

Hell's Little Angel

By

Loki Renard

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Chapter One

'Ah - *Choo!*'

Snap. Crimson flame caught at the corner of the old timbers and spread like liquid across the face of the building.

Crackle. Wood fibers snapped and burst in the fire, feeding the voracious elemental beast.

Pop. Thin glass windows gave way to the pressure generated by the billowing gases and burst forth onto the stony ground with a precious tinkling sound.

For want of a flame retardant tissue, the battle for the storehouse was lost.

In the Overworld, there is a saying that man should not build his house on sand. In the Underworld, one knows very well that one should not build anything out of timber. It's hot down here, far too hot. Why Master insisted on having the damned carve him buildings from trees, I could not imagine. It was a hell of a job getting them into Hades at all, and barely a month went by without a shipment bursting into flames. The explosions usually reduced the unfortunates tasked with transport to ashes, but Master still persisted in his perverse pursuit of the torture in spite of its impracticalities.

I fancied that he enjoyed the poetic nature of condemning sinners to eternally building that which would inevitably be destroyed in a fraction of the time it took to build. It was but one of the many punishments he inflicted on those sent to atone for their misdeeds in the Overworld, and all things considered it was relatively mild. Master could be cruel, but those he ruled over had usually earned his cruelty a thousand times over.

I wiped my nose on the back of my sleeve and watched as flames leaped and swirled about the remains of the old building, which had so far escaped the burnings by merit of its usefulness and proximity to the Master's home. Master would not be pleased, but I was. I loved fire.

The scent of charred leather floated to my nostrils and I inhaled deeply, feeling quite pleased with myself as a multitude of imps drawn by the flames crawled out of the stone caverns and danced and squealed with glee.

"Thank you Miss Kaida!" a small dark imp with large red eyes tugged at the edge of my robe. Imps were perhaps the most adorable denizens of the underworld. They stood about knee high and had large rugby ball shaped heads, oversized ears reminiscent of bunnies, and the cutest little poison dripping fangs protruding from their darling gaping maws.

"You're welcome," I smiled benignly down at the little daemon and laughed as it clapped its hands together with glee and began leaping in and out of the flames with its friends.

"KAIDA!" A ferocious roar sounded high above my head.

"Damn," I swore softly to myself. Master had wasted no time in discovering my latest trespass.

I looked up to see him standing on the balcony of his fortress which rose imposing and dark against the red swirling sky, and gave silent thanks that I was out of immediate grabbing and beating range. For a moment, I considered attempting to run away. I was getting faster by the day, perhaps I could reach the Styx before he could capture me.

But all thoughts of escape fled my mind as Master drew his tall frame up, crossed his muscular arms over his chest and glared down at me with his beautiful golden eyes. Framed by thin dark plaits at either side of his head, and the shoulder length fall of his wild mane of hair, his eyes alone drew me in and held me in place without the need to lay a finger on me.

“What have you done, little dragon?” he growled the question darkly, flicking his gaze over to where several of the imps were now rolling around on their backs in the fire, trilling with glee.

“I am entertaining the imps, master,” I said with the sweetest, most innocent voice I could muster.

“You are destroying that which I own,” he pointed out in a tone dryer than tinder.

“Merely a little leather, master, surely we have no use for leather?”

“I have much use for leather,” he said, stepping over the low edge of the balcony and onto thin air. Instead of plummeting as I would have done, he appeared to levitate down towards the ground with a slow beating of imposing wings that made his dark robes billow out around him. Hot gusts of sulfurous vapor rushed around me as he landed lightly on the ground and folded his wings once more. The dark bony tips rose above his head, creating a majestic cowl of flight bearing flesh that I at once admired and was thoroughly jealous of, for I was the dragon with no wings.

I should almost certainly have run at that point, but Master was thoroughly mesmerizing. He stood nigh twice as tall as I, and he was certainly twice as broad. As he drew nearer to me, I gazed up at him adoringly with my sweet pink eyes. Master used to tell me that one day they might be deep burning red, but in spite of his predictions they had remained a muted candy cane, frilly tutu pink that I was quite disgusted with.

“Kaida.” He said my name again, censuring me with his mere tone. Looking up at him, I saw that his face was at its most serious, his thick, bushy brows were drawn together in frustration with my behavior.

I knew I was perhaps the most troublesome of all his servants, and though he was fond of me and did not enjoy disciplining me, I thought perhaps I might have gone too far this time. Master liked to have the damned assembled for the burnings, he enjoyed their wailing and gnashing of teeth. A burning without the damned around to appreciate it was a wasted burning in his eyes.

“It was not my fault, Master,” I implored him. “I sneezed. It was an accident.”

“An interesting accident.” He tapped a thick, long claw against his elbow as he waited for me to come up with a better explanation for my behavior.

“I have a cold.”

The corners of his lips quirked in a hint of a dry smile. “Dragonkin do not get colds.”

“But angels might,” I pointed out. I did not know if angels did or not, but I sure hoped they did. Playing the 'half blood' card had saved me more than once, I hoped it would work this time.

His golden eyes darkened as I reminded him of my heritage. It did not please Master that I was a half blood, indeed, it had initially made me something of an outcast in his house. But I had long ago earned my place there, and I had wreaked terrible acts of wrath on those who challenged my right to be there. These days, it was a rare fool who mentioned my checkered heritage.

“And are angels also utterly unable to control where they sneeze?” he asked, his jaw tight.

“You know me Master, I am the weakling of your house, thoroughly unable to control my horrid angelic impulses. Please forgive your humble, weak servant.” I was pouring on the humility thick as treacle, and giving him my best forlorn look as I did so.

My self pitying speech garnered the desired result. A muscle in his jaw ticked for a

moment or two, and his lips seemed to quarrel with one another before he gave way to laughter.

"You are a scoundrel, Kaida," he said, cuffing me lightly about the head.

I giggled and pretended to be knocked about by his blow.

"She is a scoundrel, and a black mark on our legacy. Do not tell me that you were intending leniency yet again, Vladimir."

My shoulders sank along with my spirits as the brusque tones of the master's younger sister came through the flames. Lady Vasya had her brother's features, but set on a statuesque feminine frame that made them all the more terrifying. Stunning long dark eyelashes framed narrowed eyes as she walked through the flames, thoughtlessly scattering imps left and right.

Her thick, long hair hung over her shoulder in a braid, and as usual, she wore her robes low cut, showing her bountiful bosom. If it weren't for the faint hint of golden green scales about her pale skin and the unearthly emerald shade of her wide set eyes, she could easily have passed for a beautiful human woman.

"Lady Vasya, what an honor," I bowed low, making sure my delicate behind was pointed away from her. Unlike Master Vladimir, Vasya took great pleasure in disciplining those who owed her allegiance, and it was a rare day that no feminine howls of pain and contrition issued from her chambers. Almost unconsciously, I took a step closer to my master, hoping that he would protect me.

Vasya ignored me. "Are you going to deal with her, or shall I?"

Vladimir looked down at me and shook his head. As my belly twisted with nervousness, I hoped and prayed that he would tell her he would deal with me. I had been over Vasya's ample lap before, and I had not enjoyed my time there one bit. She had a thin lash she liked to use that bit into the skin and made even the full dragonkin howl with pain. On my tender hide, it caused welts that lasted for weeks.

"I will deal with her, Vasya," Master said finally. I breathed a sigh of relief, though I suspected he had always planned to discipline me himself, he simply wanted to see me squirm at the idea of being left to Vasya's tender mercies.

"Do not be soft on her - she will bring our kingdom to its knees," she warned her brother direly.

Vasya loathed me, utterly loathed me. The touch of angel about my hair and skin seemed to drive her into a frenzy of loathing whenever she laid eyes on me. I knew well enough to avoid her whenever it was possible, and to make good my escape if she did decide to take issue with me. I had once spent several months hiding amongst the damned in their hovels after she threatened to tan my hide – which in her case could very well have been a literal threat.

"Do not worry sister, she will be taken care of." There was a hint of irritation in Master's tone now, and I saw with pleasure that his broad shoulders had stiffened. He surely did not appreciate being lectured by his younger sister.

Vasya saw the subtle change in his stance and immediately became less combative. We who had pledged our lives and deeds to Master may have been afraid of Vasya, but even Vasya knew better than to press the Master too far. He was a ruthless leader, capable of anything, and he did not tolerate direct insubordination in the slightest. I knew well enough to roll over for him when I was caught out, and it had saved me much pain in my time.

I stood in Master's sheltering shadow as Vasya withdrew and stalked off into the distance, no doubt to find another victim to punish in my stead.

"Thank you, Master," I said gratefully.

"Do not thank me yet, Kaida, I have not dealt with you," he said in gravelly tones.

I bowed my head and feigned a little fear. "Yes Master."

He held out his large hand to me. I took it, not caring that he intended to slap my pale cheeks with it. I was so relieved not to have been left to Vasya's tender mercies that I would have happily submitted to any fate Master decided for me.

As he lead me away to punish me, I looked back over my shoulder at the now smoldering remains of the storehouse, saw the imps rolling gleefully about in the ashes, and smiled. It had been a worthy 'accident.'

"Over my lap, Kaida."

In the Master's library, he sat on a bone lounger and beckoned me over his lap with a crooked finger. I found myself blushing as I obediently approached him and laid myself over his lap. I had been here many times before and I knew the feeling of his strong thighs under my tummy like I knew the back of my hand.

Something in his demeanor told me that this would not be a terrible punishment. It was hard to read Master sometimes, he was as inscrutable as he was often unpredictable, but he had a tender place for me in his heart, and I strongly suspected that he did not enjoy my wails of pain nearly as much as he had sometimes claimed he did.

I squirmed a bit, getting comfortable over his lap as he raised my light robes over my back and bared my bottom. Unlike many of the others, I was not in the habit of wearing tempting scraps of underwear, I was too often being taken over laps to make it worthwhile and my sense of modesty had evaporated long, long ago.

Master's large hand settled on my behind, warming my bottom gently with its mere presence. Master ran very hot, a fact that made being disciplined by him potentially very painful indeed, but as I felt the warmth of his hand I sighed a little sigh of contentment. This was supposed to be a punishment, but I knew very well that it would not be, and the first light slap from his powerful hand proved me right. He was not spanking me like a naughty wretch, he was giving me light love taps that barely stung at all.

"Am I going to regret this, Kaida?" he asked me in low, intimate tones.

"No Master," I promised him, wriggling my bottom about in a way that I knew pleased him. Though the explicit mention of my half blood nature exasperated him, I knew all too well that he appreciated what it did to my body. Unlike the full dragonkin, whose bodies were always sealed hard and taught with almost imperceptible scales even when they were in their human forms, I was soft and curved, delicate and vulnerable to him. If he so chose, it would take the merest flick of his wrist to have me squeal in terrible pain, but the fact that I knew that and still lay trustingly over his lap was pleasing to him.

"Will you be good?" He aimed a light slap at the junction of my bottom and thighs and I yelped as it threatened to scorch my tender skin.

