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CLEOPATRA'S
Men

EVE LANGLAIS

Cleopatra's Men

By

Eve Langlais

Cleopatra's Men by Eve Langlais

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Cleopatra's Men

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ISBN: 978-1-60088-627-0

Cover Artist: Sable Grey

Editor: Lynne Anderson

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Cobblestone Press, LLC

www.cobblestone-press.com

Prologue

Cleopatra ran, the silken material of her robe tangling between her legs. Her sandaled feet slapped against the paving stones as she desperately tried to recall the layout of the lower passages in the palace. Even below ground the sound of screams and the clash of swords reached her as Octavian's army invaded her refuge in Alexandria. *I can't believe he still hates me for the love his uncle Julius bore me.* Rational or not, he was determined to drag her down. Panting, she stopped to orient herself and heard the sound of feet pounding as they raced to catch her. *I need to hide.*

Self-preservation made her move even though her muscles protested the vigorous exercise. She slipped into a room whose door lay ajar and looked around for a place to hide but the room was barren with only cobwebs and dust adorning it.

It was too late anyway. Feet scuffed on the floor behind her and she whirled to face her pursuer—and most likely death. Cleopatra almost sighed in relief when she saw Marc Antony, a relief that was short-lived, for the smile on his face when he saw her sent a chill down her spine. That and the fact he stalked toward her swinging his gleaming short sword.

Maybe it's simply one of his sick games. It would be like him to try and frighten me even in the midst of this calamity.

"What are we going to do, Marc?" she asked, licking her lips, unable to look away from the hypnotic sway of the blade.

"We are doing nothing." He stopped right in front of her, the fabric of his toga brushing the silk of her robe.

Trepidation made her want to shake, but as Queen of Egypt, she couldn't give in to her baser instincts. Live or die, almost a family motto, it had governed all of her choices thus far in life. The weak, also known as the opposition and, more sadly, her siblings, had never grasped that simple life lesson. She had, and the bloody consequences came back to haunt her now and then.

"Nothing? But Octavian draws near. Now is not the time to give up. There is still time to escape. I have a place, a hidden place where we will be safe." In truth, she would prefer to flee alone. Marc had long ago lost his appeal—not that he'd offered much to begin with—or ever given her a choice, for that matter. In her quest to survive, she'd given up her body and pretended love, for no one would ever replace Julius in her heart. Not to mention, Marc's brutal ways were shocking even to one such as her. She sported many a bruise both now and in the past that attested to his easily roused anger.

"Flee like a coward? No. I tire of running. And I have no interest in hiding." He spat the words. "I am Marc Antony, decorated Roman general and husband to Octavia. You remember my wife, don't you?"

"You mean the one you divorced so you could marry me. I don't think Octavian will forgive what you did to his sister." Part of the reason Octavian was now attacking—other than Cleopatra dallying with his married uncle—was because of the dishonor done to his family by Marc Antony.

Marc grinned jovially, which contrasted with the cold expression on his face. "Octavian will not dare harm me, not when I shall offer him a prize he cannot refuse."

"Wh-what prize do you speak of?" Cleopatra couldn't help the shiver of fear at the crazed gleam in his eyes, a look she'd seen countless times before. It never boded well and usually resulted in puddles of blood.

"I shall give him the biggest prize in all of Egypt—your head. He will forgive me much when I hand him on a silver platter his victory over the Whore Queen."

Cleopatra wanted to scream and tell him it was because of him and

Julius that people called her whore. Bedding her and boasting of it publicly while never mentioning her lack of choice in the matter—at least she'd loved Julius. Marc she'd borne, for had she not, he would have killed her. For one liberating moment, she thought to tell Marc when he grunted and heaved over her body, she thought of another, one who fulfilled her sexual needs. However, given his current state of mind, that probably wasn't a good idea.

She waited too long to speak. Marc bared his teeth at her and raised his sword.

Dread stroked its way down her spine and raised goose bumps on her flesh. "Wait," she cried, her mind scrambling for a way to escape. "I thought you loved me."

Her words stopped the sword's killing descent. "Love?" He sneered. "I loved the power I wielded through you. I loved having a queen submissive to my whims and as a receptacle for my seed and cock. But now that your power is gone, there are prettier girls, younger girls. You will serve me better dead."

"But—" She searched in vain for something, anything to delay the bite of his steel. "A boon. One last boon before I die."

"What is it you would ask for?" he asked impatiently.

"A kiss. Please, Marc, kiss me one last time that I might go into the next life with at least the memory of warmth to carry me." She almost gagged on the words. But she knew Marc wouldn't resist. It was one of his greatest failings, other than his stupidity and brutality. He could never say no to a willing woman.

A beefy arm snaked around her waist and he drew her up roughly to kiss her, his unshaven jaw scraping across her tender skin, his tongue pushing between her teeth. Cleopatra held her breath and pretended enjoyment. She snaked her arms around his torso and mimed enthusiasm in his sloppy embrace. As she moaned in fake pleasure, she smoothly pulled the dagger from the belt at his waist.

She stabbed him swiftly in the back even as she bit down on his tongue to break the kiss. With a bellow he staggered back, his hands frantically pawing at his back and the knife he couldn't reach. Blood

dribbled down his chin from her bite as he sagged to his knees, his jaw slack and his eyes wide in disbelief.

“Bitch. I shall make you pay for your betrayal.”

Cleopatra wiped her lips and smiled at him coldly. “Good luck with that. You’re dying and will never hurt me or anyone else ever again. Enjoy your stay in Hell.”

“I’ll be seeing you soon, whore.” As Marc spoke his last words, blood bubbled up and frothed from his mouth. He fell forward with a hard *thump* just as Octavian’s soldiers poured into the room. They surrounded her and gripped her arms tight.

Struggle against these types of numbers was useless, so Cleopatra didn’t bother and held her head imperially high. Octavian had finally caught her, but if he thought to use her like so many men before him, he was sadly mistaken.

I’m done with being used by men who think they can rule me because of the swords between their legs. I’ll kill myself first before it happens again.

After almost a year of imprisonment, she did, going to her death by the poison of an asp smuggled in by her supporters. Her final thought as she lost consciousness: *I’ll take my chances in Hell.*

Chapter One

The portal to Hades opened onto an alley and a figure flew out, an unusual yet evident expulsion. The being managed a tidy tumble and flip, allowing her to land lightly on her feet.

Seconds later the portal closed and the hooded figure, who'd whirled quickly, cursed. "Fuck. I can't believe I got kicked out of Hell."

Slender fingers pulled back the hood, and Cleo shook her hair, a wild golden mane that contrasted nicely with her tanned skin. She'd ditched her ebony tresses a long time ago, loving this new age of perms and peroxide.

Cleo shook a fist at the portal. "I'll be back, Lucifer. I earned my spot in Hell and you know it."

Silence answered her and she sighed. It figured that the one male in the whole world, or should she say, the known planes of existence who wasn't affected by her charms would be the Lord of Darkness himself. Not only that, but he kept blaming her for the riots her presence in Hades caused. Was it her fault that the sight of her enflamed her followers and the lusts of damned males and demons alike? Alive, she'd boasted she was the living incarnation of the goddess Isis. In death, while she didn't quite become a goddess in truth, she wasn't like the other damned souls in Hell.

Of course the first two thousand years of her descent into Hell hadn't exactly allowed her to enjoy that unexpected aspect, what with her punishment for her sins and all. In a surprising twist for both her and

Satan, while she'd done many vile things, some of her most violent acts had fallen under the "necessary good" category as deeds required by her as ruler of Egypt to keep her people safe. Who would have believed killing her brother before he could kill her would fall under the category of self-defense? Then, in a surprise her adversaries in Hell still screamed about, some of the nastiest crimes attributed to her were disproved by Lucifer. The looks of incredulity when they realized she hadn't killed her sister on hallowed temple ground had made her stick her tongue out at the vast audience that had attended her trial.

She didn't emerge completely unscathed. After all, she had done some vicious things. After spending a few hundred years receiving the lashes she'd earned—she'd learned not to scream with pain after the first decade—she served the rest of her time with grace, scrubbing the many latrines of Hell. Satan assigned her the debasing task as a way of teaching her that she was no better than anyone else. Ha. She knew better. And so did those who served alongside her. Her supporters rallied around her and offered to do her chores for her as she watched and supervised. Even funnier, Satan couldn't punish her for shirking her duties, not when he discovered she didn't compel them to take over her punishment, but that they had offered and even begged to help her.

Eventually, her years of repayment to humanity for her sins came to an end and she found herself free after a fashion. While once human, she also was more than the simple souls in Hell. Not a demon, but not quite a goddess. She knew her state of existence baffled Lucifer especially since, like a damned soul, she was bound to the confines of the nine circles of Hell because she couldn't create a portal out—although she did finagle trips to the surface by calling in favors with her demon friends. But as had always been the case in her life—and now death—things happened around her. And that was when the problems began. Her supporters, who were also fanatics, petitioned for her to reign at Satan's side as his queen, even though Satan was opposed.

Actually, so was she, for that matter.

But the movement to have her reign over them snowballed, so Lucifer did the only thing he could. He kicked her out.

Reminiscing would have to wait, for the soft thud of footsteps had her reaching for daggers that weren't in their sheaths.

"Fuck and double fuck." She'd lacked time to pack before being bum-rushed out of Hell and given a second chance at life. Or unlife, depending on how she looked at it. Looking down at her feet, she cursed again for she wasn't even wearing her stilettos. No, she'd gone for comfort with a pair of chunky heels. Well, it wouldn't be the first time the odds were stacked against her, and she refused to remember how poorly those times had sometimes gone.

Pivoting, she smiled and tilted a hip. "Hello boys. Looking for me?"

From the darkness emerged a familiar face, braced on either side by pure hulking demonic muscle. Great. Marc Antony had found her again and this time he'd brought friends.

"If it isn't the Whore Queen," he sneered. "I've been looking for you."

"And Lucifer's looking for you. He's not happy you've escaped again." She actually had no idea what Lucifer thought. She just liked seeing the color leach from Marc's face. He looked like shit. His punishment in Hell had left its mark and from what she'd heard, he wasn't even close to being done. *Marc was such a bad, bad boy when he was alive.* She didn't blame him for escaping his punishment when he got a chance, but for some stupid reason, every time, the bastard came sniffing for her blood. A dumb move, given that harassing her in Hell made it easier for his jailers to find him.

"I'm too smart for those idiots in Hell. But don't worry about me. I'm so glad I found you. I've been waiting for this moment for a long time."

"Jeez, are you still bent about the whole 'I killed you first' thing? Have you forgotten that I only did what you planned to do?"

"Whore, because of you I've spent centuries being tortured."

"Oh and my time in Hell was such a walk in the park? It was over two thousand years ago. Give it a rest already. You suffered, I suffered, we all suffered."

"And yet here you are free while I am still being punished when everything was your fault. You bespelled me with your body and forced me to do your evil bidding."

