach you to keep it in your pants if you don’t want to leave little surprises for yourself.”

She slammed the door on his astonished face, feeling justified for her ugly words. James had never been a part of her life, yet now he thought he could tell her what to do simply because he was the one who’d donated sperm?

Tears began to crowd her eyes, and she dashed them away angrily. Connor had only been gone for half an hour, yet she missed him more

than she had when she'd been kidnapped. She fought the cynicism telling her all he'd wanted was a piece of ass. He hadn't loved her. He'd just told her so because she'd seemed to expect it. She sobbed into her pillow. He couldn't have lied about it. He was just protecting her, trying to give her what he thought she needed.

Determined to stick with that belief, she sniffled loudly and wiped her face. She'd find a way to be with him again. Even if it meant seeking out a replacement Kahn, she'd be with her mate even if it killed her.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Two weeks had passed since Connor left Piper with the streak. Fourteen days of waiting for word from him or some sign of his continued feelings. She hadn't spent the entire time pining. There were twenty-four hours in a day, and she devoted at least seven of those hours to the streak and caring for her father.

The witch she'd found was a little woman named Dinah who'd taken one look at James and began brewing potions. Every day he grew stronger, his body slowly coming under his command again. The streak was hopeful for a full recovery.

They weren't so hopeful for Piper's continued leadership. She'd been jumped for dominance challenges on three separate occasions, each time defeating her challenger as a second thought. She didn't care anymore. She spent two hours in the morning going through Evan's safe and coming to the realization that the bastard was lucky she hadn't known everything he had done, or she'd have tortured him first.

It gave her new insight into the streak, though, so she didn't complain too much while she was scouring her skin until it nearly bled. The women had paid the price to keep their men safe by submitting to Evan's every whim. Whether they allowed him alone to abuse their bodies, or all of his men, they'd done what was necessary to keep as many alive as they could.

Piper admired them even while she resented them. Katina seemed to be the worse, as she was the most dominant of the weaker tigers. Having heard what Evan had done to her repeatedly for the last fifteen years, though, she stowed away her dislike.

James made an effort to improve relations between Piper and the streak by forcing them all to eat together, and even going so far as to demand they institute a movie night. It wasn't really working, but it made him happy, so everyone went along, albeit reluctantly.

He'd also tried hard to get closer to her, staying up late at night to tell her all about their family history. He never brought up Connor as though he sensed that was her breaking point. He gave her hints about each tiger, telling her about each of their idiosyncrasies, trying to soften her more towards them. It was fascinating, but nothing could touch the inner core of ice that had settled in her chest. It remained day after day, growing larger until she felt numb from the inside out.

It didn't help that she was practically dying without Connor's lust to feed from. She was barely surviving from the lust she soaked up through the tigers' sexual activities. She'd lost a good fifteen pounds in two weeks, no matter how much she ate. She was thinking about calling it the Succubus Lust Withdrawl Diet.

"Piper?" Elijah called from the doorway of the study. It had once been Evan's private domain, but she'd had everything taken out, burned, and refurnished in a simpler style. It was her thinking room.

"Yeah," she said without enthusiasm. Elijah had been helpful since Connor left. He'd defended her to the other tigers and fought for her honor, though he wasn't aware she knew about those skirmishes. It seemed he'd designated himself as her second without even realizing it.

"There are Guardian Elites here requesting an audience," he said respectfully, eyes downcast.

She grunted. She'd known they would show up, just not when. "Send them in, I guess." Piper wiped her hands on her jeans. What she wouldn't give to have Connor here offering his silent support.

Seconds later, two large males entered the study, coming to a stop in front of her desk. They wore Guardian uniforms, basic black combat pants and black T-shirts with the Guardian Elite insignia on one sleeve.

“Gentlemen,” she greeted them while sitting down. She didn’t give a shit if she appeared rude. She didn’t want to deal with them, and she definitely didn’t want to be asked where Malachi was.

Blondie bowed his head. “Kahn Piper,” he greeted her, his husky voice carrying a trace of an English accent. “I am Victor Stahl, and this is my brother, Dennis.” The brunette bowed his head. “We are here on behalf of the VPA. We need to ask you some questions.”

“What questions do you have for me?” she asked in a bored tone.

“We’ve heard through sources that you are in the possession of some information concerning the Bianca Bridges case, and that you know where the fugitive, Malachi Cromwell is,” Dennis said smoothly, his accent just as light as his brother’s.

One of her eyebrows rose. “Oh?” She doubted the people she trusted would’ve ratted her out to the VPA, so it had to be one of the tigers. Rage began to build, but she forced it down. She needed to deal with these Guardians before she ripped a strip off the tigers.

Victor sighed deeply. “Kahn, we’ve been watching Evan Walsh for two years, and we know he was involved in Bianca’s plans, we just need the proof.”

