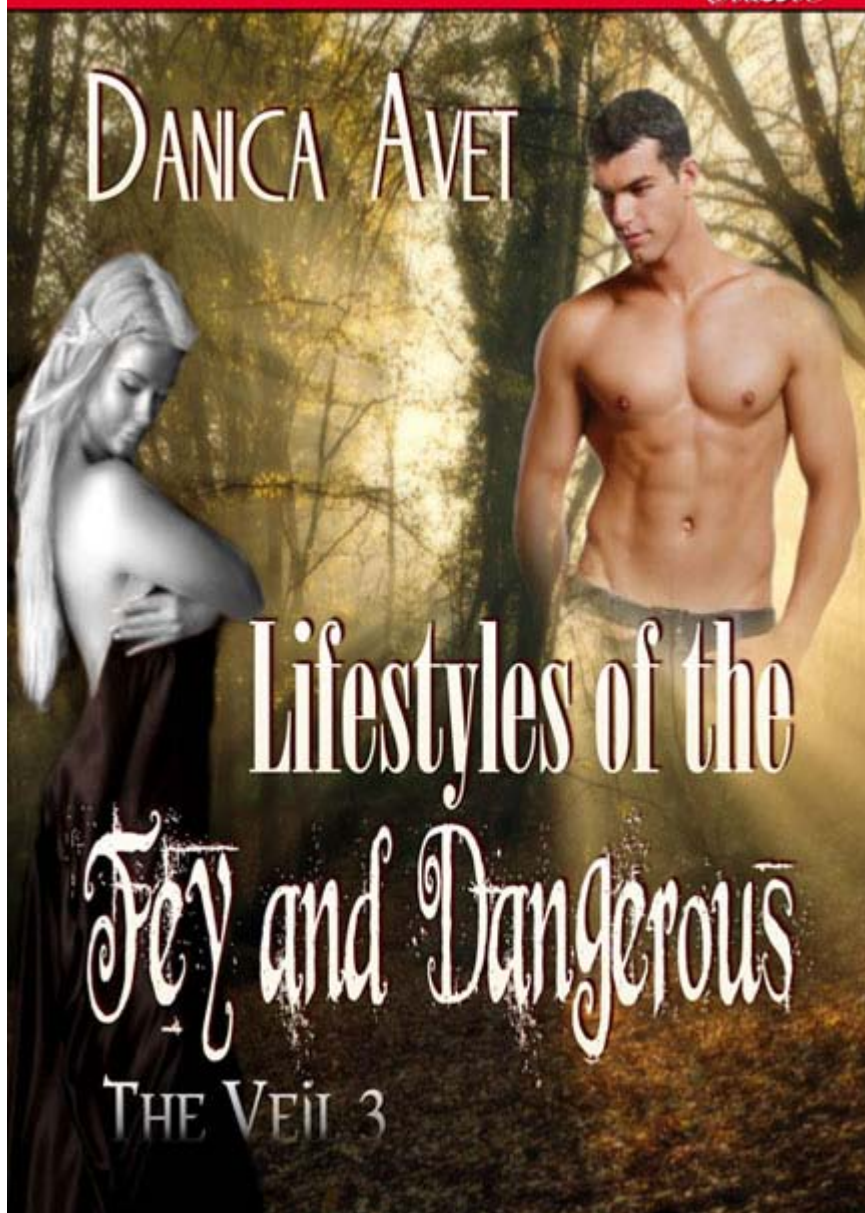


SIREN PUBLISHING *Classic*

DANICA AVET



Lifestyles of the  
Fey and Dangerous

THE VEIL 3

### The Veil 3

## Lifestyles of the Fey and Dangerous

It isn't every day a fairy gets an assignment with only one outcome: her death. As an assassin with the Eturian army, Noelani "Shade" Fayard has killed more than her share of traitors, but for the first time in centuries, she hesitates to take out her target. The Halfling marked for death makes her wonder what life would be like if it weren't for the blood staining her hands and soul. He makes her feel for the first time in centuries.

Malachi Cromwell, a former Eturian general, wants to reclaim his place in The Veil, not fall in lust or love. He knows better than to let his heart take the lead, especially when he discovers Lani was sent to kill him, just like she'd killed the very people who held his fate in their hands.

Can they overcome their distrust and bitter pasts to forge a future together?

**Genre:** Fantasy, Paranormal, Vampires/Werewolves

**Length:** 92,489 Danica words

# **LIFESTYLES OF THE FEY AND DANGEROUS**

*The Veil 3*

**Danica Avet**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.**  
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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

**LIFESTYLES OF THE FEY AND DANGEROUS**

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# DEDICATION

I'd like to thank God for giving me the strength and clarity to write Noelani and Malachi's story. This was a therapeutic exercise for me and helped me realize that not all hope is lost. When I wrote this book, I was an emotional wreck. I hated what I put my characters through, but in the end, I realized they needed to be lost in the darkness to enjoy the light. The same could be said about our lives. As tragic as things seem, there is hope for a better tomorrow; you just have to have faith.

Next I'd like to thank my mom for being such an awesome, sneaky fairy rogue on Elephant MUD. You were the most sweetly evil role-player I ever had the joy of trying to hunt! Phillip, Uncle B, Parrain, Patrick, and Adene, you made the game lively and interesting. If I sometimes wanted to call down a swarm of doom on your heads, I promise you, it was with love in my heart ;)

Finally, I have to thank the good people at Siren for taking a chance on me. And I must thank Jinger Heaston for all the lovely cover art!

I hope y'all enjoy Noelani and Malachi's story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

# LIFESTYLES OF THE FEY AND DANGEROUS

*The Veil 3*

DANICA AVET  
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## Chapter One

Blood painted the walls of the luxurious suite of rooms, a dazzling spray of red on white. It soaked into the lush carpets around her feet, squishing with her every step. If she looked at it sideways, it was almost beautiful in a macabre way.

*Mental note to self: vampires do not like having their throats slit.*

Things had gone perfectly until he had taken exception to his throat being cut. He'd run from her, his blood coating everything he came near, including her. She'd had to run after his big ass, and she hated running when she didn't have to.

She wiped her hands on her black jeans with a sigh. Damn vamps were always glad to play with blood unless it was theirs. Hypocrites.

Heaving a long-suffering sigh, she knelt next to her assignment. Her knife gleamed as she carved a small *S* into his cheek with clinical detachment. Standing again, she dissolved into the shadows, slipping from his suite without being seen.

The assignment was complete, and just like always, she'd won. Team Shade five hundred and forty-three, Team Target zilch.

The first rays of sunlight would soon be creeping over Siberia, which meant she needed to get away. The traitor's servants would



come to check on him before dawn, and when word got out, the other generals in the Eturian army would know better than to attempt a reconciliation with the Veil.

The hallway of the mansion was deeply shadowed, which made her escape easier. At one with the darkness, she darted through the maze of hallways and into the night air. She did love becoming one with the shadows. Not only was it cool as all shit, but it also protected her, which was all that really mattered.

Shivering in spite of her nearly insubstantial form, Shade cursed the assignment which had brought her to Evenkia, a district within Krasnoyarsk Krai, Russia, in the dead of winter. The turncoat she'd just eliminated lived in the middle of nowhere, which she supposed was a good thing since no one would be around to see her leaving.

Crisp moonlight strengthened her even though she kept to the deep darkness of the night. Swift as an arrow, she shot from shadow to shadow until she reached the thick forest south of the mansion. The vampire's guards never suspected her presence, talking in soft Russian as they patrolled the estate.

Once she was far enough away to avoid detection, Shade manifested into her solid form, wings unfurling behind her. Taking a deep breath of the freezing night air, she continued moving in the shadows. It would do no good to be caught by humans out hunting. Silence greeted her sensitive ears. The nocturnal animals were wary of her presence, which was fine by her. She wasn't up to tangling with a tiger or bear tonight.

Once she'd put enough distance between her and the accidental bloodbath behind her, she stopped. Peering around at the circle of ancient trees, she called forth her portal. She hated traveling through the suckers, but it was quicker than flying by human transport or her own wings.

An oval of swirling mist appeared before her. Stepping through, she clenched her teeth as she was hurtled through time and space. Her hair whipped around her face and neck, stinging her skin. With a loud

*pop*, she fell out of the wormhole of chaos and into the serenity of her conservatory.

Catching herself before she landed on her face, Shade took a moment to catch her breath. Portals were a pain, but once she caught the scent of gardenias and felt the warmth of her south Florida home, she accepted that sometimes the end justified the means.

The darkness of night settling calmed her. She sauntered through the conservatory, petite hands stroking the flowers that were her only solace. If her handler knew just how much pleasure she took in this indoor garden, he would first mock her, and then try to beat the tenderness out of her. The thought caused her fingers to curl as she removed them from the petals of a rose. Her handler was a first class bastard who wanted all of her love for himself.

Shade snorted at the thought. For her handler, love and hate was the same thing, which meant she gave him exactly what he wanted. She continued to the doors leading to her library. The smell of flowers was abruptly extinguished with the soft snick of the doors closing behind her. Silence greeted her as it always did.

Home. Prison and sanctuary, all rolled into one.

She ignored the dust and near emptiness of the rooms she walked through. She barely lived here as her assignments took her all over the world, so there was little need to decorate. And there was no way in the nine hells she'd actually clean. She might not be a noblewoman any longer, but a lady had to have standards. Her bedroom was on the far end of a long hallway and it was there she headed.

With precise, controlled movements, she removed the black T-shirt coated with the vampire's blood. Heavy steel-toe boots were kicked across the room, swiftly followed by her blood-soaked black jeans.

If every assignment went the way tonight's had, she'd have to go shopping. Again. Gods knew she hated shopping, which was why she only did it every ten years. Wearing nothing but a bra and panties, she entered the miniscule bathroom attached to the bedroom.

Turning the shower to its hottest setting, she finished stripping before she stepped under the punishing heat. She kept her mind blank while waiting for the water to warm her body. There was no use thinking about the assignment now. What was done was done. The vampire would never share his knowledge with the Veilerians, and she was that much closer to furlough.

*Mm, furlough.*

Just thinking of the short rest she was soon due to have made her knees weak. Cursing under her breath, she caught herself before she fell. Weakness was not tolerated in an assassin, had been beat out of her over a hundred years before, but she still experienced it in little bursts.

Brutally scrubbing her skin raw, she removed all marks of the vampire's blood, revealing the muted glow of her fairy skin. She never allowed her glamour to drop. It had been one condition of her terms of service—she was never allowed to reveal her true appearance. To do so would betray her heritage. And no doubt land her on a hit list in every dimension known to the Veil.

That was fine with her. It wasn't like she had anything to be proud of or go back to. Her parents were social-climbing felons who had no problem using their only child's fears and affections against her. Not that she felt anything but disgust for them anymore.

Right before her full transition, her parents had invited a "special guest" for a meal. In those days, Shade had been known as Noelani and she'd foolishly thought the Shadowland king, Leofric, was joining them for dinner. She'd dressed in her most stunning gown, had her hair woven with fresh ivy, and allowed her skin to glow its brightest.

Scoffing loudly at her stupidity, Shade clenched her hands into fists and squeezed her eyes shut. The demon lord who'd come to dinner had signified the beginning of the end of her life as Noelani Fayard. Her parents had left her alone with him, letting him charm her with his fawning attention and talk of the good she could accomplish.

Noelani had refused his offer, not wanting to dirty her hands with work. She'd been raised a noble. Work was not part of her upbringing.

Shade pressed her palms into the tiles in front of her, trying to force the memories from her mind, but they persisted, coming at her like a swarm of bees. When she'd refused the demon lord, Wikolia and Thomas Fayard had told her the Assassins Guild was offering a handsome finder's fee for them if she went with Luther.

The remembered pain and humiliation set her teeth to grinding. That same day, she'd been packed off to the Earthly dimension to be taught death. Her parents had their money and forgot all about her. She kept tabs on them through gossip and never once had they stopped their endless partying and search for pleasure. The day after she'd left, an announcement had been made in *Skado*, the dimension the Veilerians called the Shadowland, that Noelani Fayard had died of moon sickness. Shade snorted loudly. Her parents were bastards just as much as her handler was.

Forcing the old hurts and her parents' coldness down, she shut off the shower, grabbing a towel off the rack and drying herself with brisk efficiency. There was no room in her life for regrets and resentment. Sarcasm, death, blood, and more sarcasm? Yup, she had those in spades.

She dressed in a loose pair of yoga pants and a tank top. Pulling a brush through her waist-length hair with rough strokes, she tugged at the tangles caught in the silver strands. Her long locks were her only concession to vanity. When she'd first been given into service as an assassin, Luther had shaved her head after using it as a weapon against her, all as part of her training. It had taken more than thirty years to reach its current length, but the lesson was never forgotten.

Shade was a tool in the war against the Veil. Her only purpose was to erase key members of the Veilerian army to give the Eturians a better toehold in the human world. Countless males and females had died by her hand, her soul the only part of her that carried the stain of

her deeds. Those stains were nothing when compared to what Luther would and could do to her if she defied him.

*Not thinking about that...because I'd like to actually sleep at some point in the next century.*

The silence surrounding her suddenly felt heavy. Pulling her hair back into a loose ponytail, she hurried through the house to the only luxury she allowed herself—a high-tech stereo system with speakers in every room.

Hitting the play button, a throbbing bass thumped through the house, making the floors vibrate. A dark, growling voice began to sing, and the silence was banished as if it had never existed. Her eyes closed in pleasure. She sighed.

She loathed silence almost as much as she did Luther and her parents. Silence gave her conscience a platform to taunt her, to play her sins before her, and drive home her solitude. Her hands fisted over her eyes. Regret would never make up for what she'd done in her life.

*Don't think about it, you stupid bitch! This is called downtime for a reason.*

Growling softly, she turned up the music. Lying on the floor, she let the heavy metal reach into her soul to ease her. When she used to speak with her fellow assassins, she'd learned they all had some mechanism to ease them. In days long past, she had tried every one of them, but once rock and roll emerged, she'd found it. Some human had once said rock and roll was the tool of the devil. Well, she was living proof of that. She thrived on the music since it was the only thing keeping her sane.

Curling on her side, she sighed in relief. Finally, peace.

Once more in complete control of herself, she set the playlist before heading to the kitchen. With Mudvayne growling and screaming in her ears, she poured herself a glass of orange juice. She stood before the fridge with the door open. She'd have to venture out for more of the magic juice, she thought as she gulped it back.

Like all fairies, she couldn't become drunk on human alcohol. Juice, though, was an entirely different story. Something about fruit hit even the burliest of fairies like a punch in the stomach. Her own stomach growled loudly. She needed food, not juice. Restraining herself from chugging the bottle of orange juice in the fridge, she instead pulled a family-size frozen lasagna from the freezer.

Like the rest of the house, the kitchen wasn't much to look at, but it was functional, which was all that mattered. As Mudvayne gave way to Sepultura, she preheated the battered gas oven and put the pan in.

Busying herself with mundane tasks, she could forget about the assignment she'd just completed. She never spoke of her targets as people. She wasn't that cold. Yet. In another hundred years, she would be, but for now she clung to that small distinction. She found a bag of chips. Grocery shopping was definitely in her future. Standing over the stove, she ate the entire bag.

The hair suddenly stood on the back of her neck. She reached into the drawer next to her where she kept a stash of throwing knives, reflexively arming herself while putting the chips on the counter. Shade knew it was Luther. He was the only being her wards were coded to accept as a visitor. Others were fricasseed nearly a hundred yards from her dwelling.

Luther appeared in her kitchen with a soft *pop*, indicating he'd traveled to her via portal. Raising one eyebrow at him, she waited for him to speak.

In a deceptively relaxed pose, the seven-foot demon gave her an appraising look. She knew what he saw, what others saw. At barely five feet tall, Shade was extremely short for a fairy, her height and petite bone structure giving her the deceptively frail appearance. It didn't take them long to discover she was stronger and more lethal than she looked. Shade had once thought about using her glamour to make herself appear larger, more frightening, but had discarded the idea. Instead, she used her innocent looks and small size to her

advantage against assignments and anyone who dared try to hurt her. Because nothing said scary like a pygmy fairy who kicked ass.

“Shade,” Luther said in greeting, his deep voice rumbling over the raucous guitars. He glared up at the speakers above his head. “How do you stay sane listening to such noise?” he asked, snapping his fingers.

The music shut off mid-riff, and her ears rang with the absence of sound. Panic clawed at her, but she ignored it. “Who said I was sane?” she asked softly.

\* \* \* \*

Leaning against the wall near the stove, Luther allowed his gaze to travel over his underling. In his nearly five hundred years of existence, he’d never seen such a spuriously innocent female. In her early years, he’d used every means available to him to break this little fairy, and he’d enjoyed each one. His body remembered her softness, but once she stopped caring about what he did to her, all lust he felt for her died. He almost mourned her loss of warmth even while he acknowledged his success in turning a pampered fairy into a perfect killer.

She stood with her hands at her sides. Her solid green eyes betrayed no emotion, no intent, although Luther knew if he made any sudden moves, she’d disappear in a heartbeat, but not to attack. She couldn’t. He patted the vial of blood hanging from a leather cord around his neck with a smile.

The beautiful mane of silver hair he’d once used to hold her still as he slaked his lust was pulled back, exposing the face that reminded him of what she had once been. Innocent and charmingly naive. Shade wasn’t classically beautiful, her features too angular for true beauty. It was her large green eyes and full lips that made males lust for her. He knew her real skin was the soft, glowing gray of a dove’s breast. Her glamour hid it, dulled the glow, making her pale.

“Was there a purpose to your visit?” she asked him when he continued staring at her, because it was just creepy the way he watched her.

Abruptly Luther straightened. Her body relaxed in preparation of his attack. “I have an assignment for you,” he said instead of coming at her.

She tried to judge his mood. He seemed on edge and frightened. The only one who scared Luther was his master. She’d never met the Eturian Overlord, but she’d seen Luther when he came back from visiting the fire elemental, and the damage done to the demon had been extensive.

“I just came off assignment,” she told him blandly instead of asking him what their master wanted. She wasn’t in the mood for a fight.

He scowled at her, his scarlet skin darkening as his anger began to boil. “You will do as you’re told, Shade,” he informed her, his black eyes gleaming with malice.

His words flowed over and around her. Shade she had become and Shade she would always be. Once, she’d had affection for the demon in front of her, but his cruelty and ambition had ground all tender emotion to dust. He knew, as she did, that the only reason she obeyed him was the vial containing her blood suspended around his neck. Otherwise, she would love to carve her whole name in his skin and cut off some very sensitive bits of his anatomy beginning with his tongue.

“This will be your final assignment,” Luther finally said as silence stretched between them. He paused as though waiting for her to express her relief or some other emotion.

He raked a massive hand through his short black hair. Objectively, Shade knew he was a prime demon male. She’d once lusted after him, catered to his every whim, loved him. Hadn’t she heard a human say love could quickly turn to hate? They were correct. If she could



express her hatred for him without fearing for her life, she would. She would literally ooze the emotion.

Frustration settled on his handsome face and he snarled, “Well?”

Shrugging, she leaned back against the counter behind her. “Details.”

“Malachi Cromwell, demon-vampire Halfling, roughly four hundred years old. Lives somewhere in South Louisiana. You are to erase him in the bloodiest manner possible. He is a traitor to the Overlord. If you fail, you will be tortured,” he finished with relish.

Shade raised an eyebrow at him. “So?”

He leaned forward until he was hovering over her. His hot breath bathed her face, the familiar scent turning her stomach. Black eyes studied her closely and something fierce she didn’t recognize burned within them. It was almost affection, but it was quickly swallowed by hate.

“You won’t be tortured and released like the other times,” he whispered softly. “The Chief would do the deed himself.”

In spite of her nerves of steel, she almost shivered in fear. She held it back, raising her chin at her former lover. “And?”

He chuckled darkly, grazing her cheek with one black claw. “My beautiful Shade, what we did together would look like love when he was finished with you.” He stood, curling the hand he’d touched her with. “If you succeed, you’ll go into direct service of the master. It is an honor to serve him. Do not fail,” he ordered, backing away from her slowly.

“How long do I have?”

He paused, tilting his head to the side, studying her with those fathomless eyes. “Not long.” Luther snapped his fingers again and the music came back on. He gave her a smile that was beautiful and horrific. “Drown your conscience, sweet Shade. Otherwise you will suffer as no other has suffered before.”

She slumped against the counter when he was gone, hands shaking with primal fear. The sensation of a trap closing in on her

made her throat close. She was going to die. Succeed or fail, her life was over and she knew it.

## **Chapter Two**

Malachi Cromwell pondered mistakes as he entered his great room. The simple mistakes he'd made could be waved away with an apology as long as he learned from them, which he had. Complicated mistakes—say, like, joining up with an evil army and fighting against the forces of good—weren't erased so easily. He'd made so many mistakes, both complicated and simple, he wasn't sure if there was any way out of the mess he'd made of his life.

"You are troubled," his oracle, Pet, said, head tilted to the side.

As customary, Pet was covered from head to toe in thick black fabric, only a slit for its eyes relieving the cover. In the early days, he'd treated Pet like a tool, a weapon for his use against the Veil. These days, Pet had been utilized to help him redeem himself in the eyes of the very beings he'd once hated.

Throwing himself into his chair, he studied the toes of his boots. His conscience told him to release Pet. Freeing it would be one large step towards redemption, but selfishness kept him from doing something so drastic. He needed Pet's foretelling abilities to stay one step ahead of his pursuers. These days, he was drawing fire from both sides, with unforgiving Veilerians wanting his head and betrayed Eturians wanting his heart.

"Being popular sucks," he commented sardonically.

"The Veilerians will accept you eventually," Pet told him, no emotion coloring its voice. "The Eturians have already put a plan in motion to kill you." It paused, blue eyes flickering like a television rapidly changing channels. "Shadows," it whispered.

Malachi shivered against his will. He had no idea of Pet's sex, though he was beginning to suspect it was female. Females were notoriously hard to understand, and Pet was no exception. He'd held Pet captive for over three hundred years, but it offered no complaints, had made no attempts to escape. He hadn't even cared as long as its predictions came true, but now he was bothered by what he'd done.

Malachi knew his change of attitude was a result of his new relationship with his half brother. He'd hated his younger brother, hated knowing Lucian was accepted by their mother and the Veil while he was reviled as an abomination.

Remembered pain had his hands clenching on the arms of his chair. The Veil, the community of non-humans that lived on the fringe of human society, had no use for half-breeds. Before he'd defected to the Eturi, Malachi had been pressed into service of the Guardian Guild. A bitter laugh welled in his throat. Halflings hadn't been good enough to treat with respect, but the full-blooded Veilerians had put them to use as guards, enforcers, and any other low-level position they could.

Now that Lucian was on the High Council, those old regulations and beliefs were finally dying. His brother had also made it possible for Malachi to attempt to re-enter Veilerian society. The Council had granted him time to show them all how serious he was about returning as a lawful citizen of the Veil. Was it any wonder he felt a pang of remorse at his treatment of Pet? His brother was helping him achieve his dreams while he kept another captive. Sick with the realization, Malachi glanced at Pet.

"You are thinking of releasing me," Pet said suddenly, its voice holding some strange emotion.

"Do you want to be released?" Malachi asked curiously.

Pet was silent for a long time while he pondered what he would do without its guidance. If it wanted to be freed, he would do it. He owed Pet that much, if not a lot more.

"I am a danger to you," it reminded him.

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I know.”

“I could lead your enemies to you.”

Scowling, he sat up in his chair. “I bloody well know what you can do. Do you want me to fucking let you go or not?” he finally roared.

Pet looked at him, head cocked to the side. If he could have seen its face, Malachi would’ve known what it was thinking, but all he saw were those blue eyes. “Yes. Yes, I think I would like to be free,” it finally answered him.

Heart pounding, Malachi approached the invisible barrier that kept Pet confined. He’d had the magical cage constructed eighty years before. The warmage who’d built it had given Malachi the spell to bring it down, even though he’d never imagined releasing this valuable weapon in his own private war.

Malachi pondered how strange life was. Just six years before, he’d torn himself away from the ranks of the Eturi to aid his brother and his brother’s mate. Since then, others had come to mean more to him. Werewolf, succubi, vampires, Amazons, and even a demon or two had found their way into his inner circle. They didn’t know of Pet’s existence, but he instinctively knew they wouldn’t accept his reasons for confining it. His family and friends were good people who believed in freedom. Some had even given up their heart’s desire to achieve it. How could he keep this being who’d served him so well locked up?

His hands were shaking when he came to stand before Pet. The invisible wards gleamed violet as he began tracing runes on its surface. Pet watched him silently as the markings glowed black before disintegrating.

Mouth dry, Malachi paused before drawing the last symbol. His eyes met Pet’s as he traced it out. He hoped he wasn’t making a mistake. So much rode on his shoulders. If Pet killed him, Veilerians would suffer.

With an audible snap, the wards broke and the barrier fell. Pet continued to sit still, head tilting left and right as though it was looking for proof that the cage was gone.

Malachi held his hand out to Pet. It stood, black cloth falling to the floor without revealing skin. It was several inches shorter than him, its head barely reaching his chin. One gloved hand reached out, accepting his assistance.

Pet's tiny fingers curled around his, so small and delicate, yet he could feel the strength in her fingers, the power she held within. He guided it away from the chair it had sat in for centuries and gave Pet balance so it could step off the platform its cage had been built upon.

Malachi let go of Pet's hand as soon as it was standing on solid ground. "I will give you money and a ride anywhere you wish to go," he began, stopping when Pet shook its head.

"I have no wish to go anywhere," it said, tilting its head to look at the room as though seeing it for the first time. "I will stay here. You would be lonely without me."

There was no delight in its words, nothing to indicate how it felt about his loneliness, but Malachi couldn't help his relief. Yes, he would be lonely without this odd creature. It had been a constant in his life for centuries even though he'd denied needing anyone or anything for so long.

"What—" He paused, feeling like a fool for not asking this question before. "What are you?"

Pet walked around the room, picking up snuffboxes and figurines, studying them intently. He had a sense it was amused and curious about the world outside its cage. Shame nearly suffocated him. He'd done this being a severe disservice in the name of his cause. It had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he'd taken advantage of that.

No longer, he swore as he watched it touch the brocade backs of the Queen Anne furniture. He would see to it that this creature,

whatever it was, would want for nothing and have freedom for all of its existence.

“I am—” It paused. “I am a girl.” Pet told him solemnly.

Malachi felt a bark of laughter escape him. “What’s your name?” he asked, amused in spite of the burn of his shame.

“You call me Pet.”

“I know I call you Pet, but what’s your real name?”

Her hands were clasped together, and he sensed she was trying to remember something. “Tiamat. I was once called Tiamat,” she whispered, head bowed.

Frowning, Malachi wondered why the name sounded familiar. Shrugging it off, he decided to do a little research later. “What are you, Tiamat?” he asked again. He needed to know what race she was. Perhaps her people were looking for her.

Her hands lifted and began waving around as though she were trying to explain. Finally, she raised her hands to the ceiling, whispering softly. Water began to drip from the stones. Shock held Malachi immobile. With another whisper, the water evaporated as though it had never been.

“Water elemental?” he whispered to the still figure across the room from him. His heart thundered loudly. He’d been holding a water elemental captive for three hundred years and she’d never attempted escape? “Why didn’t you ever try to leave? Try to hurt me or my people?” he asked her in complete bafflement.

Elementals were the strongest beings in the Veil. They were the physical embodiment of their element, able to call upon it at will. That this water elemental had never tried to escape or kill him for his actions was a puzzle.

Apparently it was a puzzle to her as well since she shrugged her tiny shoulders. “I felt...safe here. You are a kind father,” she mumbled, her shoulders hunching down.

A kind father? Malachi felt his eyes bulge. She thought he’d been kind to her by locking her away and using her for so long? Agitated,

he rubbed a hand over his face. Jesus, he didn't need this kind of confusion on top of everything else that was going on.

"Master," a soft voice called on the other side of the closed door.

When he'd left the Eturi, he'd given his personal guard and followers the option of leaving to remain with the Eturi, or staying with him. To his surprise, the majority had remained. Calling out to Hatot, the demon who'd once been his most prized scout, Malachi commanded him to enter without taking his eyes from Tiamat.

Hatot opened the door, his eyes focused on Malachi, until he almost ran over Tiamat. Eyes wide in fear and revulsion, Hatot sprang back.

"Milord!" he cried, looking about frantically. "Should I call the warmage? Has this creature harmed you?"

"Calm down, Hatot," Malachi answered sharply. "Tia is no longer our captive. She is free to come and go as she pleases. Set up a room for her on the second floor. See that she has everything she needs."

Tiamat's head tilted to the side, studying Malachi solemnly, though she said nothing.

"What do you need?" Malachi asked the demon impatiently as he looked between him and Tiamat in confusion.

Hatot jumped as though forgetting he had come to his master for a reason. "The Amazons are here," he told Malachi with a grumpy expression.

He sighed. "Make that room ready for Tia and tell Isola and Saga they may join me." He dismissed Hatot with a flick of his finger, the demon running from the room. No doubt he would spread the word of Pet's—Tia, Malachi corrected himself—release. His followers had always feared the odd creature, and to see her walking freely would cause more chaos.

"I have to see the Amazons, but I'd rather they don't know about you," he told Tia as he turned back to her.

She inclined her head. "Yes, that is best. Isola is too curious to keep news of me silent," she answered, surprising him with her



knowledge of the females. He sensed she was amused again. "I know things about your life that you could never imagine, master. I will wait here for Hatot."

Malachi opened his mouth to ask her more, but was interrupted by the sound of two female voices talking loudly on the other side of the door. Shooting Tia a speculative glance, he hurried across the room to intercept the Amazons.

He found them in the hallway, discussing the paintings that lined the corridor. Saga, at nearly six feet tall, was in the lead, waving her hands as she talked about texture and color. Her brown hair was pulled back in her customary ponytail, revealing the purity of her profile. Isola, or Izzy, was slightly shorter than her mentor and acted more like a frat boy than an Amazon of nearly a hundred years of age. Her dark hair had been worked into a series of complicated braids that fell to her shoulders.

They were beautiful, lethal women. The fact that he was now related to them through marriage meant he would never harm them no matter how much they irritated him.

"Malachi! Your eyebrows grew back!" Izzy exclaimed impishly as she caught sight of him. She smirked. "So when are you going to attend another movie night with us? It's boring at Ruby's place."

Malachi bowed to them, manners overcoming his desire to strangle the Amazon. "I can promise you I will never watch another movie with your tribe again," he told her through clenched teeth.

Lucian, his half brother, had requested Malachi's help with a friend and offered his home as base. Not seeing the danger beforehand with his sister-in-law's hoydenish relatives staying there, he'd allowed the women to talk him into watching *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. If he had known they were going to spike his drink and shave off his eyebrows while he was incapacitated, he might've stayed at the hotel in town instead.

Saga grinned at him, correctly reading his body language. “Don’t be a spoilsport, Malachi. You’re family now. We get to torment you for eternity!” she gushed rapturously.

“I’m overcome with joy.”

The two women spluttered with laughter, leaning on each other at his flat tone. “Who would’ve thought the big, bad Malachi was so much fun?” Izzy asked, once she had herself under control. “You’re a riot!”

Rolling his eyes at the women, Malachi directed him further down the hall to his study. “What are you doing here?” he asked them once he was seated behind his desk.

Sprawled in the chair across from the desk, Saga shrugged one ivory shoulder. Malachi whole-heartedly approved of the clothing Amazons wore. Since they were always training or readying for battle, they kept to the basics: leather halter, leather pants, and moccasins. The females were sexy and dangerous, two qualities he had experienced firsthand when Lucian and his mate, Ruby, had first come together.

“Laura, Kate, and Delilah ask about you,” Saga told him with a smirk. The entire Blood Maiden Tribe took every opportunity to remind Malachi of his capture by the three females and the sex-a-thon that ensued while he was imprisoned.

“That’s good,” he murmured. He wasn’t sure how he felt about the females. They had been extraordinarily attractive and hungry in bed, but after so many centuries of sex, it held little appeal now.

Izzy pouted as though she had been expecting a better reaction. “We’re here to pick you up, actually.”

One of his eyebrows rose in question. As far as he was aware, there were no plans to reconnoiter tonight. The Amazons had offered him their help in locating and taking in Eturian generals to Council. That alone kept Malachi from wanting to toss the entire tribe into the Mississippi. They were aiding him in his struggle for redemption, and for that he could forgive them nearly anything.

“Where are we going?” he asked hesitantly. Though he gave them plenty of leeway, it was never a good idea to just follow them blindly.

Saga shot him a dark frown. “You are such a man,” she growled, her teeth bared at him.

He blinked. “What’s with the hostility?” he asked in confusion.

“Saga, babe, he’s got too much testosterone running through that yummy body to remember things like birthdays,” Izzy said chidingly. She shook her head in pity at Malachi. “It isn’t your fault you’re a male. At least I don’t think it’s your fault.” She sat back in her chair, staring at the ceiling in deep thought. “Do you suppose babies pick what they want to be? I mean, I’m sure if someone had asked me if I wanted to be male or female, I’d have chosen female without question. So maybe it is your fault you’re male, Malachi.”

Malachi shook his head, trying to clear it of her usual twaddle. “Birthday? Whose birthday is it?” he asked, trying to bring the discussion back to more sane waters.

Saga continued glaring at him, though she’d taken out her knife and was testing the blade with her thumb.

Izzy shot him a glance that suggested he was dumber than dirt. “You know. A little guy, about yea high,” she said sarcastically, her hand hovering about three feet above the ground. “Cute, smart in spite of being male, and loves you to death?”

Horror crashed over Malachi. He grabbed his phone to check the date. Sure enough, it was December twelfth. His only nephew Dominic’s sixth birthday was today.

“Shit!” he shouted, jumping to his feet. “Shit, shit, shit.” He hurried around the desk to the safe behind a painting of former VPA Chief, Ormond Steele. Swinging it open, he saw the brightly colored present just where he’d put it a month ago. He breathed a sigh of relief. His nephew had quickly become his reason for wanting redemption as a Veilerian more than acceptance as a Halfling.

Dominic was all that was innocent, his bright green eyes the only ones that looked at Malachi without recrimination. It was Dominic

who fueled the justice Malachi sought from his former Eturian colleagues. They would tear down the Veil without thinking twice about the innocents who would suffer should their presence in the human world be discovered. Science and the unexplained did not mix well. Malachi knew the first to be tested in the name of “science” would be the children who couldn’t protect themselves.

“So you didn’t entirely forget,” Saga said when he turned around with the present. She sounded both relieved and depressed. When he shot her an inquiring glance, she explained. “I’m glad you love our nephew so well, but I was really looking forward to kicking your ass.”

“I’m sure my ass is glad my brain remembers important things like my nephew’s birthday,” he said wryly. “Shall we go?”

\* \* \* \*

The party didn’t start until well after dusk because the birthday boy’s father was a vampire. It wouldn’t have been conducive to a good time for Dominic if his dad burned to a crisp at Best Burger. The venue was one of Dominic’s favorites, so his mother, Ruby, had paid an arm and a leg to rent the entire building for a few hours.

Malachi leaned against the dilapidated building, watching Dominic run around with his newest best friends, the Griffin triplets. Piper, the triplets’ mother, and Ruby sat at one of the tables eating a mound of food and discussing their pregnancies. Both females glowed with the inner light mothers-to-be shared. Their mates, Lucian and Connor, stood to the side alternately watching their children and their women.

It was an idealistic scene, one which Malachi both treasured and resented. The Amazons were there in full force, though their usual brashness was toned down in deference to the children running around their legs.

“Uncle ’chi!” Dominic shouted as he dodged Anthony and Kenneth made a grab for him. Running full speed ahead, the birthday boy rammed straight into Malachi’s groin.

Groaning breathlessly, Malachi caught his nephew before he did any more damage. The Amazons who witnessed the blow smirked. Dominic ignored his aunts and wrapped himself around his uncle like a monkey. Anthony and Kenneth latched onto Malachi’s legs, begging him to walk with them.

Giving into their demands, he let the boys ride his feet as he walked across the outdoor eating area. Dominic’s little-boy scent wafted up to his nose, nearly bringing tears to Malachi’s eyes. The fledgling vampire had burrowed a place into his heart, as well as the little Halflings on his feet.

Seeing Clara, the other third of the Griffin triplets, standing on the side with big tears in her eyes, Malachi swooped to pick her up as well. With all four children attached to him, his balance was precarious, but he couldn’t have been happier. Their warm little bodies were healing him, bit by bit. The sheer joy they took in life made him that much more determined to keep their world safe.

“Got your hands full there,” Connor, the triplet’s father, said with a quick grin.

Clara let go of Malachi to go to her father without a backwards glance. He sighed. “She’s already learning how to love ’em and leave ’em.”

“Shut up!” Connor gasped, a father’s fear of his daughter’s sexual maturity brimming in his eyes. Clara snuggled into her father’s neck, batting her eyelashes at Malachi.

“Face it, old man. That little girl’s going to run you in circles,” Lucian said as he joined them.

“Daddy!” Dominic shouted, throwing himself into Lucian’s arms.

Malachi winced, rubbing his ear. “How long is he going to be in the shouting stage again?” he asked as he lifted Anthony and Kenneth into his arms.

“It’ll be a while yet,” Kali announced as she joined them. The massive drag queen was wearing heels that put her nearly at seven feet tall. As the southern region’s only Oracle, Kali enjoyed a close friendship with the Veilerians who lived in and around Cypress Point, Louisiana. “Then, once they’ve stopped shouting, the new additions will be starting. It’s a lovely cycle, isn’t it?” she smirked as she left them to join Ruby and Piper.

“Kids, the cake will be out soon,” Ruby called as she hefted herself to her feet.

Lucian immediately headed for his mate, hugging her and urging her back to her seat. Malachi shook his head slightly as he set the boys down. He would have never believed his half brother could be such a family man, but the evidence was before his eyes.

The tightness in his chest increased. For so long, he’d stood on the outside of the circles that made up families. His own father had taken off before Malachi had known him, while his mother had ignored his existence, only tolerating him for Lucian’s sake. Being the bastard child of Liv Ravenswaay had come with benefits, yes, but there had been so much more Malachi had needed than a roof over his head and food in his stomach.

Connor clapped a hand on Malachi’s shoulder. “It’ll happen when you least expect it,” the werewolf warned before heading to ease his own mate.

He moved away from the party, easily finding the shadows for a little space. He had nothing to offer a female. His reputation was in ruins, he had no family legacy to pass on, and he was on a dangerous mission that could lead to his death. What female would want to join her life to his with so much at risk?

Rubbing a hand on the back of his neck, he stared through the iron bars surrounding the playground patio. Cypress Point looked peaceful under the beams of the full moon. Like most things in life, though, Malachi knew that peace wouldn’t last. His actions against the Eturi

would bring danger to his door and the door of his brother and friends. It was only a matter of time.

His neck tingled, and he felt awareness creep over him. Someone was watching him. Glancing into the deep shadows draping the street, he saw nothing. There was an implied threat in the gaze watching him, but also a hint of curiosity, as though the being wasn't sure what to make of him.

"Malachi, we're cutting the cake!" Ruby called out, her voice filled with laughter.

Whoever was watching didn't plan to do anything now. The threat had lessened somewhat, though the curiosity remained. With one last sweep of his gaze around the street, Malachi turned to join his family in the birthday celebration.

## Chapter Three

Shade stood cloaked in shadows, watching her target mingle with the rest of the Veilerians. She'd almost started when he moved right in front of her. For a short moment, she worried he might have seen her, but he hadn't. 'Cause, yeah, she was that good.

Drifting along the darkness edging the building, she found a spot to study him better. He was a handsome male. Unlike most of the beings she dealt with, he was of average height though he still towered over her. Dark hair curled over the collar of his shirt, the silky strands gleaming in the muted light. His face was masculine without being brutal in its handsomeness. He had equally dark eyes that had peered through her with such desolation she'd almost thought he shared her misery.

*Impossible, he's a traitor to the Eturian cause.* Not that she believed in it, but it was her duty to rub him out.

She'd researched him thoroughly before heading to Cypress Point. Malachi Cromwell had nearly killed his own brother during his days as an Eturian general. His triumphs against his brother had led the Overlord to grant him numerous troops and resources, but he'd thrown it all away to join up with Lucian. Shade sneered at the thought of the brothers working together. How Lucian had ever forgiven Malachi for his past deeds was beyond Shade, but since taking over as *Oculum*, or Council spy, Lucian had lobbied for absolution for his half brother.

"And this present is from your Uncle 'chi," Lineage Chieftain Ruby said loudly to her son.



The Chieftain had always been a creature of curiosity for Shade. To be able to touch any being and know their place in the hierarchy in the Veil was a power beyond belief. If she had been sent after the Chieftain, Ruby would now be working for the Eturi.

Shade watched as the fledgling vampire ripped open a brightly colored present. The boy looked at his uncle with a gasp of joy before throwing himself at him. Something hurt in her chest. She felt short of breath.

“Thank you! Thank you!” the boy shouted, squeezing his uncle’s neck with great enthusiasm. “Look, Mom! It’s Rock Band!” he shouted as he ran back to the table with the present.

The other children crowded around him, as well as some of the adults, everyone oohing and aahing at the present. Malachi stood, his face softened by a smile.

Her breath caught in her throat at the warmth in his dark eyes. Was that love, she wondered. Did he actually love someone?

She tilted her head. He was a curious male. His exploits were legendary, yet he was at a children’s party and seemed completely at home.

The *Oculum* stepped away from the party to answer his cell. The smile on his face died at whatever was being said to him. Closing the phone with a snap, he gestured for Malachi to follow him.

Shade stuck close to the shadows, following them as they found a quiet corner on the patio. Stationing herself above their heads, she waited to find out what was going on.

She normally didn’t spend so much time learning about a target before completing the assignment. This time, however, she had even less to look forward to than usual. Once Malachi was dead, she’d be the Chief’s toy for the next twenty-five years.

“What’s going on?” Malachi asked sharply. Shade could almost taste the tension in his body.

Lucian looked around before answering. “That was Bree,” he said in a harsh whisper. Bree, Shade knew, was another Councilor. “She

said they just got a call from Tura, Evenkia. It seems someone killed Yakov Strezinsky earlier today.”

She almost gasped in surprise. Why would they care about an Eturian traitor?

Malachi swore. “That’s the fifth one to die this month. The bastards are getting rid of them before I can find them,” he rasped. His hands clenched into fists. “They have to know what we have planned.”

Shade wanted to ask what they had planned but couldn’t risk being revealed. It would never do to alert the *Oculum* or the target that the Eturians were on to them. Shade was one of the Eturian’s best operatives because she was one with the shadows, clinging to the night, and no one ever noticed shadows until they were surrounded by them.

She rubbed the invisible insignia on her left arm as she listened to the two males arguing. They never mentioned specifics, but she was led to believe that Malachi was working with Council willingly. He was a traitor, just as Luther and the Overlord suspected.

“At least ask Grayson for some Guardian Elites for protection,” Lucian urged, his voice throbbing with urgency.

Shade could see the *Oculum* was worried for his brother, but the obstinate look on Malachi’s face showed how little he cared. “I don’t want any bloody GE’s shadowing my every step, and I sure as hell don’t want to deal with the bastard who holds their leash,” he said bitterly.

Their voices got lower, leaving her to hear nothing but hisses and curses. Needing more information, she leaned closer, almost losing her perch in the shadows. This close, she could smell Malachi’s scent. Spicy with a hint of citrus, like the most exotic of fruits, it wrapped around her like a blanket. Her mouth watered.

She shook her head. Damn, she’d missed the first part of their whispered conversation.

“...sending someone to you whether you like it or not,” Lucian was saying angrily. “My son loves his uncle too much for me to take a chance with your friggin’ life, so if you have too much pride to accept help, at least think of Dominic.”

Malachi swore softly, his eyes glowing red in the shadows. Shade shivered in reaction. “Fine. Send someone, but I’m not going to stop until I get all of those bastards.”

“Lucian?” the Chieftain called from the other side of the patio.

Giving Malachi a look of warning, Lucian punched him on the shoulder before going back to his mate. Her target stood below her, his head lowered in thought. She could kill him right now. He was somewhat hidden from the rest of the party, and he was in a vulnerable position with his neck exposed. With just one chop of her hand, she could snap his spinal cord before he could call out.

That would never work, though, since his death wouldn’t be bloody enough for Luther. Not following direct orders was enough to send her to solitary confinement after a lengthy torture session.

Shade bit her lip, staring at the male so intently his head rose as though he sensed her presence. She held her breath as he looked left and then right.

“Who’s there?” he asked in a harsh voice, eyes glowing red in warning.

Of course she didn’t answer. She wasn’t stupid enough to give herself away, but her heart gave a hard throb at his words. He was talking to her, though he didn’t know it.

He raked a hand through his hair when nothing but silence answered him. Swearing softly, he went back to the party with a false smile. Shade noted a number of Amazons watched him with hunger though none approached him. They laughed and joked, but didn’t take a step to do anything about the hunger they felt for him.

Pressing a shaking hand to her belly, she frowned down at it. What was wrong with her? She’d seen the worst the world could offer and here she was feeling something for a target. A target! Eyes

flashing wide at the realization, she looked around frantically. If Luther or any of her colleagues knew she was beginning to feel...

She shook her head. No. She felt nothing. This job required finesse. That was the only reason she was studying her target.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi drove home from the party in a nasty temper. He barely registered how fast he was going, just roared through the night. Someone was sabotaging his efforts to redeem himself in the Veil. His hands clenched on the steering wheel. Strezinsky had been a hard vampire to trace. Malachi had spent three months alone unraveling the mess of information in the logbook Piper's predecessor had kept. The code in the first half of the book hadn't been difficult to break, but piecing together the information had been downright grueling.

That little logbook had yielded the names of seven Eturian generals as well as useful dates, but those people were being picked off one at a time before he could get to them. Growling in frustration, Malachi slammed the heel of his hand on the steering wheel. He couldn't believe Strezinsky was dead!

The scenery flew by as he took his frustration out on the road. His Maserati GranTurismo S responded with a throaty roar, snarling down the empty highway. Malachi felt his face split into a wide grin in spite of his bad mood.

Cars were his one great weakness. They were a joy to drive. As long as you took care of them, they took care of you. His garage was filled with vehicles he'd owned over the years. He never got rid of a single one, treating them like members of the family he never had until recently.

Having released a little of his anger, Malachi eased up on the pedal. So he'd been denied the pleasure of turning in five of the Eturian generals. There were a lot more out there. All he needed to do was find the perfect informant.

With that issue somewhat resolved, Malachi turned his mind to the feelings of being observed he'd experienced all night. None of the others had mentioned anything, so either he was the only target of the attention, or he was paranoid. Considering most of his feelings of paranoia through the years had turned out to be people out to kill him, he was willing to bet someone had watched him tonight.

He frowned at the highway. The only problem was he hadn't been able to sense anything of the individual. That was decidedly odd. His demon senses would have picked up its scent, while his vampire abilities would have picked up the watcher's wavelength, except there had been nothing. It was as though the person hadn't actually been there.

A push of a button on the steering wheel called his home.

"Yes, master?" Kahal said into the phone, her voice smooth as silk.

"Transfer me to Tiamat's room," he ordered, drumming his thumbs on the wheel.

He heard clicking as the call was transferred to the suite he'd given to Tia. He hoped the elemental knew how to use the phone.

Another click and he heard screams and gunshots ringing through the car. "Jesus! Tia! What the fuck's going on?" he yelled as he shifted into a higher gear. The house was being attacked. Son of a bitch!

"Hm? *Abba*?" she answered, sounding sleepy.

"Tia, what the hell is going on? Who's attacking? Are you hurt?" He shot the questions out just as quickly as the gunshots he heard. His heart pounded with fear.

She mumbled something in a language he recognized as being ancient, but didn't understand.

"Tia. English. Speak English, kid. What's going on?" he pressed for information, wishing he hadn't driven. He would've been back at home much sooner if he had teleported. Fear and worry had him breaking out in a cold sweat. Before, he'd never have been this

concerned for the creature known as Pet, but now she was a real being to him and he couldn't bear for her to be injured in his fight.

"Abba? Why are you calling?" she asked him in a surprisingly sweet tone.

He was tempted to shut his eyes but didn't want to swerve off the road. "First tell me what's going on."

"Hatot told me to watch a movie called *Died Hard*. He said it would help me sleep."

*Die Hard*. She was watching a movie.

Malachi pulled the car over, gravel spraying as he took the shoulder faster than safe. Throwing the car in park and leaving the engine running, he got out to pace around it. Deep breathing techniques he'd learned during his years as a Guardian Elite cadet helped him calm the frantic pounding of his heart and clear the shaking from his hands.

Returning to the car, he could hear McClane say, "*Yippee-ki-yay, motherfucker*."

"Tia, turn the television down," he prompted her.

"I am sorry, *Abba*, but Hatot was correct, the movie helped me to sleep. I am feeling much more refreshed," she told him, and he would've said she sounded cheerful, except her voice was as flat as ever. "I don't know exactly who was watching you. The visions do not come to me all the time."

Since she'd answered the question he was calling to ask, Malachi sighed. "That's okay," he said as he put the car in gear again. "Why do you keep calling me ABBA? Last time I looked, I wasn't a quartet of singing Swedes."

She was silent for a long time. "I call you 'father' by my native tongue," she whispered softly before hanging up.

Well Godsdamn, Malachi thought as he reached the outskirts of Lafayette. The little elemental managed to unman him with a single sentence.

Warmth invaded his chest, a sensation he only felt when he thought of Dominic. It appeared the elemental had snuck into his affections over the last couple of centuries. A smile twisted his lips. He supposed having been told he was going to die every other day had some effect after all.

\* \* \* \*

Shade lingered around the *Oculum*. She needed more information on her target and she felt the stirrings of a plan trying to develop.

“Luc? What’s going on?” Ruby asked softly when the children were out of earshot.

The *Oculum* raked a hand through his long hair, before giving his mate a rueful smile. “I have to put someone on Malachi. Another one of his targets was eliminated today.”

The female weretiger Shade learned was named Piper leaned forward. “Are you kidding me?” she asked incredulously. “Which one?”

“Kitty-cat, don’t get yourself worked up,” her mate, Connor, advised softly. He pressed a tender kiss to her brow.

Smiling at her mate, Piper softened. “Fine. Which one did they get?”

Lucian looked around, making sure the children were occupied. The adults all leaned forward. “Strezinsky.”

“Son of a bitch!” Piper shouted, jumping to her feet.

“Mommy! You’re not supposed to say bad words,” her daughter’s chiding voice said from the slide.

The Amazons snickered at Piper, whose face turned red. Shade tilted her head to the side. The weretiger was embarrassed, but not humiliated to be corrected by her daughter. It was a strange sight to behold. Piper gave a little laugh and shouted an apology to the children.

Shade watched the smile melt from her face when she turned back to the adults. “Strezinsky was one of the big names on the list. Malachi was convinced the vamp had a network of lesser generals working under him unlike the others.”

She was puzzled. These civilians acted as though it was their job to help the target. It made no sense to her and she desperately needed to understand. This job was making her second-guess herself.

Pulling herself back to the conversation happening below her, she heard Ruby ask who was going to watch Malachi’s back.

Lucian’s face darkened in thought. “I’d love to send Isra Valentine, but she’s in high demand. I’ll have to make do with one of the recruits, I suppose. It’s better than nothing.”

Shade narrowed her eyes. She had heard of Isra many times in the last few years. It was said the Guardian Elite was going to be the next VPA Chief. The female’s praises had been sung all over *UnVeiled*, but it mattered little to Shade if Isra had somehow saved a house full of orphaned fairies. Power bred cruelty, and this Isra would be no different.

Leaving the party, Shade swept along the night air as she looked for a spot to summon her portal. She needed to get home and begin planning her infiltration of the target’s life. There was more going on than Luther had told her, and for once, she wasn’t going to be a mindless tool in the hands of her superiors. She wanted to know why her target was looking for the Eturian generals, but most of all, she wanted to know why he made her heart pound.



## Chapter Four

Shade cringed as Celine Dion's voice echoed throughout her house. It pained her to listen to the heartfelt words knowing that love was a crock of shit. Stuffing several black shirts in a duffle bag, she conceded that some people believed they were in love. Seeing the *Oculum* and his mate interact was proof there was some strong emotion between them, but she knew better than to call it "love."

She let the resentment and anger build. Preparing for a job was the only time she allowed emotion to rule her. The CD of sappy, sugary love songs was her means of reaching for the negative feelings she fed on, shaping them into a ball in the pit of her stomach. Pressing a hand to her abdomen, she took a deep breath. There were no touchy-feely emotions in her repertoire.

Shade paused in the act of grabbing her knife kit.

Feelings she'd long suppressed with Luther's not-so-gentle help welled inside her. She needed to get a grip before she lost all sense of herself. If she survived this damned assignment, she'd be shipped off to the Overlord's keep unless she could find some place to hide.

Shade snorted loudly. She knew better than anyone that hiding from the Overlord was an exercise in futility. If only she had someone to watch her back, someone she could trust, the unbidden thought crept into her brain before she could stop it.

Her wings burst from the slits on her back, unfurling with a hiss. Black, wispy with an iridescent sheen on the underside, they arched away from her body, draping around her like a shroud.

She had no time for kindness. Her life was on a timetable. Luther would call her back if he knew what she was planning to do. He

would call her back anyway, once he realized the target hadn't been eliminated immediately.

Clutching her hands to her temples, she fought to push the pain and images of what he could do from her mind. She'd had nearly a century to get over it, get over him, but the pain was always there ready to bring her down. The images flowed faster and faster like some kind of gruesome movie in her head.

"Stop!" she screamed, reaching out to grab something to end the mental torment. Her fingers closed around an object, a knife.

She wouldn't cut herself. She wasn't crazy, but gripping something in her hand made her feel better. The glint of the blade, the familiar leather grip calmed her. Then a sudden image of Luther when he'd been kind to her flashed through her mind. Searing pain lanced her chest, causing her to drop the knife. It fell. Right into her thigh.