Cleo rolled her eyes. "Oh please. Don't tell me you believe your own lies now. You and I both know you did a lot of bad shit. Don't try and blame me. I freely admit to the things I've done, like killing you, for instance. You know what's funny, though, is your death counted as a good deed instead of bad." She just couldn't resist taunting him.

Marc's face turned an interesting shade of purple and spittle flew when he yelled, "Kill the Whore Queen!"

Cleo shook her head and tsk-tsked him as if he were a naughty child. Marc really needed to learn some new curse words. His insults were so old—like BC old.

The muscled gray demons—a breed she'd not encountered before in her time in the pit—came at her from two sides. While they carried no visible weapons, their long claws projected from their stubby fingers and she knew from experience how sharp they were, and depending on the caste, poisonous. Instead of waiting for them to reach her, she ran at the one on the left. It braced itself and held out its arms to grab her. At the last moment, she dropped to the ground and slipped under the demon in a slide that would have made a baseball coach drool. She popped up behind the demon and landed two hard kicks on the backs of its legs, making them buckle.

She laced her hands together and swung like them like a club at the back of the beast's head, further throwing it off balance and into the path of the other demon coming at her.

A sound from behind had her ducking just as Marc swung his sword. *He almost decapitated me.* Having died once, she wasn't sure what would happen if she were killed a second time. Nor did she want to find out. With the odds against her and still weaponless, Cleo dashed toward the alley entrance and, hopefully, human witnesses. While Marc might be crazy, even he wouldn't dare break the prime rules: *don't let the mortals see us doing supernatural shit and keep the demons out of sight.* An unknown power, not of Heaven or Hell, took care of those who intentionally defied

the unwritten law. A law she was now banking on.

A third demon appeared from the shadows a few feet in from the alley exit and blocked her way.

"Damn it." This was not shaping up to be a good day.

Marc chuckled nastily from behind her and she whirled halfway, trying to keep everyone in sight at once while retreating to put her back to the wall.

"There's no escape, my treacherous queen. Now kneel before me. Maybe I'll let you suck my cock for old times' sake before I take your head."

"I'd rather screw a zombie with a decaying dick." Her insult hit the mark, and though she didn't think it was possible, it enraged Marc even further. Perfect. Angry men tended to make mistakes. Growling in rage, Marc Antony, flanked by his demons, advanced on her and if she'd had money to lay a bet, she wouldn't have wagered on herself. The situation seemed rather bleak.

But then something unexpected happened. From the night sky dropped a dark figure, landing between her and her enemies. All she could see was his back, which was wide and stretched the linen of the black dress shirt he wore. She couldn't tell his hair color in the dark, but it was long and brushed his shoulders. And his ass in his tight jeans was absolutely scrumptious.

When he spoke, his voice held a touch of an accent and she grinned at his words. "Four brutes against one delicate flower? How unsportsmanlike."

"This doesn't concern you so leave before we kill you too." Marc spoke cockily, not sensing the danger that Cleo could smell coming in waves off the stranger.

"Do you threaten me?" Cleo could hear the laughter in her rescuer's voice. "This is my city and you are trespassing. You are the one who needs to leave else you accept the consequences."

"Big talk for one man," said Marc, clearly feeling brave with his demonic backup.

"Ah, but I am not a man, and your time is up."

The stranger didn't run so much as he flew toward Marc and his demons. Cleo knew this was her chance to escape, but she found herself mesmerized by his Samaritan act—and the fact that her rescuer moved like a superhero.

With a blurring speed which reinforced his nonhuman aspect, he punched, kicked, and even at times bit the demons who attacked him. Cleo almost jumped in to help when the beast guarding the alley entrance came bull-rushing into the fray, but without slowing down, the stranger pivoted and somehow ended up behind the gray minion, his arm wrapped around its neck in a choke hold. Superior strength bent the demon's head back, exposing its neck. The man, who she realized belatedly was a vamp, sank his fangs in. Marc Antony, who'd stood back while the fight went on, didn't stay to see if he was dessert. He called a portal and dived back into the cesspool he'd crawled from to find her.

None of his demons followed. Incapacitated, they lay groaning and bleeding on the ground, downed in an act of violence that made Cleo kind of hot. *It's been a while since I've seen that kind of prowess in a man.* Not since Julius Caesar, her first—and only—love so long ago had she found herself so attracted to a man. Or in this case, a vampire.

Done with his feeding, her superhero pulled a black handkerchief from his pocket and meticulously wiped his face clean of blood. Then with a savage ruthlessness, he dispatched all the demons, stomping his booted foot onto their chests and crushing their rib cages and hearts. With each demon death, a vaporous black cloud arose as the body disintegrated. When none of the fighters remained, he finally turned to face her. Cleo swallowed. So far he'd proven friend, but as she knew all too well, oftentimes her enemies would fight among each other for the pleasure of acquiring her, or at least attempting to.

Since her death, Cleo allowed no man, beast, or other being to claim her. If she felt the urge, she took care of it and never with the same male twice. But in this case, she might have to revise her stance, for vampire or not, she found herself inexplicably drawn to him. *And he's the type I'll bet who takes and doesn't ask.* Normally that would raise her hackles but other than Lucifer, the Lord of Hades himself, she'd never encountered

someone with the strength this stranger displayed so casually. That excited her on several levels, which pissed her off, for she had no desire to be used again.

Now regretting her decision not to run when she'd had the chance, Cleo stood her ground as the vamp once again glided across the refuse-strewn alley until he stood before her. Even in the gloom, his eyes shone the brilliant blue of summer skies on a cloudless day. He wasn't as pale as she would have expected for one of his ilk, but neither was his skin dark. His facial features were pronounced with high cheekbones, a square chin, and a strong nose. His full lips curved into a mocking smile as she stared at him, her usual eloquence vanishing as she found herself mesmerized by him. Not a magical beguilement of the type vamps were known for, but a bodily trance as her body—and sexual needs, dormant for a while—woke and with a gush of heat and moisture to her sex, declared *I want him*.

He spoke first, his voice velvety and tinged with a hint of humor. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you for your timely arrival." She couldn't begrudge him thanks, for without him, things would have turned out quite differently—painfully so.

White teeth gleamed in a smile that should have been bottled and sold as a female aphrodisiac. Just ask her ever-dampening panties. Even the sight of his sharp canines didn't detract from his attractiveness.

"I am called Michael. And you are?"

"Cleo." She never used her full name, for obvious reasons. The nickname Whore Queen had stuck through the ages, never mind the fact she'd never had a choice in the relationships, real or not, that had given her that historic misnomer.

"Might I inquire as to why those denizens of Hell would want to kill a lovely creature like yourself?"

Cleo, with a shrug, settled on a half-truth. "Their employer was quite displeased with the manner in which I ended our relationship."

"And how did you end it?"

"I killed him and dispatched him to Hell," she said with a smile

that had sent multitudes running, but which made Michael chuckle.

"A lady after my own heart. Might I escort you home and ensure your safety?"

Cleo bit her tongue on her usual retort of *I can take care of myself*. Something about Michael, vampire and rescuer of damsels in distress, drew her. Why not indulge her curiosity? It wasn't like she had anywhere to go. Even more intriguing, she had no empire for him to lust after, nor did he know her actual identity, which meant his interest was solely based on her. *How novel*.

"Alas, I've just arrived in town and have yet to secure accommodations. Perhaps you could recommend a hotel of quality?" And hope that her bank account in the mortal world still held funds she could draw on.

"I know the perfect place. Come, I shall take you there."

Michael stepped closer and Cleo's nose tickled with his scent, a pleasurable mix of men's cologne and power. For those who claimed there was no such smell, she begged to differ. It was rare but unmistakable. She'd only scented it twice before, faintly with Julius Caesar and overwhelmingly so with Lucifer. But she had little time to ponder the interesting fact that Michael's scent almost rivaled that of the Lord of Darkness, for instead of guiding her on foot, he wrapped muscular arms around her and a moment later they were airborne.

Holy fuck, we're flying!

Chapter Two

Michael held the curvy female who was more than human, yet not demon or vamp. He'd never encountered one such as her before, but for the first time in millennia, his interest was aroused, along with other parts of him.

When he'd come across the battle stacked against her, he hadn't even hesitated. A damsel in distress and especially against demons? The choice was clear. That, and he was hungry. While bitter tasting, demon blood was quite potent. He only wished the male, the leader of the attack, hadn't escaped like a yellow-bellied coward. Michael's instinct screamed that male would come back for Cleo.

Cleo. Also known as Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile, last Pharaoh of Egypt. Her shortened name and bleached hair hadn't fooled him. Having lived longer than almost all known beings, Michael was well acquainted with history. He'd actually lived many parts of it under various names and guises. He'd actually seen her once from afar during her days as Julius Caesar's mistress. He'd also heard the rumors of her misdeeds, not that he put stock in all of them, for he knew firsthand how history was retold often depended on the viewpoint of the person telling it.

Knowing her identity, he realized who the man was whose assassination attempt he'd foiled—none other than Marc Antony. What Michael found most interesting was, according to recorded texts, Marc Antony committed suicide when Alexandria fell. Yet Cleo claimed she'd killed him, an interesting tidbit, one which he wondered if his other

houseguest, soon to return from his trip abroad, knew about. But he'd debate that later. Right now, he had his arms full and his cock even fuller with blood as his desire raged for this woman.

He liked the way she calmly looked about as they flew at dizzying heights and speed. He also really enjoyed the way she'd wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her body against his. He loved that he could scent her arousal, a musky aroma that promised sweet delight. He couldn't wait.

In short order they'd arrived at their destination. His home.

He reluctantly set her down on the front steps, already missing the feel of her, and waited for her inevitable question and then refusal to stay with him. Women could be so predictable, he'd learned over the centuries.

"Your home, I assume?" she asked, glancing at the large dual door with its intricate metal knocker and archaic carvings in its wooden surface.

He nodded in reply and prepared to counter her argument against staying. But Cleo was determined, it seemed, to break the molds of those who'd come before her.

"Perfect. I'd prefer an east-facing room, then. I like to see the sun rising in the morning. I'll also require some clothing and a meal as I haven't eaten in hours and find myself starved. Oh and toiletries, please. I really need to wash the stench of brimstone off me. Such a pity Lucifer with all his magic can't stop the sulfuric ash from raining on Hades." She'd no sooner stopped talking than the doors swung open as his butler prepared to greet them. She swept inside regally, like the queen she'd been, and to his grinning amusement, still was.

He had a feeling his boring life was about to become very interesting. He couldn't wait.

Cleo held in the laughter at the dumbfounded look on Michael's face as she took imperial command of the situation. She wasn't stupid. She'd known he expected her to protest the accommodations and only accept after token resistance. Screw that. She hadn't become a queen of manipulation by doing what people expected. Besides, if she expected to be treated with respect, especially by his staff, then she needed to enter his

home in a position of power, tenuous as it was.

Not only that, but when she came to his bed—for she had no doubt that was where they would end up, since she'd noticed his impressive erection pressing against her during their thrilling night flight—she wanted to cement her position as an equal, not a chattel.