“What good does it do now? He’s dead, and she’s banished,” she replied coolly, hands steepled in front of her.

“We need the names of all of Evan’s known associates. There are more of Bianca’s people out there, and we believe they’re planning something big,” Dennis said and she had to give him credit. He’d told her almost exactly what Malachi had.

She studied them carefully, her eyes traveling from blue to brown as they held their gazes steady. “Fine,” she told him abruptly making Dennis jump slightly. She hid an evil smile by sifting through the bottom drawer of her desk. Finding the log book, she tossed it to them. Victor caught it, looking at her suspiciously. “You just be sure it doesn’t come back that I was the one holding it. My streak has been through enough. We don’t need more trouble because Evan was a power hungry fuckup.”

Victor's face was thoughtful. "There's more, isn't there?" he asked idly.

Piper shrugged. "The rest of it you can't have. There are things Evan did within this streak that never needs to see the light of day." When Dennis began to protest, she held up a hand. "I'm not budging on this. My people have suffered enough. They don't need what happened leaked to be made objects of pity in the Veil. If you want that information, you're gonna have to kill me for it, but I can promise you it won't be easy."

Her voice was deadly cold with purpose, causing Victor and Dennis to exchange looks. Dennis nodded slightly, turning to her with a small smile. "Very well. We don't need information on your streak, Kahn. Now for our second problem. Do you know where Malachi Cromwell is?" he asked her in an equally deadly voice.

Piper wasn't impressed. "No. He left as soon as he gave me the information and potion to revive my father." She raised her hand, forestalling their next question. "Nor do I know where he would've gone. He and I weren't close friends. He helped me and my streak when we needed it, therefore any crimes he committed are forgiven as far as I'm concerned." She stood, indicating their meeting was over. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a lot to do. Good luck in your search for Bianca's people and your hunt for Malachi."

Victor's lips tightened as though he weren't pleased, but he stood. Giving him a polite yet feral smile, she bid them good day and watched them leave her office at a quick clip. They were probably already planning a visit to the others who'd been at the compound when Malachi discovered the log book.

With a deep sigh, Piper sank back into her chair. She needed to let Fallon know what was going on. He'd been with Malachi when the information had surfaced. He had terrible luck when it came to visits with Council and would appreciate a heads up.

Just as she picked up her cell to call her friend, she smelled one of the tigers outside her office. Her nostrils quivered as she recognized

the scent. Katina, the queen bitch of tigers, was standing outside the office and probably had been since the meeting began.

A growl built up in the back of Piper's throat. No doubt it was the other female who'd called the VPA. "Katina!"

The tiger appeared in the doorway, looking uncertain. Chewing her lip and keeping her eyes downcast, she said, "Yes, Kahn?"

"Did you learn what you wanted to?" Piper hissed beyond enraged.

Katina paled her green eyes and freckles stark against her pallid face. The other tiger had flame red hair and was built on the lean side, but moved with the innate grace all tigers did. "K-Kahn, I apologize," she stammered.

"Fuck your apologies, Katina. You called the VPA and reported your little nugget of information hoping they'd haul my ass in because of Malachi," Piper guessed. Accurately, if the wince Katina barely stifled was any answer. "You've undermined me from the start. I was okay with it because I know how much you hate Halflings, but I won't have you pulling outsiders into this streak's problems. Do you understand me?" Piper stood as the words erupted from her in a roar.

Katina fell to her knees. "Kahn, I'm sorry! Please, believe me. I—" she broke off with a sob. "I heard what you told them about—about keeping us from being objects of pity." Her thin arms wrapped around her waist as her head dipped. "You are protecting us, after all we've—I've done to you."

Rubbing her forehead, Piper plopped back in her chair with a sigh. "Of course I'm protecting you. You're my people even if you don't accept me or my chosen mate." Her answer was soft and heartfelt, belying the aching pain clawing at her throat. Connor would always be her mate. There was no doubting that.

"We do accept you," Katina whispered, turning tear filled eyes up to Piper. "You are strong and kind even though we don't deserve it."

Piper shook her head. "You fight me constantly and ridicule me behind my back, forcing Elijah to defend me when I'm not around,"

she said, smirking when Katina gave her a surprised look. “You didn’t think I would notice his scrapes and bruises and the ones the other males wear? I’m not stupid, Katina. Elijah is the only one in this streak who hasn’t tried to force me out.”

Suddenly James appeared in the doorway, leaning heavily on a cane. Shocked to see him upright, Piper sprang to her feet with an exclamation of pleasant surprise. “James! You’re walking!” she cried out, coming around the desk to help him into a chair.

