

Changeling Press

SELENA ILLYRIA



# **Dragon Kin: Resistance**

## **Selena Illyria**

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## **Dragon Kin: Resistance**

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**He's returned, determined to break down every wall she has. But will she let him?**

**It's been two weeks since Katrina last saw Braydon. She's beginning to have her doubts about their relationship. Braydon refuses to let Katrina's insecurities keep them apart. No matter what it takes, what walls he has to break down and what excuses she makes, he's going to prove that they belong together.**

**Dedication: To Vicki, Cyn, Silvia and Tara.**

## Chapter One

Braydon flipped open his cell phone and checked the bars. No signal. With a sigh, he closed it and looked around. Trees, shrubs, rocks and a dirt road surrounded him. The sky above looked like a cauldron of steel grey, black with patches of white. Humidity weighed heavy on the air, pressing against his body, and causing his shirt to stick to his skin. No matter how many times he wiped his brow, the sweat returned and streaked down his face in thick droplets.

"Looking for a cell signal, sonny? You won't find it here. Wards fuck up the reception." A small gnome with only one tooth meandered out of a dilapidated wooden shack standing a few feet away. The structure looked like it was held together by spit, gum, string and a lot of swearing. Braydon shook his head, his attention on the shorter ragged man in torn brown coveralls and a stained white shirt. He carried a spittoon which made Braydon's stomach roil at the sloshing sound coming from inside. A strong breeze picked up. He tried not to grimace as the strong odor of tobacco and herbs wafted toward him.

Swallowing, pushing down the bile rising, he said, "I need a letter sent and a fast messenger to take it. Any of your men up to the task?" He didn't see anyone else, but that didn't mean there wasn't someone lurking around.

"How fast you want it?" the gnome asked. He made a snorting sound before spitting a large wad of black viscous fluid into the urn.

Braydon tried not to retch. He'd seen a lot of things in his lifetime but watching someone spit whatever it was the man had discharged still made him queasy. Clearing his throat, he managed to say through clenched teeth, "I need a letter taken to Utopia Bay, as quick as wings can carry your messenger. I'm willing to pay ten dragon eye rubies for it. No more."

The man's eyes widened. Hunger caused his dull brown eyes to become dark and luminous. He grinned, showing off a lot of gums and that one tooth again. Braydon swallowed. *Is this going to turn into a scene from Deliverance? I refuse to squeal like a pig.* He crossed his arms over his chest but relaxed his body, readying himself for battle.

"If you want one of my boys to fly fast enough, you have to make it twenty dragon eyes. Utopia Bay is a looooong way from here. And you're asking them to go through treacherous territory. Last I checked, we had an uneasy peace with those Werewolf packs that roam the fringes near there. One of my boys disappears, I'm gonna have to replace him." He peered at Braydon, eyes glittering with lust, but his face was slack. It was as if he was at war within himself on how to proceed with such a possible fat payday.

"The wolves haven't been an issue in years," Braydon pointed out. So far he didn't sense anything dangerous from the man other than the teeth and the horrible stench from the spittoon.

The gnome shrugged. "That don't mean they won't become one. 'Sides, what if one of my boys gets pinched and changed? They're not like you pretty Elf boys. They're small, defenseless. They aren't warriors."

*You don't mention they can grow in size.* Braydon sighed. He didn't want to spend all day haggling with the man. "Fifteen dragon eyes and not a ruby more. You have the letter there by tomorrow morning, and I may come back and give you a bonus." He extracted the letter to Katrina from his pocket and held it out to the gnome, hating that the man's grubby paws would be touching anything going to Katrina.

The gnome smiled. "Deal. I'll get one of my fastest men on it." He snapped his finger and a green blur darted out from the bushes. It darted all around the gnome before taking the envelope and flying off down the way Braydon had come.

Braydon dug into his pocket and opened up a small satchel. He counted out fifteen dragon eye rubies, adding an extra one for expedited service, gave the gnome his payment and headed back to his car. As he slammed the door shut behind him, he prayed Katrina would get the letter letting her know he was all right. So far none of the

messengers he'd sent out had returned to him and that worried him. *Maybe the Werewolves really are acting up.*

He started up the vehicle and took off. Returning home hadn't been the quick trip he'd thought it would be. His parents had been thrilled to see him and to have the deed to the land which had saved their leadership positions, but a new crisis had reared its ugly head. His brother Finan had disappeared with no word. It was normal for his brother to take off but not without leaving word on how to reach him. Braydon ran a hand over his face. It had been two weeks since he'd left the tree house palace, and he'd gotten very little sleep during that time.

His nights were either filled with going in and out of bars and his brother's known hangouts, or trying to find a comfortable position to sleep in his car. He would have stayed at a hotel or inn but didn't want to chance the possibility of getting word about his brother and having to take off on short notice. At least he was close to the wheel and could drive after his sibling at a moment's notice.

To top things off, he was worried about what his absence was doing to his relationship with Katrina. No messengers had returned to him and -- due to the magical warding of Elven lands -- his cell phone and laptop were useless. There was no signal for them to latch onto. He hadn't spoken to Katrina since he'd left that Monday morning after their weekend together.

Braydon prayed that Katrina wouldn't think he was flaking out on her. His grip tightened on the wheel at the thought of Katrina erecting her walls between them. They'd made progress that weekend. It had started out sexual, but now he wanted her to make the next move and share information about herself and her life, and let him in without having to resort to sexual dominance. He'd enjoyed being in charge but wanted something more meaningful. "I'll deal with it when I get back."

His thoughts turned to Ulfric and the possibility that the Dragon Lord would try and make a move on Katrina in his absence. Despite the progress he'd made with Katrina, she and Ulfric had history, and it was clear that Ulfric had feelings for her. Braydon shook his head. *I won't let him come between us. If I have to fight for her, I will.*



A large, ornate gray building came up on the right side of the road, drawing his attention away from Katrina. He lifted an eyebrow. So far he'd seen only messenger stations, places to stay and eat and random shacks and cabins on his journey. This building had high Grecian columns holding up a tall pointed roof. Tall windows with big black shutters faced out onto the road. There wasn't a signpost as far as he could see.

He pulled up in front of the property and sent out feelers. Lust slammed into him hard, stealing his breath. He groaned as heat pooled in his lower belly. His cock thickened and pressed against his fly. Fire lapped through his veins as desire skittered across his skin, raising goose bumps in its wake. His need for sex doubled with each feeler making contact with the sexual energy.

He could sense several couples, possibly as many as thirty, inside having sex. The sexual energy emitting from this house brought to his mind the image of Katrina bent over his leather spanking bench, hands cuffed behind her back and blindfolded. Her legs were spread wide, exposing the damp folds of her pussy. Hunger to fuck her gnawed at his gut. The image was so clear, so real, he could smell her cream and perfume. Braydon reached to cradle his denim-covered erection. He squeezed the thick bulge, sending a thrill up his spine. The impression of sex from the house increased until the cabin of his car seemed filled with it. Every breath he took was like inhaling the scent of sex.

The yearning for Katrina increased. His cock pressed against his jeans with greater insistence until he was sure it would burst past the metal and fabric. Gulping in as much air as he could, he tried to calm down, to push the image away. That only made things worse.

The picture in his mind became clearer. The scents became heavier and more prevalent. Arousal flowed through his body in a cascade of sensations. Sweat dotted his forehead, upper lip and the back of his neck. Turning his head to look away from the house sent a shock of heat through him as his hair brushed against his nape. He gripped the steering wheel tightly as he tried to resist undoing his belt and fly and taking out his

cock. Every inch of his skin seemed alive and electrified with need. He wanted Katrina, craved her touch, her nails raking his back. Braydon wanted to hear her sighs, screams and moans in his ears.

He gritted his teeth. His cock pressed insistently against his fly, demanding out. His pants were growing tighter and more uncomfortable by the second. He shifted in his seat. A moan tore from his mouth when pleasure rippled through him as the smooth cotton of his shirt moved against his skin. Biting down on his bottom lip, he fought to keep the hunger at bay. His stomach tightened as the ache in his balls grew.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." He closed his eyes as sweat slipped down the sides of his face. His mind felt swathed in gauze, as if his thoughts were cotton candy. Delicate sticky froth crowded his thoughts. He struggled to remember why he was on the road, why he was away from Katrina.

A fantasy formed before his eyes. Katrina's hair spread out like a dark halo on his pillow, her brown eyes almost black with desire. A seductive smile played upon her lips. She arched her back. He could feel the soft scrape of her diamond-hard nipples against his chest. Shockwaves of heat washed through his body as his stomach clenched in desire.

Groaning, he ripped at his seatbelt, managing to undo the lock before tearing at his fly. He pulled down the tab and lifted his hips, shoving down his jeans and freeing his cock. Without hesitation or concern where he was or the fact he was stopped on the side of the road, he gripped his shaft and gave it a long stroke. He yanked up his shirt with his free hand and tugged on one of his nipple rings to add to his pleasure as the fantasy continued to unfold.

He felt the dig of Katrina's heels on the back of his thighs as he rode her hard, driving into her slick tight cunt, pushing them closer to bliss. Braydon thrust his hips upward as Katrina's groans echoed around the cabin, combining with his heavy breath. Sweat rolled down his back and neck. The car shook as he worked his hand up and down his thick rod. Braydon gritted his teeth as pleasure and pain combined to send electric tendrils through his body, pushing him closer to climax. Fire danced up and

down his spine. Hunger threaded through his veins. Pressure built up inside of him until he was sure he would burst from the stress.

"Katrina," he grunted as he stroked his cock faster with each thrust. He needed to come, needed to hear her climax with him. He fucked the image of Katrina faster and faster, matching his hand's speed with that of the daydream. He didn't know why he wasn't with her. All he knew was they both needed this. This single act would somehow fill the gap between them, bring them closer.

"Katrina, I need you," he groaned, the thrust of his hips accelerating. A tingle began in his toes and raced up his legs to roll around his balls and continue on. His balls pulled tight to his body as he was brought closer to the precipice. He tweaked his nipple one more time before the pressure inside of him burst, flooding his body with fire. On a roar, Braydon came, crying out Katrina's name. Every muscle and limb felt weightless as the afterglow set in. Settling against the seat, he let one arm drop to his side while he loosened his grip on his now flaccid cock. Warm fluid coated his hand and thighs. The image of Katrina wavered until it faded away, leaving Braydon feeling empty.

He hit the steering wheel and swore. "Shit. Shit. Shit. Someone is going to pay for this."

Braydon felt the tug of magic on his body. Its shimmering sensations slid along his skin like oil. The ease with which it had gripped him made him sick. Panic rose up as he wondered if his brother had been ensnared as easily as he had. Braydon quickly cleaned himself up, straightened his clothes and threw the door open. Cool air hit his face, dampening some more of the magic's effects but not by much. The thread of power continued to pulse around him, trying to catch him in its web again.