She swept into the impressive mansion and stood silent in front of the butler, a staid fellow dressed in starched tails. She arched a brow at Michael, who grinned unabashedly. "Chester, please prepare the golden room for Cleopatra, former Queen of the Nile and my guest."

Cleo gasped as he let her know that he was well aware of her identity. And yet, he'd still brought her home. She wondered for a moment at his game, but the time to ponder would have to come later as she laid the framework for her stay. "Hello Chester. As I was just telling your master outside, I have a few needs that I am sure you can easily accommodate." She gave him a list of demands, including a few extra she hadn't mentioned outside such as the need of a chauffeur the following day to run errands and for a list of establishments where she might outfit herself.

As she ordered his man, Michael watched her with hooded eyes, leaning back against the wall, arms crossed over his impressive chest. His presence distracted her, especially since she could now see him clearly in the light, and by all the sinners in Hell, he was bloody gorgeous.

His hair was a dark blond with lighter streaks, giving it a sun-kissed look. His face—all chiseled planes, full sensuous lips, and eyes dancing with mirth—was classic and reminded her of Vikings of old. His body, as she knew, was muscled and covered in clothing that begged for a helping hand to strip him.

Desire thrummed through her body, and her already damp cleft throbbed with the need for someone to touch it. *Hmm, for Michael to touch it, with his tongue, and then his cock.*

So long had it been since she'd felt such sexual need that she regarded him almost hungrily, a meal for the savoring, but she mustn't seem too eager—too slutty. She would have to hold her libido in check for him to seduce her. That was what most men preferred. *So much for my vow*

about not getting involved with a man, but maybe this time, since I only have myself to offer and not a kingdom loaded with riches, it will be different. It would be nice for once to take a lover not because I need protection or because of threats but just because I want to fuck him until we're both too sore to move. She wanted to feel the intimacy and pleasurable rush that came from hot, sweaty sex. Michael seemed perfect for the task. Pleasing to the eye, courtly in his manners, and best of all, already powerful, which meant perhaps for once, she'd have a lover who wasn't in her bed trying to manipulate her.

Her demands given to the butler, she didn't wait for Michael to offer. She walked into the nearest room to check it out. She entered a plush living room partitioned into multiple seating areas, including a section of print couches and love seats forming a circle. Wingback chairs were grouped around a low table upon which sat a chessboard, the pieces in play. A baby grand piano sat in a corner and a fire crackled hotly in a stone faced fireplace. Cleo moved further into the room until she stood in front of the flames, the heat nothing compared to the inferno building in her.

What is it about Michael that attracts me so? Not since Julius have I felt this kind of attraction and sexual need. It both troubled and excited her. She'd forsworn men after Marc Antony—his abuse made her hate males who thought a cock gave them the right to control her. Besides, the pickings in Hell had been slim. Her few sexual escapades when her frustration became too much had occurred with ordinary men whom she met on her excursions Earthside.

Since meeting Michael, she had a feeling, a gut instinct really, that her long years of solitariness were coming to an end. The realization made her sad. Part of her reason for abstaining from a relationship was the futile hope that she would find her first love, Julius Caesar. A fruitless wish, for after his death, she'd never seen him again, not even during her sojourn in Hell. She'd always wondered if Julius had somehow made it to Heaven. A baffling thought, for his crimes had been as great, if not greater, than her own.

She sensed more than heard Michael glide up behind her, a tall,

dark presence at her back that made her knees weak. With an iron will she'd cultivated over hundreds of years, she steeled herself only to sag helplessly when his breath tickled her neck. He caught her as he nuzzled the soft skin under her ear, his lips tugging at her lobe.

"Cleo." He purred her name as if it were an endearment. She couldn't help her sigh. "I've just met you and yet already I sense we shall have a marvelous time together, both in bed and without."

"What makes you think I'll bed you that easily?" she said, her voice breathless.

He chuckled, the sound sending shivers up her spine and weakening her legs even further and making her lean her head back into him. "Ah, my little queen. I can smell your desire. I must say, I am eager to taste it."

Cleo's sex tightened and a tremor rocked her body. He'd disarmed and aroused her completely while barely touching her. "Ah, but if I let you seduce me so easily, will you respect me in the morning?"

"I fear that I will more than respect you. I see no need to play games. I want you, and for more than just a quick fuck. At my age, I look for more than fleeting pleasure. I am seeking the one who will make me feel whole. The one who will share eternity with me as both friend and lover. One who will remind me what it is to feel again, live again."

He hugged her tightly as he spoke, a comforting embrace to go with his pretty words, but Cleo had heard such words before. No matter that they affected her differently when coming from him. "You've known me what, an hour? What makes you think I'll fall for that line?"

His lips tickled along the sensitive skin under her earlobe and she almost forgot to breathe. "You sense it too. Will you deny it? How long has it been since you've desired someone? And yet, the moment you met me, the attraction was instantaneous. You feel yourself drawn to me just like I am to you."

"For today. And what of tomorrow?" She desired him and couldn't deny he spoke the truth. Crazy and out of character, given her long abstinence from emotional intimacy with men. But something about Michael drew her.

He chuckled against her skin again, and she shivered with the blissful sensation. "What can I do to make you trust me? Swear in blood? Vow not to touch you for a year and a day? Kill all your enemies? Tell me what I must do and I shall give it to you. I've waited an eternity to meet you. I can wait longer if you require time for me to prove the sincerity of my words."

Cleo wasn't sure if it was some new superpower of her own that made her hear the truth in his promise, or if it was wishful thinking—and a horny pussy. Whatever the case, she actually believed him. That, and she was done waiting. She wanted Michael—naked and fucking her *now*. She could decide if she wanted to stay in the morning after she'd eased her lust—several times. She turned in his embrace and slid her arms up around his neck. "What are you waiting for then?" she asked huskily.

He lowered his head and brushed his lips across hers. A feathery touch that made her blood sing in her veins. Back and forth he slid his mouth sinuously across hers, teasing her with the light touch. Frustrated at his slowness, she caught his lower lip with her teeth and sucked it. His grip tightened around her, pressing her against his hard length—and she meant *hard*. She wanted to wrap herself around him—naked.

But instead of stripping for some wild sex on the rug, he pulled away from her.

Why is he stopping? Her face must have expressed the question she didn't voice for he said, "We'll continue in a moment, First, you need to eat."

Yeah, a nice fat sausage. Sexual jokes aside, she was famished, something she'd forgotten when he touched her.

He hadn't, and while she'd found herself absorbed by his teasing kiss, a tray was set on the low table before the fire. Michael folded his long legs and sat down on the rug. He tugged her down, but when she would have sat beside him, he manhandled her into his lap. Even with his rod poking her bottom, Cleo found herself comfortable, *as if I've come home*. A foolish, fanciful thought, but one she allowed herself to enjoy for its novelty.

She surveyed the tray of finger foods, from small steaming puff

pastries to sliced fresh fruit with whipped cream for dipping. Before she could select something to eat, Michael leaned forward and snagged something.

"Open your mouth."

"I can feed—" She didn't finish her sentence, for he popped the flaky morsel into her mouth and she could either chew or spit it out. She chewed and swallowed.

She turned sideways on his lap so she could look at him. "Please don't—" He kissed her and silenced her words.

The embrace didn't last long but he'd no sooner removed his lips than he pushed more food into her mouth. Cleo gave up trying to argue. Besides, she'd never had a man feed her before. Not to mention, Michael really seemed to enjoy it. After each delicious bite, he kissed her with tingling, panty-wetting effect. So while one hunger became sated, another grew in its place. But he seemed determined to ensure she was well fed. *Maybe he's making sure I have energy for sex later.*

Ready for dessert, she snagged a piece of fruit and dipped it. She brought it to her mouth as he watched avidly. The strawberry with whipped cream left a frothy swath on her upper lip. He leaned forward and swiped his tongue across her skin, removing it. "Yummy," he said softly, pulling back once again.

Cleo wanted to scream with frustration. But she refused to say anything and give him that kind of power over her. He began feeding her fruit with whipped cream, tasting her mouth after each bite.

Finally, though, she could take no more. "I'm full," she said.

"Not yet, but you will be," he said with a nudge of his hips that made his hard shaft bump against her backside.

Then he kissed her. Deeply. Masterfully. And this time he didn't stop. Cleo clung to him, panting, her channel squeezing when he slipped his tongue into her mouth to slide across her own. Hot and wet, they might have kissed for hours had the sound of a clearing throat not interrupted them. Michael parted his lips reluctantly from hers but he kept a firm grip on her as he stood. Cleo clung to him, her legs too wobbly to support her.

"Milord," said Chester, looking at a point above their heads. "The lady's room is ready and a bath has been drawn for her."

"Excellent. I think that will be all for the night, Chester. Thank you."

With a stiff bow, the manservant left the room and Cleo looked forward to resuming their kiss. Apparently Michael had other ideas—or he was trying to tell her something about her smell—for he swept her into his arms and carried her out of the room.

"I can walk," she said, although truthfully, she enjoyed his manhandling of her.

"And I can fly. Your point would be?"

Cleo laughed. The vamp had a sarcastic humor she enjoyed and she showed him how much by leaning up and licking his neck. His hold on her tightened and with a blurring speed, she suddenly found herself in a room decorated in shades of gold. *How interesting. He's not as cool and collected as he's pretending.*

Set on her feet, she turned around and took in the sumptuous room from its thick golden carpet to its honey-colored wooden furniture. She especially liked the king-sized bed with four posters covered in a brocade comforter threaded with different threads of varying golden colors from the glittering to the dull. It was like being in a treasure cavern and she was its primary jewel.

"Now did I hear something about a bath?" she said, turning to face him. She punctuated her words by unbuttoning her pants and sliding them down over her hips, revealing her skimpy underpants. Her avid audience of one watched with glittering eyes and again, faster than she could see, he moved and stood behind her, quickly divesting her of her clothing.

She shivered as the air in the room hit her feverish skin, pebbling her nipples and making her more aware than ever of the dampness in her cleft.

A rustle of fabric sounded and she whirled to see Michael nude, and oh, what perfection. Like a Viking of old, he was big, broad, and built. His wide chest with ridged abs led down to a tapered waist, muscular

thighs, and jutting proudly like the prow of a dragon ship, a thick cock made for worshipping. It jerked when she licked her lips and she smiled, a wicked little grin that made him growl her name.

"What?" she asked, feigning innocence. With a wink, she sashayed into the bathroom, feeling his heated gaze as he watched her bare ass walking away. A stinging slap on her posterior as he zipped past her made her blink then grin. Playfulness, anticipation, and desire. It had been an eternity since she'd last felt any of those emotions and she realized now just how much she'd missed them.

Her smile widened when she entered the bathroom and saw Michael already seated in the tub—if you could call an eight-foot-square sunken basin overflowing with bubbles a tub. With a throaty laugh, she dashed to the edge and hopped in.