He gratefully leaned against her, both of them bypassing Katina without a single glance. His face was red and sweaty when she finally got him settled in the chair, but his eyes held purpose.

“What are you doing walking around?” she asked him as she went back around the desk.

James flicked a glance at Katina, who ducked her head again. “I also listened in, and enough is enough,” he barked out with a thump of his cane on the floor.

Piper raised her eyebrow, wondering what he was up to. He’d tried browbeating the streak into following her dictates, but though they loved him, they didn’t feel the same for her. “It’s fine, James,” she said. Since the day Connor walked out, she hadn’t been able to really think of him as her father. Dads weren’t supposed to demand pure bloodlines, were they? “Katina will be punished for her treachery and—”

He cut her off rudely with a grunt. “That’s not what I meant. Look at you, Piper. You’re pining for your mate, and we aren’t making things better demanding you change to suit our purposes.”

“That isn’t going to happen,” she replied coldly. “I’m not exactly the pure tiger you guys want to lead your streak and breed more pure tigers. If I ever did have children, my daughters would be succubi.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. You care for this streak without reservation,” he told her with a proud smile. “I did worry about you leading them. Worried you might kill the males with your succubus powers.” He held up a hand when she would’ve protested hotly. He

gave her an indulgent smile. “Darlin’, I’m an old tiger, set in my ways, so you have to excuse me sometimes. You gave up your mate for us, gave up the family you’d been raised with, to care for this streak. Self-sacrifice is a good thing, but you’ve done enough.”

Piper’s heart pounded with hope. Were they going to relieve her of the Kahnship? She didn’t want to leave them in a lurch, but she needed Connor. She was dying without him. “What do you propose?” she asked him as calmly as she could.

“I want to speak to the streak and give them a choice between you leading them with a wolf consort and them being disbanded.”

Katina gasped loudly, her gaze jerking up from the ground to look at James. “Kahn, you can’t mean to disband us,” she spluttered in disbelief.

He glowered at her, eyebrows lowered menacingly. “My daughter has given you everything she has without asking for anything in return. I’ve tried to entice her to look over our males, but her heart is set on the wolf.” He looked over at Piper and love shone in his eyes making her throat tighten with tears. “I’m also her father, and I want to give my daughter whatever she wants.”

Piper gulped back the lump in her throat. “Are you serious?” she rasped, holding back her happiness.

He nodded. “If the streak would rather disband than accept you as their true leader regardless of your consort, then I only ask that I may go with you and your mate.”

“So do I,” Elijah said from the doorway, stepping into the room with dignity. “You are my Kahn. I said it from the first, and I have always meant it. Where you go, I’ll follow.”

The tears she’d tried to suppress trickled down her cheeks. Her father and friend were giving her their support. They were willing to leave with her rather than stay and let her be miserable.

“I don’t want the streak to disband,” she said softly, wiping her cheeks. “They are vulnerable. They need a protector.”

James sighed, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. With painstaking

care, he rose from his chair, causing Piper to run around the desk to assist him. He draped his arm over her shoulder, leaning into her for balance. “We’re going to call the streak together and vote. And the idiots better make me proud.”

* * * *

Five hours later, Piper sat in one of the cars Evan had bought with streak money. It was a lovely navy X6 BMW with leather seats and all-wheel drive. When she’d won the dominance challenge, she’d also won all of his toys. She’d given most of his luxuriant objects back to the streak, but she’d kept the car.

Piper sighed deeply, hands in her lap. She wasn’t sure if she was ready to leave. The backseat passenger door closed sharply as Elijah got in. James was in the passenger seat already, seatbelt buckled and ready to go.

“Well?” James asked imperiously. He looked good. In the few hours since he’d begun walking again, he was already moving faster and with less pain. Dressed in a pair of khakis and a polo shirt, he looked like a slightly older version of Brad Pitt.

“I’m ready when you are, Kahn,” Elijah said from the backseat. He’d already thrown his bag in the cargo along with James’ and Piper’s luggage. They were packed up and ready to leave, just as soon as she worked up the nerve.

Piper bit her lip and buckled her seatbelt. “I still don’t know if this is the best idea,” she mumbled as she started the vehicle.

James patted her knee. “Don’t worry. He’ll know what it means when he sees for himself,” he assured her before sinking back into his seat. “And if he doesn’t, I’ll kick his ass.”

With a reluctant chuckle, she put the car in gear, pulling out of the circular driveway in front of the mansion. As she drove out of the compound, first one car, then another, and another pulled in behind her until she was leading a caravan of five cars filled with weretigers.

The streak had voted unanimously for Connor to return as Piper's consort, seeming insulted she would think they didn't want her happy. Sitting with the streak, she'd listened as one after another defended her to the few holdouts, of which there were only four. After all of the arguing and debating, the vote had been taken, and she was the official Kahn of the Shadow Claw Streak.