"I will be as good as you wish for me to be," was my coquettish reply as I parted my legs slightly.

I heard my him growl low in his throat. "Do you seek to tease me, Kaida?" he asked, promptly taking advantage of the spreading of my thighs to gently pat my mons. The soft touch of his warm fingers charmed my sensitive skin, and I lifted myself up to him.

"No Master," I replied sweetly. "I know I am yours."

"That you are," he growled agreement as he continued to gently stroke my soft lips, petting my nether regions almost affectionately.

I breathed with desire, arching my hips up towards him. I knew he would not take me – he had often said that he had other plans for me, and he had plenty of opportunities to sate his lust with the nubile dragonkin females who sought him out and offered him their bodies in supplication and hope for procreation.

More than once I had crept to the door of his chambers and seen him caught in the throes of the act of mating with a female. I envied them a little for having felt what it was to have Master command them completely, for having had his thick rod buried inside them, but I did not envy them for long, for he would mate with them for three days at most, taking them over and over again then send them away, thoroughly exhausted and with their loins coated in his seed, to bear the fruit of their union.

Though he did not mate with me, he ensured that I did not seek out other males by tending to me this way from time to time, pleasuring me with his fingers until I cried out in ecstasy. As I writhed on Master's fingers, he curled his other hand in my hair and leaned down to take the nape of my neck in his mouth. I felt his teeth sink into my skin gently, holding me with their needle sharp grip as thrills of primal excitement ran through my body.

Held that way, with the petals of my sex soaked with my juices and my hips pumping at his strong fingers, I was left in no doubt as to where my loyalties and obedience lay. How delicious that something so humble as a sneeze could lead to such pleasure for me, I thought as I gasped my way closer to climax.

“Come, Kaida, show your master how grateful you are,” he purred, releasing my neck and licking the spot where his teeth had held me.

The touch of his tongue trailing liquid fire over my sensitive skin sent me over the edge. I cried out in ecstasy, shuddering in Master's arms with the pleasure he gave me so freely.

He held me for a time quietly and I was happy to lay there close to him. What we had was not a romantic love, but it was a deep connection that could not be denied. I adored him entirely.

“I will miss you, Kaida.”

The soft words murmured above me were a bombshell, tearing my world apart the instant they arrived at my ears.

“Miss me? Why? Are you sending me away? Have I displeased you?” I clutched at his arm and looked up at him with wide, frightened eyes. I did not wish to leave Master. He was all I could remember and all I wanted.

“You have not displeased me,” he lowered his head and brushed his lips across my forehead. “You have pleased me greatly, and I have found you a mate. You are to be free, Kaida.”

I searched his face and saw that he thought he had done me a great favor, but he had done me no favor at all. Though many of the master's servants dreamed of nothing but being free to find mates, I had never had such a desire. I did not want a mate, I wanted only one master, my Master.

“I don't want a mate,” I pouted desperately.

“Are you afraid, little Kaida?” he chuckled with amusement.

“No,” I frowned at the question as I burrowed my head under his arm. I was afraid of nothing. Nothing apart from Vasya, maybe.

“Who is he? Is it Alexei? I would not mate with him if you paid me,” I blustered from under the safety of the sleeve of his robe.

I heard Master's chuckle and was relieved yet again that he considered my playful

insubordination endearing.

“You do not know him as yet, but he will arrive soon. You must prepare yourself, Kaida.” His tone was gentle, but stern. I knew very well that he was not offering me an option, but that he had made a choice for me and that he expected me to accept it.

I made one last attempt to change his mind. “I don't want a mate, Master. I want only to serve you.”

I was appealing to his ego to be sure, but it was also entirely true. I really did wish only to serve him, and the thought of being required to obey another was heinous indeed. I resolved quietly in my mind that I would do everything in my power to spurn this mate Master was foisting me upon and to remain his faithful servant.

“You have served me long and well, Kaida,” Master said. “Now it is time you made your own way in the world. You are destined for greater things than serving an old dragon.” He gave a self depreciating chuckle and I frowned up at him.

“There is no greater honor than to serve you,” I said with a hint of fierceness in my tone.

He returned the fierceness with a sharp look. “Then serve me by being obedient to my will and being happy with the mate I have chosen for you.”

The argument had come full circle and I knew that I had lost, at least for the present.

“Yes Master,” I agreed forlornly.

“Good little dragon,” he said, easing me off his lap gently. I whimpered as my bare feet touched the stone floor. It felt as if I was saying goodbye to him already, and I wasn't ready to do that.

“Run along,” he said, patting my robed backside gently. “Avoid Vasya if you can.”

“I always avoid Vasya if I can.”

His chuckle at my parting shot followed me out the door of his chambers, and I held on to the warm sound as I made my way out of his house and began picking my way through the jagged rocks that ringed the fortress. I wanted to be away from familiar sights as I processed what Master had told me. More importantly, I did not want any of the others to see me shed the tears which sprang to my eyes at the idea of leaving him. I would never hear the end of it if they saw me in a moment of weakness.

I passed the remains of the old storehouse and saw that already the ashes of the fire had cooled and the imps had scattered back to their caves and their lava pools. What had once brought them such unrestrained joy had now passed away and could not be rekindled. I wondered if that was to be my fate, if the flame of my devotion was to be extinguished and leave me a pile of ashes for the rest of my days until someone finally took pity on me and swept me into the lava flows.

Chapter Two

To say that I was upset was an understatement. Though I had protested his decision, I had refrained from showing my true feelings in front of Master, for I knew he would not be pleased at my wailing, especially when he no doubt considered that he was doing me a great honor in releasing me from his service.

I wandered towards the mountain plains of despair deep in thought and paying very little attention to the cries of the damned, or the cackles of glee from the daemons as they dressed them in lead water wings and poked them towards the rivers of lava. There must be a way for me to show Master that I wanted only him – a way to convince him to keep me as his.

Since I'd hatched, all I'd known was his ownership, his deep rumbling voice and his great golden eyes. I'd grown up with the other hatchlings admiring the Master, and the day he had taken me into his service had been the happiest day of my life.

"You look unhappy. Don't tell me the old fool finally had the nerve to punish you as you deserve to be punished." Vasya's cruel mocking tone broke through my thoughts, making a bad moment even worse. I looked up to see her standing a few feet in front of me, her crimson lips curled into a smirk of glee.

I drew a deep breath. Normally when confronted by Vasya I would not hesitate to flee. There was no shame in living to walk and sit comfortably another day. On this day however, she was the perfect focus for the anger and rejection I felt. As I gazed upon her terrible face all the terrible feelings borne of Master's promise to give me away rose up in me and expressed themselves in a snarl.

For a moment, Vasya looked thoroughly stunned. As the Master's sister, she ruled over us all, and challenges were rare. She enjoyed cruelty far too much for anyone to risk crossing her and losing the battle. But I had forgotten the possibility of consequences. I had forgotten everything except the hurt that weighed heavy in my chest.

"Are you threatening me, Kaida?" She asked the question with undisguised glee. Not only did she think I had already been punished, but I was now effectively handing her my backside on a silver platter – or so she thought.

As I glared at her, I realized that Master had been correct about some things. I had served him long and well. I was certainly no longer the timid hatchling who had scurried about his feet and tried to climb matron's robes with my sharp little claws.

I had grown up fearing Vasya, but now I realized quite suddenly that I was almost as tall as she was, and though I did not have her ostensibly scaled skin, I was by no means weak. The weak do not survive in our lands, and I had been hardened by the fires all my life. I was curved and strong, and the pale braid that I sported was almost as long as hers. Hours earlier I would not have dreamed of challenging her, but if Master was letting me go, then what did I have to lose? I would not run and hide from her. Not this time.

"Your hide will make a pretty hanging on my wall," Vasya purred threateningly. She wanted to frighten me, she enjoyed fear – she fed on it.

"Yours will make a good hammock for the damned," I taunted her in return.

Her gorgeous green eyes widened in shock. She had clearly expected me to grovel or flee, or perhaps wet myself. Nobody talked back to Vasya, and she did not know what to do with it.

“How dare you address me that way?” she hissed.

“Probably several of the damned, your ass alone could fit four or five,” I continued my musings aloud.

Her shriek of rage tore through the sulfur laden air. She was furious, so furious that she spontaneously lost control of her form and her carefully folded wings burst out from her robes, shredding them to pieces as the diamond green leathery expanses rose high above her head. In an instant, she had half-transformed, her body remained voluptuous and feminine but her scales were far more pronounced now and her eyes were large with rage.

I remained recklessly calm in the face of her display of aggression. She would not kill me, even she would not risk Master's wrath. This was just another way to scare me... this was just a....

With a cry, she flew at me. The claws on her hands were razor sharp and she slashed them viciously towards my mid-section, threatening to disembowel me where I stood. I leaped back just in time, avoiding her onslaught.

“That's it, get some exercise.” I taunted her, though my heart pounded as she wheeled about in the sky and made another pass at me. This time she was so close I was forced to drop to the ground to avoid her rage. Wisps of hair were working their way out of my braid and hanging in my eyes, treacherously distracting me for a moment as I scrambled to my feet and ran for cover.

I had no intention of lashing out at her. No matter what the circumstances, I knew Master would not look kindly on an outright assault on his sister. I hoped that all my years of dodging the consequences of my actions would come in handy now, when I needed to dodge some very serious consequences indeed.

Clearly further enraged by having missed me twice and still having to listen to my taunts, Vasya completed her transformation, losing all remnants of human form as she unleashed her sleek dragon self.

“Holy.. hell...” I breathed. I'd never seen Vasya transformed, transformation was tiresome and usually reserved for times of extreme need. As a dragon she was every bit as large and dangerous as her human form had indicated she would be. She stretched a good twenty feet in length, and her wingspan was at least as long as that. The gusts of wind from the beating of her wings alone were almost enough to knock me off my feet.

She screeched something unintelligible at me and burped a ball of flame that shot by my head and burst against the rock face behind me, hurling shards of stone dramatically into the air. I was quickly beginning to revise my earlier assumption that Vasya would not kill me. She seemed fairly intent on doing so after all. It had been a mistake to wander so far away from the protection of Master's home and taunt Vasya. If I died out here, there would only be her word to account for it, she could easily say that I had run away upon having discovered Master's plans for me, or deny having ever seen me at all.

With that realization, fear finally took hold as Vasya screeched with glee and flew after me, buffeting me with hot currents of air as she drew closer. Flame light gleamed off her scales, making them shimmer with a monstrous beauty I did not have time to stop and appreciate.

“Ladies, ladies, please...” A genteel voice broke into our conflict with a slow drawl.

As Vasya's claws descended towards me, I dodged and turned to see a fellow with an unruly shock of white hair standing in the middle of the hellscape I called home, mildly

observing our altercation.

He was dressed in a crisp white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and dark pants perfectly tailored to his muscular frame. One hand was on his hip, the other held a dinner jacket slung casually over his right shoulder. He looked as if he'd just stepped out of a glittering dinner party and was thoroughly amused to find himself on a lonely plane in the underworld watching an enraged dragon do her level best to annihilate me.