Michael almost came at the appreciation on Cleo's face when she first beheld his nude body, but his heart stuttered when he saw the sheer delight and joy that lit her expression when she noticed the tub. Like a mischievous child, she jumped in with a gleeful laugh and splashed him.

Gone was the imperial queen and cutthroat survivor. In their place he discovered fun, warmth, and a burgeoning feeling he'd thought to never feel again—affection.

Only a few hours or so since they'd met, and yet already a bond grew between them. He didn't fear it being one-sided. He'd read people for too long and often he knew them better than they knew themselves. He knew her actions were calculated for effect, but ultimately genuine.

Caught up in her enthusiasm, he joined her in a water fight involving splashing, dunking, and tickling, play that left them breathless and panting. The fleeting slick touch of her body against his fed his ardor, and when he grew too eager to play any longer, he stopped it by simply grabbing her slippery body and rubbing it against his.

Immediately her eyes became hooded, her gaze languorous. With her wet hair slicked back, her skin moist, she looked like a sea nymph risen from the ocean.

He bypassed her waiting lips to press his mouth against the hollow of her throat. She clasped his head with both hands, her fingers threading

through his damp hair. He could feel her pulse fluttering against his mouth. Her blood, neither demon nor human, beckoned him with a siren call.

He resisted the allure, for he had another destination in mind. He licked his way down, nuzzling his face between her breasts. The water impeded his progress. He clasped her around the waist and swung her up to sit on the side of the tub. He stood between her legs, her moist core pulsing against his chest as he latched onto a pert nipple then tugged on it.

She hissed in pleasure and wrapped her legs around his upper torso, pressing her sex harder against him. He cupped her breasts, kneading and playing with them as his mouth toyed with each bud in turn.

She was so responsive to his touch without his biting or beguiling her. Though he was attractive, there was something about him that frightened human women, as if they sensed his otherness. It was one of the many reasons he no longer indulged in sexual play unless his need became overwhelming.

Her enthusiasm could be measured by how tightly she gripped his shoulders as he teased her breasts. In his excitement, his teeth nicked her skin and he tasted her fleetingly before pulling away. *What in the world is she?* For even the tiny drop of blood he'd tasted was the sweetest he'd ever had. And potent too.

She hadn't even noticed his little scratch and he was tempted to latch on and suck her blood like some fledgling with no control. *But I don't want to scare her or chase her away.*

It was one thing for her to accept he was a vampire, and quite another to allow him to feed on her even if it would amplify her pleasure a hundred times. If he had his way, though, he'd spend the next millennia with her at his side. He had plenty of time to introduce her to his needs.

She mewled and squirmed against him. Ignoring the thin line of blood on her breast, he kissed his way down her belly to her trimmed curls. He knelt before her on the bench in the tub.

Her legs spread wide for him, exposing her sex in all its pink, silken

glory and he brought a finger up to trace the delicate edge of a plump lip. She shuddered and he saw moisture seep from between her folds. Unable to resist, losing control like a callow youth at the sight of her desire, he pressed his mouth to her core and licked her.

She cried out and her body quivered. He snaked his arms to wrap around her thighs, anchoring her against his face. His new heaven. Her musky scent was the sweetest fragrance he'd ever smelled. Her cream flowed like honey and tasted better than any decadent dessert he'd ever partaken of before. He spread her pussy lips, stabbing his tongue inside her. She clutched at his hair, tugging it in wild abandon. The pain of it excited him for it bespoke better than words her desire. He loved it. He left off torturing her channel to stroke her clit. Swollen, her little nub stuck out from its hood and he teased it relentlessly. He flicked his tongue across it, sensing her pleasure building higher and higher. When she came too close to the edge, he stopped and changed the motion. He sucked it, squeezing it with his lips. A little nip on her bud almost made her come, with him not far behind, she excited him so. He felt the quiver that rocked her body and knew he'd drawn it out as long as possible. She must have known it too, for she lay back on the cool tile of the bathroom floor and beckoned him with her knees drawn up and spread. His savage, lusty side wanted to dive on her offering and pound into her, but as her lover, he knew that while they would both have fun, she'd have bruises to show for it in the morning. But that didn't mean the trip to the bed couldn't be pleasurable. He scooped her up from the floor.

"Straddle me, Cleo," he ordered, the soft silk of her skin against his hands making his cock twitch. With his hands on her waist, he held her up with effortless strength as she guided him into her moist sex.

He gritted his teeth at the jolt of pleasure that rocked him. He almost came, especially when she wrapped her legs around his waist and in a quick move, sheathed him completely.

He dug his fingers into her ass cheeks as he tried to regain control. Apparently Cleo wasn't looking for control, for she leaned forward and sucked on his neck.

"The bed," he gasped.

"Fuck me," was her reply. He would have, but she took control, somehow bouncing herself on his shaft while squeezing her pelvic muscles. He tried to hold on, determined she come first, maybe twice before he came. He hadn't counted on Cleo. She still sucked on his neck hard enough to leave a mark, but she stopped for a moment to say, "Come for me." Then she bit him.

Cleo was holding on to her orgasm by a thread, determined to make Michael come first. The man was truly gifted in the erotic arts, for never before, not even with Julius, had she ever found herself so aroused and out of control. *I need to regain the upper hand.*

Hence why she told him to come and then chomped him. Oh my, the reaction. He pistoned her while he stood and held her. His cock thrust deep and hard, each strike hitting her sweet spot and making her tremble. She inadvertently clamped her teeth down harder on his skin and the metallic taste of blood coated her tongue. But she couldn't let go, for her body had reached the point of no return. She came apart in his arms, her orgasm shaking her with the intensity of a seven-point earthquake. He joined her in her pleasure, his whole body going rigid. He cried out her name as his cock pulsed thick and hot inside her.

Cleo hugged him tightly and barely registered the fact he staggered into the bedroom. She did notice, though, when they landed on the bed. He made sure she stayed on top as they hit the springy mattress and she lay against him, her body slick with sweat.

I think I need another bath.

She giggled. His chest vibrated under her cheek when he spoke. "I might regret this, but I am going to ask anyway. What is so funny?"

Cleo propped herself up on her elbows and looked down at him. He looked deliciously rumped and before she answered she gave him a quick kiss. "I'm dirty already. I think we need to wash again."

He chuckled. "I think the only way you're ever going to end up clean is if you shower alone, for I can almost guarantee if we get in that bath again, we're going to do very dirty things."

"Promise?" She grinned at him mischievously.

"Give me a few minutes to recover and I'll show you."

"Well, while we wait, old man, I think it's time you spilled a little about yourself. You seem to know who I am, so I think it's only fair that I get to know more about you."

"Where would my little queen like me to start?"

"First with a better nickname. I'm not a queen anymore and given how history has chosen to view my actions, I'd rather not be reminded."

"Very well. I'll think of something new. In the meantime, a condensed history of me. I guess I'll start with the most shocking part first. I used to be an angel."

Cleo looked at his face, which was completely serious, and digested his words. "An angel?"

"Yes. I'm even mentioned in some of the Bibles as the archangel Michael. I was the commander of God's army."

"But that would make you—"

"Really old." He grinned, looking boyish and nothing close to his several millennia old age.

"You fuck pretty good for a geezer," she teased.

"And you look great for a cougar."

Her jaw dropped at his remark and she waited for anger to make her slap the smirk off his face. Instead she surprised herself by laughing. "Okay. I promise not to make any Viagra or walker jokes. Go on. How does an angel with big fluffy wings end up a vampire?"

"The wings, first off, aren't physical wings, but metaphysical ones. Those I kind of miss. They were total chick magnets," he said with a wink. "Although my flying ability does make up for it somewhat. As for the reason I lost my angel status, it was actually pretty stupid. I said no to God."

"You said no to God?" Cleo's eyes widened. Then she cracked up. "Oh we're a pair," she said between giggles. "I got kicked out of Hell by Satan for being too helpful." She didn't detail the help in question was giving Lucifer a wife and queen he didn't want.

"Well, I got kicked out too after I refused to lead the army in a slaughter of some infidels whose only crime was in not believing in Him. Because God isn't allowed to kill and I was already immortal, something

even he couldn't take away, he instead cursed me. I became a vampire, doomed to walk the earth until the end of time."

"So all vampires are fallen angels?"

"Not quite. Some are fallen angels. Some are progeny of existing vampires and others, dead souls that through some special deal with forces I've yet to meet, give their soul to a being that resides in neither Heaven nor Hell."

"Another supreme force? I've never heard of that." Then again, theology had never interested her much.

"Not many have. Whatever it is doesn't advertise itself. I've got to say, you've taken this remarkably well. Most women seem to find the idea of an angel turned vampire repugnant."

Cleo shrugged. "Who am I to cast stones? I killed my brother and anyone who stood in my way to the throne. I manipulated people to keep my reign secure. I was a mistress to two men who used me to advance themselves." She laid herself bare now, warts and all, and forced herself to breathe as she waited for the warm glow in his eyes to change to the disgusted look she'd become accustomed to from others.

"And? Your past is your own. I will not judge you, for I too have done things for the sake of survival and power. But I have to ask...I got the impression from the history texts that you were quite fond of Julius Caesar. Your words seem to imply otherwise."

Cleo squirmed, uncomfortable with the shift in conversation. *How awkward, talking about an ex-lover while naked on top of a new one.* But she wanted no secrets between them. She'd had enough of them in her last life. "I loved Julius. He was my first, no matter what the books say. But there's no denying he used me and the position I held. When he died, he left me with a reputation that no amount of polishing could erase. I also had no one to protect me from the next man who wanted my prestige and wealth. Marc Antony didn't give me much of a choice. He wanted my power. He took me to his bed, and I made the best of it, even given his brutish ways, but I never loved him."

Sorrow clouded his eyes. "I'm sorry you've been treated so shabbily. I can promise you that I am not with you for a throne or power.

Although I do have to say your body is pretty awesome." He proved his point by sliding her down his body until her bottom hit up against his hardening shaft.

Cleo shook her head and smiled at him. "I've got to admit when Lucifer kicked me out of Hell, I never expected to end up having sex with a vamp who used to be a fallen angel. I'll have to send him a thank-you note."

Michael laughed, a pure, genuine sound that made her shiver. She scooted back up to kiss him, too horny again to take the time to explore the strange new feelings he created in her. In a blurring movement, she found herself under him, her lips possessed in a fierce kiss that left her breathless. He pulled back to look at her while the head of his cock teased the entrance to her sex and she caught a glimpse of his fangs.

"How come you didn't bite me?" she asked with curiosity.

"I wasn't sure how you'd feel about it."

"Does it hurt?"

He lowered his head and tugged on her bottom lip lightly with his teeth before answering. "It doesn't hurt as my saliva releases endorphins into your blood, and if I do it at the moment of orgasm, it will hold you at that rapturous point until I stop sucking."

"You mean it would result in, like, multiple orgasms?"

"Multiple orgasms squared," he replied, thrusting into her welcoming channel.