Instant pain removed any thought of Luther and her stupidity from her mind. Gasping in relief, Shade looked down to see the knife embedded in her thigh. Shit. Another pair of pants ruined. In her normal, detached manner, she jerked the knife out in a quick, smooth motion. Great, just great. She'd grabbed one of the iron knives in her kit, not silver. Blood blossomed, dripping down her leg.

Stripping off the pants, Shade walked to the bathroom ignoring the twinges of pain accompanied by the movement of her muscles. Placing the knife on the counter, she unearthed her first aid kit, looking for gauze.

"Godsdamn, I'm stupid," she mumbled as she propped her foot on the lid of the toilet. Cleaning the wound, she saw she'd managed to bury the knife deep enough to see bone. "Fuck," she grunted as she began swiping at the wound.

Iron could be deadly to fairies unless they built up a resistance to it like she had. Being punished for fifty some odd years straight with iron shackles, knives, pokers, and whatever other devices Luther used had given her a strong resistance. The blood continued to well, flowing freely. She didn't smell skin burning, and though her leg felt

like it was on fire, Shade thought she might've taken the knife out in time.

Holding a gauze pad to the wound, she quickly wrapped her leg. That would have to do until she could moonbathe. Calmly, she set about cleaning up the blood, mopping it off the floors, sponging it up from the cabinets, though the metallic scent lingered. As much as she hated cleaning, blood was not a good decorating idea.

She finished packing her bags, keeping her mind carefully blank. Five pairs of black jeans joined the T-shirts along with black socks, and several more knives. She added a case of throwing stars, a bundle of throwing knives disguised as hair pins, and a retractable sword. The duffle bag bulged with weapons, but she paid no mind. There was no telling where this foolish plan would lead her.

Celine had given way to Whitney Houston by the time she could go outside to moonbathe. Removing all of her clothing, she walked through the house to the conservatory. She left the door open so she could continue listening to her preparation music.

Petals, soft as velvet and powerfully fragrant, brushed her skin as she moved through the aisles of flowers. Shade didn't allow herself to be tempted into returning the caress of the flowers. She didn't want to be soothed. She needed to keep her edge sharp and deadly. The flowers seemed to bobble sadly as though knowing her plans. Not that she really believed the flowers understood her moods, but she...very nearly cared for them, as much as she was able.

The door to her tiny backyard beckoned. Stepping through the threshold, she was immediately surrounded by the glorious beams of the moon. Shade raised her hands to the sky as though to embrace it. She felt its energy pouring into her body. Fairies had to recharge their energy under the pale power of the moon otherwise they would weaken quickly, their magic failing them at inopportune moments.

Shade's wings, which she'd left open, unfurled to their full width, catching as much of the beams as they could. The gentle energy flowed into her body, filling her up. It brought no peace, though. It

never did. The moon might be a beautiful form of nourishment, but Shade always saw it as a cold mother, looking down at her children with detachment. Tilting her head back to stare at the orb in the sky, she knew she patterned herself after it. Distanced. Cold. Empty of life, but capable of so much.

She remained outside for hours, soaking up as much of the moon magic as she could. Glamour was easy magic for her, but it would be even more difficult this time since she also had to modulate her voice. The wound in her thigh was nearly closed, though the scar would remain. Iron-inflicted wounds never vanished, as evidenced by the numerous marks on her body.

Dressed again in black jeans and a black T-shirt, she was almost ready. Walking to the small box on her dresser, she pulled out three strips of black leather. She didn't want to put them on. They reminded her too much of the shackles she'd once worn, but it was because of those shackles she had to wear the bands. Swiftly wrapping one around the iron burn around her throat and one around each of her wrists, she took a deep breath. It wouldn't do any good for her target to see the markings.

With her bags in hand, and the torment in her head quiet, Shade cut off Diana Ross in mid-note as she sang "Endless Love." The last echo of the singer's voice bounced around the living room. The silence encroached, scorching her eardrums. Love. Who the fuck needed it?

\* \* \* \*

Malachi sat in his study the next morning, poring over the logbook. There had to be something he missed, some piece of the puzzle just begging to be found. He sat back with a sigh. He wasn't finding anything. Lucian had given the book to him when Council decided to allow his assistance. The book had belonged to a lower-ranking member of the Eturian, a vicious weretiger who'd lived as

more animal than human. Filled with names, dates, and code, the book was their only tangible link to the Eturi.

A knock sounded at the door. “Come in,” he called across the room, frustration lending his voice a growl.

Hatot stood in the doorway looking shocked. “M–master, there is a Guardian here,” he whispered.

Gritting his teeth, Malachi growled out, “Send them in.”

Godsdamn Lucian! His damned brother was determined to protect him, which was laughable since Malachi was more lethal than any Guardian. He’d learned at the knee of the previous VPA Chief, and his years with the Eturi had given him an even greater appreciation for danger. No Guardian would be able to match him in skill and sheer determination. But he could use the Guardian as a research assistant, he thought grimly. Maybe he needed a fresh set of eyes on the evidence. Satisfied that the Guardian would be utilized in such a way, he forced himself to relax.

His genial smile was ready by the time the Guardian’s shadow appeared in his doorway. The tiny figure seemed to dance into the room, steps touching the rugs so lightly it looked as though they were floating. Long, light-colored hair was pulled into a ponytail, revealing a pointed chin, high cheekbones, arched silver eyebrows, and a pair of wide green eyes. He fought for air. She was gorgeous. Her skin was dove gray, glowing slightly. What the hell was she?

“You’re a fairy!” Malachi exclaimed with surprise. The female jumped slightly, her full lips parting.

He stood to welcome her, his earlier anger forgotten. He was seized by some strange compulsion to hover over her, especially when he came around the desk and saw she only came up to his shoulder. It was rare for him to meet females who weren’t his height or greater. The Veil was filled with women who stood on their own two feet and were comfortable with it. This female, this little fairy, looked as though she wanted to run as he walked towards her.

She stood her ground, though, jerking her little chin up to meet his eyes. The green was a startling shade against her gray skin. Malachi corrected himself—her skin wasn't gray. It was almost tarnished silver. He wanted to touch her to see if it was as cold and hard as the metal, though he strongly suspected it would be soft as down.

"I'm Malachi Cromwell," he said, bowing slightly, trying out his most charming smile. Females always trembled when he flashed this particular smile, but to his surprise, she looked aloof and unimpressed. "You're a Guardian?" he asked with a playful smile. He was going to get a reaction out of her. Somehow.

"Yes," she said simply.

Her voice sounded like the rasp of velvet brushing skin. He shivered, and then frowned. There was no emotion in her voice. No inflection to clue him in to what kind of fairy she was.

"I didn't know there were fairy Guardians," he tried conversationally. Ah-ha! A reaction at last.

"How do you know I'm a fairy?" she challenged, crossing her arms over her chest.

He approved of the pose since it pushed her plump breasts together. Heat coiled in his belly. He knew his body was giving off the scent of lust, a scent all females were drawn to. Except she looked completely unaffected. What had she asked him? Something about fairies, he thought as his gaze traced across her face. Fairies. Oh, right.

"You were using glamour, I take it?"

Malachi tried not to smirk. Fairies were masters at deception, but he was one of the few Veilerians who had the ability to see through their glamour. It pissed them off to no end that he could see to the real them. Just as it apparently pissed this little bit of a fairy off.

He gave her another smile. "Glamour doesn't work on me, I'm afraid. Although I'm not that upset since your beauty should never be hidden behind a mask," he uttered smoothly.

\* \* \* \*

Shade almost gaped at him. He could *see* her? Shit, he could see her! This wasn't good at all. She struggled to contain her welling panic. Would he know exactly what she was other than fey? She would have prayed, but she had no faith in a higher power. She'd have to handle this herself, except how should a female react when a handsome male flatters her? Her fingers twitched as she battled the urge to curl her hands into fists.

"We all hide behind masks," she answered, keeping her voice from wavering with sheer force of will.

He smiled again, a dimple creasing his cheek. She wanted to stare at it, but she could sense he was used to females being in awe of him. She could see why. He had a magnetic personality and an irresistibly charming smile. Shade suspected her target very rarely failed to do exactly what he set out to do, and at this moment, he was trying to charm her.

"Please, call me Malachi. And you are?" Again with the dimple.

"Lani Brown," she said, extending her hand.

She didn't want him touching her, much less shaking her hand, but it was what business associates did. She'd seen that much on television. The name she used had been well established when she first became an assassin. When he checked her background, he'd find she had a clean record with the Guardian Guild. It was all bullshit, but the cover was one of the best, implemented back when they'd had an insider on Council.

She should've expected her target to be different. When her hand was presented in a businesslike manner, he grasped it in his much larger, warmer hand, bringing it to his lips. The strange sinking sensation she'd experienced the previous night returned sevenfold. His lips, chiseled yet velvety soft, brushed the back of her hand. Heat seared her skin, darting up her arm, and down her body. Heart pounding and mouth dry, she pulled her hand away.

“Beautiful,” he replied, not stepping away from her.

They stared at each other silently. Shade felt awkward, as though her skin had suddenly shrunk a size too small for her body. She forced herself to remain still and unaffected. She didn’t need any more complications in her life. This male had been sentenced to die by her hand, and he would if she didn’t find him worthy of a reprieve.

Feeling as though she were smothering, Shade stepped away from him. Her breath was coming a little faster from his proximity and the thoughts inside her head. She felt like her sanity was hanging by a very thin thread. Anything could snap it.

\* \* \* \*

“May I see your certification?” Malachi asked the silent fairy.

They’d stood so close he could smell her gardenia-scented soap, but she’d said nothing. She’d stared him in the eye, her green gaze curiously flat and empty until she stepped back. She intrigued him, but he didn’t have time for females. If she was going to be of any help to him, they needed to get started.

He watched as she pulled a wallet out of her back pocket. She didn’t carry a purse, something he hadn’t seen often with females. The wallet flipped open to reveal the standard issue Guardian Elite identification badge. It agreed that she was Lani Brown. Her qualifications were listed as Weapons Master, Intermediate Magic User. He looked for the impossible-to-replicate Guild’s seal and found it. She was legit.

“Thank you,” he handed it back, careful not to brush his fingers against hers. Kissing her hand had sent the heat in his belly spreading outwards and he didn’t want any repeats. He stepped away from her, waving to a chair. “Please, sit.”

Keeping her in his sights, he walked to his own chair. He studied her across the desk, taking careful note of the thick leather band around her neck and wrists. He’d been around plenty of fairies, and



they usually abhorred anything around their pulse points, but this one seemed comfortable with the bonds. They gave her a BDSM vibe he found sexy as all hell.

“Did Lucian tell you what’s going on?” he asked to get the ball rolling.

“You’re searching for Eturian generals.”

“Right. I have a deal with Council to find and turn as many generals as I can over to them. Someone’s been killing them before I can find them.”

She was quiet, her green gaze flickering over him as though judging him. Malachi stiffened. He’d had more than enough of being found wanting by the Veil. If this little fairy thought she could make him feel like less because of mistakes he’d made—

“Do you have any leads?” She cut off his train of thought with the logical question.

Her expression hadn’t changed one bit. Lucian should have told him he was sending an ice queen. This fairy was as cold and alien as he’d once thought Tia was.

“What I have is coded so tightly I can’t unravel it,” he admitted, his own voice carrying a bite of frost. Damned if he was going to give her the satisfaction of being the only one unaffected. Apparently unaffected, he amended ruefully. “I managed to come up with seven names. Five of those people have been executed in the last month. I need to apprehend the remaining two and find more.”

“Who are the last two?”

Wanting to snap at her for being so icy, Malachi forced himself to remain calm. Opening the logbook to the last place he’d decoded, he read the names. “Omar Pascal and Sharon Roberts. Pascal’s last known whereabouts was Tombstone, Arizona, and Roberts was last seen in London.” He flipped the book closed again, leaning back in his chair with his hands laced behind his head in an easy posture. “So? What do you think?”

“Let me see the book,” she replied with easy calm.

Raising an eyebrow, he leaned forward to toss her the book. The fairy had quick reflexes as she caught it in a smooth movement that had the book flipped over as soon as it settled in her hand. He watched her as she looked over the pages of indecipherable markings. If he trusted, he would've allowed someone else to give breaking the code a try, but he didn't trust anyone.

"Can you read it?" he asked impatiently. She'd been silent for a good five minutes while she looked at the page.

He almost swore she grimaced, but the expression came and went so fast he suspected he'd imagined it. When she did raise her head, her face was inscrutable. "I can read a little of it. It looks like a mixture of Fey and Cuman. Whoever wrote this had information about a meeting in February of next year. I'll see what else I can find out, if you like."

Malachi stared at her incredulously. His heart pounded. She'd picked up that much from studying the book for five minutes? Had he ruined his mission by being too stubborn to ask for help?

"I was a trained Guardian and I couldn't decode that. Are they using a new training technique now?" he asked, half-kidding.

She just studied him with a distant expression. "You could say that."

"What's Cuman?" he asked curiously, repressing the urge to shiver. Lani was a strange mix of fire and ice. He didn't know whether he wanted to get closer or stay away, and his dick didn't get a vote.

"A Turkish language that's supposed to be extinct," she answered promptly. "Whoever wrote this part of the book is either very old or knowledgeable."

"What do you mean whoever wrote this part of the book? It's all written by one person." He frowned at her.

She shook her head slightly. "Three different people wrote this book. The first part was written by one person, this section here." She

paused to show him a few pages. “This was written by someone else. The end of the book is written by yet a third person.”

Anger heated his blood. “How do you know that?” he demanded sharply.

She betrayed no hint of fear or unease. “The handwriting is similar, but the word usage is different, the looping of the vowels less angled, and the code itself changes to something more sophisticated.” She handed the book back to him, face carefully blank.

Astounded to have missed such a thing, Malachi flipped through the book, finding the last page of what he’d deciphered and the first page of what Lani had deciphered. Flipping back and forth, he frowned at the pages. He couldn’t read the code to see if she was correct about the word usage, but the handwriting was just the slightest bit different. How had he missed this, he thought in despair. He’d wasted months because of his pride.

“Do you want me to stay here or leave?” Lani asked him in a quiet voice.

Raising his head, he pinned her to the chair with his gaze. “You’re not going anywhere.”

## Chapter Five

Lani didn't take exception to Malachi's harsh demand, simply asking him where she should store her gear. Inwardly cursing himself for being pigheaded and not asking for help earlier, he led the tiny Guardian through his three-story home. She didn't appear impressed by the luxurious furnishings or awed by the priceless artifacts. If anything, she appeared bored. Did she dislike beings of wealth and influence?

Malachi would understand it if she did. New Age Guardians didn't join the guild for the money. Theirs was a life of danger and sacrifice. At one time, he'd been dazzled by it against his will. Nearly four hundred years ago, Halflings had had no choice but to join. Since Lani was a full-blood fairy, he suspected she'd had no other option left except joining the Guild. A hundred and fifty years of her life would be spent protecting Veilerians and their businesses, if she lived that long.

He wanted to look at her but concentrated on his steps. He'd never met someone so cold. Her manner, her personality, and her very presence carried a distinct chill. It was as though emotions never touched her. It was odd and discomfiting. He couldn't fight the compulsion, sneaking a peek at her as they rounded the second landing.

Lani wisped alongside him like a shadow, making no sound. She didn't look at her surroundings, as though nothing would dare touch her. The servants they passed didn't even look at her, almost as though she wasn't there.

He stopped in front of a room on the second floor at the complete opposite side of the house from Tia. He could put Lani on the third floor, but that was reserved for his use only.

“This will be your room,” he told her as he opened the door.

The room was decorated in shades of blue and white. When he’d purchased the mansion two hundred years before, he’d had the usual antebellum furnishings, but had recently hired a fairy to redecorate his home. As a result, it was warmer, more inviting. Not that Lani seemed to appreciate it.

Upon entering the room, she set her bulging duffle bag on the floor. He’d tried taking the bag from her, but she’d refused to give it up. When he heard the distinctive clink of metal, he knew it held weapons, and considering the impressive bulges in the canvas, she’d brought an arsenal. Had Lucian told her how dangerous it was to be around him?

Lani walked over to the window across from the door, sparing the bed a disinterested glance. Malachi knew the window provided a spectacular view of the back gardens which were currently in bloom. Entering after her, he did his best not to look at the bed. Even though she seemed to be frozen solid, something urged him to touch her, to melt and mold her to his body. Yeah, looking at the bed was a bad idea.

“If there’s anything you need, just ring the bell,” he told her in his best dispassionate host’s voice. “The bathroom is through there.” He pointed out the discreet door tucked in the corner of the room.

She turned around slowly to face him again. The sunlit window behind her emphasized the curves of her body, which were now permanently singed upon his corneas.

“I just ask that you don’t poke around. I have several servants and guests staying here,” he continued. Was Tia a guest or a servant, he wondered. “I’ll give you time to get settled.”

When she said nothing, he nodded shortly and exited the room. Gods help him, but she was the strangest female he’d ever met!

\* \* \* \*

Shade looked at the large bedroom she would be staying in. It was pretty, she supposed. Not really her style, as it had actual furnishings in it. She almost smiled. Plush carpets cushioned her steps as she walked to her bag. She didn't bother unpacking her clothes since she wasn't sure how long she'd be staying at her target's home.

It was strange to be given shelter by the being she was supposed to kill. A sharp pain in her chest made her wonder what was wrong with her. She'd never experienced as many physical pangs resulting from her long-denied emotions as she had since seeing the target. He was bad for her, she decided as she chose her weapons. Strapping three daggers to her thighs, unmindful of the pain from her self-inflicted wound, she stood and strapped the retractable blade to her back.

The male was problematic. She could still smell his spicy scent hovering in the air. The strange heat in her belly grew into an ache. Shade frowned down at her body. What the hell was wrong with her? She pressed a hand low on her abdomen. She felt strangely swollen and achy at the apex of her thighs. Then she remembered...

She remembered the feeling from her time with Luther. At one time, she'd exulted in the wickedness of her body's response to a male, but those days were long past. How could she feel something similar for the man she had to kill? Especially since his death meant she would survive to become the Overlord's toy?

They were going to kill her. She knew that just as surely as she knew the Overlord would make it hurt worse than anything she'd ever felt in her life. It would be long and drawn out, perhaps with little rest periods, but it would be a slow death nonetheless.

She could come clean with the target. He was working to redeem himself in the Veil. He'd once been an Eturian general—he knew how

their superiors worked. Surely he'd forgive her and help her find sanctuary?

Shade scoffed loudly, closing her eyes. The target would slice and dice her himself regardless of the lust in his eyes. But death on her terms was a lot better than anything she'd get from Luther or the Overlord. If she could, she'd kill all three of them just to gain a little peace of mind. Luther and his lord would be easy, but she had a suspicion the target would be harder to eliminate.

"Kill him," she said out loud, turning the words over in her mind.

"Kill whom?" the target asked from the doorway. "I hope you don't mean me."

Shade whirled around. She hadn't expected him to return so soon. "You didn't knock."

One silky, dark eyebrow rose. He looked thoughtful and dangerous. "I waited downstairs for you for two hours. You didn't show up, so I came to see what was keeping you," he answered her easily. "I did knock, but you didn't hear me."

Shade felt the blood leave her face but remained unwavering in her defensive stance. She'd lost two hours?

"I apologize," she responded in a clipped voice.

"Who are you going to kill?" The target Malachi's voice was clearly suspicious, although his eyes betrayed nothing.

"It was a phrase," Shade told the target. She would keep his name out of her mind. "I thought a friend nicked one of my knives."

He studied her carefully. She knew it was a lame story, but it was the best she could do.

Finally shrugging and releasing her from his intense gaze, the target left the room, leading her downstairs. He wouldn't stand in front of her, a tactic she used herself, never letting anyone at her back. They were on the landing when she heard what sounded like a car crash coming from one of the rooms further down the hall.

Seeing her attention directed that way, the target shook his head. "Just one of my guests watching television. Your room is soundproof,

so you shouldn't hear anything," he told her, smiling charmingly. His white teeth flashed in his dark face, drawing Shade's gaze. The smile died, but the intensity remained in his eyes.

Her mouth felt as dry as a desert while her hands had begun to sweat. What peculiar phenomenon was this? Since it was unknown, she decided to ignore it for the moment. "What are we doing tonight?" She made sure her voice was as deadpan and flat as possible, hoping to distract the target from her reaction to him.

If anything, his eyes darkened even more, a tint of red creeping into the irises. It was like watching a lunar eclipse. Beautiful and alien. Logically, she knew demons' eyes turned red when they were feeling high emotion, and the crimson swirling in the target's eyes suggested he was feeling something. But what?

White teeth sank into his bottom lip, slowly drawing the flesh into his mouth before releasing it. Shade's eyes were glued to that moist tissue, riveted by the sheen. Her previously dry mouth watered. Her mind registered the changes in her body absently while her focus remained on the target's mouth. She'd never really noticed anyone's mouth before unless she was ordered to cut out their tongue, but even then, she'd never studied one with such close scrutiny.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi felt his cock swell as those green eyes stared at his mouth as though trying to figure out what he could do with it. If she gave him even the slightest encouragement, she'd find out firsthand. Her own lips were flushing with color, the storm-gray flesh deepening to slate, though her eyes remained solemn and cold. So her body felt something even though her mind remained untouched. Never having cared much about a female's mind, he was startled by the sense of grumpiness the thought roused in him.

Those green eyes rose to meet his, granting him a brief glimpse into endless confusion before going blank again. The urge to move in



closer and kiss her rushed forward. He barely restrained the impulse. They had work to do, he reminded himself with one last lingering glimpse of her lips.

“I want to show you where you’ll be working,” he sighed, breaking the strange connection. “This way.”

He continued downstairs with Lani moving silently beside him. She was so eerily quiet he wondered how she acted in bed. No, don’t think about bed, he ordered his libido. Except the thought lingered. Was she silent and intense, or was she free with herself?

The puzzle occupied his mind as they stepped into the great room. Now that Tia was no longer imprisoned in it, Malachi decided to put it to better use. He’d ordered all traces of Tia’s former cage removed, and the spot next to his throne was eerily bare.

The fairy shifted next to him, sending a waft of gardenia-scented air past his nose. His cock twitched and he had to clench his hands to keep from grabbing her. She worked for him, which meant she was off-limits. For now.

## Chapter Six

Shade watched the target carefully. The room he'd brought her to was large, reminiscent of a medieval great hall. The furnishings were antique and very well kept.

"This is where we'll be working," he told her conversationally, waving her further into the room. "I'll bring the logbook by later. For now, I want you to look at the assassination files. We need to know who this killer is and who they're working for."

Shade paused, head tilted to the side. He was giving her the task of tracking herself. It took copious amounts of willpower not to laugh out loud. How ironic.

She nodded, but couldn't resist adding, "Although this seems like a waste of time since it's most likely the assassin is part of the Guild."

To her surprise, the target shook his head. "It's doubtful. The VPA Chief has already asked the Guild Master and they swear there have been no assignments targeting these individuals." He sounded so certain Shade felt a chill.

The Veilerians knew a lot more than she'd given them credit for. It wasn't unheard of for assassins to take out their own people, but for the goody-good Veilerians to suspect the truth was more than she'd expected. She had to be careful to maintain her cover as well as find out how much they knew.

"I'll look into it," she said, stepping towards a large table holding five stacks of paper.

He looked at the watch on his wrist. "I have to be somewhere, otherwise I'd help. If you need anything, let Hatot know. I should be

back in about three hours.” He tossed her a careless smile and ambled out of the room.

Standing in the cavernous room, Shade felt very small.

She knew what was in these files. She’d been there for each and every kill. She didn’t want to see what she’d done. Killing, even though it was her job, wasn’t something she took lightly, regardless of how much Luther worked to extinguish any spark of compassion in her soul.

Shade looked around warily. She didn’t want to be caught staring at the files like they were about to bite her.

She began flipping through one of the files. She remembered this assignment clearly. A witch named Bianca Bridges. She’d been the former *Oculum*, and after pulling a stunt on Ruby, the Lineage Chieftain, she’d been exiled to the Halls of Silence. She was the same Councilor who’d put Shade’s fake credentials in the Veilerian database.

The witch had been in the Halls for a few years before the order for her execution came through. Shade still got chills thinking about that prison.

The Veilerian High Council had several prisons in alternate dimensions, but the only one Shade feared was the Halls of Silence. As the name implied, there was absolutely no sound. That had been one of the hardest assignments she’d ever fulfilled. She’d nearly hyperventilated by the time she got to the cell holding the target.

Bianca had seemed shocked to see Shade there, especially since she thought the Overlord would rescue her. The kill had been quick, but Shade had been required to wait several hours before leaving so as not to alert the guards. She hadn’t wanted to fend off elite guardians.

Pushing the memory away, Shade perused the files. She knew from the files kept in the Eturian vaults that her current target and Bianca had been childhood friends, then lovers. Bianca had been the one to recruit Cromwell into the Eturian. That single recruitment had

catapulted Bianca to the upper echelon of the Eturian army, though not as high as she'd wanted.

Now Bianca was gone, and Cromwell was trying to get in good with the brother he'd fought against for centuries, and he intended to use his former life to do it. Shade had to admire him. If she were in Cromwell's position she would do the same. However, it was her job to make sure he was forever silenced. No matter how attractive he was, or how much her body wanted him, Malachi Cromwell must die.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi watched the little Guardian pore over the files from the privacy of his suite. His home was filled with hidden cameras, which had been necessary when dealing with the Eturians. Now they afforded him the ability to watch his new shadow without her knowing. The panel of monitors tracked every movement in the house, but he'd pulled the camera to the great room up to the forty-six-inch flat screen so he could catch every nuance of her character.

It had been enlightening. She flipped through the pages quickly, pausing now and then. Then, the corner of her mouth would curl up as she read over something. He wanted to know what she found amusing in the files.

"Bad to the Bone" suddenly rang out. Picking up his cell, he flipped it open. "Hey, Luc, you got that information for me?" he asked his brother, never taking his eyes off the screen displaying Lani.

"Yeah, she looks legit. I haven't talked to anyone who's actually worked with her, but the records show my assignment request being filled by a Lani Brown who's been with the Elite for over a hundred years," Lucian answered, his voice thoughtful.

"What are you thinking?" Malachi asked harshly.

Lucian sighed heavily. "Hells, I don't know. I only put the order in this morning and she's already on your doorstep. She could be a spy sent by the Eturi, or she's a Guild Assassin."

Scoffing at the thought of the little fairy killing him, Malachi leaned forward to adjust one of the cameras. Zooming in on her, he could see the shapes of the knives under her clothing. “What weapons do GE’s carry these days?” he asked absently.

“Retractable swords. Chul-Moo has been working on them for centuries, but we weren’t able to have them made for use until the last century.”

Malachi leaned forward. She had a cylindrical-shaped item under the back of her shirt. “Are they about seven or eight inches long retracted?”

“Yeah. Nice little buggers. You want one?” Lucian asked with a laugh.

“Nope. My Guardian has one. Are they hard to get?”

“Shit yeah!” Lucian shouted. “I can’t even have one, dammit. They’re limited to Weapon Masters only. If your girl has one, she’s legit. Probably just one of Nila’s spooks.”

Shuddering at the Council Executioner’s name, Malachi wrapped up his conversation with Lucian. Lani probably did work for Nila. She seemed the kind of female the *Manu* would have on her roster.

He sat in the hidden room attached to his personal library, watching the female for hours. Her lips would move, but since he’d never wired the room for sound, he had no idea what she was saying. Now and then, she would clutch her head as though in pain. But not once did her eyes reveal a single emotion. It was unnerving, especially since he seemed to have far too many unexpected and unwelcome feelings where she was concerned.

Leaning back in his chair with his hands laced behind his head, Malachi closed his eyes. He was attracted to her, more than he’d been attracted to anyone in a while. He wasn’t even sure what it was about her that called to him. He preferred his women tall and lushly figured with a wicked sense of humor. As far as he’d gleaned, Lani had no sense of humor and she was small enough to fit in his pocket.

Opening his eyes again, he watched as she dropped the last file, clutching her head in her hands again. Her eyes squeezed shut. Lowering her right hand, she pressed it to her thigh, fingers digging deep through the material. Her face cleared even as blood coated her fingers.

“What the fuck!” he shouted, jumping to his feet and storming from the room.

\* \* \* \*

Shade sighed in relief as dark pain lanced through her body. Her mind had trapped her in an endless loop of blood and gore, the likes of which sent stabbing pain to her heart from her acts of violence. No, not acts of violence, she reminded herself. They were assignments. That was all. Except she’d never been required to review her past deeds before. She was a great believer in leaving the past behind her and forging forward. This last assignment was throwing her for a loop, bringing her face-to-face with her actions.

Had she really pinned a demon to a wall with scalpels? She didn’t recall that assignment, but there was no denying the tiny *S* carved into his cheek. That mark was hers alone, and she remembered being called to erase a demon. So it was hers. The cold must be seeping into her memories, she decided as she dug her fingers into her reopened wound. It was rumored that when an assassin was too close to the edge, the barrenness of their conscience would wipe out the memories of their kills. She hadn’t thought she was so close to that plain.

“What the hell happened?” the target roared from the doorway.

Shade snatched her fingers away from her wound, wiping her bloodied fingers on her jeans. The metallic tang of blood hovered in the air around her as she turned to view the target charging towards her, his face etched with fury.

Before she was aware of it, she was grabbed in an iron grip. It had to be iron, she thought dazedly, because it burned her fey skin. She was pulled to her feet, her jeans around her ankles scant seconds later.

“What are you doing?” she asked him in the coolest voice she could manage.

One large hand held her wrists together, in a gentle yet firm circle. Shade knew she could easily break his hold, but wanted to know what he was doing, why he was angry with her.

The target ignored her, kneeling before her to study her thigh, which was slowly knitting.

“Hatot!” he roared. He shot her a dark glance. “Don’t move.”

The demon who’d let her in the house appeared in the doorway, hovering anxiously. “Yes, master?”

“Find me some damn gauze, peroxide, and other first aid type shit,” the target ordered sharply. “Now!”

Hatot sped away, his robes flapping around his feet.

Shade tilted her head to the side, looking down at the thick hair of the male kneeling before her. She supposed she should be embarrassed that he was seeing her half naked, but having spent over fifty years naked and chained, it didn’t have the power to humiliate her anymore. Besides, her black boy shorts covered her enough for propriety’s sake.

Large, lightly calloused fingers grazed the skin around the wound, pressing gently. She felt the heat of his breath on her leg and wondered how the warmth managed to wind itself to her stomach. It was as though he were bringing fire into her body.

“How did this happen?” he asked softly, not looking up at her.

“Training,” was her answer. It wasn’t unheard of for Guardians to wound each other during exercises.

“It wasn’t bleeding earlier.”

Ah. He wanted to know how she’d reopened it. “I jostled it. It will heal,” she told him coldly.

Heavily fringed eyes peered up at her. Her heart stuttered. She analyzed the irregularity. She hadn't ingested anything to cause the reaction, and though she felt warm from the target's touch, she didn't believe he was feeding electricity into her body. Her head tilted the other way as she met his eyes.

Her heart stuttered again. Luther's effect on her had mostly been physical. In the early days she'd felt butterflies when talking to him, but her heart hadn't pattered this much. Ever.

"What are you doing to me? Did you use a spell on me?" she asked tonelessly.

It had to be a spell. Demons were notorious for dabbling in magic they didn't understand.

"Spell?" he responded, his brown eyes clouding up. "I'm not using magic against you, Lani."

"Then why is my heart acting so strangely?" she challenged him, tugging her wrists out of his hands.

The target's head rose, his face turned upwards in all its masculine glory. Her breath caught in her throat. What was going on? Her body was malfunctioning, she thought hazily.

He cleared his throat, his eyes taking on a tinge of red. "Your, ah, heart?"

Shade nodded. "You're doing something to me. Some spell."

He shook his head from side to side. "No. I promise," he whispered, his gaze tracing over her face. His mouth opened—

"Master, I have what you require!" Hatot trotted into the room eagerly.

Handing over the gauze, a bottle of peroxide, and a first aid kit large enough to keep a hospital emergency room running, Hatot beamed at his master.

"Thank you," the target told Hatot, quickly and efficiently cleaning the blood from Shade's leg and the freshly healed wound. "Hatot, please take these pants to be cleaned." The target finished



stripping the jeans from her legs, tossing them to the demon who held them like they were about to bite him.

“Yes, master.” Hatot sniffed at Shade. His bulbous nose wrinkled. “Shall I tell Cook to hold supper?”

The target sank back on his heels as he looked Shade over. The lust stirring in his brown eyes caused a strange breathlessness to grip her.

“Tell her to hold it for an hour. We should be done here by then.”

Hatot left just as quickly as he had arrived, bearing Shade’s pants before him like a flag.

“Let’s get you upstairs so you can change,” the target suggested as he tossed the bloodied gauze into a trash can.

Once again, Shade found herself surprised as he swung her up in his arms. “I can walk.”

He shrugged his strong, muscled shoulders. “I’m sure you can, but I’d really hate for you to strain your wound and bleed on my floor.”

“I can fly,” she reminded him.

“I don’t think so. I like my paintings and vases right where they are,” he answered, swiftly carrying her across the house and up the stairs.

Shade tried not to let her body sink into the warmth of his, but it was an impossible task. No one had carried her like a child since the day Luther had taken her to his secret chamber. She’d fought to no avail. She’d been far too weak to take on the demon then. She wasn’t weak now, but she almost liked the sensation of being carried by this male.

Fool, she chided herself as they drifted down the hallway to the room she’d been given. *He’s putting on an act. He’s a traitor, remember?* However, she said nothing as he carried her to the room she’d been given.

Without speaking a word, he placed her on the edge of the bed, the bare backs of her thighs meeting the cool satin of the duvet. The

target backed away, hands on his hips. He looked down at her with an expression she couldn't read. What did he want?

"Dinner will be ready in a bit. Go on and do whatever you need to. I'll meet you at the stairs," he said abruptly, spinning on his heel and stalking from the room.

Shade cocked her head to the side, watching him leave. What was it about him that made her want to study him just for the pleasure of it?

She pinched the bridge of her nose. It was fascination and good, old-fashioned lust that had her acting like an idiot, and feeling things for the first time in decades. And it had to stop.

Her body wouldn't follow her directions when he looked at her a certain way. It wanted to burrow into his warmth and ignore the warnings of her mind. At the same time, the emergence of her feelings was overwhelming. Her chest was heavy, as though all of her sins were weighing her down.

Crossing the room to find another pair of jeans, she eased into them, careful not to strain the freshly opened wound. She'd have to be careful not to injure herself again. Her heart had taken too long to recover from whatever he'd done to her.

Frowning down at her body as she fastened her jeans, she noted absently that her breasts felt heavy and achy, while her intimate flesh seemed slick with moisture. Damn, how was she going to concentrate on finding a way to kill the Halfling when she wanted him between her thighs? This assignment was sucking as nothing had ever sucked before.

## Chapter Seven

Malachi paced at the foot of the stairs. Lani was driving him crazy. She was attractive, yes, but it was her innocence he found most intriguing. When she'd looked down at him with confused desire clouding her eyes, he'd almost grabbed her. Only knowing she was injured and puzzled had kept his hands away from her tempting curves.

He couldn't understand the clutch of fear he'd experienced seeing her hand coated in blood. He hadn't even paused to think about the ramifications of taking her pants off. He'd just known he needed to see her wound. It was only after the blood was cleaned away that desire punched through him.

She was lush, like a ripe peach. He'd known she had curves under her grim garments, but having her naked, silver thighs displayed to his hungry eyes had taken his desire to a new level. Not that she was perfect. Her legs were riddled with scars, the kind of wounds inflicted with iron weapons. Her left knee was one big scar, the flesh puckered brutally, but it didn't detract from her beauty.

Pausing to pass a hand over his forehead, Malachi tried to force his cock to stop its insistent throbbing. Those black panties she wore had hugged the top of her muscled thighs just as modestly as a pair of shorts, but he'd known she was bare beneath them. His mouth dry, he tried to swallow. The scent of her arousal had flooded his nostrils, bringing his desire to a fever pitch. Then he'd made the mistake of carrying her to her room like a Rhett Butler wannabe.

Lani, her solemn green eyes, and the bed had proved nearly too much temptation for him. He'd run for it. He chuckled softly. The

former scourge of the Veil had run from a pint-sized fairy. If only they could see him now, they'd know he wasn't anything to fear.

A slight shift in the air patterns around him caused Malachi to look up. Lani drifted down the stairs on silent feet. She wore another pair of black jeans, her feet in yet another pair of boots. The unrelenting black should have made her appear menacing, but he now knew what her legs looked like under the material and saw how the black was a perfect complement to her complexion.

Snapping himself out of the thrall Lani had unwittingly cast upon him, Malachi bowed slightly. She made him feel courtly, her diminutive height arousing feelings of protectiveness in him. He wasn't sure he liked it.

"Feeling better?" he asked, watching her closely.

Her face was closed again—no desire lingered in the green depths of her eyes. She merely nodded, keeping her eyes averted.

Did she know how close he'd come to tearing her clothes off and ramming into her little body? Gods, he hoped not. She was off-limits. She worked for him, for God's sake! Sort of.

"Good," he bit out. "Dinner is ready. If you'll follow me?"

He led her through the spacious hallway to the dining room he rarely used. He preferred taking his meals in his suite if he was at home. Most of the time, he ate out or grabbed something on his way in from his investigations. But he didn't want her anywhere near his suite. It would be too tempting to follow his libido instead of his brain.

The dining room was formal with a table large enough to sit twenty. Caramel-colored walls were a perfect accent to the gleaming mahogany table and chairs. Portraits and paintings by various Veilerian artists lined the walls. Casting a critical eye over the room, Malachi had to admit it could be intimidating to someone unused to luxury.

Lani merely glanced around before sitting down at the setting to the right of his chair. She didn't wait for him to seat her, pulling the

chair in herself. Malachi pondered her as he took his own chair. Coupled with her bare-bones protest when he'd carried her upstairs, he surmised she wasn't used to being waited on in any capacity. Given the innocent desire that had shimmered in her eyes along with her confused questions, he suspected she'd never had a lover either.

Hatot and Kahal swept into the room bearing covered dishes. With synchronized movements, they served Lani and Malachi, who sat in silence. Malachi watched her as the food was uncovered, revealing a tomato basil salad. With no expression on her face, she began to eat the salad using the proper fork. So she had some training in extravagant dinners, he thought with satisfaction.

Silence stretched as they finished their first course and were served a spicy coconut shrimp soup. He felt like an idiot with the fancy meal but supposed his cook was thrilled to have an audience to bedazzle with her gourmet skills. Lani tasted her soup tentatively, then ravenously.

"You like the soup?" he asked curiously. It would be interesting to learn more about her.

She shrugged. "It's good," was all she said. "A little too much sugar, though." She pushed the bowl away.

So, he thought, she wasn't feeling talkative. He finished his serving, waiting for the next course. He hoped she wasn't concerned about gaining weight. She was perfectly lush and rounded in all the right places. He shifted in his chair before taking a sip of wine. He needed to stop thinking about her body.

"How long have you been with the Guardian Guild?" he finally asked when the silence was too much for him.

She turned her head to look at him. "I'm sure you already know the answer to that question," she replied coolly.

Warmth crept into his cheeks and he cursed himself for blushing. Of course she'd suspect him of having her checked out. "Yes, I do. My apologies."

"I would have done the same."

He cleared his throat, watching her take a bite of the orange-glazed duck. Her eyes closed as though in pleasure. His mouth went dry. Grabbing for his wineglass like a lifeline, he swallowed compulsively.

Several more minutes passed in silence broken only by the soft clink of silverware against flatware. He watched her surreptitiously as they dined. Her hands were graceful as she ate. Her manners were impeccable. She'd obviously come from a life of some wealth.

"Do you like working for the Guild?" he asked as the duck was removed to make way for a serving of broiled salmon with lemon garlic sauce.

Sometime during the duck course, Lani had relaxed her rigid posture. A light rose crested the tops of her cheekbones, deepening the silver tint of her skin. Her eyes slid to him, making the first bite of fish stick in his throat. Those green eyes of hers were soft and glowing.

What the hell, he wondered even while he basked in the glow.

"It's a job."

"What is?" he asked stupidly, leaning closer to her.

She cocked her head to the right. "The Guild. It's just a job."

"Oh."

"I wanted to be a horticulturist," she told him confidentially, taking a sip of wine. Her tongue swept across her lips, drawing his eyes to their plump contours.

"You like plants?"

She shrugged, leaning back in her chair to let Kahal take her empty plate. "Plants do what they're designed to do. They're simple," she replied, her words soft and slow.

"How old are you?" She seemed unguarded and relaxed. If he hadn't kept such a close watch on her, he would've thought she was tipsy, but he'd seen her take approximately four sips of wine.

"Two hundred and thirty-five," was her prompt response. She licked her lips as Hatot set a plate of caramel and chocolate drizzled

cheesecake in front of her. She attacked the dessert with an eagerness he found surprising.

Watching her lick her lips after each swallow, Malachi's blood pressure was dangerously high. Sweat dotted his forehead, his cock pressed against the zipper of his trousers begging for release into her. He struggled to concentrate on the conversation.

"You were young to be accepted into the guild," he remarked, giving up on pretending to do anything but watch her eat. She would've been a hundred and thirty-five or thereabouts when she joined up, barely out of transition into her full powers.

She paused with her fork in midair. "I was never young." Leaning forward to wrap her lips around the tines of the fork, her eyes closed in bliss.

"Gods," Malachi whispered, gripping the edge of the table desperately.

He had to keep reminding himself that she was here for work, not to become his personal chew toy. The fangs his bitch of a mother had bestowed him were threatening to spring forth. It was rare for him to crave blood, but his body wanted a taste of little Lani.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked him, jerking his gaze back to her eyes and away from her luscious lips.

"Doing what?" he rasped, having no idea what she was talking about.

One petite hand waved in the air. Gods, she *was* drunk!

She gave him a shy smile, her green eyes twinkling. "Why are you trying to find the Eturians? Aren't they your friends?"

Malachi sat back, trying to distance himself from her drunken charms. Should he give her the real reason, he wondered even while he watched her eye his cheesecake. Pushing the plate over to her, he smiled slightly as she attacked the second portion with vigor. He'd forgotten fairies could eat twice as much as the other races.

Looking away from her, he contemplated his glass of wine, holding it up to the light. "I never wanted to join the Guardian Guild,"

he said softly. "It was forced on me just as it was forced on so many other Halflings in that time." Carefully setting the glass on the table, he turned to her. "Do you know what they used to do to recruits? We were starved, beaten, punished like beasts until we learned not to question our superior, full-blooded leaders." He couldn't hide the bitter anger in his voice, didn't even attempt to.

Lani had long finished her cheesecake and sat studying him. Her face was blank, though he sensed her body tensing. Did she understand? Could she, a full-blood fairy, ever understand the torment he and the other Halflings had endured during their training? Training that was forced on them?

"After a while, you accept it and move on," he continued, breaking their connection. "I had accepted it until Bianca came to me with an offer to make the Veil pay for their treatment. I wanted to be seen as a person, not as something less than full-bloods." He shrugged. "So I joined them, pitted myself against the very society that had forsaken me."

"People died," she said coldly.

Malachi nodded. "I know, and I mourn their losses, but it was war. I never killed anyone without provocation and I'm taking steps to correct my mistakes. Bringing the Eturi down is my only goal now."

"Is it really?" she asked, her voice icy. "Or are you determined to show everyone what they missed by shunning you all those years ago?"

Surprise rippled through him. Surprise and anger. How dare she presume to understand what he and the other Halflings had been through?

"You're right." He growled, leaning forward menacingly. "I want them to wallow in regret. I want my parents to know I'm the reason they have their safe little world. What does it matter to you, Guardian?" His gaze trailed over her face and shoulders. "You, with your cold emotions and pampered upbringing. You play at being a



Guardian, at being a protector for the Veil. What happened, princess, your parents didn't buy you the pony you always wanted?" He laughed. "The full-bloods were treated like nobles compared to us Halflings, babe. So don't pretend to understand my motives."

Malachi watched the softness fade from her eyes. The green began glowing with danger. Something in her expression sent a chill down his spine. He'd accused her of being cold, but there was nothing cold in her face now. Feral rage burned in her eyes, a rage so intense he almost expected her to catch fire. She stood next to her chair, her hands clutched into tight fists.

"You know less than nothing about me," she answered him with a dark smile, showing a lot of bright white teeth. "I believe I should leave before I injure you."

Spinning on her heel, she stalked away. Fury burned in Malachi's heart. He'd be damned if she was walking away in the middle of a discussion. Not a fight, because fights indicated strong emotions and he had none towards her. Liar, he chided himself as he burst out of his chair.

Before he'd even crossed the room, wings burst out of her back, shredding her shirt in a menacing display of feathered black, arching above her body protectively. She whirled around, teeth clenched. He'd meant to grab her shoulder, turn her around to face him, and finish the debate. Lani apparently had other plans, because as soon as she turned around, a dagger was flying at his head.

Dodging the projectile, Malachi caught her in his arms, confident he could hold her until she calmed down. He didn't expect the little fairy to become a whirling dervish. With well-placed blows to his jaw, solar plexus, and groin, as well as being blinded by silky, black feathers, he was on the ground with a knife at his throat.

\* \* \* \*

“Dammit, woman, calm down!” the male roared loud enough to crack the ice surrounding her conscience.

Blinking slowly, Shade saw the target pinned to the floor. A small trail of blood flowed from the point of her knife which she hastily pulled away. Cold hard fear made her heart thump in overtime. She’d attacked him with no memory of the actual fighting. The cold was finding her too quickly to combat.

Jackknifing to her feet, she stepped away from the target, who appeared more angry than hurt. He didn’t bother standing, instead sitting up to run a hand through his thick hair. Anger and some other emotion she didn’t recognize rested heavily on his face.

“I’m sorry, dammit,” he muttered as he folded his legs to sit cross-legged. “I shouldn’t have torn into you like that. You’re right, I don’t know what your life was like and I shouldn’t have made that comment about it.”

Shade stared at him, trying to make sense of his words as well as the dark expression on his face. He looked...apologetic.

The target looked up at her through his thick eyelashes, his expression abashed and easy. “Truce?”

She stiffened. He was trying to use his charm on her and somehow it was working. Her stomach was warm, her heart fluttered, and without conscious effort, her eyelids lowered. Shade could feel the blood rushing through her body, pooling in her lips, her nipples, and lower. She didn’t want to feel it, but she couldn’t deny he had some kind of power over her.

“Lani? Will you forgive me?” he asked, dark eyes wide and sorrowful.

Shaking her head to clear it of the spell he cast over her simply by looking at her, Shade vowed to make an appointment with a witch as soon as possible. Something was wrong with her, because she shouldn’t be feeling anything.

“Lani?” he prompted her again.

“Fine.” Her voice was abrupt.

The target let out an exaggerated breath as though he'd been holding it while waiting for forgiveness. He gave her another smile, this one filled with white teeth, the dimple in his cheek flashing. "Let's walk," he suggested merrily as he climbed to his feet.

Blood still flowed from the wound in his neck. A sharp pain in the vicinity of her heart had Shade's face screwing up in disgust. Was she sorry she'd hurt him?

"What's wrong?" he asked, head cocked to the side.

"You're bleeding."

One lean hand rose to his neck, finding the wound. "Well, shit. I didn't think you'd actually stick me," he said good-naturedly. "You're damn fast with those knives."

Since she wasn't sure if it was a compliment or not, Shade didn't answer. Retracting her wings, she sauntered over to the table to retrieve a napkin for his neck. Why she was so worried about his blood, she couldn't say. She only knew she didn't like the pain in her chest that seemed directly linked to his pain, imagined or not.

Turning again, she found herself nose-to-chest with him. His warmth called to her, making her yearn for his touch. Her every breath swallowed his scent, a teasing blend of citrus and spice. Shade kept her eyes straight ahead, seeing nothing but the width of his chest covered in a charcoal-gray sweater. She hadn't noticed his clothing before, but she saw that the sweater was good quality. Her gaze trailing downwards, the black slacks he wore appeared soft as butter, and as she watched, a large bulge formed beneath the zipper.

Shock jerked her gaze up to his face, which was a lot closer than she'd thought it was. Gazing into his deep eyes, Shade felt as though the earth moved beneath her feet. This target was dangerous to her in more ways than the physical, but she couldn't help leaning closer to him.

Red began to bleed into his irises, giving the chocolate brown more depth. She saw his nostrils flare as he moved closer still.

He stopped. His breath feathered across her face, sending chills down her spine. Her hardened nipples ached, seeming to reach out to him. He shifted slightly, bringing his torso in contact with the hard points and throwing her body into a tailspin of sensation.

Shade licked her lips, watching the red deepen in his eyes. She read his intent. He was going to kiss her. And she would let him, because every female deserved one passionate kiss in her lifetime. Right?

## Chapter Eight

The first brush of his mouth against hers felt like something from a dream. It was barely there, leaving only a slight tingle on her lips to tell her they'd met his. The second brush was more substantial, the velvet of his mouth dragging against hers. Her breath caught in her throat. Gods, she'd had no idea!

The third brush was the most potent. His mouth settled over hers firmly, pressing their lips together. Then the target's mouth opened, drawing her bottom lip into his mouth for a playful suckling she felt all the way to her toes. Unable to resist his silent demand, her lips parted.

Hot, wet, and insistent, his tongue swept into her mouth. Shade gasped as her taste buds exploded with his flavor. She tasted the wine he'd had with dinner and, beneath it, the decadent taste of male. Primal instinct made Shade tangle her tongue with his, dipping into his mouth for a deeper taste.

His hands rose, circling her back and pulling her tighter against him. The bulge in his pants pressed into her stomach. His thigh slipped between her legs to nudge her core. Then she was lifted from the floor, straddling his muscular thigh as his hands found her backside, kneading and guiding her against him.

Liquid heat poured into her veins, obliterating all thought. Eager and hungry, Shade's hands rose to knead his shoulders, little moans catching in her throat as she let him rock her on his thigh. A harsh sound rasped in his throat as he kissed her deeper, his mouth biting at hers almost savagely.

A knock sounded on the door of the dining room. The target ripped his mouth from hers, his eyes fully red now and chest heaving with labored breath.

“What?” he shouted, not bothering to hide his anger.

“M–master, the Amazons are back,” Hatot called through the door, clearly not willing to open it to deliver his message.

Females coming to see the target. Pull back. The words flashed across Shade’s mind, forcing her body to follow. She slid off the target’s thigh, ignoring the resulting tingle. She straightened her clothing and scrubbed a hand over her mouth trying to rid it of his taste. He had females in his home, Amazons who were known to be beautiful, warm, and sexual. He’d been playing with her.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” Shade told him coolly, pleased to see the surprise in his eyes.

She walked out of the room, passing Hatot at the threshold. Her keen ears picked up the sounds of females talking from the front of the house, but she avoided them by slipping into the shadows. The cool caress of the familiar darkness soothed her battered pride and the sting of her first taste of desire.

Coasting to her room, Shade closed and locked the door. Dropping wearily to the bed, she wondered what had possessed her to take such a risk. He was an assignment, not a potential mate. Not that she was looking for one anyway. Her chance of happiness had been lost the second Luther touched her, killing everything in her that was soft and loving. She was a death dealer and death had no future.

Once again, the cold crept into her, nestling close to her heart. This was for the best, she thought as her eyes closed. She wanted to be numb to future heartache and pain for as long as she lived, which wouldn’t be long once Luther knew she hadn’t fulfilled her assignment.

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“Don’t you have better things to do than to bother the hell out of me every day?” Malachi stormed into his library where Saga, Izzy, and Rosetta, the drag-queen Amazon, lolled.

“Someone’s frustrated,” Rosetta said in her deep voice, winking an outrageously made-up eye at Malachi. “Sugar, you know the girls and I would be happy to take care of your frustrations. You just say the word.”

Repressing a shudder, Malachi sat at his desk. The walk from the dining room to his library had barely been long enough to lose his erection, but nothing would ease the ache of lust entirely. He wasn’t even sure if having Lani would give him relief. Thinking about that explosive kiss made him hard and aching again.

“So what are you doing here?” he grouched.

Saga shrugged, contemplating the toes of her boots. “We’re bored.”

“Yeah, things used to be exciting around here what with Ruby running from Lucian, Piper going through her kitty-cat phase, and that hottie incubus friend of yours showing up all over the place. Things just aren’t fun anymore,” Izzy complained from the sofa she’d sprawled upon. “And now that we can’t participate in the next Battle of Lionesses, we don’t have shit to do other than train, drink, and screw.”

“You make it sound like those are bad things,” Rosetta said from her place in one of the chairs in front of Malachi’s desk. Today, the drag queen was sporting a baby blue wig, sparkly feathered eyelashes, dramatic make-up, and a tiny bikini type dress that Malachi did his best not to stare at.

“You’re just saying that ’cause you found out Bruce was gay,” Izzy mumbled into the crook of her elbow. “Other than Bruce ‘the Bull Moose’ Prior, the men are all the same with the same bits and pieces.”

Malachi wanted to squirm. He wanted to stick his fingers in his ears and pretend he wasn’t listening about other men’s bits and

pieces. However, these females were his friends, so he stood and poured them each a hearty glass of scotch.

“What’s really the problem?” he asked as he handed Saga her snifter.

“We’re really bored, seriously,” Saga mumbled into her snifter. “Lucian kicked us out of the house ’cause we were making too much noise. He told us to come here, that you might have something for us to do.” She finished off her scotch, putting the glass down with a decisive click. “I hope he was right, because I’m on the verge of calling a Hunt.”

“A Hunt would be fabu!” Rosetta agreed from the opposite chair. Even Izzy looked interested.

Malachi did shudder this time. The Amazonian Hunt was the stuff of legend and an extremely simple concept. A single male was voted as the most virile specimen of manhood. Luckily, the Amazons only applied the Hunt to Veilerian males because humans wouldn’t stand a chance. The male, or Green Man, was given a notice of one week to put his affairs in order and to plan his escape. On the dawn of the eighth day, Amazons the world over who wished to participate emerged from their camps on the hunt for the Green Man. Sometimes the Hunt lasted a week, sometimes it lasted for years, but it was well-known when he was caught the Green Man wouldn’t walk for a while.