Anger welled up inside him. He latched onto the emotion and used it to push back the magic. Marching up to the house, he used his Elven senses to detect danger and found nothing except for the lust spell continuing to emanate from the house. He didn't doubt many a person had fallen in its grip.

He banged on the front doors, hoping he was making enough ruckus to disrupt whatever was going on. It took a few moments, but the paneled wood door swung open and a tiny slip of a Fairy stood before him, dressed in a sheer pink peignoir. Bright fuchsia curls were piled high on her head as large blue eyes gazed up at him in annoyance. "Yes?" she hissed. Her skin was a blush color. Long thin arms crossed over her chest and a tiny bare foot tapped in irritation. An air of lust and desire clung to her as the scent of sex wafted past her.

Braydon didn't underestimate her for a second. She might be small, but he knew her kind could knock a man twenty times her height down with a single flick of her finger. "I'm looking for someone." He dug into his back pocket and produced a small, miniature portrait of his brother and held it out to her. "He's a prince. His family is very worried and would be more than willing to pay a huge sum for his safe return."

The Fairy's eyes narrowed as she took in the picture. Calculation lit up the porcelain blue orbs. "Yes, he's here. Just a second." She turned away from him, and within seconds Finan was marched toward Braydon, a lust-drunk look on his face. His arms hung heavy at his sides as he was pushed toward his brother. It looked as if Finan needed help walking. Worry made Braydon drop the picture and rush toward his sibling, hoping and praying he was okay.

"What's happened to him? What's going on?" Braydon demanded.

"Nothing. Just had a session with Melody. She's really good with desire magic. He'll be fine in an hour or two. You mentioned payment?" The Fairy had shrunk in size and flitted before Braydon's face, obscuring Finan's features from him.

"Yes, yes, send your request to the palace. No more than twenty dragon tail opals, okay? Those don't grow on trees anymore." Braydon moved around the Fairy and wrapped an arm around Finan's waist.

"Actually, I was thinking of those lovely pink desire crystals. May I request those?" the Fairy asked sweetly.

"Yes, yes, but within reason. How's ten sound?" Braydon asked, annoyed that he had to haggle while trying to get his brother out of the house.

“Deal. You should expect a letter of official request from the Frission Bordello. Good doing business with you and him.”

Braydon dragged his brother out into the open air. The door slammed shut behind him.

Like a puppet who’d had his strings cut, Finan slid to the ground, dragging Braydon with him. Braydon struggled to get out of Finan’s grasp. He stood up and looked over the building. “Bordello? What the fuck were you doing in this place?”

A glance down at his brother showed the other Elf fast asleep. A soft snore floated up to Braydon, who grimaced. He was tempted to shake his brother awake but thought better of it. Instead, he scooped his sibling up in his arms and threw him over his shoulder. He carried him to the car and settled him into the passenger side before doing a U-turn and taking off the way he’d come. He hoped he hadn’t wasted a lot of time where Katrina was concerned.

## Chapter Two

Katrina groaned and slipped a hand between her legs. She could see Braydon so clearly. He was on top of her. His thick amethyst hair hung down, obscuring the light, but she could see his face. Sapphire blue eyes filled with lust and hunger as he drove into her, stretching her pussy.

"Mine," he growled, as he took her to heaven with each stroke. Pleasure rolled through her body with each push of his hips as his cock slid into her, rubbing against the sensitive walls of her vagina. She rubbed her clit, matching the pace of her dream lover's thrusts.

"Braydon," she moaned.

"I miss you, babe. Miss you so much." He peppered her face with kisses as he slowed the pace.

Threading her fingers through his hair, she brought his face closer to hers. "Miss you too."

He lowered his face to hers and kissed her. The contact was soft at first before turning possessive, a mash of teeth and tongue. She was so hungry for the touch of his mouth she didn't care about the pain. Working her clit faster she groaned and arched her back. The sensitive tips of her nipples brushed against his chest, setting off sparks inside of her. She pulled her face away. "Braydon, love me," she groaned.

"Always," he whispered, as he withdrew and plunged forward, fucking her faster and faster.

"Yes." Katrina met his thrusts with thrusts of her own. The fire inside her built up as her orgasm coiled tighter and tighter. She slid a hand from his head down to grip his shoulder. Her nails dug into the flesh. Katrina came on a scream as desire rushed through her body. Holding her dream of Braydon close, she grasped at every sensation

elicited from the fantasy until it faded, leaving her feeling empty and unsatisfied. The door to her room slammed open and Ulfric stood in the doorway. Squeaking in shock, she grabbed the blanket and pulled it over her nude body.

Ulfric looked around, green eyes wild, his hands scaled black claws. "What's going on? Are you okay? Katrina?" His nostrils flared and a bright red blush flushed his fair skin. "Oh, uh. Okay." He backed out of the room leaving her feeling embarrassed and alone.

She rolled over and buried her head in a pillow. "Braydon, where are you?" The urge to crawl under the covers on the bed filled her. Another day and no word. She'd gone from concerns for his safety to wondering if her fears had been correct and he'd found someone else while at court. Despite Brenton and Ulfric's assurances that wasn't the case, and both of them sending word to Braydon's parents on her behalf, she doubted she'd hear word back. She didn't want to think that after their weekend together she would have to rack him up as yet another person who'd abandoned her. The idea brought tears to her eyes as an ache started in her chest. She curled up in a little ball and muffled a sob. The idea of having to let go of the hope she'd had when he left hurt.

It was hard enough having him gone, but seeing the couples around the club added salt to the wound. Brenton and Sky didn't hide their affection for each other, not in the least. Witnessing their relationship only added to the yearning she felt to have Braydon with her. It wasn't only the sex she wanted. She missed his voice, his presence, him. It felt like something was missing in her life, something she hadn't realized she needed before, and now it was gone.

A knock at the door brought her out of her thoughts. She wanted to tell the person to go away but couldn't. Ulfric had taken up residence in her house soon after Braydon had left. He said he wanted to watch over her while her mate was out of town. At first she'd been happy for the company. Ulfric didn't get into town too often so to have one of the few people she actually liked around was a soothing balm to the sense of dread over Braydon's trip.

After a few days, Ulfric's residency had begun to wear on her, especially in the wake of Braydon's lack of communication. No matter what the excuse she was given, she couldn't help the insecurity which reared its ugly head and whispered horrible scenarios in which Braydon would return but not alone. Instead he brought a gorgeous Elven princess or some other beautiful creature she couldn't compete with. Those ideas gave way to the notion that Braydon had abandoned her. Having gotten what he wanted he had just up and disappeared.

The knock came again.

Sighing, she crawled out of bed, pulled on a robe and opened the door a crack. "Yes?"

"Made breakfast: strawberry pancakes, maple syrup, scrambled eggs, bacon and a chocolate mint smoothie. Open up. We need to talk." Ulfric nudged at the door and Katrina debated whether to stand aside and let him in. Her stomach made the decision for her by grumbling.

Pulling the robe closed at the neck, she stepped back. "Come on in."

The scents of breakfast wafted past her as he walked to a small sitting table she used for a desk. He sank his large frame down in a chair next to the table and looked at her, expectation in his eyes.

"Fine." She went and sat down, pulling the plate of pancakes toward her.

"First, I'm sorry about barging in. I thought you were in danger. I heard you scream and, well..." The blush returned, this time a deeper shade of red. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Anyway, we have to talk about Braydon. I know you don't want to discuss it. You're tired of all of us telling you what to think and how to act. You aren't going to ask our advice -- and that's fine -- but we can see how his absence is affecting you. I have to tell you, holding your emotions close to your vest isn't helping anyone, especially you. It's okay to tell us. We won't judge you or leave you."

Katrina opened her mouth to say something, anything. She wasn't sure what could be said about her predicament. Ulfric's concern didn't annoy her like it would have in the past. In fact, she was touched by it.



"I'm not sure what to say," she started out. "I feel --" She paused to search for the words to describe how she felt.

"It's like my world moved on its axis. I let Braydon in and it felt good." Katrina cut a wedge of her pancakes with her fork before spearing the stack. She put the food in her mouth and chewed, watching Ulfric's face for any indication that her words had some sort of impact. She swallowed and took a sip of her smoothie. "Now I'm struggling," she admitted. "It's hard not slipping back into Doubting Thomas mode, thinking maybe he's abandoned me, maybe he's met someone else or it was all a game and now he's gone."

She shifted in her seat, turning fully toward him. "It's hard, trying to ignore the voices of doubt. When he left we'd just started something. He brought my walls down, and now I don't know what to do. It's easy to go back into that way of thinking. And seeing Brenton and Sky every day doesn't help." Katrina shook her head. "It feels like every couple out there is coming to Clash & Claw, and I have to sit there and watch them. It doesn't help that I haven't heard from Braydon. It's much easier being angry than to admit I'm scared and worried."

Just mentioning those emotions brought a sense of tightness to her chest. It became hard to breathe. She wanted to leave the room, to hide from Ulfric and not face her fears. Taking a deep breath she plunged forward. "It all boils down to wanting to be with Braydon and yet not sure of what to expect. I have no control here and I hate it." The tension in her body lessened but it still hummed inside of her.

"I don't know how to act here. I want to hear from Braydon, to know he's okay and he'll be back soon. Or maybe I want to know my fate with him, to know he's left me. I don't know." She scooped up her scrambled eggs and ate them.

"Braydon's too honorable to bind himself to someone and then abandon them," Ulfric pointed out.

"You don't know that. You've worked with him before, sure, but I haven't and besides you don't know if he's met someone or not," she countered. Katrina held up a hand. "I know it's doubting but we don't know what's going on. He hasn't contacted

me. I'm going to try not to read anything into his silence. Try being the operative word, but it's hard, what with old habits and all that. In the meantime, I can't hide here in my house nor can I avoid the club, no matter how many times Brenton tries to give me time off. I have to get to work." She continued to eat and Ulfric just sat there. The quiet stretched out between them. It wasn't uncomfortable nor did it feel heavy with things unsaid. They were two people having breakfast.

"Did you eat already?" Katrina finished off her pancakes and took a sip of the smoothie.

"Yup. Toast, scrambled eggs and a bit of bacon." Ulfric didn't look at her when he said that.

She rolled her eyes. "In other words, you're more concerned with me than you. I swear I should indenture myself into your service just to make sure you're eating properly. Let me finish this, and then I'll shower and make you some waffles. How's that?"

Ulfric snorted. "I think not. I can take care of myself, young one." He turned to peer at her, his eyes shining with good-humored warning.

She shook her head. "No, you can't. You'd forget to eat if I didn't remind you. I should call you three times a day to remind you. Make yourself useful." Katrina shoved the now empty plate at him. "Do you remember how to wash by hand? Or do I need to show you?"

"I can handle myself. Go on, get clean. You reek of dissatisfaction and sex," he teased.

"Ugh, stupid dragon senses. Go on, get. You coming to work with me?" She hoped he would say yes. Ulfric didn't get out and socialize much. Even when he did leave his mountain retreat, he still didn't do much except buy groceries.