"Little help?" I panted, taking cover behind a rock next to him as Vasya came swooping down again from the sky, her gaping maw open, ready to toast me to a cinder with a blast of flame.

"Oh I'm not sure you need it, you seem to have the situation under control," the insufferable git replied, his blue eyes creased with good humor as he slid aside gracefully, allowing the avenue of fire Vasya exhaled from her belly to pass him by.

"And they say chivalry is dead," I noted with displeasure a moment before I was forced to hurl myself backwards off the ledge of the mountain to avoid Vasya's stubby dragon arms and their vicious not so stubby claws as she passed low overhead, spewing fire out of her nostrils and blowing smoke out of her rear end.

A moment later, I hung off the edge of the crumbling rock face, cursing my life, cursing my luck, and above all, cursing the smirking fool who refused to help me. This was to be the end of it all. I was to be murdered by Master's sister on the day he announced I was to be sent away. There was something poetically balanced about my fate that almost made me resign myself to it – almost.

"Help me!" I screamed at the man on the plains.

He appeared to ignore me entirely, but turned to address my tormentor.

"Lady Vasya, how nice to see you again," he shouted into the sky as Vasya made a triumphant pass overhead and prepared to crisp me to a cinder.

To my extreme surprise and great joy, his greeting brought Vasya to a halt. It appeared that she had not spotted the fellow in her frenzy of blood lust, but upon laying eyes on him, she gave a squealing cry of glee that made my ears bleed.

In less than a minute, she had landed and melted back to her human form. She was naked, except for her braid which gave her some form of modesty, but her flirtatious smile indicated that she rather enjoyed coming upon this particular fellow in her natural state.

"Edwin! It has been far, far too long," she greeted the man in genteel tones, apparently content to pretend that she hadn't just been caught in the act of attempting to slaughter one of her subjects.

"The pleasure is mine as always," Edwin flattered her, bowing down to kiss her hand.

As they re-made each others acquaintance, I scrambled wildly at the rocks and managed to pull my battered and bruised frame back onto solid ground. They both ignored me completely as I lay on the ground panting with relief.

"You look tired my lady, allow me to escort you back," Edwin said to Vasya charmingly, offering her his crooked arm.

"Please, I would be honored," Vasya replied with a giggle I found quite chilling coming from a creature who'd been doing her level best to kill me just moments earlier.

Arm in arm, they started towards Master's house without so much as a glance back at me. I watched the pair of them recede into the distance and thanked my lucky stars that I was alive.

It was a long way back home in my half-charred state however and by the time I stumbled into the Master's fortress, I was feeling a little less generous towards Vasya and her friend Edwin. They'd left me out there to die, those bastards. They would suffer for that, either at the hands of Master, or at the hands of my new mate, whoever he was.

"Kaida!"

A kindly voice, full of concern called out to me as I entered the fortress. It was Matron, bustling towards me with a serious look on her face.

"I've been looking for you... Kaida, you are a mess!" she lectured me, frowning at the smudges of soot and the bloody scrapes on my elbows and knees. "What are we going to do with you?"

"You are fortunate there's anything left of me to do anything with," I said tiredly.

"You've been in trouble again," she said disapprovingly, placing her hands on her hips.

I sighed. Matron had always been a hard ass, ever since I was a little one she had been catching me out in one mischief or another, and she'd never been shy about applying her rod if she thought I needed it.

"I'm here now. I'm going to have a bath."

"You are certainly not! You are going to report to the infirmary. I don't want to hear another word out of you until you've done that."

Her lips were pinched together in a thin line, and her dark eyes had grown almost black with displeasure. It seemed that me almost getting myself killed was a significant source of irritation in her life.

"I'm going to have a bath," I repeated myself arrogantly. "Oww! Matron!" My squeals were caused by the vice like grip she'd suddenly taken on my left ear. Matron was a tall, thin dragonkin, more than capable of handling even the most rambunctious of our number. It had been some time since I had crossed her, and I'd forgotten how easily she was able to turn the tables of discipline if one did not cooperate.

"You'll be going to the infirmary, then you'll be having a good thrashing, that's what you'll be having," she said grimly as I wailed and tried to regain control of my ear.

It was the creaking of large doors that saved me from Matron's tender mercies. She dropped my ear as if it had been a hot coal as the council chambers opened and the elders began to file out behind Master.

"Kaida, what happened to you?" Master had seen our little scuffle and was looking at me with considerable concern, as well he might. I was battered and filthy, and my clothes had been torn in several places.

"I was unsuccessful in avoiding Vasya."

His brows rose in a simultaneous tribute to surprise and concern.

"Vasya did this to you?"

"Indeed she did. She would have done more too, if a handsome stranger had not swept her off her feet," I said, pleased to be telling on Vasya.

"A handsome stranger?" Master looked puzzled.

"Blonde? About yea high?" I reached above my head as high as I could. "Talks as if he has a stick embedded in his posterior? Answers to the name of Edwin?"

"Oh." Master's expression cleared into comprehension, but he did not look pleased in the slightest. "So you have met Edwin."

"Only in passing. He left me for dead," I said bitterly.

Master looked thunderous in his displeasure. "Go with matron and report to the

infirmary. I will send for you later.”

As he turned and walked away surrounded by his councilors, I knew that his ire was not directed at me, and I felt giddy with glee at the thought that Vasya would feel his wrath, glee that was not even dampened when Matron grabbed me by the back of the neck and began marching me towards the infirmary.

“Ow, Matron!”

Matron had cleaned me up and determined that my injuries were superficial, which was bad news for me, as that meant it would 'do me no harm to be reminded about proper discipline,' as she put it.

I found myself in the undignified position of being put over the bed entirely naked so that my bottom was raised at the edge of it and my legs were spread open on the floor so that my legs formed a triangle. I was expected to support the weight of my lower body on my tip toes, and to keep my arms stretched out in front of me. It was a devious position that lifted my bottom into the perfect position for the application of Matron's rod.

“You know I am to be mated, Matron?” I said over my shoulder as she stood to one side of me and marked her swing.

“Are you? How nice,” she said in her inimitable 'I couldn't care less' tone.

“So really, you probably don't have the authority to do this any...fffooooWWW!” My squeal was the result of a cracking cut of her rod that told me without a doubt that she had all the authority she needed.

“Please Matron, mercy,” I tried begging, but it was useless. Matron was not Master. She was not largely ruled by her ego, nor did she have a particularly special place in her heart for me. It was her duty to ensure that I was persuaded to behave myself better and she clearly intended to do her duty, no matter how large I got.

Her rod hurt like blazes, and she brought it down with a wicked precision that left no patch of skin unscathed. She had a talent for lining the strokes of the rod just so that each one landed a short way from the previous one, tracing new pain and reigniting the ache from the previous stroke. Under the expert application of her rod I was soon reduced to squealing and howling like a hatchling. My feet drummed on the floor with a desperate tattoo as I wailed for Matron to stop.

She did not stop until I was sobbing tears that ran down my cheeks and soaked into the bed below me, and when she did finally cease her punishment, her demeanor remained grim.

“You are getting too old for this, Kaida. I hope your mate is strong enough to save you from yourself.”

I wiped the tears from my eyes and saw through my pain that she was actually worried about me. As I stood gingerly and pulled the robes she handed me over my head, I did my best to reassure her.

“If Vasya cannot kill me, who can?” I grinned as I licked at the tears I had shed, feeling better at the thought in spite of my aching body and my burning behind.

Matron shook her head at me. “Its that arrogance that will end you, Kaida.”

A tap on the door saved me from further lecturing as a runner informed me that Master wished to see me in the grand room.

The grand room was the room Master usually reserved for visitors of great importance. I had occasionally peeked through the doors to marvel at the grandiose carvings that covered the

place from floor to ceiling, but I had never been inside. I felt suddenly nervous at the idea of going in there. Whatever was going to take place in that room was going to change everything, I was sure of that. Change was in the air, and no matter how much I might try to fight it, it would take me whether I liked it or not, so it was with considerable trepidation that I presented myself to the guardian at the great doors.

"Master wishes to see me," I said, twisting my hands nervously in my robes, almost putting the sharp ends of my nails through the fabric.

The guardian, clad in crimson uniform nodded, went to the door and announced me to the room with a short burst of his shiny trumpet.

"Lady Kaida!" he called, then bowed aside to let me pass.

I entered the grand room to see Master ensconced on a large stone throne, and a familiar figure waiting at his side. It was Edwin, the man who had left me for dead. Perhaps Master was going to punish him for me, I thought hopefully.

"Come here, Kaida," Master bade me.

I went to his side, avoiding the blonde man to the best of my ability. A glance in his direction showed a smirk on his rugged features as he watched me walking gingerly into the room, a smirk I yearned to wipe off his face.

"Are you well?" Master asked me.

"Yes Master," I nodded, keeping my eyes downcast. It was best to make a good show of penitence after having been involved in two significant incidents in less than six hours.

"I am glad to hear it Kaida. It would have been a great pity to lose you on what should be such a joyous day for you."

I raised my eyes to his suspiciously. What on earth was he talking about? Joyous day? This had been one of the worst days I'd had in quite some time.

Master smiled at me and gestured towards the smirking buffoon to his right. "Edwin this is Kaida," he introduced us. "Kaida, Edwin is the mate I spoke of. He has honored you by choosing you."

I was silent only because I could not think of a suitable curse.

"Kaida?" Master prompted me after a moment or two.

"I would not take him as my mate if the Underworld froze over," I said, finally finding words that adequately expressed my disdain for my chosen mate.

"Kaida!" Master's growl of displeasure frightened me a little, but I would not give in to this awful match so easily.

"He left me to die. Is that what you wish for me, Master?" I ignored Edwin entirely and focused my pleas on Master.

"If I may," Edwin interjected.

Master nodded curtly.

"The lady created her own peril in taunting Lady Vasya, and whilst I may not ostensibly have acted in her favor, it is certain that had I not stopped Vasya when I did, this particular conversation would not be taking place."

"Unbelievable. He wants credit for leaving me hanging off the plains half burned to death," I said sarcastically, throwing my arms in the air.

"Enough, Kaida! Edwin has several estates in the north. He is a very worthy mate for you and I command you to show him due respect!"

Master was getting angry. I did not like Master when he was angry. But I liked even less being given to a man I did not know from the bristles in a damned man's behind.

"I cannot Master, he loves another," I played my final card, hoping against hope it would work.

"What are you talking about, Kaida?"

"Lady Vasya. He loves her. She loves him." I knew I spoke half the truth at least, Vasya had been far too pleased to see Edwin for my liking.

Master glared at me for a long moment, then snorted. "Ridiculous," he said finally, dismissing my claim entirely.

I looked over at Edwin to see how he responded to my accusation, but I found to my ire that he was looking at me with clear amusement in his pale blue eyes. Everything I said and did seemed to amuse this horrid man.