“No, no Hunt,” Malachi scolded softly. “I heard Demos is still recovering from the last Hunt.”

“I didn’t get to participate in that one,” Izzy complained, bottom lip poking out in an extreme pout.

“It was fun. This shit we’re doing now isn’t fun,” Saga told her younger colleague.

Seeing their restlessness gave Malachi the chills, pushing his lust for Lani out of mind for the moment. He was desperate to keep them from trouble. “Okay, I have a job for you,” he told them abruptly. Three heads swiveled in his direction, eyeing him with eagerness.



Christ. “You know I’m hunting Eturian generals, right? Well, five of them are dead already.”

“What? Are you serious?” Saga demanded, leaning forward in her chair. “Who did it, does Council know?”

Malachi shook his head. “The only thing we know for certain is that the Assassin Guild isn’t taking credit for the kills.” He paused, a part of his soul mourning the girl he’d grown up with. “Whoever it is, they got Bianca.”

“What. The. Fuck. She was locked away in the Halls of Silence, wasn’t she?” Saga asked, her face white as a sheet.

“Yeah.” He sighed wearily. When that news had come his way, he’d nearly lost it. Sure she’d been an evil bitchtress, but he’d once been happy with her, been friends with her. “She was dead for two days before the guards found out. The files are in the great room.”

He needed to move around. Leading the three Amazons from his library to the great room, he indicated the files. Saga paused by the table, her nostrils quivering.

“There was a fairy here,” she said sourly.

As nonchalantly as he could, Malachi nodded. “Lucian requested a GE to help me on this case.” Hopefully the Amazon would leave it at that, because he wasn’t ready to talk about Lani with anyone.

Luckily, she let the subject drop as she crowded around the files with Rosetta and Izzy. All was silent for several minutes as they looked through the files.

Izzy whistled. “Wow, whoever this is, they’re a kick-ass assassin,” she said in wonder.

“Why do you say that?” Malachi asked. He was inclined to agree since the killings were done silently and with great precision, all within hearing distance of the victims’ guards.

“Well, other than the fact that they got into the Halls of Silence, killed Bianca, and did it all without setting off the alarms, they’re calculating. Look at this,” she said, holding up the picture of a demon pinned to a wall. “This demon could’ve screamed for help, but no one

heard a sound. Look at the way he's pinned. Whoever did this is both strong and cold as ice. The scalpels went right between the bones of his radius and ulna. You'd have to position the scalpels in just the right spot to support his weight without pulling on the wounds more. This wasn't a crucifixion, no matter what it looks like." She put the picture down and lifted the autopsy report. "They found no evidence of a spell or potion that kept him from screaming. What they did find was bruising around the larynx that prevented him from making a sound. The killer could've easily used a potion or spell, but didn't because they can be traced."

"We know all that, Sherlock," Saga said wryly as she flipped through her own file. "But you're right. In each case, with the exception of Bianca, the victim was silenced immediately before execution."

"What's with the *S* on their faces?" Rosetta asked as she peeked at her file. "I mean, that's like serial killer shit."

Malachi paced around the table. "I think the *S* is their trademark. Some assassins leave objects with the body, or cut off a certain body part as their signature."

"That's just sick," Rosetta said, getting up from the table.

"What do you need us to do?" Saga asked as she set the file aside.

"I don't want to imply that I don't trust Council, but I want to be sure no clues were passed over because they were Eturian generals. Go to the execution scenes and see what you can find," he told Saga with a grim smile. "We're missing something."

"Shit yeah!" Izzy said with a happy grin. "I always wanted to be Columbo."

"Jesus, Izzy, Columbo dressed horribly!" Rosetta protested as she sauntered around the room, poking at the decorations. "Malachi, you have some nice digs here. Are you sure you're not gay? 'Cause most men don't decorate well."

"I'm positive, honey," Malachi answered with a smile.

She sighed. "That's too bad."

“What about Bruce?” Saga asked as she stood.

“You women are ruining me for relationships. He wants us to move in together, but I can’t give up my girls.”

Izzy nodded. “True. You know what they say, ‘chicks before dicks.’”

“True dat,” Rosetta agreed as she and Izzy performed some complicated handshake.

Saga sighed deeply, rolling her eyes to the ceiling.

“How high are you counting?” he asked her in a stage whisper.

“I was going for ten, but I’m aiming for a hundred now,” she whispered back.

Malachi was unable to hold back a laugh. Grabbing Saga around the neck, he pulled her head close to ruffle her hair. She squawked good-naturedly, elbowing him in the ribs to get away from him. If she’d wanted to hurt him, it would’ve been easy, but she looked at him like a brother since they’d both decided not to tempt the fates by having an intimate relationship.

“Make a copy of anything you need from the files, but I’d like to keep the originals here,” he said as he let her go.

Saga fixed her ponytail as she nodded. “I guess this would be cool to do for a little while. Why didn’t you ask Pagan to handle it?” she asked, referring to the vampire who ran a Veilerian security and private investigations service.

“Last I heard, she was on hiatus doing some suck-up work for VP Chief Snow,” Malachi told Saga as he gathered the files for them. “Seems she trespassed into one of the GE armories, cleaned out their demon-killer bullets, and left a love letter for Snow in the ladies’ loo.”

“Aw shit, she broke in, didn’t she?” Izzy asked, joining the conversation.

Malachi nodded, biting his bottom lip to keep from laughing. Pagan’s antics were giving her twin brother, Mortimer, gray hairs and entertaining the rest of the Veil. “She, ah, somehow found a naked picture of Snow in his heyday as *Satricarion* and had it wallpapered

in every stall in the bathroom along with his private number.” He wanted to laugh at the idea of the former satyr leader, or *Satricarion*, and current VPA Chief being bombarded with calls from horny Veilerian women.

Izzy laughed loudly while Saga looked intrigued. “Does she have the negatives?”

“I don’t want to know!” Malachi said, throwing his hands up defensively. These women were worse than frat boys sometimes. “Anyway, Grayson has Pagan playing bodyguard to his son while he’s on tour with his band.”

“She’s got to be going insane,” Saga said, shaking her head ruefully at her friend’s antics. “Wait ’til I tell Albreda what her BFF has been up to.”

Rosetta laughed. “She’ll probably be jealous ’cause she didn’t get to see Grayson Snow nude. Our queen has the hots for him.”

A collective “eww” echoed around the room.

“I don’t want to hear any more!” Malachi said forcefully. “Get to work and stay out of trouble. If you need anything, give me a call, okay?”

“Yes, dad,” they all chimed in together.

“Good. If you get in trouble and don’t call me, I’ll paddle all your asses,” he warned half-playfully.

“Oh! A spanking, a spanking!” Izzy shouted, jumping up and down. “You must give us all a good spanking!”

Saga dragged Izzy from the room. Rosetta sauntered after them, hips swinging dramatically. Shaking his head at their antics, Malachi leaned against the table.

He was fortunate the Amazons and his brother were so willing to forgive and forget. Most of the Veilerians he met up with eyed him suspiciously, as though they expected him to pull out a measuring tape to size them up for a coffin. Malachi wiped a hand over his face. He lived with his mistakes every day, but hopefully he’d prove his willingness to live by Veilerian law again.

Blowing out a tired breath, he left the great room and headed upstairs. He hadn't seen Pet, no, Tia, all day, and he worried that she was lonely. It was strange to think of her as a person since for so long, he'd only viewed her as a weapon in his war. No longer, he thought firmly as he reached the second floor. She was to be cosseted and treated like a member of his family, because that's what she'd become.

Stopping for a moment, Malachi looked down the hall towards Lani's room. He wondered what she was doing, if she was still pissed at him. She'd said she would see him in the morning, so she wasn't going to run away. He shouldn't have kissed her, but he hadn't been able to resist the temptation of her drowsy eyes and full lips. His cock twitched. Scowling down at his groin, he told it to heel. When this shit with the Eturi was over, he'd try to coax more from her, but not now.

Dragging in a deep breath, he continued to Tia's room. Before he even reached the door, he heard the television blaring. Smiling to himself, he knocked.

The door opened and he looked down to see Tia's blazing blue eyes looking up at him. He opened his mouth to greet her but was distracted by the sudden groans and cries that were unmistakable as impending orgasm poured out the room.

He gaped at Tia. "What are you watching?" he asked her in shock.

She shrugged. "*Abba*, I didn't expect you to finish with the fairy and Amazons so soon."

"*Oh, oh, harder!*" a woman screamed, squealing as the slap of flesh meeting flesh grew louder.

"Uh," Malachi said, feeling the heat of a furious blush work its way to his face. Gods, Tia was watching porn! "You need to turn that off. You shouldn't be watching that stuff," he told her, feeling fiercely protective of her.

"Yes, *Abba*," she answered, turning around to turn the television off.

He remained at the doorway, feeling awkward. Was Tia a sexual being? Did she hunger for sex? Did she even know what it was? Gods, he thought in horror. She was his responsibility and she'd been watching *porn*! Now he knew how Lucian felt when Dominic watched Victoria's Secret commercials.

"May I come in, Tia?" he asked, feeling like a father about to invade his teenage daughter's domain.

"Of course, *Abba*."

He gave her a stiff smile and stepped into the room. The room had been immaculate when she'd taken possession of it, but now the bed was messed up, piles of dishes cluttered the nightstands and floor around the bed, and she hadn't turned the television off. No, the orgy happening on screen was in silent mode, which looked ridiculous.

"Why are you watching this?" he asked harshly as he stepped forward to shut the television off.

"I was curious, *Abba*. I have only seen things like this through visions, which are one-sided. It looks like fun, doesn't it?" she asked, and if her voice had held the slightest tinge of interest, he would have run out of the room. However, her voice was as emotionless and flat as it usually was. "Have you done those things? Do they feel good?"

The blush that had faded mere seconds before came back in full force. "Um." He shuffled his feet. This shit wasn't something they taught in the Guardian Academy. He needed someone who could answer these questions who wasn't sex starved like the three Amazons who'd just left his house. "Why...why don't I have Ruby, my brother's mate, speak with you about it, Tia?"

"Oh." She stood in the middle of the room, hands clasped together. "Okay. Can I do that one day?"

"Gods! Don't ask me something like that!" he exploded, dragging a hand through his hair. A cold chill dripped down his spine at the thought of some male damaging her innocence. He'd kill them. Slowly and painfully. He needed to buy her a chastity belt. She wasn't leaving her room until she was...well, much older. "Do you like your

room?” he asked her, determined to bring their conversation to something less frightening.

“It is nice, *Abba*. And the food is very good.”

“You should have Hatot or Kahal up here to clean it,” he suggested as he accidentally kicked a fork across the room.

“But I like to have shiny things like these,” she told him, scooping up the fork and stroking it lovingly. “I have never owned anything. These are mine now.”

Hurt speared Malachi’s chest. She hadn’t owned anything because he’d never given her anything. She deserved possessions just like every other Veilerian. “I’ll have Kahal bring you some catalogs, and you can order anything you want from them,” he promised her solemnly.

She tilted her head to the side. “What’s a catalog?”

He smiled. “It’s a book with pictures of things to buy. If you want something from them, just have Kahal order them for you.”

“That sounds agreeable. Thank you, *Abba*,” she said with a bow of her head. “The shadow still follows you.”

The casual statement raised the hairs on the back of his neck. “Do you know what it is?”

“It hasn’t made up its mind what it wants to do. Sometimes I can almost hear it talking, but it goes away too quickly,” Tia said, the barest hint of frustration coloring her tone. “It’s in danger, too. It knows it’s going to die, that’s why it isn’t sure what to do.”

“Do about what?” he asked almost desperately. Tia’s predictions were always fluid and subject to change, but lately, they’d been too obscure to truly understand.

“Why, whether to kill you or not. It should, but it isn’t sure if it wants to. It’s very confused,” she answered, her voice softening as though in sympathy.

“Do you know who they work for?” he asked excitedly. The assassin was after him! He needed to draw them out, try to capture them and find out what exactly was going on.

Tia shook her head. “No. It’s very frustrating.”

Malachi placed a hand on her shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. “It’s okay, Tia. If you’re meant to know, it’ll come to you.”

Her head turned to look at his hand, which took up a large part of her shoulder. Malachi quickly let go, feeling awkward again. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to touch you,” he told her apologetically.

Her head cocked to the side again. “No, I liked it. It made me feel...” Her voice drifted off as though searching for the word. “Warm here,” she said, placing her hand over her heart.

Shifting his feet, Malachi thought of the similarities between Tia and Lani. They both had no idea what emotions were and no clue how to deal with them. While he knew Tia’s inability to understand emotion hinged from her isolation for hundreds of years, Lani was harder to understand, and he wanted to. Desperately.

“It made you feel comforted,” he told Tia softly, brushing his fingers over her veil. He wished he could see what she looked like. It seemed important to be able to recognize the being who considered him a father. “Will you take this off?”

Her blue eyes considered him thoughtfully before she shook her head. “Not yet. It isn’t time.”

“Okay,” he said gruffly. “Don’t watch that...stuff again, okay? It isn’t appropriate.” He gave her another squeeze on the shoulder before turning away. “Remember to pick whatever you want in the catalogs tomorrow. Clothes, shoes, music, pictures, whatever, okay?”

He sensed that she was pleased. “Yes, *Abba*,” she answered, bowing her head.

As he left the room, his attention was caught on a pile of DVDs in the corner of the room. Wanting to make sure Tia wasn’t going to be watching more porn, he went through the stack. It seemed harmless enough: *Die Hard*, *Talladega Nights*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Underworld*, *Cum Together*...what the hell?

“Where did you get these movies, Tia?” he asked, slipping the porn from the pile.



“Hatot let me borrow his movies.”

Malachi decided he needed to have a talk with his servant about being too helpful. Putting the porn DVDs on the side, he made sure he didn’t skip any. She was certainly physically old enough to watch them, but the innocent glow in her eyes made him feel ridiculously protective of her. He wanted to keep her safe from the nastiness in the world just a little longer.

“I’ll take these for now,” he told Tia wryly. “Get some rest.”

She bowed, a tiny figure draped in black cloth. “Yes, *Abba*. Good evening.”

Malachi stepped out of the room. Looking at the selection of skin flicks in his hand, he began chuckling. Who would’ve thought he’d have to raid his adoptive daughter’s porn pile? Laughter spilled from him as he climbed the steps.

When he paused at the foot of the stairs and glanced at Lani’s door, no one was around to see, or to wonder why he laughed even more.

## Chapter Nine

Shade woke when she felt a slight tingle in the air. Her eyes stretched wide to see in the utter darkness of her room. The tingle grew until it became a low hum.

Swearing, she jackknifed in the luxurious bed the target had given her. She knew what that sound meant. Hurrying into her clothes, she was somewhat prepared for the inverted portal. She was sucked into the screaming chaos the instant the portal opened. Mildly thinking that it was too early in the morning for this shit, Shade relaxed and let it take her. She'd fought one before, back when she'd tried running from Luther, but the ensuing pain hadn't been worth it.

What seemed like hours later, she was deposited on her knees in Luther's private residence. Bloody demon lords were the only ones who could call inverted portals, which meant he could call her to him anytime he wanted.

The hard tiles beneath her knees did little to absorb the shock of bone hitting the ground, yet she wouldn't allow a grimace to cross her face. Luther was watching her even if he wasn't in front of her at the moment.

Taking the short reprieve to look around, she saw he'd called her into a courtyard of some kind. His home was a dark, monastic retreat with only him as its resident. He'd brought her here once, when he'd been in the stages of infatuation. Shade was sure the dungeon still carried the stain of her blood on the stones. Her own mark left on the home of her handler and torturer.

"Why isn't he dead?" Luther asked calmly from somewhere behind her.

Shade didn't bother turning around. He had set her on the floor in this direction for a reason. Turning around would only anger him that much quicker.

"I'm trying to discover his weakness," she answered smoothly.

"You don't need to know his weaknesses to kill him. You were given your orders and haven't fulfilled them." The scrape of foot on stone came from three feet to her left. "Don't you remember what happens when you anger me, Shade?" he whispered in her ear, hot breath bathing her skin. "Do you want to be punished? Is that it, my sweet? You miss the feel of the irons around your neck and my whip on your skin?"

Deep in her gut, a knot of cold fear and revulsion pulsed. Showing no outward reaction, Shade forced her mind to cut off the images his words gave her. She'd lived those images. She didn't want to remember them. Not now. She needed her wits about her if she was going to get away from Luther.

"Lovely Shade. I wasn't ready to turn you over to your assignments. I almost begged the master to let me have you as a reward for my years of service." The back of his hand drifted over her cheek and down her throat to the band of black she'd used to cover her burns. "These bands excite me, Shade. They make me want to chain you again."

Panic clawed at Shade's throat. She wanted to scream in rage, wanted to tear his eyes out. Instead she stared straight ahead, letting him hover over her. His day would come, she knew. He was useful to the master now, but soon he wouldn't be, and when that happened, he would die. And if she was alive to see it, she'd dance a fucking jig over his dead body.

His massive hand encircled her throat, jerking her gaze around to meet his. "You will kill him, Shade." He snapped his fingers and another figure moved into the courtyard.

Shade couldn't see who it was, but she was surprised. Luther never let anyone join in his little games. Her panic blossomed as

Luther ripped her shirt from her body, leaving her in nothing but jeans and a bra. His lips quirked as he inspected her, fingers digging into her neck.

“You always were lovely, such a shame you’re no longer any fun,” he murmured before nodding at whoever stood behind her.

Sudden, searing pain made Shade’s mouth open on a soundless scream. Fire licked up from her shoulder. A brand, they were branding her with super-heated iron. She felt the poison seep into her system through her open flesh. The brander kept pressing, the stench of her burned skin making her stomach twist. Agony hurtled through her body, making her flail and shudder in Luther’s cruel grasp.

“Perfect. Another,” Luther urged his assistant.

Shade struggled in his hold. She’d make him rip her throat out before she’d take another brand. The pain. Oh Gods, the pain! She fought his hold to no avail. She was still too weak and disoriented from the portal.

The fire met the opposite shoulder, searing deep into her tissue. Black dots danced before her eyes as tears trickled down her cheeks. She couldn’t breathe with Luther’s hold on her throat, couldn’t move as the brand marked her with a fiery kiss. The iron was removed, though the pain lingered.

Ice-cold saltwater was poured over both wounds. A scream of agony was trapped in her throat. The salt burned more than the brand had. Weakness flooded her limbs, the black dots turning into waves as darkness crept into her vision.

“You should know better than to defy me, Shade,” Luther whispered against her ear as a lover would. She felt his lips touch the top curve of the appendage then his teeth sank into it sharply. “If the master didn’t want you for himself, I’d keep you here and fuck the assignment.”

She wanted to shudder, wanted to rail at him, but the pain racking her body and Luther’s viselike grip on her neck kept her silent. Shade swore to herself she was going to kill Luther. Forcing her eyes open,

she tilted her head back enough to meet Luther's gaze and let him see the intent in her eyes.

She saw the knowledge of his death in his face. He wasn't scared, wasn't intimidated in the least. If anything, the bastard looked like he anticipated the fight, the light in his eyes both lustful and eager. He dropped her to the ground.

"Don't forget the job, Shade. I might not be so nice next time," he cooed with a kick to her ribs.

Grunting from the blow, Shade ignored him, forcing herself to stand. Shivering from pain and cold, she reached deep in her psyche for the will to summon a portal. Weaving on her feet, she called it forth, thankfully falling into the chaos the instant it appeared. She floated, her body lax from the pain.

Landing on her back, she tried to hold back her scream as the wounds met the soft satin comforter on the bed. Panting with the effort to swallow back more pained sounds, she flopped over to her side and finally her stomach, letting the cool air wash over her skin. It was painful, but less painful than lying on her back.

She pressed her face into the duvet, tears leaking down her face. She'd brought this on herself by trying to be tricky and outmaneuver her superiors. She'd known Luther was going to call her in when the target didn't die. She'd known the punishment was going to be bad, but she'd hoped for more time to come to a decision about the target.

Suddenly the air was filled with the sounds of an alarm. A siren wailed into the stillness of her room. Gathering her willpower, she rolled to her feet, shoulders hunched slightly. One deep breath. Two deep breaths. And she was able to stand upright, clenching her teeth to hold back a grunt.

Walking was torture. There was nothing to help that. She needed to find out what was going on and help if she could. Teetering on shaky legs, she found another shirt, biting back a cry as she pulled it on. She wished she would've had time to at least treat the burns, as

the shirt would stick to them, but wishes weren't for her. Grabbing her retractable sword and throwing knives, she strode out the door.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi was in the great room when the alarms went off. Striding to his security command center, he nodded to Callas, who was speaking into his earpiece.

"We have twenty-five intruders," Callas informed Malachi as he deftly switched the security cameras to show the force fighting the outside guards. "They came through the garden."

Frowning at the monitors, Malachi watched as, one-by-one, his guards were felled. His hands fisted. The guards weren't for more than the appearance of security. They weren't well trained, or even bright, but he hadn't been able to force them into the limbo between the Veilerian and Eturian societies. He'd taken them in, showed them how to keep watch, and left them alone.

"How did they get past the wards?" he asked Callas. Like any intelligent landowner, he'd had his land warded within an inch of his life, and they should've held considering how much he'd spent on them.

"They've either got a witch or a warmage with them," Callas said apologetically. "It would have taken time to break the ward, but if they've been at it long enough, it could happen."

"I'm going to help them," Malachi stated with another glance at the monitor. He couldn't sit back and watch his people get hurt trying to protect him.

Stalking from the room, he bypassed several frantic servants. Commanding them to the panic room in the cellar, he raced upstairs to find Tia and Lani.

Tia was standing in her doorway, head cocked to the side.

"They won't get inside," she said confidently as he hurried towards her.

He stopped at her words. “They won’t?”

She shook her head. “There won’t be much of them left soon. If you don’t hurry, you won’t get any.”

“What the—” he began as he turned back down the hall. Who would be able to demolish a force that size?

A sudden scream of pain from outside made him forget about wondering who it was. He needed to save his people. Stopping on the fifteenth stair, he tapped on a panel in the woodwork. Smiling in satisfaction as it slid back to reveal a cache of weapons, he chose two knives and a sword.

Hurrying down the remaining steps, he threw open the front door. At first, his eyes had to adjust to the blazing ball of sun as it hovered above the skyline. Dawn was breaking, casting strange shadows over the front lawn. He slipped the knives into his belt loops. He hadn’t been prepared for this confrontation, and he cursed himself for not being dressed more appropriately.

“This is what happens when you become complacent, old boy,” he murmured as he turned his head left, then right, looking for the invaders.

A body hurtled around the corner of the house. Dark and hulking, it paused when it saw Malachi standing in the doorway looking like a relaxed lord of the manor. The pause didn’t last long though as it shot across the lawn, straight for him.

Teeth gleaming in a parody of a smile, Malachi met his attacker, not caring the demon was over a foot taller than he. Flipping the demon to the ground in a move too swift for him to counter, Malachi buried the sword in its chest.

Sounds of fighting tickled his ears, drawing him to the corner of the house. Lani was there, moving like a phantom around a group of eight demons. They were lightning fast, striking out at her with massive fists and uttered spells, but she was faster. Malachi gaped, not sure he was even needed.

As he watched, one demon fell to the ground with a gurgling cry, blood from his slit throat spraying his comrades. Another demon cried out as his distraction cost him his life. He, too, fell to the ground.

“Spread out!” one of the more intelligent demons shouted, finally figuring out Lani was taking them out one-by-one because they were all crowded together.

They still hadn’t noticed him, so Malachi strode forward, exchanging his sword for the knives. Thus armed, he leapt into the fray, stabbing one demon in the heart while slitting another’s throat. That was four down, four to go.

\* \* \* \*

Shade paused to watch the target fight. She’d always assumed he sent his minions out to fight for him, but that assumption was completely unjustified. He moved like liquid silk, changing position to stab one demon while grappling with another. He didn’t appear to take much satisfaction in the killings, though he never slowed his deadly dance across the lawn.

Gravel crunching under foot was all the warning Shade had as a battle-axe whistled over her head. Dropping to the ground and kicking her legs out, she crushed the demon’s testicles. He let out a high-pitched gasp as he fell. Flipping to her feet, Shade grabbed him by the hair, pulling his head back.

“Who do you work for?” she whispered to him, her knife perched on his Adam’s apple. If Luther had sent someone to finish her job after that little interlude at his house, she’d geld him.

His throat bobbed under her blade as tears of fear leaked from his eyes. “Roberts, Sharon Roberts,” he whispered, his eyes widening as he caught something behind Shade.

Letting go of her captive and rolling in the opposite direction, she saw the intelligent demon lob off the head of her captive. Knowing it



hadn't been an accident, but a calculated kill, Shade sprang to her feet with knife in hand.

The intelligent demon smiled coldly. "You won't have time to share that information with anyone, fairy." He hefted his axe in his hands. "I've always wanted to split a fairy and see if magic dust spilled out."

"And I've always wanted to have a demon head as a car ornament. It's too bad for both of us we don't always get what we want," she retorted, ducking under the axe.

It caught her, though, a sharp pain tearing over her shoulder and down her arm. Hissing, she ignored the injury. Evading the swinging axe, she managed to step into him, burying her knife in his heart. Twisting it for good measure, she pushed the demon away.

"Nice," the target said from behind her.

Turning carefully to avoid pulling at her burns, Shade faced the target, wondering how he'd managed to fight so viciously yet keep his hair from being mussed up.

"You didn't do too bad yourself."

"How many left?" he asked as he glanced around the lawn.

"I think these were the last unless some got by me and your guards."

He raised an eyebrow. "Let's go take a look," he suggested, bowing slightly and gesturing her to lead the way.

Shade would've shrugged in pretended indifference, but the wounds on her back and the new slice on her shoulder made movement difficult. She hadn't felt the burns so much while battle lust roared through her, but now the fight was over, the pain was excruciating. She stalked ahead of him, digging her fingernails into her palms to keep from letting out pained sounds.

She shouldn't have fought so hard, but something had demanded she protect the target. The group of demons had attacked in a specific pattern, going for the weaker guards first, and overpowering the more

experienced once. When she'd arrived on the scene, the demons had lost only four, while the target's guards were down nine.

The sight of the helpless Halflings had brought forth the fury she'd always kept in careful check. She'd fought with the more experienced guards, helping them bring down twelve more demons. The remaining had run for the front of the house. Shade had ordered the guards to help their fallen and hurried after them.

"Master," a voice called, snapping Shade out of her reverie. One of the target's guards stood at attention, his ruddy face filled with outrage and pain. "We lost twelve."

"Damn," the target bit out, his face suddenly looking weary. He gripped the guard's shoulder. "I want their names and familial information. I'll take care of them."

"Yes, master," the guard said humbly. "If it hadn't been for the fairy, we'd probably all be dead." He turned to Shade, bowing deeply. "You have my deepest thanks, milady."

Shade nodded, not wanting to make more of it than it was. How could she, when she'd been sent to kill their leader just as the demons had?

"Get this cleaned up. Call Maia and have her tend the injured. I'll find someone to reinforce the wards," the target ordered, nodding when the guard bowed again before hurrying off.

He sighed, his face lined with pain as he watched the guards gently lift their fallen friends. "I hate war, Lani. It's ugly and it makes no damn sense."

Shade didn't answer since she happened to agree with him. In spite of the life she led, she hated the violence in which they lived, but praying for peace was hopeless.

"You don't say much, do you?" he asked harshly as the silence stretched between them.

She gave a brief shake of her head. Now that the excitement had passed, her body was feeling every ache and pain. Shade needed to

get to the privacy of her room before she passed out. She didn't want to be vulnerable in front of this male.

"If you'll excuse me, I need to clean my weapons," she said coldly, turning on her heel and walking away.

She felt his eyes piercing her back as she entered into the house, but she didn't slow. Black dots danced in her vision again. She had a very limited time before she lost consciousness.

## Chapter Ten

Malachi watched Lani walk away as though she didn't have a care in the world, as though it hadn't bothered her to kill as many as she had. Maybe it didn't bother her, maybe she was as cold as she seemed. It bothered him, though. Losing his men for no apparent reason hurt him more than he would ever admit. They had been simple people who only wanted to aid the Halfling cause in some way. They'd followed him, and he was responsible for their deaths.

Sighing deeply, he rubbed the back of his neck. There were no easy solutions to the "cause." Without the full support of the Veil, Halflings would always be treated differently because they didn't fit in with their parental groups. Unless their parents made an effort to support them, there was nothing for them to look forward to except joining the Guardian Guild. Unfortunately, there weren't always enough jobs to go around.

Malachi bowed his head, feeling defeat weigh heavily on his shoulders. Something on the ground near his feet caught his attention. Crouching down, he saw it was some kind of fluid. He touched his middle finger to it. Blood. Still slightly warm. His head rose like a predator on the hunt. Lani.

Roaring as primitive instincts pushed his rational mind to the side, Malachi stormed into the mansion. He ignored the servants milling about in the foyer, taking the stairs two at a time. Blood trickled up the stairs. She'd been wounded fighting for him! His heart pounded with possessive outrage.

Her door was locked, but that meant nothing to him in his state. With one powerful kick to the latch beneath the doorknob, the door

sprang open, bouncing off the wall behind it. Lani was curled up on the floor. She hadn't made it to the bed before collapsing.

Malachi rushed into the room, falling to his knees beside her. A small puddle of blood had pooled on the floor beneath her. He cursed the black she constantly wore. If he'd have seen the blood, he wouldn't have allowed her out of his sight for one second.

He wanted to move her but feared causing her pain.

"Hatot!" he roared through the open door. "Get me the damn first aid kit again!"

The servant's faint answer came back. Satisfied that something was going according to plan, he gently eased Lani to her back. Her face was pale, the silver faded to a chalky gray beneath the streaks of blood.

"Son of a bitch," he whispered as he pushed her hair out of her face. She seemed too fragile to bear this kind of wound.

Taking care to lift her carefully, he slid one arm under her knees and the other under her shoulders. A piercing shriek met his attempts to lift her.

"Lani, what is it? Where else are you hurt?" he asked urgently.

Her eyes were half-open and dull with pain. "No lift. Leave me," she rasped through dry, chapped lips.

"Bullshit." He tugged her clothes off. He would find out where else she was injured.

"No," she insisted, batting at his hands.

"I need to see where else you're injured, sweet. I promise I'll make it quick."

Ignoring her further attempts to push his hands away, he tried to pull her shirt up, but the blood had soaked it making it hard to maneuver without hurting her more. Seeing one of her knives tucked into a hip holster, he unsheathed it and cut the cloth off her torso. Blood had stained her skin, dripping like obscene graffiti over the mounds of flesh rising from her bra. Pushing away the surge of desire he felt at seeing her bared, he pulled the shredded T-shirt from her.

Breath hissed out of his mouth when he saw the slice on the top of her shoulder. It began at her collarbone and slashed downward towards her elbow. Stitches, he thought with a churning stomach. She'd need stitches.

Malachi shook his head. He needed to assess the other injuries. Crawling to her other side, he gently pushed her away from him to see her back.

"Fuck!"

She had two brands on her back. Someone had marked the Greek letter Delta into her flesh on either side of her shoulder blades. He cursed again, coaxing her over onto her stomach. Bile rose in his throat. He remembered seeing brands like this on some of the older Halflings who'd come from Greece. It was the mark of a slave, and someone had put them into this brave fairy's flesh as though she were cattle.

"Master," Hatot said hesitantly from the doorway, his huge eyes taking in the female and the brands. "Should I call a healer?"

"Yes, call Piper and find out which healer she used for her father. I want them here now."

"Yes, master," Hatot said softly, placing the first aid kit next to Lani's body. With another surprised look at the bared flesh of her back, he turned and ran out of the room.

The brands were obscene on the surface of her back, but as he studied her more closely, he saw faint scars feathering down her silvery skin. She'd been tortured repeatedly. The scars appeared to be from a whip, though he didn't know of any that would permanently scar a fairy. Like most Veilerians, fairies healed supernaturally fast and usually without scarring.

Digging in the first aid kit, he found some surgical gauze. Knowing he could do nothing for the brands, he pressed the gauze against the slash on her shoulder. While he waited for the blood flow to slow, he stared at the profile turned towards him.

Lani had to be an amazingly strong woman to have endured the pain of branding and then fought like a devil with no thought for her wounds. Brushing his knuckle against her velvety cheek, he wondered how she'd come to be so self-sacrificing. She hadn't made a single sound of distress downstairs, hadn't hinted about her wounds.

Malachi wasn't sure how long he stayed with her, staring at her and cleaning the wound on her arm. He didn't even care how long he'd watched over her. For such a delicate woman, she managed to pack a wallop on his emotions. It was scary and exhilarating all at once.

"You called for a healer?" a female voice said from the doorway.

Snarling instinctively, Malachi hunched over Lani. Reason trickled into his brain. He'd told Hatot to call a witch. Right. The plump little female in his doorway looked vaguely familiar, and he searched his brain for her name. She'd helped Piper's father recover from a poisoning two years ago. Dinah!

"Dinah, you have my gratitude for showing up so soon," he said solicitously. "I need you to heal her."

Dinah tiptoed into the room, coming to hover over him and Lani, making little *tsk* noises in her throat.

"Put her on the bed please," she commanded with a wave of her hand.

Malachi gingerly lifted Lani, her tiny body draped face down over his arms. He did his best to ignore the soft breasts under his hand and placed her on the bed.

"Now, leave so I can take care of her." Dinah rolled up the sleeves of her body-hugging dress, bustling around the room. "Hatot told me someone named Tia has been asking for you."

"Damn," Malachi muttered. He wanted to stay with Lani. He softly brushed a tendril of hair away from her cheek, the silky strands catching on his fingers.

"Go on, she'll be fine."

With a heavy sigh, Malachi did as he was told. As he closed the door, he promised himself he'd check on Lani just as soon as things settled down. He'd also find out how she'd gotten the brands when she hadn't left the house since the night before. If he had a traitor in his midst, their ass was fried.

\* \* \* \*

Shade groaned. Pain roiled deep in her body, causing her to ache.

"Don't move just yet, miss. You've been out for three hours, a few more minutes won't make any difference," a soft voice said from somewhere overhead.

Trying to analyze her position, Shade realized she was facedown on a bed. She didn't remember getting there. The last thing she recalled was staggering up the steps, into her room, and then utter blackness.

The helplessness of her position didn't escape her. She wanted to move away from the calming coolness at her back, but it felt so good. She didn't feel hands on her, just a gentle wind that penetrated the branded flesh. It spiraled deep into the wounds, easing the nerves screaming for relief.

"Thank you," she whispered to the angel healing her. Tears leaked from her eyes. They trickled down her cheeks. Little trails of salty fluid she hadn't shed for anything but torture. Now, she cried from relief.

She floated in a fog of peace. It was calming, soothing. Shade wanted to stay there forever. The fight she'd taken part in seemed like a distant memory. Luther's mini-torture was no more than a vague impression. She was surrounded by the spicy, citrus scent of her target.

Here, in this fog, she dared to call him by name. Malachi. Warmth embraced her. The kiss she'd shared with him lit a small fire in her chest. Why had she done that? Why had she accepted his kiss? She



finally admitted it to herself—she'd wanted to know what a kiss tasted like. More importantly, she'd wanted to know what *his* kiss tasted like.

Shade sighed, feeling a point of fire on her hand. It wasn't an uncomfortable sensation. The heat traveled up her arm to join the first fire in her chest. She instinctively knew Malachi was with her. There was some relief in finally calling him by name, at least in her mind.

Her brain, overactive since her body was motionless, spewed forth memories. Memories of what had happened the last time she'd trusted someone, the last time she cared for someone.

She moaned as images bombarded her mind, dispelling the peace. Flashes of Luther when she first joined his ranks filled her head. Charming, he'd set his sights on her, singling her out for attention.

*Walking back from a rough training session, Shade ran into Luther, trying not to stare at his handsome face. He was always watching her, but she didn't know why.*

*"Noelani," he said, smiling broadly. "Take tea with me. There are some things I'd like to speak with you about."*

*She bit her lip. He was attractive, one of the best instructors, and even if this wasn't the life she'd wanted for herself, she was determined to make the best of it. If Luther was going out of his way to give her some extra pointers, who was she to turn him away?*

*"That sounds nice," she whispered shyly.*

*The tea had been good, the conversation informative and thrilling. Luther explained to her how he wanted to take over her training personally.*

*"You're going to be one of the best," he'd said, his eyes twinkling. "You can probably get there all on your own, but I can make it happen a lot sooner."*

*"Really?" she'd squeaked, her heart pounding. It was considered one of the highest honors to have an instructor take a personal interest in a student. That he thought she could become one of the best was a balm to her sore feelings. "I'd like that."*

*It began slowly. They met after Noelani spent all day training with the other recruits. Her body bruised and sore, she'd meet with Luther to learn the tricks of the trade. He never asked for anything in return, but he watched her expectantly. She knew he was waiting for her to fail or cry off, which she would never do. She was going to be the best, and her parents would mourn the day they sold their daughter to the Assassins.*

*Then it happened. Noelani had trained with Luther for two months before the first beating occurred.*

*She'd failed to block a high kick. Something she'd done very rarely, but Luther had flown into a rage. One second she'd been on her feet, and in the next, she woke up in the infirmary. The witches told her she had a ruptured spleen, eight cracked ribs, and a concussion. Luther apologized profusely. He hadn't meant to hurt her. Noelani had accepted his apology and waved off the incident as an accident.*

*The next time, they'd been having dinner together. It had become a habit for them to eat after a training session, and Noelani held those private meals close to her heart. Even though he was training her and fraternizing wasn't allowed, Luther had won her over. She was head over heels in love with him. She'd planned to tell him that night. Instead, they argued about her continued lessons with the rest of the recruits.*

*Luther wanted her to be placed solely in his hands, but Noelani believed there was still a lot to be learned from the other instructors. She never saw his fist, but she woke up in iron shackles. She'd screamed in agony for hours as the iron burned the flesh of her neck and wrists. When Luther released her, he'd had tears in his eyes. It was all part of her training, he swore, brushing her tears from her face.*

*Her heart bruised just as badly as her body was burned, Noelani had accepted his apology, wanting nothing more than to have Luther's love. She'd stupidly believed he would never hurt her again.*

“No,” she whimpered. She didn’t want to think about it, didn’t want to remember that night. The night she’d gone from being Noelani Fayard to becoming Shade. Her brain continued to flip through the images.

*“The Overlord has agreed to release you into my custody, Noelani,” Luther informed her, his face bright with pleasure.*

*She beamed with pleasure. Finally, Luther would take her to his home forever. She could stay at his keep and guide the servants, taking her place as mistress of his home. She sighed happily.*

*Things began well. She was pleased to be the woman caring for his home. She didn’t even mind the verbal lashings he gave her when something wasn’t to his standards. It was her fault for not making sure his home was perfect. She worked harder at giving him exactly what he needed. He wanted to move their relationship to the next level, wanted to bed her, and though she allowed him liberties with her body, she’d never let him breach her maidenhead.*

*Then he stopped being patient. All it had taken was one small smile from a servant, and Noelani’s world blew up in her face.*

*“You whore! You think I don’t know what the servants want to do to you?” he shouted, grabbing her arms to jerk her forward. “They want to fuck you, but you’re mine. You’ll always belong to me, and I’m going to show you why.”*

*She’d fought, but her strength had never been enough to save her from Luther’s cruel grips. He’d dragged her to his “special” chamber. It was the same room he’d chained her in, and the return to that darkness caused panic to fill her. She fought harder. He just tightened his arms around her, his heart pounding a rapid tattoo against her shoulder. The gleam of madness and a strange affection filled his eyes.*

*She was in chains, the iron burning her again as he stripped the clothes from her body. Noelani squirmed and kicked at him, fear choking her. The lust in his eyes as he gazed upon her naked body*

*told her exactly what he was going to do. She fought on instinct alone and she knew it wouldn't be enough.*

*He fell on her, fists as large as her face pounding at her body. Blood flowed, bones cracked, and blackness sucked at her. Luther wouldn't let her go under though. He revived her, leaving her crumpled on the ground while he undressed. His covetous eyes roamed over her colorful bruises and bloodied body. His face softened even while his body hardened before her puffy eyes.*

*"No," she gurgled, blood trickling out of her mouth. She didn't want this. Didn't want him. The void called to her again, but Luther must've seen it, because he broke two of her fingers to call her back.*

*"You're going to stay right here with me, my love," he whispered as he arranged her body in a position he found pleasing.*

*She shook her head, her useless limbs splayed out like a sacrifice. Her hoarse voice screamed for mercy, called out for help from someone, anyone. But no one showed.*

*He'd destroyed something inside her that day, killed her innocence in more ways than one. When he'd finished with her seventy-two hours later, not a single spot on her body had been left unmarked and her soul had been shredded beyond redemption. That was also when he cast the spell that bound her to him for eternity. The anticipation on his face as he'd filled the vial with her blood was forever etched in her memory.*

*Noelani died that first night. Over the next fifty-three years in Luther's personal service, Shade emerged. She never forgot the price of vulnerability, never allowed anyone close. She was cold and logical. The Shade was Luther's creation, and he was scared of it even while he reveled in it. The beatings, the rapes, the tortures by his hand had forged an ice-cold instrument of death.*

*She could never forget that.*

*The peace gone, Shade lay still as death, letting the coldness replace the warmth of Malachi's presence. She'd never let another close to her. She couldn't afford to.*

## **Chapter Eleven**

“What happened to you?” he asked in a rough whisper.

He sat at her bedside while Dinah finished the last of the healing rites. The witch had done a wonderful job as far as he could see. Lani’s shoulder was almost completely healed while the brands on her back were already scabbing over.

Once Dinah had finished healing her, he questioned her about the brands.

“They’re fresh,” the witch said in a disgusted tone. Her brown eyes filled with fire. “They’re no more than five hours old, and whoever did it used iron and saltwater to make them scar.”

Malachi cast his gaze over the faint lash marks on her back. Iron was the only thing that could scar Fey, but adding saltwater ensured the scarring went deeper. Fury built in his chest.

“The Delta symbol indicates slavery, but the double mark means she’s a slave in this lifetime and in the After,” the witch continued, meeting his eyes steadily. “The After is where Fey believe they go when they die. She also has shackle burns on her neck and wrists. She’s been tortured frequently in her life.”

“Who—” he began, unable to get the words passed the choking feeling in his throat.

Dinah shook her head. “I have no idea. The torture could’ve happened in her youth, or a week ago. Fairies don’t heal like the rest of us.” She tilted her head thoughtfully. “These...look similar to markings I’ve seen on some of the captured Eturian soldiers I’ve treated over the years.”

Malachi said nothing, just stared down at the tiny figure in the bed. He remembered the Greek Halflings he'd seen years ago while he was in the Eturian army. He'd seen ugly, horrible things in those days. The markings were merely another reminder of what he was responsible for. For Lani to have them, though, he frowned. Had she been captured by the Eturians at some point? Could that be where all of her scars came from? Thoughts turned over in his head, but he was jerked out of them when Dinah spoke again.

"Whatever happened to her, she has a lot of pain buried deep. The wounds will heal," Dinah quickly assured him when his eyes widened. "She'll heal physically, Malachi, but her emotional and mental wounds are much deeper."

The pain in his chest intensified. Now that he knew about the marks she kept hidden from him with her bands of leather, he no longer found them sexy. There was nothing attractive about mental and emotional anguish in the physical form. So he sat at her bedside, gently stroking her hair and hand, wishing he could remove all her hurts.

She studied him carefully. "You know, I wasn't going to help her when I found out you were the one requesting me. I'm glad I did, though."

"Why?"

She smiled softly. "Because I finally realized what Piper and Connor see in you. You are an honorable male," Dinah said with a little bow. "I hope you find the redemption you're searching for, Malachi Cromwell. Blessed be."

He grunted at her, earning a laugh as she walked out.

Looking back at Lani, he couldn't deny this fairy had some kind of strange hold on him. If he were a betting kind of Halfling, he'd almost believe she was his mate, but since his life was too fucked up right now to deal with a relationship, he pushed the thought away.

She began to twitch, her eyes moving rapidly behind her lids as she dreamed. Malachi continued holding her hand as she fought

invisible demons, her hoarse cries unintelligible to him as she spoke in a language he couldn't understand. He didn't need to know the words, because the torment in her face spoke clearly.

He waited with bated breath, hoping she'd wake up from the dreams, but she didn't. Instead, her body went strangely still and cold no matter how many blankets he piled on her. He'd even crawled in the bed with her to loan her his body heat. Nothing worked.

Scared for reasons he didn't care to contemplate, he shouted for Dinah, who ran back into the room and checked Lani over. Physically, nothing was wrong with her, the witch told him with a shrug. Dinah left again to finish looking over his injured guards, leaving Malachi staring at Lani with a strange pain in his chest.

Malachi knew he didn't have time to help this Guardian with her problems. His deal with the Council was good only so long as he produced, otherwise he'd be shipped off to the nearest maximum security prison. Then everything he'd done over the last six years would be for nothing. His followers would be disbanded and imprisoned, and their cause would die.

Letting go of Lani's hand was hard, but he forced himself to. He leaned back in his chair, pressing his fingers to his closed eyes. So much was riding on his success. Lucian had done what he could to smooth the way, but the rest was up to Malachi.

The question now was who had given her the brands and how? He'd reviewed every monitor, looking for the moment she'd left the house, but she never had. Despite his worry for her, something niggled at the back of his mind, urging him to view her wounds in a new light.

It seemed too coincidental that she came to harm immediately before the compound was infiltrated. Suspicion wormed its way through his more tender emotions. Could she have been sent in to spy on him and tell her leaders how to attack?

Opening his eyes, he studied her still form. He tapped his finger on his bottom lip as he thought. She'd shown up right after Lucian put

in his request. She was a skilled killer who held the markings of a slave. What did it all mean? He was going to find out. He just needed the perfect bait.

Malachi stood over the bed, his mind and heart at war. His heart told him Lani was a victim who needed his protection, while his head warned him not to do anything to jeopardize his future.

He left the room deep in thought. Tia was standing in her doorway looking at him. He wanted to keep going until he reached his suite of rooms, but the way she stood told him she was excited about something.

“Tia? Is something the matter?” he asked once he was in range.

“No, *Abba*. I just wished to let you know I’ve picked what I want.”

Malachi stared at her blankly until he remembered his promise from the night before. “Right!” he said with forced heartiness. “Where are your catalogs? I’ll have Hatot or Kahal order whatever you marked down.”

Her head tilted to the side as she studied him. “You are not happy, *Abba*. Why are you lying to me?”

“Lying?” Malachi’s mind went blank.

“I know you are troubled, yet you are smiling. Why are you lying with your face?” she asked curiously.

His face cleared as he caught what she was saying. “It isn’t a lie, Tia. I’m pretending. I’m glad you found things you want, I just have a lot on my mind.”

She nodded. “Yes, the fairy. She’s pretty. Will you keep her?”

Blood rushed to his cheeks. “Um. You’d know that better than me,” he said jokingly. She knew the future, and if she didn’t know if Lani was going to stay with him, he sure as hell didn’t.

“I already looked, but it’s dark. I can’t see anything about her.”

“That’s strange, isn’t it? You’ve always been able to see someone if you focus.” He frowned deeply. He didn’t like that Lani might not have a future.



“There are too many things left open to see, *Abba*. There are a lot of decisions that haven’t been made yet.” Her blue eyes flickered as she peered into the future. “Your brother is about to call.”

The phone rang.

“Yeah,” Malachi growled into the phone with a stern look at Tia before he turned away.

“We just heard what happened. Is everyone okay?”

Scowling down the hallway towards Lani’s door, Malachi thought about what to tell Lucian. He didn’t want to voice his suspicions about her just yet. Lucian would attempt to ride to the rescue, and he wasn’t ready to get rid of Lani.

“Yeah, everyone’s fine. We lost a few men, but their families are being taken care of,” he muttered, hauling ass to his private rooms.

“Good, good.” Lucian sounded distracted and thoughtful.

Malachi pondered the importance of his brother’s mood as he entered his suite. He’d had the entire top floor remodeled, making the rooms bigger. The walls between two bedrooms had been knocked down to make his sitting room large enough to hold the massive rows of monitors where he watched the house.

Bypassing the comfortable chairs, he headed straight for the bar. He poured a good measure of Scotch, which he downed hurriedly.

He braced himself. “You’re not usually so quiet when you call. What’s going on?”

Lucian took a deep breath as though gathering his thoughts. Knowing he wasn’t going to like what was coming, Malachi poured another drink, this time taking it to the beat-up leather recliner he kept solely for relaxing.

“I know you have a lot going on right now. I wouldn’t have called if I thought you wouldn’t want to know right away,” his brother began, his voice strangely hesitant.

“Cut the crap, what happened?” Malachi asked harshly.

“We found out where Pascal is.”

A thrill of anticipation traveled up and down his spine. His heart pounded with the need to hunt, but he kept his voice calm. "That's good. Where?"

"Not yet, Malachi," Lucian said warningly. "I want your promise you won't go alone."

Not bothering to hold back his curse, Malachi took another gulp of his drink, feeling the burn as it eased down his throat. He should've known Lucian would put conditions on the information.

His hand tightened around the crystal of his snifter. "Fine. I won't go alone."

"You'll take the Guardian with you?"

Remembering the wounds his little Guardian was sporting, Malachi cursed out loud. "She's hurt." He didn't explain further, not wanting to tell Lucian about the brands on her back.

"Then wait until she's healed before looking for Pascal," his brother said easily.

"Fine! Tell me where." His voice was harsh with anger and desperation. He was so close to finding the rest of the generals.

Lucian was quiet for several minutes. "Pascal is now *Satricarion* of a pack of Satyrs in Arizona. They relocated there sometime earlier this year. He's been keeping a low profile, which is why it took Ruby's family so long to track him down. Unfortunately for him, he came across a group of Amazons one night, insulted them, and they took him for tithing. He was released about a week ago."

"Good." Malachi's mind was already busy calculating Pascal's strength after giving his tithe to the Amazons who'd captured him. Tithes were paid by males to Amazon tribes they insulted which could be anything from manual labor to servicing whichever Amazons took a liking to them. "Do we know what his tithe was?"

Lucian's voice was rich with amusement. "Ah, it seems Pascal came to the attention of Vandal the Violent and spent two weeks in her tent."

Harsh laughter burst out of Malachi before he could stop it. Vandal was a terror according to what his sister-in-law's family told him. She was nearly seven feet of pure muscle and bad attitude. "Did he walk out of there or was he carried?"

"He walked. Very slowly."

They both laughed. Amusement eased some of the anger in Malachi's chest, making him sigh. "Damn, Luc. You ruined my bad mood."

"That's what little brothers are for," Lucian quipped, his voice light with relief and laughter. "I'll e-mail you the information we have on Pascal's hangouts. I'd suggest giving him a few more days to get used to being away from Vandal before going after him."

"You think he's worried she liked him so much she'll come back for seconds?"

A huff of laughter carried over the line. "Word is Vandal was so impressed by his, um, charm, she mentioned keeping him."

Malachi finished his drink, plunking the crystal on the polished table next to him. "That's too bad. After I'm finished with him, I doubt he'll be of any use to her."

Lucian was quiet for a moment. "Have a care, brother. You don't want to fall back into old habits. Get your information from him, and send him to Council for punishment."

He heard the warning in his brother's tone but ignored it. Pascal would give him what information he needed, or he would die.

\* \* \* \*

Shade lay in bed, her face pressed against the coolness of the pillow. Her body was a maze of pain, but she could think through it. She had to.

Luther's brands meant one thing—he was going to plead with his master for her after her usefulness had ended. She knew without even looking at the marks that they were the brands of slave. He'd once

threatened her with the punishment but hadn't wanted to leave identifying marks upon her body. Well, more than he already had.

Now that he'd made punishment reality, she had to move fast. There would be no escaping him, not with his abilities to portal her directly to him, but she could do what she'd set out to do in the first place.

She ignored the pain as she pushed herself into a kneeling position on the bed. She was weak, but a night of moonbathing should help her heal quicker.

Black spots swam in her vision as she eased onto the floor. Her legs wobbled. Grasping the post nearest to her, she clung to it until she was steadier on her feet. Her every breath seemed to pull at the burns on her back, a taunting pain.

Shade wasn't sure how long she stood there, but it was enough to make her shiver in the cool night air. She needed to get outside without being seen.

Slow, halting steps brought her to the window. She peered out. The grounds were quiet, peaceful after the violence they had seen. She wasn't sure what day it was or how long she had been out. Not that it mattered. She needed to heal and find out more about her target. If there was the slightest chance he wasn't working against the Veil, she would aid him until Luther called her.

The sight of the moonlight bathing the garden below in silvery light made her ache to be outside. With a careful study of the gardens, she saw no guards about. Good.

She opened the window, hoping the target hadn't installed an electronic alarm system. When it swung open without a sound, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Shade closed her eyes, letting her body dissipate into shadow. The coolness and familiarity of her other form gave her a small thrill of satisfaction. No matter what, Luther had never been able to harm her shadow self. Instead, he'd kept her bathed in light, dispelling any lingering darkness so she had no place to hide.

Forcing herself to forget about those dark days, Shade slipped through the window and coasted in the sheltering gloom of the house. She wafted along until she was deep in the garden below her window.

Once she was far enough away from the house where no one could see her from the windows, she slipped out of the shadows. Carefully stripping her panties from her body, she unfurled her wings.

Spying a bench in the center of the circle of roses and jasmine, she sat down. Head tilted back and wings spread wide, she reclined in the moonlight, feeling its healing rays soak into her skin.

## Chapter Twelve

Malachi normally didn't walk around the garden maze behind his home, but he was restless. The previous night had given him information about Pascal that he couldn't use right away. His promise to Lucian ate at him, as did Lani's continued illness.