Cleo grabbed at his shoulders, her nails digging in as he swirled his shaft inside her. "Do you want to bite me?" she asked on a gasp as his cockhead prodded her G-spot, making her whole body clench in pleasurable agony.

"I want to claim you as mine and give you pleasure like you've never known," he whispered against her lips before thrusting in and out of her in a sudden steady cadence that left no room for talk.

She wrapped her legs around his shanks as he pounded into her willing flesh, bringing her ripe body quickly to the edge again. As she hovered on the brink, in a day that had already brought so many surprises, she thought *what the hell*. "Bite me," she whispered.

The moment the words left her mouth she wondered if she should take them back.

Too late.

His mouth latched onto her neck and with a small pinch, his fangs sank in. Cleo screamed in absolute pleasure as her orgasm rushed over her. And over her. And over again.

In the foggy mist of pleasure that became her world, she could vaguely hear someone keening in rapture. *I think that's me.* Further thought became impossible as bliss grabbed her in its maw and left her limp and more sated than she'd known a woman could be.

She would have said thank you, but wrung dry, she fell into a deep sleep, cradled in arms that held her tight. Before she passed right out, she could have sworn she heard a whisper.

"My precious goddess. I shall worship you forever."

Chapter Three

Cleo awoke alone in the gigantic bed even though she remembered, if faintly, falling asleep in Michael's arms. *Michael*. Just thinking of him made her smile. *Is this what love at first sight, or should I say bite, feels like?*

She missed him already, which was so unlike her. *I don't need a man to be happy*, but the fact remained, she'd have loved to have woken up in his arms. She'd wager the light streaming through the window probably accounted for his departure. Sunshine and vampires didn't mix. What a shame, because there was nothing better than making love in the sunlight on a bed of soft green grass. But, as her sore body could attest, Michael had no need of exotic places to make her body sing. The man's prowess was incredible and his technique...Mmm, the best she'd ever known.

To her annoyance, thoughts of Julius rose. Her first lover, he'd introduced her to the pleasures between a man and a woman. Much older than she, he'd lacked the vitality of a younger man, but he'd made up for it in skill. Even more astonishing, he'd listened to her, even when she in her ignorance and youth had acted like an idiot. When he'd died, she mourned his death and even contemplated following him. In her twenties, though, and in full bloom, she'd boxed away her feelings for him and had gone on only to find herself in an abusive relationship with Marc Antony who, in her grief and desire to feel loved again, had fooled her. Only too late had she realized her error—at the end of his fists—but as she'd done all her life, she'd grinned, borne it, and survived.

Well, until her suicide. Not that she'd had much choice. Octavian's

plans for her would have been a lot more painful and bloody, the sick bastard. But she'd gotten the last laugh, dying on her own terms.

And now I seem to have received a second chance at life—or unlife. I'm not sure who or what I am anymore. Strangely enough, she looked forward to rediscovering herself, on her own terms this time. Which seemed at odds with her frolic with Michael the night before, but she got the sense he wanted nothing of her, but her. He wasn't after power or prestige and didn't seem interested in dominating her. *He just seems to want me.* And she wanted him.

Rolling over in bed, she heard a crinkle of paper and she tugged a sheet out from under her head.

Good morning my lovely goddess,

I hope that nickname meets with your approval. If not, I shall find another that conveys my appreciation of your beauty and charm. Now that you're laughing at me and my sappy side, I am sorry I wasn't there to wake with you. While I sleep, though, please know that you have full run of my home and staff. As well, you have carte blanche to spend what you need in outfitting yourself. I've amassed a fortune over my lifetime that I could never spend even if I tried. Although I do hope you'll try your best.

I look forward to dining with you this eve and even more to the dessert I have planned.

Your lover,

Michael

The note he'd left her was disgustingly cute and romantic, and yet Cleo couldn't help giggling and sighing over his words. Michael was truly determined to win her over. *I'll admit, I like his style.* She especially liked his offer to spend his money on necessities. While her own money was possibly accessible, a great concern of hers was that touching it would create a paper trail that would somehow lead Marc Antony to her again. Besides, it would be a refreshing change to spend a man's money, given that in her past life, her lovers had always taken advantage of her generous nature and coffers.

She showered, her soapy hands sliding over a body still sensitive from Michael's touch the night before. While drying, she noticed the faint

puncture marks in her neck. They'd healed so much already they were more like red dots and would probably disappear in a few more hours. Her new self seemed to have better than human healing abilities. *How cool.* She dressed in her leathers, which Chester had miraculously cleaned somehow while she slept, then skipped downstairs looking for food.

From out of nowhere popped the distinguished butler with a solemn, "Brunch is served. If milady would please follow me."

Used to the pompous antics of staff who took pride in their master's status, she didn't giggle like her new humor seemed wont to do, but followed him regally.

He seated her and clapped his hands, starting the stream of platters that arrived by a platoon of servants, all dressed smartly in black-and-white uniforms.

How traditional. She liked it. As she ate, she made her requests. "I will need a car with a chauffeur for the day." Driving, she'd discovered on her last trip to the modern world, was a knack she just couldn't seem to acquire. She preferred old-style chariots with a team of horses.

"Already arranged, milady, along with a trio of bodyguards."

Cleo stopped eating and fixed the butler with a stern look. "I did not ask for nor do I need some pretty-boy muscle. They'll be of no use against the threats I usually face. Just arm me with a pair of silver-edged daggers and I can take care of myself." For in the daylight hours, demons rarely dared walk. The nastiest predators tended to only come out at night. Well, except for her. Stores beware.

"While I am convinced of milady's prowess in defending herself, my lord was most adamant that you receive supplementary protection. But fear not, these are not regular mortals I've selected to guard you."

Cleo arched a brow. "Really? And what, pray tell, are they?"

"Lycanthrope," said a gravelly voice from behind her.

Cleo didn't turn, thus forcing the speaker to move until he and two others stood in her line of sight. Even then she did not speak, inspecting them instead, her gaze roving over their bodies. Dressed in jeans and T-shirts, they were muscled nicely. They sported close-cropped hair, clean-shaven jaws, and cocky attitudes. The leader of the group was older

and thicker than the younger ones and he grinned at her stare. "Thaddeus at your *service*."

She didn't return his smile, engaging as it was. As was her habit, she needed to ensure he understood who was in control, so she took the wind out of his sails. "You and your children will not do at all."

The young ones growled and their brows creased in anger, but Thaddeus laughed. "My pups might be young, but I assure you, they are deadly."

She mentally commended him for keeping his calm at her direct insult. "I'm sure you are capable of killing, else Michael wouldn't have assigned you guard duties. But where I am going, you will stand out too much. All will know I am guarded."

Now it was his turn to frown. "That's the whole point, though."

Cleo now smiled, even as her eyes remained flinty. "But I want them to attack me. It is best to take care of danger when you expect it, than to have it sneak up on you unaware."

His smile came back, but this time it was less jovial and showed the predator that hid within him. "Understood. My men and I will change so that we blend into the crowd and we'll arrive in separate vehicles. I promise you won't see us, but we'll be nearby should something happen."

"Excellent." Cleo would have to commend Michael later on his choice of head guard. Apparently he'd learned the lesson that muscle is nothing without a brain. The lycans left to prepare for their undercover mission and she drummed her fingers on the table.

She would never admit it aloud, but after the previous evening's attack, she was a little nervous about going out. She could take care of herself against reasonable odds, but chances were the next time Marc Antony came after her, he'd stack the deck in his favor. The werewolves would even things out, but they didn't reassure her like she knew Michael's presence would.

Which annoyed the fuck out of her. Yes, she liked him, a lot. But depending on a man, even a hot, super-powerful one who seemed besotted was something she'd sworn not to do again. *And here I am falling in that trap quicker than ever.*

But spending his money was another thing. So shopping she went, alone with her invisible entourage.

Good as their word, she saw neither hide nor hair of her bodyguards as she spent an obscene amount of money outfitting herself. She wasted hours shopping, stopping only for coffee and a Danish. Nothing attacked her. Marc Antony didn't appear to shout "Boo!" like a bogeyman. And she went home almost disappointed.

She hated waiting, for she knew it was only a matter of time before Marc found her again. A hatred like his wouldn't be scared off by Michael's strength. Marc was stupid and sneaky. He'd wait to pounce when she least expected it and was alone.

Unless I hunt him down first.

Cleo rolled the thought around as she walked, laden with bags, into the mansion through the door held open by the efficient Chester.

"I trust milady spent an enjoyable afternoon."

"Oh I spent all right." Cleo laughed. She'd cemented her position with Chester, and now that he knew she was boss, after his master of course, it was time to win over his heart with charm. Loyal servants were priceless.

"Being paid for services rendered?"

The words, thrown at her in a mocking voice she'd once known so well but never thought to hear again, made her freeze. A chill swept through her.

Impossible....

Cleo whirled, bags falling from unfeeling fingers to thud on the floor. Her breath caught in her throat and her heart stilled, for there *he* stood, halfway down the grand staircase. He looked younger than when she'd known him, his golden curls not yet touched by gray, the lines in his face smoothed, the sneer on his mouth ugly, and the fury in his eyes heartbreaking.

"Julius," she whispered. Then she fainted.

Chapter Four

Michael woke abruptly. *Cleo!* Their bedroom antics the night before—along with the delicious blood he'd taken from her—had forged a bond between them, one he didn't quite understand but that allowed him to sense her to a certain extent. He felt her sharp shock as something or someone upset her. Then, her mind went blank.

Concerned and even a little scared, he rose from his bed stowed in a secure room in the basement of his home, hidden from all but his most trusted servants and his one friend. Michael flew up the stairs, his feet only skimming their surface in his hurry.

The fading daylight shining through the windows flanking his front door made him squint and tickled his exposed skin unpleasantly, but not enough for him to stop when he saw Cleopatra crumpled on the floor. Chester knelt at her side, checking her pulse.

In a blurring moment, Michael held her cradled in his lap.

"Isn't that touching," said a voice dripping with disgust.

Michael looked up and saw him standing on the staircase. He bestowed an angry glare on his best friend of the last few hundred years: Julius Caesar, former lover of his paramour, Cleopatra.

"You're home early," said Michael accusingly.

"Too late, I would have said, judging by how the harpy has already sunk her claws into you."

"What did you do to her?" asked Michael, lifting her with ease and carrying her into the living room while Chester scurried to yank shut the

drapes in the room, blocking out the remnants of the sunlight.

Julius followed him. "I merely said hello. Not my fault she up and fainted."

Michael could hear the truth in his words, but he could also clearly read Jules' stiff anger and hatred. Cleopatra had always been a hands-off topic between them. Michael now wished he'd pushed for more information, for Jules, while bitter before, now seemed livid at the unconscious female in Michael's arms, and even more strangely, at him. Unless....

"Are you jealous we have become lovers?" If you could call one night of absolute bliss a relationship. Then again, he planned a repeat performance tonight, tomorrow, the next day... And, well, maybe after a few hundred years, he'd give her a night off.

Julius laughed bitterly. "Jealous that you've taken a whore to your bed?"