She'd been dumbfounded and more than a little weepy at their support. When Piper had then mentioned she was going to Texas to find Connor, they'd all wanted to go so they could show they were behind their Kahn and her Consort one hundred percent. It'd been hard getting some to stay behind, but the ones who had looked upon it as a chance to prove their worthiness by watching their home.

Speeding into the sunlight with her streak behind her, Piper just prayed to the Gods her mate still wanted her, trouble and all.

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Uncle Connor, you have to stop this,” Toby said firmly, though his voice cracked a bit with fear and unease.

Connor blinked at his nephew with blank, bloodshot eyes. He didn’t want to stop, he thought with a weary growl at his nephew. Turning back to the book, he read the happily-ever-after with a tight throat.

In two weeks, he’d read nearly eighty of the romance novels Piper had in her bedroom at Persephone’s house. On his way back to the pack in Texas, he’d stopped in Cypress Point to pick up his nephew and a few mementos from his mate’s first home. Persephone had personally helped him pack some of her daughter’s beloved paperbacks and carry them to his truck.

She hadn’t stopped crying, her eyes puffy and red-rimmed as he drove away. She seemed to think Connor was being hasty in leaving so soon. Persephone told him Piper would never choose anything over love, and when she came back looking for Connor, she’d be upset.

He’d waved her words away and tried not to stiffen when she gave him a flower-scented hug. Piper’s sisters had crowded around the porch of Persephone’s Pleasure House, all grieving for their little Halfling, and waved him good-bye. All except for Prudence, who’d decided to go with the father of her child.

A part of him had been touched by their obvious caring. They didn’t necessarily like him, but they accepted him because they knew Piper had loved him. They also respected him for giving Piper a chance with her recently discovered father. Yeah, he was a regular nice guy.

The situation with Toby hadn't fizzled out either. Connor was still pissed his nephew had manipulated him, but how could he hold it against the cub when he'd managed to give him Piper? Heart aching and soul weary from being separated from her, Connor went back to the home he'd shared with Toby since he had nowhere else to go. He'd buried himself in whiskey and romance novels much to Toby's dismay.

He read them all, from historicals filled with language he hadn't heard spoken since his childhood to paranormal romance with women who reminded him a lot of his mate. Reading them helped him learn more about Piper as well as feel closer to her. When he fell asleep at night, it was with one of her novels draped over his face so he could breathe in the faintest trace of her scent on the pages. It was pathetic, and he didn't care.

He missed his mate. Two weeks of being away from her and he was ready to jump through the gates of Hell to get back to her. But he wouldn't. He wouldn't force her to choose between him and her streak, even though he wanted to. He knew the troubles she faced as a leader, and he wouldn't add to her burden by crippling her with a consort none of them wanted.

"Uncle, please, I'm begging you. Eat something," Toby said, his voice hoarse and worried.

Connor lifted his lip in a snarl as he picked up another book. The cover looked intriguing. It showed a long-haired man biting a small female's neck who was wearing a red corset and black leather pants. It would do.

Sitting back in his recliner that now sported a depression the exact size of his ass, he cracked open the cover. Toby hovered over him like an old lady. The boy hadn't left him alone the entire time they'd been back in Wolf Gap. It was annoying yet satisfying to know his nephew was concerned.

Just then, there was something that sounded like a fleet of cars hitting their gravel drive a mile away. Connor's large ranch house was

tucked in a small wooded area several miles from the nearest major road and had a driveway that discouraged people from traveling far. These vehicles were coming determinedly, fast if the roaring of the engines was any indication.

Connor looked at Toby, seeing confusion in his blue eyes. The new Alpha knew nothing about their visitors, so there was a chance they weren't pack. Could they be Guardian Elites? He'd received a phone call from Lucian warning him the GE's were on the lookout for anyone associated with Piper's rescue squad. Seems there'd been an information leak in the streak, and everyone who'd been there that day was suspected of knowing where Malachi was.

One engine in particular was racing along the drive with no regard for their suspension. Connor walked to the front porch to wait for them. Toby and Pru joined him and they stood there, arms crossed as they waited to see who was foolish enough to intrude upon the Griffin Wolf's territory.

A car whipped around the last curve, fishtailing as it sped to the house. The afternoon sunlight picked out shades of blue buried under piles of road dust, and he could tell by the sleek lines and purring engine this was an expensive vehicle. Several yards behind the navy car, sedans crept around the curve, taking it a little slower than the lead vehicle. All in all, six vehicles raced up his drive, stopping in front of his home with a spray of dust and gravel.

The wolf paced in Connor's mind. It didn't like intruders on its property. It snapped and snarled. The wolf hadn't been active in Connor's soul since he left Piper, so he should be partially thankful for his unexpected company.