She hadn't moved one inch last night, nor had she budged during the day. Dinah suggested her body was in a deep healing sleep and she'd wake up when she was ready. He didn't like that. He wanted Lani awake. He told himself it was so they could go after Pascal, but his heart knew it was because he wanted to be sure she was going to be all right.

Malachi sighed roughly and turned a corner in the maze. He didn't know why he'd had the stupid thing built, except he liked looking at it from his suite. It was soothing to watch the flowers bloom, to smell their sweet scents.

He smiled as he plucked a rose. Tia had suggested the garden might be a good place to find his calm again. She'd had a lot to say actually. The first of her packages had arrived earlier in the day and she'd demanded he show her how to use an MP3 player, a computer, and camera. Then he'd had to sit down and watch *Steel Magnolias* with her. If he wasn't mistaken, she'd cried, but since she still wore the veil, it was hard to tell.

His little pet had become a member of his household. She ate everything his cook prepared for her, demanded Kahal and Hatot watch movies with her, and asked for opinions on clothing she wanted to order. His credit card had taken a large hit from her shopping spree, but he didn't mind in the least.

Just then he spotted something gleaming in the moonlit garden. Frowning, he peered through a trellis lined with wisteria and jasmine. His eyes widened as he saw Lani in all her naked glory posed on the bench at the heart of the maze.

He should stride forward and demand she go back to bed. She needed rest. His rational mind knew this, but his primal urges surged forward.

Her head was tipped back, her hands resting on the bench behind her, which thrust her full breasts upward. Her wings were spread wide behind her, fluttering gently. His gaze traveled over the body reclining before him, trailing from her silvery throat to the nest of white curls between her legs.

His mouth went dry then flooded with moisture as he stared. She hadn't pressed her knees together. Her legs were sprawled open, giving him a glimpse of the tender flesh of her womanhood below her curls. Malachi's mouth watered.

He wanted.

His fangs sprang forth.

He needed.

Lani's breasts rose as she took a deep breath.

He would have.

\* \* \* \*

Shade breathed a sigh of relief as the pain of her brands faded away. The moon's glow had done what she'd hoped it would. Now she could continue her assignment without pain. She still didn't know what she was going to tell the target. He would want to know how she came by the brands, but there was no way she could tell him the truth.

She heaved another sigh. Her mind had been quiet since her forced sleep. She thanked whatever gods had given her peace even while she knew it wouldn't last. Tomorrow she'd present herself to the target and demand they start searching for those generals more

actively. She'd translate the logbook for him, hopefully earning more of his trust.

Something disturbed her peaceful reverie and her eyes snapped open. She immediately saw red eyes gleaming at her through a fall of thick flowers. A strange sensation crawled down her spine, making her shiver. Her nipples tightened, and a low growl came from the direction of the trellis.

Shade knew she should cover up, run, fight, do something, but she held stock-still as the eyes began to maneuver around the trellis. Those eyes never wavered once. They pinned her in place until the male stepped into the moonlight.

His face seemed carved from ivory, startling against the darkness of his hair and the crimson of his eyes. She shivered again, alien warmth stealing through her body. Those eyes. They raked her from head to toe, pausing on the tips of her breasts, lingering on the private flesh between her legs. They stroked her with heat, causing her breath to catch in her throat.

"What do you want?" she croaked, startled to hear her voice sounding breathless. She cleared her throat, sitting up, her wings wrapping around her naked body protectively.

He growled, stalking forward slowly. His shoulders were tight. His chest expanded and deflated with every harsh breath.

For the first time since she'd become the Shade, she felt vulnerable. Her breath sped up. She felt feminine. Her body tensed the closer he got. She should run. He wasn't in his right mind. Neither was she. Her body was once again acting on its own, moisture seeping between her legs.

She licked her lips. "What are you doing here?" She tried again.

He never paused in his forward movement, reaching up as he tore off his shirt. Shade's eyes widened at the beauty of his torso. No scars marred his chest. The light dusting of hair across his pectoral muscles only enhanced her awe. Her gaze followed the trail of hair over



stomach muscles that rippled with his every step. His hands went to the waist of his trousers, tearing the belt from the loops viciously.

The leather went flying, but she couldn't take her eyes off of the target as he closed on her. Her body shook with a strange emotion, and her breath rasped loudly in her ears. He stopped for a split second. The trousers fell to the ground and were kicked away as he stalked forward.

Shade felt her mouth fall open in surprise and awe. He was beautiful. Her heart pounded. His legs were leanly muscled, the long ropes of sinew twisting and relaxing as he stalked ever closer. But it was the sight of his erection that made her mouth dry, and her eyes widen. He was long, very long, and thick. Perhaps even bigger than Luther had been. Muscles she hadn't even known she possessed clenched low in her body.

She knew what he wanted, and she wanted to give it to him. Her body ached with want. She shoved away the logical part of her brain that warned this was not only a bad idea, but potentially dangerous and painful. The primal fairy wanted, and it would take.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi couldn't stop himself. He'd tried. Gods knew he'd tried to tell his primitive instincts to take a hike. This female had too many secrets for him to get involved with, but his libido had ignored him the instant he'd caught a whiff of her arousal. Those laser green eyes watched him with heat instead of ice even as her body alternately beckoned him and warned him away.

Her wings were still folded around her torso, shielding her breasts from his view, but her knees had spread, opening her inner flesh to his gaze. Even as he stalked closer, she squirmed as though in discomfort.

Malachi dropped to his knees in front of her. He wanted to take her now, but a single thread of reason warned him to initiate her slowly. Male possessiveness demanded he wipe all others from her

mind and soul, brand her with his body rather than a torture device. He needed to show her so much pleasure she'd think of him, and only him.

His fangs wanted to pierce her flesh while his cock penetrated her body. He would do so, but first he had to prepare her. His fingers found her knees, stroking over the scarred flesh. He was touching her, finally, with no barriers between them. She quivered, her breath hitching in her chest.

Their gazes never broke away. He watched her green eyes glow with pleasure as he stroked her silky skin. Her wings fluttered as though ready to unveil her, making his breath catch. He licked his lips, stroking his hands down to her ankles, wrapping his fingers around the petite bones. The beast urged him to open her wide and plunge inside. No, he clenched his teeth. He would give her pleasure first.

Lani's wings shifted, gifting him with the sight of her pearlescent skin peeking through the notches in the feathers. Slowly, her wings spread wide, baring her body to his hungry view. Her breasts rose and fell with her ragged breaths, the tips hard as diamonds, flushed deep with desire.

He bared his teeth in a hungry smile. She gazed down at him with desire mingled with fear. He leaned forward, drawn to her like a moth to flame.

\* \* \* \*

Shade gasped as the male's taut stomach came to rest fully against the damp heat between her legs. The ache intensified, and she would've cried out from the strange pain, but his mouth swallowed all sound.

His tongue thrust deep, swirling around hers, dominating her. She whimpered in confused need. His hands remained on her legs, thumbs

drawing circles on her skin while his mouth ate at hers. He gently suckled her tongue, teasing it into tangling with his.

Wetness seemed to burst between her legs at his taste. This time she was the one delving into his mouth, licking along his teeth and cheeks. The tip of her tongue traced the fangs that had extended at some point. The sharpness of the tips was exquisite danger she played with for several moments until he tore his mouth away from her.

Gasping at the loss, her eyes flew open as his lips trailed over her jaw, pausing at her pulse to suckle the skin. She squirmed uneasily. He could bite her. The scrape of a fang against her made her body shudder with a mixture of want and fear. The mouth traveled lower.

Shade's wings were fluttering wildly by the time his mouth latched around one nipple. Her head fell back at the sensation. Heat surrounded her tender flesh, pulling at it in slow, wet draws. She gasped towards the moon. He moved to the other breast, greeting it with the same intimate kiss.

Her hands clenched on the edge of the bench behind her, her hips shifted restlessly, rubbing her aching center over the ridges of his abdomen. The resulting pleasure made her moan. She did it again.

He laughed darkly, releasing her nipple. The moist tips tightened further in the coolness of the night air even as his hot breath washed over her stomach. His tongue flicked at her belly button, causing her to suck in her stomach. She held her breath in awed fear as she looked down.

The hands on her legs gripped her behind her knees and pushed up, tilting her backwards. She gave a little cry of surprise to find herself flat on her back, draped over the seat of the bench. Her arms were above her head, her legs cupped in his big palms. She looked down warily as he grinned up at her with a sly smile.

"Wh—what are you—" she whispered.

He didn't answer, his hands spreading her legs wide, baring her most private flesh to his gaze. She hiccupped in fear.

His face was stark with male lust. It was an expression she'd seen enough in the past to be familiar with. That look quickly cooled her ardor. Malachi rubbed his cheek against her thigh, the soft abrasion sending flutters through her womb but doing nothing to quiet her misgivings.

She was tensing to sit up when his tongue tunneled through her nether lips as one of his hands came to rest in the center of her torso to hold her in place. She shrieked in surprised pleasure. The tip of his tongue found her clit, circling it gently but firmly.

She fell flat on her back, her hips thrusting forward helplessly. He chuckled even as his tongue dipped to her entrance, lapping at her arousal. More wetness replaced what he tasted, her body weeping for his attention.

Hoarse cries were wrung from her throat as his wicked tongue speared her body. She writhed on the bench wanting more, wanting to get away. She didn't know what she wanted, but her body was no longer hers to command.

He paused, pressing her knees further apart. Shade caught her breath, relieved to have the brief respite. Then she cried out as one long finger breeched her entrance.

His tongue swept over her clit, laving the tender bundle of nerves as his finger slipped in and out of her. Then it was joined by another finger. They spread her inner muscles, burrowing inside her slippery warmth. His tongue moved faster while his fingers thrust.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi was wild with lust. Her hoarse cries had given way to a lyrical language she shouted to the night sky. His eyes watched her face even as his tongue flicked over her clit. He was so hard, aching to plunge into her body yet wanting to give her this gift.

Her voice was thick with her impending orgasm, her inner muscles tensing around his fingers. He wanted to taste her climax,

wanted to bathe in her arousal. Wrapping his lips around the bud of her pleasure, he suckled. Crooking his fingers slightly, he found the spot that drove most women over the edge.

She came with great pulls on his fingers, her back arched in surrender. He continued pumping into her, wringing more cries from her, before removing his fingers and dipping his tongue in her honeyed sweetness once more.

\* \* \* \*

Shade floated down to earth, her body limp. She felt as though she'd fought a major battle, and she wasn't sure if she'd won or lost. Her breath came in ragged gasps, her skin coated with perspiration. What had he done to her? A strange feeling of peace invaded her every pore. When the clenching of her body began, she'd been frightened but hadn't been able to pull away from the intense pleasure he was giving her.

His tongue still lapped at her, the gentle rasps making her heart leap with each drag against her sensitive flesh. When he stopped, she looked down to meet his heated gaze.

Watching her like a great predator, he turned his head slightly, pressing a kiss to her leg. His fangs gleamed in the light as they raked the tender skin of her inner thigh. Her breath caught in her throat at the implied danger, except he pulled away.

He'd been crouched as he stroked her with his tongue, but now he rose fully to his knees. He swept his hands up her body, pausing to pluck her nipples.

"I'm going to take you," he rasped as his erection came to rest against her swollen flesh.

Shade shuddered. She squirmed, trying to pull away from him. Her limbs felt so heavy and uncoordinated she only managed to nestle his cock further between her folds. The threat of his penetration made her panic. She'd thought she could finish it, she'd thought she could

forget her past with his beautiful eyes on her, but as he came above her, all she could see was Luther. All she felt was pain and hatred.

“No!” she screamed, raising her hands to gouge his eyes out.

He caught her wrists, pinning them to the bench next to her hips. The tip of his erection danced over her clit, making her squirm. “Yes,” he whispered, leaning over her. “I need you. I won’t hurt you, Lani, I swear it on my life.” He pressed a gentle kiss to each of her nipples. “Please.”

Fear and panic nearly strangled her. “N-no, I-I c-can’t!” she cried, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Shh,” he whispered, kissing the tears from her face. “I won’t hurt you.”

He kept insisting he wouldn’t hurt her, but it was her body that would be invaded, her flesh that would have to bear the brunt of his length. “No!”

## Chapter Thirteen

The target stilled completely, sanity slowly returning to his eyes. The crimson glow dimmed. He released her wrists, gently stroking the flesh with his thumbs. He took a deep breath that caused his chest to rub against hers, abrading her sensitive nipples.

“Very well,” the target whispered against her lips. He kissed her one last time before pulling back.

Shade sat up, her wings shielding her again as she watched him warily. He didn’t look at her as he knelt on the ground. His shoulders were slumped, his head bowed as he struggled to fight the lust she’d seen in his eyes.

The moonlight lovingly stroked his muscled body, touching every part of him she could see, including the glistening cock straining up from between his legs. For a moment, she wondered what it would be like to be completely intimate with him, but she brushed the thought away impatiently. He would hurt her. That’s what males did when they had sex.

Watching his chest work as he tried to catch his breath, Shade bit her lip. Forbidden thoughts encroached on her mind. He was in pain because of her. She well knew what happened when a male didn’t have his needs fulfilled. She’d been the recipient of Luther’s lust when he was forced to forgo sex for long amounts of time. Would the target hurt her the same way?

*I could ease him.* She blinked in astonishment. She could! He’d given her...pleasure. Unexpected pleasure, yes, but it had been pleasure nonetheless.

Refusing to think about what she was about to do, she slipped off the bench, kneeling next to him. She bit her lip. She wasn't entirely sure how to ease his discomfort.

*Touch him. You let him touch you, touch him back. Don't be a coward about it, just do it!*

She took a deep breath and feathered one hand down his back. The target snapped upright, his eyes drilling holes into her.

"Don't touch me," he hissed, arching his back away from her fingers.

The curve of his body and aggressive thrust of his hips made her body flood with arousal again. Gods, he was magnificent! Curiosity made her bold. While he was arched backwards to avoid her left hand, her right hand grasped his erection.

"Gods!" he shouted to the sky, his head thrown back. His chest heaved, and his body shook.

Shade marveled at the feel of his cock, hard yet silky under her hand. She could feel his veins pulsing beneath the smooth skin, pounding in time with his heartbeat. A bead of fluid gathered at the proud tip, assuring her that he enjoyed her touch. His reaction was gratifying as well. He grabbed her fist, showing her how he wanted her to move her hand on him. Then he thrust his hips, driving his cock in and out of her grip.

Her breath sped up. Her eyes were glued to their hands, but then his hand fell away and he groaned. She looked up at him. His eyes were trained on her face. His tongue wet his lips. He grabbed the back of her neck, pulling her to him. She feared he would force her to take him into her mouth. Luther had done that, and she hated the submissiveness of the act. It wasn't desirable in her mind, it was degrading. She tensed to break away, her hand gripping his erection harder.

He kissed her. He kissed her like he needed her in order to live, his tongue plundering her mouth, dipping between her lips at the same



cadence of his thrusting hips. She moaned, feeling the spark of arousal begin again.

He pulled away, and it was then she realized his hips weren't thrusting, her hand was stroking him. She pumped her hand up and down his long length in the same rhythm he'd set, making him growl.

"Gods," he whispered, his eyes squeezing shut. When they opened again, the feral light was back and he jerked her closer.

Shade kept moving her hand, beginning to enjoy the feel of power she had over his pleasure. She was giving to him, he wasn't taking, wouldn't have taken from her, and it was...sexy. Then he darted forward, his fangs piercing her jugular.

She cried out, her hand pausing on an upward stroke. She'd always imagined a vampire bite to be painful and ugly. Nothing had prepared her for the pleasure. Twin spirals of fire sank into her body from the point of penetration. They traveled through her, firing her sensitive sex into responding.

His fingers found her wetness even as her hand continued to stroke. He penetrated her, two fingers slipping into her tight dampness as his thumb stroked her clit. Shade pumped her fist on his cock faster, keeping time with the draws on her throat. It was an endless cycle of pleasure. Her neck, his cock, her wetness, over and over again.

He cried out against her neck, releasing her from the bite as his seed spurted over her hand. In that same instant, Shade felt the same clenching sensation as orgasm crept over her. Her back arched as she cried out, her body clamping down on his fingers.

She wavered on her knees before an arm was looped around her waist, pulling her against him as he slumped to the ground. Shade rested on the male, her legs entwined with his as the moon bathed them both in its serene glow.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi drifted in a haze of pleasure. He hadn't felt this kind of contentment from something as simple as a hand job since he was a teenager. His mouth curled as he thought of Lani's innocent stroking. She'd looked so uncertain, as though she wasn't sure what he'd like. Little did she know he liked anything she did to him.

He'd seen the panic in her eyes when he tried to penetrate her. That was when he knew for sure she'd suffered some kind of sexual assault. It had taken everything in him to pull away from her. For her to turn the tables on him after her rejection...gods, could anything have been sexier?

She shifted in his arms, making his eyes open. He couldn't see the moon any longer. Lani had draped them both in her wings, the feathers teasing his skin with her every breath. Her cheek rested against his chest, her mouth open as she slept.

Gravel dug into his back and ass, but he wouldn't give up his position for a little comfort. Lani was in his arms, trusting him not to hurt her as she slept. He felt warmth pierce his heart. She was amazing.

His hands traced over her back, finding the seams where her wings adjoined her body. She twitched as though it tickled. Smiling, his fingers caressed the harsh scars puckering her back. The smile faded. She'd endured great pain in her life, yet she never spoke of it, never used it as a tool to get what she wanted. She simply accepted it and moved on.

"You can let me go now."

Her voice drifted up from his chest, making him jerk his gaze down to hers.

The sleepy seductive allure to her eyes had given way to her usual coldness. Malachi felt his temper stir at the return of her emotionless self. He eased his arms away, doing his best not to shake her. Lani had to be the most contrary female he'd ever met.

She was off of him in a flash, standing on the other side of the bench before he'd even sat up. Her wings were once again wrapped

around her, guarding her nakedness from him. Not that it mattered anymore. He knew what she looked like naked. Better yet, he knew what she looked like as she came. Her green eyes glowing with heat were etched upon his memory.

Pride stiffened his spine. If she could act like their mutual orgasms hadn't touched her in any way, so could he.

"Bit late to cover up, sweetheart," he said tauntingly as he stood to his full height. He stretched. "I've already seen what you have."

She didn't move, and her eyes didn't flash with indignation. Lani stood like a statue in his garden, and he felt a stab of remorse. Gods, he didn't want to antagonize her. He wanted to shower her with adoration. He wanted to lick her from head to toe and everywhere between until her taste was etched on his soul.

Her gaze roamed over his body, zeroing in on his stiffening cock. Malachi swore he saw her gulp, though her face remained rigid and emotionless.

"So what do we do now?" He crossed his arms over his chest. He wanted her, and there was no use trying to hide it.

"Nothing," she said coldly, turning away from him.

He had to admire how agile she was with her wings. When she faced him, they covered the front of her body, yet as she turned, they whirled around to cover the back of her body. The scene made him harder. It was like watching a Burlesque show without the music.

Malachi licked his lips as he watched her drift away from the center of the maze. He wouldn't let her ignore him. Hurriedly grabbing his slacks, he pulled them on, hopping on one foot, then the other.

He almost injured himself with the zipper in his hurry to catch up with her. Adjusting himself before gently zipping the slacks, he took off running for her, yet when he turned the corner, she was gone.

\* \* \* \*

Shade used the shadows to cloak her return to the house. She couldn't believe she touched him. She couldn't believe she'd allowed him to touch her! Not only touch her, he...he'd licked her! Down there! Her body tingled in remembered pleasure, while her mind nearly locked down from shock.

Sinking onto the bed, Shade clutched her skull. She'd enjoyed her brief respite so much she hadn't prepared herself for the pain racing through her body. Remembered humiliations, remembered heartache burned her alive as memories played like a broken record.

"Please stop," she whispered into the silence of the room, but the sound didn't help break her out of the soul-rending flashback.

*Images of Luther using her, degrading her, taunting her played in a seemingly endless loop.*

Her head throbbed and the scars on her body burned with remembered pain. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Gods, she needed it to stop. She needed—

Desperation had her looking around for something to stab herself with, something to distract her from herself. The memories wouldn't stop, and thinking of her target did nothing but remind her of what Luther could do to her if she failed. Distraction was the key. Frantic with desperate pain, her hands fumbled over her belongings, searching for help. Finding one of her knives sticking out of a pile of clothing, she gripped it tightly.

Holding the knife did nothing as she was instantly drowned in a sea of memory...

*Luther strangling her as he used her body.*

*Pinned to an altar by iron shackles as he carved his name all over her body with a steel blade. He hadn't wanted to use iron that time.*

*Forcing her to do things to him that she could never recover from.*

Shade screamed, the knife rising—

A hand grabbed her wrist, halting the downward stab.

"What the fuck are you doing?" the target yelled, his hand squeezing her wrist, making her drop the knife.

Instinct and remembered pain gave her strength. She tore her arm out of his grasp, kicking out. Her heel caught him in the stomach, doubling him over.

Whirling around, Shade ran across the room. The images in her mind were real. Her eyes darted around the dark room, seeing Luther in that corner taking her against the wall. She saw him in the opposite corner making her tell him how much she loved him as he cracked a whip over her back. He was everywhere.

She needed to escape. Clutching her head, she ran for the window, throwing it open. Retracting her wings, she climbed on the ledge and was about to spring to the ground below when she was grabbed from behind.

She screamed, feeling Luther's arms wrap around her. It was hopeless. He'd always have power over her. She'd never be rid of him.

"Jesus, Lani! Calm down!" Large arms and legs wrapped around her, pulling her to the floor.

She lost it, tossing her head from side to side. Shade screamed out a hundred years of pain as the pictures in her head flipped back and forth from a smiling, charming Luther to the monster he'd become. She'd done everything for him until he'd finally rejected her by breaking what was inside her.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi tucked his head into Lani's neck, listening to her screams. She shrieked and howled like the demon he was, her body so tense he feared she'd break something. He didn't know what she was seeing in her head, but he instinctively knew he'd triggered something in her. His heart broke for her. He'd caused this somehow, and he didn't know how to fix it.

Gods, he squeezed his eyes closed, rocking her stiff body. Seeing her framed in the window backlit by the moon, she'd looked like a

fallen angel with the weight of the world on her shoulders. There had been a look in her eyes he'd seen once before in his own eyes, right before he'd left the Guardian Guild and joined the Eturians. It was a look a person got when they realized there was no more hope, nothing to look forward to except death. Seeing it in Lani's eyes was like a wake-up call.

Now, holding her in his arms, he felt her body shuddering. Blood dripped from her nose onto his skin, searing him. Her shrieks hadn't abated at all. Wild, piercing screams that raked across his heart.

He'd done this to her. He squeezed her tighter, whispering words of comfort. Her head thrashed, but she didn't fight him. Her hands were resting on his legs, digging into the muscles of his thighs.

His eyes burned, but he wouldn't let her go, he couldn't. Rocking her in his arms, he held her as he whispered incoherent words against her skin. He wanted to murder the ones who'd done this to her, just as surely as he wanted to kick his own ass if he could. He'd wanted her, and despite the fear in her eyes, he'd done what he damn well pleased. The selfish bastard of the Eturian army had gone forth and conquered, and now Lani was paying the price.

After what seemed like a lifetime, her words finally slowed. Her body relaxed in his arms. Malachi didn't budge. There was something comforting in holding her tiny body in the cage of his. In that moment, she was vulnerable, not at all like the cold, emotionless female he'd come to know over the last couple of days.

"Lani?" he whispered into the delicate shell of her ear.

She didn't move, didn't speak. He brushed the wispy silver hair from her face and saw that her eyes were closed, her breathing even and deep. She'd fallen asleep.

Moving carefully so as not to disturb her, Malachi lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed. Placing her in the center, he hurried to the bathroom to find a cloth to wipe the blood from her face. When he returned, she hadn't moved. She didn't stir once as he

cleaned the blood and tears from her skin, though her forehead creased for a moment.

“Shh,” he whispered, throwing the towel across the room. He eased into the bed, pulling her into his arms. She went tense and a whimper escaped her lush lips. Malachi pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. “Shh, Lani. I’m here. I won’t let anything happen to you,” he rasped against her soft skin. “I swear it on the Veil.”

As though she heard him, her body relaxed, her curves fitting into his hollows and plains like a puzzle piece sliding into place. Warmth surged into his chest yet again. She trusted him to keep her safe. He didn’t care if it had more to do with her sleeping against a warm body than with trust. He was content to be her anchor.

He stared up at the ceiling, watching the shadows dance as the night progressed. Shade didn’t move the entire time. He dozed in short spurts, waking abruptly to make sure she was fine. Each time, the feeling of contentment would return stronger than ever.

He still wasn’t sure if he could trust her. With the trials she’d been through, there was no telling where her loyalties lay, and he didn’t have time to investigate her fully. He had to finish rounding up as many Eturian generals as he could before Council decided to yank the plug on his operation. His personal life was on hold until he could find the key person who would give them the name of the Eturian leader.

Stroking the tiny hand resting on his chest, he had to admit that so far, the entire plan had gone to shit. With five of the known generals killed and only names of two more who were still alive, his chances were next to none. The arm wrapped around Lani’s shoulders tensed as his hand clenched. He just needed a bloody name!

When he fell back asleep, his dreams were filled with images of what he’d do to the person who stood between him and redemption.

\* \* \* \*

“You were careless,” the voice said calmly.

Luther cringed inwardly. He couldn’t let his master see a hint of fear. He knew he shouldn’t have called Shade to him. Calling forth the inverted portal had alerted his master to Shade’s proximity. He’d wanted to know what happened, and Luther had admitted his actions.

“Will she turn on us?” the master asked idly, studying the landscape beyond the library window.

“No. She’s too afraid.”

Luther shuffled his feet uneasily as the master remained silent. The decision to brand Shade had been made in haste, but it had been his strongest desire for over a century. She was his now, and it was on her skin for everyone to see. Unholy pleasure lit within him.

“What other leverage do we have on her?” the master asked, startling Luther from his lustful images.

Shifting from one leg to the other, Luther frowned in thought. “She’s been in our keeping for nearly two hundred years. Once she had the most basic training, I pulled her out of the ranks and trained her myself, so she has no friends.”

The master nodded his handsome face, thoughtful. “What about family?”

Luther pursed his lips. “Her family ties are weak.”

“But she does have family.”

Nodding, Luther wondered what his master was planning. Shade’s parents had ceased to matter to him from the moment their deal was complete. They never attempted to contact her, and she’d never asked about them. If she had, he would’ve taken great pleasure in slaughtering them in front of her. He would allow no one to hold more power over her than he did.

“Extend a special invitation to her family. They will be my guests until this matter with Cromwell is wrapped up.” The order was given in a slow, deliberate tone that didn’t give away his thoughts.

Luther bowed deeply. “Yes, master.” He backed out of the room.



He'd almost reached the door when the master's voice stopped him. "Don't call her back without my permission, Luther. She has a reason for waiting, and I'm intrigued to find out what it is." He turned to look out the window again. "She'll have four days after her family arrives here before I call her. If she hasn't completed the assignment by then, she'll be *my* guest."

Resentment rose in Luther's breast, but he merely bowed to his leader. It wouldn't do any good to fight him for Shade. The master would squash him like a bug. He'd have to content himself with whatever was left of her when the Overlord was finished.

\* \* \* \*

Shade woke from a deep sleep, blinking blurrily. What had happened the night before? Her mind exploded with a barrage of images. The target—Malachi, her heart sang—pleasuring her in the garden. She'd pleased him back. Then she'd come back to her room and nothing.

Raising her head from the pillow, she looked around. She was alone, except the warmth in the sheets next to her suggested someone had been with her through the night. Who had stayed with her? Why had they stayed?

She eased from the bed, feeling tenderness in her neck, breasts, and the wounds on her back. Frowning, she went to the bathroom to check the status of her body. Her neck was bruised, her breasts were sore, and the brands on her back were almost completely healed.

Shade bit her lip, studying the marks on her shoulders. If she lived past this assignment, she'd have a constant reminder of Luther's possessiveness. Hate roiled in her gut. She paused. The hate was nothing new, but the ease with which it came was.

Panic gripped her, but she forced herself to breathe through it. She could handle this, she swore silently. Bracing her hands on the bathroom counter, she breathed deeply. She'd once been a normal

female. She'd loved, hated, laughed, cried, and everything in between. The coldness that had been creeping up on her over the last century had thawed, leaving a mess behind. Horror at her actions over the years mingled with fear and self-hatred.

Then the shame and degradation of what Luther had done to her. Eyeing the shower, she turned the water on as hot as it would go. She needed to be clean. She was stained with the blood of strangers, and the power she'd given Luther.

Huddling in the shower, she wrapped her arms around her knees, face pressed against them. She couldn't kill Malachi. Malachi, her heart cried again. She smiled against her legs. How stupid had she been to deny him his name, even in her mind? With him, she felt like a real person, not a killing machine. With Malachi, she felt like a woman, and after what they'd done in the garden, she knew he desired her. That's what all those weird feelings she'd been struggling with had been about—desire. Even now, remembering how he'd made her feel the night before, she felt a stirring of need unfurl inside of her. But it was more than that. He was an honorable male with respectable goals. She could never hurt or betray him. But because she couldn't do it, didn't mean someone else wouldn't. Her head lifted in startled awareness. Malachi was in danger and not just from her. The demons that'd attacked his home could've killed him, and there was the chance Luther would send another assassin in to finish her assignment.

Staring blindly at the white tile in front of her, Shade knew she had to do everything in her power to protect him. She'd have to tell him her true purpose in coming to him, but not yet. She swore softly. No, not yet. She wanted to experience pleasure in his arms while she had emotions guiding her.

She would do it, she decided as she stood in the shower. She wasn't going to hide from herself anymore. It was time she lived, at least a little before her time ran out.

Shade had gone in that shower, but it was Lani who came out, and she was ready to take a little pleasure for herself.

## Chapter Fourteen

Malachi emerged from the shower in a foul mood. He'd left Lani before dawn, not wanting to tempt himself with her nearness and his morning wood. Swiping a hand over the fogged mirror, he glared at himself.

"You need to pull your head outta your ass," he told his reflection as he slapped on shaving cream. "This is your last chance to get what you've been fighting for. You can't let a female get in the way of that."

Scraping the razor over his chin, he muttered under his breath. His cock wasn't listening to him and neither was his mind. It kept replaying Lani's reactions to his touch, replaying her touch on his body. It was torture. Simple, erotic torture.

Throwing the razor in the sink, he wiped his face with angry swipes of a warm towel. It wasn't just his goal at stake, he reminded himself. He didn't know if she could be trusted. There had been something just a little too convenient about her showing up right before the demon attack. He would keep his eye on her, but she wasn't getting any closer to him than she already was.

A cool, soft hand touched his shoulder, startling him. Whirling around, Malachi gaped at Lani. There was something different about her, but he had trouble making his brain process anything more than her presence in his private bathroom.

"What are you doing in here?"

\* \* \* \*

Lani bowed her head slightly. She'd sought him out to seduce him. She hadn't expected him to be in his bathroom wearing nothing but a towel. Not that she minded since it bared most of his beautiful body to her hungry gaze.

He had been wonderful by moonlight, but in the bright of day, he was magnificent. The lean ropes of sinew over his frame made him resemble a statue she'd seen years ago. He wasn't heavy with muscle, though it was evident he had them.

"Lani, what are you doing here?" he asked her again, his voice husky.

Looking up, her breath caught at the gleam in his brown eyes. They were dark with just the slightest tinge of red creeping into the irises. Feeling as though she were looking at a stranger, her gaze traced his face before resting on his mouth.

"I want to feel," she whispered so softly she knew he didn't hear her.

She was proven correct as he leaned closer. "What?"

Her tongue crept out to wet her lips. This was harder than she'd imagined it would be. In the shower, it had seemed the simplest thing to walk in here, strip, and indulge in decadent pleasures. Now that she was faced with the male she wanted so badly, she felt frozen.

*You can do this, Noelani. You need to do this! This one's for you, for all you've suffered at Luther's hands. It's time to feel like a woman instead of a slave.* The thoughts echoed around her head. Yes, she did deserve this.

Without answering Malachi's questions, she dropped her robe. Standing nude in front of him meant something this time. She couldn't pretend she didn't feel his gaze moving over her. She wouldn't be able to hide her body's reaction to his perusal, not that she wanted to.

\* \* \* \*

“Lani,” Malachi croaked. He wasn’t sure what he wanted to say because his brain was somewhere in his towel.

She was completely bare. She hadn’t put the straps of leather around her neck or wrists, baring her scars to his eyes. Not that he paid much attention to them in the first place. How could he with her naked body in front of him?

“Lani,” he tried again. “What—”

He was abruptly cut off because she dropped to her knees in front of him. Malachi was aware that he probably looked like an idiot with his mouth hanging open, but how else was he supposed to act? She gave him a shy smile before letting her gaze flitter down his torso to the cotton covered bulge in front of her face.

His breath caught in his throat as her tiny hands found his calves. Those slightly callused hands stroked down to his feet, fingers trailing over his skin, sending a shiver down his spine. He’d had no idea his legs were so sensitive.

“You gave me so much pleasure last night.” She sighed as her hands drifted back up his calves. She paused at his knees, stroking the skin at the back before tracing the hollows formed by his thigh muscles. “I want to do the same for you,” she whispered.

“Ungh,” was all he managed as those little hands slid up his thighs.

The towel fell to the floor, completely forgotten. Malachi stared down at her, his chest heaving with his every breath. Was she saying she wanted to—? Oh Gods, yes! She was!

Her hands found his cock, shackling it in a tender grip. She stroked once, twice. He swayed on his feet. Bracing his hands on the cabinet behind him to keep from falling over, Malachi struggled to regain his control. He was three hundred and ninety-four years old. He was a master of control. Masters of control didn’t leap on tiny fairies driving them crazy. He told himself that over and over, but it did no good. Her little hands were stroking him into madness.

He watched with stunned lust as she leaned forward, her little pink tongue swiping at the tip of his cock. His hips jerked. Gods, the torture! She appeared to like his reaction, because she smiled, this time not so shyly, before swirling her tongue all the way around the crown.

“Lani,” he rasped, sweat beginning to trickle down his body.

Then her mouth closed over him. He growled. He wanted to thrust, wanted deeper inside that warm mouth, but he forced himself to hold back. She was giving him a gift. An unexpected but wholly appreciated gift. He gulped when she suckled on the tip of his cock. He wasn’t going to last. He was going to come too soon, and she’d never do this again.

\* \* \* \*

Lani moaned at Malachi’s taste. Spicy and dark, it lingered on her tongue. Closing her eyes, she took more of him into her mouth. Her hands roamed his legs and hips, feeling every shudder that racked his body as she lashed him with her tongue. She listened to him gasp, pant, and growl, and it made her hot. Her body reacted to his arousal, growing wet for him.

She clasped his bottom, feeling the muscles clench as he rocked forward. His cock delved deeper into her mouth, throbbing against her tongue. She suckled, her hands digging into his skin. She alternated between suckling and lapping at Malachi’s cock, his obvious pleasure magnifying her own. With a gasping moan, he came, his seed spilling down her throat. His body continued to shudder as her hungry mouth drew out the last of his release.

A sense of satisfaction lit within her. This was the power women had over men, the power she hadn’t realized she could have. She couldn’t imagine doing the same for anyone other than Malachi because no other man made her aware of her femininity as he did. It was heady and arousing. She wanted more.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi's knees went weak, and only his hands braced on the cabinet kept him from falling. She released him from the tempting cave of her mouth, letting him fall to his knees in front of her. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into his chest. Closing his eyes, he shuddered and wondered if they had time to take a nap.

As much as the thought of sleep appealed to him, his nature wouldn't allow him to do so without repaying the favor.

Right. Repay the favor. He just needed an hour or two. He kissed her forehead, tucking her deeper into his embrace. She'd shot his morning recriminations to stay away from her to utter shit with that selfless act of pleasure. Malachi knew he was completely wrapped around her itty bitty finger. He only hoped she didn't realize it.

She cuddled closer, her silky body warm against his rougher skin. The sensation awakened his recently sated lust. His cock twitched. Seemed like he'd be returning the favor sooner rather than later, he thought with a smile as one of her hands found his growing erection.

"Do you want to take this to the bedroom?" he mumbled against her temple.

She nodded, tucking her head under his chin.

Grinning hugely, Malachi stood with her in his arms. It took him a few seconds to get his balance, but when he did, he carried her to his room. Gently placing her in his bed, Malachi straightened up.

The black and red comforter highlighted her pale beauty, leaving him in awe. Her green eyes were shining with emotion. That was the difference, he thought hazily. She nearly blazed with feelings.

Climbing in next to her, he trailed a fingertip over her velvet soft cheek. "What happened?" he asked and immediately wanted to kick himself. He didn't want to ruin the mood, but he had to know why she was suddenly showing her feelings to him when she'd kept a tight lid on them before.



White teeth sank into her lush bottom lip. Her forehead furrowed. “I don’t know.”

He almost laughed. She still remained an enigma. Resting on his side, he studied her. She seemed at ease with her nudity, no wings bursting out to cover her, no shyness in her face, though her cheeks were flush with light color.

He had to take this slowly. He never wanted to see fear in her eyes when she looked at him. Ever. Keeping that in mind, he came to rest on his side facing her.

He was going to enjoy her and make sure she enjoyed him. In this moment, they were no longer a Halfling beyond redemption and a Guardian with a tortured past.

Stroking one finger down the center of her torso, he felt her shiver, saw her brilliant green eyes grow warmer. Pausing at her navel, he circled it lightly, feeling her stomach hollow as she sucked in a ragged breath.

“You’re beautiful.” He pressed his hand flat to her stomach.

The stunned hope in her eyes fired him. Hadn’t anyone ever told her she was beautiful? Determined to not only tell her how beautiful she was, but also show her, he kissed her.

It was a gentle kiss. It was a kiss that would have been innocent in its simplicity if his hand wasn’t smoothing over the flat plain of her belly. He marveled at the heat that immediately sprang up between them. Such an intense reaction to such a light kiss.

He rubbed his lips against hers, not wanting to rush this seduction. No, he wanted her free of all her inhibitions. He nibbled the corner of her mouth. Her lips quivered with an uncertain smile. Pressing harder, he tasted that smile, taking it as a reward for his patience.

Sliding his hand up her body to cup her breast, he caught her breath as she gasped, slipping his tongue past her lips. He groaned as he revisited the warmth of her mouth. She tasted like nectar with just the slightest tinge of salt from him. He plundered her mouth, savoring their tastes mingled together.

A tiny hand fluttered to the back of his neck as though uncertain of its welcome. Pressing closer, he devoured her mouth and was gifted with fingers stroking through the hair at his nape.

His hand tested the weight of her breast, his thumb brushing a hardened nipple. She moaned into his mouth, her hand clutching his hair. She was heating up for him. For him and only him. Primal possession roared through him, tearing his mouth away from hers so he could taste her flesh. Tracing his damp mouth down her chin and neck, he feasted on her breasts.

Drawing on her nipple, he allowed himself to relax some of his restraints. Both of her hands fell to his shoulders, short nails digging into his skin, spurring him on. Delicately scraping his teeth on her turgid flesh, he moved to the other breast, treating it with the same tenderness.

\* \* \* \*

Lani's head tossed on the pillow. She was immersed in pleasure and fear. She wanted, oh she wanted so much! The fear wouldn't leave her, though. The female she'd once been cringed in terror that he would cease pleasuring her and hurt her. It lingered in her mind, growing as he devoured her.

His hands slid down her body to her thighs, spreading them wide enough to make room for himself. Lani tensed. He was a heavy weight over her, his hands almost bruising as he gripped her. The heated crown of his cock brushed the damp curls at her center.

"Lani," he groaned, his body growing still. He lifted his head, looking at her with crimson eyes. "Lani, I won't hurt you. I'd never hurt you." His tone was reverent and solemn in spite of the sheen of perspiration on his skin and the strain on his face.

For the first time since she came to the bed, she really looked at him. His honor was bright enough to light the corners of her soul.

“I—I think I know that,” she whispered, sorry that she didn’t have the courage to go further. “I just...can’t—” She broke off, her words strangled in her throat.

Tenderness and understanding warmed his face, relaxing the taut lines. “Do you want me?”

“Yes!” The whisper was harsh and heartfelt. She blushed at his smile. “I mean, yes. I do want you. I just can’t—” She stopped again, closing her eyes in frustrated embarrassment.

She felt him shift, moving from between her legs to her side again. Her eyes stung with repressed tears. She’d fucked this up royally. Finally, she had feelings, and she wanted to act on them, but her mind wouldn’t shut down.

A feather-light kiss brushed her cheek, making her heart ache. She reveled in the sensation. Her heart had been untouched for so long, but Malachi was the first to give it life. She’d treasure every pain simply because it made her something other than Luther’s Shade.

“Babe, you do know there are other ways of doing this.” His moist tongue touched the tender lobe, making her shiver. “If you want to try another position, I’m not going to complain. Missionary position isn’t a requirement in my bed,” he said in a voice rich with amusement and desire.

Lani stared up at him, not sure what he could mean, but she couldn’t hide the hunger in her face. She wanted him more than she’d ever wanted anything before, and this fear was keeping her from him. She nodded slowly, hesitantly.

The rumbling growl in his chest was her only warning. She was pulled over his body before she even knew what he was doing. Breathless with surprise at his speed, she blinked at him. Lani knew she was fast. She almost prided herself on her ability to move faster than anyone could see, but this male had just taken her by surprise.

He laughed up at her shock, one hand lifting to smooth her hair out of her face. “I’m on fire for you, little fairy,” he whispered, his thumb stroking her cheek.

“Are we going to have sex now?” Yes, she was very eager, but she should’ve at least acted more blasé about it, because he laughed so hard he nearly threw her off his body.

“Gods, Lani, you please me.” He hugged her tightly. “If you’re ready, straddle my hips.”

Nibbling her bottom lip, she did as he directed, pressing her chest against his as she straddled his narrow hips. This position pressed the heat of his cock between her open folds. She wiggled slightly, closing her eyes as the tip rubbed against her clit.

She did it again, her breath catching in her throat. Gods, she hadn’t known! She experimented, moving her hips left and right, then backwards and forwards. Her arousal allowed her to glide along his length easily, sliding her clit up and down his shaft faster and faster. Pleasure bolted through her body.

“Gods, Lani!” he growled, holding her hips still.

Opening her eyes, she stared at him blankly. “What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing,” he whispered hoarsely. “I just can’t take anymore. I need to be inside you.” He stared into her eyes. “Are you ready?”

## **Chapter Fifteen**

“Yes,” Lani whispered softly. The ache in her body was so strong she could barely hold still. She felt hollow, like there was something vital missing from her, and she suspected it was him.

He smiled, kissing her softly.

“Lift your hips,” he instructed, one of his hands disappearing between their bodies.

Lani’s eyes followed his hand as she lifted herself. Seeing his palm wrap around his cock made her feel heavier than before. It was erotic to watch him handle his shaft, sparking ideas she wanted to explore. Later, much later.

“Now, lower yourself again,” he whispered, guiding the head of his cock to the ache between her legs. “Move however slow or fast as you like. You’re in control.”

Her head shot up. She was in control of their sex? Power, the same power she’d felt with her lips around his cock, roared through her.

Eager to know what it felt like, she did as he told her, lowering her hips. The thick head of his cock pressed against her entrance, stretching her. Her eyes widened. He was bigger than she’d expected. She didn’t know if she could take him inside her.

He gritted his teeth, lowering his hands to the sheets. “It’s okay. Take all the time you need.” He grunted as she paused.

Gulping in trepidation, Lani pressed down further, her eyes rolling back as he slipped in another couple of inches. He was so big her tissues burned, but the arousal he’d built in her helped soothe the

ache. Slowly, so slowly she was driving herself crazy, she took him into her body.

Once their pelvises met, she opened her eyes. Malachi's face was beaded with sweat. The chest beneath hers lifted and fell heavily. She leaned forward to kiss him, his cock dragging along her tender channel so that the tip rested just inside her opening.

They both gasped.

"Mm." His hands dug into the bed. "Move the way it feels best for you." His words were slow, gravelly as though he had to struggle to get them out.

She rocked back down, tunneling his shaft into her again. The sensation was amazing! Lani bucked her hips, trying to find a rhythm to increase the pleasure. Lifting her torso just enough to move faster, she purred at the new angle. She panted. His shaft was caught in the snugness of her body, his hips trapped between her knees, her nipples dragged over his chest hair with her every move. Soon she was lost to pleasure.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi was breathing heavily, growling deep in his throat as his little fairy rode him. Gods, he wanted to grab her and thrust but forced himself to let her set her own rhythm. He was enjoying it, but he wanted to be deeper, embedded in her tight sheath until they were inseparable.

She emitted little mewls of pleasure, her face glowing with desire. He had to constantly pull himself together because watching her pleasure herself with his body was making him lose his control. He wanted her to come first, to reach climax with his body, but gods, he wasn't sure he could hold on much longer.

"L-Lani," he stammered, unable to catch his breath. "Sit up. Sit up!"

Her eyes opened, staring at him with hazy green eyes as she continued grinding on him. Leaning forward, he kissed her deeply, thrusting his tongue into her mouth in time with her inexperienced wiggles on his cock. He throbbed. No! He had to make her come first.

“Sit up, baby.”

Gods bless her, she did. She cried out as the movement impaled her more deeply. He grunted, struggling to catch his breath. She circled her hips, and he promptly lost it again.

“This feels,” she gasped, her head tilting back. “Gods, this feels so good!”

He would’ve agreed, but his clever little fairy had already taken the initiative, rising and descending along his rigid erection. He gritted his teeth, hands still tangled in the sheets. She was a fucking vision as she rode him.

Her hair stuck to her body, that gorgeous silver skin glittering like it was covered in diamonds. He brought his knees up to give her support and was rewarded with a hefty downward push that made her breasts bounce. She whimpered, her lip caught between her teeth as she bucked.

His body strained for release, sweat pouring off of him as he tried to wait her out.

“Malachi,” she mewled, her face twisted with hunger. “Please...I don’t know what—”

That was all he needed to hear. Clasping her hips in one hand, he pulled her into his upward thrusts. He dug his heels into the mattress, pumping his hips into her. He watched her eyes widen then grow slumberous at the new rhythm. With his free hand, he reached between them, letting her see his intentions, and he wanted to howl at the anticipation lighting her eyes. Then he touched her. She was so wet and swollen, his fingers had no trouble stroking over her rigid tissue.

Eyes slitted in pleasure, he watched her face as he stroked and thrust into her. Her eyes went wide, and her mouth formed a perfect

O. Then her head went back as she wailed, her long hair tickling his thighs.

The silken channel he was buried in clenched around him hard enough to make his eyes roll back in his head. Pleasure roared through him as her inner muscles pulled at him with strong, rapid spasms. He couldn't hold back any longer.

His own head going back, he roared as he came, his seed pouring into her still-clenching body. He gave her everything, his fingers circling her clit to enhance her orgasm even as his own died away.

Slowly, as her muscles fluttered around his sensitive cock, her body relaxed. She slumped over him as though she had no bones, coming to rest against his chest.

He attempted to put his arms around her, but he was boneless. His legs, which had bent to support her weight, fell. Splayed out on his back with a fairy on his chest was how his enemies were going to find him.

He didn't care. He'd just had the single most amazing sexual experience of his life, if he didn't count the one earlier and the one from the night before. Lani set him on fire like no one else ever had, as though she and she alone had been made for him. Knowing she'd confronted her fear of sex for him tempted Malachi to pound on his chest like a beast.

As he drifted to sleep, his mouth crooked slightly. Lani might be a novice at making love, but just like with everything else she'd done since he met her, she packed a solid punch.

\* \* \* \*

Lani didn't know how long they slept. She only knew that when she woke up, she was curled into Malachi's body with his arms around her. Warmth flooded her chest. This was what true intimacy was. The wonder of it filled her with elation and trepidation.



She was feeling so easily now, too easily. Malachi, who hadn't known her for nearly as long as Luther, had seen the difference in her. Would Luther kill her for her new self?

Probably. She was most likely going to die, but she couldn't work up any sense of regret. She'd thrown herself into pleasure so intense it'd obliterated all the barriers she'd erected around herself. She felt...free.

Malachi's eyelashes fluttered before he opened his eyes. They stared at each other.

"Hi," he rasped, his arms tightening around her.

Heat scalded her cheeks. How was one supposed to act after sex?

"Hi."

A slow smile curled his lips, lips she'd devoured not long ago. One of his hands stroked down her back to grab her backside, gently squeezing and pulling her tighter into his body. She gasped at the feel of his erection pressing against her stomach.

"You—I," she stammered in surprise. "Halflings can go more than once?"

Laughter lit his dark eyes as he chuckled. "Babe, if you had any idea how many times I can go..." His grip eased off her butt to dip between her legs.

Hissing in a startled breath, Lani's eyes drifted closed. She was tender, but the minute he touched her, dampness welcomed him.

The laughter died as crimson flowed into his eyes, searing her. "I want you, Lani," he growled, his clever fingers easing between her swollen folds.

She gasped, her eyes drifting shut as he probed her body. "I—mm, I want you, too." She lifted her leg to drape over his hip.

"Do you want to try another position?" he asked, removing his hand from her secrets.

She wet her lips, her eyes cracking open at the removal of his fingers. "Another?"

He nodded. "This one would put me deeper inside you."

Her breath hitched at the thought. Moisture pooled in her lower body. Gods, he could go deeper? Just imagining what it would feel like made her nipples bead up against his chest.

A rumble deep in his chest made her toes curl. “Gods, the look on your face! Will you let me show you, Lani?” he asked, nibbling on her lips. “I would love to show you.”

She would have responded, except his tongue was in her mouth, mating with hers again. She liked this kissing. Suckling on his tongue, she was amazed to hear little moans rising from her throat. He made her hot for him so easily. His hands roamed over her body, finding sensitive areas that left her shivering in his embrace.

Then he was breaking off the kiss despite her protests. She was gently turned to her stomach. Malachi’s wicked mouth began a laborious journey down her spine.

Lani turned her head to the side, gasping loudly as his hot mouth trailed down her back. The rasp of his slightly roughened chin gently abraded her skin, driving spasms of pleasure through her body. He paused at the base of her spine before traveling back up again, this time with his teeth.

The bites he placed on either side of her spine felt like brands, though these were brands of pleasure instead of pain. He stopped at the brand on her right shoulder. Lani held her breath. Would he think she was weak and disgusting for being marked in such a way?

A velvet tongue traced the scars, each lap leaving a mark on her heart. Tears flooded her eyes as he repeated the gesture on her left shoulder. His clever tongue trailed up her shoulders to her neck, then discovered her ear. His hot body covered hers, his cock resting in the cleft of her buttocks.

“You’re so sweet and wet, baby,” he whispered in her ear.

Shade couldn’t answer. Her willpower had nothing against the strength of Malachi’s seductive pull.

Malachi disappeared. A pillow was shoved under her hips, raising them slightly. Hands squeezed and molded her ass, which was unabashedly displayed.

She felt something spreading her folds. Lani tensed. She remembered this position from her time with Luther, but she'd never been as excited as she was now. If she hadn't just spent time earlier having sex with him, she would have worried. As it was, she trembled in anticipation.

Her trust was rewarded as a tongue swiped between her exposed tissues. Her back curled as she cried out. The tongue returned, slipping as deep as it could go into her channel, as though lapping up her arousal. He growled against her, sending vibrations through her body.

"Malachi!"

It was the first time she vocalized his name. It was wrung from her mouth as the ache built in her lower stomach again. "Please, please," she panted, her hips bucking back, wanting his tongue, fingers, cock, whatever inside her. Now.

His mouth was gone, and before she could work up the breath to complain, the head of his erection pressed against her splayed folds. She was so wet for him he had no problem sliding into her.

She gasped loudly when he was all the way inside her tight channel. In this position, her body was filled with him, his cock a scalding, pulsing presence inside her. His hips rocked once, stealing the breath from her. Lani's body went soft around him, adjusting to his size and length.

He went utterly still. "Wh-Wh-what are you doing?"

His cock inched out of her so slowly she shuddered, her hips trying to buck to hold him inside her. His chest came to rest lightly against her back. His hands found hers, lacing their fingers together against the mattress.

"Making you mine," he growled against her ear.

In a flash, his teeth sank into her neck at the same time he slammed into her again. Any breath she had was instantly lost as he buried himself inside her. She gasped as he withdrew, only to lose her breath again as he slammed into her almost savagely.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi tried to temper his thrusts, not wanting to hurt or scare her, but he was lost to the primal sensation of filling her body as he drank her blood. Rich and sweet, it poured down his throat as he thrust into her. She was so tight, so wet, he went mindless from pleasure.

Her gasping cries encouraged him. Quickly retracting his fangs, he licked the twin wounds in her skin before rearing above her. His hips slammed forward. She was so responsive, so tight and wet. Her petite body was framed by his, her silver skin glistening with sweat. Gods, she was so beautiful, and he was so close to losing control.

The room echoed with the sounds of her cries and his harsh panting. He growled, laboring over her like a beast.

He felt her channel beginning to tighten. She started calling his name, singing it into the pillows as she came with great pulling clamps on his cock. Malachi strained over her tiny frame. He wanted it to last, but it was no use. She bucked against him, meeting the final thrust he rammed into her. He shouted to the ceiling as he emptied himself.

Her soft whimpers slowed as he lowered to the side, pulling her body with him so he stayed inside her. Collapsing behind her, he spooned against her. He scattered kisses over her nape as he soothed her with one hand on her flank. He didn't understand the words she whispered, but he could hear the emotion and praise in them, which was enough for him.

When he finally caught his own breath, he pressed a final kiss to her ear.

“Stay with me today and tonight.”

\* \* \* \*

Lani heard his whisper, turning her head to look at him. The glow of contentment and approval in his eyes made her heart pound. Could she stay with him this one night and pretend the outside world didn't exist? Pretend she didn't have a mission to sabotage?

He snuggled closer, his hand spreading over her ribcage. Feeling that comforting touch, she knew the only answer she could give him.