In a flash, Michael deposited Cleo carefully on the couch, flew across the low-slung table separating him and Jules, and punched him.

Jules went flying back, crashing into the wall with a hard *thud*. A human would have died from the blow, but Jules just shook his head and sneered at Michael.

"What? Can't stand the truth? She didn't acquire the nickname Whore Queen for nothing."

"I'm not a whore," said Cleo, who'd regained consciousness. The catch in her voice stabbed at Michael. He rushed to her side and gathered her to him, offering her comfort. She wouldn't take it and pushed at him so she could stand to face Julius. "You of all people should know that. After all, you were the one to take my virginity."

Julius just snorted in disdain but Michael saw the momentary softening in his face as he remembered the event.

Cleo kept talking. "I was faithful to you up until your death, even though you were married to another, even though everyone laughed at me and insulted me. I loved you, and this is how you remember me?" Her voice cracked and Michael wanted to hit Julius all over again.

"Loved me? Is that why you jumped into bed with that pervert

Marc Antony? Is that why you fucked anyone who would help you remain queen? And what about your sister? You had her fucking killed. The woman I thought I loved would never have done that."

"After all we shared so long ago, I cannot believe you would think that of me. Fuck you, Julius. It's because of you that Marc thought he could have me. I never had a choice. He made my life a living hell and killed everyone close to me, including my sister. You're just as bad as everyone else, automatically believing the worst of me. How dare you!"

Cleo's words hit Julius like well-aimed bullets and Michael didn't stop the damage. Cleo had a right, for Michael heard the truth as she spoke. And apparently Julius could hear it too for he opened his mouth to speak, perhaps to apologize, but Cleo ranted on.

"And you? You speak of betrayal. Look at you, not dead after all. Care to explain that, Julius? You want to tell me why you let me think you were dead all this time? Why you let me mourn you? Love? You never loved me, you bastard. You used me just like Marc did. Well, I'm fucking sick of it. I can see the truth now, and how I wished I'd never wasted one moment of my life pining for a love that never existed."

Julius finally found his tongue and Michael could only shake his head in resignation as his friend still refused to admit his mistakes. "You talk of using, and yet here you are with Michael, fucking him and then spending his money."

He didn't say it, but the innuendo was clear: *like a whore*. Cleo looked at Julius sadly as she moved to stand next to Michael, who tucked her trembling body tight to his side. "I thought I might finally make the choice of being with someone because he makes me smile. I'm not after power, or prestige, or even his money. I've had them all and they never helped me when I hurt or cried alone. I just want to live and laugh. Is that so much to ask for?" She turned and buried her face in Michael's chest. He held her close as her shoulders heaved and her tears dampened his shirt. Michael regarded his friend as he reeled. Julius opened and shut his mouth, as if searching for the words to retort.

Michael inclined his head toward the door. Julius took the hint, and left the room. Michael would have to deal with him later. For now he had

his arms full with Cleo, who sobbed against him, but not for long. Her inner strength and will were unable to cave to weakness, even of the emotional kind, for long.

She pushed away from him and he gave her space, bracing for what would come.

"You fucking bastard. Why didn't you warn me Julius would be here? How could you do that to me?"

"He was supposed to be abroad for another month."

"So when were you going to tell me?" Her accusing gaze stabbed him, for she was right. She hadn't deserved Jules' ambush.

"Soon. I swear. Believe me, had I known Julius would arrive home so soon, I would have told you or brought you to one of my other homes. I didn't mean for you to be hurt."

"I'm not hurt." She lied poorly as she scrubbed at her tearstained face. The regal queen, reduced to a woman like any other who had been hurt by love. "So does he live here or something? What's the deal?"

"Julius lives with me. He's been my best friend and companion for several hundred years now."

"Did—" She swallowed, and taking a deep breath, finished her question. "Did he ever talk about me?"

"No."

"Oh." The answer seemed to shrink her, but a moment later she found her spine and straightened again. She pasted a phony smile on her face. "Thank you for your hospitality, but if you could have your chauffeur drop me off at a hotel, I think that would be best for all."

"No."

"Fine, then I'll call a cab."

"No." Michael held on to his temper by a thread. He wasn't angry with Cleo, just the unfair situation fate had placed him in. He'd finally found the one who made him remember sunshine and happiness, and in a cruel twist, his best friend would be the reason she left.

"I'm not staying here," she said, her chin jutting obstinately.

"I'm not letting you leave me." He knew it was stupid to make the ultimatum. He'd blame it on his testosterone. His age. His ego. But the

result was the same. *I'll make it up to you, I swear, but you can't leave me.*

Her back stiffened and her eyes turned hard. "No one, especially not a man, tells me what I can or cannot do." She pivoted and walked out of the room.

And Michael, for the first time in his existence, chased after a woman.

Chapter Five

Cleo reeled and held on to her burning anger lest she drown in wracking sorrow. She stalked, unseeing for the tears in her eyes, toward the front door with no further plan than her need to leave. Escape this house and its cruel ghost from her past. *And even worse, leaving the first ounce of happiness I've enjoyed in forever.*

Instead of walking out the door, she walked into Michael's broad chest.

"Don't go," he ordered, softened with a, "please."

He blocked her way, so she stood still with her arms crossed under her breasts. She was wearing a black cocktail dress that hugged her lush curves and dipped low over her cleavage. She'd bought it and then worn it home to please him. To his credit, his gaze stayed locked to her face.

"Let me go," she said, having a hard time keeping her voice steady.

"No."

Pissed at him and the whole male population in general, she tried to go around him. He easily sidled sideways, blocking her again. She shoved at him, but he didn't budge. Frustrated, the tears she'd worked so hard to hold in finally flowed down her cheeks, and suddenly it was just too much. She lost it. Cleo pummeled and kicked Michael, crying and cursing incoherently. He didn't move to block any of her shots, nor did he retaliate. He simply stood and let her vent until, sobbing, she leaned against him.

Still he didn't speak, just wrapped his arms around her tightly.

Moments later, she felt the kiss of the night air on her skin. The sun had just set, but when she opened her eyes, high up in the air held securely in Michael's arms, she could still see the pinks and purples of the sunset as it stained the horizon before nightfall. It was beautiful and calming. Under control again, she cringed at her earlier freak-out. *Talk about a major temper tantrum.* One Michael weathered.

He flew them through the sky as the colors streaking the horizon faded and the cold brilliance of the night with all its starry glory appeared. He didn't speak, and Cleo was thankful. She wasn't sure what to say. Her mind was awlirl and she didn't even know where to start—or what to feel.

Eventually they landed, not on a rooftop with a city view, but by the edge of a lake. In the midst of wilderness, the water and its shore were unsullied. Michael stamped down a bower for them in the tall grass and sat cross-legged. He beckoned her to sit and when she hesitated, he dragged her down into his lap, facing outward. Cleo gazed at the lake, the fat three-quarter moon reflecting in its surface. Around them, silence reigned as the forest recognized a predator come among them. Even Michael's soothing presence couldn't mask who she was.

Cleo fiddled with the hem of her dress. She waited for him to say something. The silence grew. "I'm sorry I hit you." It was the best opener she could think of.

"I deserved it. I am so sorry I did not tell you of my houseguest. I never wanted to do anything that would hurt you and one day later, I've already failed miserably."

Cleo sighed. "It's not your fault. I thought Julius was dead. And even with everything that happened to me after his supposed death, I never expected he'd hate me so much."

"I never knew either. He never spoke of you or his time in Egypt. He's not too keen on remembering the past."

"What happened to him?"

It was Michael's turn to sigh. "I'm not sure if it's my place to say. But perhaps the knowledge will help you understand why he is so bitter now." Michael paused as if collecting his thoughts. "Julius didn't quite die

as everyone believed, obviously. He was converted into a vampire by a sadistic vampiress. She changed him, then drugged him so he wouldn't wake. She allowed his family to entomb him. But she didn't fetch him right away. She let him wake, alone in his tomb, crazed with bloodlust. When she eventually came for him, he was a beast with the instincts of a killer. He went on a killing rampage through the countryside. He came to his senses, bathed in the blood of a family, all killed by him down to the youngest child. Only then did she retrieve him and bring him back to her abode. She experimented on him, using forbidden magic that returned his youth to him, but left him a changed man. He became a toy for her, one which she performed depraved acts on. She also waged a mental war, feeding him lies that made him hate all he'd loved in his past, twisting his emotions and taking from him every solace."

"That's why he hates me." It wasn't so much a question as a revelation. Much as Cleo wanted to hate Julius, hearing Michael's abrupt account evolved her anger into pity. Pity for the degradation and pain a once proud and loving man had found himself subjected to. And while it didn't excuse him for his words to her, she could at least now understand them.

"Julius doesn't hate you. He hates himself. It's just easier to take it out on others."

"So how did he escape?" she asked, even though she suspected the answer.

"I killed the bitch. I rammed her body, kicking and screaming onto a stake I'd pounded into the ground and let the sun roast her to ashes."

Cleo shivered. For a being who'd once borne the title archangel, he had a bloodthirsty side—one she approved of. "I'm glad you made her suffer. And thank you for telling me. But how does knowing this help? I mean, where do we go from here?"

Michael tightened his arms around her and rested his chin on top of her head. "If you really feel you cannot share the house with him, then I shall send him elsewhere."

Stunned didn't describe her reaction to his words. "I thought he was your best friend?"

"He just treated my paramour with great disrespect. I meant what I said last night. I've waited a long time to find you. You mean too much to me already. If I must choose, then I choose you."

Cleo opened her mouth to tell him to throw Julius out on his ear. To beat him within an inch of life. But, truly, it wasn't Julius' fault he was so bitter, and besides, she was a big girl. She could handle a little name-calling, especially knowing where it derived from. "I can't let you do that. He's your friend and he doesn't deserve losing his home. He can stay. And I'll stay too, but I won't be held responsible for his demise if he insults me again." She'd kick his balls so hard, he'd cough them out. And then she would let Michael at him.

Michael seemed surprised at her capitulation. "Truly? Tell you what, if he dares say one unpleasant thing to you again, I'll hold him down so you can beat him."

"I'll hold you to that." The tension broke and relief flooded her. *I don't have to leave.* Restless all of a sudden, she stood and turned to look at Michael. And she looked some more at what he wore, or rather what he didn't. In his rush to come to her rescue, he hadn't dressed. Heat instantly flared to life between her legs for he had the tousled look of someone who'd jumped out of bed. His hair was ruffled and sexy. His chest taunted her with its eminently lickable bare expanse of skin and when he stood to face her, his track pants hung indecently low on his hips. She took the few steps that separated them to place her palms on his bare chest. Cool to the touch, his skin was smooth, hairless, and much too tempting. She leaned forward and pressed her lips over his left breast where his heart thudded slowly.

He might be a vampire, but he's not dead like legends say. He breathes, has a heartbeat, and he can get smoking hot. It made her wonder if he'd taste like a man or if he'd have a unique flavor. No time like the present to find out. Nothing like sex to make it all better.