"I thank you, Master Vladimir, for providing me with such a thoroughly delightful mate," he said politely to Master. "She is beautiful and spirited, exactly what I desired," he continued, looking at me with an expression of desire I found nigh abhorrent.

Master nodded, mollified by Edwin's acceptance of me in spite of my reluctance concerning the match. I continued to glare at Edwin. He was a strange looking indeed, with his pale blonde hair and his smooth skin that lacked all the texture of our people. He looked sort of me, but also like something else entirely, something I'd never seen before.

"Is he even dragonkin?" I snapped suddenly.

Master looked angry all over again, but Edwin's outright laughter stopped him from becoming entirely outraged.

"You are delightful, Kaida. It is a pity to disappoint you, but I cannot pretend to be dragonkin."

"He is of the angelic races, Kaida," Master explained painstakingly.

"Oh," I digested that for a moment. "Then what is he doing *here*?"

Again Edwin laughed that irritatingly pleasant laugh. "Even angels fall, Kaida."

Chapter Three

The Master I adored had given me to a Fallen Angel. To say that I was displeased would have been to vastly understate my feelings on the matter.

I was informed that I was to leave with my mate that very evening. The reason for the blind rush to kick me out of the only home I'd ever known was not made clear to me, but then neither was the reason for hurriedly mating me off to Edwin in the first place. It was tempting to believe that great things were afoot, but I thought it more likely that everyone was simply tired of me and wished to foist me off on Edwin before he realized what a terrible deal he was getting.

My final audience with Master was heartbreaking. He held me close in his arms, kissed the top of my head and wished me well. I cried genuine tears at leaving his side, but I knew that I had no choice but to go. My fate had been decided for me.

Edwin had prepared a carriage for us, and he was in very high spirits as he guided me to it. My few possessions had been packed into black cases and stacked on top of the carriage, which was to be drawn by four horses dark as night with blazing eyes, burning hooves and manes of fire. They stamped and whinnied as I approached them curiously. I had not seen such creatures before. Though I had heard of horses and seen pictures, none lived in our lands.

"They are beautiful, aren't they?" Edwin said, placing his hand on my shoulder.

I shrugged it off angrily. "Don't touch me!"

"Now now Kaida, behave yourself," Edwin chided me gently.

"I am behaving myself. If I were not behaving myself, this carriage would no longer exist," I growled aggressively.

Edwin laughed his strange laugh and put his arm out to usher me into the innards of the carriage. I resisted of course, I was not going to allow myself to go quietly into the night. When his palm gently touched the small of my back, I whirled about and slapped him across the face.

The cracking sound echoed around the suddenly silent stables as I looked defiantly at Edwin. He had not moved, not in the slightest. Indeed, there was no sign at all either on his cheek or in his demeanor that I had done anything at all.

"Please Kaida," he said, gesturing towards the carriage with a polite nod of his head. "Let us make haste."

It was eerie, his total lack of response. I expected him to yell at me, perhaps to beat me, at the very least to look a little angry, but instead he remained steadfastly polite and courteous as he ushered me into the carriage. I made no further attempt to escape or assault him, it was clear to me that when I dealt with Edwin, I was dealing with something beyond my comprehension.

The interior of the carriage was comfortable and contained two dark velvet bench seats facing each other. I sat down, and when Edwin sat next to me, promptly changed to sit on the other side of the carriage. Something about being close to him made my spine tingle in unpleasant ways.

Edwin reached out the open window and tapped the upper ledge of the carriage, which was evidently the signal for the staid driver in top and tails to crack the whip and urge his beasts forward onto the great road that ran the length of the Underworld, and along which I had never traveled before. Master forbade us to leave his lands, and I'd never felt the urge to explore too far from his protection.

Master's lands were ringed by tall, bleak mountains, and as the carriage began to climb up the winding road that went through the narrow pass that lead god only knew where, I felt a

curious sense of elation that mingled with my sorrow. I had scented adventure, and it excited me.

For the most part, I was glued to the side of the carriage, staring out the window at the wonder of the splintered mountainous ranges. I glanced over at Edwin once or twice and saw that he was alternately smiling quietly at me, or closing his eyes altogether. He made no further effort to speak to me, evidently preferring to remain enigmatic.

I wondered what it would be like to mate with him. I certainly had no intention of doing so willingly, but it was possible that I would not have a choice in the matter, he certainly seemed thoroughly sure of himself. What if he forced himself on me? Could he do that? I sized him up from a tactical perspective as we bumped onwards to our fate.

He was not nearly as large as Master, but he was certainly larger than I was, and undoubtedly stronger, though it was difficult to tell what kind of a body he had under his tidy suit. As I tried to make out the lines of his frame, Edwin opened his eyes and caught me looking at him. I turned quickly and resumed gazing out the window whilst he chuckled quietly to himself.

Since I'd met the man he'd been laughing at one thing or another. It was beginning to wear on my nerves.

"What's so dammed funny?" I finally snapped at him.

"All of life is amusing if one knows the right way to look at it," he said mildly.

"Easy to say when you're the one riding into my life and destroying it," I replied bitterly.

"Aw, it will not be so bad, you'll see little dragon," he said with a mock pitying tone.

I did not reply. I was hurting, and he seemed to have no empathy for me at all. Everything was a joke to him. I had to escape his clutches and somehow return to Master.

"You've made a mistake," I said at length, when a plan had come to me.

"Oh, have I?"

"Yes. I'm not even a full dragonkin, you know," I revealed my biggest secret, hoping that it put a stop to his desires.

Edwin's smile grew wider, into a full grin. "I am aware of this fact, and I must say it pleases me. I do not wish to take a mate capable of turning herself into a vicious beast at a moment's notice."

So he knew my weakness. Unlike Vasya, Master and the other dragonkin who could transform themselves into impressive beasts of prey, I was earthbound. "Do not imagine I am any less vicious for being unable to take dragon form," I warned him direly.

He chuckled. "Of course not, Kaida. But I am more than capable of handling you, do not be afraid on that score."

I glared at him and fell silent once more. He had a terrible knack of effortlessly gaining the upper hand in any conversation.

"I don't want this." I tried again.

"That's because you do not yet know what 'this' is," Edwin replied in his easy tone. "Do not be afraid, Kaida, you will be happy."

Again I was forced into silence. He never responded the way I thought he was going to respond. I found myself suddenly missing Master all the more. I liked his predictability. Pouting, I curled up on my side of the carriage and stared out at the landscape. For hours the carriage rocked unsteadily onwards and upwards along a mountain trail that seemed perilous at the best of times. It was so thin in some places that the carriage wheels could barely fit along it, and I saw from the window that the fate waiting for us should we slip off the road was a long fall into a lava flow. It should have terrified me, but I was too full of anger and sorrow to add fear to the

mix.

Finally, after what seemed like hours and hours, we reached the summit of the mountains and made our way through the narrow pass flanked by squadrons of dragonkin loyal to Master. I wanted more than anything to throw myself out of the carriage and demand to be taken back to him, but I knew all too well that Master would not welcome me back. If I was to return, it would be in disgrace at having dishonored him.

I closed my eyes for a few minutes, not wishing to see the noble features of my people and their flashing, brilliant eyes as they watched the carriage pass by. It was not until the carriage began to descend, and a strange brightness assaulted my eyes even through closed lids that I looked out again.

The sight that met me was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. The rocky path had smoothed out and now wound its way gently down a mountain side full of green grasses and wild flowers. Their scent wafted to me, aromatic and fresh and I breathed it in deeply. I had never smelled anything so wonderful before.

Still more wonders awaited me. As I raised my gaze from the trail and looked out over the new lands, I saw fields upon fields of meadows and trees, and amongst it all, a silver snake of a river that I knew must be the Styx.

“Oh my...” I breathed to myself, quite forgetting I was not alone.

“It is beautiful, isn't it?” Edwin said.

I ignored him and stuck my head out the window. It truly was beautiful. A soft, warm breeze flowed across the plains and the mountain side, sending green ripples through the grasses.

“What... what is this place?”

“Elysia,” Edwin informed me.

“Elysia? It is so close? I had no idea!”

“Heaven is never all that far away,” Edwin said with his trademark chuckle of amusement.

I did not have so much as a moment to roll my eyes at his remark as the carriage picked up speed on the smoother road and swept us full speed into Elysia, where I had heard that the days were bright and long, and all was well with the world.

Here and there, I saw the departed frolicking with one another amidst lambs and lion cubs and marveled at how handsome they all were when they weren't being subjected to eternal torment.

Confronted by all this strange light and joy, I felt very confused indeed. “Why am I here?”

“That is a very deep question, one that many wise minds have pondered,” Edwin said jovially.

“No, I mean why did you bring me here. Why me?”

His amused expression took on a keen look. “Perhaps I just liked the look of you.”

“Don't give me that. This was decided a while ago, wasn't it? But nobody wanted to tell me about it, they wanted me in the dark. What is going on?” As I'd been observing the landscape, my mind had been working on the problem of my rather sudden mating to Edwin. Edwin had already been on his way when Master informed me of my match, and Edwin had known precisely who I was when he had found me on the plains – in fact, I was beginning to doubt that there was any accident that he was on the plains.

“You have a suspicious mind, Kaida,” Edwin said smoothly.

“No, I have a mind,” I corrected him.

"This is true," Edwin agreed, flattering me. "A beautiful mind at that. Your master raised you well."

He was talking about me like I was a free range chicken. "Yes, he fed me only the best grain," I snapped back irritably.

"And he molded you into a beautiful, willingly obedient mate."

"Obedient? I am obedient to Master. I will not be obedient to you."

"You have no master anymore Kaida, no master but me, and you will obey me in time. You crave to obey, it is in your blood." His usually smiling expression had drawn serious and intense as he spoke and I felt myself being drawn into his crystal blue gaze. He had a hypnotic quality about him that was undeniably attractive, indeed he was a very handsome creature and should I have met him under other circumstances I might well have been flattered by his attentions. As it was, I forced myself not to melt with his charms.

"You, sir, have picked the wrong mate," I informed him primly. "Best return me to Master and hope that he is willing to refund you whatever you paid him."

Edwin laughed, and his demeanor returned to its usual easy going state. "Oh Kaida, you are priceless," he said. "I shall enjoy you immensely."

"No you won't," I said in my most contrary tone. "I will ensure you do not."

He did not reply to that, but he did not look concerned either. Nothing I said seemed to affect him, indeed, the more contrary I tried to be, the more amused he looked.

"Let me go or I will fling myself out of this carriage!" I eventually threatened him.

"How melodramatic you are," he replied with just a hint of boredom in his voice.

"I will do it!" I declared, drawing myself up and placing my hand on the carriage door.

Edwin leaned back in his seat and regarded me with a long look. "I have no doubt that you are capable of such a feat of idiocy. Do you forget that this morning when I came upon you, you were fighting a dragon and failing miserably?"

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but he continued before I could object to his assessment of my faculties. "You may resist me all you like. I will enjoy it. It will amuse me. And it will make it all the more sweeter when you tire of your rebellion and behave like the sweet dragonling you are."