He and Toby remained on the porch waiting for something to happen. As though on cue, all the engines were turned off, leaving the front yard steeped in silence.

The driver's door of the lead car slowly opened. A small breeze whipped around the house, carrying the driver's scent away before Connor could find out who and what they were.

A small boot landed on the ground. Then the other as the driver was blocked by the door and the window's illegally tinted glass. They were black, rugged hiking boots with faded jeans draped over the tops. The feet moved back as a hand gripped the edge of the car door.

Connor wasn't sure what made his heart start beating like a drum because the sight of that hand shouldn't have alerted him to anything. But it did. He saw slender fingers on a small hand and small claws curled from the tips.

Then the door closed, and he fell to his knees, drinking in the sight of his mate. She was a vision, her gold and black hair glinting in the late afternoon light. She was pale, he noted with worry. Lines of strain were etched around her eyes and mouth, her skin stretched tight over her cheekbones and jaw. Eyes practically eating her up, Connor noted she'd lost a lot of weight, and he wanted to roar.

Those fucking tigers hadn't been taking care of her, the wolf snarled angrily. They were supposed to have accepted her without him there to cause problems. Her fucking father was supposed to have cared for her!

Piper stood poised next to her vehicle, her sunglasses keeping him from seeing her beautiful eyes. As though her coming out of the vehicle was a signal, doors opened on every car and tigers poured out looking worse for wear and tired. One small figure got out of the driver side backseat, though Connor barely noticed with all of his attention on his mate.

Her plain white T-shirt fell over her thin body, and her jeans were baggy. She looked terrible, and a horrible thought occurred to him. If she was here looking so ill, maybe she was dying, or maybe worry had worn her down. If all of the tigers were with her, maybe they were on the run from the Eturians.

He lunged to his feet and started to step off the porch, wanting to scoop her in his arms and care for her. Except a hand caught his arm and hauled him back up.

Snapping at his nephew, Connor balled his fist and nearly struck

him. The cold look in Toby's eyes stopped him. Even though Toby was younger, he was still Connor's Alpha. Clenching his jaw, Connor dropped his hand and whirled around again to keep his eyes on Piper.

She walked forward, the tigers falling into line behind her like lethal little ducklings. Her strides were sure and steady, though the closer she got, the faster her breathing became.

His wolf howled. Want her now! Connor barely held himself back. Something was going on, and he wasn't sure his wolf's primitive instincts would help him if push came to shove.

"What's the meaning of this?" Toby asked harshly, power in his voice. Connor almost felt a smile trying to emerge. His nephew had been Alpha for two weeks now and was maturing into the leader wolves were proud to follow.

Piper stopped at the foot of the porch stairs, raising her head to look at Toby. One tawny eyebrow rose above the rim of her sunglasses. "Alpha, I'm here for something that was taken from me," she said coolly, no hint of panic or trepidation in her voice. She gave her sister a casual nod.

"Oh, really," Toby drawled. "What would I have that belongs to you, Kahn?"

Piper smirked. "I've discovered several books were taken from my mother's home, and I'm here to get them back."

Books? She was here for her books? Connor knew his mouth had dropped open because several tigers were nudging each other and nodding at him with grins. She wasn't here for him. She was here for her bloody books! The wolf snarled. All this time he'd hoped and prayed Piper would realize she needed him more than her streak.

A snarl escaped him, making the tigers take a big step back except for Piper, her father, and Elijah, who remained in one place. "Take your fucking books then!" he growled darkly before turning his back on the one female who'd ever meant anything to him.

Toby moved aside just as a weight attached itself to Connor's back, tackling him to the porch. Flipping over and dislodging his

attacker, Connor snapped, barely holding back as he realized he'd just gone for Piper's throat.

Lying on his porch with his mate's weight pinning him down, he felt as though he were drowning in sensation. Her sunglasses had fallen off baring her eyes to him, and he felt his breath catch. Those gold eyes swam with tears and love.

"Piper?" he asked hoarsely raising his hand to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "What are you doing here?"

Hoarsely, she said, "I'm here to get my books and collect my consort."

Connor blinked up at her. The wolf was silent, obviously just as confused as he was. Okay, so she really wanted her books. They'd been good, but he didn't think he'd have put them above his mate. "Your books?"

She nodded. "Well, no, not really," she whispered earnestly. "I just needed a good excuse to show up here, so I could show my mate and consort how much I love him."

A volcano exploded in Connor's chest because he felt lit from within. His arms banded around Piper to drag her to him. Not caring that nearly her entire streak looked on or that Toby was smirking at them, Connor pulled his mate down for a kiss, Piper breathing life back into him.