She licked her way down his chest to the waistband of his trousers only to have him pull her back up.

"Much as I'd enjoy what I think you are about to do, could we go somewhere a little more comfortable?"

"Spoilsport." She leaned up to kiss him and he met her halfway, the intensity of his embrace stealing her breath.

She twined her arms around his neck and pressed herself against him, feeling the hard prod of his cock against her lower belly, the thin material of his bottoms not holding it back at all. She slid a hand down and grabbed him through the material, smiling when he groaned.

"You're going to kill me, Cleo."

"Not until you've pleased me," she sassed back, slipping her hand inside the waistband of his pants to stroke his engorged flesh. She didn't play for long, for he used his speed and strength to sling her over his shoulder. A heartbeat later, they were aloft and zipping through the night sky.

Apparently the lake didn't lie far from the house, for quicker than she could think, he'd landed in front of his home and walked through the front door. She waited for him to put her down, but he seemed content to carry her caveman style.

"Put me down. What will Chester think?"

"He'll think I'm getting lucky," he said with a chuckle followed by a firm smack on her bottom.

Cleo shrieked in mock outrage and flailed at his back. He replied with a hand up her skirt, his fingers pushing aside the flimsy material of her panties to delve inside her moist cleft. She moaned and squirmed against his hand, wanting more. And the damned vampire, the tease, instead of rushing to the nearest bed, walked at a normal mortal rate.

Not for long. "Oh Michael, I can't wait to wrap my lips around your cock and suck it. I think I might even sit my pussy on your face while I blow you. Smother you with my sweet cunt. Did I tell you I like to bite? I think I might bite your cock, squeeze it—"

She lost her breath and voice when in the blink of an eye, the hall disappeared. He dropped her on a bed, and not the one in which she'd slept last night. Before she'd even registered that fact, she was naked and so was Michael. *I'm really starting to like all these superpowers of his.*

He covered her body with his own, skin to skin. She arched up against him, delighting in the feel of him. But today she wanted a turn at

being in charge.

"Get on your back," she ordered.

"But I want to pleasure you," he groaned against her lips.

She almost gave in. His words sent liquid heat to her sex along with an insatiable urge to seat him to the hilt inside her. "Lie down now." She pushed against his chest, enjoying the solid feel of his smooth flesh under her touch.

With a sigh of mock resignation, he flipped onto his back and she sat up. The previous eve, consumed with lust, she'd only faintly registered the magnificence of his body. Now he lay at her mercy, his vast chest and jutting cock laid out like a tempting meal, one she couldn't wait to indulge in.

"Hands under your head, fingers laced," she commanded. Only when he complied did she straddle his waist, the wet heat of her sex resting on his muscled stomach, which clenched in response. Leaning forward, she kissed him lightly and moved back before he could capture her lips.

"Don't move," she said, her breath already coming faster. She traced the edge of his jaw with her lips, sliding her way over to his ear. She grabbed the lobe with her teeth, a gentle bite which made him suck in a breath. She toyed with his sensitive flesh, sucking it and biting it again. Done with his ear, she moved down his neck, licking it and then nipping the skin, followed by a hard suck. His body tensed beneath hers and she could see the muscles in his arms straining to stay where she'd ordered them.

She leaned up and smiled down at him. He looked at her with smoky eyes that glowed with his desire. She was tempted to kiss him, but instead she settled for stroking her hands up and down his chest, enjoying the ribbed feel of it, the skin taut, not an ounce of fat marring his sculpted perfection. She danced her fingers over his nipples which, already tight, puckered even more. She caught the tips with her nails and pinched them. She almost flew off the bed as he bucked. Squeezing her thighs tight around his waist, she pinched again and followed up with flicks of her tongue that alternated between his nubs.

"Cleo," he warned.

She shushed him. "Behave, or I will pleasure myself and force you to watch."

"You are an evil goddess," he said with a strained chuckle as she took one of his nipples in her mouth and sucked at him.

She laughed, a seductive sound that sent a tremble through his body. "I'll show you evil." Enflamed by his words and evidence of his ardor, she pushed the limits of his control even further by turning around on his body and sliding up his chest, placing her pussy inches from his mouth.

Then she pushed some more and took his cock into her mouth in one swift inhalation.

Prepared for his reaction, she didn't fly off when his body arched up off the bed. She held on tight with her thighs and clamped her mouth down firmly around his shaft.

"Cleo," he bellowed, but even amid her sexual torture, he kept his hands off her. But she hadn't said anything about his face, and as she sucked his long dick, he tilted his head forward as far as he could. While he couldn't taste her, he blew on her cleft, hot, moist air that made her sex quiver. It also made her honey seep onto his chest.

But Cleo had a mission. He'd fed on her cream already and now she wanted to taste him. She fondled his balls with one hand while she worked his cock up and down with the other. Velvet-covered steel, his shaft pulsed in her mouth as she bobbed to and fro on it.

Michael was incoherent behind her, his gasps and groans while his body trembled the sweetest sounds she'd ever heard. As his cock swelled more and more, she finally relented a bit and slid her body back the last few inches needed to butt her cunt up against his mouth.

He latched onto her with a ferocity that made her cry out around the prick in her mouth. He tongued her and caressed her, bringing her already simmering desire to a boiling point.

She lost her rhythm on his cock as he expertly pleased her pussy. She moaned, on the brink of orgasm.

"Tell me to fuck you," he panted, pausing only a moment in his

oral onslaught.

Cleo tried to find her cadence again on his cock but he flicked her clit with his tongue and she gave up. She rolled off him, panting, only to flip around and straddle him again, the tip of his cock nudging her plump lower lips. His hands remained laced under his head and he looked flushed—and so very sexy.

She lowered herself slowly onto him, gasping as his thick length filled her, deeper and deeper until he nudged her sweet spot. She paused for a moment fully seated on his shaft and rocked slightly, each motion sending a jolt of pure bliss throughout her whole body.

“Let me touch you,” he begged.

Instead of replying, she leaned forward and grabbed his wrists, stretching her body over his. Braced, she slid back and forth on his pelvis, grinding her clit against him while driving him deep. Her muscles clenched around his cock, which pulsed inside her. Faster she gyrated, trying to hold on, wanting to prolong the rapture. She lost it when he thrust his hips upward, hitting her G-spot hard.

With a scream to break glass, she shattered, her orgasm ripping through her with ripple after ripple of pleasure. She sagged against him helplessly, her muscles turned to putty.

But Michael wasn't done.

In a moment, she found herself on her back, her legs up over his shoulders, his cock plowing into her, so deep. He stoked her fading orgasm back to a feverish pitch and threw her over the edge again, enveloping her body in blissful, shuddering waves.

She gasped, keened, and panted until she thought she would die again.

His body tightened and she prepared for the gushing heat inside her, but once again he surprised her. He withdrew and quickly straddled her upper chest and thrust his cock between her parted lips. She had only a moment to taste her honey on his shaft before he came in her mouth, filling it with cream. She swallowed eagerly, his flavor surprisingly sweet especially considering his diet. She drained him, sucking at his wilting cock until he finally pried free with a laughing, “Enough.”

Cleo smiled back and licked her lips. "Delicious."

Michael chuckled as he lay back beside her and snuggled her against him. "You are indeed a goddess. My goddess."

"And you are my dark knight," she replied, burrowing closer to him, enjoying the intimacy. Being with him felt so right. And much as she'd vowed never to depend on a man again, there was something about Michael that made her say screw it. *What I feel for Michael is more than lust.* She had a feeling she'd lost her heart to him, or most of it anyway. Much as it galled her to admit it, especially after his hateful words, Julius would always keep a small piece as the man she once knew and loved.

* * * * *

Julius wanted to get drunk so bad, but his vampire blood processed the alcohol almost as fast as he drank it. Cleo's accusation rang in his mind.

"You did this to me."

For so long he'd been angry with her, an unreasonable anger perhaps, but one he couldn't halt. He realized it was stupid to expect her to remain celibate and unattached after his death, or undeath in his case. Yet when the vampiress who'd turned him had cruelly thrown in his face the undisputable truth of Cleo's involvement with Marc Antony, a pig and brute of a man, he'd become furious.

Never mind she thought him dead. Never mind the vampiress used him as her own personal sex toy for more years than he wanted to count. He'd expected Cleo to remain unsullied. Then the rumors from Hell had circulated. Cleo was fucking demons. Cleo was blowing Satan. It seemed everyone had a story about Cleo, the Whore Queen.

But the thing that angered him most? As soon as he'd seen her walking through the door, her hair blond, but her face and body and even her laughter the same, his first thought? *I still want her.* Forget having her, though, for she now bedded Michael. And even worse than her fucking his best friend was realizing how wrong he'd been about so many things.

Blinded by jealousy, it had never occurred to him to question the

rumors. He'd believed every fucking lie and wrongfully hated her for over two thousand years.

When she'd defended herself, he'd sensed the truth, a vampiric ability that he now cursed for it was so much easier to believe the worst of her.

Julius cried out in frustration and threw the glass of whiskey he'd just poured at the wall.

And now even though I know the truth, I'll never have her, no matter how much I still love her. For she was Michael's now and he could not betray the man who'd saved him from the vampire bitch who'd tortured him for so long.

I wish things could be different, though.

Michael came to find him just before the dawn, the scent of Cleo clinging to him and making Julius close his eyes as he fought a jealous urge to rip his friend's throat out. Not a good idea, for Michael could kill him without batting an eye.

Julius schooled his features as Michael gazed about the wrecked room before facing him and raising one eyebrow in question.

"I'll clean it up." *Actually, I need to do more than clean,* thought Julius, surveying the wreckage.

"I'm not worried about the furniture, or kindling to be more accurate. But I am sorry to have caused you such turmoil."

"Who said this had anything to do with you?" Julius hated that Michael knew the cause of his loss of control. Jealousy—a vile emotion he'd never thought to experience again, and for Cleo of all people, a woman he'd wrongfully hated for centuries. *I can't lie to myself. I still love her.*

"Would it help to say I didn't expect to feel so strongly about her?" Michael said, shrugging apologetically.

"She has that effect. I know from experience." Julius couldn't help the bitterness in his tone. Cleo, like a succubus, drew men in with her charms, sucked them dry then tossed them aside. Or so he'd thought for so long. It had never occurred to him to look past innuendo and slanted historical views. Even now, knowing the truth, it was easier on his

emotions to believe the lies.

"Jules, my old friend. Why would you believe such vile rumors? You of all people know how often truth is twisted."

"Yeah, well, you know what they say about hindsight. It's too late now anyways. Even if I hadn't attacked her like some steroid-addicted jealous ex-boyfriend, she's with you now. I would never betray you like that." But he hated Michael for it even as he loved him as a brother.

Michael looked at him pensively. "It wouldn't be the first time we shared."

For a moment, Julius felt a surge of hope. *To hold Cleo once again. To show her with more than words how sorry I am.* He shook his head. "Perhaps had I not laid into her, it might have worked. But now? Now, she hates me."