"Very well. I trust that this will amuse you then."

With those parting words, I opened the door of the carriage and, as I had threatened I would, threw myself out of it.

It was not nearly as pleasant an experience as I had imagined it would be. Though it was covered in grasses, the ground still hurt considerably when I landed on it at speed and began tumbling down a small incline, gathering all kinds of bumps and bruises from the small stones that remained on the mountain side.

When I finally stopped rolling, I sat up, thoroughly dizzy and saw that the carriage had pulled to a halt a little way down the road. Neither Edwin nor the driver seemed inclined to see if I was alright, which was almost as infuriating and painful as the bruises I'd inflicted on myself.

"He doesn't care for me at all," I told myself aloud. If I had behaved this way with Master, he would have stormed across the plain and torn strips off my hide. Edwin was probably laughing his silly head off about the whole affair in the comfort of his carriage.

I stood up, inspected my robes, which were now almost as filthy and torn as the ones I'd ruined fighting with Vasya. It seemed that today was not going to be my day. Looking around me, I could see for miles, which was lovely, but I also saw that there was nothing for miles – nothing but the carriage, which was still waiting like a dark blot on an otherwise idyllic

landscape.

With a bruised body and a bruised ego, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to cry. I sat down in the long grass, wrapped my arms around my knees and rested my head on them in total misery as my tears began to fall. This wasn't fair, all I wanted was the comfort of my home.

"Are we ready to continue, Lady Kaida?" Edwin's voice came from somewhere nearby. He must have eventually lowered himself to pretending as if it mattered what happened to me and come to get me. I did not acknowledge his presence, but I did try to still my tears. I didn't want him to see me cry.

"Come along," he said after a moment or two, trying to cajole me up and back to the carriage.

I was having none of it. I was not going anywhere or doing anything. Everything hurt. I wanted to be alone. I wanted Master.

I almost screamed aloud when I felt his hands on me for the first time, but he was not setting about giving me the beating Master would have said I deserved, he was simply scooping me up in his arms and carrying me back to the carriage, a helpless waif in his strong arms.

He did not speak further and the only sound I made when he set me down back on my soft velvet seat was a small sob. Edwin closed the door and the carriage began to move again. Once more I was being carried away from all I knew and loved. How could Master have done this to me? How could he have forsaken me?

I had no fight left in me. There was nowhere to run, because there was nowhere to go. I belonged with Master, but he no longer wanted me. My tears began to fall again, silently this time and eventually, as the carriage rocked with the gentle undulations of the road, I fell into a fitful sleep.

"Wake up, Miss Kaida."

When I opened my eyes again, it was dark, very dark, but I could make out the thin face of a woman who startled me immediately. For a moment I thought I must be looking into a mirror, she looked so similar to me, apart from having soft gray eyes and many crinkled laugh and smile lines around her mouth and at the corners of her eyes.

"Who are you?"

The first question out of my mouth was a blunt one, but I was not overly concerned with politeness. I was thoroughly disoriented. I was no longer in the carriage, instead I was indoors somewhere in comfortable chambers that smelled of soap and flowers.

"You may call me Nerida," the woman said, fussing about with something near my side.

I turned and looked to see that she had a large basin of water and she was wringing out a wash cloth. I was only momentarily confused as to their purpose, for she soon made her wishes known.

"Take off that filthy rag," she gestured towards my robe, which still clung to me in all its tattered glory.

"What? No!"

"Lord Edwin warned me you could be troublesome, and instructed me not to tolerate it." The skin around her lips wrinkled as she pursed them in disapproval.

"I don't care if he made you the High Priestess of Intolerance, I'm not getting naked in front of you," I snapped irritably. Really, this was too much. Being awoken by strangers and commanded to take my clothes off? I was very close to losing my temper indeed.

Nerida drew back, and for a moment I thought she was going to slap me, but then she surprised me by relaxing and smiling in a comforting manner.

“You're quite right, you've come from a land with ways different from our own. I will leave this here for you to clean yourself if you wish. There are many clean clothes in the wardrobe.”

With that, she withdrew from my chambers, having thoroughly stunned me with her unprecedented display of reasonableness.

Left to my own devices, I decided that I did very much want to get clean and change clothes. It would have been preferable if there was a bath, but I took what I could get with the basin and the washcloth, which were soon utterly black with the filth I'd managed to accumulate during my quick trip through a small portion of the Elysian fields.

Naked and damp, I made my way across to the wardrobe Nerida had indicated. Upon opening it, I discovered that there was indeed a wide variety of clothing, both in the traditional style of the dragonkin, and in the eclectic style of Elysia. I saw pretty lace dresses, and long flowing skirts, and jackets that fitted about the bust, but I eschewed the strange new fashions for more familiar clothing I could be comfortable in.

I finally chose a pretty purple robe with gold trim that caught my eye. It was far finer than anything I had worn at home, and as it slid silkily over my tired frame, I breathed a sigh of pleasure. It felt wonderful, so light and yet so very regal.

Once dressed, I padded over to the door Nerida had exited and found to my surprise that it was open. I thought they would perhaps have locked me in to prevent my running away, but as I stepped into the wood paneled hall, I saw why that was not necessary. A burly guard in silver mesh nodded at me from his vantage point opposite my door.

“Lady Kaida,” he said gruffly.

“Sir Tinsel,” I replied in a similarly serious tone.

He ignored my spontaneous title for him as he gestured down the hall. “Lord Edwin believes you may be hungry after your journey and requests the pleasure of your company for dinner.”

Lord Edwin believed correct, I was very hungry indeed. It would seem that throwing oneself out of carriages and collapsing into hysterics consumed rather a great deal of energy.

I allowed the guard to usher me down the hall to a small dining room lit by candles, where Edwin was waiting for me. He had been reading a book, but when I arrived, he laid it down immediately and stood up to greet me with a warm smile. As before, he wore a crisp shirt and neat black pants, but he had evidently stowed the jacket away somewhere. Evidently he had been making an effort to relax, for his shirt was slightly open at the collar, revealing a broad chest covered in curling golden hair. For an angel, he was certainly very elemental and virile in his appearance.

“Kaida, how lovely to see you,” he said approaching my side of the table and pulling out a chair for me. “Please, sit and we shall dine.”

It was difficult to respond to him aggressively when he was making such an effort to be nice. He'd already put up with a great deal from me. I couldn't imagine what Master would have done if I'd attempted to behave that way with him.

“Thank you,” I said in a small voice. “It looks lovely.”

It really did look lovely. A large bird had been roasted to succulent perfection, and it was surrounded with spiced vegetables and accompanied with rich gravy. How could I resist such a treat? I began eating immediately, and found that it tasted even better than it looked.

“I trust you met Nerida,” Edwin asked me.

I nodded in between bites.

“She is a most wise and knowledgeable woman. You will do well under her.”

“What does that mean?” I was instantly suspicious of the idea of being 'under' any woman.

“This is a whole new world for you, Kaida. I thought it best that you have someone to show you around it when I am tied up in tiresome affairs of state.”

I laid my fork down and prepared to pitch a fit. “You got me a nanny?”

“Hardly Kaida,” he chuckled. “Think of her as a governess if you must think of her as anything other than a friend.”

“Is she a friend I am expected to obey?” Something in Nerida's demeanor earlier had strongly implied that she expected me to do as I was told.

“Well I wouldn't expect you to obey anyone at present,” he smiled, “ Though in due course, I am sure I will command your obedience,” he winked at me.

“Oh you're sure, are you?” He was too light hearted to be truly angry at, so I resumed eating once more as we bantered back and forth.

“Oh yes, quite sure,” he replied with a charming grin.

I shook my head. He had no idea what he was talking about. He might be handsome and powerful and charming, but he knew nothing about commanding a lady. He had no concept of discipline, he'd not so much as raised a hand to me even when I engaged in the most outrageous behavior I could think of. I would run amok in this place, I realized with quiet glee.

I was arrogant indeed during those first days in Elysia – and as Matron had predicted, it was my arrogance that was eventually my downfall.

Chapter Four

It was clear to me immediately that Edwin was a vastly different man from Master. Master brooked no dissent and kept those who served him on very short leashes indeed. Though I had often received softer, more preferential treatment in my later years with him, he had also turned my rear lava-red on more than one occasion as a result of relatively small infractions when I was first in his service. It was the knowledge that he would not hesitate to whip me to tears if I needed it that had kept me in line with him, and which, if I was honest with myself, had spurred a great deal of my adoration for him. After a time, I had come to need Master's correction, to rely on it as a sign that he still cared about me.

The Lord Edwin's approach to discipline was nothing like Master's. He did not bother with pretenses of sternness, nor did he trouble himself over small infractions or displays of temper. He merely went about his business and allowed miscreants to play out their own ropes and bind themselves up prettily for him until such time as he deigned to deal with them.

I knew none of this in my first days in Elysia. I thought Master had landed me with a soft headed fool, and I set about taking advantage of Edwin as much as possible. I noted that he did not push the matter of our mating, and I certainly made no attempt to raise the subject. I would not rush to yield my body to him, if he wanted me, he would have to prove that he was worthy of me.

As had been the case in Hades, I was still a creature out of place in Elysia. The difference was that instead of being a weakling angel among dragons as I had been in Hades, in Elysia, I was a dragon among angels, a fact I soon came to enjoy immensely. There was nothing more amusing than breathing gently on a flower, or a small wooden ornament and making it burst into flame. I performed that trick several times to the consternation of the guards, Sir Tinsel, the guard who had evidently been commanded to shadow me like a puppy especially did not enjoy the trick at all.

"Please Lady Kaida," he begged gruffly on one occasion. "You will have the place in ashes."

"Perhaps I will," I grinned wickedly.

"Nerida, I beg you," Sir Tinsel did not finish his sentence, but he clearly wished for Lady Nerida to correct me.

"Kaida, please, do stop taunting the guards, there's a dear," Nerida said absent mindedly. She was kneeling in front of me, thoroughly engrossed in a prayer. Nerida was always praying, though for what I could not imagine. She was already in Elysia, what more could she possibly want?

I grinned behind her back and blew an ashy kiss at Sir Tinsel, whose face screwed up with frustration. Oh the things he would do to me if only he were allowed, his expression seemed to say.

I enjoyed all manner of pranks of that nature during my first days in Elysia. Most of them did not come to Edwin's attention save for one occasion when I crept into the kitchens slightly before dinner and scorched all the food just as it was leaving the kitchen. It took a quick run to make it back to the dining room to be seated in time to see the food arrive, but it was entirely worth the effort. There was nothing more priceless than the look of horror on the servant's faces as they uncovered dishes of foul smelling charred meats.

"My lord, I cannot imagine what has happened here," a young maid whimpered, looking

for all the world as if she were about to burst into tears.

“Do not trouble yourself my dear, I have some idea,” Edwin said dryly, looking over at the place where I sat smiling broadly.