Their lips met as though for the first time. His lips were gentle as he grazed them across hers. Her tongue darted out playfully, earning a growl and a full assault from Connor. His teeth pressed into her lips, forcing her mouth wider as their tongues dueled hotly. Moans and groans erupted from both of them as they pressed closer and closer as though trying to fuse their mouths together.

Triumphant roars accompanied by a lone howl called him back to the present. Connor pulled back before leaning up to steal another kiss from her puffy mouth. "My mate," he growled dangerously.

His body was fully erect and ready for her, but first they had some things to discuss, and they needed privacy. Feeling lighthearted for

the first time in weeks, Connor slapped a hard hand on her ass, making Piper jump. "Let me up, woman."

Rubbing her cheek with a pout, Piper climbed to her feet giving Connor her hand to help him up as well. Humoring her, he let her pull him to his feet and immediately wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

He knew he was grinning hugely but couldn't seem to help it. Toby was smiling, the worry erased from his face. James and Elijah stood in front of the other tigers with Persephone squeezed between them, all of them beaming up at Connor and Piper.

"We have a lot to talk about," Piper said softly. To Toby, she said, "Alpha, do you have room for us to rest?"

Toby grinned, the same boyish smile that had once made Connor forgive him anything. "Of course, and call me Toby," he urged Piper with a wink.

Letting out a playful growl, but keeping a tight possessive hold on his mate, Connor drew her into the house, letting Toby handle setting up the accommodations. Piper looked around their home, her eyes darting over the dark, masculine furniture and Indian print blankets lining the sofas.

It was an intimate house with four bedrooms, two baths, a library, and a large kitchen Connor's mother had insisted on when it was built. The dark wood floors gleamed in the light, reflecting Connor and Piper's images back at them.

Pulling her behind him, he led her to his room, the library. Decorated with floor to ceiling bookshelves and soft leather sofas, this was his favorite room in the house, and he wanted his mate in there. Now.

She laughed softly as he slammed the door closed before pulling her into his arms. She tilted back to look up at him with soft gold eyes. Connor's hand shook as he cradled her jaw.

"Piper," he rasped against her lips. He groaned, the feel of her body pressed up against his an exquisite torture. "Gods, Piper, I missed you."

Her slim arms wrapped around his waist as she fit herself firmly against him. “Silly werewolf, did you think you were going to get away from me so easily?” she asked lightly, though shadows lurked in her eyes.

“I didn’t want to leave you,” he began, but she covered his lips with her own, stealing his words in a soft kiss.

“I understand why. They wouldn’t have accepted you until they accepted me,” she whispered, her breath feathering across his mouth. “I—I was hurt. You left—just left without explaining yourself.”

The bruised tone of her voice made him wince. He’d wanted her to believe it so it would be easier for her to adjust to the streak, but that she’d bought his ploy hurt. “You were never a quick lay for me, baby. You’re my mate. I love you.”

Her eyes glowed at his words. “I love you, too,” she told him, her words winging through him like an arrow. “Don’t ever do something like that again though, or I’ll kick your ass!”

Connor laughed, squeezing her tight. “If I do something so stupid again, you have my permission to kick my ass.”

“Promise?”

He stroked her hair. “Promise.” He set her away from him to look her over carefully. “You haven’t been taking care of yourself,” he accused her in a rough voice.

Her eyebrow went up again. “Neither have you,” she retorted. “I almost didn’t recognize you with that beard.”

His hand went to his face because he’d forgotten all about it. “I’ll shave.”

She shook her head with a twinkle in her eyes. “I’m curious how it’ll feel against my skin.”

Just that quickly, his body went back into full arousal. Growling playfully, he scooped her into his arms and walked across the library to deposit her on the edge of his desk. “I’ve always heard curiosity kills the cat,” he said as he began to tear her clothes off.

Shivering under his hot gaze, Piper leaned back on her hands,

thrusting her breasts under his nose. “And I heard satisfaction always brought it back,” she purred as he yanked off her jeans and panties.

Laughing sharply, he buried his hands in her hair, kissing her with all of his pent-up love. Her skin was just as silky smooth as he remembered, her honeysuckle scent beckoning him to nirvana. His clothes disappeared as her claws sliced through material, and then her hands were on his body.

Piper purred loudly as Connor’s skin was made available to her. Her hands sought out every familiar muscle and hair-roughened patch of skin. She was on fire for her mate.

His mouth tormented hers with teasing nips and laps until she cried out for more. Sealing his lips over hers firmly, he gave her the taste she wanted until her head swam. Then his mouth was gone, coasting down her throat to her nipples, which perked up shamelessly for him. A rough growl rumbled from his throat as he tasted her skin, his beard scraping sensitive flesh.