"No. I thought I would wander the bookstore a bit, visit the garden district, see if I can find some new flowers to grow." He took her plate and stood up.

She blinked. "Are you going home so soon? Brenton is thrilled to have you here."

Katrina didn't mention that she would miss him. They hadn't spent a lot of time together since she'd left him, but the past weeks had shown her there was still affection between them even if he cared for her in a more romantic sense than she did him.

"No, no, but I will be moving my things to the inn on the edge of town. I've overstayed my welcome." He gave her a sad smile.

"Ulfric --"

He held up a hand. "Don't, please. I know you don't feel the same way I do, but staying here, if you have another dream like that one, it will only hurt me more." He hung his head.

"I hope one day you find your *souler*. You deserve to find your soul mate."

Pain chased across his face. His features scrunched up and he turned away. "I do too. I'll -- I'll get this washed up. Go take your shower."

Katrina hesitated. She didn't want to leave him like this, but knew if she pushed the subject it would only hurt him more. Rather than continue their talk, she headed for the bathroom and shut the door behind her, praying that Braydon would return quickly, and that Ulfric would find some peace in this lifetime.

She turned on the shower and undressed. Rather than wait for the water to heat up, she opened the door and stepped under the spray, gasping at the downpour of ice water. Closing the door, she grabbed the body wash and started to get cleaned up. As the water heated up and sluiced over her, she felt herself begin to relax. Closing her eyes, she gave herself over to the morning ritual that helped her start the day. Thoughts of Braydon, worries about what the future might bring, any sorrow she felt for Ulfric slipped away as she allowed the heat of the water to relax her.

Once her shower was over, she felt clear-headed and ready for the day. Dressing in her usual corset and jeans combo, she pulled on a pair of thigh-high black lace-up boots and leather jacket before grabbing her purse. With one last glance around the living room area, kitchen and dining room, she headed out of the house. She hoped, by the end of the day, to hear something from Braydon.

## Chapter Three

Braydon pulled up to the front of the palace, feeling a bit better about having his brother safe and sound. He was concerned that during the drive back Finan remained asleep, and not even a slap to the back of the head or a bit of shaking helped. Worried that something was wrong, he didn't stop driving until he reached the palace. He didn't even stop to check at the messenger stations to see if there was anything for him. He got out of the car, went around to the other side, retrieved his brother and carried him into the palace.

His parents met him at the gates. "Not sure what's wrong with him. I'm thinking it's a spell of some type. Call the royal physicians."

King Parlan barked out orders while Queen Emer waved attendants over to help Braydon with his brother.

"Where did you find him?" Parlan asked.

"At an inn." Braydon didn't want to tell them the truth. He wasn't sure what was going on with his brother, but he wasn't about to tell his parents that Finan had been found at a bordello of all places. Finan had always been the responsible one, taking after their father. It made no sense for him to act this way now. He ran a hand over his face and stood in the Great Hall trying to understand the events of the day. All he knew was he was exhausted and missing Katrina and worried about Finan. A hand clapped him on the shoulder.

"Son, go to your room. Get some rest. Do you need anything?" his father asked, concern in his bright blue eyes.

*Yes, Katrina.* "A bed and some food would be good, oh, and a messenger. Is there any way to get cell service here?" He prayed that they'd made some sort of effort where

technology was concerned. He knew it had been two weeks, but he hoped they'd given thought to his suggestions to bring them into the modern era.

His father grinned. Hope bloomed in Braydon's chest.

"Yes! We've had this most amusing man come in and install Wi-Fi and a few other things. Your mother has become enamored with satellite television. She's found some wonderful cooking shows, and now I can see the Para-ball games without having to fly out. No need to leave your mother or our people. It's wonderful. We've been getting used to surfing the internet and such. Thank you for your suggestions. Your cell phone should work now."

So relieved, Braydon hugged his father. "Thank the goddess."

His father chuckled as he pulled back. "We're going to want to meet this woman who has you so worried."

Braydon grinned. "One day, Father. For now I want her all to myself."

Rather than continue talking to his parent, he rushed up the stairs and headed to his wing. Once inside his bedroom he shut and locked the door before taking a quick shower. After he dried off, he grabbed his cell phone among a pile of clothes and strode to his bed. He got in without dressing. He hit speed dial and prayed that Katrina was home and would take his calls.

"Hello?" Ulfric's voice rumbled over the speaker.

Ice cold dread traced a finger down his spine. He cleared his throat. "I need to speak to Katrina."

"She went to work." Ulfric's tone was neutral.

Braydon tried to rein in his temper. The slow burn of anger wove through his body. Clenching his jaw, he took a moment to calm himself down and not read anything into Ulfric answering Katrina's phone. He tried to rack it up to the Dragon Lord looking after her rather than trying to take what belonged to Braydon.

"I'll call there." Braydon's words came out through gritted teeth.

Ulfric chuckled. "Angry, Elf? I must say Katrina is a vision when she wakes up. Would make a man want to linger in bed, all day."

Braydon increased the grip on his phone until the casing began to creak. The nails of his free hand dug into his palm. He tried to keep himself from uttering something he knew could cost him. "I know. Thankfully, I'll get to see that for the rest of my life. You will only be able to dream about it."

Braydon was proud he hadn't resorted to accusing Ulfric of anything untoward. Although, thoughts and images of Ulfric spying on Katrina while she was sleeping wouldn't leave his head. They kept rolling over and over until he wanted to scream stop.

"But I haven't had to dream about that the past two weeks, now have I?" Ulfric jabbed.

The dig hurt. Braydon rubbed his chest as an ache bloomed there. "Don't start something you can't finish, dragon," Braydon growled, trying to get some of his pride back. "I'll be home soon and she won't need you."

Ulfric gave a bark of a laugh. The rough sound grated on Braydon's nerves. "You think so, Elf? You truly think she won't need me? I feel so sorry for you because your pretty brain cells aren't working. She *always* needs me."

Braydon ignored the comment. "What the fuck are you talking about? She hasn't needed you for years."

A creak of leather whispered through the phone. "Who do you think set her up in her life in Utopia Bay once she was free? Who do you think gave her the house and helped her get her job? She had no references. She had no allies when she arrived. I helped her. I put in a good word with Brenton. I helped her build a life."

"But she doesn't need you now. If you demand payment for what you've given her, she'll hate you," Braydon pointed out. He doubted the Dragon Lord would call in his chips now but the possible threat made him uneasy.

"I would never ask for repayment, but I'm making you understand I will always be a part of her life." The leather creaked again.

Braydon could imagine the smug look on Ulfric's face.

"That may be, but she chose me. I'm her bond-mate." Braydon felt a sense of satisfaction at being able to point that out.

"On your side. You forget she needs to say the words, bind herself to you too."

Braydon's stomach dropped. Before he left, he hadn't mentioned the words needed to be returned. He hadn't thought there would be another suitor.

"Remember, Braydon, you may have brought down her walls, but you have yet to win her heart, and that she'll fight tooth and claw to keep. Good bye, Elf." The phone line went dead.

Braydon growled and threw the phone down. He wanted to get back to Katrina as soon as possible. There was no way he would let Ulfric take what he'd worked so hard to get regardless of their past relationship. He got up and began to pile his things on the bed. All he could think of was getting back to Katrina and defending what he'd started.

A knock on the door brought him out of his mad dash to get packed quickly. "Come in," he called out as he threw some shirts and pants into a suitcase.

His mother entered the room. Worry creased her delicate features. "Braydon, we need to talk to you about your brother. He's not waking up. We need help. Our healers don't know what to do. And we don't have the means here to help him. I've never seen anything like this. Can you bring him with you to Utopia Bay? We understand Ulfric is there. Perhaps he can help us?"

The hope in his mother's eyes broke him. As much as he didn't want to ask a favor of Ulfric, he couldn't deny his mother. "I'll take him to Utopia Bay. Will you and Father be coming with me?"

She shook her head. "We can't leave so soon after we've got our land back. There are still people who protest our rule and will look for any excuse to oust us from power. We will join you when we can. I know you will take care of your brother. I look forward to meeting your Katrina." She gave him a small smile.

Braydon went to her and enveloped her in a hug. "You'll love her, Mother. I swear you will. And of course I'll take care of Finan."

Queen Emer stepped out of his embrace. "Thank you for coming back. I know you had to leave behind your bond-mate for us. We appreciate your sacrifice. I know it will all work out." She gave his arms a squeeze before stepping away from him, turning and leaving the room.

He wasn't sure how she knew there was trouble but his mother had always been right. Braydon prayed that she was right this time. This time he dialed her work number. Katrina never carried her cell phone on the floor with her unless it was an emergency.

"Clash & Claw, how may I help you?" Brenton asked.

Confused, Braydon took a moment to figure out what he wanted to say.

"How may I help you?" Bren repeated slower this time.

Braydon shook his head. "Sorry, Bren, it's Braydon. Is Katrina there?"

"Finally. Where the hell have you been? Rina's been worried sick."

Braydon's shoulders slumped. *My messengers didn't make it.* He sighed. "I tried to send word. Can I speak to her?"

He heard the sound of chair wheels rolling back and then footsteps. "Sure, if she wants to talk to you." Laughter and talking filtered through the receiver.

"Are you having a party? It's what, ten in the morning?" Braydon didn't think they'd open the club so early.

"It's the Waterman party. You were supposed to be back by now and doing security detail." Bren's tone was neutral.

Heat tinged Braydon's cheeks. "Fuck. Decker's probably livid. He hates working soirees. I had a family emergency I couldn't get out of. None of my messengers reached you?"

"Not a one but then again, from what I hear the Werewolves are making a stir on the outskirts. If anyone is coming into town then they may have met with some trouble. How many did you send?"

Katrina's voice filtered through the speaker. Braydon latched onto the sound, soaking up the husky tone he'd been longing to hear for the past two weeks.



"About fourteen or fifteen." Braydon strained to listen to what she had to say.

"Crap. I'll call around the local infirmaries and hospitals. See if I can find out anything dealing with Werewolf related injuries. Give me a list of the species and genders of who you sent out, and I'll tell you if they made it in or not. Knowing the wolves they may have kept them."

Katrina's voice grew louder and then the sound became muffled. Braydon wished that he were there in person. A phone and the distance didn't help ease the worry that he'd lost her. Ulfric's words rolled around in his head. Jealousy started a hot burn in his stomach and seared his heart. He swallowed and waited for someone to tell him what was going on.

"Okay," he heard Katrina say.

"Bray? I'll check on those messengers for you. Here's Katrina." The line went silent.

He tensed, waiting for the ax to fall. *At least she decided to talk to me.*

"Hello?" Katrina asked. In that single word he heard a hundred emotions. The most prevalent was caution. Guilt ate at him.