“Yes.”

## Chapter Sixteen

Rolling over, Malachi reached for Lani. Feeling nothing but cool sheets beneath his hand, his eyes snapped open. Peering around the room in the predawn darkness, he saw she was gone. He rolled over again, lacing his fingers behind his head, and scowled at the ceiling.

He was definitely not pleased that she slipped out of his bed. They'd spent yesterday together, eating, talking, and making love. She hadn't spoken much about her life or past, but they'd discussed movies and books. They'd talked about places they'd seen. He had to admit Lani had travelled a lot more places than he had. He smiled. She'd waxed poetic about flowers and the joy they brought her. He liked that about her, that she found such pleasure in the simplest of things.

It had quickly become one of the best days of his life. He grimaced. He didn't want to sound like a sap, even to himself, but Lani made him happy and protective. It was a strange combination he wouldn't normally have welcomed.

She was such a contradiction of strength and fragility. She was shut off from her emotions, yet brimming with them. She'd cried the last time they made love, but she hadn't been aware of it. If it hadn't been for the glow of warmth in her eyes, he would have worried he was hurting her. She'd accepted his touch, responded to him with utter abandon. He wanted to experience her wild responses every day for the rest of his life.

The cold hand of dread passed over his mind. He blinked at the ceiling in astonishment. Was he talking about, a mating? A full bonding with her? He gulped.

His heart pounded. There were still too many things he had to prove to his opposition, too many people who relied on him to fulfill his promises. And then there were the ambitions he had after he was accepted by the Veil.

Lani, for all her graceful ways, was too much a cold warrior to be a suitable mate for his ambitions. If she was at his side, Veilerians would talk. They'd gossip about his inability to live according to acceptable social standards. He wouldn't be able to show his bitch of a mother what she'd missed by ignoring him.

His lip curled at the thought of Liv Ravenswaay. Gods, he hated her. It didn't even matter that they hadn't talked in two centuries, because when they spoke in the past, she never once acknowledged him as her son. His fall from grace within the Veil hadn't hurt her in the least. She'd expected him to come to a bad end considering his father was nothing more than a lowly demon clerk. Malachi needed a highborn mate to parade in front of Liv, someone who would open doors for him, doors that had been locked from the moment of his birth.

Lani was special, there was no doubt about that, but she didn't match his requirements in a mate. Liv wouldn't be impressed by a Guardian, and she especially wouldn't approve of a fairy linked to her in any way. That was almost temptation enough for him to pursue Lani, but she deserved better. Didn't she? He rubbed the achy spot on his chest, shaking his head. His train of thought was moot. It had been great, explosive sex, but nothing long-lasting at all.

Frustration flung him from the bed. His thoughts turbulent, he hastened through his morning ablutions, showering and shaving angrily. Mumbling at the nick on his chin, he dabbed it with toilet paper and got dressed.

Bloody females, he thought as he shoved his legs in a pair of black jeans. Lani had damn well made him feel like a giant among men and then snuck from his bed like a thief, leaving him conflicted about what he wanted from what had been his well-planned future. He

should go to her room and demand an explanation. He'd given her some of his best moves, dammit!

A soft knock sounded as he was buttoning his shirt. Hope flickered in his heart, making him abandon the buttons to answer the door. Lani had come back, he thought as he crossed the suite. She'd probably just gone to her room for something and was coming back—

He threw open the door, hope dying a quick death as he saw Kahal standing in the hallway.

"What?" he asked harshly as he turned away to finish dressing. Damn Lani.

"Master, the fairy is awaiting you on the terrace," the servant said with a little bow.

Malachi glared at her. Then he grunted. "I'll be down in a few."

"Yes, master."

What was Lani up to, he wondered as he put on his shoes. Was it possible she was shy about what they'd done all day and night? He paused on his way to the door, a smile on his face. That had to be it. She'd been embarrassed! Gods, he was so stupid. Of course, she didn't want to face him in bed. She'd been wild in his arms, and he suspected she had no experience with the matter.

Chuckling at his overreaction, he whistled as he made his way downstairs. He made plans as he walked. They'd have breakfast, make love, and then head out to Arizona to get Pascal. It was time to get this investigation underway. He greeted the servants he saw with a cheeriness they weren't used to.

Passing through the study to the terrace beyond, he saw Lani sitting at the small table, files at her elbow. She'd obviously had the same thought he did about their investigation. He fought the urge to grin. This woman, while she wasn't perfect for his future, was perfect for right now.

"Good morning, Lani."

He stepped behind her to place a kiss on the top of her head. When his hands came to rest on her shoulders, he went still. She was



cold. He knew it before even looking at her face. The stiffness of her body under his hands was all the evidence he needed to know she'd disappeared behind her walls again.

He fought the urge to make her become the sweet, emotional female he'd made love to. She'd hidden herself away from him. Fury rioted in him as he stared down at the crown of her head.

\* \* \* \*

Shade remained still, even though her skin felt blistered by Malachi's rage. She'd known he wasn't going to be pleased with her change in attitude, but it was best for him.

Last night had been a dream come true. He'd made her feel wanted, needed for something other than violence. But with the morning light, she'd known today had to be the day she told him the truth. Retreating into her Shade persona was a matter of self-preservation.

"Let's go," he said, his voice as cold as the ice around her heart.

"You're not going to eat?"

He didn't answer, just turned on his heel and walked back into the house. Shade lingered at the table. She suspected he was hurt. Emotions flooded her since he wasn't there to see. Tears stung her eyes.

She didn't want to hurt him. No, far from it. She treasured his life, his honor, and his feelings. With no understanding of what she was experiencing, she knew without a shadow of a doubt that he'd done something to her and she'd never be the same again. The only way for her to protect him was to pull away, no matter how much it hurt.

Firming her resolve, she pushed away from the table and followed him into the house. He wasn't in the study, but her senses, sharpened after spending a night in his bed, led her to the great room. He stood in front of the fireplace, staring into it, deep in thought.

Gods, she wanted to throw herself in his arms, babble out all of her feelings. Without realizing it, she took a step forward, hand extended to touch him. He turned away from her, his eyes cold.

\* \* \* \*

Glancing at the watch on his wrist, Malachi noted it was noon. Determined to ignore the feelings her presence roused in him, he focused on the job.

“According to Lucian, Pascal should be at his home.” He turned back to her, flicking a glance over her black attire. A hard smile pulled at his mouth. He knew what that body felt like, tasted like. Damn her to the nine hells. “Ready?”

Her eyes met his and he sensed energy gathering inside her. It was vicious and twisted, though her serene expression showed no signs of the tumult taking place within her.

“Ready.”

\* \* \* \*

Traveling through a portal with someone was vastly different from going alone, Shade knew. What she hadn’t expected, was that traveling with Malachi would be like drifting on a breeze. Normally when she’d traveled with another via portal, she and the person bumped and banged into each other. Malachi had far more power over the wormhole energy, and the chaos dwindled down to a manageable trickle.

She wished it had been more chaotic because the calm gave her too much time to think. He was using her own trick against her, acting cold and impersonal. It was better this way, she knew, but she couldn’t help but feel a pang of hurt when he refused to look at her.

They landed in Tombstone with a pop. There was no need to brace themselves before landing because the energy set them directly on

their feet. Malachi's portal had deposited them in an empty corner of Boothill Graveyard.

Shade looked around curiously. She'd been all over the United States, but never here. The graveyard had rickety looking tombstones with some of the most infamous names in American history etched into them. In 1881, she'd been in the midst of her service to Luther, but she'd heard of these beings in the hellhole of his home.

Everyone in the paranormal community, Veilerian and Eturian, had been fascinated by the Earp brothers and their friend, Doc Holliday. Luther had wanted to travel to Tombstone to collect trophies from the bodies, but he had been obliged to go on assignment on the other side of the world.

"Do you know where Pascal lives?" she asked Malachi, forcing her voice to remain emotionless. Gods, who knew this would be so hard? She'd only wanted a taste of pleasure, not emotional entanglement!

He gave a short nod. "He lives just off Highway 80." He indicated the direction with a jerk of his chin. He gave her another cold smile. "Shall we go?"

Shade nodded. Walking beside Malachi in a place of death brought home the assignment she'd been given. She was no longer his hunter, but there were others who would attempt to succeed where she had failed. She peeked at him through her eyelashes.

He gave the impression that he wasn't aware of her walking beside him. It was such a startling contrast from the day before that her breath hitched. It's for the best, she chanted silently. You can't protect him if you're in his bed. She needed to plan a way to protect him and try not to die doing it, not obsess over hurt feelings. Now that she knew his purpose and honor, she knew destroying him would be like shooting the moon into dust.

The silence between them was rife with tension and unspoken words, so to distract herself, she thought about what she knew of Pascal.

He'd once been a guard to one of her targets. The assignment had been simple—kill the *Satricarion* in front of his guards. The *Satricarion* had been discovered selling Eturian locations for alcohol money. Pascal had been present when she'd torn the horns of his leader right out of his skull. That tended to make an impression on a being, but it wasn't likely that he would recognize her.

Shade hadn't dropped her glamour once, not even when she discovered Malachi could see through it. She'd have been more concerned about his ability if she knew she was going to be alive in the upcoming months. Since she wasn't, she was oddly comforted that someone knew what she looked like. Malachi knew a lot more about her than anyone else did.

The cemetery was beginning to get business. Tourists walked around with cameras, pointing out the names they recognized. What odd beings humans were.

They walked along the highway for a couple of miles before he cut across a small ditch, heading up a slight incline. Shade easily followed, seeing where he was headed. There was a small building several yards away from the highway. It looked like a rusted out shed, but Shade knew it was nothing more than a façade.

Approaching the shed, she saw several tire tracks leading to and away from the shed, though no vehicle was present. The shed itself was old, rusted tin with gaping holes in it. Entering the dim interior, there appeared to be nothing to see. But she knew differently, as did Malachi.

"Do you see the trigger?" he asked as he swept a gaze over the walls.

Shade knew he was looking for the latch that would open the secret door of Pascal's lair. She released a faint trickle of magic to search for it. One of the reasons for her recruitment to the Eturian army, other than her shadow roots, had been her ability to find anyone, anywhere. With only the minimal facts, she could locate

whomever she was sent after. A pulse of warmth traveled up her arm as she extended her hand over a spot on the floor.

“Here.”

She squatted down to dust off the trigger. It was cleverly disguised as a rock barely the size of a quarter. She pressed it and the soft hiss of an air-locked door greeted their ears.

Standing again, she saw a trapdoor located in the darkest corner of the shed. They approached the door to see stairs leading into absolute darkness.

“I’d normally insist on going first to protect the damsel from any stray dragons, but I think you should go first,” he told her, sarcasm heavy in his voice.

Some quirk made her want to grin at him. She quickly stifled the urge and headed into the darkness ahead of him.

He closed the trapdoor behind him, sealing them in cool, absolute darkness. Shade allowed her shadow abilities to sharpen. Her eyesight was flawless in the pitch black, and she maneuvered down the stairs quickly. Malachi moved slower, his steps hesitant. They couldn’t risk looking for a light source if they were going to catch Pascal off guard.

“You are still here, right?” he whispered from behind her, his voice intimate in the darkness.

Turning around, she saw him staring blindly ahead of her. His eyes searched for her, and she allowed her eyes to glow briefly. His lips curled in a mocking smile that hit her like a blow to the stomach.

She channeled the hurt she’d been fighting all morning, sharpened her senses, and the sight of his smile, mocking or not, pierced her with a new ache. She wanted to beg his forgiveness, wanted to throw herself at his feet and apologize for retreating after he’d shown her what pleasure was all about. But those were stupid fantasies, she told herself sharply. She had a job to do.

Turning back to the corridor, she saw it was carved from rock but well swept. Pascal had lived here awhile if the smooth surface of the bedrock was any indication. Her nose twitched. Whiskey and beer

scented the air. Satyrs were known as the “frat boys” of the Veil. They drank and flirted like no other race.

Shade wanted to forge ahead. She could almost scent Pascal somewhere in the depths of the underground lair but forced herself to wait for Malachi.

Her irritation was short-lived as she was hit from behind unexpectedly. She stumbled forward, but two hands wrapped around her waist, pulling her into heat that seared her back and buttocks.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi hadn't meant to grab Lani, but his eyesight wasn't up to pitch black. When he'd jokingly asked if she was still with him and saw the glowing green of her eyes, he'd felt relief. Not because he was concerned about the dark, but because she hadn't left on her own.

Watching her in the graveyard, he'd sensed she was confused and baffled by the humans. Her no-nonsense attitude and calm demeanor hid a miasma of pent-up emotions that were screaming to be released. He suspected she only let go when she was on the job, or making love. Not that he would think about making love with her again. He was still pissed off with her.

With his arms extended in front of him, he'd tromped down the steps, nearly stumbling when he hit even ground. She'd been several feet in front of him the last time he saw her, so he believed she was keeping her distance.

He'd nearly bowled her over, and the impact of his much larger frame lifted her off her feet. She would've fallen on the ground if he hadn't grabbed at her. At least that's what he tried to tell himself. If his libido could speak, it would've laughed in delight as he was instantly surrounded by gardenias and smoke.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

Malachi had lifted her instinctively to keep their feet from getting tangled up so she now rested fully against him. Her petite body fit his perfectly. The missing piece in the jigsaw puzzle of his body. Her ass was perfectly curved and tenderly cradled his groin. The sweet dip of her back fit his torso, her head next to his. Her small hands rested on his where he clasped her waist.

In this position, their hearts were aligned, beating in unison. Her hair tickled his nose. Malachi brushed his face against the feather-light strands. Her body was softer, more pliant than it appeared when she was in Guardian mode. At this moment, she was all woman. A woman whose body he remembered fondly if the bulge in his trousers was any indication.

“You can put me down now,” her calm whisper rasped in the dark.

Put her down. Yes, he needed to put her down and step away. His muscles tensed as he prepared to do just that, but his subconscious had other plans. Before he realized his own intent, his arms slid around her completely, pulling her deeper into his body. He hardened more behind the zipper of his jeans. The soft press of her ass tempting him to get closer.

He buried his face in the crook of her neck, brushing his lips against skin soft as rose petals. He breathed deeply of her floral scent, letting it seep into his pores. Females were no mystery to him, but this one made his body, mind, and soul burn. Her body was tense. Malachi stifled his sigh. She was still cold, though her body was oh so warm.

Unable to torment himself further, he carefully slid her body down his.

Once her feet touched the ground, she spun out of his hands. He opened his eyes. He still couldn't see worth a shit, but soft green light five feet ahead of him told him Lani was looking away and that she wasn't untouched by his play. Emotion welled inside his chest. She wasn't immune to him as much as she pretended to be.

"Sorry about that," he whispered to her with a cocky lilt to his voice. He felt like he could take on a giant. She could try to hide from him, but she was just as conflicted and confused as he was quickly becoming.

She said nothing for several heartbeats. The green glow disappeared and reappeared as though she were slowly blinking.

"The corridor ends in a doorway five yards ahead," she rasped back emotionlessly, the glow extinguished, leaving them shrouded in darkness again.

Scowling at her, Malachi silently trailed behind her. Now that he had a better fix on her scent, it was easier to follow her in the blackness. When the smell of gardenias became stronger, he knew she'd stopped, so he did as well. He sensed her waiting for him to touch her again, but he fought the impulse.

Instead, he leaned forward. He allowed his lips to touch the shell of her ear. "On the count of three..." he said against the cool, soft skin.

\* \* \* \*

Shade felt pinned in place. Her body was ready for action, coiled to burst through the closed door, but the second his silky lips touched her ear, her mind did a complete shutdown.

It was worse than when he'd kissed her neck and held her so closely. Her body remembered what his had done to it. Her heart pounded and every inch of her body he'd touched had gone up in



flames. This time, she knew what those lips felt like on every inch of her body.

“One.”

Warm, moist air flowed into her ear and down her neck, making her shiver.

“Two.”

Her nipples hardened. She had to focus! They could get killed if she wasn’t paying—

“Three.”

Shade’s muscles knew what was expected of them even if her brain was on hiatus. Her foot lifted, unerringly finding the spot just below the latch. Her brain kicked into gear as the door burst open, spilling muted light into the corridor.

She went low into the room doing a quick scan, cataloging the sprawl of bodies draped on every flat surface. Malachi was right behind her, his eyes sweeping for Pascal. He wasn’t in the room, but three other satyrs and five nymphs were.

One of the satyrs opened his eyes blearily. He had two women draped over him—one with her hand cupped over his genitals, the other cushioning his head with her breasts. He looked confused, but was evidently still drunk enough not to care who’d just broken in because he fell back against his fleshy pillows and commenced to snoring.

None of the others moved. Naked skin glinted in the light of two small lamps, the air heavy with musk, alcohol, and perfumes. The satyrs had been enjoying an orgy until some point in the night when they all passed out.

There were two doors leading out of the main chamber. Malachi nodded left. Shade went right. Pascal was down here somewhere. Her magic flared, telling her she was close. She paused next to her door. He wasn’t in there. She knew it without entering.

Leaving her doorway, she joined Malachi at his doorway. He gave her a questioning glance. Nodding silently, she indicated Pascal was in the room. He nodded.

He pushed open the door. Silence greeted them. Shade couldn't tell if Pascal was awake or not, just that he was definitely in this room. She saw the corner of a mattress with tangled sheets as they crept into the room. Her magic sent out an alarm. Too late.

She was grabbed from behind. Shouts erupted. Lights were flipped on, and Malachi nodded his head. "Let's do it."

Smiling fiercely, Shade slammed her head back, shattering cartilage and earning herself a howl of pain. Quick as lightning, she spun around, knife at the ready. The satyrs had awakened and weren't looking too pleased to have their lair invaded. The females were crowded in a corner like sheep. The male she'd hit was Pascal. His nose bled heavily as he cursed them to the nine hells.

Two of the satyrs hurled themselves at Malachi while the third went for Shade. Executing a quick sidestep, she bashed the hilt of her dagger into his head. The satyr hit the floor like a frat boy at an all-night kegger. Pascal came at her again.

Spinning to her left, she sent a roundhouse kick to his torso, knocking the breath out of him in a whoosh. She followed it up with a right uppercut. His head went back. Grabbing his hair, she jerked him against her with her knife resting against his throat.

"Don't move," she growled in his ear. He went still.

Malachi had already disposed of his pair of satyrs. He shook his head slightly. Yanking one of the sheets from the bed, he tore it into strips which he used to tie up the unconscious satyrs. Once all three were secured, he beckoned the females closer.

Shade pulled Pascal further into the room until her back was against the wall. The five nymphs were timid until they got a better look at Malachi's face. Their hungry eyes crawled all over his body. Eagerly stepping forward, they surrounded him.

Naked skin in shades ranging from ivory to chocolate twined around Malachi as they cooed up at him. He was stroked worshipfully. He took it all in stride, flashing the females the same charming smile he'd used on Shade.

"Ladies, would you allow me to tie you up?" he asked them, his dimple peeking out.

Shade knew her lip was curling. It was an involuntary reaction to the breathless chorus of yeses, she told herself. Her stomach roiled with anger and, yes, jealousy. She wanted to cut out their lisp tongues and shave them bald.

Mentally maiming each nymph, Shade held Pascal firmly. Within moments, all five females were tied up, though not as tightly as the satyrs. Pascal was rigid against Shade, fury vibrating along his frame, but he didn't move.

Malachi turned to them. "I think we should talk in the next room, don't you?" His eyes passed over Shade speculatively.

The females instantly sent up a round of protests. They wanted the male to play with them. Shade almost spat on them as she guided Pascal from the room. They reached for her as well, but only because they saw the glamour of a young male she projected.

Pascal knew she wasn't male as he was pressed up against her chest, but he still made no move to get away from her. Once they were in the main room, Malachi closed Pascal's door, tracing a few wards on it.

"That should keep them in there for a little while, at least." He rubbed his hands together gleefully. "So, you're Omar Pascal," he said conversationally, leaning against the wall. "Nice place."

"You'll die for this," Pascal hissed.

"I always hear that, yet here I am." He raised his hands as though to say, "can you believe it?" "I just have some questions for you, Omar."

"I know what you want to ask me, and I'll die before I tell you anything!"

Shade tightened her grip on the knife, ready to slash if she had to. She wanted to do it anyway, but Malachi was shaking his head as though he read her mind.

“Don’t get so worked up, Omar. My friend here doesn’t seem to like you much, and I’d rather not have to clean blood out of my clothes.”

Omar laughed harshly. “Do you think anything you do will be worse than what they’ll do to me if I talk?”

“I wouldn’t be so certain of that,” Shade whispered against his ear.

He went still. Shade hadn’t disguised her voice on purpose. He’d heard her speak the day his leader had died. He’d screamed in horror at what she’d done before killing the *Satricarion*.

“Y–you,” he breathed.

“Shh, Omar. This is between you and me. You will tell this male what he wants to know.” Shade made sure to keep her voice low and even.

Malachi looked at them carefully, his eyes darting between Shade and Pascal, though he made no move to interrupt.

“I’ll tell you, oh Gods, don’t let her hurt me,” he whimpered at Malachi.

Arching his eyebrow, he crossed his arms over his chest. “That works for me. Who are your other contacts?”

“I–I don’t know their names.”

“That isn’t going to work, Pascal.” Malachi’s voice was cold, just as cold as it had been when he spoke to her earlier.

Shade pressed against Pascal’s neck, her threat unmistakable.

He rose to his tip-toes. “O—one of them was part of the attack against the Chieftain! H–harrity! A—and the Shade!” he screeched. “Shade is the key!”

It took everything Shade had not to show her shock at hearing her codename being used by a low-level Eturian. It was no secret the Eturians had assassins, but their identities were kept secret. And with

the exception of this satyr, she'd had no witnesses in her long years of work.

"Who is Shade?" Malachi then demanded.

Shade felt her heart lurch. Gods, she couldn't be exposed yet. She wanted to tell him herself, make him understand—

"A-a-ssassin," Pascal whispered. She felt sweat trickle down his throat. He might not know for sure she was the Shade, but she wasn't taking any chances.

"Eturian or Veilerian?"

"E-Etur—"

Her hand jerked, severing his throat. Hot blood coated her fingers, spraying Malachi's face as Pascal struggled to breathe through the gaping wound in his neck. Her eyes met his livid gaze. Pascal sank to his knees, clawing at Malachi's legs.

"I'm sorry," she told him, although she wasn't sure what she was apologizing for, killing Pascal, or being who she was.

## Chapter Eighteen

Malachi stared into Lani's startled eyes. The minute Pascal had said the name Shade, panic had crept in her face. He'd suspected she knew something about the assassin. But now he knew. Gods, he knew.

"Let's go," he growled, turning around and marching out of the lair.

Pascal was no use to him now. Lucian wasn't going to be pleased to find out he was dead, though that mattered little at the moment.

He knew Lani was following him. He could feel her energy behind him. Shade, not Lani, he reminded himself. Taking her blood meant she was now a part of him, a part he now wished he'd never taken. Godsdamn her! He pounded up the steps, bursting into the dimly lit shed.

Without waiting for her, he called a portal. He stepped in, closing it on Shade as she stepped through the concealed door. She stood on the other side of the portal surface, her face tight with emotion.

Closing his eyes, he shot through space and time, wanting to get the fuck away from her before he killed her himself. Unable to control his emotions, he hurtled through the wormhole, his powers unstable, making the journey chaotic and almost painful. He welcomed it as it matched the pain and betrayal tearing through his body.

She was an Eturian assassin! She'd been the one eradicating his contacts these last few months. He knew it. He laughed wildly. The little bitch, he thought viciously. He'd almost handed her his heart on a silver platter when all she'd wanted was his head.

Landing in the great room again, he fell to his knees. His whole body hurt. It was a pain very near the torture he'd endured during his years of Guardian training.

Torture. He remembered the marks on Shade's body. She'd welcomed those scars on her body, he knew. It was a harsh training regimen assassins voluntarily went through, but it was what made them the most lethal beings in all dimensions.

Cupping a hand over his eyes, he laughed again. To think he'd been so fooled by her tortured, innocent act. A stinging sensation assaulted his eyes. He swore crudely, getting to his feet. He wasn't going to let that little bitch destroy what he'd worked so hard for. He had a name, Harrity, a name he was very familiar with.

"Master?" Hatot asked from the doorway, the demon's confusion evident. "Master, Mistress Dinah asks where Guardian Brown is. She needs to check her wounds."

"Get out," Malachi whispered harshly. "Tell Dinah that the fairy"—he spat out the word—"won't be joining us again. When you're finished with Dinah, pack up that fairy bitch's stuff and throw it to the road."

Shocked silence met his command, causing him to raise his gaze to the doorway. Shade stood behind Hatot, her face pale, her eyes wide. Hatot looked between Malachi and Shade, then turned on his heel and ran.

"Come to finish the job?" he asked her in a dangerous whisper. "Well, give it your best shot, sweetheart."

She shook her head, her long hair slithering over her shoulders in a beautiful waterfall of silver. "I don't want to—"

He let out an exaggerated sigh. "You want to fuck first? Damn, you're a demanding assassin." He stalked closer to her, noting that her color continued to seep away. "Don't tell me you're shy now. Why, you're one of the best cocksuckers I've ever had," he told her with a cruel smile even while his soul was screaming at him to stop.

“I wanted to tell you,” she whispered, pain etched upon her face. “I wasn’t going to—”

“You wanted to wait until I trusted you before stabbing me in the back,” he shot back, cutting off her wounded words. “But I have news for you, sweetheart, I don’t trust anyone. You spread your legs for me and it was fun, but you weren’t anything more than something to scratch an itch.”

He watched her like a hawk, noting that her eyes were dilated, her hands shaky, and her breathing rapid. She looked like she was in pain. Good. She deserved to hurt for what she’d done to him.

Damn her. She’d made him think of something other than the future he had craved for so long. She, with her shy eyes and lethal skills, made him want to be something better, and it had all been a lie.

“What’s wrong...Shade?” he asked silkily, noting her visible flinch when he used her codename. “Did you think I cared for you?” She took a step back as though to escape his words. “Poor little assassin,” he crooned. “Did the others fall for your helpless victim routine? Is that how you managed to kill them? Well, looks like you fucked the wrong assignment this time, didn’t you?” Then a thought occurred to him. She’d been the one to kill Bianca. “Did you fuck Bianca, too?” he asked incredulously.

\* \* \* \*

They were now in the hallway. Shade pressed up against the wall as Malachi advanced. The hate in his eyes tore her apart. Gods, what had she done? She wanted to cry, but some kernel of pride kept the tears from forming. She needed to warn him, but the unrestrained fury in his face kept her silent. Even as he continued spouting vile, hateful things at her, she didn’t defend herself again. He wouldn’t listen.

His hands slammed into the wall on either side of her head. He leaned down, his eyes fully crimson and dangerous. Fear bloomed in her chest. For the first time since she’d seen him, she was scared of



him. He wasn't the male she'd had sex with, or the honorable male who'd helped her through her torments. He was someone else. This was the Malachi Cromwell who'd been coaxed into joining the Eturi, a man full of bitterness and hate. And she'd been the one to bring it out again.

A sob caught in her throat.

"Are you going to cry, little assassin?" he crooned at her, his breath wafting across her face. "Cry for me, Shade, and maybe I'll chance another dip between those thighs of yours."

Sharp, swift pain lanced her heart. Looking down, she expected to see a knife sticking out of her chest, but nothing was there. No, it was all internal. She felt like she was dying inside. She wanted to protest, wanted to fight his hate, but she deserved it. Gods, she'd been sent to kill him, and instead of telling him who she was up front, she'd hidden her purpose and abused his good nature. Her mouth opened to apologize. Then he said something that made her cold all over.

"What's wrong? Don't you like me anymore?" he whispered in a harsh whisper, his hate spearing her to the wall.

The chill traveled from her heart to her toes and back again. Neurons fired. He'd used the almost same words Luther had when everything went wrong. She knew he couldn't have known the effect those words would have on her, but it was like the hollow core of her soul suddenly filled with every emotion she'd fought against.

She attacked.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi was surprised when Shade's eyes went from wounded deer to cold, hard killer. He'd never had that look directed at him, but couldn't really blame her. His anger knew no bounds, and he wanted to hurt her as much as she wanted to hurt him.

Yet when she came at him in a flurry of well-placed kicks and punches, he didn't fight back. He just deflected the blows, his mind

seeing his body as though from a distance. How had it come to this? This woman had unleashed passion in him he hadn't even known he possessed, yet she was also the harbinger of his death.

The fight lasted for several minutes. Not a single sound escaped her lips, though her eyes told him everything he needed to know. When she sent a kick to his head, he grabbed her ankle and threw her leg down. Then a fist flew towards his stomach. He brushed her hand aside. She wasn't cold now. No, her eyes burned with fury, with vengeance.

Then it stopped just as abruptly as it started. She breathed heavily, drawing his reluctant gaze to her chest. His groin tightened. He still wanted her. Even though she'd screwed and killed the people he needed to earn his redemption, he still wanted her.

Doubt filled him at the thought. Could she be that good of an actress that she could feign her panic, her responses? He waved the doubt away. He didn't want to reason right now. He wanted to hurt her.

Except she turned on her heel and headed to the stairs.

"Where the fuck are you going, Shade?" He growled, stalking after her.

She didn't answer him, just continued up the stairs and down the hall to her room. Hatot stood in the chamber, organizing her bag being packed. He stopped when Shade appeared in the doorway, snapping his fingers to direct the other servants out of the room.

Malachi slammed the door behind him, crossing his arms over his chest. Shade ignored him, throwing her clothes into the bag. The clink of metal against metal raised his temper even more.

"Aren't you even going to show me the weapons you were planning to use?"

One tiny hand reached up and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. The way it shook, Malachi knew he was goading her into feeling something. It fanned the blaze of his fury.

“Godsdamn you, why didn’t you just kill me when you first met me?”

Stopping her hurried packing, she straightened her back, hands at her sides. He saw her shoulders lift as she took a deep breath.

“Are you going to listen to me? Or keep making accusations?”

He almost snorted but stifled the sound. Let her think he was going to believe her. “Sure.”

She turned around, her chin rising to meet his gaze. Even now, after everything, he still wanted her. He was a sick bastard, Malachi decided as he stared at her. He was sick to want this female.

“I was sent here to kill you in the bloodiest manner possible. Upon my return, I should have gone on furlough, but my—” She paused, her eyes closing briefly. “My handler informed me that I was to go into direct service of the Overlord. He’s a monster, Malachi. I’ve seen what he’s done to those who displease him. He was going to kill me.”

This time he couldn’t hold back a scoff of disbelief. “You expect me to think that they’d kill their best assassin?” He snorted at her look of disbelief. “Babe, I’ve seen what you can do and it isn’t pretty.”

“It’s the truth,” she whispered, her eyes wide.

He started laughing. He laughed until tears poured down his face. “That’s rich, Shade.” He said her name sarcastically. “Why would they kill you now when you’ve been such a good little monster?” He eyed her coldly. “So why don’t you tell me who the Overlord is, Shade? I mean, if we’re both going to die, I should at least get something out of it.”

She was shaking her head, her eyes wide. “You’d kill me?”

Malachi bit back a curse. He couldn’t kill her. He should want to rip her head off for what she’d done to him, but he couldn’t. “No, you’ll just go to prison like all the other criminals,” he sneered. “Now, who is it, Shade?”

She swallowed audibly, panic entering her eyes. “Steele, Ormond Steele.”

He laughed outright. “Nice one, babe. Steele’s been dead for over three hundred years.” His anger stirred again, and he edged closer to her. “Who’s the Overlord? And don’t lie to me.”

“No, that’s not true. Steele isn’t dead. He’s our leader. He sent me on this assignment through my handler.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And who’s your handler, Shade? Santa Claus?” He turned away, pinching the bridge of his nose. He couldn’t bear to look at her anymore. He couldn’t kill her either. She needed to get out of his sight before he did something he’d really regret. “Just get out. Leave. Go wherever you want, I don’t fucking care, but don’t you dare come back.” He whirled back around when she didn’t answer. “Do you understand me?” He fairly roared the question, enjoying the slight flinch she couldn’t hide.

She gave him a barely discernable nod, but it was enough. With hate and pain following at his heels, he slammed out of the room, resting his back against the door. He took several deep breaths. There was so much information he needed, but not from her. Never from her. His lip curled.

“*Abba*,” Tia’s soft voice called down the hall.

Gods, he didn’t want to see her right now. He wasn’t fit company for her. “Not right now, Tia,” he begged harshly without looking at her.

“*Abba*,” she said insistently, nearing him. “We need to talk.”

He sighed deeply. “Fine. Let me just get L—the fairy out of here.”

“You can’t let her leave!” Tia cried out, running up to him.

Surprise had him looking at her, and shock had his mouth drop open. She’d abandoned her veil and robes. Tiamat wasn’t a water elemental, he thought dumbly. She was something else, but what, he had no idea. Power practically bled out of her, and he had to fight the urge to take a step away from her. Her hair was pure black, her skin dusky, making her bright blue eyes glow. She had a strong nose for a female, full lips, and sharp cheekbones. She looked like an Egyptian statue dressed in a pair of hip-hugger jeans and a blue men’s shirt.

“Tia! Where’s your veil?” he shouted, standing straight.

He didn’t know why he was outraged, possibly because he knew if any of his male servants or friends saw her, they’d go insane with lust. Gods, he didn’t need this on top of everything else, he thought inwardly.

She waved off his question, staring up at him earnestly. “You can’t let her leave, *Abba*! They will kill her. I have seen it!”

Sudden fear gripped him by the throat, strangling him. No. Lani couldn’t die. He still had to punish her for hurting him. He spun back around, throwing open the door hard enough for it to bounce off the wall.

She was gone. A roar of denial escaped, echoing throughout the house. The silence afterwards was loud, heavy. His chest heaving with his seething emotions, Malachi vowed that he and Shade weren’t finished yet. Nowhere near finished.

\* \* \* \*

Shade held her breath in the shadows. She hurt so much and she should’ve left, but leaving would only put Malachi in more danger than he was already. The minute he’d left the room, she’d dissipated into the shadows, biding her time. He had no idea about her other form, which would aid her cause.

There was still time before Luther called her back. Hopefully it would be enough to form a plan to keep Malachi safe, a plan that would protect him even after her death. So many thoughts swirled around her brain she felt overwhelmed, but those would have to be examined later. For now, she was going to be Malachi’s hidden protector.

He left the room, his face etched in fury and some other emotion she didn’t recognize. The female in the hallway paused to look in the room before Malachi closed the door.

Those eerie blue eyes looked directly at the spot Shade was hidden in, making her gaze narrow dangerously. The female was beautiful and apparently very comfortable with Malachi. She had no idea who she was, or what she meant to him, but she'd find out.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

For two days, Malachi remained at home refusing to see anyone. He wasn't sure how word had gotten out about Shade's profession, but it had, and everyone from the Amazons to Lucian had tried to talk with him. So far, he'd managed to elude their questions by locking himself in his suite, though he knew it wouldn't last.

Reclining on the long sofa in the center of his sitting room, he sipped a glass of scotch. It was his fifth or sixth of the night. He eyed the container. He'd have to send Hatot for another bottle.

Once again, as he had since the day Shade left, he felt as though he were being watched. It was the same sensation he'd had when he was at Dominic's birthday party. That it showed up before Shade had made him wonder what the hell was going on, and how he could make it stop.

"Whoever you are, I'd appreciate if you'd just leave," he said conversationally. He took another sip of scotch. "If you're working with Shade, tell her I'm going to find her, and when I do, she'll be sorry."

"Who are you talking to?" Lucian asked from the doorway. "I knew you were having problems, but I didn't know talking to yourself was one of them."

Malachi didn't answer him, instead saluting his brother with his snifter.

Lucian approached him, coming around the sofa to stare down at Malachi. "We need to talk."

Giving an indifferent shrug, Malachi took another sip of scotch. He didn't give a shit what Lucian wanted to talk about. The Council

had pressed to have Malachi brought in for questioning about his part in Pascal's death, but they'd stopped sending queries when Pascal's pack revealed information about a second person who acted alone in Pascal's death.

\* \* \* \*

"You can't sit here and brood. I have information for you." Lucian stalked to the chair across from the sofa.

Lucian sat quietly for several minutes. When word had leaked about the Guardian being an assassin sent to kill Malachi, he'd nearly gone mad with anger and fear. His elder brother might not have been the biggest part of his life until recently, but he was a welcome addition. Studying Malachi, he wanted to wring Noelani Fayard's neck. He'd never seen Malachi so unkempt before. The lines on his face, the thick stubble on his face, and dark shadows under his eyes all pointed to just how much this mess had affected him.

"Don't you want to know what I found out?" he asked in a voice that was equal parts curious and exasperated.

"Do whatever you want to, little bro," Malachi answered absently.

Lucian sighed, sitting back in the chair. "I received a packet from an anonymous informer yesterday. It listed the names of several beings we've long suspected as being Eturian sympathizers, as well as their locations." He paused. Malachi remained silent. "Then, this person said the most ridiculous thing. They claimed Ormond Steele was alive and leading the Eturi."

He paused again, hoping Malachi would respond to that. When he didn't, Lucian dealt Malachi's leg a solid kick. "The letter was signed 'Noelani Fayard.' Do you know who she is?"

"No clue," Malachi said after several seconds of terse silence.

"She calls herself Shade."

\* \* \* \*



Malachi's heart stopped. Her name wasn't Lani Brown? He almost laughed. *Of course she lied about her name, you ass.* Something tugged at the edges of his alcohol-soaked mind, but Lucian spoke again.

"She went on to apologize for her actions against the Veil, and—this was really curious—said if she were able, she would stand trial for her crimes." Lucian pressed his hands together, resting his chin on his fingertips. "She also included a character reference for you—"

Malachi did laugh then. "Oh, that's just what I need, a character reference from an assassin!" He laughed harder, though the sounds were more like sobs than laughter.

"Malachi," Lucian responded, his voice solemn and understanding. "It isn't your fault. She lied to you and manipulated you. It's what assassins do."

"For fuck's sake, I know that, Lucian!" He sprang to his feet to prowl around the room. "I was stupid, and I'll pay for that now. Not just me, but the rest of the Halflings will pay for what she's done." He stopped, running a hand through his hair. "A godsdamn Eturian assassin!"

"Well you won't have to worry about seeing her again," his brother broke in harshly. "No doubt she's being punished for not fulfilling her assignment."

Ice wrapped around Malachi's heart. As much as he hated Shade for what she'd done to him, he didn't want her hurt. Not after seeing the marks on her body. Oh, he knew she'd traded her soul for an assassin's knife, but that didn't change the fact that he still felt protective of her.

"What do you think about Steele still being alive and leading the Eturians?"

Malachi sat again, his elbows resting on his knees, hands hanging loose. "It's impossible. Ormond was my mentor. I know him better than most anyone else. He wouldn't have joined the Eturi, much less

become their leader.” Sitting back, he let out a gusty sigh. His thoughts were scattered with images of Shade being hurt for failing her assignment. With iron will, he forced his attention to the conversation. “Besides, I know Steele’s dead.”

“Did you see his body?”

He frowned. “No. I was out on assignment when it happened,” he answered slowly. He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter, Ormond is dead. The assassin is trying to trick us by making us look in the wrong direction.”

Lucian shifted slightly. “Do you really believe that? Tell me, Malachi. You spent nearly a week with her. Did you fear for your life with her around?”

Malachi snorted. “I guess not. She’s a little bit of a thing.”

“I see. Did she give you any indication as to what kind of person she is?”

Lips twisting with disgust and self-hatred, Malachi nearly growled. He’d thought she was an innocent victim trapped in a situation she couldn’t get out of. “She made me think she was a victim.”

Lucian nodded solemnly, his eyes thoughtful. “Who’s to say she isn’t a victim?”

He laughed harshly. “Gods, Lucian! Mating has turned you into a woman!” Malachi jumped out of his chair again, striding around the room, hoping to work off some of his frustrated energy. “The people she’s killed over the years would say she isn’t a victim.”

Stopping at the window, he glared out at the garden. From this floor, he could see the bench where he’d first tasted Shade. Fuck, his chest hurt. If it wouldn’t have been for his natural longevity, he’d worry he was having a heart attack. But no, it was nothing as mortal and mundane as that. It was Shade. She hurt him in ways he’d never experienced before.

“So, I did a little investigating,” Lucian was saying, his words nearly drowned out by the anguish in Malachi’s heart. “Found out that

there was a memorial service for one Noelani Fayard nearly a century ago.”

Memorial service? He turned around, eyebrow cocked at his brother.

Lucian nodded. “Wikolia and Thomas Fayard, members of the *Skado* court, laid their daughter to rest after she lost her battle with a childhood illness.”

“Wait, she was a *Skado* fairy?” Malachi asked in disbelief. It sort of made sense now. Her skin color, her wispy ways. The *Skado*, or Shadow Court of Fey, was known for its darker fairies. He tapped his chin, thinking. “Was she a full-blood?”

“Yup. My contact in *Skado* claims she disappeared from Court nearly a hundred fifty years ago. In fact, she was to be betrothed to King Leofric himself, but she contracted this illness right before the ceremony.” Lucian sat back, lacing his fingers behind his head. “I did good, huh?” he asked with a self-satisfied smile.

Malachi was too wrapped up in the information to answer Lucian. She was a shadow fairy, one who could’ve become the *Skado* queen, until she disappeared. Remembering the conversation he’d had with her, he knew she was two hundred thirty-five years old. She’d have still been a pre-transitioned fairy when she disappeared.

His head throbbed the harder he thought. He felt like there was a vital piece of the puzzle missing. It was just out of his reach, waiting to be discovered.

“Dammit!”

“Problem?” Lucian asked in a bored tone.

“No, I just feel like I almost know something, but it just isn’t there yet.” He grabbed up his scotch again, draining the glass dry in one gulp.

“That isn’t helping, I’m sure.”

He glared at his brother. “I appreciate all the information, but I’ll handle this how I see fit.”

They glared at each other for several minutes, neither one willing to budge. Finally, Lucian turned his head, breaking their eye contact.

“Fine. Just don’t kill anyone.” He growled, coming to his feet. “I don’t want more complications with Council.”

Malachi gave a curt nod. He wasn’t going to tell Lucian he was already planning to hunt Shade down to find out exactly what she knew.

Lucian stomped out of the room, wearing his fury like a cloak. Once he was gone, Malachi smiled slightly. He loved his younger brother. As much as it irked him to have Lucian meddling in his business and trying to protect him, it was also good to know he had some family who cared.

He rubbed the back of his neck. The feeling of being watched persisted. Shooting a glance around the room, he didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary. He sighed, strolling to his bedroom.

The deep shadows of the room eased the growing ache in his head. Too much alcohol, too little sleep, he supposed. He just needed to rest a bit, then perhaps his feelings of paranoia would fade and he’d have a better idea of what to do about Shade.

Undressing in the dark, he crawled between his sheets, sighing at the crisp coolness of the fabric against his skin. He hadn’t been in the bed since the night he’d shared with Lani. No, dammit, Shade. Stop it, he ordered himself, punching his pillow savagely. He had so much trouble calling her by that vile name when he knew how she tasted, how she felt against him. He grunted into his pillow. She made her choices, and he’d learn to live with them. He wouldn’t be happy about it, but he could survive the pain.

Glad that he’d had the presence of mind to have Kahal strip the bed two days ago, he closed his eyes. He wouldn’t have been able to get a wink of sleep if he’d been surrounded by her scent. Hell, even though his rooms were aired out, bedclothes laundered, he almost swore he could smell her gardenia-scented skin.

Pain lanced his stomach and chest. Gods, this was killing him, he thought bleakly as he forced his body to relax and sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Shade remained motionless in the deepest shadows of the room. His body jerked slightly before his breath eased into a relaxed rhythm. Watching him these past two days had been a new lesson in torture for her. She'd wanted to touch him so badly, wanted to tell him how sorry she was for what she'd done. But she couldn't.

Living in shadow had given her a new view of Malachi. She'd stolen food from the kitchens, investigated the house further, though she couldn't bring herself to seek out the other female yet. In the last two days, she'd observed Malachi closely. He hadn't eaten, instead fueling his body with anger and alcohol. He'd seen no one other than the servants who brought more bottles of liquor and cleaned his suite.

Gods, his suite. When she'd come to his rooms to seduce him, she hadn't paid close attention to anything but finding him. Now, she had time to study it closely, discovering more about her lover. She learned he loved art, for the paintings and sculptures lovingly placed around his suites were of the highest quality. He also loved looking at the garden, since he frequently stared at it, his face drawn with longing and anger.

Several times, she'd stroked her hands over his belongings, feeling the rich textures of velvet curtains, brocade furniture, and silk pillow coverings. He was a creature who enjoyed his comforts, though he wasn't pampered. His monitor and weapons rooms were impressive, showing he was both a guardian over his people and a dangerous man.

She'd left him exactly five times since she'd resorted to shadow living. Each time, it was to scout around the property. Three of those perimeter checks had yielded results. The first had been a small demon group trying to break the wards. The second attack came from

a pack of werewolves who were trying to dig under the property line to avoid the wards. The last one, though, had been Halflings. That had shocked her.

She hadn't killed any of the attackers, merely incapacitated them and moved them to another location before Malachi's guards could stumble across them. The Halflings, she'd questioned.

The resentment and bitterness they felt towards Malachi had been tainted with evil. She'd discovered they were Veilerians, not Eturians, and wanted Malachi to die because they felt he was bringing ruin to all Halflings.

"He's evil," one of them had hissed, his strangely beautiful face reflecting Elvin grace and demonic strength. "He's made us whipping boys for the Veil. We're treated worse than we were when we used to be pressed into service!"

"They all fear us," another had agreed. She had been a fairy-vampire Halfling. "The pure bloods fear we'll rise up against them."

That conversation had left Shade with a lot to think about when she wasn't staring at Malachi. The Halflings were in a bad spot, and if they had been truthful, it was worse than before. The only way to change that would be for Malachi to do what he'd been tasked with doing for Council. She'd hoped the confession and reference she delivered to Lucian would be the first step to helping Malachi, but he hadn't shared it with anyone but his brother. Her lover's angry dismissal of her reference had been like knives to her heart. Because he was correct.

Who would care to listen to anything she had to say? She was one of the monsters Veilerians warned their children about. They might not know of her personally, but she was the very worst of what the Eturians represented—a cold-blooded killer. At least that's what she'd been before Malachi.

To hear the brothers discuss her so casually had nearly sent her running from the room. She'd had no idea she had once been considered as a consort to Leofric. The *Skado* king had been kind as

far as shadow fairies went, but he'd been too sly and turbulent for her taste. She huffed out a soundless laugh. Why he'd want to mate with a lowly member of his court, she had no idea, but that avenue had been closed with her parents' actions.

The black sheets draping his bed served as the perfect backdrop with Malachi as the jewel set in their center. Over the last few days she'd watched him grow paler, more haggard, and she'd known she was the cause. It brought her no satisfaction to know he hurt as much, if not more, than she did.

Malachi shifted in the bed, a soft moan rumbling up from his chest. Biting her lip, she stepped closer to the bed. He was so beautiful. The dim light cast deep shadows over his features, giving him the appearance of a shadow knight. Grinning at her whimsical thoughts, she allowed her gaze to trail over his body. Oh yes, she thought. He could've been a shadow knight. Those warriors of *Skado* had always filled her daydreams as a child. Magical knights who protected their shadow lands before the great treaties made them obsolete.

How many times had she dreamed of such a knight coming to rescue her from her indifferent parents? She'd prayed for someone to love her, someone who would be her partner. But those prayers went unanswered, because shortly after her third meeting with King Leofric, Luther had shown up for dinner and her life was forever changed. Her lips curved in a cold smile. Slender fingers caressed one of her daggers. Yes, Luther would pay for making her a monster.

Malachi's mouth twisted slightly, drawing her gaze.

She wanted to touch him, kiss him. An idea entered her head. She tried to shove it away, but it persisted. She was a shadow, he was asleep. Touching him now wouldn't hurt anyone. She licked her lips. No, it wouldn't hurt anyone at all.

## Chapter Twenty

Soft hands stroked over his shoulders and chest, making his breath catch. Gods, he'd missed her! Lips met his in a tender kiss like velvet against silk. He moaned. More, he needed more. Guided by instinct, he pressed open her mouth, slipping his tongue between her lush lips. He groaned at her taste. Their mouths dueling, he gripped her hair to make sure she couldn't leave him. Again.

The nectar of her kiss sent fire tunneling through his body. Caught between dreams and wakefulness, Malachi breathed in her gardenia and smoke scent. He wanted to carry that smell with him everywhere. He wanted it to seep into his pores and mark his body. Tangling his fingers in her hair, he devoured her with his mouth. He needed her.

Blood pumped through his body, heading straight for his groin. He shifted, the sheet sliding off, leaving nothing between them. The touch of her cool skin against his own fueled his desire. Growling with need, he rolled them over until she was beneath him. He should slow down, savor having her beneath him, but he was guided by blind instinct. She'd left him, and she needed to realize that there was no going back for her. Never.

Hands widespread to touch as much of her as he could, he stroked her breasts, flicking his thumbs over her nipples until they were hard.

He forced himself away from her mouth. His lips found her nipple unerringly, his eyes closed to keep the dream close. She groaned and shifted under him as his tongue swirled around her stiff flesh. Hands clasped at her waist, he held her still as he moved to the next breast, drawing on her savagely. Her sharp cries spurred him on.



The sweet musk of her arousal rose in the air. He growled, wedging his body between her restless legs. Lingering, nibbling kisses bisected her torso. He wanted to taste her, make her feel the same madness he did.

Her legs opened wider before his mouth reached its destination. He rained soft kisses on the tender skin of her lower abdomen. Silken thighs were treated with the same pseudo-innocent salutation.

She squirmed in his hands. He breathed deep of her need and pressed his cock into the sheets as arousal hammered at him. The need to take, to possess, was overwhelming, but he'd have his revenge first. Awareness crept in. He knew she was really here, in his bed, and he would make damned sure she wouldn't leave him again, no matter how idiotic he behaved.

She was trembling, her breath quick and ragged. Good. She was almost ready. Dipping his head, he swiped his tongue from her entrance to the tiny button at the apex of her thighs. Arousal dripped from her body. Small hands clenched in his hair, pulling him back to her.

He smiled against her folds, flicking his tongue over her clitoris, her breathy cries sounding like a symphony to his ears. Anchoring her with one arm over her hips, he pushed into her slick, hot entrance with two fingers. Her flesh slowly yielded to his invasion, tight around him. In and out, slow and steady, thrusting into her tense little body the way his cock demanded.

But first, the lesson. A simple swirl of the tongue, accompanied by a slow pumping of his fingers into her sheath, and she was screaming his name. The primal clenching of her body had him thrusting against the sheets. No, he wouldn't lose control yet.

Fierce possessiveness gripped him. This was his time, his female. He rose above her. He'd never made love to her in this position, and suddenly he wanted it more than anything. Her lax body trembled, but he would hear no arguments.

Gripping her behind the knees, he spread her legs up and out, opening her wide. He could hear her panting. Was she scared that he would hurt her? She breathed his name. No, she was trembling for him, panting with need, desire. Holding her legs steady, he found her heat, bathing the tip of his cock in her arousal.

He moaned softly. With a slow flex of his hips, he slid into her welcoming body. Her tense muscles gave way to his hardness until he nudged the mouth of her womb. He growled loudly, throwing his head back. His fangs descended.

Not yet, he thought fiercely.

Slow glide out, torturously slow thrust in. Out, in, she shook as he took his time with her. His balls ached for release, but he wasn't ready. No, she was going to learn never to leave him. No one else could give this to her. No kings would make her feel this way.

Pulling out until he was barely in her, he stopped. Her hips wiggled as though to bring him back, but still he waited. Whispered demands in her native tongue pleased him. He thrust in hard. She cried out. Slowly pulled out again, her hips lifted, trying to keep him. He waited again. This time her demands were louder, her hips moved frantically. Yes. She knew.

Lowering his head, he opened his eyes. Saw her bathed in darkness, saw her shadowy form. But she could never disguise her green eyes, hazy with desire and—he cut the thought off. He wouldn't think of softer emotions. Not when he was teaching her what it meant to be, to belong to a demon Halfling.

“Mine,” he ground out, thrusting deep, hard and fast.

He paused before pulling out with deliberate slowness. It was agonizing but showed her the control he had over her pleasure.

“Mine,” he repeated, slamming forward. Her breath hitched on a sob.

The thrusts picked up tempo. Withdraw, slam forward, until their bodies were slapping together, slick with desire and sweat. The word “mine” was pulled from the very depths of his soul as he thrust. Her

fingernails scored his shoulders, raking down his back. He gave a triumphant laugh. She was savage in her need to reach fulfillment. Her eyes glowed in the darkness of the room.

She reached climax, shattering around him, a thin wail tearing out of her throat. He gritted his teeth, his control held by a thread. Slipping the backs of her knees to the crook of his elbows, he planted his fists on either side of her shoulders. Her hips angled up. He plunged again.

“No,” she whispered, her head thrashing from side to side. “No, no more!”

“Yes,” he growled, pushing into her steadily.

Her mouth opened, her forehead creased every time he pressed forward. She was tight, and he was probably causing her discomfort, but she rose to meet his plunging cock. He stole her words of protest with a savage kiss, his tongue dipping into her mouth with every surge of his cock. Her channel was wetter, tighter, closing around him. She was stealing his control with each thrust.

His balls drew up. He was close.

“Who are you?” he demanded harshly, his breathing choppy.

“Noelani!”

“No. Who.” Thrust. “Are.” Retreat. “You.” Hard thrust.

“Y–yours,” she whimpered, turning her head to the side.

Roaring in victory, he darted down. His fangs pierced the vein in her throat with his final controlled thrust. The sweet rush of her blood in his mouth threw away all of his finesse. He plunged and thrust into her welcoming body savagely.

Her scream of completion flowed into him. Sharp teeth sank into his shoulder as her fingernails raked down his sides. She bit him in her passion, her inner muscles clamping around him tightly, flexing and releasing until he came as well. Slamming into her one last time, his seed spilling into her tight warmth, he threw his head back to roar his masculine triumph.