Connor knelt before her, pulling her hips to the edge of his desk to fit himself between her thighs. The first stroke of his tongue on her nether lips made her cry out. The brush of his beard and mustache on her thighs and clit as he tongued her entrance had her screaming. It was torture. Delicious, mind-numbing torture.

Fingers gently tested her depths, stroking in time with the flicker of his tongue on her engorged clitoris. When his lips wrapped around the tender tissue and sucked, she fractured apart, screaming to the ceiling with her orgasm.

When she came to, she was resting on her back across Connor’s desk, and he was still between her thighs, licking at her, drinking of her arousal. Her hands clenched as her sensitive body began to warm again, the ache returning to her belly. Instinct had her rocking her hips up, silently urging him to fill her.

He hissed out a curse and lunged to his feet. His amber eyes glittered dangerously in the dim light, an arousing contrast to his dark skin that glistened with his control. Control that quickly disappeared

as he hooked her knees over his elbows, spreading her open for him.

His eyes never left hers as he eased his cock into her sheath. Piper's breath caught with the intensity of the moment. He was in her heart, her soul, and slowly breaching her body. His struggle for control showed in his quivering muscles. Sweat beaded up all over his body, falling on her skin where they touched.

Then, he was inside of her, his shaft stretching her and nudging her cervix. Piper's eyes threatened to flutter closed, but she wanted to see him, soak in his love for her like a flower before the sun.

"My mate," he growled so deeply, Piper felt the words vibrate through her body.

"Yours," she whispered back, her hands finding his biceps, her claws digging into his skin. "Always yours."

As though that was the signal he needed, his muscles bunched. He glided in and out of her body in long, smooth strokes, his cock dragging along her inner walls with heavy precision. She panted. He growled and sped up. Their eyes never left each other during their primitive dance, each of them focused on giving their mate the most pleasure.

Piper stroked his lean hips, digging her nails into his flesh to urge him on, and he responded with a roar. Soon they were saturated with sweat, their bodies slipping and sliding easily until, with one last thrust that bordered on pleasure/pain, Connor came. The deep thrust and hot spill of his seed at the mouth of her womb made Piper's body twist with another, more powerful climax. They were locked together, his cock jerking in her channel, her muscles massaging his seed from him. Give and take, back and forth, the pleasure bounced between them.

In that moment, a ghostly wolf leapt from Connor's body while a transparent tiger leapt from Piper's. The two animals swirled around them in metaphysical form, scenting each other warily, eagerly. Then, with the last spill of Connor's seed, the animals merged, whirling between them like a tornado until they were both enveloped. Bonded.

Forever.

* * * *

Hours later, they lay on the floor of Connor's library. They'd never made it out of the room. Once they were bonded, the wolf and tiger wanted an affirmation, sending Piper and Connor into a whirlwind of lust that ended with both of them covered in bites and scratches.

Connor stroked his hands over Piper's lush body. She'd needed him in more ways than one. Her body had been dying without his male lust to sustain it. Naturally, he hadn't minded taking her yet again to assure himself of her restored health.

It was the strangest sensation to feel the bond stretching between them, and their animals enjoyed it just as much as they were. Piper's tiger would race down the bond to swipe at the wolf playfully, sending the wolf tearing down the bond to snap at her heels. They went back and forth until they finally cuddled near each other just as Piper and Connor were cuddled on his rug.

They'd been talking nonstop between bouts of lovemaking. She told him about her visit from the VPA and the *Survivor*-esque voting that had solidified her position in the streak. He'd explained what happened when he, Toby, and Prudence got back to Wolf Gap.

Piper lay draped over Connor's torso, her legs tangled with his, her fingers sifting through his chest hair. "The streak wants a lot of cubs," she told him shyly.

His body tensed. "What do you want?"

Resting her chin on her hand, she looked up at her mate. "I want your cubs."

His eyes closed, and he seemed to be counting.

Frowning, Piper poked him in the ribs making him jump. "Do you have a problem with that?" she growled at him in a tone similar to his own when he was angry.

Connor's eyes remained closed as he caught her jabbing finger. "No problem, kitten," he assured her. "I'm just trying to figure out how many would fit in that mansion of yours. I'm guessing you want to fill the house, right?"

She stared at him solemnly. A sly smile crept across her face. "Of course."

Quickly rolling her over and settling between her legs again, Connor leaned up to kiss her nose. "So I'm thinking we need at least fourteen cubs before you're happy," he told her as he trailed his mouth over her face and down her throat. "And I love to keep my mate happy."

Sighing deeply, Piper tangled her fingers in his hair. "You're doing a good job so far," she murmured with a smug grin on her face.

As Connor loved her thoroughly, Piper wondered if she should tell him they were already on their way to filling their home. She decided against it right then and there. He was doing such a marvelous job of keeping his mate happy after all.

Epilogue

One year later...