"Babe, I'm sorry I haven't been in contact. I did send messengers but they haven't reached you. Brenton thinks that the problems with the Werewolves have kept them from reaching you. I'm going to be home soon. I have to bring my brother with me, but I'll see you. I needed to check in with you. See how you are, and let you know how horrible I feel that my messages haven't gotten through." He prayed that this would be enough to keep her from dumping him.

"Your cell phone or laptop doesn't work? You brought those with you." This time she sounded careful. Neutral.

"Until recently, my parents didn't have wireless and proper cell service, and the places I had to go to look for Fin didn't give me enough bars to call, or they didn't have Wi-Fi." Braydon waited for response.

"How did you keep in contact with Ulfric when he hired you to take the gem from me?" This time her voice sounded softer. It gave him hope.

"Ulfric came to court or sent messengers to keep in contact with me until I made my way to Utopia Bay, where he gave me a cell phone in order to give me orders and to check on my progress." He hated that Ulfric had been brought into the conversation. Braydon could feel her trying to find fault with him. He hated it but understood it. She was trying to keep herself from getting hurt; building walls where there needn't be any.

"Katrina, stop it. Stop trying to put crap in between us. I couldn't communicate with you. I accept that responsibility, but I'm not going to let you use any excuse to keep me away. As soon as I get my brother settled, I'm coming by your place and I expect you to be there. If you're not, I'll check the club. I won't stop looking for you until I find you. And once I do, you better be ready because every second I have to spending looking is one more second I add to your punishment. Understand, love?" The seconds ticked by. Braydon reached along their connection to find she was bristling.

"Punish me?" she growled. "Punish. Me. How dare you? You've been gone for two weeks and I'm the one that gets spanked?"

Warmth flushed his body as he remembered the last time she'd been spanked by him. Heat spread through his groin. His cock thickened. "I wasn't talking about spanking but since you brought it up --" He reached down to palm his growing erection, stroking the rough denim material against his cock. Sparks of pleasure slid up and down his spine. He bit back a moan as desire wrapped around his body. Ribbons of need to be with Katrina encircled his cock as he increased the pace of his hand.

"Don't. Don't turn this sexual. And stop whatever it is you're doing." She coughed and cleared her throat.

"Feeling the heat, babe?" he teased. Braydon pulled back on their connection but didn't shut it down.

"Stop making this about sex," she demanded.

He fell silent. The emotions he was getting from the thread that bound them together were chaotic. A complete jumble of mixed feelings that made his heart ache and his thoughts confused.

“Braydon...” She blew out a breath. He could almost feel the humid air brush against his skin. “I’m trying here. I’m trying not to cry.”

Sadness hit him square in the chest, making his heart skip a beat. He sucked in a breath as the pain spread.

“I was really scared. I thought --” She paused and then started again. “I thought something had happened to you, that you’d found someone else.” She sniffled.

Braydon closed his eyes, absorbing her pain into him, wishing he could hold her. “Never, babe. Never. I know those are just words but I can’t find anyone else. I’ve bound myself to you. There can be no one else.”

“But how do you know you haven’t made a mistake? That if some beautiful, Elven woman comes along and she strikes your fancy --”

Braydon growled. “Don’t. Don’t you dare allow your insecurities to dictate how you react. When I get back there I’m going to show you how much I’ve missed you.”

“But, Braydon, you don’t love me. You can’t.” She said the words in a rush before the line went dead.

Braydon was left listening to silence, stunned.

## Chapter Four

Katrina's thumb refused to move from the "end" button. Tears were in her eyes as she struggled to breathe. She wasn't sure what being bound to him meant, but she knew one thing, he couldn't possibly love her enough or even care enough to make a commitment like that to her. She clenched her jaw and stamped her foot, feeling stupid. *Why did I blurt that out?* she wondered.

A gentle knock on the door pulled her out of her miserable reverie. "Come in." She sucked in a breath and hoped it was something to do with the club, not Bren or Ulfric wanting to talk. Katrina didn't think she could talk anymore.

The door swung open and Bren strode in, shutting the door with a firm click behind him. "So?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. So? That was it? That was all he had to say? That single word was weighted with so many other words she wasn't sure how to respond at first. Licking her lips, she decided to be honest. "I don't know what to do here. I'm so confused and scared."

Bren went to her and folded her in his arms. "It's like that in the beginning, when you're finding your way. You'll find the flow and things will be all right. You'll see."

"Is that how it was between you and Sky?" She prayed for a yes. Katrina didn't want to be alone. To know that she was the only one in the world that had no clue what she was doing or how to act in a relationship or whatever it was that she had with Braydon.

"Yes. But you have to let down your guard with Bray. He's a good guy. Letting things come between you two only hurts you in the end. Trust me. I wasn't honest with Sky and I ran. I let my fear and stupidity control how I acted with her and look where it got me -- months without my *souler*."

"Braydon bound himself to me. I don't know what that means and I --"

"Whoa, whoa. He did what?"

Katrina took a step back and looked up at Bren. "He bound himself to me," she repeated. A chill of worry sliced down her spine as sweat beaded on her brow and upper lip. The room went hot and cold as the seconds ticked by, waiting for Bren to say something.

A graveness fell over his face as his gaze took on a serious tone.

"What? What's wrong? Is it dangerous?" Tension sung through her body. She took another step back and prayed for him to tell her something, anything.

Brenton cleared his throat. "For an Elf of the royal line to bind himself to you, well, it's like he's married you. There can be no one else. It's a serious deal, Rina, very serious. They don't just bind themselves to people. It's not like handing out candy, hon. If he said the words, then yeah, he's very serious. He can't rescind a binding. It's up to you, if you accept the binding on your end, but for him, he can't take it back nor can he look at another." He paused and drew in a breath.

"It's sort of like a *souler* for us dragons. Once we find our soul mate, we can't look at another. The idea of being without them tears us apart. Same way for Elves. Once they find that person and want to bind themselves, it's forever to them. I know that puts some pressure on you, but you have to do what's right for you. Just remember he's not playing around here, Katrina. He wants to be with you. You can't dismiss something like that."

Shock reverberated through her. No thoughts. Not even the smallest word rolled around her head. She couldn't contemplate someone doing something like that.

"But why?" The words tumbled out before she could stop them.

Bren sighed and shook his head. She looked up at him confused. "You've been focusing so hard on trying not to make attachments, on not letting yourself get too involved, and focusing on the what if, you haven't stopped to see the what is. There are people who care about you, who love you, and would fight to the death to keep you free." He looked in her eyes. "You're worth fighting for, but you just don't see it that

way. You don't get that he adores you and wouldn't want to be without you. You've never seen the way he looks at you, or the way he talks about you when you're not around. You haven't had to put up with months of him begging for details about you." He chuckled.

"You ask why, he asks why not. Take a chance. Don't think of love or anything of the binding. Just explore what you have now and know he's not going anywhere. He stepped down from his throne, left the court life behind him to work for peanuts as a bouncer and settle down here in Utopia Bay. Part of that reason is you. Open yourself up to the possibility, Rina. Please." Bren placed a soft kiss on her forehead before moving away and leaving the room.

As soon as the door was shut, Katrina went to her desk and sank down in the chair. Her thoughts were a jumble of contradictions. Bren's words refused to be silenced. It frightened her to think people wanted her to stay, that they would fight for her. *But then who would they fight? Who would call in your contract?* the voice of logic whispered.

For a moment she struggled to name anyone who would dare drag her back into servitude. Ulfric had made sure all her debts were paid and had an agreement with every single one of her ex-Dragon Lords that they would never track her down, never call on her or call in favors with her. No one, she answered the voice.

*Then why are you scared? Why can't you finally settle down? Make a life and accept Braydon for your own?* The question scared her. Permanence wasn't a thought she entertained much. Fear of attachment, abandonment and being taken away from someone always loomed in the forefront of her mind. Since moving to Utopia Bay and creating a half-life of sorts, the old fears settled in the back of her mind along with memories of her treatment at the hands of callous and careless Dragon Lords and humans alike.

Her hands shook at the thought of taking Brenton's advice. For a long time she'd watched her friends and acquaintances settle down, start a life and fall in love, all the while envious of what they'd found. Now the opportunity to reach out and gain the

same hovered before her with Braydon and she found herself frozen. Her hands became damp as her heart rate escalated.

Putting down the phone, she closed her eyes and struggled to find calm in the storm. She forced herself to recite passages from the *Tao Te Ching*, finding calm in the verses. After a few more moments she blew out a breath and settled against the back of the chair. Energy skittered along the muscles in her legs. The need for movement became overpowering. She got to her feet and left the office.

A glance around the club's main floor showed that Brenton and Decker had everything under control. Her bartenders were serving drinks in a timely fashion and the servers were passing out food without a single tray going empty for long. Bren looked over at her, and she tilted her head toward the door. He gave her a nod and waved his hand in a shooing motion. She turned and left the club.

Cool air hit her face. The sun hung high in the sky with only wisps of clouds. It was another gorgeous day but Katrina felt alone. Her heels clicked on the newly added sidewalks. Tall trees rose up on either side of the road. Not a single business nearby. Only the stray chirp of a bird, the rustling of a bush or grass kept her company. She loved that the club was located so close to the forest, not only for privacy but also for the sake of the view from the upper levels of the building. She shoved her hands in her jeans pockets and allowed her thoughts free rein.

"Do I want to take a chance and let Braydon in with my baggage and all? Do I want to actually settle down and have a life here without fear?" she asked herself aloud. *Yes!* The word came out loud in her mind. It echoed off the walls of her brain and in her ears.

"Talking to yourself, little one? First sign of crazy," Ulfric murmured behind her.

She laughed, not minding his company in the least, so long as she could continue walking. "I'm thinking out loud. Not crazy at all."

"Says you. You trying to figure out your life? Need a sounding board?" He fell in step beside her.

"Yes and no. Some things I'd like to keep to myself and discuss with Braydon. I think... I think I want to try to form a life, whatever that means. I want to --" Words failed her in that moment. She wasn't sure what she wanted to do. There were so many options to pick from.

"You don't have to tell me everything, little one. Some thoughts you need to keep to yourself."

She was grateful to Ulfric in that moment. Her thoughts flew to Braydon's cabin, how cozy and comfortable and lived in it was. Remembering the pictures of family and friends on the wall sent a pang of pain through her chest. "Thanks. Ulfric, what do you think of my house?" Nibbling her bottom lip, she waited for his answer.

"To be honest, it's cold and empty. You don't live there. You sleep and eat there, but there is no life there." His words were gentle but they still hurt.

She thought of her house. The only reason she'd bought it was because the previous owner had been asking a lot less than it was worth. Besides that, the hedge separating her from her neighbor was high enough that they couldn't see what she was doing and vice versa. Privacy had been the most important thing for her, although now, she wasn't so sure. Katrina was pretty sure she wasn't up to any block parties as of yet, but the thought of trying to make a connection didn't sound as horrible as when Ulfric had first suggested it, when he'd helped her move in. It had been Ulfric who helped her pick out her furniture and get a few necessities. Beyond that she hadn't really invested in artwork or anything of value.