Her sweat-slick body went limp, her chest rising and falling as sobs racked her body. He released his hold on her legs, letting her limbs settle on either side of his. Slumped over her, he pressed soft kisses over her damp face, his shaky hands awkwardly smoothing back her hair.

“You’re mine,” he rasped into her ear. He closed his eyes. “You’re mine. Don’t ever leave me again.”

He rolled to the side, pulling her against him, arranging her legs and arms over his body. Relief coursed through him. She was back and she was his. She wasn’t going to ever leave him again. He wouldn’t allow it.

He lay next to her, his mind surprisingly clear of the effects of alcohol. There was more to his need to possess her than just getting off, or being angry at her. Laying claim to her by blood was a vampire trait, but the need to make her admit to his mastery was all demon. Malachi wasn’t a hundred percent sure what that meant, but he wouldn’t let her forget her promise.

\* \* \* \*

Lani woke, warm and content. Blinking open her eyes, she focused on the face next to hers. Sometime during the night, they’d turned to face each other. Malachi was sleeping, his expression relaxed and showing the same traces of contentment she felt.

Was this love? This feeling traveling through her body felt as though it would burst out of her at the slightest touch. She shied away from it. She couldn’t bind her life to his. Death was her only destiny, redemption and life his. This week with him had been the best of her entire existence, and she’d hold that close when she entered the After.

Turning away from the heart’s deliverance, she looked out the window. Dawn was coming, and with it another day to protect her lover. She eased from his tight hold, stopping when he grumbled and grabbed for her. A smile crept across her face at his sleepy,

disgruntled expression when she pulled completely away from him. Her pillow found its way into his arms, his nose burrowing into it for her scent.

Tenderness filled her. This male had done what no other being had ever managed. He'd pulled her from the coldness she'd been heading towards. It was a fine gift, she thought as she dressed. She felt as though she could win any battle with the love she had for him.

She paused, the hairs on the back of her neck lifting in awareness. There was tension in the air. Thick and heavy, it pressed on her. Shooting a quick glance at Malachi, she saw that he was sleeping completely undisturbed. She cursed softly. Luther.

Scrambling to finish dressing, Lani kept as quiet as she could. The last thing she needed was Malachi to wake up and see her pulled through an inverted portal. She paused in the act of lacing up her boot. He'd wake up and see she was gone. Biting her lip, she stared at the figure in the bed.

Gods, she didn't want to leave him! Not just because it would be the last time she ever saw him, but because she'd sworn never to leave him again. Except there was nothing for it. Luther was calling her, and she couldn't refuse. As much as she'd love nothing more than to hide in Malachi's arms, she'd be torn from them if she tried.

And if Luther ever realized how much she loved Malachi, he'd do his best to torture her with the information. She knew Luther, knew what got him off. No, she had to remain strong.

The power rose sharply. Forcing herself to finish dressing, she pulled on her weapons, strapping them down for the upcoming journey.

Malachi let out a grumbling sigh. Her heart melted at the sound. A lump formed in her throat. No! She couldn't weaken. She didn't need Luther to see a trace of emotion in her. But she didn't want to hurt Malachi. Coming to a quick decision, she rummaged around Malachi's library, finding a paper and pen.

Biting her lip hard enough to make it bleed, she tried to think of what to tell him. She had only a few more seconds before she was pulled out of Malachi's life forever. Dashing off a few quick lines, she ran back to the bedroom, placing the letter on the one weapon she wasn't taking with her.

The portal appeared with a loud pop. Throwing one frantic glance at Malachi, Shade was pulled into the swirling vortex. Her last sight of him was the beautiful line of his back.

*I love you*, she mouthed silently before the portal closed, throwing her into the wormhole.

\* \* \* \*

Luther strained at the portal. Shade was being resistant, which was unheard of. She knew the consequences of rejecting his commands. Except this time he wasn't calling her for himself, unfortunately. No, his master demanded Shade's presence.

Shade hadn't completed her task in the allotted time. Luther wasn't sure if the master would give her another chance or not. Her greedy, bootlicking parents so far hadn't impressed the master with their usefulness. He shuddered. For the last four days, they'd had sex with every guard in the fortress, eaten their way through his stores, and complained about the lack of entertainment.

He frowned, forcing more power into the summoning. The vial of Shade's blood he wore on a string around his neck was nearly boiling at the power he was emitting. That blood was his link to her, the only thing that could call her to him at his whim, and it wasn't working. Digging deep, he thrust more power down the link between them.

Ah, he felt her. She wasn't fighting now. He eased up on the power, tugging Shade through the wormhole. To him. The master wouldn't mind if he had a little fun with her first. She would pay for making him dip into his power reserves.

Patient now, he waited for her to spill through the portal. Blood rushed through his veins, and his heart pounded. It was going to be fun having Shade home again.

\* \* \* \*

The smile on Luther's face was the first thing Shade saw when she fell out of the portal. The second thing she saw was that she wasn't in the dungeon, or any of the receiving rooms. Luther had called her to him from the comfort of his bedroom.

Luther's living areas were ornate from what she remembered. The dungeon was the only room that wasn't decorated in Louis XIV furniture. The bedroom dripped with gold-gilded furnishings, and painted silk upholstered every chair. The focus of the room was the state bed with its elaborate drapes. She shuddered. Gold, crimson, and dark wood. The room looked like a bordello to her, and from the look on Luther's face, he was ready to add her as its main attraction.

Wariness replaced any lingering warmth she felt from recognizing her love for Malachi. Luther always had plans, and it looked as though his latest was to warm her up for death with his favorite means of torture. The excitement on his face gave credence to her suspicions. Fuck.

"Shade," he said, his voice oozing charm and satisfaction. "I've been waiting for you. Did you think you could keep me from calling you through?"

Silently, she shook her head. She slowly pushed herself to her feet, bending her knees and balancing on her heels. She needed to try to get the vial away from him before she could attempt to kill him.

He quirked an eyebrow at her, his eyes curious. Did he sense something different about her? Gods, she hoped not. If there was one thing Luther loved, it was a puzzle, and he'd see her change in attitude as something he needed to figure out. Even if it meant breaking her bit by bit.

His shirt was unbuttoned, the white silk showcasing his chest. Her heart tripped. She remembered scenarios like this too well. Except this time she wasn't chained down by anything but the vial of blood hanging from his neck. Luther's massive chest rippled as he stretched. It was an impressive display, but she'd long lost any attraction to it, or him.

"Why did you call me back so soon?" she asked, trying for a cold tone. She wasn't even sure she knew what it meant to be cold anymore. Not since Malachi.

The other eyebrow joined the first. It was an expression that conveyed deep surprise. She'd never asked him anything willingly. Dammit, she was already screwing up!

"You haven't completed your assignment," he replied, walking towards her with confidence.

Her hands clenched into fists. She'd give almost anything to be able to tear his heart out with her bare hands. Her gaze strayed to the vial as it swung lazily from one side of his chest to the other. That vial held not only power over her, but it was also the symbol of her lost innocence and fall from grace.

He smiled. "You remember the night I filled this vial, don't you, Shade?"

Of course she remembered. It had been the first night of her fifty-three years of captivity. If she closed her eyes, she could still see him filling the vial with the blood from his invasion mingled with his seed. She repressed a shudder of revulsion. He'd stood over her, chanting his incantation, closing the trap on her.

"The power wouldn't have worked without a little of your blood mingled with mine," he told her now. "It could've been a prick of your finger, but I wanted you, Shade. I wanted your innocence, but most of all, I wanted all of that emotion you used to ooze." His gaze traveled over her. "You used to glow with it. Then, you weren't fun anymore." He stared at her, a pout on his face. "Did I break you, Shade? Or do you just hide your feelings better now?"



The horror she'd held at bay threatened to overwhelm her. She couldn't do this, she thought in terror. She couldn't pretend indifference. The fight-or-flight instinct all living organisms have rooted in their psyche reared up. Run. Run away.

He must've read the intent in her eyes because he teleported directly before her, banding his arms tightly around her. "Oh no, my little Shade," he whispered in her ear. "You've been a naughty girl and it's time you receive your punishment."

## Chapter Twenty-One

She'd left him again, Malachi thought when he woke up. Pain raced through his body until he forced it aside. Shade had lied to him. She was supposed to have been here in his arms when he woke up, but she'd crept away again.

Swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, he sat up, head clutched in his hands. He couldn't keep doing this. She'd made her choice. Frustration had him pushing to his feet. He stalked across the bedroom to look out the window.

The sun was pouring its loving rays over the garden. A beautiful morning, indeed, but he couldn't care less. Shade had hurt him for the last time, he swore silently. He had other things to do, things more important than nursing his broken heart.

Blind to anything but his pain and rage, Malachi strode to the bathroom, wanting nothing more than to wash Shade's scent from his skin. Mentally planning his day, he washed and dressed in record time. No, no time to think about Shade. Then he saw a note propped over something on his nightstand.

He sat on the edge of the bed. He didn't want to open the note, didn't want to read what lies she'd written. But he wasn't a coward, he told himself strongly. Opening the paper, he stared at the scrawling words. The handwriting was messy, almost awkward, but the note was easy to decipher.

*Malachi,*

*I am so sorry for everything I've done to you and your cause. I wish I could have helped more, been more, if only to pay you back for*

*all you've given me. For most of my life, I've lived in a shell of ice, but you broke through and showed me how to live. I can never repay you for that, but know that if I had a choice, I'd never leave you.*

*I hope someday if you can't remember me fondly, you'll at least remember the difference you made in one fairy's life.*

*Love,*

*Noelani Fayard*

*P.S. Veilerians and Eturians have been testing your wards for the last three days. Please get everyone away from your home and keep safe. You will have your redemption. That I do promise you.*

He sat staring at the letter, the words blending together before him. Love, Noelani Fayard. He closed his eyes. Remembered the glow in her eyes last night. It had been dark, yes, but nothing could hide the light of love. Son of a bitch! He jumped to his feet, stopping when he saw the item the note had been propped up against.

Picking it up and turning it over, he saw that it was Shade's retractable sword. He'd never seen it up close, but he recognized her scent, as it was embedded in the leather.

He pressed the latch, releasing the blade. He caught his breath. It was beautiful. Some kind of fey steel, which meant it hadn't been made by the Veilerian weapons master. This was her sword, he thought in awe. The elaborate scroll work along the flat of the blade seemed to tell a story with finely etched knights fighting against monsters. Rotating the hilt, he felt that it was a perfectly balanced weapon. It was a fine sword, a sword meant for honor, not murder. Embedded in the hilt were the stylized letters, NF, in gold.

The sword, the letter...she hadn't left him willingly. Hope mingled with love. He stared at the sword. He was in love with an assassin, the assassin who'd been sent to kill him. And now she was out there, somewhere, enduring Gods only knew what. He needed to find her.

Nearly frantic with worry, he retracted the blade, keeping it in his hand as he hurried into his security room. He needed to get his people to safety before he did anything else.

The next few hours were spent making calls to his closest allies to ensure his people's protection. They weren't happy to leave, but they went because he asked them to. Tia remained with him as he finished closing up his house. The time for being reactive was over. Noelani was fighting the bloodiest of battles, and he could do no less.

He and Tia arrived at Lucian's house late in the evening. They were welcomed at the door by Briggs, Ruby's English bulldog, and Rosetta.

"Where's Lucian?" Malachi asked as he stepped across the threshold.

Rosetta was staring at Tia, her mouth hanging open. Flicking an impatient glance at the drag queen, he looked back at his...daughter. Tia was wearing black jeans, a blood-red blouse, and had pulled her hair into a ponytail. She looked young and exotic.

"Rosetta, this is Tia. Tia, this is Rosetta. Now, where's Lucian?" he demanded of the stunned Amazon.

"I'm right h—Holy hells," Lucian whispered from the hallway next to the stairs.

"What is it, Lucian?" Ruby asked from behind him, peering over his shoulder to see Malachi and Tia.

"Lucian, Ruby, this is Tiamat. My daughter," he said proudly, putting a gentle arm around Tia's shoulders.

The glowing face she turned up to him caught at his heart. Tia might not have come from his body, but she belonged to him as no one else would. She knew the darkness that had been his life before, had been a victim of it, and she still accepted him.

"Your daughter?" Lucian gaped, looking stunned.

Tia turned her sapphire gaze to Lucian. She studied the tall vampire quietly. "He is my *Abba*," she said softly. "You are my *Namabba*, my uncle."

Malachi looked on as Lucian gaped at Tia. Ruby appeared amused, coming to stand next to her mate. “This is something of a shock, Malachi,” the Chieftain said mildly, her gaze traveling between Tia and Lucian.

Tia pulled her eyes away from Lucian and stared at Ruby. A reverent look came over her as she took in Ruby’s swollen belly. She bowed deeply. A smattering of lyrical language flowed from her.

Ruby and Lucian looked at him with questioning eyes. He shrugged. He had no idea what Tia was saying, but seeing his brother flustered was more than pleasing.

Tia approached Ruby, still bent nearly in half. “Please, young mother. May I touch the babe?”

A twinge of unease trickled down Malachi’s spine, but he sensed no danger from Tia, nor could he believe she would bring any harm to Ruby or her unborn child. Ruby studied Tia closely, doubt, suspicion, and finally acceptance crossing her face.

Taking Tia’s outstretched hand, she placed it on the crest of her belly. Malachi watched carefully, noting that Lucian was tense next to his pregnant mate. It proved to be unnecessary. Tia’s head came up, the look of awe on her face nearly blinding.

“Oh, mistress,” she breathed, her blue eyes blazing. “Oh, what a strong daughter you have!”

Stunned, Lucian and Ruby looked at Tia, then at each other. The smile they shared made Malachi’s heart ache with want for Lani. This is what he wanted, he decided as he watched their hands join over Ruby’s stomach. He wanted the closeness his brother shared with his mate, wanted to put his hand on the child growing under Lani’s heart. It was what he would have, damn the consequences.

Lucian kissed Ruby on the cheek and approached Malachi with silent intent. Tia continued gushing over the Chieftain, her tiny hands fluttering around her as she talked.

“I’m not going to ask how you managed to get yourself a fully-grown daughter, but I have a feeling she isn’t the real reason you’re

here,” Lucian murmured. He jerked his head, indicating Malachi should follow him to the den.

Before following his younger brother, Malachi checked on Tia. Rosetta had left her post by the door. She and Ruby were offering chocolate and goodies to Malachi’s foster daughter. With a bright smile, Tia followed them into the kitchen.

Minutes later, Malachi sank into one of Lucian’s overstuffed leather chairs, nursing a glass of whiskey. His brother sat across from him with a similar drink in hand.

“Where’s Dominic?” Malachi asked, not quite ready to tell Lucian his reason for being there.

“He’s at the Blood Maiden’s camp. They’re having a movie night.”

“Good God, did you tell them not to shave off his eyebrows?” he demanded, ignoring the twinkle of amusement in Lucian’s eyes.

“They like Dominic a lot better than they like you. Besides, it isn’t a drinking-game movie. I think they’re watching *Babe* or something like that.” Lucian chuckled softly. “How, um, accurate is your Tiamat?”

It was Malachi’s turn to smile. “She’s usually right on spot with her predictions. Congratulations, brother. You’re having a girl.” He laughed loudly. “You’re having an Amazon.”

Lucian’s swarthy face paled. “Oh God,” he whispered, throwing back his whiskey. “Oh God.”

Malachi laughed uproariously. He knew Lucian was already picturing the training his daughter would go through, the battles she’d join because she needed to, and he also knew Lucian was thinking about the males his daughter would kidnap. He stopped laughing. His niece was going to kidnap males and have sex with them. He shuddered.

“We’ll lock her up,” he swore to his brother. Sweat beaded on his upper lip. “Tia, too.”

Lucian nodded, looking decidedly ill.

Malachi shook his head. He needed to stop imagining horrors and get to why he was here. “We need to stay here, me and Tia.”

“Of course. Have you thought about the information I presented to you?”

“I, um,” Malachi paused, trying to gather his thoughts. He couldn’t find the words for himself, so he gave Lani’s letter to Lucian to read for himself.

Relaxing, he tilted his head back. He hated asking anyone for help, but in this instance he’d beg for it. Lucian wasn’t just a Councilor, he was also a damned good strategist. In their years of fighting against each other, it had been a draw nearly every time.

“Hm.”

“She also left this,” Malachi added, handing over Lani’s blade to his brother.

Skepticism crossed Lucian’s face until he extracted the blade. “But...this isn’t a Guild weapon! Do all Eturians have this? Where did she get this? Who made this?” The questions came out so fast Lucian stumbled over his words. His face held an expression of awe mingled with shock.

“I think it’s a legacy sword,” Malachi answered, with a nod towards the blade.

Lucian’s forehead wrinkled in a thoughtful frown. “These look like Shadow Knights,” he murmured, studying the etchings carefully. “She’s a shadow fairy, I have no doubt now. If this sword was hers before she went into service, then she was part of the Royal Court.” He looked up at Malachi. “Tell me honestly, Malachi. What are your feelings for this female?”

Feeling trapped in the chair, Malachi got to his feet to pace around the room. What were his feelings for Lani? They were so mixed up he wasn’t sure he could begin to explain.

“She’s an enigma, Luc.” He poured another drink. “She hasn’t had an easy life, but I don’t know exactly what happened to her to be able to help her. She was sent to kill me, but didn’t, yet she’s killed so

many others, in so many ways.” He stopped, gulping back the alcohol, enjoying the burn as it eased down his throat. “I—I think I love her.”

Lucian made a restive movement before blowing out a stream of air. “She’s an assassin, brother. Say you manage to clear your name. If word got out about her profession, you would be shunned again. You’d lose all the respect you’ve wanted to earn.”

“You think I don’t know that?” He laughed harshly. “Ever since I found out exactly what was going on with the Eturi, I’ve wanted nothing more than to make things right. But at what cost, Lucian? I’ve lived for the chance to fix my mistakes and get Halflings recognized as full citizens of the Veil. It’s been an obsession.” Clutching his glass, he bowed his head. “Will I have to give up a future, too?”

His brother sighed deeply. Malachi could picture Lucian pinching the bridge of his nose, a habit he had when he was thinking hard. “I don’t know what to say. I’ve supported you in everything, but this might be too much.”

“Then don’t,” he answered, turning to face Lucian. “I don’t know what’s going to happen, and Tia hasn’t been forthcoming with any predictions. Right now, the future isn’t what I’m worried about. It’s Lani. I think she either went back, or they took her. I’m...concerned.”

Lucian’s clear green eyes studied Malachi carefully. “We never managed to get a spy into their network, but word does leak over to us now and again.” He stood, towering over Malachi. “We’ll put feelers out, see if anything comes back. I can’t promise you anything though.”

“Promises are for children, Luc,” Malachi answered with a tight smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “I just want her safe.”

“We’ll try.”

\* \* \* \*

Shade twitched, one eye cracking open before shutting quickly again. Her body was one throbbing pain from the top of her head to



the bottoms of her feet. Luther hadn't held back once he began his punishment.

Blood roared in her ears as she strained to hear if anyone was with her. Silence. Her body relaxed. A groan fought its way to the surface, but she stifled it. It wouldn't do any good to give voice to her pain. She was lying on a pallet in the same cell she'd lived in all those years ago. It seemed fitting that the Shade had been born here, and would most likely die here as well.

Once Luther had her under control, she'd been transferred back to his special room. The dungeon hadn't changed a bit since the last time she resided in it. Still dank with mold-covered walls lit by old-fashioned torches. Luther's residence was museum quality from the antique furniture to the creepy dungeon, she thought with a pained chuckle. She wondered if he gave tours.

"Ah, Shade. You're awake!" Luther said from the other side of her cell door.

She didn't respond, saving her energy for another round of agony. Since they were underground, she had no idea how long she'd been in his hands. It could've been a day or it could've been a week. Drifting in and out of consciousness hadn't aided her ability to mark the passage of time.

"I was worried I'd have to give you a dunking to wake you up," he continued cheerfully. "You're a marvel, my love. Always able to take whatever punishment I mete out." He sighed gustily.

There was a scrape of metal on metal, and the door opened. She heard his footsteps approach. If she'd hurt just a little less, she could've swiped out at him in a futile attempt to show him she'd never surrender. Her body refused her mind's commands.

She sensed Luther standing over her. Then she felt the coldness of his fingers against her cheek. Her stomach roiled with hatred and fear.

"There's something different about you, dearest. I can see it," he whispered. His fingers stroked across her skin. "Do you know how much I mourned your loss of emotion? How much I wish I hadn't had

to beat it out of you? But now...I can see it again. Like a beautiful little flame sparking to life.”

Clothing rustled, striking terror into her heart. Gods no, not that, she thought frantically, wanting to pry her eyes open to see him. She couldn't survive another rape at his hands. Not after her body had accustomed itself to Malachi. Her mind screamed out in fear while her heart thudded painfully.

Her neck muscles strained to hold back her screams as Luther touched her body. He whispered against her skin, a gentle sound for the vile things he described to her.

“You missed me, didn't you, my love? Ah, you were always a beauty, my Shade.” His hands removed the tattered remains of her clothing. His breath caught. “You belong to me. You always have. If I could've, I would have kept you here with me, but we needed assassins with your skills.”

He growled, his hands pawing her breasts. Lani locked herself deep in her mind, blocking out what was happening to her body. He stopped, studying something. Then he roared.

Her head snapped to the side with the first blow. “You whore!” he screamed at her, his eyes gone fully red. The next blow snapped her head in the opposite direction. “You let another demon mark you!”

A grim smile curled her mouth. Luther stopped his fists, staring down at the deceptively fragile female sprawled on the pallet like a rag doll. Her face was swollen and bruised beyond recognition. Blood flowed from her mouth, nose, and several cuts all over her body. She was a gruesome sight, but something within her glowed ethereally.

Her eyes cracked open. Luther caught his breath. She wasn't Shade anymore. She didn't know what he saw, but she suspected he was aware of the difference in her because she felt it shining inside of her. She was...someone else. She was the noble fairy who'd been placed in his custody. This is who she would've been without his training. She saw shock and awe in his eyes before she lost consciousness.

“Luther!” a feminine voice called from the stairs descending into the dungeon.

Lani turned her head, peeking through her eyelashes. She saw Luther at the small window at the top of the cell. He looked slightly panicked.

“Luther, darling,” a woman’s voice cooed, coming closer to the cell. “You’ve been hiding from me.”

Slapping Lani once more, he exited the cell, locking the door behind him.

Ice speared the back of Lani’s skull. She knew that voice. She hadn’t heard it in nearly two hundred years, but she remembered that rich contralto. Wikolia, her mother. What was she doing here?

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Lani saw small hands slink up Luther's massive shoulders before burying themselves in his hair. His head was pulled down. She heard hungry, panting moans as Wikolia kissed the demon who'd just moments before tormented her daughter.

Luther pulled back, breathing heavily. "Milady, you shouldn't be down here," he protested, taking her hands from around his neck.

"Where is Lani?"

"In there."

"You bad boy, you!" Wikolia giggled. "Can she hear us?" She sounded positively thrilled at the thought of her daughter listening to her mother seducing her captor.

Lani attempted to wrinkle her nose, but pain stopped her. Gods, her face felt like it had met with a Mack truck.

"She's unconscious right now," Luther admitted slowly, sounding as though he wasn't sure what to think of Wikolia's curiosity.

"Mm, and I bet these big hands had a lot to do with that." She purred. "You've been avoiding me, and no male avoids me, or these, for long."

Luther's face was twisted in lust. Yeah, her mom had quite the rack on her, if she recalled correctly.

"Now, there's one thing I've always wanted to know about a demon of your, um, size," Wikolia was saying, her voice husky.

"What do you want to know, milady?" There was a rustling sound. "Gods!"

"My, oh my, Luther. I knew you'd be impressive, but this is...spectacular."

Lani's mouth curled as she heard clothing drop to the floor, then hungry suckling. Luther's head flew back, hitting the door, but that didn't stop him from groaning and enjoying her mother's well-known favors.

Bile rose in her throat. It was a scene she'd become used to during her childhood. Her mother devouring every male in sight. Usually her father was never far behind as he enjoyed sharing his wife with others.

As if on cue, she heard his smooth voice. "Lia, my love. You started without me." More clothing rustled, and then she heard the slap of flesh against flesh.

Her skin crawled as the groans and grunts escalated. She closed her eyes again. This was Hell, she decided. But what were her parents doing here?

She wasn't sure how long their impromptu orgy lasted, only that it was suddenly silent. Opening her eyes again, she saw Luther was no longer standing on the other side of the door.

"Mm, my love, that was excellent." Wikolia purred. "This demon tastes like wine."

"You were magnificent, Lia." Thomas panted.

Luther was strangely silent. Lani wondered if he was shocked. She almost giggled at the image of Luther being ravished by her parents. Her humor faded as she listened to them talking.

"Luther, darling, is what your master said true? Will he give us a position of power in his ranks if we convince Lani to kill that troublesome Halfling?" Her voice was sultry but cold.

"We shouldn't discuss that here," Luther grumbled, then gasped.

"This is the best place for...discussion," Wikolia said with a girlish giggle. "Look at him grow, Thomas!"

"That is impressive," Thomas said thickly. "I wonder if our daughter enjoyed his attentions as much as we have."

"Doubtful," Wikolia answered over Luther's gasps. "She was always a strange child. No passion at all in her."

“A prude.”

“Yes, she wouldn’t know what to do with something like this.”

Thomas gasped. “And you do, my sweet?”

Wikolia laughed wickedly.

Luther groaned.

She gasped.

Thomas moaned.

They were at it again, this time banging against the door.

Afterwards, Wikolia giggled, saying, “I think we wore Luther out.”

“It appears so, Lia,” Thomas replied with his own chuckle. “Poor sot. Do you think we did the right thing?”

Lani held her breath. Were they talking about handing her over to the Eturi, or their current plan? She strained to listen to them.

“Of course we did. Leofric would have banned us from Court if he had married her. He was so infatuated with her. If she had become queen, we would’ve been cast out by our own daughter,” she answered coldly. “No, giving her to Luther was for the best.”

Pain lanced her heart. They hadn’t sold her. They’d given her away just so she wouldn’t marry Leofric. Tears squeezed out the corners of her eyes. Some part of her had wanted to believe they needed the money and that’s why they sold her. To find out after all this time that they’d just wanted her out of their way was even worse.

“If we can get the Eturian to sponsor us, we might be able to overthrow Leofric,” Thomas said so softly Lani could barely hear him.

They wanted the *Skado* throne now? Wasn’t anything enough for them, she thought wildly. She had to get out of here. Malachi and his Halflings weren’t the only ones who would suffer if she remained. She might not have been back to *Skado* in nearly two centuries, but they weren’t bad people.

“What if Lani doesn’t agree?” Thomas asked thoughtfully.

“We’ll make sure she does. She’s been nothing but a problem for us since she was born. I had to listen to my father wax poetic about her for years, only to be followed up by Leofric,” Wikolia responded sharply. “I will not let her ruin a good thing for us.”

“Yes, my love, of course,” Thomas soothed. “She should fall into line if we had some leverage over her.”

“Hm, you’re right.”

Silence, broken only by Luther’s incoherent mumbles, echoed around the dungeon. Lani held her breath. Gods, if only it was dark enough to lose herself in the shadows! She could get out of the cell, find out what they were planning, and be gone. But Luther knew about her shadow form and had always planned accordingly.

“I have it,” Wikolia said triumphantly.

Lani strained to hear what they were saying, but for once, they were practicing discretion and whispering. Damn them, she thought angrily.

“...shouldn’t bother her, murderer that she is.”

“It won’t matter anyway, once it’s done, they’ll want her head,” Thomas whispered back to Wikolia.

She frowned at the bright lights of her cell. They were going to trap her into killing someone? What the hells was going on?

“Oh, look, he’s waking up,” Wikolia whispered. “We should invite him to our bed tonight. There are several positions I want to try out with a brute this size.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem, my love. I doubt he gets any satisfaction from our daughter,” her father replied. “Is she in there?”

Clothing rustled again as they dressed.

“What? Oh, yes, he said she was unconscious. Pity that. It would’ve been more entertaining if the little bitch heard everything,” Wikolia answered in a pouting voice.

Thomas murmured something, his voice coming closer to the door.

Lani heard soft applause. “That’s brilliant! Thomas, you’re downright wicked!”

Staring at the window of her cell door, Lani flinched when she saw Thomas peering in. He was tall enough to see into the cell, and the cruel lust on his face made her cringe.

“Well, well, our little shadow is awake,” he murmured. “Lani, love. How horrible you look.”

His cold green eyes surveyed her naked form. Lani wanted to cover herself, but her body still wasn’t working. Instead, she glared at Thomas, wanting to hate him for what he’d done to her, except the little girl she’d once been still ached for his love and approval.

“Let me see her!” Wikolia demanded with a laugh.

Thomas moved back, making his wife giggle as he lifted her high enough to see into the window. Wikolia was still as beautiful as she’d been when Lani was a girl. Her heart-shaped face boasted a pair of amethyst eyes that contrasted sharply with the same silver hair she’d passed on to her daughter.

“Noelani, you do look awful!” She laughed, her eyes glinting cruelly.

Lani remained silent. Humiliation spread throughout her body, the stain seeping into her soul.

“Nothing to say to your parents, Lani?” Thomas asked sternly, though his eyes twinkled. “Such a terrible daughter we’ve been saddled with, Lia.”

“Indeed, Thomas,” Wikolia answered primly. “We’ll have to think of a suitable punishment for her.”

Lani wet her lips. “Go. To. Hell.” Her voice was raspy from disuse and pain.

“Now, is that any way to treat your parents? Shikoba never speaks to us this way, does she, Thomas?” her mother said reprovably.

Lani frowned at them as much as she was able. Who the hell was Shikoba?



“Of course not. Our daughter is all that’s sweet and kind. Tsk, Lani. If only your sister could...”

His voice was drowned out by the blood rushing through her ears. Gods, she had a sister? They’d had another child? Her mind frantically tried to grasp the implications. A sister, she had a sister she’d never known about.

“What are you doing?” Luther’s voice suddenly boomed, startling them all. “Get away from there! Go back upstairs. I’ll be up in a minute and we’ll talk about this.”

Luther’s anger was evident. He must need her parents’ cooperation for something, her agreement to complete the assignment, more than likely. Her parents moved away from the door, murmuring to Luther.

His face darkened with lust, he looked through the window at Lani. “Agreed. Now go.”

Once they left, he entered the cell again, his slacks unbuttoned. He moved languidly, no doubt tired from her parents’ attentions. Hopefully he would leave her alone as well, but as she looked into his eyes, she knew he wouldn’t.

He crouched next to her, smoothing one hand over her cheek. “Shade, Shade, Shade,” he said chidingly. “Your mother is a fine fuck, but she isn’t you. Don’t worry, I won’t forget about giving you what I promised.” His voice was soft and cold.

Trying not to show her trepidation, Lani squinted up at him through her swollen eyelids. “Bastard.”

Huffing out a laugh, he casually slapped her. Her head spun from the blow.

He sighed. “I can’t have as much fun with you as I want right now. You have a short reprieve today. Your parents would like to show you something,” Luther said with a monstrous grin. “Afterwards, though”—he leaned over her, placing a gentle kiss to her forehead—“it’ll be just you and me.”

Standing again, he tweaked her nipple, twisting it painfully. When she didn't cry out, he laughed. Then with a mocking bow, he left the cell.

Lani relaxed on the pallet again, her mind whirling with escape plans she rejected one after the other. She couldn't go anywhere as long as she was too wounded to walk, and she couldn't even dissipate into the shadows with the flood lamps Luther had lined her cell in. It felt impossible to imagine getting out of here before she found out what they wanted of her.

She paused, thinking. She had a sister! Shikoba Fayard...a younger sibling she'd known nothing about. Lani wondered how old she was, what she was like, if her parents had done half the things in front of her that they'd done in front of Lani. She shook her head slightly. If she got out of here alive, she'd find Shikoba and learn what kind of fairy she was before coming forward. Did Shikoba even know about her?

There was so much to think about. Malachi was still in danger, and if she understood her parents' whispering, she was still on the job. If they could convince her to go along with it. She laughed softly, moaning as her ribs protested. There was nothing they could do to her to make her kill the male she loved. They just didn't know it yet.

\* \* \* \*

It was hours before she saw or heard anyone again. Without the glowing rays of moonlight to heal her, she was stiff and bruised, though nowhere near as injured as she had been. Once her body began to respond to her commands again, she'd stumbled around the cell to work the stiffness from her joints and muscles. Soon, she was moving a little faster, and a little easier. The bruises wouldn't fade for several more hours, the cuts would take at least another day, but she was moving, and that was all that mattered.

She'd paced around the cell so many times she knew it was exactly thirteen bricks wide and eighteen bricks long. The flood lamps numbered in the teens with one covering every angle possible and not a single shadow to be found. Her growling stomach reminded her she hadn't eaten for at least two days. No time to think about it, though, she thought with a wince. She had only so much time before Luther came to get her for whatever her parents had planned tonight.

Distant clanging told her someone was coming into the dungeon. She nearly flew to the pallet, arranging herself in what she hoped looked like a pained sprawl. Her ribs protested the quick movements, so when Luther opened the door, she really was in pain.

"Ah, Shade. Wonderful!" He entered the cell while two of his imps shuffled in behind him.

Lani glared up at the demon lord as he clapped her in manacles and leg shackles. The imps carried bright lights, so she knew Luther was moving her somewhere.

"We have a delightful evening planned," he was saying as he pulled her to her feet. He snapped a collar with a lead around her neck.

"Come along, little fairy. We have games to play."

Shuffling as fast as she could to avoid tripping, Lani tried to keep up with Luther's distance-eating strides. The imps followed, keeping the lights on her at all times.

The strange procession went up the dungeon stairs, into the house itself. Luther didn't head to the social rooms like she thought he would, instead leading her upstairs to the private rooms. Her stomach began churning. She had a bad, bad feeling about this.

Her feelings were recognized when Luther opened the doorway at the very end of the hall. It was his bedroom. She recognized it from the day before. What she hadn't expected was her parents to be lounging on his massive bed. They got to their feet when Luther and Lani walked in, their faces effused in malicious smiles.

“This is going to be so much fun,” Wikolia gushed, floating forward to push Lani’s hair away from her face. “You would have been so pretty if it hadn’t been for that skin, my dear.”

“Yes,” Thomas agreed, sauntering up to peer at Lani’s naked body. “A shame she was born defective.”

Wikolia’s face twisted with anger. “I—”

“I know, my love. You can’t help that your grandfather was a Shadow Knight,” he soothed, patting her hand. “It’s just unfortunate Lani had to pick up his skin color. That was all I planned to say.”

Her mother simpered, turning her face up for Thomas to kiss. Shade watched them swap spit for several seconds, while Luther stared at her. She could feel him watching, judging her reaction. Luckily, her face felt frozen in a grimace.

When her parents finally broke apart, their eyes blazed with lust. They turned back to her, walking around her still form as though looking to see what changes time had wrought.

“Oh, my! Look at these brands, Thomas!” Wikolia giggled, her hand brushing the marks on Lani’s back. “Luther, you naughty boy, I didn’t know you were such a master of pain.”

Luther’s chest puffed out. “Shade has been my most dedicated pupil since the time she came to us. I’ve tried various techniques on her, but she’s never broken.” He almost sounded proud, Lani thought with hate.

“Really,” Thomas drawled. “That’s such a surprise. The pampered little princess grew up fast and strong, it seems.”

Wikolia, never one to allow the attention to be anywhere but on her for very long, clapped her hands. “Put her in place!”

Chuckling at her enthusiasm, Luther tugged Lani to the center of the room facing the bed.

“We have a special entertainment planned tonight,” he whispered against her face. Excitement burned in his black eyes. “I wanted to make sure you didn’t miss a single second of it.”

Luther nodded to the imps. They came forward to place the lamps on either side of her. They disappeared for a moment then came back, rolling something into the room. Lani wanted to turn to see what it was but wouldn't give Luther or her parents the satisfaction of knowing she was scared.

The noise stopped, and she was jerked back to a flat board. She squirmed but, with the restraints, didn't have much of a chance to get away. Before she could muster up a real defense, she was strapped to the board, her head tied down so she could only look straight. She clenched her hands into fists, wanting to kill every single one of them.

One of Luther's hands came up to stroke her face. She snapped her teeth at him. There was no doubt in her mind that what they planned to do to her was going to seriously piss her off.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Malachi met with Saga, Izzy, and Rosetta to learn what they found out while Lucian tried to contact someone with ties in Shadowland. The wheels were turning, albeit very slowly to his mind. He just couldn't stop imagining what could be happening to Lani while he was stuck trying to clean up a mess he'd made centuries ago.

"The scenes were clean," Saga was saying, her face serious. "We didn't find anything new that way, but we did learn that the assassin used glamour to keep their identity a secret."

"I know who the assassin is," Malachi interrupted. He didn't want to go over old information.

Izzy's eyes nearly bugged out of her head. "You do? Then why the hell didn't you call us back?"

He felt his face heating up under their intense stares. How could he explain that their assassin had been living with him for a week? Best to rip it off like a Band-Aid. "Um, remember the fairy you smelled at my home?"

Saga nodded slowly, her gaze never leaving his face.

"That was the assassin."

"She was living in your house!"

"Holy cow, she's got some mad skills, can I meet her?"

"What does she wear?" Rosetta piped up, her voice carrying over the others.

They all turned to glare at the drag queen, who shrugged without a trace of embarrassment. "Malachi's daughter was rigged out in the best Michael Kors get-up. You should've seen her! It was this beautiful—"

“Quiet,” Saga ordered, her eyes narrowed on Malachi. “The fairy was sent to kill you.”

He nodded, fighting not to flinch under her glacial stare.

“And when did you find this out?” she asked quietly.

He thought. “Three days ago.”

“And you didn’t bother calling us back when you found out?”

He ran a hand through his hair, sitting forward in the hopes they would realize how impatient and sincere he was. “I’m sorry I didn’t call you back about it. I...sort of went crazy when I found out, okay? I told her to leave. She left and came back after sending Lucian a confession complete with a list of names.”

“Where is she now?” Izzy asked, her usually cheerful face stony.

“Ah, I don’t know exactly. She left my, um, home sometime last night or this morning,” he hedged.

“You slept with her,” Rosetta said in a singsong voice.

Malachi frowned darkly. “No, I didn’t—”

“Hon, even though you’re pissed right now, you look much more relaxed than usual. You, sir, are a man well sated,” Rosetta pronounced, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Fine! I slept with her—”

“After you found out she was sent to kill you,” Saga broke in, a twinkle entering her eyes.

“Yes! Okay, I didn’t plan—”

“You’re in love,” Izzy stated boldly, her face reverting to its usual impish expression. “You fell in love with your assassin!”

The three of them started laughing uproariously, clutching their sides. Sighing deeply, Malachi sat back in his chair to stare up at the ceiling. Why had he thought he could work with these impossible females, he wondered as his ears were abused with their imitations of his protestations. Lani was in danger, he knew that in his heart, and these Amazons were making fun of him!

Saga wiped tears from her eyes as she finally calmed down. She giggled. “Sorry, Malachi, but you have to admit it’s funny.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “How is this funny? I’m in love with a female who was sent to kill me, and now I don’t know where she is, or if she’s in danger!”

“Okay, first off, she didn’t kill you, obviously. She had a change of heart somewhere along the way. That’s a good thing. Good.” She held up a second finger. “Secondly, she’s a bloody assassin. It isn’t like she’s a creampuff who’ll get herself killed the first second she’s out of your sight. And thirdly, you’ve been so friggin’ nauseating with your plans for ‘redeeming’ yourself,” she said scathingly. She used air quotes. Air quotes! Malachi stifled a shocked laugh. “That we figured we were going to be asked to leave you alone so we didn’t ruin your image.”

His humor faded abruptly. “You thought I’d ignore your friendship?” he asked, deeply offended even while he acknowledged in his mind that he had thought about it once or twice.

Izzy cocked her head to the side. “We’re not insulted or anything, you know. It isn’t like we don’t know we’re abrasive. We just don’t care what people think about us. Neither should you.”

She was so young he looked at her pityingly then realized they were giving him the same look.

“Malachi, you’ve been living your entire life trying to be what everyone expects you to be, trying to live up to some image you have in your head. When are you gonna realize that the only people who really matter are the ones who like you for who you are?” Saga asked him softly.

He gaped at the three of them, all of them looking at him with sympathy. He wanted to protest their assumptions, but he couldn’t. It was all bloody well true. He’d made some great friends in the last few years, when he’d looked past his own bitterness to see that there were good people out there. To be counted as a friend by them, relied on to watch their children, or help them when they needed it, was a heady feeling. He didn’t need to keep working at being someone of worth—he already was. No more sucking up to people who didn’t give a



damn about him. No more tiptoeing around the Veilerian elite. He didn't need to hide who he was from these people. They accepted him, Halfling blood notwithstanding.

Lani deserved the same acceptance. She believed herself to be less worthy than he did, and he suspected she didn't have anyone to lean on. Except him. She could lean on him if he found her in time. She could be his mate, his partner.

Saga snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Earth to Malachi...Good, you're back with us." She sat down again, looking smug. "Now, we're looking for a fairy, right? What does she look like? What kind of fairy is she?"

Izzy sat forward. "Yeah, give us deets!"

The next half hour was spent extolling Lani's virtues, telling his friends what little he knew about her except how she tasted, felt, and sounded in bed. Those were secrets she'd passed to him, and he doubted the Amazons would want to hear it anyway.

"A friggin' shadow fairy!" Izzy exclaimed when he was finished. She socked Rosetta on the arm. "That's some kick-ass shit!"

Malachi looked at the Amazon, surprised. "You know about them?"

Saga rolled her eyes. "She's just been obsessed about them forever." She leaned forward, saying in a loud stage whisper, "You should see her tent. She has Shadowland posters all over the place."

Izzy huffed. "So what? The shadow fairies are the most interesting of the fairy races." She pouted, crossing her arms over her chest.

"How so?" Malachi asked intently.

"Oh. Well, the Shadow Knights were able to hide in shadows."

"So?" Rosetta asked from the sofa where she was filing her nails. "Amazons can do that, too."

"No, you don't get it. When I say they hide in shadows, they"—she flapped her hands—"become the shadows. They dissolve into a mist-like substance and move from shadow to shadow. It's what made them one of the most dangerous races in the fey kingdom."

“How do you know this?” Malachi demanded. If this information had been out in the open, then how had he and the rest of the Veil remained ignorant of it?

She shrugged. “I traveled a lot before I joined the Blood Maidens. One of the tribes I stayed with had a mated male who was a Shadow Knight.” She sat forward. “They were the premier assassins before The Great Fey Treaty of 1754,” she whispered. “They could hide in the smallest shadow, and some of the strongest ones were able to teleport through the shadows.”

Impressed, Malachi sat back with a thoughtful frown. Was Lani one of these Shadow Knights? “What happened to the Knights? I mean, they didn’t just disappear, right?”

“Oh, well, he said that when the Treaty was signed, the Knights were all killed. Their children were monitored for those abilities, but luckily none of them had them. Why, do you think your fairy slipped through the cracks?”

“What do they look like?” he asked hoarsely.

Izzy shrugged again. “Most of the time fairies use glamour, but I was lucky enough to see this one without it. Their skin is grayish silver, and they have black wings. The others tend to have gray wings.”

Gods, Lani was a descendant of a Shadow Knight! Wonder, mixed with fear, seeped through his body. “Then that’s what she is. She’s a Shadow Knight, or a descendant.”

“Oh my gods!” Izzy squealed. “I have to meet her. When are we going to find her?” She was jumping up and down in her excitement.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, feeling like a fool. “Lucian is trying to contact one of his spies to see if there have been any rumblings in *Skado* about her.”

Saga nodded, her gaze thoughtful. “Have you taken blood from her?”

Malachi's face burned with heat. It was a personal question, especially since he was a Halfling and had no need of sustenance from blood. "Yes."

"You should be able to find her that way," she mused, tapping her chin. "Have you tried?"

He nodded shortly. "I'm only a half-blood vampire. The link only lasts for a short period of time, which has passed."

Izzy wrinkled her nose. "That sucks. Okay." She slapped her hands on the arms of her chair. "There has to be another way to track her."

"You could contact a tracker Demon," Rosetta inserted, her eyes bent to her fingernails.

Everyone looked at her in astonishment.

"What? You think I can't come up with ideas?" she asked huffily.

Emboldened by the idea, Malachi launched himself across the room, grabbing Rosetta by the shoulders and planting a loud kiss on her cheek. "You're a star!"

He was gone before Rosetta had a chance to reply, leaving the three Amazons in bemused shock. The drag queen wilted back into her chair, fanning herself. "Oh my. That man is beautiful," she whispered, one hand pressed to her cheek.

Saga grinned at her friend. "Too bad he's taken," she said in agreement.

\* \* \* \*

Lani glared ahead stonily, ignoring the woman sitting in front of her. The men had left the room an hour before, leaving Lani to her mother's not-so-tender mercies. Wikolia had spent most of that time slapping Lani or pulling her hair. She hated to say it, but her mother fought like a girl.

Wikolia twirled a strand of hair around her finger, her expression pensive yet satisfied.

"I hated you from the moment you were born," she said conversationally. She sat on the edge of the bed, her legs crossed.

"I would've never guessed," Lani gritted, ignoring the sting her mother's words caused her.

It wasn't unexpected. Even as a child, she'd known Wikolia didn't care for her. It was in the way she brushed aside all of Lani's attempts to please her, the stinging slaps on her face when she "bothered" Wikolia. Only her grandfather had shown her affection, but he'd died far too soon to protect her.

"I would've aborted, but my father wouldn't allow it. And of course, Thomas wanted a son." She sighed, rolling her eyes as if to say, "men." "He thought it was so exciting to have a Shadow Knight child. He didn't know what you could do to us, how you could ruin us all because of the color of your skin and wings. But he knows now.

"And then my father," she continued with hate burning in her eyes. "The man who adored me my whole life, forgot about me the minute he saw you. You reminded him of his father." She snorted. "You were the Shadow Knight my father could never be, and he worshipped the ground you walked on."

Lani felt her eyes widen. Was that what her mother's hatred was all about? Jealousy?

Wikolia's lavender eyes were narrow slits of hatred. "Did you think I wouldn't get back at you? You ruined my life. Thomas and I had it so good before you came along. We had fun. No responsibilities, no Shadow Knight to taint our standing at court."

"How is any of this my fault?" Lani finally shouted. "You could've left me for someone else to raise."

Her mother slapped her face almost absently. "My father forbid it, you stupid little bitch." Her face twisted. "He was the one who contacted Leofric about a possible union between the two of you. The King! The one fairy who could bring an end to our lifestyle, married to my daughter? I don't think so."

Lani would have shaken her head, but the strap stopped her. The torment she'd lived with for nearly two hundred years was all because her mother was a selfish bitch? It amazed and repulsed her.

"And Thomas?" Lani asked, unwilling to call him father. "What did he think?" She shouldn't have asked, but she needed to know at least one of her parents cared for her.

Wikolia waved one petite hand in dismissal. "Thomas didn't care one way or the other. You weren't the boy he wanted, and as soon as he realized you would just draw more attention to us, he lost interest."

Her body flinched involuntarily, earning a laugh from Wikolia. Any hope of reprieve from someone in her family died. Her mother hated her and her father was indifferent. Tears burned her eyes. Stupid, pitiful tears that fell down her cheeks as Wikolia watched with satisfied malice.

Luther and Thomas reentered the bedroom, their faces dark with lust. The minute Luther saw the tears on her face, his eyes dilated and his mouth parted as though he were watching a striptease. He was excited by her emotion, something she'd fought so hard to keep a secret from him.

He approached her, his hand extended to catch her tears, but Lani snapped at his fingers.

"Tell me what the fuck you want so I can get away from you," Lani snarled. Luther's hands had paused in their descent.

"Very well," Wikolia rasped. "You must fulfill your last assignment, daughter."

Lani laughed harshly. "Or what?" Her body was still throbbing from her beating, her heart was broken yet again, and Luther looked like he wanted to eat her up. Did they honestly think they could do anything worse to her?

"Did you know she has a sister?" Thomas asked, raising his head to look over her shoulder at Luther.

Forcing herself to look bored and uninterested, Lani arched an eyebrow. Her parents just snickered.

“She’s a fetching little thing,” Thomas continued. “Almost looks like Noelani.”

Over the thundering of her heart, Lani heard Luther’s breathing speed up. Some part of her knew her handler would be entranced with the idea of owning another fairy that looked like her. Dread filled her as she waited for the axe to fall.

“Mm, yes,” Wikolia purred. “Shikoba is such a beautiful, young fairy. Very obedient.” Her eyes drifted to Luther. “You would adore her, Luther. Just think, matching fairies for your pleasure.”

Lani’s heart stuttered to a stop, blood rushing through her ears. She had no idea how old her sister was, or even what she was like, but no one deserved to become Luther’s plaything. Shock held her immobile as she stared into the cold eyes of her parents. They would willingly give another child to this hell?

“Why?” she whispered when she was able to speak.

Wikolia shrugged. “She’s just like you, a burden. Only this time, my father isn’t here to see her. She’s had a little better time than you have, but she still has to go. I don’t allow any rivals in my house.

“And Luther has impressed us with his techniques, which is why Shikoba will come to him if you fail.”

Thomas shifted slightly, drawing Lani’s gaze. The coldness in his eyes reflected his wife’s. “If you succeed, we will attempt to reason with Luther’s master to keep you alive.” He leaned down to nibble the edge of Wikolia’s ear. “We don’t want you to die, Noelani, not unnecessarily.”

Choking on rage and hatred, Lani closed her eyes. Shikoba was an innocent, just as she’d been all those years ago. She couldn’t let her sister fall into Luther’s hands, would kill her parents to prevent it if she had to. The coldness Malachi had managed to thaw threatened to return, but this time she welcomed it.

Baring her teeth in a fierce snarl, Lani opened her eyes again. Some of her barely restrained anger must’ve shown in her gaze, as Thomas and Wikolia’s eyes widened in surprised fear. Icy fury sat

heavy in her stomach, demanding blood to appease it. Not yet, she cautioned it. She needed to plan first.

“Fine,” she said flatly, forcing her emotions aside. Shikoba would need Lani’s considerable skills if they were going to survive.

Luther let out a grunt that could’ve been disappointment or approval. His hands lifted from her body reluctantly. She heard him walking around the table, saw him appear out the corner of her eye. He was grinning hugely, dwarfing Thomas and Wikolia with his massive size.

“You always manage to ruin my fun, sweet Shade,” he crooned, brushing his fingers over her lips.

Unable to stop the impulse, Lani snapped with her teeth, catching the tip of his finger. Blood burst on her tongue in accompaniment to Luther’s laughing shout. He casually slapped her face, busting her lip.

Their blood mingled in her mouth, a hated mixture that seemed to unlock invisible chains. The weight of Luther’s power over her seemed to dissipate, unshackling her soul. Did he notice? she wondered, shooting him a quick glance. His face remained wreathed in false cheer and intense lust.

Wikolia touched his face, turning him to her. “She’s no fun, Luther. Let’s show her what we can do together,” she cooed, wrapping her arms around his neck to kiss him deeply.

Thomas’ eyes flared with desire as he watched his wife. The three of them tumbled to the bed, directly in front of her. Disgust warred with disbelief. This was what they’d planned? To have her watch them have sex? Was this supposed to impress her?

Idly wondering if she should send her parents a “Thank You” note for distracting Luther, Shade waited for their antics to cease. Soon the bed stopped shaking, their voices went silent, and she could think again.

She’d given them her word she would fulfill her last assignment, and she would, just not the way they intended. First she had to protect

her sister, provide for her care, and then protect Malachi. Then this entire mess would be over.



## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

When they finally released her, she wanted to stab them all through their black hearts. They'd kept her strapped to the board for two more days, her parents watching with ill-disguised rapture as Luther exacted punishment on her. The slaps, punches, and cuts littered her body with wounds, weakening her when she needed strength. She was only allowed a little water, and never any sleep.

Luther had set the imps to watching her when he and her parents were sleeping or otherwise occupied. The slightest droop of her eyes resulted in a beating or splash of freezing water. The hatred she'd always felt towards Luther began to expand to include her parents.

Finally admitting that ignorance was bliss, she wished she'd never learned of their self-serving ways and disgust of her. She'd always looked back on her early years with a pang of nostalgia, but now the blinders were gone, she saw that everything her parents had done had been in their own interests.

If she didn't have her sister and Malachi to attempt to save, she'd have wished for death. As it was, her love for Malachi and her curiosity about her sister kept her going. Closing her eyes briefly, she conjured Malachi's face, wishing she'd been able to tell him everything in her heart. There'd been no time, though, and if things progressed as she planned, there never would be.

Movement on the bed grabbed her attention, and though her eyes were burning from lack of sleep, she forced them open again. Luther shifted to the left of Wikolia, stretching his arms over his head. Joints popped as he flexed with a loud yawn. His head rose, eyes finding her in the gloom of the bedroom. It wouldn't be hard for him to see her,

she thought ruefully. She may as well be in a spotlight. The flashlights the imps had placed near her had given way to floodlights when it became apparent her parents were going to keep Luther in bed.

“Good morning, my Shade,” he rumbled, sitting up to scrub a hand over his face.

The vial of her blood and his fluids still dangled from the cord around his neck. He’d made no noise about the spell breaking, so she wondered if she’d made up the whole episode. She wondered if her desire for freedom made her imagine she was free of his power.

“Your mum is quite the hellcat,” he remarked as he climbed out of the bed. He turned to look at the two fairies entwined on his mattress. “She’s a fair slut, she is, but I much prefer you over her. She’s cold, like a reptile, but you were always so warm.”

He approached her, his face wan and tired looking. It seemed that her parents had drained him of a lot of his energy, for which she’d be eternally grateful. Quelling the urge to shudder at the images swirling in her mind, Lani called forth her blank mask.