“I will bring you another,” she promised, rushing away with tears in her eyes. I had some empathy for her, she had failed her master. I knew what that felt like and I pitied her for it, but my amusement at the prank far outweighed any guilt I had concerning it.

“Kaida my dear, if you wish to trouble yourself with antics of this kind, that is one thing. But I will not permit you to torture those who serve me well.” Edwin's tone was still calm, but I sensed an edge to it that I had not heard in his voice before. Was I finally pushing him too far? What would he do if I did? The prospect of angering him set a fizz of excitement in my belly.

My giggle of unrestrained glee saw him raising one fine brow. “So you enjoy this do you, little dragon?”

“You went to Hades for a mate, what did you expect?” I replied tartly and thoroughly unrepentantly.

Edwin turned his head to the side and looked at me for a long moment, then he pushed back his chair and stood up. I squirmed in my chair as he approached me, looming over me like a well dressed wall. He was almost always wearing a finely tailored dark suit. If I did not know better, I would have thought that he moonlighted as an accountant in the Overworld.

“I think it is time we had a little chat about those expectations you mentioned,” he said as he looked down at me with just a ghost of a smile on his face.

“Chat away,” I said smugly.

“Oh, I think you'd prefer it if we conducted this little talk in the privacy of your rooms,” he warned me.

The smile on my face did not lose any of its intensity as he leaned down and offered me his hand. I accepted it graciously, secretly thrilled that he was finally paying me the sort of attention I thought I deserved. He said little along the way, but the look in his piercing blue eyes had changed from his usual easy going expression to a far more intense one that made me hopeful indeed.

“After you,” he said politely, ushering me into my rooms. I entered obediently and waited expectantly for his next command. When I was safely ensconced in the privacy of my chambers Edwin stood in front of the door, his suited legs spread slightly apart, his hands in his pockets as he addressed me.

“So, my dear, it would appear you have a penchant for trouble making. What should I do about that?”

The question was rhetorical, so I merely shrugged. I hoped he was not planning to bore me to death with words.

“Of course, it is possible that it is not trouble making you enjoy so much as the consequences of trouble making. Is that the case?” His voice grew soft as he approached me with those heavenly blue eyes locked on mine seeming to read my very thoughts.

“Is there a part of you that cannot rest until you have cried out in pain, little dragon?” he murmured, tracing the line of my jaw with his fingertip.

I shivered under his touch, but again, made no reply.

“I wonder if you know what it is you are asking for precisely,” he pondered aloud. “Are you really prepared to taunt me until I chastise you harshly?”

He walked around me now and I felt the hairs of the back of my neck stand up as I heard his footfalls behind me. The muscles in my bottom tensed as he leaned in close and whispered into my ear. “Just how bad will you be for me, little dragon?”

I made a soft whimpering sound, and heard him chuckle deeply. “I have heard the tales from Nerida, as you no doubt knew I would. Have you wondered when I might put a stop to your behavior? Have you wondered when you might go too far?”

He had completed his circuit and now stood before me once again, looking down at me with a hunger in his gaze. I saw how deeply he wanted me, how much he must have been restraining himself from laying his hands on me ever since he ushered me into that carriage. I felt power in his gaze, a power I could exploit for my own ends. If he could not master me, I would master him and all he surveyed. Perhaps that was Master's plan all along. Perhaps he wanted me to claim Elysia for the dragonkin.

“I have not wondered, it is more than obvious that you are accustomed to weak willed obedience from spineless little angels and that you are incapable of handling one as powerful as I.” The taunt was out of my mouth before I could contain it.

He laughed. “Spineless angels? Do you forget that are half angel yourself?”

I snorted with derision. “I have never been allowed to forget it. It is a curse that has nearly gotten me killed more than once, including on the day we met.”

“Aw,” he made that half mocking, half sympathetic sound as he smiled down at me. “Perhaps you will discover that it is the angel in you, not the dragon that gives you your strength.”

His words challenged everything I had ever thought about myself. Was he mad? The dragonkin were the most powerful creatures of the Underworld, angels were nothing compared to them. To prove it, I took a breath, allowed it to mix in the hot depths of my belly, then breathed a stream of licking fire directly at him. That would show him who was boss.

I expected him to yell and jump away in fear, but he merely smiled as my flame played across his face as harmless as a zephyr. My flame did not touch him, could not burn him.

“What... why...” Suddenly, it was I who was afraid as he shook his head and made a tutting sound. He should have been screaming in agony as his flesh bubbled from his bones, not standing there smirking.

“Poor little Kaida, let me put you out of your misery before you hurt yourself.” His voice was little more than a low purr as he leaned into my ear and closed his hand around my upper arm. “And for the record, little dragon, you went too far long ago, but unlike your past master, I do not concern myself with punishing every infraction as it occurs. When it suits me, I shall take you to task, and believe me, you will repent for all your sins most thoroughly indeed.”

The room cartwheeled about me as he spun me easily over his knee. He had propped his leg up on the frame of my bed, creating a muscular pivot across which I lay, kicking and squealing with sudden fear. What had happened to the charming, laid back gentleman who had barely raised an eyebrow when I hurled myself out of his carriage? I did not know, but it had been replaced with an avenging angel as hard as iron, whose open palm slammed down across my silk covered bottom with no mercy whatsoever.

I had been spanked soundly in the past, but nothing I'd experienced compared to what Edwin did to me in just a few minutes of chastisement. Each one of his slaps sent a shock through the tender skin of my bottom and deep into the flesh of my rump, and though he allowed my robe to stay down modestly covering me, it made no difference at all.

I began to howl from the very first slap, arching and bucking and swearing every word I knew. After the first volley of the most vile cursing I could conjure out of my memory and imagination, the spanking stopped suddenly. I hung already breathless over Edwin's knee, hoping that he was done with me.

"You are behaving like a spoiled little hatchling. I expect you to take your punishment with good grace," he said, his tone firm, but still somehow casual, as if he was entirely unaffected by my howls and squeals, as if this was nothing more than a small, but tiresome chore he had to undertake before bed time.

"It hurts!" I cried.

"Of course it hurts. But it is a pain you brought upon yourself. Every slap you feel is equivalent to the suffering you caused. If it hurts badly, it is only because you have hurt others badly."

"I didn't hurt anyone!" I wailed.

"Didn't you?" Edwin was patient as he explained the obvious to me. "How do you think you made the guards feel witnessing your attempts at petty arson? How do you think that poor maid felt when she unwittingly served a burned dinner to her lord? And how did you think you made me feel when you threw yourself out of that carriage? You have caused plenty of pain, little dragon, and now you must atone for it."

One particular sin stood out among the others. I could not let him start slapping me again until I had understood what he meant by it. "I caused you pain when I leaped out of the carriage?"

"Of course you did."

"I thought you didn't care."

"Well you thought wrong, didn't you?" Edwin replied, slapping my bottom soundly once more.

"This isn't fair!" I squealed in desperation, kicking my legs frantically.

"On the contrary, this is very fair indeed," Edwin said as he applied several more hard swats to the lower regions of my bottom, making my hips leap and squirm with every slap. I could do little but gasp and cry as he continued giving me the kind of spanking that made me wish that I was back over Master's lap, if only for the fact that it would not hurt so much, or so deeply.

"I can't take it," I eventually sobbed. "I'm sorry, so sorry."

As I said the words, a strange thing happened. Though Edwin's palm was still landing against my bottom with a regular tattoo, the swats suddenly hurt much, much less than they did before. I twisted my tear stained face around to peer up at Edwin in confusion, and my expression made him burst into laughter.

"Discovered the power of genuine contrition, have we?" he chuckled, leaning down to plant a kiss on my forehead.

My bottom stung and throbbed, but I felt much lighter and happier now. It was as if a weight had been lifted off my heart as my new master lifted me up off his knee and drew me into a warm embrace.

"I am sorry," I repeated myself. It seemed strange that I should have been so awful to Edwin and so set against coming to Elysia with him. The lightness of spirit I now felt was beautiful, and the feeling of being held in Edwin's arms was like none I had experienced before. Without saying a word, I felt his love surrounding me, protecting me even from myself.

"I know Kaida," he said with a warm smile as he drew me over to lay down on the bed. I

cuddled up with him and allowed him to gently stroke my hair as I played with the buttons on the shirt and avoided his gaze. I felt thoroughly ashamed of how naughty I had been.

"You're forgiven," he said quietly.

"I am sorry, but this has all been so hard," I admitted. "I was never told I would be given away. I thought I would be with Master forever."

"You were given away - like a puppy," Edwin agreed. "But puppies are usually happy in their new homes, and I promised you you would be happy, did I not?"

I giggled a little. "I am not a puppy!"

"Of course not. You're a beautiful strong creature who was made to be with a mate who could handle her the way she needed to be handled."

I blushed as my bottom throbbed and reminded me of his 'handling.' Now that I had forgotten about the all consuming mission of disobeying him and causing chaos, there was room for other questions to come into my mind. The first of those was the question I had asked in the carriage, the question that had not been answered to my satisfaction.

"Why did you choose me? You have the pick of all in your lands. Why put yourself through the trouble of chasing some hellion from Hades?"

Edwin paused a moment before he replied. "Let's say that I enjoyed the idea of bringing our lost sheep into the fold."

He was referring to my mixed blood again. Was there anything that didn't inevitably come down to the strangeness of me simply existing in my own skin?

Edwin must have known by the way my face fell that his answer had not pleased me.

"What is wrong, little dragon?"

"So it's all because I'm this half blood freak – again. If I'd been born one or the other nobody would give a tinker's toss about me, would they?"

"Given your temperament, I am sure you would have risen through the ranks of either of our lands regardless of your blood," Edwin said diplomatically. "And had you been horrid, I'm sure I would not have had to negotiate with Vladimir for so long before he agreed to let you go."

I rolled my eyes. So they had haggled over me, had they? How wildly romantic. "How many goats did he ask for?"

Edwin smiled. "He wanted to be sure you would be treated well. He had a great fondness for you."

The reminder of how much Master Vladimir had cared for me knocked me off my sarcastic high horse rather quickly. "I know," I said in a soft voice tinged with sadness. Would I ever see him again?

Reaching down, Edwin tilted my chin up so that I had to look into his eyes. "I am not insulted if you miss him, Kaida. I owe him a great debt. He protected you, had you raised in safety, and when it was time, he let you go."

"How did you know I even existed?" Edwin was dodging my questions quite slyly, but I would not let the issue rest until I knew the truth – all of it. I gazed into his eyes just as determinedly as he had gazed into mine and saw him smile ruefully.

"Very well, I suppose the story may as well be told now. I am surprised Vladimir did not teach you it himself. Do you know who your parents were?"

I shook my head. "I was raised in a nursery with the other hatchlings."

Edwin nodded. "I suspected as much, the dragonkin approach to mating and childbearing is so different from our own, I doubt any of those in your nursery knew their parents any more than you did."