The walls were still the same color as when she'd moved in. The notion of changing anything, of trying to make it more to her taste, made her nervous. *What if I screw up something? Pick the wrong color?* Interior decorating wasn't really an interest of hers and the idea of looking at paint swatches or picking out furniture made her feel out of her depth and lost. Her heart picked up the pace again and her breath came out in large puffs of air.

"Calm down, little one. What's getting you all worked up?" Ulfric moved closer and put his arm around her, rubbing her arm.



"Interior design." Heat flushed her cheeks, crept down her neck and spread through her chest. She felt ridiculous admitting that.

Ulfric chuckled. "We'll start off small, how's that?"

It soothed her to know he wanted to help, but she was hesitant about accepting his help. "I think I have to do this. You know, pick the color and furniture? You can help," she added quickly. "But I have to start the process myself. Start really living for me, you know?"

Katrina looked up at Ulfric to see if he understood. He nodded. His pale blond hair threaded through with crimson bounced and shook. "You need to exert your independence, make your own decisions. I understand that. I had to do the same thing when I left my clan behind."

She was relieved that she hadn't insulted him. A remnant of the conversation she had with Braydon came back to her. "Ulfric, Braydon says he's got to bring his brother into town with him."

"Yes, whispers have reached me that his brother lies in a coma. I'm not sure how I can help him."

She looked up at him, wondering how he could get word so quickly. "How do you know that?"

"I have sources within the palace. Besides, I don't use the same methods of communication as most. Mine don't depend on trails through Werewolf territory." His rough voice grew darker, deeper as his face became serious.

"So they are restless?" Worry for Braydon's safety rose up so fast she couldn't squash it.

"Don't worry, Braydon is a warrior of the highest caliber. But I do worry if the Werewolves are restless. They feel they are being shoved out of the political scene in Utopia Bay. They barely have representation as it is, since their kind is in the minority with Vampires slowly growing in population each year." Ulfric ran a hand over his face. "It's a headache as the dragons are being asked to either step down or mediate or something."

"Is that why you're in town? You never said beyond you wanting to visit. Not that I want to kick you out of my guest room or anything." She gave him a smile.

He laughed. "I've called a bed and breakfast in the garden district. You'll need your privacy once Braydon hits town, as I suspect he will soon."

"But you don't have to go --"

He held up a hand. "I do. But I won't be far." Something flashed in his eyes and Katrina had the uneasy feeling that her ex-Dragon Lord had a bone to pick with Braydon. She'd thought their business had been concluded, but now she wasn't so sure.

"Please, go easy on him," she requested.

He gave a bark of laughter. "Worried about him? Don't be. The Elf can take care of himself."

She nodded. "But sometimes you don't know when to stop."

"Maybe." Silence fell between them. Words unsaid floated in the air but neither one uttered a word until they arrived in the center of town. People bustled along the sidewalks, coming in and out of quaint old-fashioned shops and cafes.

"I'm going to the paint store. I'll see you later." She ducked out from under his arm and headed for the first store she saw. Once at the doorway, she glanced back to find Ulfric standing where she'd left him, an unreadable expression on his face. Rather than go back and ask what was wrong, she headed into the musty old store. The air was filled with faint scents of paint and paint thinner and other chemicals. She roamed up and down the aisles, bypassing asking for help at the small desk area in the center of the shop, and instead, wandered around letting her whims and wishes guide her.

She came to a stop in front of a display of color samples. It all seemed so intimidating. *Where to begin?* Ignoring the darker colors, her gaze was snagged by warm earth tones and lush autumnal colors. The hues reminded her of her favorite time of year in Utopia Bay when the leaves changed color and sweaters were a good thing.

She could taste the lush, creamy warmth of pumpkin pie with a dollop of whipped cream on top or the decadent darkness of a large mug of hot chocolate. Katrina could see the tiny marshmallows floating at the top with a fine drizzle of

caramel and fudge sauce. The air was crisp and cool, yet not cold enough to bundle up completely. A smile tugged her lips. She could picture her bringing in the mail while Braydon cooked up something delicious for dinner. The image in her head tugged at her heartstrings and made her miss him that much more.

As much as she wanted to be mad at him, to hate him for not communicating, she knew as well as anyone that outside of the main city it was difficult to find signs of the advanced time. Also, there had been rumors of Werewolf packs getting more aggressive as the weeks went by, demanding more space, freedom and rights. A shiver traced its way down her spine as she thought about the fate of any of those messengers he'd sent. It was a bad idea to mess with an angry Werewolf.

She breathed in and blew out the warm air. Shaking her head, she focused on the samples in front of her. Braydon had said he'd wanted to be with her, and she wanted to be with him. Her life was empty without him, but at the same time she wanted space, time and an opportunity to really explore the life she hadn't lived since becoming free. So much was open to her now and her mind was trying to accommodate all her options.

"First things first, my home. I need to make it mine." She grabbed a handful of paint swatches and left the shop. Standing to the side of the doorway, she examined each one in the bright sunshine until she narrowed down her choices for the living room. A grin on her lips, she re-entered the store and ordered up the cans of paint. Her heart thudded against her ribcage in a heavy rhythm as she watched the Elf behind the counter pouring in the base and mixing up the colors. Excitement crawled along her nerves as well as a jittery sense of doubt rolling around in her mind.

The Elf looked at her. His gaze was gentle, nonjudgmental. "Are you okay?" His tone was soft, lulling and she felt her nerves settle down a bit.

"First time painting my place. I'm a bit excited and --" She paused, trying to find the words. "Nervous, I guess? I've never done something like this before. It's all so new, the painting thing." Heat crawled along her skin, spreading through her chest, creeping up her neck and flushing her cheeks. The tips of her ears tingled as a sense of

sheepishness took hold. She ducked her head, feeling foolish and stupid for her admission.

"Former Bound Human?" The question held no weight or judgment. It was just a query, that's all.

She nodded but refused to look at him, to see if there was pity in his eyes now.

"I understand. Former Bound Elf." The words were like a punch to her gut as the shock reverberated through her. Her head came up as she stared at him. Dragons normally went for humans as they were considered more pliable, easier prey.

A pretty pink blush spread along his cheeks but he didn't look away. "I was young, never gambled before and, well..." He held up his hands and shrugged. "Five years." The Elf held out his wrist and showed off a similar design of runes and delicate patterns, this one more intricate than the one on her collarbone.

"Powerful?" she asked, as her gaze traced the swirls and curves and dips of the tattoo.

"Very. The Dragon Lord was a woman. She and her lover were good to me." He ducked his head.

Katrina sensed a story there but didn't pry. "I got passed around before Ulfric bought my contracts and paid off my debts. It took me a while to get used to being treated so well."

He nodded. "I'll bet. I've heard the horror stories. Have you ever been to a support group? Mireya runs one for those of us still acclimating to life outside of Bound life. If you want to come to a meeting..." He held up his hands. "No pressure."

Katrina thought about it. She hadn't really discussed what happened to her, not even to Ulfric or Bren. Braydon had been the only one who'd been given a hint into her past life. If he'd been with her, he would have told her to go for it and supported her throughout the whole thing. She knew that right down to her soul. Tears filled her eyes and she bent her head again to hide it.

"Whoa, whoa." Footsteps thudded against the bare wooden floor planks and made their way toward her. Strong arms wrapped around her and held her to a solid

chest. The steady rhythm of the Elf's heartbeat was soothing but it wasn't what she wanted. Pulling away, she smiled at him and sniffled. "Not sad. I'm missing my lover right now. He'd tell me to go for it, show support."

Bright red patches appeared on his cheeks. "Damn, thought you were single. Your lover is a lucky man."

She stared at him. His words didn't make sense to her. "You don't know me. Why would you say something like that?"

"You're beautiful, for starters, and clearly been through a lot, but you're trying to make a life for yourself here. A lot of Bound Humans hide from it. Shrink away." He shook his head. Pale yellow strands danced in the overhead lights. "That makes you strong and it makes you sexy." He gave her a cheeky grin that brought heat back to her cheeks.

She'd been hit on before but not like this. It was gentle and sweet. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"Don't be." He grinned. "But I'm serious about the group. Please join us. We meet in the tearoom at the old B&B in the garden district. It's safe, and the owner is a nice witch who's been helping former Bound Humans get jobs. We meet on Fridays for lunch so it doesn't cut into anyone's schedule. Please come." He turned and walked back around the counter and covered her paint cans. Once she made payment and grabbed her purchases, she left the store only to realize she hadn't driven into town. The idea of walking back to the club carrying the heavy cans made her groan. She looked around, trying to decide whether to bite the bullet and go home or hike back to the club.

With a sigh, she gripped the handles of the paint cans tight and headed back the way she came, her feet protesting every step. By the time she'd arrived her face was a mask of sweat. Her corset felt hot and clung to her overheated flesh. Her legs burned from the effort of the long walk, and her arms and hands hurt from holding the weight of the cans. A small ache began at the base of her back from hunching over as she

walked along the road. Not once had she seen a car. The only thoughts she'd had on her journey back was how surprised Braydon would be to see the living room painted.

Bren met her at the bar. He took the cans of paint, concern clearly written on his face. "You should have called. I'd have sent a car to pick you up." He reached over and brushed a few strands of hair that stuck to the side of her face.

"No cell and no money for a cab." She tilted her head toward the cans. "Impulse buy. Want to paint my living room. Party over?" Her voice came out in breathy puffs of words.

"Go shower. It's okay. It's winding down." Brenton urged her toward the locker room and she went without protest.

After stripping off her clothing, she hopped into the first empty shower stall and turned on the water. She sucked in a large gulp of air as an ice cold wave hit her, pouring over her skin, raising goose bumps. Her nipples pebbled. She wrapped her arms around her body but she didn't get out of the stall.

Closing her eyes, she remembered the encounter with Braydon in the locker room before he'd left. Gorgeous, naked and masturbating, he'd made his desire for her very clear. Heat shimmered down her body in a gentle wave, raising the temperature of the small cubicle. Longing to feel his body against hers, to have him back with her, took hold. Arousal spread through her belly as her pussy heated.

The ice cold water became a contrast to her slowly awakening body. A sensual web of need wrapped around her as the downpour heated up. Her nether lips thickened as her clit became engorged. She resisted the urge to touch the aching bud. As much as she wanted to find relief from the churning desire trying to take hold of her body, she refused to make herself climax with her hand. Instead, she lathered a washcloth with her favorite body gel and ran it quickly over her body. When the slightly rough surface ran over her plump nipples, threads of electricity arced to her throbbing center.

Clenching her jaw and ignoring her desire, she continued to wash off the sweat. The water became a gentle heat that relaxed her muscles and for the moment made the aches go away. It had been a long day filled with a lot to think about.