“You won’t fail this time, will you, my sweet?” he asked, his covetous gaze tracing her naked flesh.

Many times during the two day sex-a-thon with her parents, she’d caught him watching her while using Wikolia.

He tapped her cheek. “I wouldn’t mind if you failed, though. Imagine having two of you to enjoy,” he continued, tired lust swimming in his black eyes.

It was a greater effort to keep her face empty of emotion, especially when he began to detail exactly what he planned for her and Shikoba. She attempted to block out his words, but they leaked through her shield, every syllable spearing into her and finding roots. Revulsion and horror filled her until she couldn’t keep her mouth shut.

“What about your master?” She hissed, her eyes slits of green fury. “Does he even know I’m here? Isn’t he the one who wants me after the assignment is complete?”

Surprise, quickly masked, registered in Luther’s eyes. “You’d do well to remember exactly what the Overlord can and will do to you when you’re in his keep.”

“Then why isn’t he here?” she insisted, knowing she should keep her mouth shut. She was a mass of bruises already, but she couldn’t resist goading him. She knew Steele didn’t know Luther had called her back.

The fist that split open her cheek was expected. The hands that pulled Luther back to keep him from inflicting more damage weren’t. Wikolia and Thomas each had one of Luther’s arms, holding him away from her.

“No, you can’t hurt her anymore,” Wikolia advised, hugging Luther’s arm to her naked chest. “We need her to finish the assignment, remember? She can’t do that if she’s dead.”

Reason leaked into Luther’s face slowly, though his eyes still betrayed his anger. “Fine.” Looking to the imps, he made a sharp gesture. “Release her, clean her up, and get out of here.” He looked back to Lani. “Don’t mess this up again, Shade. Or there won’t be enough of you left to bring to the master and your sister will take your place.”

He let the threat hang in the air as one imp pushed the rack out of the room with the other scurrying alongside to keep the light on Lani. She kind of felt like Hannibal Lecter being brought in by the Feds. Lani snorted quietly, making the imps jump.

\* \* \* \*

When the door shut, Luther whirled on the two fairies standing behind him. The fury on his face had Thomas edging away from his wife, while she looked at Luther with lustful greed.

“Don’t ever reprimand me again.” He growled, pinning the fairy in place with his gaze. “Your usefulness is at an end. Get the fuck out.”

Anger darkened Wikolia’s face. “I don’t think so,” she retorted, standing straight. “No one dismisses me—”

Luther’s backhand across her mouth stopped her words, though it didn’t extinguish the lust in her eyes. Disgust filled him as he saw she was excited by his brutality. She wasn’t Shade. She was a pale imitation of the female who’d just left the room.

“Get out of my house, slut.”

Thomas reached out to catch her arm as she started after Luther. “No,” he cautioned her, his expression grave. “We’ve done what was asked of us. He’ll kill us if you push.”

Glancing at the demon who was dressing across the room, Wikolia felt a quiver of lust and hate. Her daughter, her most hated child, had won the admiration of a demon male who made no effort to hide it. Noelani had stepped on her hunting grounds far too often, she thought as she and Thomas dressed. The little bitch would pay.

\* \* \* \*

Lani fell through the portal, landing in a heap on her bedroom floor. Groaning from the aches and pains her beatings had left her, she leveled herself up enough to make sure her wards hadn’t been breached. The silence of her home pressed in on her. All seemed clear, though she wouldn’t know for sure until she did a walk-through.

Flopping over to her back, she stared up at the shadowy ceiling. Her entire body throbbed. The imps had cleaned her up all right, with a high-pressured water hose that left her burned all over. Rolling her eyes towards the bedroom window, she saw that it was a moonless night. There would be no healing moonbath for several days. She’d have to heal naturally.

Willing herself to move in spite of her pain, Lani pushed to her feet, for once glad to not be wearing any clothing. Her skin raw from her “bath,” she staggered to the living room. The air in the house was musty from her absence, but it was the silence that pounded at her.

Turning on the stereo, she breathed a sigh of relief as music blared from the speakers. Stumbling to one of the two recliners, she dropped into it with a wince. Several minutes passed as she wavered in and out of consciousness. Finally realizing she wouldn’t be any use to Malachi or Shikoba in her current state, she decided to sleep.

Dragging a small blanket to cover her nakedness, she reclined in the battered chair, her eyelids falling shut. Between one breath and the next, she fell asleep to the dulcet sounds of Ministry pounding through the house.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi stared out at the moonless night. Lani was out there somewhere. The gods only knew what was happening to her, and he was stuck waiting for information. He cursed himself soundly for not asking her questions when he’d had her in his bed.

The last night with her would have been the perfect time to ask her what her life had been like. She’d been soft, defenseless, and utterly his. Now, she was gone yet again, and he had no idea where to start looking for her.

“You are troubled again,” a soft voice said from the doorway of Lucian’s attic.

Malachi’s mouth curved into a reluctant smile. He’d thought Tia was too enamored of her new friends to look for him, but once again, she surprised him.

She crossed the room, her soft steps barely making a sound. Tia’s small body ducked under his arm so she could lean into his side. Her little, warm weight helped ease some of the worry and burden in his heart, though nothing would end it except for Lani’s return.

“Do you see anything, Tia?” he whispered without looking at her.

Her slim arm hugged his waist. “No, *Abba*. The sight doesn’t always let me see when I’m close to something.” She paused and Malachi could feel her staring at him. “She is a strong woman. A worthy mate for my *Abba*.”

Heat licked up his cheeks while a smile crept across his face. How this little...whatever she was could get him to blush was beyond him. “What are you, Tia? You’re not a water elemental.”

She stiffened against him, saying nothing for several minutes. Malachi didn’t pressure her, just continued to hold her and look out the window. He needed a moment of no worry, just a minute, and then he could move on to finding Lani.

“I—” She paused as though wracked by indecision. She mumbled something in that lyrical language before taking a deep breath. “At one time, I was immortal and very powerful. There was a battle, and I was destroyed.” She shuddered, huddling closer. “I waited thousands and thousands of years to return to Earth.”

Malachi said nothing, not sure what to say at all.

“One day, a being told me my time of torment was over. I could return to Earth, but stripped of my powers. I laughed, thinking it would not matter. How much could things change since I was last here, I asked myself. I agreed to return to Earth, but I had to promise never to reveal myself until someone who loved me asked.” She paused, and Malachi risked a glance down at her. Her face was thoughtful, her blue eyes staring unseeing over the sea of sugarcane surrounding Lucian’s house. “I didn’t understand the importance of that, *Abba*. No one had ever loved me in my former life. No one had cared that I was killed for trying to protect my own.

“I agreed and there was a blinding flash of light. Everything was so loud, so strange. I couldn’t see anything. There were strange smells, and I was so cold, so small.” She stopped, a rueful smile pulling at her mouth. “I was born to an orphaned human around present day Texarkana. They thought something was wrong with me.

I was sent to an orphanage, and then someone decided to get rid of me.”

Tia looked up at him. “You found me that night. I had lived among the humans for a few years, not knowing why they hated me.”

“You scared them,” Malachi surmised, seeing the flash of pain in her eyes.

“Yes. I was a child, but I still retained some of my powers. Not the ones that would protect me, just the ones that told me the time would come when they would send me away, or attempt to kill me.” She looked out over the grounds again. “I saw you finding me, taking me to your home, and caring for me.”

Guilt weighed heavily in Malachi’s heart. He hadn’t taken Tia in to care for her, he’d taken her in to use her, and he’d never made a secret of it. In fact, he’d relished his edge over his enemies.

“Tia,” he said heavily. “Can you forgive me for everything?”

She turned wide blue eyes up at him. “Of course, *Abba*. This was meant to happen. You needed me, and I needed you.” Her little hand rested over his heart. “The things we suffer are for a reason, and even when we don’t understand why, we need to remember that life is about pain, mistakes, and learning from both. I would never have understood that if I hadn’t been destroyed in my former life. I was arrogant and selfish, thinking only of myself and my power. Even those I cared about were only tools to help me get what I wanted.”

Malachi winced. That was exactly how he’d seen Tia, as a tool to help him bring the Veil down. She patted his chest, making him open his eyes again. “I don’t understand,” he admitted hoarsely.

She smiled softly. “I was a goddess in my former life.” Her smile faded as her eyes seemed to see into the past. “I was reborn here to learn my lessons.” Tia turned back to him with shining eyes.

“Just like you. You have learned your lesson, *Abba*, and now it is time for you to fight for your happiness. It’s there, waiting, you just have to grab it with both hands,” Tia told him solemnly.

He nodded thoughtfully, looking out over the dark landscape. Happiness wasn't something he'd ever searched for. Contentment most definitely, but never joy. And he knew without even asking that his path to happiness lay in Lani's hands.

A sudden commotion from downstairs had him frowning and looking over his shoulder. If he wasn't mistaken, that had been Izzy doing her best "school girl" squawk. The rumble of Lucian's voice mingling with another male's cleared his confusion.

He pressed a soft kiss to Tia's forehead. "Tia, I need you to go back with the Amazons and take the backstairs, okay?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "*Abba*, I can feel the incubus walking up the stairs."

"Did you just roll your eyes at me?" he asked, completely flabbergasted. "And what do you mean you can feel him walking up the stairs?"

"He's an incubus, *Abba*. They have magical signatures that call to every female in a hundred foot radius," she explained patiently as though explaining to a child. "However, I will use the backstairs because I would rather you don't fight with him."

With that, she floated from the room, her ponytail bouncing. Malachi stared after her. She was going to make him old before his time, he just knew it.

"Nice, *t-frère*," Fallon Plaisance said as he sauntered into the room. "Who was that?"

Malachi's fangs sprang forward, and he took a step towards his friend. Fallon held his hands up, laughing. He looked disgustingly attractive with his white-blonde hair and silver eyes. If they weren't friends, Malachi would be tempted to rearrange the incubus's face just as a public service for the rest of the men on the planet.

"Don't worry about her," Malachi muttered as he gestured Fallon towards the long sofa in the attic. "What are you doing here? I thought you were at some kind of incubus reunion or something."



Fallon shrugged, a strange expression on his face. “I went, but there was...I don’t know.” He frowned. “I met this girl, and she just disappeared.”

Malachi sat back, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. This was nothing new. The male was an incubus after all. He had more women in his bed than planes left LAX. “So? You always meet girls and never see them again.”

The incubus was shaking his head, his face troubled. “No, there was something else...”

“Are you cheating on me, Fallon?” Izzy shouted as she came into the room. The sparkle in her eyes belied the accusation.

Malachi snorted loudly. Izzy had a crush on Fallon that went back several years, but she never acted on it. Instead, she treated him like everyone else who came into contact with her. It was probably a good thing they’d never hooked up, Malachi thought as he watched Fallon smirk, as Izzy would kill Fallon.

“*Bébé*, I would never cheat on you if you promised to be mine forever,” he teased, though his usual sparkle was missing.

Huh, Malachi thought with surprise, Fallon really was troubled. There was nothing he liked more than flirting, so not to take Izzy up on her usual teasing was very unusual.

“So why did you show up here?” Izzy asked bluntly as she settled between the two men.

Fallon shrugged as he studied his toes. “I heard about Malachi’s *misère* and thought he could use help.”

“Sweet!” Izzy crowed. “I never got to work with you last time,” she continued, bouncing on the sofa. “You want to team up with me? ’Cause, babe, you, me...we could do so much together.”

“Oh Gods, is she at it again?” Saga’s tired voice carried across the room, and she shook her head as she saw Izzy bouncing closer and closer to Fallon. “We should have her put down. This rabid fascination is so not good for the Blood Maiden Tribe’s rep.”

As usual, the interaction between Saga and Izzy cracked Malachi up and even brought a smile to Fallon's face. His friend was seriously troubled, but at the moment, all Malachi could think about was Lani and what was happening to her. When he found her again, he promised to help his friend.

## **Chapter Twenty-Five**

Lani jerked awake, sitting straight up. Eyes wide, she studied her living room. Music still blared from the speakers, but nothing else had changed. Blinking rapidly to get the sleep from her eyes, she saw that five hours had passed since she'd lain down. Feeling surprisingly invigorated, she hurried to her bathroom. Her body still ached, but it was more manageable than it had been. A quick shower, clean clothes, and she felt almost fairy.

Following the dictates of her growling stomach, she shuffled to the kitchen. Studying the cabinets and fridge, Lani wanted to kick something. She hadn't gone grocery shopping before the assignment began, so she had nothing to eat. Snarling at the moldy crust of bread left in the breadbox, she slammed it closed. She needed food. She'd slept longer than she meant to, and now she only had nineteen hours before Luther came looking for her again.

The grumbling of her stomach only got louder as she debated going without and shopping. Black dots danced before her eyes, making the decision for her. Food first, hopefully it wouldn't take longer than six hours to find her sister.

Trudging to the small garage attached to her home, she slid into the nondescript Ford Taurus she kept for those few times when portaling wasn't possible. It sputtered to life after three attempts, and she headed to Missy Kwon's Diner in Copa Grove.

If she had a phone, she would have called her dinner order in, but she didn't see the point in having one. They would have been too noisy when she was on the job, and the only person who ever contacted her was Luther, and he'd just pull her through a portal or

portal to her when he gave her assignment. As it was, she had to wait half an hour for her order to cook.

She tried to ignore the tantalizing smells of food cooking and thought about her plan. She'd already notified the Veilerian Council about the Overlord's identity along with the names of several top Eturian generals. Her main concern, though, was to take Luther out without him killing Malachi first.

She had to get rid of Luther before he realized that the spell he'd cast on her so long ago was no longer in effect. It had taken her a few hours away from Luther's home to feel the difference, but it was there. The darkness that had followed her around for so long was gone, replaced by a soft hum of...love?

Luther had said he cast the spell using her blood and his and that's all that was needed. The last time she'd made love with Malachi, he bit her and she'd returned the favor, tasting his blood at the same time he drank from her. Had Malachi cast a spell over her without knowing? She knew, not even as angry at her as he had been, he wouldn't have done it on purpose. He didn't think he could cast spells. Yet there was something different about her, something even Luther had noticed.

It wouldn't be long before Luther added it all up, and when he did, he would make it his sole purpose to destroy Malachi.

"Fifty-five," an Asian-accented voice called out, snapping Lani out of her reverie. She paid for her meal and ignored the wondering expressions on the humans' faces. They always looked at her like she was crazy when she came here. If it hadn't been for their kick-ass beef and broccoli, she'd find another restaurant to clean out.

\* \* \* \*

Lani sighed, her stomach beyond full. Sitting back in her chair, she popped the button on her jeans to give her belly room. Surveying the mass of empty bags and containers on the table, she once again

thanked her lucky stars for Missy Kwon's. The mounds of food she'd brought home for herself could've easily fed a family of six. It hadn't mattered, though. She'd plowed through each dish, nearly moaning at having her roaring hunger satisfied.

Drowsy and content, she wanted nothing more than to sleep for a good twelve hours. That couldn't happen, though, she thought with a groan. Shikoba was in *Skado* now, and if she knew her parents, they'd hustle home to make sure she was well-hidden from rescue attempts. Absently rubbing her belly, Lani thought about her plan.

Getting into *Skado* wouldn't be difficult, but getting Shikoba out would. There was no doubt in her mind her parents had some kind of security to keep Shikoba in place. If she had to, she'd utilize her special skills to get her sister away from their parents. She didn't want to kill any of her fellow citizens, though, especially if they were working for her parents because it was the only option left to them.

A snort interrupted the thrash metal blasting through the house. Wikolia and Thomas had burned so many bridges in *Skado* no one would voluntarily work for them. The only reason they hadn't been run out of the kingdom was because of their noble blood. Noble blood. Ha. There was nothing noble about her parents, even if they shared an extremely vague blood connection with King Leofric.

She shook her head, no time to think about her parents. Shikoba needed out of *Skado*. She'd get her sister out. The next part of her plan involved her throwing herself on Malachi and Lucian's mercy. She hoped they would take Shikoba in, protect her from Luther and the Fayards.

That was the true kink in her plan. Though she trusted Malachi, she wasn't as sure about Lucian. The *Oculum* was a male who lived for justice. He was just as likely to toss her in prison to await execution as he was to listen to her.

Finally able to button her jeans again, Lani left the kitchen. She didn't bother cleaning up her mess. If things went according to plan, or went horribly wrong, there was little chance of her returning home

again. It made things slightly better to know she'd never put much effort into making it a true home. With the exception of her stereo system and her conservatory, she wouldn't miss it at all. Malachi's mansion had been more like a home to her than this one, she thought as she entered her bedroom.

Crossing to the hidden panel in the far wall, she pressed on the latch. With a soft "click", the door swung open, muted light spilling into the bedroom. Over the years she'd made a practice of collecting weapons. Displayed on the wall were knives, daggers, short swords, throwing stars, garrotes, whips, and one gun. The gun had been one of her first purchases after she'd seen what it could do to a demon.

Appropriately named *Dämon-Fluch*, or Demon Bane, the gun was similar in size to a Desert Eagle. It was a black double-barreled revolver that held specialized bullets made only by Veilerians. Biting her lip, she kept a firm grip on the gun as she rooted for ammunition.

This gun, this single weapon, was intended for one person only. She'd bought it with the purpose of killing him. The simple act of purchasing the gun had given her a sense of security, a feeling that one day she'd rise above his tyranny. That time had come. No longer in his power, she could finally fight back. She slipped two bullets into the chamber. Power filled her, the power to take revenge on the one who'd torn her dignity from her all those years ago.

The shoulder holster she took out next was all black. Strapping it on, she slipped the gun into the holster and moved a few times to make sure the fit was correct. Nodding to herself, she then strapped on several of the daggers and put the throwing stars in a small holster she strapped to her belt. It was a ridiculous amount of weaponry, but if things went downhill, she wanted to be prepared.

With a final nod, she closed the panel. Her retractable sword was greatly missed, but knowing Malachi had it was enough for her. Perhaps he'd even pass it to Shikoba. A familial gift from her only sister and a grandfather she'd never known. Smiling softly at the idea of giving something to her sister, Lani left her home.

Out front, she turned back. With shaky fingers, she found the ward securing her home. She pricked her finger on one of her daggers and pressed the blood to the ward. It gleamed brighter before dissolving into nothing. She sighed, and then straightened her shoulders.

*Skado* was her first stop. From there, only the Gods knew what would happen next.

\* \* \* \*

It had taken considerable convincing from his brother for Malachi to stay at the house and read through the secret files. He wanted to be searching for Lani, not reading, but Ruby had made a valid point that the Amazons were expert trackers and he'd only be in their way. Malachi studied the files in front of him. Ignoring the shouted laughter of the Amazons and Fallon across the room, he frowned over the information Lucian had gathered about Ormond Steele.

He remembered Steele as being a fire elemental with integrity, but the sealed Council files told a different story. Steele had been the VPA Chief when Malachi was a green recruit, and the elemental had taken him in. He'd taught Malachi how to survive the bruising punishment meted out to all recruits. He'd been a friend and mentor. Yet, Malachi had never known that Steele had faced more than one ass-chewing by the Council.

Flipping through one report, Malachi read that Steele had taken other weaker recruits under his wing, but each of those recruits had disappeared after several months. Once Steele was killed in battle, evidence popped up here and there about abnormalities in Steele's reports. The current VPA Chief had led an internal audit on his predecessor and found that Steele's protégés had all died within months of being recruited into his service.

The evidence was bleak and brought home to Malachi just how easily he'd been led astray. Steele had experimented on those recruits.

In the days before DNA testing and genetic manipulation, he'd used demon magic to enhance certain characteristics of the Halflings under his control. The corpses found buried beneath Steele's house had been grotesquely disfigured. Some enterprising Councilor had drawn pictures of what was found, and Malachi shuddered at the strange mutations. How Steele had hidden all of this while still preserving the benign and kindly air, Malachi couldn't imagine, but with the evidence before him, he couldn't deny how wrong he'd been.

"This should have been made public," he told Lucian, who was sitting across from him.

The big vampire sat back, swiping a hand over his weary face. "I didn't know anything about this until I brought Shade's letter to Chief Snow." Anger colored his brother's voice. "Dammit, this information could have helped us years ago."

"Snow didn't have any clue Steele might still be alive?" Malachi asked, doubtfully. He'd met Chief Snow recently and the satyr was no idiot. He was scarily competent and had reorganized the Veilerian Protection Agency from top to bottom.

"He says he didn't think he would be, but then said he wasn't surprised." Lucian growled. "He found some letters between Steele and Bianca's parents, but nothing that leapt out at him."

Malachi thought about that. Bianca had been a very powerful witch with Council ties. She could have helped stage Steele's death, even going so far as to make it appear real without any suspicion. Something pushed for attention in his mind, a memory he'd forgotten about until thinking about Bianca and Steele together.

"She was there when he died," he said slowly, thinking over what he remembered. "I was out on assignment, but I remember Bianca giving me a blow-by-blow account of what happened."

Lucian nodded, a dark frown on his face. "Snow said she was the healer on site when the attack happened, so she could have slipped Steele something to make him appear dead."



Thinking about Bianca's skills with potions and how she'd kept Piper's father paralyzed and sickly for a decade, Malachi believed it.

"So she was in with Steele from the very beginning and helped him disappear." He threw the file on the desk. "But why did they leave so much evidence behind? Steele is a fire elemental. He could have incinerated the corpses until nothing was left."

"Not every evil mastermind is thorough, Malachi," Ruby said as she eased into Lucian's lap. "I think it might've been Bianca's job to erase all evidence of Steele's activities, but she got sloppy. That may also be why she was eliminated once she was arrested."

He nodded, sighing heavily. He mourned the girl he'd grown up with, but even when he'd known Bianca was with the Eturians, he hadn't realized the depth of her corruption.

"So Steele is the Overlord," he muttered, raking a hand through his hair.

Lani had told him, but he hadn't believed her, thinking she was trying to wiggle out of trouble with him. Pain squeezed his heart as he suddenly remembered something she'd told him.

"He's after Lani. After she killed me, she was to be placed in his personal service." Panic threatened as he looked at the pictures in front of him. "We have to find her."

Ruby patted his hand. "We will, Malachi. I promise. My family is on the hunt now. If she's in this dimension, we'll find her."

Whoops from the front of the house had Malachi springing from his chair. He pounded down the hallway, his heart in his throat. Gods, he prayed, please let them have found Lani.

\* \* \* \*

Lani frowned at her parents' house. Small yet elegant, it was painted bright peach with glaringly white trim. It was a splotch of jarring color against the silvery grays of the plant life that surrounded it. She shook her head. When she'd lived here, the house had been a

more sedate grayish pink. She'd thought it beautiful. Apparently her parents had painted the house to reflect their new, carefree lifestyle.

All was quiet, which worried her more than anything. When she'd lived with her parents, there'd always been people coming and going, but now the house almost appeared deserted.

Working her way around back, she found a small opening in one of the windows. Shifting to her shadow form, she slipped through the crack and found herself in the library. The books on the shelves were for show. There were only a few real tomes, the rest just book facings. She'd spent hours here as a young fairy, reading about faraway places, never imagining that she'd soon be given away.

She shoved the thought away. Shikoba was in the house, somewhere. Drifting along the shadowy sides of the hallway, she inspected each room, seeing no one. None of the servants were in the main rooms, and it appeared that her parents hadn't come home yet. Biting her lip, she peered up the stairs. There weren't many shadows around the staircase. If one of the servants came out when she was ascending, they'd see her. She took a deep breath. Best to go quickly, she decided.

Shooting like an arrow, she hit the stairs, her shadow form melting beneath the bright track lighting. There were no shouts of surprise, so she relaxed slightly. Rhythmic pounding and cries came from her parents' room. Bile filled her mouth. They were home, and entertaining.

With her parents otherwise occupied, she had ample time to search for her sister. Taking a deep breath, she approached the room she'd slept in until her internship with Luther. Opening the door, hurt gripped her.

It had been stripped of all her belongings. Gone were the precious few books she'd managed to buy, along with all the flowing dresses she used to wear. It was as though no one had ever occupied the room, as though no dreams had been spun in the small bed. Heartsick from those lost dreams, and wanting nothing more than to leave the

house, she searched the other rooms for her sister. Three other rooms proved to be guest bedrooms, all appointed in her mother's heavy style.

The final room, the smallest, was on the far end of the hallway. The door boasted a small window similar to the one on the cell she'd occupied in Luther's dungeon. It opened when she pushed on the knob. This was Shikoba's room, she thought with a tight chest. Soft pink walls made for a homey, innocent atmosphere. Shikoba didn't have a lot of furniture, just a dresser, mirror, night stand, and a small bed. The windows were covered in heavy iron bars.

The comforter on the bed was wrinkled as though something had sat there. Moving to the closet, she threw it open. Clothing was missing, and what was left had been rifled through.

Had Luther already come for her? she wondered as panic began to wind its way through her. She couldn't let Luther have Shikoba. Hatred, for her parents and for Luther, formed a hard, cold ball in the middle of her stomach. They were going to pay, she thought as she stalked back down the hall.

Throwing open her parents' bedroom door, she expected to see them going at it, but no one was in the massive bed. Lani frowned, trying to locate the sound. It came from the room next to her parents' bedroom. When she'd lived here, that room had belonged to her grandfather. The connecting door had been put in place because her mother wanted to be able to check on him during the night. What had they done to the room? Dread trickled down her spine. Going by the sounds happening behind that door, she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"Shikoba," she whispered to herself. Nodding firmly, she twisted the knob, soundlessly opening the door.

## **Chapter Twenty-Six**

The room was an atrocity to her grandfather's memory, and the sight of what her parents had done to the once dignified fairy's room was enough to turn her stomach. The paintings of Shadow Knights and their consorts were gone, replaced by nude paintings of Wikolia. Spiked paddles with needle sharp points were lined along the wall where her grandfather's sword had been kept in a place of honor. The sword had disappeared years ago. She knew for a fact since she'd been the one to take it. The retractable blade was the only thing from her life as Noelani she'd retained. The comfortable chair he used to sit in while he looked at the window and spun stories had been replaced by some kind of bench with straps. Lani shuddered.

The only thing that had remained the same was her grandfather's emperor-size bed. That bed had been in his family for five generations. He'd been born in it, as had his only daughter and granddaughters. Now, that bed was host to a tangle of naked, sweat-and blood-streaked limbs.

Apparently, she'd just missed the show since Wikolia, Thomas, and two other males were slumped in a big pile. Blood stained the glaringly white sheets, and it looked as though one of the paddles had been used. Generously.

Lip curling at the sight as well as the smell of sex in the air, Lani stalked to the bed. Hate churned in her stomach, so strong she nearly gagged. How could Wikolia have done this to her much-loved father's room? Rage unlike any she had ever known guided Lani. Luckily, her parents had decided to have a candlelit orgy, so she was well within the shadows before they realized the door was open.

By then, she'd already used the butt of her gun to knock out the two males with sharp raps against their heads. Wikolia squealed, while Thomas swore loudly.

Now that she had her parents' undivided attention, she materialized in front of them. Petty pleasure coursed through her. For once, she had them surprised. She savored it for a moment before getting down to business.

"Noelani! What do you think you're doing?" Wikolia asked in a haughty voice. There was no shame in finding herself naked with three men in her father's bed. Instead, she looked like she wanted to box Lani's ears.

Lani raised an eyebrow at her mother. "Did you really think I'd forget what happened earlier this week?" she asked in an icy tone.

Thomas made to get out of bed, but before he did more than move his leg, one of Lani's knives was butted up against his chin. "No, stay." She gave them each a cold smile. "Where's Shikoba?"

Wikolia tossed her hair over her shoulder. Crossing her arms over her chest, she pouted like a child denied a gift. "Really, Noelani, you've always been so crude. Couldn't you have waited until our guests left before barging in here?"

"No."

"Ungrateful child," Thomas muttered darkly.

"Ungrateful?" Shade asked, stunned. She tapped the knife's flat edge against his proud chin. "I'm supposed to be grateful that you gave me to Luther, or that the three of you tortured me for three days?" She scoffed loudly. "I'm supposed to be grateful that you're intending to hand another innocent over to him?"

Thomas waved a hand. "You weren't following orders. So he used a little game of slap and voyeur to get your attention. You shouldn't be so prudish." He relaxed in the bed, drawing Wikolia down to rest on his chest. "I suppose you have something else to bitch about?"

It took everything she had not to let her jaw drop at her father's easy acceptance of her torture. She hadn't really expected much from

him, not after Wikolia's little revelations at Luther's home, but she'd hoped for some compassion from Thomas. Instead, he and Wikolia looked so smug and comfortable with their selfishness.

"Where's Shikoba?" she asked, not wanting to get into an argument with them. Time was of the essence if Luther had her sister.

Wikolia shrugged beneath Thomas' arm. "She should be in her room."

Lani frowned. "She's not there."

The hand draped over Wikolia's shoulder twitched a betraying movement for Thomas. "Where is she?" she demanded, leaning forward with the knife.

"Well, if she isn't in her room, we don't know where she is," Thomas replied easily.

Growling softly, she prowled closer. "Was she here when you came home?" Maybe if she kept the questions simple, they'd understand them, she thought derisively.

"Ah, I don't know actually," Thomas admitted, scratching his chest. "Lia? Did you see Shikoba when we got home?"

Wikolia gave another delicate shrug. "I didn't look for her. She usually stays in her room. She knows I hate looking at her," she said, her eyes ice cold with disgust and contempt for her daughters.

Ignoring the pain her mother's words caused, Lani pressed for more. "How long have you been home?"

Still scratching his chest, Thomas was quiet for several minutes. "Since yesterday morning, love?" he asked Wikolia. When she nodded, he beamed. The smile fell as he looked at Lani again. "Um, since yesterday morning. We came home and..." His voice trailed off as he waved a hand at the two unconscious males in their bed.

"Who are they?" Shade asked. Perhaps they knew where Shikoba was.

"Um, I think he's the gardener," Thomas said, pointing to the male with dark hair whose face was buried in Wikolia's stomach.

“And isn’t he the new butler?” he asked his wife, pointing to the second male.

“What does it matter? She’s ruined our afternoon,” Wikolia snarled up at Shade. “You’re such a little spoilsport, Noelani. Gods know I should’ve drowned you and your bloody sister when you were born.”

“Why didn’t you?” Lani asked in a low, deadly voice. If Wikolia had been so unhappy, she could have spared Lani, and possibly Shikoba, a little pain.

“Because he threatened to cut me off!” Wikolia shouted. “My father knew I didn’t want you, especially when I realized you were a Shadow Knight, and he threatened to cut me off from court, threatened to cut off my funds if I ever harmed you.” She laughed shrilly, her eyes wild. “I got back at him, though, didn’t I?”

Knowing Wikolia hated her for being a Shadow Knight, for harkening back to her darkened roots, was becoming a point of pride for Lani. Her hand tightened on the knife. The evil these two despots had wrought with their greed had ruined too many lives. She should finish them, except she wasn’t sure she could bring herself to kill her own parents.

Thomas’ eyes flicked to the knife and Lani’s white-knuckled grip. “Love, maybe you shouldn’t be so hasty to condemn our daughter,” he said in a falsely hearty voice. “She’s quite the celebrity now, isn’t she? Everyone knows about her, um, assignments. Why, I’m sure if Leofric knew about her, he’d want her to join his guard. Don’t you, love?” he asked Wikolia in a broad hint.

Lani bared her teeth at them. “Save your breath, Thomas,” she snarled. “You’re both disgusting. You think I didn’t hear you talking about killing Leofric and blaming me?” She laughed harshly when she saw the surprise in their eyes. “I’m sure he’ll find that enlightening.” She tapped her chin with her free hand, the knife still at the ready in the other. “I’m sure he’d love to hear how two of his most devoted courtiers are planning to kill him and take his throne.”

Wikolia's face went parchment white. "I'll kill you myself," she hissed, her eyes slits of violet.

Scoffing, Lani twirled her knife. "I'm almost tempted to let you try, mother dear. But as you both know, I'm an instrument of death, the product of your hate." She smiled broadly. "Did you forget that?"

"Don't threaten your mother!" Thomas protested, sitting up angrily.

"Tsk," Lani said chidingly. "Let's not get all excited, *Dad*. I'm sure Leofric won't kill you. After all, you are nobles in his court."

"What do you want?" Wikolia's lips were tight with anger, her violet eyes flashing with hatred.

"What do I want? I want to know where the fuck my sister is!" Lani shouted, red obscuring her vision for a brief moment.

"I've told you, she stays in her room. If she isn't there, I don't know where she'd be." She stroked a hand down the gardener's back. "Now, take yourself out of here, Noelani. You're no longer welcome in this house."

Lani felt a spark of humor at her mother's words. Had she ever been welcome in this house? Even as a child? Her parents certainly hadn't made her feel welcome, the only one who treated her well had been her grandfather, but when he died...the gloves came off.

Wikolia's indifference appeared to have faded to sexual need as she touched her gardener, while Thomas still appeared shaken. "If you're lying to me," Lani began. "If I find out you let Luther take her, I'll come back. And next time, I will kill you both. Very slowly. Got it?"

Thomas' head jerked in a nod while Wikolia looked offended. Restraining the urge to roll her eyes, Lani backed out of the room, closing the door with a soft *snick*. Looking around her parents' bedroom, she saw a heavy dresser that would block them in the room for a little while. Lani channeled her rage and used it to give her the strength to push the dresser across the room. Once it was positioned in



front of the door, she smirked at her reflection in the mirror above the dresser.

There was some relief at knowing any ties with her parents were broken. If she survived this plan of hers, she wouldn't feel obligated to look out for them. They'd made their bed—in many places—and now they could lie in it.

Once finished making sure they couldn't get out of the room right away, she began a sweep of the house. There had to be some clue telling her where Shikoba had gone. Time was against her, though. She had no way of knowing if her parents were going to attempt to come after her or not. A swift survey of the house gave her nothing.

Hands clenching at her sides, she tried to think rationally. Was it possible Luther had already taken Shikoba? Her heart said it was. Otherwise, where would she be? Looking at her sister's room, it was obvious Shikoba was a virtual prisoner in their parents' house. Where else could she possibly go?

Taking a deep breath, Shade decided on a plan. She'd go after Luther. He had no hold over her, not any longer. If she could get close enough to him, she could finish him once and for all. She could finally break free of the most dangerous aspect of her nightmarish past.

Decision made, she called forth a portal.

\* \* \* \*

"You know, I've seen a lot of sick shit in my time, but this takes the cake. Really," Izzy was saying as Malachi approached the foyer of Lucian's home.

"What the hell are you talking about, Izzy?" Saga asked as she dragged something into the house.

"Well, I saw Ruby give birth. That was fucked up. I'm never having kids, by the way—"

“Oh, thank the gods,” Rosetta breathed as she came up behind Izzy. “I’ve been trying to figure out how to get a transfer if we had to deal with a pregnant Izzy.”

“—and then we found this shit,” Izzy finished, not offended by Rosetta’s words at all. She waved her hand at Saga and whatever she was dragging in the door.

Malachi pushed through the crowd of Amazons to see a bloody and very bruised fairy pulled across the threshold of Lucian’s house. Bile rose in his throat, and he fought the urge to gag. The fairy was missing a wing, several fingers, and was bruised from head-to-toe.

“What the hell?” he shouted, outraged at the fairy’s appearance, instantly reminded of Lani’s scars.

Izzy shook her head sadly, staring down at the fairy with her hands on her hips. “He shouldn’t have told Saga to move her fat ass.” She tsked.

“What?” Lucian asked in a voice that illustrated just how confused and pissed off he was.

“Well, this is the *Skado* informer you told us to track down,” Izzy explained as she brushed at blood on her shirt. “It wasn’t easy finding him, I tell ya.”

“What the fuck did you do to him?” Malachi roared at Saga.

She shot him a mean look. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear with a bloody hand, she growled. “He wouldn’t tell us anything. Said he didn’t need some fat Amazon bitches cramping his style.”

“Wait, he called you fat?” Rosetta asked in a dangerous snarl. She strode forward and kicked the fairy in the stomach. “No one calls my bitches fat!”

Malachi pulled the outraged drag queen away before she inflicted any more damage with her six-inch platforms. “Tell me what happened,” he demanded of Saga, who he was hoping was the more lucid of the two Amazons.

“Lucian told us to contact this piece of shit and find out more about Noelani’s life in the Shadowlands. When we showed up at his house, he told us to get lost.” She shrugged. “We entered the house—”

“We kicked in the motherfucking door. I felt like Olivia on *Law & Order: SVU*, and ’cause Saga’s more butch than me, she got to be Meloni. Besides, I look much cuter than she does in heels.” Izzy interrupted enthusiastically. “Anyway, we were like ‘Freeze, you son of a bitch!’ and then he took off running.”

Rubbing his temples, Malachi knew trying to steer Izzy back on track was futile, so he let her ramble on.

Looking like a kid on Christmas, she threw out her arms. “Saga, um, well, she sort of lost it. She caught him and started beating the shit out of him. I tried to stop her, but...she’s on her period.” She whispered the last. “Anyway, he talked a little, but nothing that made sense, so we brought him here.”

The fairy roused enough to mutter, “Psychotic bitches. It’ll take me forever to grow that wing back.” He looked up at Lucian. “I’m going to sue!”

A vein throbbed in Lucian’s forehead as he stared at the bag of flesh and bones in front of him. Ruby rubbed his shoulder soothingly, but she was glaring daggers at the fairy as well.

“Get him cleaned up and carry him to the den. I want to talk to him,” was all the *Oculum* said before he stomped back through the house.

Malachi whistled through his teeth. The fairy must have a death wish to try to take on two Amazons and taunt the *Oculum*. “Is he crazy?” he said out loud, earning a snort from Izzy.

“Dude, he’s batshit crazy. He had all of these clippings around his house about the King and Shadow Knights.” She shifted, her hand going to her pockets protectively, which told Malachi she’d swiped more than a few of those clippings for her collection. “Then on the way here, he was mumbling about the Eturians and assassins.”

One of the bigger Amazons arrived just then and picked up the fairy by the wing and carried him through the house.

“Do you think he might’ve been feeding information to the Eturians as well as the Veilerians?” he asked Saga, who looked as though she’d calmed some.

She nodded, fire burning in her blue eyes. “The little shit had stacks of gold in his safe, enough to buy an island somewhere and live like a king.”

A figure behind Saga caught Malachi’s attention. He saw dusky silver skin, bright green eyes, and he ran towards the female. Saga barely moved out of the way before he mowed her down and had the female wrapped in his arms, but the instant he touched her, he knew she wasn’t Lani.

He dropped her like a rock. Saga reached out to steady her. She looked exactly like his Lani, built the same, almost identical in appearance, but where Lani was hard and lethal, this female looked soft and untried. Her eyes were wide and scared. Lani would’ve looked him in the eye and stared him down.

“Who are you?” he asked in a harsh whisper.

“This is Shikoba,” Izzy said, pushing her way between Malachi and the fairy. “We sort of...found her wandering around the Shadowlands when we were coming back.” She wrapped a hand around Shikoba’s wrist. “She’s a Shadow Knight, too. Can I keep her?”

## **Chapter Twenty-Seven**

Slipping into Luther's home was easier than she'd thought it would be. The enormous house was turned upside down. Sticking to the shadows, Lani was able to learn that the Overlord was coming for a visit. The frantic pace with which every servant moved proved to her just how terrified everyone was of him.

She dimly heard Luther bellowing in the distance, though his words were indistinct. Ducking along the deeply shadowed walls of the hallway, Lani made her way towards Luther's voice.

It was simple enough to sneak upstairs. Everyone was so preoccupied with readying the house they never saw her when she had to venture out of the shadows. The second floor of Luther's mansion was nearly silent now. He'd stopped yelling, but she still heard the soft murmurings of conversation.

The door to his room was open, light spilling into the hallway. Keeping to the shadows around that fall of illumination, Lani rested against the wall opposite the door. She saw Luther sitting in one of the ornate chairs in front of the bedroom window. He spoke to someone moving around on the other end of the room.

"Be sure you have all the blood cleaned from the carpets here, and the dungeon downstairs," he ordered as he flipped through a book on the table in front of him. "I don't want anyone breathing a single word of Shade's visit. Got it?"

"Yes, master," a soft voice whispered.

Luther stood, dropping the book with a sigh. "The master will want treacle pudding for last meal. Have the cook prepare it." He clasped his hands behind his back, looking out the window. "Have the

two imps who took Shade out of here killed before the master arrives. I don't trust them."

"Yes, master."

"Go," Luther told his servant with a negligent wave of his hand. "I want everything done to my specifications or you'll be the next one in the dungeon."

The servant bustled into view, a smallish imp with greasy black hair and the expression of a frightened rabbit on his face. He kept his back to the doorway, bowing all the way out of the room without turning away from his master.

Once he cleared the doorway, he took off down the hall, his fear evident in his trembling limbs and rolling eyes. Lani watched Luther for several long minutes. He didn't move. He just continued to look out the window, his hands behind his back. What was he thinking? Was he frightened of his master's impending arrival?

It didn't matter, she told herself. He'd taken her sister, and he would die for that. She stepped forward.

\* \* \* \*

Luther felt a prickling on the back of his neck. He ignored it, staring into the night. Some premonition told him his time was finite, but his arrogance refused to believe it. Who would or even could kill him? The master was on his way to find out the latest information on Cromwell's assassination, and to make plans for Shade's indentured servitude.

He grimaced. He still didn't like the idea of the master having his Shade. Too many years shaping her into the perfect weapon had left him with a strange possessiveness. Having had her in his dungeon again, if only for a little while, reminded him of how much he'd loved having her there. She was full of emotions again, the old Noelani staring out at him with hate he could almost taste. The master would

break her as he hadn't been able to, and something that resembled sadness weighed heavily on him.

Perhaps he could arrange for some kind of accident to befall Shade, something to make it look as though she'd died. It wasn't unheard of. The Overlord had faked his death as well. All Luther needed was a powerful witch, and then he could keep her here in his home forever. He shivered at the thought. He didn't really care about Shade's sister. She was simply an ideal, not solid, not Shade.

A whisper of sound attracted his attention. The servants should have a care for his privacy. Spinning around, he gave the doorway his darkest glare.

At first he saw nothing but the empty doorway and the splash of light in the hallway. No one was there. Then, something stirred in the shadows beyond the light. His heart thundered.

A small black-booted foot stepped into the light, then another. Curvy legs encased in black pants then came into view as the figure took more steps into the light, then a pair of rounded hips. The light revealed a pair of pale, silvery hands relaxed at the being's sides. Sweat beaded on his brow. A torso appeared next as the being slowly crossed the threshold. Silver hair swirled around fragile shoulders. He saw a slender neck, then a pointed chin seconds before she stood bathed in light.

Air whooshed out of his lungs as fear gripped him. She'd come to him on her own. She'd never once in nearly two hundred years appeared before him without force. Yet, here she was, green eyes glittering with grave intent. Looking into that familiar face, Luther knew without a doubt, he was facing his executioner.

\* \* \* \*

"Luther," Lani breathed, feeling the thrill of the impending battle in her heart. "Where's Shikoba?"

Luther's mouth gaped for a moment before a spark of anger lit his eyes. For a moment there, she feared he'd ruin her revenge by having a stroke, but now, seeing the fury in his face, she smiled.

"What are you doing here, Shade?" he asked, his hands coming to rest on his hips. "Do you have so little care for your health that you'd traipse into my home without permission?"

She smirked. She could see the sweat on his forehead, could almost smell the acrid scent of his fear from across the room. He was scared of her, scared of what her presence meant.

"I wouldn't have come if you hadn't taken Shikoba," she replied, sauntering forward confidently. "I wouldn't have come looking for you so quickly, but you had to let your greed and lusts bring you to this." She shook her head almost sadly. "Now, where is she?"

He laughed. "Is that why you're here? You think I have your sister," he said wonderingly. Reaching up, he stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Where's my cold, indifferent Shade? What happened to her on this assignment?"

Lani raised her chin, giving him a haughty smile. "She doesn't exist anymore."

"Oh, I beg to differ, my love," he drawled. "You'll always be Shade. You can save as many innocents as you like, refuse any number of assignments, pretend you've never felt another's lifeblood stain your hands, but you'll always be Shade. You'll always be my creation."

She waved her hand at him. "Whatever, Luther. Where's Shikoba?" she asked in a hard voice.

He smirked. "I don't have her. Yet. Now, it's time for you and me to have some fun."

Still smiling at her, he touched the vial in his hands. Lani felt the whiplash of his power swirling through the room before he channeled it to concentrate on the vial. For several seconds, he spilled power into the glass of nothingness he held. Slowly, his smile died. Strain showed on his face, but nothing happened.



“What—” he began, his voice shaking.

“Oh, did I forget to mention the spell is broken?” Lani asked sweetly. When she smiled at him, she read the fear in his face, the terror that the monster he’d created had finally come back for vengeance.

\* \* \* \*

Piko crept closer to the master’s door. He hadn’t found the imps Master Luther wanted killed. Every instinct he had screamed at him for returning to the master’s chambers with the bad news, but what choice did he have? Master Luther was the second most powerful being in the world. He would find Piko whether he told him the truth or not.

He heard Master Luther talking to someone and breathed a sigh of relief. If someone else was there to channel Master Luther’s anger, Piko might survive.

Creeping closer to the room, he peered through the door. His breath caught in his throat. The master was facing off with his fairy slave. She looked better than the last time he’d seen her, although that wasn’t saying much since she’d looked near death. Piko couldn’t help but admire her as she stood up to the master.

They looked like those human characters, David and Goliath. He bit his nails as he listened to them talk. The fairy smiled, and it wasn’t nice at all. The master looked shocked and more than a little sick.

Piko made a sudden decision. He wouldn’t alert any of the guards about the fairy’s presence. She was only doing what so many of them had wanted to do for centuries. If the master killed her, he would be satisfied. And if she killed the master, no one in the house would mourn his passing.

Nodding to himself, Piko tiptoed back down the hall. He might have decided to let the fairy and the master be, but he wasn’t going to stick around to see who won.

\* \* \* \*

After several hours of finding out all the pertinent information they could from Shikoba, Malachi felt as though he finally had a good idea of how Lani had ended up working for the Eturians.

Shikoba had crept from her home after listening to her parents talk before disappearing to their rooms. Wikolia, Lani's mother, had made it very clear that as soon as she could manage it, she would find a way to kill Lani if someone named Luther didn't do it for them. Malachi's stomach had turned at the fear and revulsion in Shikoba's face, only able to guess at what Lani had experienced at their hands.

Now Shikoba sat trembling in a corner of the sectional sofa in Lucian's den, her arms wrapped around her waist for comfort. It had taken some coaxing to get Izzy to leave the fairy alone, but once he'd assured her Shikoba wasn't going anywhere, she'd finally caved.

"You can stay with me and my foster daughter," Malachi told his female's sister now.

It was eerie how closely she resembled Lani, and he couldn't ignore the urge to take care of her. He'd take care of Lani, too, if she'd let him, but if they managed to get out of this mess alive, Malachi knew she'd want to be at his side making decisions with him.

"Why would you do that?" Shikoba cringed as though she expected him to berate her for asking the question.

He smiled. "You remind me a lot of Lani. She's a lot more, um—" He waved his hand trying to think of a non-offensive word for Lani.

"Dangerous?" she supplied helpfully, a shy smile on her face.

Malachi snapped his fingers. "Exactly. She can take care of herself, but you haven't learned how yet. You're also her sister, and I know she'd want someone to watch out for you." He knew it in his heart that Lani would fight to protect her younger sister. The fairy was innocent, though damaged from her years with her parents.

“Thank you,” she whispered, staring down at the rug in the middle of the floor. “Do you know where she is?”

He shook his head, trying to fight the panic again. He was worried sick about Lani. When she’d become so important to him, he couldn’t pinpoint exactly, and the when didn’t matter anyway. All he knew was that he needed to find her, to protect her from whatever Luther, her parents, and the Overlord had planned for her.

\* \* \* \*

Shikoba bit her lip, looking at the Halfling sitting across the room from her. He had been very kind to her the moment he realized she was his beloved’s sister. She hadn’t even known she had a sister until she overheard her parents talking, but once she found out what they had planned for Noelani, she’d known she needed to find her sister help. She just hadn’t expected Noelani to be in trouble from more directions than their sick parents.

Malachi’s face was etched with worry and fear. Dark shadows under his eyes stated quite clearly just how concerned he was for Lani’s safety. Koba twisted her hands together. She could help him. At least, she thought she could, but she didn’t want to mention it if her abilities weren’t as strong as other Shadow Knights.

“Um,” she began, stumbling to a halt when he fixed tormented brown eyes on her. Her heart melted. He loved her sister—it was there in his face for anyone to see. Always a sucker for a happy ending, Koba was determined that her sister have a happy-ever-after. “I think I can find Lani.”

\* \* \* \*

“H–how?” Luther stammered, taking a step back, eyes wide as the implications of the broken spell hit him.

Lani shrugged one shoulder, stepping closer to him. "I bit you, remember? Then you hit me. The blood mingled, and voila, I'm free." She sighed dramatically. "I've waited and waited to be free of you, and now I am. Finally." Her lips curved into a cold smile.

He shook his head. "You'll never be free. Every time you see the marks I've put on your body, you'll remember me," he protested. Malicious glee gleamed in his eyes. "Every time you let another between your legs, you'll remember me. You're mine. Always have been, always will be." He smiled confidently.

A bead of cold sweat trickled down her nape. Was it true? Would she always remember him?

Sensing her doubt, he pressed. "You've remained hidden from the world, always on the outskirts of it, never a part of it. What do you think they'll do when you try to enter it, Shade? You think they'll welcome you with open arms?" He laughed. "They'll lock you away just like I did. They'll probably even torture you. Is that the kind of freedom you want?"

"It'll never happen," she boasted as confidently as she could. But the seed of doubt had been planted. What could she do on the outside? He was right in that the world would never look kindly on a killer, no matter how much she atoned for her sins.

He smirked. "Do you think Cromwell will protect you?" He laughed outright when he saw her start in surprise. "Did you honestly think I wouldn't know who put his claim on you? I could smell his possession on you. You submitted to him, to *him*, when you never submitted to me. Tsk, Shade, letting that filthy Halfling between your legs. I thought you were smarter than that."

She shook her head. What was he talking about?

"Oh, come now, do you think he'll give a shit if you're thrown in prison, or executed?" He laughed long and hard, his eyes studying her coldly. "He wants his vengeance against the Eturi. What do you think you are, my sweet?"

"I'm not an Eturian," she protested, though she knew better.

The look of pity he bestowed upon her made her stomach rebel. Oh Gods, she was Eturian. She might've been forced to work for them, but she would still be held responsible for the lives she'd taken.

"Exactly, my dove," Luther cooed. "You can still save yourself. Just bow to me now, call me 'master,' and I'll forget this ever happened. Bow to me, swear on your life you'll serve me in whatever capacity I wish, and I'll hide you from the master." He looked at her benevolently, his eyes awash with the same twisted love he'd always shown her.

"What about Malachi?"

She felt numb now. If she gave into him willingly, she'd be signing on for an eternity of pain and humiliation.

He waved his hand. "He still needs to die. The master is adamant that Cromwell suffer for defecting." A sudden spark lit his black eyes. "We could kill him together," he suddenly announced. "Yes, I like that plan. We'll kill him together. That will prove to me that you know you're mine."

Hate twisted inside her heart. He would ask her to kill Malachi as a way to prove her loyalty? She pulled the gun out of the holster. Some part of her took a big step back, as though to assess the situation properly.

She imagined herself, pale but resolute with a gun nearly as big as she was. She saw Luther, swarthy skin losing color as he stared down the barrel of a *Dämon-Fluch*, looking at his own mortality.

"You'll never lay a hand on him or my sister," she swore, squeezing the trigger.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Malachi and his group fell through the portal. He had no idea where they were, only that it had taken them the better part of an hour to collect enough people to mount a successful rescue attempt. He didn't know where they were going, or who they would be up against, but he hadn't cared. Fingers of terror tried to push through his forced calm. It felt as though the universe was telling him his time was running out.

Looking around, he saw they'd been deposited in front of a large mansion. The windows were ablaze with light. It was an estate, he surmised as he took in the outbuildings.

"Any idea where we are?" he asked his group.

"Looks like Connecticut, *t-frère*," Fallon murmured as he rubbed a hand over his short hair.

Izzy sighed at the incubus then wiped a hand over her chin. "Me want," she cooed, earning herself a jab in the ribs from Saga.

Malachi ignored their antics. "Is she in there?" he asked Shikoba.

His female's sister closed her eyes, concentrating on the retractable sword that had become their divining tool. "Yes, she's inside somewhere."

Malachi's eyes touched on each one of the people with him. "I don't know whose house this is, or what we can expect inside. I won't ask any of you to come with me. This is my mission, my mate I'm going after. It has nothing to do with Council, or glory."

Saga rolled her eyes. "Will you be quiet already? I'm ready to kick some ass!"

A chorus of huzzahs followed her statement. Malachi found himself grinning fiercely at the ones following him. "I'll never forget this." When Izzy rolled her hand at him, telling him to talk faster, he laughed. "Let's go kick some ass."

They oozed across the lawn, a dozen Veilerians and one little Shadow Fairy. The front door was unlocked, and there was no ward on the house. Malachi found it strange but wasn't about to question their luck.

Using hand signals, he separated the group in the foyer. The first half slipped off to the right, while he took his group to the left. The house was definitely museum quality, judging by the furniture and portraits on the walls. Who lived here, he wondered as they swept the bottom floor.

They found no one until they entered the back of the house. Chattering voices behind one of the doors had him squeezing against the wall. The smell of food wafted through the crack under the door. They'd found the kitchen, and it was probably filled with the cooking staff.

He shook his head at Shikoba, pointing to the small cupboard across from the kitchen door. She glared at him but hid as he silently commanded. Once she was hidden away, he nodded to the rest.

Throwing open the door, his fighters swarmed into the room. Six imps were preparing what looked like a feast. They all screeched when the door flew open, dropping everything in their hands once they saw Malachi's menacing group.

His warriors quickly tied the imps. Malachi was lucky enough to have a warmage in his group. The mage cast a spell over the subdued servants, sending them into a deep sleep.