I nodded in agreement, but kept quiet as he spoke. "My father and your father were comrades. Your father had a reputation for rebellion, and when he mated with your mother, it was not taken kindly. Sadly, he was killed shortly after it became apparent that you were on the way. Your mother returned to her homelands, and according to tradition she left you to be hatched in Vladimir's nurseries."

Edwin paused in the telling of the tale to let me take it in. It was strange to finally hear the story of how I came to be what I was, but it was odd too. In Hades, most common hatchlings were not raised by their parents, they were raised by matrons in nurseries and sent out to be trained under masters when they were old enough. Our upbringings made us fiercely loyal to our masters as we knew no other family.

Seeing that I remained silent, Edwin drew a breath and continued with his tale. "Before he died, your father, feeling the paternal responsibility which is alien to the dragonkin and knowing that your mother would no doubt leave you in the nursery with the other hatchlings, asked my father to ensure the safety of his unborn child. After you were hatched, my father looked over you from afar for some time, and when I poked my young nose into his affairs, I could hardly fail to notice that the rowdy little miscreant he occasionally despaired of was growing into a gorgeous creature."

Just like that, the pieces finally fell into place. "So that's how you know Vasya. You've been watching me all this time? Why didn't I ever see you?" I was confused and a little bit scared to think that all my life there had been eyes on me, eyes I'd never known about.

Edwin stroked my hair and looked down at me with something too close to a pitying expression for my liking. "You never paid much attention to the officials that came and went, did you Kaida? You were too busy fighting with the other hatchlings and your matron, proving your worth to them in spite of your sweet pink eyes and missing wings."

I nodded as I recalled my early years. They had not been happy ones, I was been teased and bullied mercilessly for being so different. In the nursery I had learned the importance of asserting myself, of fighting for everything I got.

"I asked Vladimir for your hand some time ago," Edwin continued, "but he refused me at first. He thought me unable to handle your high spirits. Recently, he changed his mind."

"Why?"

"That I do not know," Edwin admitted. "I did not question my luck. I came to get you immediately and discovered you doing your level best to get yourself killed by Vasya."

The dry tone in his voice made me smile. "So you knew what you were getting then, when you came for me. You knew I was trouble."

Edwin grinned at me. "Oh yes, I was very much well aware. I conditioned my palm specially for your arrival."

I cast my gaze towards his crotch. "I bet you did."

"That was not what I meant you little wretch," he laughed uproariously at my innuendo.

"So you have known me from afar for all these years, and I had not the faintest idea of who you were," I mused quietly.

"Quite so," Edwin agreed.

"And still I do not really know you. All I know is that you are a lazy disciplinarian." I grinned back up at him as I teased him, then yelped as he brought his hand down across my cheeks.

"Lazy, hmm? No, I simply do not have the time to whip you constantly."

"I am not so bad," I said, fluttering my eyelashes at him.

“You are when you take it into your head to be,” he replied. “But I hope, my dear, that you will not be so anxious to cause trouble, now that you know you have not been whisked off by a spineless stranger too timid to keep you in line.”

“Perhaps not,” I squirmed around so that my bottom was protected by the mattress beneath it. “Now I shall cause trouble for the sheer pleasure of entertaining my life long stalker.”

Edwin grinned and began tickling me in a most dastardly fashion until I flipped over to protect myself and received several sharp swats to my bottom.

“It is good to see you smile, Kaida. I did not like seeing you so upset,” he said when I had finished giggling.

“May I go back and visit Mas... Vladimir sometime?” I asked. It no longer felt right to refer to Master as Master.

To my surprise and joy, Edwin agreed to the request. “Undoubtedly so at some point in the future, but for the moment, I want you all for myself. I'll have to tame you properly after all, I can't have you going back to Vladimir as wild as you left him. I have to show that old dragon a thing or two.”

With that promise made, he gathered me up in his arms, and I contented myself by melting into him. It was true that I did not yet know him well, but already he was beginning to feel like home. There was just one matter left to settle.

“Are we to mate tonight?” I asked the question hopefully.

Edwin chuckled and kissed my nose. “You are not yet ready my sweet.”

“What do you mean I'm not ready? I'm more than old enough,” I protested.

“Oh I know you are old enough, but you are not yet ready,” he repeated his words, frustrating me.

“What do I need to do to be ready?”

“Keep learning,” was his cryptic reply.

Chapter Five

Edwin was a curiosity wrapped in an enigma wrapped in a smile. It was clear that he adored me and he treated me like a long lost treasure, but it left me in a state of some confusion as to how to be with him. I had known how to deal with Vladimir. He had been my master outright and he had expected nothing but obedience. Our relationship had been simple. In stark contrast, my relationship with Edwin was anything but simple.

It did not take long for me to develop a genuine affection for my new mate. He treated me well and his light spirited humor never failed to brighten my day. It was easy to see him as a confidante and friend. It was not so easy, in spite of the ease with which he had spanked me, to treat him as one I should obey, which was bad news for many reasons.

I found myself feeling rather rudderless, as if I had no master, and the result of that feeling was a strong urge to misbehave wildly. Perhaps if I had acted out in front of Edwin and allowed him to correct me it would not have been so bad, but I found myself hiding my misbehavior from him, not because I was afraid of what he would do to me, but because I didn't want to lose the warmth of his good humor.

The obvious thing to do would simply have been to behave myself, but the obvious thing to do is so rarely the easiest thing to do. I had become so used to creating havoc wherever I went in Hades that not to do so in Elysia was almost impossible. I tried being good, I really did, but I found myself growing irritable and grumpy after just a few days of being pleasant.

To make matters worse, I was growing bored. Nerida was a nice enough companion, but she spent every moment that she wasn't fussing over meaningless minutiae praying for silly things like Overworld peace and bonnets for baby squirrels. I also had a sense that she was really little more than a spy reporting back to Edwin when he could not be around. She was not the only barrier to having fun either, Sir Tinsel was also something of a thorn in my side. He clunked noisily about everywhere I went, making me feel like a rat in a tin cage.

I eventually decided that the only thing for it was to give both of them the slip whilst Edwin was busy during the day. That was harder than it seemed. Sir Tinsel was constantly posted outside the door of any room I was in, and Lady Nerida clung to me through the course of most days like sickly sweet honey.

Eventually, I was forced to climb out the window of my bath chamber. There was a fall of a story or so to a ledge below, too small a distance to bother me much, so I slid out the window, landed on the ledge lightly and continued on my way across the tops of the roofs of the many buildings that were built around Edwin's stately home.

It was my first time out and about in Elysia, and I found it quite refreshing and freeing. I was misbehaving for sure, and the simple act of being a little bit naughty made my spirits rise. After wandering hither and thither for a while, I ended up sitting atop a thatched roof near a large square of frolicking souls who were bashing about the place in a mindless sort of way, chattering happily and tossing flowers at one another on occasion. So this was heaven, I thought to myself, all very similar to hell, but with better lighting and fewer spiky bits.

For a long time, that was all I saw, the departed wandering to and fro doing their departed business with tinkling laughter and sweet scented flowers occasionally spontaneously growing where they had walked. Eventually, when I had almost become entirely bored with the entire scene and was contemplating setting a portion of the roof ablaze simply for something to do, something interesting happened. An organized group of the departed wearing rather spiffing blue

uniforms entered the square and began going around those who had been milling about aimlessly, apparently soliciting something from them.

It was their flowers they were taking, I realized, they were gathering bouquets from those who were caught in the square. Once the flowers had been taken, the group ran off holding the flowers aloft and chanting a dark, guttural sounding slogan that seemed out of place on that bright sunny day.

The event spurred my curiosity, so I slid down the roof and landed next to a sad looking departed woman. She was a pretty, shimmering being with a beautiful translucence to her skin that was quite lovely.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“We're not allowed the flowers,” she said mournfully, gazing at me with her celestial eyes.

“Why not?”

“Because we're not allowed the flowers.”

I thought her rather dim at that point. I repeated my question once more and she merely repeated her answer, so I tried another line of questioning.

“Who were those people who took the flowers?”

“The enforcers, they do the angels' bidding.” It was her turn to look at me as if I was mad. There I was, an angel in my own right and without the foggiest idea of what was going on.

A few more stilted questions and answers later, I was starting to get the idea of what was going on. The flowers were popular amongst the departed for the visions they imparted when rolled up and smoked. For some reason, the angels who ran Elysia did not approve of this past time and spared no resources in stamping out the practice.

Naturally I was deeply interested by this phenomenon. A few more inquiries resulted in information suggesting rather strongly that I might be able to find myself some of these flowers at the nearby meeting house.

This was a temptation far too strong to ignore, and I made my way quickly to the building that would probably have been a tavern had the patrons been alive, but because they were dead and terminally good, it instead featured no interesting recreational substances at all. Well, *almost* no interesting recreational substances at all, if my sources were correct.

The place looked thoroughly innocuous at first glance, just a few tables with departed souls sitting around them swapping battle stories. A lesser being might have left the place empty handed, but I had a nose for trouble and it took me only a moment to find those who were holding flowers. I noticed that my appearance seemed to cause some consternation in a darker corner of the place and I made my way there immediately.

I knew from personal experience that troublemakers congregate in darker corners, and the group of young looking departed I found sitting around the corner table had all the hallmarks of potential rule breakers. Their clothing was relatively disheveled, they grimaced at me with rebellious half smiles, and one of them wore a hat so low on his face that his eyes were completely covered, whilst his pants were so low that his undershorts were almost entirely exposed. Clothing, he was doing it wrong, but I wasn't there to act as a style consultant. I was there for flowers.

I sat down at their table unbidden and watched with glee as they shuffled away from me. “Got any floral?” I asked in my best shady tone.

At first they claimed that they had not, but when it became apparent that I wasn't going to leave them alone they rather decided that they might have some after all. Before we knew where

we were a pipe had been surreptitiously produced and was being passed around our little group.

When it was my turn, I used their quaint little lighting device on the business end of the pipe and drew a deep breath in. The smoke from the flowers was heavy and florid and had the effect of being instantly relaxing. I was soon giggling along with the departed as they stashed the pipe once more and we all sat back to enjoy the effects of Elysia's finest floral arrangements.

I found myself chattering a great deal to my new friends, who I discovered had all managed to get themselves killed in a war somewhere in the Overworld, done a brief stint in one of the more relaxed regions of Hades and were now trying their best to work out what to do with eternity in Elysia.

"It's, like, boring, you know?" Graden, the ringleader of the little group confided in me.

"Yeah. It's, like, boring," his comrade, Tank, agreed.

"Boring," said Julius, the smallest, quietest and most hat endowed of the group.

"Boring," I intoned along with them. Under the effects of the flowers, the scene around us was slightly more psychedelic, but I was distracted from the pretty colors in the light by my own hands, which were suddenly absolutely everywhere. They seemed so large and unwieldy. How could I have been going about my day dragging these large mitts about with me and not noticing?

"You're a bloody dragon, you should never be bored," Graden pointed out.

"Not much point being a dragon when you're locked in a tower most of the time with a guard and a nanny," I replied, seeing if putting my hand further away from my face might help make it more manageable. It did.