Focusing on that, she finished cleaning herself while making mental notes to get paint supplies. She had no doubt that Ulfric and the others would want to help. Whether she allowed it or not was still up in the air. Part of her clung to the idea of doing it alone, of cleaning the walls and painting the entire room herself. It had nothing to do with not wanting her friends to help, but rather accomplishing something for herself, to continue to exert her independence, and because she'd hidden behind the fears of being taken away.

After drying off, she dressed in the spare clothes she had in her locker. A glance at the clock showed her it was almost time for the club's regular night opening. She hoped she made it through the night without falling sleep. Already her eyelids and body felt heavy. The toll of the long walk to and from the paint store was making its presence known. Vowing to grab a caffeine jolt from behind the bar, she headed out only to run into Jewel, her second in command. The tall lithe man smiled down at her.

"Bren told me to come in and cover for you. You okay with that? Don't want to step on toes or anything." He pushed back a hank of shockingly bright red hair. His green eyes glittered behind long lashes.

For a moment, Katrina wanted to hug the man and thank Bren. It was a thoughtful gesture, and she knew that Jewel needed some extra cash for house repairs. "Fine, but I'll stick around as long as I can keep my eyes open, okay?"

He saluted her. "Aye, aye, Captain!"

She resisted the urge to smack him on the back of the head. Sensing her desire, he bent down and she rolled her eyes. When she didn't do what he thought she would, he turned around and wiggled his ass at her.

"You'd like it far too much. Now get." She laughed and shook her head when he straightened up, bowed low and backed away.

"Yes, your worship. Of course, your grace. At once, oh merciful one." He bumped into Decker, stopping him dead in his tracks.

"Watch where you're going, Fae," the dragon growled.

Jewel blew him a kiss before walking away toward the DJ booth. Katrina chuckled and took a seat at the bar. Within minutes she was bored. It felt as if something was missing. A glance around showed her what she was yearning for. Braydon. His easygoing flirty energy used to fill the club. It had felt sexy, made her feel wanted. She slouched on the chair and sighed. No matter where she went or what she did, there he would be.

The thoughts of him rolled through her, reminding her of how empty it seemed without him there to fill it up. An ache began throbbing in her chest and wouldn't subside. Pushing the thoughts aside didn't help. They reappeared again in a new form, taking on a new shape. She could see him sitting at her dining room table as if he belonged there. Or above her as they made love, his thick amethyst hair hanging down, blocking out everything around them.

With a sigh, she realized she couldn't stay at the club. There was no enjoying the atmosphere without him here. She looked around until she saw Brenton and nodded toward the door. He gave her a thumbs up and she left. No one stopped her. She was about to get into her car when Ulfric emerged out of the soft darkness setting around the parking lot. The flood lights gave off a soft glow but weren't at full strength yet.

"Going so soon?" His voice was a bit gruffer than usual.

"Yeah." Katrina wasn't sure what to say.

He entered a pale yellow circle of light, the front of his shirt torn.

"Ulfric?" She started to go to him but he held up a hand and grinned, the canines sharper and longer than usual.

"No problem. Just got into a fight with a Werewolf who was under the impression I was an easy target. I set him right and delivered him to Egan. Go on home. I'll meet you there."



She wasn't sure what to say. There was a dangerous energy swirling around him. Pinpricks of power rolled over her skin like sparks that stung. Hissing, she began to back away. Awareness of how alone she was grabbed a hold of her throat and wouldn't let go.

"Don't worry, Rina. I won't hurt you. Just feeling the last of the adrenaline from the fight." The power subsided to a dull burn on her forearms, but that didn't put her at ease at all.

"Let me call Brenton." She turned to go back into the club but he shook his head.

"Don't. I'm going in there to see him. Go home. Have dinner. Call the Elf. It's okay." He walked past her without pausing and entered the club.

Things seemed to be escalating. A sense of urgency sent bursts of energy through her to do something -- anything -- to make sure Braydon was okay.

Blowing out a breath, she slipped out her cell phone and hit speed dial, praying that he would pick up. After three rings it went straight to voicemail. "Braydon." She paused as the words stuttered on her tongue then fell away to nothing. Heat flared in her cheeks. Taking a moment, she took a breath and let go. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Braydon, it's Katrina. Just get home safe, okay?"

Katrina hung up and hoped that he wasn't driving out there right now. If things were getting bad, she wanted him safe at home with her. Getting into her car, she sent up a prayer to whatever gods and goddesses were listening to keep him and his brother safe.

## Chapter Five

Braydon gripped the wheel and kept watch. He could feel the pounding of wild animal energy against his mental shields. Someone was out there probing, searching, looking for easy prey. With Finan out cold in the seat next to him, he wasn't sure if he could truly keep them both safe.

A loud snore floated toward him, and he almost crashed the car in shock. So far, Fin had been silent. Not even his breathing had made a sound, yet now he was snoring. Braydon was tempted to pull the car over and shake his brother to see if that helped any, but his senses were alive with the possibility of battle.

Besides, he wanted to get to his home by morning, see Ulfric by afternoon and then see Katrina at nightfall. He would have preferred to see Katrina first, but there was no telling what type of magic Fin had been put under. For all he knew, snoring was an even bigger danger sign than him not waking up.

"Slow down, asshole. You'll get us killed."

Braydon's heart leapt in his throat as he swerved in shock. If it weren't for his quick reflexes, they would have crashed into a tree. Luckily, there were no other cars out, or there would have been a major accident. Instead, he righted his course and glanced over at his brother before refocusing on the road.

"What the fuck!" he cried out.

"Draught must have worn off." Fin yawned and shifted in his seat before settling down.

"Draught? You took a draught? You scared the shit out of all of us, and it wasn't even magical in origin? I'm turning around." Anger sizzled along Braydon's nerves. He didn't know what his brother had done or why, but at that moment he didn't care. His brother's foolishness had kept him from Katrina for two weeks.

"Don't, please. Take me with you. I'll explain and you have to promise not to be mad, okay?" Fin pleaded.

As much as he loved his brother and family, Braydon's gut told him he wasn't going to like what was about to be said. "I'm not going to promise anything until I've heard the whole story."

"While you were away, it wasn't only our people we were worried about. The other Elf Lords had cast a vote because they felt that since Father had failed as a leader, he shouldn't be king anymore. They wanted to take our land," Finan ground out. "They wanted to take over. Father wouldn't allow it and promised to fight to the death, but we were outnumbered. Our forces were stretched thin. We had soldiers fighting with Talon the Grey, and then we had some of our best people guarding a shipment of dragon's blood rubies with Blackheart the Wise. We had enough to do guard duty and keep peace among the people."

A soft pulse of pain began at Braydon's temples as he gnashed his teeth. "Go on."

Finan took a deep breath. "Help was offered by Mordred the Shadow. We were wary at first. He didn't get his name for nothing. But the Elf Lords were adding on their force, stirring shit up among the people. We became desperate so we agreed." Finan paused again. Braydon almost pulled the car over as annoyance joined the headache that was forming in his head.

"His asking price was that I marry his ward, a human woman. We don't have many details about her other than she lives in the mortal world and doesn't want anything to do with magic or the paranormal. Anyway, we agreed and then you sent word that you had the deed to our lands which would solidify our claim to the throne. We were overjoyed. There was a problem --"

"Mordred," Braydon finished.

"Yes. He was pushing hard for the marriage to take place. Mother and Father wanted to send me to Utopia Bay under the pretense of an errand for Ulfric, but that wouldn't have fooled Mordred. However, an ailment, one that needed magic we didn't

have... Well, that would work, and I could stay with Ulfric for as long as he would have me. So I formulated a plan." Finan sounded so proud of himself that Braydon wanted to smack him.

He groaned, unsure if he wanted to hear about the plan or not. "Go on," he said with some reluctance.

"I'd heard the soldiers talk of a Fairy who could give you a strong enough sleeping draught to make you sleep for days. It was a secret potion that not many knew about. I figured I could take it, fool the court physicians and then be taken back by you to Utopia Bay under the pretense of needing Ulfric's medical expertise. Mordred couldn't contest an ailment. And that is why I'm with you now. Mordred had to let us go. He doesn't know much about magic, and our court physicians didn't know what was wrong with me. This way I can give Mother and Father enough time to figure a way out of it." Finan settled back against the seat and closed his eyes.

"Idiot. You could have told me. I was scared." Braydon hated being left in the dark about anything to do with his family.

"No, you wanted to get back to your bond-mate quickly. That's what you were worried about," Finan pointed out.

"That too. Two weeks! Two fucking weeks I wasted looking for you." Braydon sighed. "You can bunk with me until Ulfric agrees to keep you under his roof. If anyone asks me about you, you're ill."

"Fine by me. I can't wait to see Utopia Bay. I've heard stories about it. You'll show me around, right?" Finan's voice was high pitched with excitement.

"I can't now, can I? You're supposed to be ill and bewitched with sleep. I'll drop you off at my place, and you can get settled in, then I'll go to Rina's to give Ulfric the lowdown and see my woman. You are to stay put and not do something stupid, understand?" Braydon looked over at his younger brother, hoping he got the message.

"Of course," Finan muttered.

"I can't believe this. I can't believe that you did this. You're the fucking responsible one and now *I* have to save *your* hide? When did we step into the Twilight

Zone?" He sighed as a sense of tiredness pulled at his eyes, but he refused to pull over or stop. Braydon had to get to Utopia Bay, make it up to Katrina and get protection for his brother. He had to.

He couldn't believe his younger, usually sensible, responsible brother would pull a stunt like this. *I've been gone so long he's changed into me.* Braydon shuddered at the thought and put on some speed. He hoped by the time he got back home, Katrina would be willing to listen to him.

The drive sped by but the sense that they were being watched wouldn't leave him, not even when he pulled into his driveway three hours later. For a moment, he hesitated in opening the door. There was no telling what could be out there. He didn't exactly feel threatened, but there was something he couldn't shake. With a deep breath, he pulled the handle and planted a foot down on the ground. Nothing happened at first and then he heard a thud. Whirling around, he relaxed his body to stretch out his awareness, trying to sense where the threat was coming from. A small blue creature crawled toward him.

Braydon blinked. Recognition hit him square in the chest as all the air left his lungs. It was one of the messengers he'd sent to Katrina. He scooped up the smaller man, who filled the length of his palm. The creature was panting hard.

"Sorry. So sorry." The words came out in short puffs of air. "Couldn't deliver the message," he panted. "Too many predators. Too many wolves."

*Shit.* Braydon sighed. "It's okay. Come inside. I'll put you up in my spare room where you can rest. I'll pass on your message to a friend of mine who may be able to do something. I don't suppose you saw the other messengers I sent?" He prayed they hadn't met with a horrible fate.

The small blue man shook his head. "No, and I've heard of no captives taken by the wolves either."

A chill ran down Braydon's spine. Fear formed a lump in his throat. He tried to swallow it down but it wouldn't budge.

"Fin, take this guy and my keys." He dug into his pocket and pulled out his house keys. "Make yourself at home, give this guy something to drink and eat, then put him in the guest room near the back of the house. It'll be a green room. You'll be in the red one. I'm going to Katrina's. I need to see Ulfric. I think the packs may be converging."