A soft whistle came from the corridor. Recognizing it as Saga's, he signaled back for her to enter.

The Amazon sauntered in, counting the six imps in custody. She smirked. "We got eight," she boasted softly.

Rolling his eyes, Malachi stood up from his crouch. “The first floor is secure?”

She nodded. “As secure as a dryad in a tr—”

A gunshot cut off her words.

Ice cold fear gripped him. His heart stopped, his breath hitched in his chest. Lani! He wasn’t sure if he roared the words, or if he screamed them in his mind, but he was out of the kitchen and racing for the stairs before the echo from the shot fell silent.

\* \* \* \*

Lani grunted as the gun was knocked out of her hand. Luther had moved so quickly, she’d barely gotten the shot off before he was on her. Whirling, she planted her foot in his stomach.

He staggered but didn’t back off. He swung one large hand, catching her across the face. Lani flew back into the wall, bouncing off with a shrill cry. Bloodlust roared through her body, demanding appeasement. She launched herself at Luther in a flurry of punches and kicks.

He hissed as she crushed his nose with an upward jab but retaliated with another punishing blow to her jaw. She shook her head to clear the stars just in time to duck the backswing aimed for her temple. Her only advantage was her size and speed, as Luther had her on strength and reach. Using that to her benefit, she swooped in to rain blows on his torso.

Kicking out with all her strength, she slammed her heel into his knee. A loud crunch and his scream of pain was her reward. She wasn’t given a chance to enjoy it, as he swung out with a crushing blow to her chin.

She had a sensation of flying, before she hit the ground. Groaning, she struggled to her knees. Peering out of swollen eyes, she saw Luther crawling towards her, hatred and retribution written all over his face.



"I'm going to kill you." He hissed, spittle flying out of his mouth. "I would have laid the world at your feet, Shade. All you had to do was submit to me, but you didn't. Now you're going to be begging me for death by the time I'm finished with you, you little bitch!"

Groping for the wall, Lani stood. Blood pounded through her ears. Her eyesight was blurry, her breathing labored, but she wasn't ready to give in. She'd fight until she died if she had to.

She palmed one of her knives. He swept his good leg at her feet, knocking them together. She tumbled to the ground, and before she caught her breath, he was on her.

Large, brutal hands latched onto her throat, squeezing. She gasped, fighting for breath, but her hands were busy. She stabbed him, slashed him over and over again until they were both coated in his blood, but Luther seemed not to feel her pathetic attempts to save herself.

"We're going to die together, my sweet." He breathed into her face, an almost peaceful look in his eyes. "Forever. You and I."

Lani wanted to scream that she'd rather burn in every circle of the nine hells, but she had no breath left. Spots danced in front of her eyes, lending her death at Luther's hands an otherworldly appearance. She stabbed him again, wringing a grunt from his mouth as her knife found a sensitive spot.

Sudden peace filled her, curling her lips as she drifted into the darkness. This time, though, she wasn't afraid of it. She'd fulfilled her promise to avenge herself and protect her sister.

A loud boom echoed around the room, and the bruising pressure on her neck relaxed, though she still suffocated as a heavy weight crushed her chest. She cracked her eyes open.

The black spots faded, to be replaced by a face she loved. Malachi stood over her, his lips moving. A nimbus of light seemed to surround him. She smiled up at him. He was here, she thought with a weary sigh. He was safe.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi screamed at Lani to wake up. He'd thrown the bastard off her, not caring about anything but getting to his female. She was covered in blood and bruises. Her face was void of all color beneath the mask of blood she wore.

"Gods, Lani!" he shouted again, checking her over for life-threatening wounds. Finding none, he cradled her in his arms. "Baby, please wake up, please." He pleaded with her, stroking his hands over her hair.

If he hadn't paused to order Saga and the others to watch the first floor, he would've been here in time. Instead, he'd walked in just as she was being choked to death.

His first step had encountered a gun, a *Dämon-Fluch*, with one shot remaining. Without the slightest bit of hesitation, he'd aimed the gun at the bastard's head, pulling the trigger. The resulting blast had left a lot of gore, but more importantly, a very dead demon lord. Now he just needed to get his female to breathe.

"Move, Malachi," Saga said in her sternest, most commanding voice.

Without realizing, he obeyed, settling Lani on the floor with great care. Saga bent over her, taking her vitals.

Shuffling feet brought his head around. His group stood in the doorway, looking worried and uneasy. "Is the first floor secure?" he asked for lack of anything else to say.

Izzy nodded, her eyes still on Lani. "Locked tight."

"She'll make it," Saga said in a calm voice. "She got the shit beat out of her, but she'll recover." She looked at the demon. "Who the fuck is that?"

Malachi took Lani's hand in his. It was so cold. He began to gently chafe the skin, trying to warm her up. "I think that's Luther," he admitted.

They heard someone running down the hall. It was one of the GE's. "There's someone coming," the male said in great gasps. "I saw them on the drive."

Malachi swore, looking down at his female. "How many?"

The male gulped for air. "At least fifty."

"We can't fight them," he said almost sadly.

Deciding quickly, he gathered Lani into his arms. "Get everyone together, we're leaving now."

He walked from the room, his love a light burden in his arms. She stirred slightly. "Burn..." she moaned.

"Shh, love. I'm taking you home, don't worry." He soothed her even as he carried her to the highest point of the house.

"No," she croaked, her voice ruined from those hands around her throat. "Burn. House."

Surprise made him nearly stumble. "What?"

"Prison. Burn. It."

He paused. Had this been her prison? "Someone feel like going pyro? My mate wants to burn this place down." He'd destroy it gladly.

"What about the captives?" Izzy asked.

Malachi cursed. "I'll release them." He ran a hand through his hair, thinking furiously. "The mage stays here. Call the portal and get everyone out," he ordered.

Reluctantly, he handed Lani over to Saga. Shikoba stood next to the Amazon, her eyes wide. "Take care of her if I don't come back. Swear to me," he told the fairy in a low, urgent voice. "Tell her I love her."

Shikoba nodded jerkily, her gaze drifting between him and Lani.

Straightening his shoulders, Malachi looked at the two warmages in the group. "Which one of you is coming with me?"

Izzy bounced on the balls of her feet, looking like an overgrown puppy on crack. "I have a lighter and I'm not afraid to use it!"

"A lighter?" Malachi asked skeptically.

Reaching in one of the bags she carried, she pulled out a flamethrower. “Yeah, I couldn’t pack the big one ’cause Miss Prissy Ass, Saga, here didn’t want to carry it. This should do the job, though,” she said with a big grin.

“Let’s get to it.” He stood back to let Izzy pass. He looked back at Lani in Saga’s arms. Her eyes were half-open, glittering at him from across the attic space. He looked up to meet Saga’s eyes. “Get her out of here. We’ll get out another way.”

With one last look at Lani, Malachi swung around, heading for the lower levels of the house. He’d honor Lani’s request, and hopefully make it out before the force coming up the drive made it to the house.

He raced downstairs, his heart leaping to his throat. The servants they’d rounded up when they raided the house were tied together. He probably had Saga to thank for that. She tended to think ahead when others were falling apart around her. The group of servants were awake, their eyes frantic and fearful.

“Get the hell out of here, we’re torching the place.” He growled as he cut the last line.

The imps, too scared to ask after their master, tore out of the house as fast as they could. Malachi looked around. He didn’t want to leave anyone here to die in the blaze.

Izzy met him in the foyer, looking like some kind of whacked-out mishmash of Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2* and Hannibal from *The A-Team*, complete with a fat cigar dangling from her mouth, which she spoke around. The flamethrower was strapped to her back, and she held the gun in an easy grip.

“It’s just us and that big ass army coming up the road,” she chirped with a bright smile.

“What?” Malachi shouted.

Peering through one of the curtains, Malachi felt the blood drain away from his own face as he saw the leader of the incoming forces.

It had been nearly three hundred years since he’d last seen his mentor, but there was no mistaking the male he’d nearly worshipped.

Steele still had the bearing of a king, though his face was more deeply lined than it had been. His shock of white hair swayed over his head in a merry dance as the wind whipped around him and his men.

The emblem on Steele's tunic caught Malachi's gaze. It was a red hawk on a field of white. In the hawk's claws was a small veil. It was an emblem he'd seen many times before when he'd received correspondence from the higher-ranking officials in the Eturian army.

He'd known, he'd seen the paper evidence, but it was nothing compared to seeing his mentor in the flesh. Malachi's fingers dug into the wood casing around the window. He wanted to run out there and rip Steele's throat out with his bare hands.

"Can I burn it now?" Izzy whined.

Malachi whirled around. "Start the fucking fire here, and get upstairs!"

Izzy bounced and pulled the trigger on the thrower. She wiggled her hips and sang, "*The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire! We don't need no water, let the motherfucker burn, burn motherfucker, burn!*" She moved around the first floor like a gardener watering plants instead of a half-crazy Amazon burning down a house.

Malachi started through the back of the house with Izzy on his heels. Steele was a fire elemental and could contain this fire if he got here in time. Pausing in the kitchen, Malachi waited for Izzy to run past.

The fire was crackling merrily in the rest of the house. They didn't have much time before it reached the kitchen, so he pushed Izzy out the door and flipped on the gas stove before he ran for it.

He was just at the back door when the explosion threw him forward into the courtyard, his body engulfed in pain. Izzy grunted as he landed on top of her, their limbs tangled as heat roared over their heads.

"Oh God, Rosetta is going to kill me for not letting her do this." Izzy moaned as she heaved Malachi off of her. "She's been trying to figure out ways to get you on top of her for years."

Coughing with tears streaming down his eyes, Malachi wanted to tell her to shut up but couldn't find the breath. Smoke scorched his lungs and throat while his diaphragm ached from where he'd slammed into her pointy elbow.

Sprawled on his back with the fire lighting the night sky, he fought the urge to pass out. They needed to get away from the smoke and the heat, but mostly he and Izzy needed to be out of sight before Steele and his army showed up. And they would do that, just as soon as he got his breath back.

"C'mon," Izzy grunted, getting to her feet. She swayed. "I wish the girls could've seen that, well except for the part where I burned my ass on the fucking flamethrower." Leaning over, she grabbed one of Malachi's hands, pulling him up until he was sitting. "Why don't they show how much that shit hurts in the movies?" she continued to complain as she struggled to get him to his feet.

Her arms came around his back, and that's when the real pain hit. His back was burned, her touch causing what little air he had left to hiss from his mouth.

"Ew, that's not good," she mused as she moved her hands to his waist. "Your back feels like barbecued hamburger. You want me to carry you?"

Malachi glared at her. "Let. Me. Catch. Breath."

"Okay, sure, we'll just sit here and wait for those other guys to show up. I don't think they'll mind that we blew up one of their generals' houses or anything." Her voice was sharp as the crack of a whip. "We don't have time for you to be manly. You have to preserve some energy to call a portal, remember?"

He hated it. Gods knew, he hated having to lean on anyone, and it would kill him to be seen as weak, but in this moment Izzy was right.

She must've seen his reluctant agreement, because she hefted him over her shoulders in a fireman's carry. Malachi groaned as the burns across his back and legs stretched at the move, but she didn't pause.

They were off, heading away from the fire, towards cleaner, fresher air.

Gulping air, he felt some of the fatigue pass as he became more aware of his surroundings. He could hear the fire roaring in the distance, along with the shouts of Steele's people. It would only be a matter of minutes before the Overlord had the fire out and his men scouring the countryside for the culprits. They needed to get out of here, now.

Izzy obviously realized the same, because she stopped as soon as they hit the thicket of trees and bushes on the edge of Luther's property. She let him slip off her shoulders, panting from carrying his weight. Malachi wanted to apologize for being weak back there, but from the lively look in her eyes, she was having the time of her life.

Turning away from the insane Amazon, he checked the progress of the fire. He'd promised Lani he'd burn the house down, and the flames were greedily licking through the manse, but as he watched they died. Steele.

He wanted to confront his former mentor, the true traitor to the Veil, but that was suicide. He had confirmation of Steele's connection to the Eturians now. He was an eyewitness. That would have to do, both for his redemption and to help the Council put a plan into motion.

Closing his eyes, he searched the last dregs of his strength for enough power to call a portal. He pushed the power outwards, and the portal glowed weakly.

"I won't be able to control us inside," he warned Izzy as he stumbled to it.

She grinned back at him. "Good! It feels like a rollercoaster, and they won't let me back in Six Flags," she shouted as they fell into the whirlpool of power.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

The trip through the portal revived Lani as nothing else could. She barely had time to wonder who was holding her before they were dumped into a strange house.

Chaos reigned for the moment, as shouts came from those in the group she was with, and loud questions from the people they'd appeared before. Lani pushed out of the hold on her, surprising a grunt out of the female holding her.

A female. Puzzled, Lani looked up. "Who are you?"

The female raised an eyebrow. "Definitely not your knight in shining armor. Can you stand?"

Probably not, but Lani nodded anyway. She'd be damned if she was going to sit in some strange woman's arms like a child. Without delay, the woman put her on her feet, taking a step back as though she didn't want to touch Lani any more than Lani wanted her touch. Wobbly knees nearly had her falling to the floor, but habit had her bracing them to hold her.

She shot a quick look around her. The portal had deposited them in someone's living room. The room was large and filled with comfortable furniture. It was also packed with people. She spied no less than twenty large females who were no doubt Amazons, at least three vampires, and one fairy. The fairy caught her attention and held it.

She stared with fascination at the female, knowing in her heart that this was Shikoba. The other fairy stared back, her green eyes wide and uncertain. It was like looking into a mirror, she thought with some shock. Wikolia had said Shikoba looked like her, but she hadn't



said how much. Her sister was a reminder to Lani just how much she'd changed in the last century.

"Shikoba," she mouthed, not sure how to approach her.

A small, shy smile pulled at her sister's mouth.

"Why do I feel like I'm watching *This is Your Life*?" one of the tall women, no, a man dressed like a woman, said in a loud voice. Someone tried to shush her, but she frowned. "What? They're just standing there. Hell, if that was my sister, I'd be jumping for joy or something." Someone murmured something else. "So what? Koba's a cool kid, if she's too stuck-up to at least tell her 'hello,' then that's her loss."

There was the sound of a scuffle, but Lani refused to look away from Shikoba. She took a step forward, yearning filling her heart. Her sister looked innocent, untouched by cruelty. Yes, there were shadows in her green eyes, but they were light, as though she'd only had a glancing encounter with the darkness Lani had expected to see. She whispered a prayer of thanks to the heavens.

This was becoming awkward. She should say something. She wished Malachi was at her side. She'd have some support if he were here. She frowned, looking around.

"Where's Malachi?" she asked into the tense silence.

One of the vampires, a tall male she recognized as the *Oculum*, and Malachi's brother, Lucian, shifted. His green eyes speared her in place. "We were wondering the same thing."

"He had something to do," the woman who'd held Lani said in an easy voice. "He and Izzy will be coming soon, I'm sure." She turned a serious look on Lani, her blue eyes surveying her with something that looked like compassion. "Would you like an introduction?" she asked Lani with a tilt of her head to Shikoba.

Something eased in Lani's chest. "It would help if I knew who you were as well," she said somewhat wryly.

Humor sparked in the blue eyes. "Saga of the Blood Maiden Tribe. The offensive woman we just tossed out is Rosetta."

Saga and Rosetta. Vaguely, she remembered hearing Malachi speak of them. She inclined her head. "I'm Noelani Fayard, or Shade."

"Shade, eh?" Saga said with a small smile. "Well, this is your sister, Shikoba Fayard." She took a step back. "Now you two make nice."

She jerked her head in a silent command. There was a mass exodus from the room with the exception of Lucian and his mate, Ruby. They stood to the side, eyeing her curiously.

Once everyone was gone, Lani didn't know what to do.

"Um," she began, blushing when her voice came out louder than she intended. Gods, this was excruciating! Give her a target to kill, and she was cold as ice, put her in a room with a sister she never knew she had, and she was at a complete loss.

Shikoba suddenly grinned. "I think we're both unsure how to start," she said in a low, musical voice.

Lani nodded. "I never knew..."

"Me neither. Not until I overheard Mom and Dad talking about you," she admitted with a small smile. She took a step forward.

Surprise blanked Lani's mind. "How did you get here?"

"When I heard them talking about what had happened to you with...Luther? I snuck out. Two of those Amazons found me and brought me here."

"What were you planning to do?" Lani asked, curious and hopeful.

Shikoba shrugged, a blush cresting her cheekbones. "I was hoping to go to King Leofric, or one of the Veilerian Councilors to let them know what was going on. I mean"—she cleared her throat—"our parents weren't only planning to kill you, they were going to kill King Leofric, too."

"Who's Luther?" Lucian asked, entering the conversation for the first time.

Having the undivided attention of the *Oculum* made Lani break out into a cold sweat. This vampire had a lot of power. He could toss her in prison with just a snap of his fingers. She swallowed, forcing away the fear. She'd been an assassin for nearly a hundred years, she could handle him in spite of the little voice inside her mind whispering that this wasn't just a male, this was Malachi's brother.

"He is—was, one of the Eturi's top generals," she told him in a mild voice.

"Was?" The word shot out of Lucian's mate's mouth. She was a fierce-looking female with tattoos on her face.

Lani cleared her throat. "Mala—ah, Master Cromwell killed him." Something told her formality was the way to go right now, so she fell back on her court upbringing. "Master Cromwell discovered me fighting Luther, and killed him. He, um, saved my life," she admitted with a feeling of awe and wonder. Malachi had saved her life!

"Why were you fighting this Luther?" Her voice was suspicious. "Aren't you an Eturian assassin?"

The question hovered in the air, bold and pointed. Shade wanted to look at Shikoba to see how she'd taken the news but felt her attention was better focused on the Chieftain. This was it, she thought with dismay. She wouldn't lie to them, and they'd see her slapped in shackles.

She straightened her shoulders, tilting her chin upward to stare directly into the Chieftain's face. "Yes, I am—was an Eturian assassin. I've been one for nearly a hundred years."

"Why?" Lucian asked, crossing his arms over his chest. He studied her with sharp focus.

"Ah, what?" Lani asked, feeling her false bravado leaking away.

"Why are—were you an Eturian assassin?" His voice was cold enough to give her frostbite.

This time she did glance at Shikoba, who watched the three of them with unabashed curiosity. She hadn't even had a chance to talk

with Shikoba, yet two of the Veil's most influential people were waiting for an answer.

Giving a mental shrug, and wondering if she shouldn't just go back to her assassin's lifestyle, she turned to them again. "My parents gave me to Luther shortly after my transition. Instead of killing me, he decided to train me as an assassin. I have been...compelled to follow his orders ever since."

Silence stole over the room, heavy with unspoken questions. She could see Lucian and Ruby wanted to know more, but it was Shikoba's painful stillness that had Lani looking towards her. Her breath caught. Tears flooded her sister's green eyes.

Those tears firmed Lani's resolve. She turned back to Lucian and Ruby, hands fisted at her sides. "I've done horrible things, milord, and milady. I've killed...I don't know how many people. I don't ask for leniency, or even understanding." She paused, her breath hitching in her chest. She wanted Malachi here. She didn't want to say what she was about to, but if it came down to her turning herself in to protect her sister, she would. "I only ask that you grant my sister sanctuary within the Veil. I don't want our parents to ever have her in their power because I fear they would pass her off to someone for their own means."

Silence greeted her request.

Lucian frowned at her from his great height. "And what should we do with you?" he asked in an offhand manner as though it didn't matter to him one way or the other.

She opened her mouth to reply but was surprised by a hand slipping into hers. Looking to her left, she saw Shikoba had crossed the great distance between them to stand at her side. Lani stared at Shikoba in a dazed manner. Why would Shikoba come to her side? Her hand was squeezed gently, reassuringly. Warmth flooded Lani's heart. Support. Shikoba was offering her support.

A gasp escaped her when her right hand was taken in a bigger, hotter hand. Looking to that side, she saw Malachi. His face was

blackened, some of his hair was singed, and he was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen. He squeezed her hand, giving her a pained smile. Love filled her body, lighting up her soul. She wanted to talk with him about what happened back at Luther's home, but first she had to deal with the Councilor and Chieftain.

She turned back to them. "I'm willing to turn myself in to the Council for my crimes against the Veil," she stated simply.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi squeezed her hand hard, his heart pounding in his chest. When he'd taken her hand, he'd thought she would ask for clemency, but not his little fairy. No, she offered to put herself in Council's hands. He wanted to spank her, kiss her, sweep her into his arms and take her away.

Didn't she realize what could happen if Council got their hands on her? Did she think they'd let her go on her merry way? He wanted to howl at his brother to ignore the crazed female, but he held back.

Lucian shot Malachi an inscrutable look. He pulled a familiar book out of his back pocket. It was the logbook he and Lani hadn't gotten around to translating. Lucian hefted it in his hand, his expression mild. "Do you recognize this book?" he asked Lani.

Malachi glared at his brother, ignoring the sudden amusement on Ruby's face. He knew damned well that, with the exception of Shikoba, they all knew what the book was.

"Yes, milord, I do," Lani answered calmly, although he could feel her pulse racing in the wrist pressed against his own.

She was scared, but it didn't show on her face. Pride filled him. It didn't matter what Lucian decided. If he had to, he'd spring Lani from prison, and they'd hide. He wasn't going to let her go without a fight.

"I found this book in the pile of paperwork Malachi brought with him from his house. There were several portions of this book that eluded all of our best code breakers, so it was with some surprise that

I discovered it had been translated.” He stopped, looking Lani over carefully. “Did you translate this book?”

Stunned surprise had Malachi staring at Lucian unblinkingly. His brother nodded. She’d translated the book? He turned his head to stare at his female, who stood proud with a slight blush staining her cheeks.

“Ah,” she began. She cleared her throat. “Yes.”

“Why?” Lucian shot out in his hardest voice.

Malachi felt her flinch, and he shot a glare filled with the promise of retribution at his brother. Lucian was scaring her on purpose! A growl formed in his throat.

Lani’s voice cut the growl short. “Because I wanted to make sure Mala—Master Cromwell was cleared on all charges. He’s not a monster, not like the rest of us. He deserves to have his reputation restored, to be welcome within the Veil again.”

His mouth dropped open in shock. She’d done it for him? An almost giddy delight spread upwards through his body. He laced his fingers with hers, putting their hands closer together.

“I also wanted to stop Steele from winning this war,” she added in a stronger voice. “There will always be those who don’t want to live in secrecy, who want to oust the humans, milord, but Steele will destroy everything if he isn’t stopped.”

Lucian nodded. “I just have one last question for you,” he said cordially. He put his arm around Ruby’s waist with easy familiarity. “Do you love my brother?”

Malachi, who’d just turned to Lani, almost gave himself whiplash to look at his brother. Lucian grinned unabashedly, his eyes twinkling with amusement and happiness. Dammit, he thought in terror. He didn’t want Lani to admit her feelings, if she had any, not in front of his family, not until she was ready. A cold sweat formed on his forehead. His stomach twisted into knots. He knew she could feel his trepidation in the sudden dampness of his palm. How could she answer, he thought in dismay. She didn’t—

“I—I love him.”

The admission was made in the barest whisper, yet it echoed throughout Malachi's body.

"You do?" he asked in a near shout, his heart thumping so hard he knew Lucian could hear it. He turned to meet her warm, green eyes. "You love me?" he asked with a stupid grin on his face.

\* \* \* \*

Lani felt another blush swimming up her face but didn't back down from the warmth in Malachi's eyes. Of course she loved him. He was the best thing that had ever happened to her. She couldn't deny him the words that filled her heart any longer. If she had to face an eternity without him, she wanted him to know he was forever in her heart.

"Shade, Lani," he breathed, fire kindling in his eyes. "Gods, woman, I love you, too."

She barely felt Shikoba release her hand as Malachi pulled her into his arms. There before his brother and sister-in-law, he kissed her as though he never planned to let her go. Lani lost herself in the touch of his lips against hers, the feel of his body pressing close to hers. It seemed like an eternity since they'd been together, and so much had happened since then. She felt like she'd been released from prison.

For the moment, she allowed the weight of her worries to go, reveling in the taste of her male. Her hands rose of their own accord, sinking into the silken warmth of his hair to hold him closer. His tongue dipped into her mouth, heralding a wave of desire so strong she felt dizzy from it.

"Ahem."

They ignored the sound, their mouths fused and their hands urgently holding each other close.

"Ahem!"

Malachi's arms tightened around her.

“Ten bucks says they both pass out from lack of air,” a female voice said from somewhere behind them.

“Twenty.”

“A hundred says they’ll be pregnant within the year,” another voice said.

“Two hundred on that one!”

“Day-um! This is almost as good as Skinemax!”

Malachi finally paid attention to what was going on around them, pulling away from Lani. Looking down at her, he almost went under again, but some sense forced him to survey his surroundings.

He bit back a groan. Lucian and Ruby were eyeing him in surprise, and the Amazons were critiquing Malachi’s kissing technique, while Shikoba smiled shyly.

Looking back at Lani, he saw the misty desire in her eyes slowly fade to comprehension before being replaced by horrified embarrassment. A dark flush flooded her face before she ducked her head against his chest. A helpless chuckle burst out of him. Who knew assassins were shy?

“Well...that was fun.” Ruby chuckled, grinning at Malachi unrepentantly.

“You have no idea.” He didn’t mean for his voice to throb that way, but what the hell.

Catcalls flooded the room, sending a tide of heat up his neck. He squeezed Lani close. They needed to talk, but for now, he just wanted to hold her. She seemed to feel the same as she burrowed deeper into his body.

“Anyone hungry?” Saga said loudly when she caught Malachi’s pleading look.

The Amazons stampeded out the room followed by a giggling Shikoba, a smirking Ruby, and a grinning Lucian, who winked and closed the door behind him. Alone for the first time in a long time, Malachi comforted himself by holding her close.



“What happened?” she asked in a soft voice. He looked down with a questioning expression. “At the house. How did you find me? How did you find Shikoba?”

“Ah, that.” He nodded. Of course she was curious—he was curious, too. He wanted to know what had happened to her since the moment she’d left.

He led her to one of the deep, overstuffed sofas, pulling her into his lap as he sat down. With her curled up against his chest, he told her everything that had happened since the morning she left his bed. He stroked her hair as he ended his recount with the explosion.

“I don’t know if I want to be caught in another fire with Izzy, but she saved my ass out there.” His mouth twisted. “I saw Steele myself, Lani. We’ll bring him down, I promise.” Nuzzling her temple, he whispered, “Tell me.”

So she did. It took everything Malachi had not to howl when he learned about her treatment at Luther’s hands in the past. Hearing the pain her voice as she told him about her parents’ plots, he wished he could tear them apart with his bare hands. Instead, he held her tighter, offering his silent support. Then, she said something surprising.

“I lived for over a century waiting for the time when I’d kill Luther,” she said, voice low and uneven. “I dreamed about it, how it would make me feel to know he was finally dead.” She paused, staring at her fists resting in her lap. “I thought I’d be free, but I’ll never be free.”

He jiggled her in his lap to get her attention, ignoring the pain of his wounds. Nothing was as important as Lani right now. Bruised green eyes rose to meet his. The desolation there was haunting. “How do you mean? You’re free now,” he told her in a soothing voice. “I don’t think Lucian will turn you over to Council. If anything, your actions have saved countless lives.”

She shook her head. “You don’t understand. What I am...Luther made me.”

She told him what Luther said to her before their brawl. His heart ached at the shame in her voice. He wanted to argue with her, explain she wasn't a monster, but knew his protests would fall on deaf ears. His little fairy was stubborn and honorable. Once she got the idea in her head that she was nothing but a cold-blooded killer, it would stay there until she discovered she wasn't. He sighed deeply.

"...your redemption," she was saying, her voice growing stronger. "I won't stand in the way."

"What?" he asked startled.

She turned an earnest gaze up to him. "It will ruin you if word gets out about my past. Maybe it would be best if I went away. Maybe I could go back to *Skado*."

He frowned down at her. "What the hell do you mean? You want to leave me?" he asked in a harsh tone.

Lani's breath hitched. "Of course I don't want to leave you, but your place is in the Veil, Malachi." She was on the verge of tears, just thinking about not having him in her life. "You've worked so hard for it. I can't stand in the way of that. You could finally become who you wanted to be, maybe—" She paused, choking on the words. "Maybe even mate a debutante who has impeccable breeding." She tried to sound cheerful, but by the look in his eyes, it wasn't working.

"Lani," he rasped. "How could you think I'd give you up for a future I don't want?"

She felt her eyes widen in surprise. "I don't understand," she told him weakly.

He laughed. "And I will," he promised. "By being happy, Shade. My mom was miserable and my father weak. They still are as far as I know. It took me a while to realize, but all this time, I wasn't fighting for their acceptance, but my own." He hugged her close, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I couldn't forgive myself for being dumb enough to follow a foolish dream. I can do so much more working with the Veil, rather than against it, but I won't throw my future away

for it. You mean more to me than anything else.” He squeezed her tighter.

When he spoke again, his voice was thick, as though he was strangling on some strong emotion. “You’re my family, Lani. The family I’ve always wanted. Don’t ask me to give that up.”

## Chapter Thirty

Malachi held his breath as he waited for Lani's decision. He wouldn't beg her...much. Gods, if she still wanted to leave him, he wasn't sure how he'd react.

"I'm your family?" she asked after a tense silence.

He nodded jerkily.

She frowned into space, as though thinking hard about her options. "I'd l—"

"*Abba!*" Tia screeched from the doorway.

He and Lani jumped as his foster daughter raced into the room, her face glowing with happiness. Lani stiffened as Tia danced over to them as graceful as a gazelle.

"Tia," he began, locking his arms around Lani to keep her in place. "You interrupted us."

She waved a small hand. "Pffth, my *Amagan* has already decided to stay with us," she said offhandedly. "I want to talk about the baby."

Lani froze as the strange female's laser blue eyes settled on her. "Who are you?" she asked. The female was achingly beautiful, the type of female she could imagine at Malachi's side.

Malachi sighed loudly. "Lani, this is my foster daughter, Tiamat. Tiamat, this is—"

"*Amagan*, yes, I know. She, my sister, and I will all be very happy together. Now, about the baby," Tia said impatiently.

"What sister?" Malachi demanded.

"What baby?" Lani asked at the same time.

Tia threw her hands in the air. “Shikoba is my sister now, isn’t she?” she answered Malachi with wide, innocent eyes. She turned to Lani. “And you will be having a baby soon.”

Lani’s jaw dropped. A baby? Her? She looked at her stomach in shock. “How...what?” she heard herself ask as though from far away.

“Tia, are you serious?” Malachi asked in a raspy whisper.

Tia rolled her eyes. “I never lie, *Abba*,” she told him reprovingly. “*Amagan* has decided to stay with us, so we will be a family. All of us.” She smiled beatifically, looking from Malachi and Lani as though it was all settled.

Lani was still speechless over the baby announcement, staring at herself. A baby? A kernel of joy burst inside her. A baby! She was going to have a baby!

She laughed out loud. Malachi’s head swiveled at the sound. The surprise and barely concealed elation in his eyes brought hers to the surface. She laughed again, throwing her arms around his neck. “A family, Malachi,” she whispered against his neck. She trembled at the thought of having her own family, people who would love her unconditionally.

A huff of disbelieving laughter rumbled in his chest. “Were you really about to tell me you were staying?”

Lani nodded against him, her body so full of happiness she was afraid she’d burst. “I love you. If you can wait for Council to pass judgment, I want to build a future with you,” she whispered fervently against his skin. She soaked in his scent, imprinting it into her memory. “I don’t know what I can do in the Veil, though. I’ve only ever been an assassin.”

“I believe I can help with that,” Lucian said from the doorway.

Lani turned to see him and Ruby standing side-by-side. The satisfied smiles on their faces made her hope for the best even while a voice in her head told her hope was for fools.

“I’ve talked with the other Councilors,” Lucian began, waving his hand at Malachi when he tensed. “Everything’s fine. Noelani’s

confession and her translation of the logbook went a long way to bringing them around to my way of thinking.” He entered the room, seating his mate on one of the chairs before taking up a position in the middle of the floor.

“Noelani’s inside information can prove helpful in catching the remaining generals,” he said as he paced. “I’ve managed to convince the other Councilors to offer her a position in intelligence.”

Malachi grinned broadly. “Thank you,” he mouthed to his brother.

“Don’t thank me too soon,” Lucian warned in an ominous tone. “We have years and years of code that remains unbroken. She’ll be working for a long time. But more importantly, her life will be in danger. Not only is she turning against the Eturians, but she has more information because of her position in their organization.”

Lucian’s solemn tone managed to dampen some of Malachi’s joy. What his brother said was true. Malachi thought of the numerous attacks leveled against him in the last five years, and cold fear gripped him.

“Ruby has suggested assigning guards to Noelani, for her protection, as well as the protection of your new...family.” Lucian looked at Malachi with a look that made Malachi feel as though he was about to fall off a cliff. “Now, Malachi, since you’ll be apprenticing to Grayson Snow, you and Noelani will have to make appearances during Veilerian Agency events.”

A loud roaring filled Malachi’s ears. There had to be some mistake, he thought numbly. Council and Grayson would never approve of him apprenticing to the VPA Chief, especially after learning that Malachi had once been Steele’s protégé. He blinked. He had to have heard that wrong.

His croak caused Lucian to pause in the middle of explaining his grand plans. “Yes?” he asked, halting in front of Malachi.

Lani watched Malachi swallow hard.

“Grayson’s apprentice?” he asked in a hoarse voice. “Impossible.”

Lucian made a tsking sound. “Not so impossible. You were the top of your class in the Academy and probably would have moved into the officer ranks if Bianca hadn’t gotten to you. Grayson feels you should have another chance.” He paused. “Of course, you’re up against about fifteen other apprentices, so you don’t have the job for sure. You’ll have to work for it, overcome a lot of obstacles before any of that happens, but if you want to give it a try, Grayson wants you to join up.”

Malachi held his breath. Lani’s warm weight on his lap, against his chest, anchored him. Looking into her emerald eyes, he saw a future where he could do more than he’d ever dreamed of, but only with her at his side.

Lani smiled at him softly, understanding his trepidation. “We can do this,” she whispered to him. “Together, we can do anything, right?”

A burgeoning smile stretched Malachi’s mouth. He swooped down to kiss her hard on the mouth before looking up at his brother. “Yes.”

“Excellent,” Lucian said as though it never occurred to him that they might decline. “Now, there’s a little fairy who was waiting outside. I believe she can come in now?” he asked archly.

“Shikoba,” Lani cried, scrambling off Malachi’s lap.

He grunted as she kneed a tender spot but smiled as she hurried out the room to her sister. Tia sat next to him, resting her head on his shoulder.

“It’s going to be fine, *Abba*,” she said softly. “Everything is going to be just fine now.”

Hugging her close, Malachi smiled at his brother. “I think you’re right, Tia.”

Lani returned, towing Shikoba behind her. The sisters were smiling shyly but happily. Malachi felt contentment settle in his chest. This was his family.

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, Lani and Malachi lay entwined on a bed in one of Lucian's guest rooms. They'd spent hours talking and kissing. For the moment, they were content with that alone.

Lani finally broke down and told Malachi everything about her time with Luther. He'd held her as she cried over her repeated rapes. His mate had suffered too much over her young life, he decided. From now on, her days would be filled with joy and happiness.

"My parents," she sighed once her tears were under control. He tensed. "My parents need to be stopped. I think they're planning to kill King Leofric. They were going to blame it on me."

His hand clenched into a fist. Those godsdamn monsters. "We can let King Leofric know of the plot," he said soothingly. He paused as a new thought occurred to him. "I'll let him know." He trusted in Lani's love, but he didn't know the king well enough to determine if the fairy would push to have her declared his rightful mate or not. His arms tightened around Lani.

They were quiet for a while, and he thought she'd fallen asleep when she spoke again. "Do you really think I'm carrying a babe?" she asked in a shy voice.

Her words ricocheted through him, setting off all of his protective and possessive instincts. He growled softly, easing her to her back.

"If you're not pregnant now," he rumbled against her lips. "You will be...very soon."

He listened to her breath catch then whoosh out in a sigh of surrender. Exalting in his power over her, he nuzzled at her mouth. He wanted to take her hard and fast, brand her as his, but this was their first time together as a mated couple. He would have patience.

He hadn't planned on Lani seeing things differently. When he kissed her, it was her tongue that bathed his lips, urging them open. Once she had him where she wanted him, she set out to kiss all intelligent thought right out of his head.



She used every single move he'd taught her, improving on some, her tongue dancing between his teeth. She lapped at the inside of his cheeks, nibbled on his lips, sucked on his tongue in small, rhythmic pulls that had his hips dancing to the same beat.

When she purred into his mouth, spreading her legs for him to settle between them, he was a goner. A growl of need escaped him. He tore his mouth away from hers, wanting, no, needing to make her as crazed as he was.

Trailing open-mouthed kisses along her jaw and down her throat, he nipped at her vein. He was tempted to take a bite, his fangs were nearly throbbing with the need to plunge into her, but he decided to wait. His mouth found a nipple instead, laving it as though he had all day while his hand was busy rolling the other between his fingers.

She moaned loudly, arching her back. He switched breasts, suckling at her, taking as much of her he could into his mouth. Her legs shifted restlessly. He chuckled against her skin as his hands danced down her silken belly.

"Malachi," she moaned when his fingers found her wet folds. "Gods! Malachi!"

He ignored her half-hearted protests, slipping one long finger into her tight channel. He withdrew slowly before plunging in with two fingers. Her hips bucked against his hand.

\* \* \* \*

Lani opened her legs wider, wanting more. She moaned when his hand withdrew again. His wicked chuckle fired her senses. Lost in desire, she reached out, stroking a hand down his chest to find his cock. Grasping it in her fist, she pumped her hand in time with the thrust of his fingers inside her body.

Soon they were both moaning, hips rocking as they stroked each other. A pearly bead at the head of his cock told her how close he

was. She was close herself, her inner muscles drawing tight against the invasion of his clever fingers.

Then, he brushed his thumb over her clit. Gasping, she opened her eyes wide. Malachi's face was dark with desire, his eyes glowing red in the grips of his pleasure. "I want you," she moaned up to him, squeezing his cock. "I want you inside me!"

It was as though she'd flipped a switch. No sooner did she say the words than Malachi was positioning himself at her entrance, his heavy erection pressed against her. Deliberately, he looked up at her through his eyelashes. A flush climbed his cheekbones.

"Watch," he commanded.

Lifting her head, Lani saw the head of his cock poised at her entrance. He grabbed her hips in his hands, and thrust. Seeing the thick length of his cock pressing open her flesh nearly sent her over the edge. He looked up at her as though to make sure she still watched until he was fully seated within her.

He leaned forward, pressing deep. "I love you," he whispered.

She opened her mouth to reply but cried out as he pulled out and thrust back hard and fast. Wrapping her legs around him, she hooked her ankles together, wanting more. From then on his thrusts were deep, deliberate, and hard. He pounded into her with purpose, his eyes on her face.

The slick, wicked sounds of flesh slapping flesh were accompanied by Lani's sharp cries, and Malachi's harsh breathing. Her body tightened around him, her entire focus spiraling down to the pleasure coursing through her body.

He thrust deep, rocking into her. She exploded with a keening cry. Her body clasped him tightly in rhythmic spasms. Feeling weightless, her legs fell from around his hips.

They were picked up in big, steady hands. Lani's eyes fluttered opened in surprise. The insatiable lust on his face made something jerk low in her belly. He hissed, his eyes glowing brighter. She didn't

know what he was planning until the backs of her legs came to rest against his shoulders.

She gasped as he slid a little further inside her. She felt his cock, still hard and thick.

“Malachi?” she asked in a high voice.

Her answer was a seductive smile, and a thrust of his hips. Lani fell back, letting him take her. She’d thought she was finished, done for, but the push and pull of his cock on her inner walls had her crying out for him.

Her hands found his thighs, nails biting into his muscles, earning her a hiss of approval. Sweat slid down his body, coating hers where they met until they were both slippery with dew. Lani’s gasps turned to cries. Malachi’s raspy breathing became growls. They powered together, reaching for the ultimate goal.

Lani felt that dangerous tightening again, and she fought for it, her hips bucking up to meet his thrusts as well as she could. One of his hands slipped between her legs. A startled cry escaped her when he brushed his thumb over her clit. All it took was one flick of his thumb and she fell apart.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi felt Lani clenching around him, her thin wail of completion echoing in his ears. With one last thrust, his seed splashed into her welcoming body. He growled as he came, his hips rocking on her to extend their pleasure as long as he could.

Once her muscles stopped their wild fluttering, once his cock was flaccid, he released her legs. Unwilling to let her go even now, he rolled to the side, pulling her on top of him. They were still joined together, just as they always would be, he thought with tired satisfaction.

On an exhausted puff of air, he whispered, “I love you.”

Her sleepy, “I love you, too,” followed him into sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Tia sat in the attic, looking out at the dark night. Shikoba had already fallen asleep, unable to keep up with Tia's insatiable curiosity. The fairy had answered so many questions for her, explained so much, Tia felt as though her mind was filled with information.

A sea of sugarcane swayed in the night air. She sighed. Things had come about better than she'd hoped. When she'd first had the vision of her *Abba's* future, she hadn't seen a way for it to come about. She felt horrible for the pain her new *Amagan* had suffered throughout her life, but it was Tia's experience that you could only truly understand the joys life held after experiencing its horrors.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Yes, life was going to be good for her new family. If she felt a twinge of regret for letting those horrible demons into her *Abba's* wards, she waved off the feeling by knowing it had brought her parents together. Pain and joy, hate and love, these were things *Abba* and *Amagan* needed to experience. Now, their lives could move forward.

Her heart fluttered in her chest. The baby, she thought with a dreamy smile. The baby was going to be a wonder to them all.

A vision flickered in her mind. She sighed deeply. She grew tired of seeing snippets of the future, not knowing how it would affect those around her. Relaxing, she let herself sink into the vision.

She saw one of the women she'd just recently met on a field of white. She looked lost and alone until the figure of a man appeared in the distance. He was a handsome man, Tia saw, with flowing blonde hair and a charming smile. Dark forces swirled around him, though she had the sense that he wasn't a part of the darkness, so much as the focus of the dark energy. As though compelled by some unseen force, the woman and man met in the center of the field, their bodies melding together until no space remained between them.

Blinking away the vision, she noted the sun beginning to rise in the distance. A joyful smile curved her mouth. It was the dawn of a new day. It reminded her that there was always hope for a better tomorrow. Because as night faded before the brilliant sunlight, so too would evil be consumed by the good, by love and joy. She closed her eyes with a heartfelt sigh, glad she'd been given this second chance at life.

## Epilogue

The sun was sinking as he entered his house. Hatot greeted him with a strained smile. That was when Malachi heard Etta James crooning about finding love at last. He grimaced.

“Who pissed her off?” he asked the Halfling with a brief smile.

Hatot bowed deeply. “I’m afraid one of King Leofric’s emissaries met with the mistress earlier today.”

Malachi growled. Leofric seemed to have made it his life’s mission to shower Lani with outrageous gifts, and offers of marriage even though she was already mated. He wanted to strangle the narcissistic fairy, but with the new relations between *Skado* and the Veil, it was diplomatic suicide. He rolled his shoulders to rid himself of his anger and tension. He’d have another talk with Lucian to see if Shikoba could be the new ambassador to *Skado*.

Giving Hatot a nod of sympathy, he strode through the house. Not much had changed since he and Lani had moved back in. The only request she’d made of the servants was for fresh flowers to be placed throughout the house every day. He didn’t mind the change. Seeing the bright blossoms reminded him of his and Lani’s many moonlit escapades. Lust guided his footsteps to the great room.

Pausing in the doorway, he noted Izzy, Saga, and Rosetta filing their nails while they warily watched the small whirlwind pacing in front of the fireplace. The three Amazons had leapt at the chance to join the Cromwell household. They rotated with six Halflings for guard duty, which gave them time to visit with their Tribe, and family. Their antics amused Lani, and they spent an inordinate

amount of time helping her train Shikoba in the arts of war. He still wasn't sure how he felt about that.

Shikoba had become another daughter to him. Between her and Tia, he thanked the Gods every day he and Lani had a steady income. Those two, together with Rosetta, seemed intent on draining his bank account dry. Not that he minded. Their laughter rang out through the mansion, lifting everyone's spirits.

He leaned against the doorjamb, watching his mate stalk back and forth, pregnant belly preceding her. He privately thought she looked like she'd swallowed a beach ball, but whenever he saw her look at herself in the mirror with disgust he waxed poetic over her beauty. And she was beautiful in her pregnancy.

Even now, in her agitated state, she glowed from within. Her face had filled out in the last seven months, easing some of the hardness he'd first seen in her. Happiness had done the rest. Her eyes were brighter, though sometimes the shadows returned.

She whirled around as she felt his eyes on her. A loving smile spread across her face. His breath caught in his throat. It didn't matter how often he saw that smile, it still took him by surprise.

With one hand resting on her belly, Lani sashayed—waddled, he mentally amended—over to him. He loved that waddle, loved seeing her body ripe with their child. If he sometimes woke in the middle of the night in a state of panic over her being in labor, he put it down to pre-labor jitters.

"Babe," he said in greeting, pulling her into his arms. The distance between their bodies had grown steadily as the baby grew, but they managed to fit together regardless. He kissed her deeply. "What did Leofric do this time?" he asked, rubbing his hands over her lower back.

\* \* \* \*

Lani groaned as her mate soothed her aching muscles. His gentle hands were sometimes her only anchor when she began to think her life was nothing but a dream.

There was no end to her happiness in her family. She learned to both love and hate their quirks, like Malachi's need to watch what she believed were idiotic movies, or Tia's habit of leaving her shoes wherever she happened to sit. They learned to understand her as well. When she played her love songs, Tia and Shikoba generally made themselves scarce, while Malachi came to soothe her. Like now.

Tucking her head into his chest, she sighed. "He sent me a beautiful set of throwing knives, two poison rings, and invited me to join him for the next Moon Festival."

Malachi had begun to tense when she mentioned the knives. By the time she mentioned the festival, he was as stiff as a board. Her mate didn't like Leofric's attention any more than she did. She wished the bloody king would find a new obsession, but when he'd learned about her resurgence and subsequent entrance into the Veil, he refused to talk with anyone but her.

"I'm calling Lucian," Malachi said through clenched teeth. "Right. Now."

Lani couldn't help but giggle a bit. "Don't bother, I told Leofric's emissary he could send all his inquiries to Shikoba from now on. She's excited about moving between realms," she added unnecessarily.

Since they moved into Malachi's home, Lani, with the help of her Amazon friends, had made it her quest to teach her sister how to defend herself. Now, she felt Shikoba would be able to handle nearly any situation she found herself in. Her sister's confidence had increased, and since her guardianship had been granted to Lani by the King, she was free to make her own decisions.

"She wants to do it?"

"Yes. She thinks Leofric is...hot?" she said uncertainly.



“Hawt,” Rosetta corrected her from across the room. “Honey, if you’re gonna be hanging out with all these hawt men, you need to know how to talk like you really appreciate them.”

“Sorry, Rosetta,” she said meekly, winking at Malachi. “I don’t think Leofric’s hawt at all.”

Malachi growled playfully. “You’d better not.” He nuzzled her neck.

A sharp pain made her gasp.

“Babe?” he asked, worry clear in his dark eyes.

Another pain, this one stronger than the first, had cold sweat forming all over her body. Her back had been hurting all day, but she hadn’t paid any attention to the pain, thinking it was the strain of carrying the baby. Stupid, she thought with an inward snuffle. She was in labor if the rippling pains across her abdomen were any indication. Using her assassin’s training, she kept her face free of pain.

“Nothing,” she said with a brief smile. “Indigestion, probably. I feel like I ate a house today.”

The next pain lasted a little longer. Gods, she wanted to howl. Malachi was smiling at her indulgently.

What the fuck did he have to smile about anyway? she thought with a mental growl. He’d done this to her, made her awkward and fat and horny all at the same time.

Unable to help herself, she glared up at him.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi wasn’t sure what was going on, but Lani was looking at him with the same evil glare she’d once used on the satyr she’d killed. Was she upset because he hadn’t protested that she ate a lot? He fidgeted, wondering if flowers would help. Then, he saw her flinch. The move was so subtle, so small, if he hadn’t known her, he wouldn’t have noticed it.

“Lani?” he asked in a soft voice.

“Asshole,” she grunted, her hand rubbing her belly. “I’m going to kill you, Malachi. Slowly, painfully, and with great pleasure.”

His heart pounded. The baby. The baby was coming!

“Saga! Go...find someone! She’s having the baby!” he shouted even as he swept Lani into his arms. “Hatot! Call that healer person...whatever her name is and tell her the baby’s coming,” he roared down the hallway. He hustled from the room clutching his mate to his chest, heading upstairs. “Breathe, baby.” He mimicked what he wanted her to do.

“Stop breathing in my face, dammit,” she growled, one of her hands pulling on his hair. “This is all your fault. I can’t see my feet, I can’t sleep on my stomach, I can’t—” She gasped loudly. “Oooh, I’m going to hurt you so bad,” she panted when she got her breath back.

“Okay, okay,” he soothed her. “I’ll get your knives after I put you in bed. I promise, sweetheart.” He’d give her any damn thing she wanted, just so long as she didn’t hurt anymore.

The covers on their bed were already turned back. Someone had heard him shouting and taken action. That was some relief at least.

Gently, as though handling delicate crystal, he placed his mate in the middle of their bed. He stood again, feeling helpless.

“What now?” he asked her.

Those beautiful green eyes he could gaze into for hours shot him a cold look. “Do you think I do this in my spare time? I don’t know what to do now. I’ve never had kids, remember? And I can tell you one thing, we’re not having any more. Got it? This is it. Your one shot.” She grunted with another pain.

Malachi ran to the doorway. “Someone get your ass up here and do something!” he roared into the house. He paused, hearing movement below. Good, something was happening.

He turned to reenter the bedroom but stopped when he noticed his hands were shaking like leaves. He needed to calm down, he told himself sternly. Females had babies all the time. Lani was strong. She could handle anything.

She cried out, banishing all thoughts of control. Running back to the bedroom, he sat next to her, grabbing her hand.

“What can I do, baby?” he rasped.

“Sit behind her so she can brace herself against you,” a wry voice said from the doorway.

Swinging his head around, he saw it was Dinah, the witch. She rolled her eyes at him. “Relax, Malachi. She’s going to be fine. She’ll forget all about the pain and threats of violence after the babe comes,” she said reassuringly as she carried a bag into the room.

Malachi did as he was told, sitting behind his mate and pulling her back against him. Her hands found his thighs. Sharp nails dug into his denim-clad legs with her next contraction.

“You heard her?” he asked Dinah when Lani relaxed again. He stared down at his wife. She was so tiny. Gods, he was a monster!

“Nah,” Dinah said easily as she began stripping Lani’s clothes off. She ducked a small fist aimed at her head. “Some women get violent during labor, some go quiet, and some do both.”

She checked Lani and the position of the baby. Her eyes met Malachi’s over Lani’s shoulder. “I hope you’re ready, papa,” she said with a grin. “She’s further along than I thought she’d be. It’ll be quick and messy.”

Malachi gripped Lani’s hands and pressed his cheek next to hers. With every push, he whispered, “I love you,” and with every threat she made against his manhood, he whispered, “I love you.” He told her so many times he went hoarse.

\* \* \* \*

Five hours later, Lani could feel herself glowing as she held her son in her arms for his first feeding. He was a sturdy lad with silvery skin, dark hair, and gleaming green eyes. His little wings were black as night.

“We’ll have to bind his wings until he’s older,” she whispered to Malachi, who was slumped in the chair next to the bed.

Her poor mate, she thought with a smile. He’d been used and abused for five hours straight. The rumbling snore she heard was proof of his exhaustion. She giggled against Vaughn’s downy hair.

Gazing at her husband, Lani felt love swell in her heart. If she searched the world, she’d never find a male better suited to her. The reverence in his face when he’d held Vaughn for the first time would forever be etched upon her mind. He’d lit up like a candle, pride and male arrogance settling about his shoulders like a cape.

So she let her mate sleep while she dreamed of the chaos her future held. She dreamed of more children, more shadow fairies, and millions of kisses between her and Malachi.

\* \* \* \*

And it was chaos.

For years, Saga, Izzy, and Rosetta would dine on the birth of the Cromwells’ first child. It was the loudest, most violent labor they’d ever witnessed. In honor of the threats against a male, the Blood Maiden Tribe made Lani an honorary Amazon, and sent her an Amazonian battle shield.

Lucian would be heard complaining that he hadn’t been there to laugh at his brother, while Ruby comforted Malachi for panicking.

Tia and Shikoba, who’d had front row seats to the miraculous event, swore never to have children. Sure, they loved their new brother, but watching Lani bring him into the world had suppressed any maternal feelings they had.

Meanwhile, Malachi took the ribbing, the joking, and the insults with grace. Lani didn’t know what to make of the teasing but slowly learned it was part of belonging to a family.

Vaughn, their firstborn son, would grow up knowing he was adored by each and every one of the adults in his world. Joined later

by two brothers, and one sister, he watched over them with all the pride and love his parents had instilled in him. He wouldn't know the pain his parents had gone through before his arrival, but he would see, every single day, how much they loved each other.

It was in their every glance when they looked at each other across a dining table filled with children. It was in their every touch when they held hands as they herded their children to family functions.

Most of all, Vaughn and all of his siblings felt it at night when they snuck into their parents' room as little shadows. The bed had grown as the number of children had grown until it could comfortably sleep ten people. Their mother would scoot to one side of the bed, their father to the other, leaving a large gap between them. The little shadows would fall into the middle of the bed fighting for the honor of sleeping next to mom or dad.

When everyone was settled and the youngest ones drifted to sleep, Vaughn would hear his father whisper, "I love you" across the pile of children between him and his mate. His mother would whisper back, "I love you, too."

# 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*

The Veil 2: *Succubus-in-Waiting*

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