"Looks like we found Rapunzel boys," Tank giggled in a most effeminate fashion. He was a squat, bulky fellow who had managed to bring a plethora of acne scars into the afterlife, something of an achievement considering most of the departed were perfect, smooth, well dressed versions of what they might have been in the Overworld.

"On the contrary, it looks as if you've found my errant mate."

It was a voice none of us wanted to hear. To them it was the officious voice of an angel. To me it was a familiar voice. A familiar voice that was usually tinged with humor, but which at that point in time was tainted with rather unsettling anger.

"Edwin! Hello Edwin," I greeted my mate cheerfully. "How did you get here?"

Edwin scowled at me. "I was called by a guard who happened to spot a dragonkin skulking about places and people of ill-repute."

"Oh, it's really not that bad," I did my best to placate him, but my powers of persuasion were sorely lacking.

"Come here."

Edwin snapped his fingers officiously at me and pointed at the floor in front of him. I stared at his hands, noticing for the first time how long and finely formed they were.

"Kaida!" There was a definite tension in his voice, and I realized that though a significant amount of time had passed, I was still sitting in the same spot I had been sitting all along.

"Edwin!" I said, thoroughly pleased to see him all over again as I stood up and weaved my way over to him. His feet seemed to be inordinately large and I almost tripped over them as I endeavored to obey his order.

He sighed deeply as I stumbled and steadied me with his arm. "Come along Kaida, let's get you home."

"Okay guys, I have to go. Stay real," I cautioned my new friends.

"Go hard," Graden advised me.

“Rock on,” I returned the favor of advice.

“KAIDA!”

It was funny how much Edwin suddenly sounded like Vladimir used to, but the tremor that seemed to run through my very bones at the tone was significantly less fun. I realized through my flower filled haze that I was actually in trouble with Edwin. This was new. Even when he had spanked me for the first time, I had not gotten the sense that I was really in trouble with him.

“Edwinypants, what can I do you for?” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them, and they didn't seem to please him much at all.

“Come along.”

I came along as he wished me to, doing my best to stay quiet. I figured by staying quiet, I could perhaps minimize the amount of trouble I was in. The walk back home seemed like a very long one, and when I arrived, everyone looked at me with a remarkably uniform expression of disapproval. They looked so similar with their frowns and their thin lipped stares that I fancied they must have been practicing in mirrors or something. I found that idea immensely amusing, and caught a fit of the giggles, which made everyone else look much more annoyed than they already were. Edwin took me straight to my bath chamber, which I also thought odd, though I did not question his judgment.

“Nerida, run her a bath would you please, she is not going to feel well,” he said. Nerida obediently leaped into action, which was a significant improvement on all the standing around and wringing her hands she'd been doing since Edwin had brought me home.

“I feel fine!” I protested. “Fine, fine, fi....” My own words were cut off with a sudden wave of nausea that saw me diving for the floor and retching my innards out into a handy chamber pot.

“Fine, is it?” Edwin sounded slightly amused for the first time since he'd found me. “Are you enjoying the effects of the flowers now? Did you know they're poisonous to angels, hmm?”

I would loved to have responded, but my whole body seemed to be taken over by convulsions. It was a deeply unpleasant experience, one I was already promising myself I would never repeat.

“Here, drink this.” Nerida was crouching down next to me and waving some dark brew under my nose.

I drank it. I would have downed anything that might have a chance of making me feel better. It tasted odd and bitter and didn't seem to do anything of any use at all at first.

“Under the noses of half a dozen guardians you managed to find the one illicit substance in Elysia. You would find trouble anywhere, wouldn't you?” Edwin seated himself on the side of my bath and watched me retch dispassionately.

“I'm sorry,” I said tearfully. I had been wrong about the drink being ineffective. Within moments, the effect of the flowers appeared to have worn off, and fortunately so too had the urge to vomit everywhere. I still didn't feel very well though. I sat in a rather pitiful and disheveled state at Edwin's feet, feeling very sorry for myself indeed. It was fortunate that I felt sorry for myself, for it was obvious that nobody else felt the least bit sorry for me at all.

“Do you know what a panic you caused when Nerida found you gone?” Edwin lectured me with no regard for the tears in my eyes.

“I'm sorry, I was bored,” I explained lamely.

“If you're bored then find a way to pass the time that doesn't involve half killing yourself.”

It was all getting too much for me. Being spanked was one thing, but being lectured was quite another. His words were so cutting, his expectations so unreasonable. "I'm not an angel!" I yelled at him. "I can't be good! Don't you see!"

"Oh cut it out."

I was stopped short in my tirade as Edwin began one of his own.

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. Can't be good? Can't help doing silly destructive damaging things? Can't help constantly seeking negative attention? You can help all of that, Kaida, and you will."

I felt my lower lip tremble, but Edwin wasn't done yet. His eyes were like chips of ice as he laid down the law in no uncertain terms. "You're thoroughly spoiled. You like being in trouble. You like being spanked. But instead of asking for it you go about making other people's lives a misery in the hope you can manipulate your way into getting what you want. Well it won't fly Kaida, not here." He looked at me with a hard expression in his eyes. "You know what I'm going to do with you?"

I shook my head mutely.

"Nothing at all. You're not going to get attention for behaving this way Kaida. You're not going to get a thing."

With that said, Edwin stood up and left the room abruptly, leaving me gaping open mouthed after him. Nobody had ever spoken to me that way before. Nobody had ever called me out like that. Master Vladimir had known all too well that I enjoyed his corrective attentions, and in my time with him I had become used to misbehaving to get his attention and receive affection. I hadn't been lying when I told Edwin I didn't know how to be good, I truly had never tried it before with any measure of success. My life up to that point had been one constant round of misdeed and correction, misdeed and correction.

Though the tears in my eyes remained, I wiped my eyes on the back of my sleeve and determined that I would not cry. Edwin disliked me now, and I did not blame him. If his story were to be believed, he had watched over me my whole life and now he sought to provide me with the best Elysia had to offer. And what did I do? I threw it all in his face.

"Are you alright, Lady Kaida?" Nerida asked nervously, her eyes darting from me to the door whence Edwin had stormed.

"Yes. I think I'll take my bath now," I said politely.

She left me to it, and I took my bath. Whilst I did so, I gave myself a very stern talking to. It hurt to see Edwin's face screwed up with disappointment in me. I didn't want that from him. I wanted his smiles and his warmth. It was time I stopped behaving like the wretched little hatchling with no wings and started embracing my life for what it was.

When I emerged from my bath, I spent some time picking out clothes with care. Discarding my usual robes, I looked about for something different, something that would perhaps show Edwin how serious I was about making amends. In a set of drawers, I found a pair of dark pants, not unlike the ones he often wore, but tailored with a flowing feminine cut that I rather fancied. I'd never worn pants before, but I discovered that they felt good. I matched the pants with a crisp white blouse trimmed with a high lace collar and flowing lace sleeves that made it look a little bit as if I had wings after all, and set out to find Edwin.

A series of inquiries with various guards later, I found him on one of the balconies, gripping the railing and staring out over Elysia with a fraught expression on his face. He looked tired, and worried, I realized guiltily. I was probably the source of both those conditions.

"Edwin?"

He looked over his shoulder, then turned towards me. I felt nervous for a moment as his eyes ran critically over me.

"A new look, Kaida?"

"A new leaf," I said timidly. I did not know how to make amends this way. In the past all my apologies had been wrenched out of me under the duress of pain. This was a new experience, and it was gut wrenchingly difficult. "I am sorry Edwin. I've been awful, I've been acting as if I were still a hatchling with Master. I don't want to be that way anymore. Not with you."

Edwin sighed and ran a hand through his blonde hair. "It is difficult Kaida. I did not realize how hard it would be for you coming here. You were little more than a slave in Hades, constantly in a rebellion to a Master who enjoyed it. Here that is not the case."

"I know, but I... I want to serve you," I said humbly, lowering my eyes. Giving myself like this without the threat of punishment was strange and powerful. "I want to serve you. I don't want to displease you anymore." There was a tremor in my voice as I spoke, and it was impossible to keep my hands from shaking. I felt so utterly vulnerable in a way I never had done before. In my rebellion I had been safe and secure. If anyone rejected me, it was because they couldn't handle me. Now I was offering myself to Edwin, and if he rejected me, it would be because he did not want me. "I'm not very good at it, but I will try, I promise."

"Oh Kaida," Edwin's voice was soft as he reached for me. "My poor little dragon."

He drew me against his chest and I burst into the tears I'd needed to cry my entire life. "I'm sorry, I'm awful," I sobbed.

"You are not awful. You are a high spirited little wench who has managed as best she could. But things are different now Kaida. You need not rebel for my love."

"I know," I whimpered, nuzzling his chest.

He held me for a long time and I treasured every moment of it. I had spent so long not knowing what I was missing in my life. But one fear remained.

"Edwin?"

"Yes my dear?" He smiled down at me and brushed the silver streaks of hair off my face.

"What if I fail?"

His smile grew warmer as he looked into my troubled eyes. "When you fail, my dear, I will correct you."

I nodded and put my head back against his chest. "Edwin?"

I heard the rumble of his laugh through his chest. "Yes?"

"What if I like the correction sometimes?" I tensed in his arms, knowing that he did not want me to crave 'negative attention' as he called it.

"Hmmm," he pretended to ponder the question. "I suppose I could make sure my little dragon is well disciplined on a regular basis so she does not feel the need to act out for my attention."

I giggled against his chest. "Really?"

He slid one hand down to cup the curve of my behind. "Really."

I enjoyed the feeling for a moment before I spoke again. "Edwin?"

He patted my bottom warningly. "Yes, Kaida?"

I looked up at him with a wicked little grin on my face. "Now have I learned enough to mate?"

Edwin's answer was a throaty low growl that sent thrills of excitement through me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. "Oh I think so."

He swept me up in his arms and carried me through to his chambers, chambers I had not

been allowed to set foot in, much less sleep in. I realized then that it had not been I who had been waiting for Edwin to prove himself worthy of me, but it had been Edwin who had waited patiently for me to offer my willing submission.

Finally, that which I had thought impossible amongst the fires of Hades had taken place, I had vowed to obey the angel who claimed me. To my delight, the wages of obedience were far more pleasurable than the wages of sin.

I forgot about my rebellion and willingly opened my body to him and with vows of devotion, he merged his essence with mine, bonding us for all time with the act of love.

The dragon roared as the angel surged within me, and my cries echoed far across Elysia as I wrapped myself about him. Over and over he took me, teasing me until I begged for release, then rewarding me with transcendent pleasures that had only been hinted at in my earlier sensual experiences.

The long day waned into a star laden night and I learned that in his love my angel demanded obedience from every part of my mind, body and soul. In him I had found my savior, in him I was redeemed. In him I became blameless and free.

When we were both entirely sated, I lay cradled in his embrace and closed my eyes to the sparkling heavens with no doubt that the fierce little dragon had finally found peace with the angel who'd always loved her from afar.