He dumped the little man as gently as he could into his brother's hands. He got back into the car, leaving his brother standing near the porch looking lost. *I'll explain later.* Braydon prayed that Ulfric was at Katrina's. "Call Ulfric," he ordered the car.

A soft ringing filled the car before the Dragon Lord answered. "What?" A female giggle could be heard in the background.

Braydon's ears burned. He recognized that sound, had heard it over the few months he'd lived in Utopia Bay. Gripping the wheel tight, he tried to calm down and only managed to push some of his anger deep down inside. "Ulfric, we have a problem. You were right. The messengers I sent hadn't made it through, too many predators as one told me. I suspect the packs are converging on Utopia Bay. I think they may try and make their move soon. Whether by force or politics I don't know."

"Shit. I'll get in touch with my contacts on the council, see if something can't be worked out, maybe offer them the old stallion shifter lands since they've moved on to the safe havens up in the mountains."

Braydon sighed, empathizing with Ulfric. The Dragon Lord had great influence in the community. Sometimes it sucked being a person of power. He knew what that was like, which is why he'd left it behind for something normal. "I'm on my way to Katrina's. I suppose I'll see you there." It was a small probe to see if the Dragon Lord intended to cause trouble or not. He still couldn't help but worry that while he'd been gone his place had been taken by something more familiar and comfortable.

"No. I have to go take care of this now. Have fun." Ulfric ended the call, giving Braydon a bit of hope that he'd at least have a chance with her, that they would be alone and have some time together. He prayed she'd be open to hearing what he had to say.

\* \* \*

"Braydon?" Katrina tried to focus on getting the roller to paint a straight line of red. Small droplets of rust-colored paint dripped to the canvas covering the floor. Her heart sped up its rhythm and a fine sheen of sweat slipped down her face. The slow moving fan above them didn't help her cool down. Her palms were damp from nervousness, not exertion. She bit her bottom lip as she pushed the roller up and down, not looking at Ulfric.

"Yes. He suspects the wolves are gathering close to the city. He's not sure whether they will be peaceful or not. I'm not taking any chances. I'll see you later. Oh," he paused.

She looked up. The expression on his face was stoic. Katrina braced herself for bad news.

"Give the Elf a chance. He couldn't reach you. There were outside complications. Hear him out, okay?" He slipped on his jacket but didn't look away.

Heat flushed her cheeks. She nodded.

"No, say you'll give him a chance," Ulfric ordered.

She couldn't understand where this was coming from. "Why are you pushing this?"

"Because I can see new energy in you. There's a spark now that hasn't been there before, and he helped start that. You deserve to be happy, and he deserves to be given a chance." He moved to the door. "Please, do it for yourself, if for no one else."

Ulfric hadn't needed to plead with her. She'd already decided, but he didn't need to know that. "I'll try."

He nodded and left. The only noise in the room was the creak of the fan above and the roller on the wall. It became a task, trying to concentrate on getting one wall finished. Every click, each rustle of leaves or gust of wind made her think of Braydon on his way to see her. The roar of an engine next door startled her enough to make her jump and look around. A blush heated her cheeks and neck as her heart raced.

Licking her lips, she took in a deep breath, inhaling the faint odor of paint. A glance around showed how much she'd done. A small smile tugged at her lips as a

sense of accomplishment swelled inside of her. It wasn't done yet, but most of the room was painted in a soothing rust color. It made her want to fire up the hearth, snuggle under a warm blanket and read with a glass of wine on hand. The image grew until she saw Braydon bringing her a plate of something. They dined together in the dull golden glow of the fire, with maybe a few candles spread around. The picture was cozy and sent a sense of warmth spreading through her. It felt right.

Grinning, she got back to work, feeling more settled than before. A car pulled into the driveway and for a moment she froze. A sense of panic crept up inside of her as she became aware of how her once baggy shirt was now sticking to her sweat-coated body. Her hair was a mess, pulled into a loose bun that was falling apart. The sweatpants she wore weren't in the least bit sexy. They were baggy, stained with paint and the hems were frayed at the bottom. Old tennis shoes completed the outfit.

The panic pushed her into action as she rushed to the window and looked out. Braydon got out of his SUV, looking like sex walking. He wore a pair of jeans that hugged his muscular legs. His t-shirt was loose but couldn't hide the ridges of muscle underneath as he moved. His long purple hair was pulled back, exposing his piercings to the dull glow of the waxing moon overhead. She whimpered, feeling very inadequate. Katrina wanted more time and a shower, maybe even to put on something sexy to wear. She looked down at her grubby stained clothing and sighed.

Rather than run around like a chicken with her head cut off, she threw open the door, not bothering to clean up the tarps or paint cans and tools. *If he's going to see me like this, I may as well not hide anything.* She prayed he wouldn't turn tail and run. Taking a quick sniff of her armpits to ensure that she didn't reek to high heaven, she sent up a thank you to the deodorant gods and stepped out onto the porch, paint roller still in hand and dripping on her shoes. Groaning, she tried to hide it but couldn't.

"Hey, beautiful." Braydon stopped mid-stride up the walkway and for a moment she thought he would indeed leave. A smile curved his lips and humor sparkled in his eyes. "What are you doing? Did you start something without me? Gain some sort of paint fetish?"



She swallowed as her lower belly tightened and heat spread through her body. The reaction she always got when near him caused her nipples to tighten and her pussy to become damp. Licking her lips, she replied, "Painting the living room." The words came out in a croak of sound that made her want to run and hide.

"And you couldn't wait for me?" He came closer and stopped once they were mere inches apart. She wanted to close the gap between them but didn't move. Instead, she stood there, absorbing his presence. Seeing he was safe and standing before her was enough to soothe most of her fears. Seconds ticked by at a slow crawl. All she could do was look him over. There were bags under his eyes, and he was paler than the last time she'd seen him. Close up, it even looked like he'd lost weight. Worry for his health made her act. She grabbed his hand and pulled him into the house, closing the door behind them.

"When's the last time you ate? Or slept properly? Have you been drinking enough water? Sit down." She tried to pull him over to the dining room, but he wouldn't move. Looking back, she saw that the living room had his attention.

"I like it." Braydon released her hand and wandered into the space. His bright blue eyes roamed over the work she'd been doing since she got home. "Are you going to get new furniture or use what you have?" He glanced over his shoulder at her.

"New stuff," she mumbled, feeling self-conscious all over again. "It's not really done yet. I have to make the lines neater. Some are crooked and it will show once the paint dries." She stood where she was, unable to go to him. It felt awkward having him look at her first attempt at painting a room by herself. Despite Ulfric's offer of help, she'd turned him down in favor of doing it all herself.

"It looks fantastic, babe! Can I make a suggestion?"

She was happy that he was asking and not telling, and that he hadn't offered to help. "Sure." She tried not to grin but couldn't keep the smile off of her face as pride swelled within her, pushing the arousal back.

"If you're going to redo the room, maybe it's time to update the windows? Do you know how old they are? And maybe have the fireplace cleaned? I know a guy who

does good work. I'll give you his number. But this really looks great. I can't wait to see the finished product."

Tears filled her eyes. He wasn't pushing her to take part. He was giving her the reins and letting her take the lead. Braydon understood her. Before she could stop herself, she dropped the roller and went to him, throwing her arms around him and hugging him tight. She nuzzled her head in the crook of his neck and kissed the sensitive skin there. "Thank you," she whispered. It was all she could say. No other words seemed adequate for the gift he'd given her in that moment.

"It's nothing. You need this," he murmured as he stroked her hair.

Tears slipped down her cheeks. She buried her face deeper into his neck, hoping to hide the emotional outburst.

"Shhh, it's okay. If you need anything, ask. I'm here for you. I'm sorry I couldn't return earlier. Family stuff to deal with." His words were weighted in weariness.

She pulled back and brushed some stray amethyst tendrils away from his face. Reminders of how worried, angry and hurt she'd been surfaced. As much as she tried to push them away, they refused to leave her thoughts. Taking a step back, she put some distance between them. Regret at the words she'd said, the doubt she'd expressed, whirled around, turning the situation bittersweet.

"I let my fears put up walls."

"I know." He didn't go to her. She wasn't sure if she felt relief or disappointment.

"Braydon, I've never had this type of relationship before. They've never meant anything to me, and now I'm so confused. I know I want to be with you, but we're so different on the surface. I don't know how to handle things." She looked down at her paint-stained shoes, unsure of whether she wanted to see his expression.

"And I understand that. But you have to trust me. You have to let me in." He took a step toward her but didn't come any closer. That small gesture emphasized the distance between them. It hurt to have him so far away from her, not holding or touching her. She wasn't sure how to close the gap between them.

"I don't know how." Tears threatened to fall again. Swiping at her eyes, she tried to prevent the wetness from falling.

"Let down your guard. You know I can give you what you need, but you have to let me."

She clenched her jaw as pressure began to form in her head. "I want to but I can't." The words came out through clenched teeth.

"You're thinking about it too much, trying too hard. You have to let go."

Still not looking at him, she shook her head. "Easier said than done."

"Do you want me to force you to submit? Is that what you need?" His large hands took hold of her shoulders, but he didn't squeeze.

She wanted to say no. Katrina didn't want to have to go there every time she needed to knock down her walls. "It's so frustrating. I don't know --" She threw up her hands and finally looked at him, hoping that he would have some of the answers she didn't.

"I know you're not used to this. It's hard at first, but once you get used to opening yourself up things will become easier. Letting your guard down will become automatic, not a chore." His features were soft. There was no pity in his eyes, just an emotion she couldn't identify looked back at her. "Let me help you, babe."

She wanted to say no, that she could do it alone. Gritting her teeth, she struggled with giving him an answer.

He shook his head. "No, I can see it now. You need to be forced." Without warning, he grabbed her hand and pulled her to the bedroom.

"What the hell? Get off of me." She tried to pull her hand back, tried to put up a good fight, and yet deep down inside she knew he was right. There were so many walls that even letting one slide down took a lot of work, and she didn't have the energy. Just deciding to paint and get new furniture was pushing her comfort zone further than she thought she could go.

"No. You know you need this, or you would have kicked my ass and thrown me out. Undress and get on the bed. You know the drill." Braydon stripped out of his shirt

but didn't undo his belt. She could see a thick bulge tenting his fly and licked her lips, wanting to taste him, suck him off until he came down her throat.

"No." His hand covered the raised denim material. He squeezed the erection trapped behind his fly, letting out a shuddered groan. The sound rippled down her spine. She groaned as her cunt contracted and became slick with need. Her panties dampened as she watched him rock his palm against the bulge.

"Please," she whispered.

He yanked the hair band out of his hair and shook his head. "No. Do as I say."

"But --"

"No buts, Katrina. Undress. Now." He undid his belt and slipped it through the loops. The sound of leather gliding against the rough denim made her shiver. Goosebumps broke out over her skin as her body flashed hot and cold.