Piper opened the front door and squealed with happiness. With her five month old daughter on her hip, she leaned forward to buss Malachi's cheek. Clara, her daughter, clapped her hands on his face affectionately. The little flirt.

"Come in!" she invited the Halfling, stepping back to let him in. "Connor's at the store, but he won't be long."

She led him into the sitting room, putting Clara on the floor to play with her brothers. The princess, as she was called by her father, hadn't taken kindly to her brothers taking away her blocks. Kenneth and Anthony, also five months old, were still chortling together, no doubt plotting some new form of torture for their sister, but Piper let them at it.

Because of her and Connor's wereanimal sides, the triplets were advanced for five months, looking more like twenty month old toddlers. They were spoiled by the weretigers, their grandmother, grandfather, and aunts. Clara was already showing signs of being a great beauty with her tiny tiger stripes, flirting with every male in her vicinity from Malachi to Fallon to all the tigers. Anthony and Kenneth were sturdy with devilish ice-blue eyes like their father and seemed to know how to use them to melt any female's heart but their sister's.

"So what's the news?" she asked Malachi as she settled herself in a roomy chair.

He was a frequent visitor to the Shadow Claw Streak now that the Council had absolved him crimes against the Veil. Piper was relieved

her friend was no longer hunted by the Guardians. It hadn't been easy sitting on her hands while he was being chased by the GE's.

When she and Connor had been called in to testify, she'd answered the High Council's questions honestly and directly. It was intimidating to sit before the Aristus, or Council interrogator, and list why Malachi deserved to be freed. Bree O'Dell was a scary female when she was in work mode, and she'd fired question after question at Piper as though trying to trip her up. In the end, though, she and Connor had managed to convince Council that though Malachi hadn't been completely innocent in the past, he was deserving of a second chance.

Ever since, he'd made a habit of dropping in for a visit, usually with Fallon at his side. Her childhood friend was another regular at their home, and though he and Connor would never be best friends, they got along for her sake.

Malachi scooped up Anthony, who'd toddled over with a drooling smile. He nuzzled her son's neck before answering. "They're going to include me in the investigations," he finally said solemnly. "Lucian pulled a few favors and managed to get me a meeting with Grayson Snow. We talked, and I'll be working for the VPA in a consultant's capacity until the rest of Bianca's band is brought in."

Piper smiled. "That's great!" she exclaimed. "It's better than we'd hoped for."

He nodded, though he didn't seem as pleased as she thought he would. "I have a bad feeling though," he finally admitted when she stared him down waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"A bad feeling about what?" Connor said from the doorway.

"Da-da!" three little voices squealed. He was immediately overrun with toddlers all scrambling for attention.

Connor fell to the floor in an exaggerated manner the children thought hilarious and was promptly covered in babies.

Smiling at her husband with all of her love, Piper answered him, "Malachi thinks something's going to go wrong now that he's a VPA

consultant.”

“Do you need anything?” he asked the Halfling seriously while his fingers sought out his children’s tickle spots.

Malachi shook his head. “No, I’ll be fine. I just wanted to share the news with you two.”

“How’s Ruby doing?” Piper asked, quick to relieve the darkness that seemed to want to seep into her home.

Laughing loudly, Malachi shook his head. “Lucian doesn’t know what to do with himself now she’s four months along. He wasn’t around when she was pregnant with Dominic, and he never had to deal with an expecting Ruby,” he said maliciously.

Biting her lip, Piper shared a look with Connor. Now that the streak was more settled and secure, she’d made him an offer he couldn’t refuse the night before.

They would be looking to expand their own family in the next eight months. More children, more laughter, more tears of joy, and infinite love. They were bringing a new generation of hope to the Veil, something no one would’ve ever expected of a succubus-hating werewolf and the succubus weretiger hybrid who won him over.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danica Avet was born and raised in the wilds of South Louisiana (that would be somewhere around Houma) where mosquitoes are big enough to carry off small children and there are only two seasons: hot and hotter. With a BA in History, she figured there were enough fry cooks in the world and decided to try her hand at writing. For eight years she played at writing, but in 2008, she decided to get serious and began down the rocky road to publication.

Unmarried with no children, Danica is the lucky pet of a compulsively needy dog and two cats. The pitter-patter of little feet has been known to make her break out into a cold sweat.

Writing is how she gives the voices in her head a way out. They speak to her constantly wanting their stories told and she does her best to accommodate them. She writes paranormal romance and may eventually branch out to contemporaries. When she isn't writing, working, or contemplating the complexities of the universe, she spends time gathering inspiration from her insane family, reads far more than any sane person would want to, and watches hot burly men chase an oblong ball all over a field.

Also by Danica Avet

The Veil 1: *Ruby: Uncut and on the Loose*

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