"Braydon --"

"Fine, we do this the hard way." He grabbed her hand and led her over to the bed. Her pussy gushed cream at memories of her last spanking as his hands came up. She whimpered, but not in protest.

"We could stop this now. Just do as I say," he murmured, pulling at her hips.

She sucked in a breath as her body made contact with his. His heat seeped through the thin material of her shirt. Her nipples pebbled further, throbbing for attention. He released her hand and brushed a knuckle against one tight peak, setting off sparks of heat straight to her clit. She groaned. He touched first one nipple and then the other before taking the collar of her shirt and ripping it apart.

"Hope you didn't love that shirt," he smirked. "Now the pants." Braydon folded the belt in half. "Untie and take off."

She narrowed her eyes at him. Stubbornness reared its head. "No. You do it, *master*."

"Fine." He grabbed her hips and turned her around to face the bed. From behind he ripped at the knot and yanked her sweatpants down to her ankles before bending

her over the mattress. She tried to get up but he placed a hand on her lower back and held her down.

"Using Elven strength to hold a tiny mortal down? Cheater," she threw out, loving how he was handling her.

"Whatever will help you to let go, babe." He rubbed the flat part of the belt against her cotton-covered ass.

She wished she'd been wearing something sexier like a thong, something to tease and taunt him.

"Fuck, even these granny panties you have on arouse me." The first slap of the belt echoed around the room and rung in her ears followed by a few more swipes before he ripped her underwear off, exposing her warmed ass to the cool air of the room. "You have such a sweet ass, babe. I didn't get to fuck it last time. Maybe this time."

His words inflamed her. She hoped he would take her ass this time. Lust crawled through her veins, setting her body on fire. He used the belt to spank first one cheek and then the other in quick succession. The heat from the slaps spread through her groin, taking her desire higher. Her juices trickled down the inside of her thigh. It shocked her how wet she was. Braydon spread her thighs further apart and swiped his hand between her legs.

"You taste so fucking good, babe. I can't wait to eat you out. Not yet. You've been a bad girl, and we're not done with your punishment."

She heard his footsteps walk around her bedroom but didn't look up to see what he was doing. This time felt gentler somehow, as though he wasn't using as much force as last time.

"Braydon, are you going easy on me?" She prayed the answer was no.

"No, babe. Going to be doing things differently this time. Stand up." His voice came from right next to her, causing her to jump. He helped her to her feet. She stepped out of her pants. Arousal hung thick in the air. Her heart beat a rapid pace against her

ribcage as he turned her back to the bed. Her skin felt tight. The room seemed too hot. "On the bed now."

She didn't argue. She climbed up onto the mattress and lay down. This time she didn't feel vulnerable or exposed. The heat in his eyes made her feel desired and wanted. Without being told to, she spread her legs and waited for him to make his next move.

"Look at that. I didn't even have to order you. Goddess, you're gorgeous." He took an arm and lifted it over her head, tying it to her headboard. Braydon made his way around the bed and did the same with the other arm but left her legs untethered.

"There. Perfect." He stood back, his gaze roaming over her body. The pride and awe she saw on his face made her feel beautiful, even loved. "You're getting better, more trusting. Once you start to trust yourself, you'll need this less and less."

She shook her head, not wanting to think about what could be. Not yet. The here and now with him was all that mattered.

## Chapter Six

"I'm going to love you slowly. Work my way up your body. Show you how much I desire you, how much I care about you, how beautiful you are to me." He undid his fly and pushed down his pants before stepping out of them and climbing onto the bed. His cock rose up from a bed of dark purple curls. It thudded against his stomach, the head already flushed a dark red. Droplets of pearly fluid formed at the slit on top of the cockhead.

She strained against her bonds, wanting to taste him.

"No, not yet. First you must accept what I have to say to you." He dropped down to all fours and then sank down onto his stomach on the bed. With great care he lifted her foot and placed a kiss on the instep before moving up. Every bit of contact was so light. His lips whispered across her skin, driving her mad, making her want something more solid and substantial. He blazed a path up one leg and down the other, not paying any attention to her damp slit which was throbbing for attention.

"From the day I met you, I knew how special you were. You are a gorgeous woman." He licked the back of her knee, sending a shiver of heat up her leg. The touch felt odd yet nice. "Beautiful. Strong. Capable."

She opened her mouth to protest. "How could I have been capable if I let myself fall prey so many times?" Tears welled up in her eyes as her past opened up like a book in her mind. All the years she'd been traded back and forth like a puzzle piece, all the moments she'd accepted the blame for others' mistakes only to have them not do the same for her.

"Those incidents weren't your fault. You couldn't have known --"

"But how could I not have? I trusted my instincts and they were wrong. So wrong." She turned her head away, trying to bury it in the pillow as the tears slid down over her temple.

"Don't doubt yourself." He nibbled up her inner thigh, soothing away the soft nips with gentle flicks of his tongue. "Look at yourself now, not as you were then. Back then you were young and didn't know any better."

She groaned as he swiped a long lick up her slit and then back down.

"And now?" Katrina asked, waiting to see what he would do next. She lifted her head to look down her body and watched as he parted her pussy lips.

"Now, you're trusted and people trust you. They would fight for you. I would fight for you," he murmured before blowing on her throbbing clit. Heat rushed through her as pleasure shivered along her nerve endings. He sucked the nub into his mouth and tugged before releasing it with a pop. "You are worthy, beautiful. So worthy of all of this, of all you've worked for. Let go."

It was so easy to listen to him, to believe it, and yet a small part of her fought to hold on, to grasp the last edges of the pain from the past.

"It's not going to be easy. And you're not going to heal overnight, but we're here for you, all of us." He grazed the top of the sensitive bundle of nerves with his teeth before flicking his tongue over the top. She groaned and wrapped her legs around his head, trying to pull him closer.

"Trust me like you did before. Open up to me." He sucked her clit into his mouth while pushing first one finger and then a second inside of her. She rocked her sex against his mouth while he thrust the digits in and out of her sopping cunt. Her orgasm built as a heaviness in her belly that grew and curled, winding tighter and tighter with each shove of his fingers. He released her clit and kissed his way up her body, moving so slowly.

"You bound yourself to me without ever asking for the words back," she said. "How could you do that? Make that promise?" The words came out thready and filled with need.



"Because I trust that you won't break my heart."

The words tore something inside of her. A sob formed in her throat as his fingers picked up the pace.

"Because I need you to live. This world would be nothing without you."

Tears slipped down her cheeks, flowing faster and faster with his words.

"Because to me, past and all, I want to be with you, and I'm willing to wait forever for it."

"Braydon," she sobbed out. Katrina came as she called out his name. The orgasm unraveled, spreading fire through her body. She trembled under so much emotion and pleasure.

"Shhh, it's okay, babe, I'm here. I always will be. Not going to leave you ever again," he whispered as he withdrew his fingers.

She knew that, could feel it to her soul that what he told her was the truth. As she floated in the afterglow, she didn't feel any pain or fear, just the moment and him. In that instant she could see her world as it was. So many people loved her, cared about her and didn't ask anything of her. *How could I fear them leaving when they need me?* For the first time in her life she felt needed, truly wanted. In awe, she looked at Braydon, who lay on his side. He had only given to her, not taken anything from her. She tugged at the scarves, wanting to touch him, hold him.

"Not done yet." He gave her a wicked grin that caused her pussy to flutter and her heart to skip a beat.

With a deep breath, she met his gaze. "Use me. Fuck me. Bind me to you. I want to be yours."

Braydon's eyes glittered for a moment. His nostrils flared and he groaned. "I won't have you say the words, not yet, but the other stuff I can do." He reached up and ripped down the scarves. "Hold onto me."

He rolled on top of her and did a push up, balancing himself on his forearms. She wrapped her legs around his waist and waited.

"I'm so glad you're mine," he whispered before taking a kiss.

She threaded her fingers through his hair as he pushed forward, sinking into her welcoming heat. Katrina groaned against his mouth as his cock stretched her. She had missed this feeling. She had missed him.

Pulling her head back, she stared straight into his eyes. "Next time you need to leave, you take me with you. No excuses."

"Yes, babe." He grinned.

"You'll pay for that, smartass." She slid one hand down his back, stroking the hot flesh. She followed the ridges of his spine down until she ghosted her fingers over the crease of his ass. Cupping one muscular cheek, she dug her nails into the firm muscle, urging him on. Throwing her head back, she groaned. "Feels so good. Fuck me harder, Bray. I'm all yours."

He withdrew and slammed into her. The desire spiraled higher with each stroke. She thrust her hips at him, moving with him while tightening her hold around his waist and digging her heels into the backs of his thighs. Each push took her closer to that point where pleasure and pain melded and nothing mattered.

"Mine. Mine. Mine," he chanted.

"All yours," she agreed, pulling his head down for a kiss. Their lips molded against each other as the rhythm of their bodies increased. Her mouth opened, allowing his tongue entrance, sliding and twining against hers, mimicking their lovemaking. The heat grew and their bodies became slick with sweat. Her nipples rubbed against his chest, creating arcs of electricity that shot straight to her sex, increasing her pleasure. The pressure within her grew, becoming bigger and bigger until it burst. She threw back her head, crying out as she came. Braydon followed her, his cock expanding and jerking before he spurted his seed deep in her vagina.

Cradling her close, he rolled over on his side without slipping out from her. She could feel their combined juices trickling down her thighs. He placed a kiss on top of her head. She let out a sigh. This time her world felt stable and grounded. She felt more sure, both of herself and him. It was a new beginning, and she couldn't wait to see where it led her. Unwinding her legs from around his waist, she scooted back,

mourning the loss of his cock inside of her. Katrina climbed out of bed and held out her hand. "Come, let's shower and make something to eat. I want to hear all about the two weeks you were away."

Braydon grinned. "As you wish, beautiful."

When he rolled off the mattress and took her hand, she felt grateful he was in her life and that he believed in her. This time she knew someone wouldn't abandon her, that there were a lot of someones who wouldn't leave her all alone. She vowed to never betray their trust or doubt them ever again.

"What are you thinking about?" He brushed some hair off of her face.

"How I'm going to enjoy tying you down for round two and getting payback." She grinned as his gaze became heated.

"You can try but you'll have to catch me first." Before she could respond he took off into the bathroom.

She shook her head. "At least life won't be boring with you around." Katrina took off after him, meeting him in the bathroom. He scooped her up in his arms and gave her a possessive dominating kiss before kicking the door closed.

## **Selena Illyria**

Interracial author Selena Illyria was born with an overactive imagination, great curiosity and a love of writing that pushes her imagination. There are many worlds she'd love to explore, from paranormal to sci-fi, cyberpunk and beyond.

Are you willing, dear reader, to step into her worlds? If you do, feel free to poke around. Mind the pixies. They can be very um... excitable by newcomers. \*wink\*

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