"I don't agree. I think she still cares for you."

"I highly doubt that. Besides, how can you even think of sharing her?"

"I care for Cleo, more than I would have imagined possible and in such a short time. But I am neither blind nor stupid. You are and will always be her first love. Much as she might revile you for the moment, I don't think it will last. I don't want her to have to choose between us. And if I have to share her, I would do so with one I can trust."

Julius' mind whirled with the possibilities. A golden ray of light broke through the hard shell he'd encased himself in since his death, and his heart warmed from the cold stone it had turned into. The path would not be easy, for him or her, even if the payoff could be priceless. However, it could also end up in misery. "I don't know."

Michael clapped him on the back. "Think about it. I love you like a brother, Jules. I would not see you unhappy, and much as I care for Cleo, I would gladly share her with you. That was not the main reason for my visit, though. We've been invited to the Faerie court on the morrow. I would like you to come with us."

"I'm not in the mood for a party," said Julius. How can I smile and act like nothing is wrong when I'm still reeling from my mental reevaluation of Cleo and the discovery I still love her?

"I care not if you scowl all evening. I am more concerned with Cleo's safety. Since I can't bring my bodyguards inside to protect her, I'd hoped you'd come and be another set of eyes and muscle to look out for her."

Julius' brow creased. "Why? Is she in danger?"

"Very much so, I fear. I met her the other night as she was being ambushed by Marc Antony and a demon goon squad. I think it's just a matter of time before he shows up again to cause trouble."

Marc Antony, her lover after his death whom he'd believed had taken her heart. Wrong. And now that bastard Marc, who'd forced her to be his whore, threatened her. Julius said, "I'll think about it."

Michael left him and Julius went to find his special room before the dawn did. His mind whirled. He already knew he'd join Cleo and Michael on the morrow. The thought of her coming to harm sent an icy shiver through him. He also couldn't help wondering, *could I make it up to her? Make her love me again?*

Visions of him and Michael loving her, fucking her, claiming her made his cock swell. *She'll never agree to it. She hates me now.* But his new undead status gave him the time he needed to make it up to her, and even more amazing, keep his friendship with Michael. With any other man or being, Julius would never have even considered sharing, but he owed everything to Michael, who'd saved him from an undead nightmare.

Besides, he knew from experience how intense sharing a woman could be. He almost came at the thought of how much more pleasurable it would be if that woman was Cleo.

I've got a second chance, so hopefully my mouth won't fuck it up the next time I see her.

Chapter Six

Cleo woke late, the sun already well past the midpoint. She'd spent a restless night—or morning, if she were to get technical. While Michael had erased for a few hours the shock of seeing Jules again, once he'd left her, dreams that were more like nightmares plagued her. And when she woke—often—her mind replayed over and over their disastrous meeting.

It hurt deeply to know that Julius, of all people, believed the foul rumors that abounded about her. When she'd given herself to him to save her people from his armies, she'd known to expect derision, but in the process she'd found love. To discover he'd never actually died, and even worse, thought so little of her as a person was a cruel blow.

Not that it mattered now. She had Michael. Her heart swelled with happiness as she thought of him. He made her smile. He listened to her. He laughed with her. He didn't care about her past. She was so falling in love with him. *But what if I'm wrong about him too?* Sure, he seemed to ignore history and innuendo to see the woman she truly was, but at the same time, she was no Girl Scout. When he eventually met her ruthless side, would he still care for her?

Oddly enough, she believed he would. *I hope.*

She bounded out of bed, in a better mood for having thought of Michael, who'd promised her a surprise tonight. She showered before dressing in jeans and a T-shirt that read "Super Diva". Then she went downstairs to snag a late lunch, actually more like an early supper, considering the advanced hour of the afternoon.

Chester, as usual, was the height of efficiency and fed her within moments of her arrival. When she finished, she got up from her seat to go for a run in the garden, but Chester waylaid her.

"The master has arranged for a hair and makeup artist for this evening's outing."

We're going out? Wicked. She followed Chester to a room she hadn't yet explored that resembled a hair and beauty salon with a hair-washing sink, mirrors all over, and a chair that moved up and down. Used to the eccentricities of the rich—after all, she'd indulged in a few in her lavish days—she seated herself and allowed the fawning male duo to do their magic. With a few pointers from her, of course.

Several hours later, she regarded herself with a critical eye as the pair with the dexterous hands beamed in pride. She smiled at what she saw.

Look out, world, I'm back and done hiding. Time to be me, whether anyone likes it or not.

* * * * *

Michael whistled in appreciation as his Egyptian goddess came down the stairs. She'd made great use of the tools he'd given her. Her platinum hair had been returned to her natural dark color, but in a striking twist she'd trimmed her hair to just above her shoulders with the bottom edge, about an inch or so in width, dyed a golden color. Her eyes were darkly kohled and mysterious, her lips red and wet-looking—his cock stirred in interest when he imagined them wrapped around it. The gown she'd chosen out of the dozen he'd had delivered was similar to the Roman toga. White and ankle length, it left her shoulders bare, scooped in the front to reveal a tantalizing hint of cleavage, and for contrast, she'd fitted a braided gold belt around her waist. And when she walked, the high slits on either side showed off her tanned legs almost up to her crotch.

"You look absolutely magnificent," he said, holding out his hand to her.

She tilted her head in acknowledgement and gifted him with a coy smile. "I'm glad you approve."

"I've got something else for you," he said, turning her around and pulling from his pocket a necklace made of the finest gold links that, when he placed it around her neck, appeared on her skin like a fragile filigree.

Michael crooked his arm for her and led her outside as Chester held the door open for them. As they moved down the steps, he stumbled when Cleo said, "I've got a present for you too. I'm not wearing any panties."

Why he felt like an immature youth around her with no control of his body or thoughts, he didn't know, but he loved it. He handed her into the limo and heard her gasp.

The reason was Julius seated in the farthest corner.

"Glad you could come, Jules," said Michael.

Julius inclined his head at him and then briefly looked at Cleo and said gruffly, "You look fantastic."

"Thank you." Cleo's words were soft and she didn't look at Julius when she spoke, although she did snuggle tight to Michael's side.

He put an arm around her as he resisted the urge to instead slide it through the slit in her dress to check her pantyless claim. However, that would be cruel of him with Julius sitting so close.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"A party."

"A vampire party?"

"No, a Fae one."

She said nothing for a moment. "You do realize, given their longevity and the beings they associate with, I will be recognized."

"I hope so. I am most honored that the most beautiful queen to have ever ruled on this mortal plane chooses to accompany me."

Michael quite enjoyed the blush he brought to her cheeks and held his fist in check at Julius' snort.

"You flatter me," she said with a pointed glare at Jules. "But there are many who, like your roommate over there, will have believed the rumors put out about me. They may not be nice."

"Then I will kill them."

Cleo laughed, a warm genuine sound, and he lost the battle. He kissed her, lightly so as to not ruin her lipstick but enough to bring a gleam to her eyes and for him to scent her desire. "Oh Michael, I wasn't worried about me. I can handle jerks, but I don't want to see you put in a bad spot because of your association with me."

"Let me worry about that. I meant what I said. I am proud to be with you and I'm not afraid to show it. And if someone dares hurt you with words or actions, they will face my wrath."

He'd rend them limb from limb. Even Julius treaded on thin ice. But for the sake of their friendship, he'd give Jules a chance. Uncomfortable as Jules had to be given their intimate banter, Michael could see the longing as well.

It gave him hope that all would turn out well, even if a small part of him wanted to keep Cleo all to himself.

They finally arrived at their destination, another manse like his own surrounded by acres of land. Bought years ago when humans began encroaching their forests, the Fae maintained the property through generations using glamoured humans to keep their secret safe.

A footman opened the limo door for them and Julius clambered out first, followed by Michael, who then turned around to help Cleo out. A long, tanned expanse of leg emerged first, the slit riding high and almost giving him a peek. Unfortunately, she stood and material covered her before he could see any pink. No matter. He'd see and taste it later.

Julius stood off to the side, scanning the shadows only dimly lit by pastel lanterns that proved more decorative than practical. As Michael headed up the steps, with Cleo's hand resting on his biceps, he sensed Jules trailing behind them. They entered the house and a knee-high fairy with a voluptuous woman's body squeaked when she saw them. She fluttered away on translucent ruby-colored wings and whispered frantically in the ear of another fairy, whose colors were more of an emerald blend.

Cleo tilted her chin higher, her face a stony mask. She appeared aloof but Michael could feel the tension thrumming through her. As they

approached the double doors thrown wide open that led into the grand ballroom, Jules, with a crease between his brows, sidled up and took a stance on her other side.

The majordomo took one glance at them as they entered and did a double take. Clearing his throat, he turned to the assembly and announced them in a booming voice amplified by magic.

"Grand vampire and former archangel, Master Michael, accompanied by former Roman general Julius Caesar, and the last Ptolemaic Pharaoh, the Queen of the Nile herself, Cleopatra."

Stunned silence greeted them, then furious whispering. Michael felt his face darken as his enhanced hearing caught some of the tidbits being bandied about.

"It's the Whore Queen."

"I heard she fucked all the demons in Hell and Satan too to escape punishment."

"I wouldn't mind a piece of her Egyptian ass."

Michael must have growled aloud, for Cleo suddenly stepped in front of him and placed her hands on his lapels.

"It's okay," she reassured him. "I warned you they wouldn't be nice."

"It doesn't make it right," retorted Julius.

Michael and Cleo both turned to look at him in surprise.

Jules smiled sheepishly and shrugged. "I know. Just yesterday I was one of those idiots. But after listening to these ignoramuses, you gotta admit it's pretty far-fetched. Almost as if someone were deliberately seeding the rumors. I mean, even Vlad the Impaler never got this kind of reaction and he was truly fucking evil."

"Mark Antony," said Cleo. She shrugged. "He just won't give up."

"Oh he will after I'm through with him," said Michael under his breath. Cleo gave him a wide-eyed look while Jules grinned and cracked his knuckles.

"Can you wait to kill him until after we've danced? It's been ages since I've had the chance."

Cleo looked up at him with her exotic, kohled eyes and he resisted

the urge to find an abandoned room and pleasure her—numerous times. “With pleasure, my goddess.” Michael swung her into his arms and joined the other couples twirling around the vast ballroom.

Cleo fit perfectly in his arms and moved like an extension of him. Her body brushed his and his lust, barely under control, roared to life. And she knew it too, the minx.

She licked her lips and pressed herself closer before drawing away in a teasing dance that made him forget they were in a crowded room. Together they moved, eyes locked on each other, the sizzling heat between them almost visible. The space around them cleared, not that Michael really noticed, too intent was he on dipping and twirling Cleo, the delighted look on her face so addictive he never wanted to stop.

Eventually the song ended and Michael came back to reality with Cleo in his arms, her eyes heavy lidded with arousal.

Thunderous applause broke out, breaking the spell. Cleo gracefully gave a half bow to the court as Michael led her to the refreshment table. The tone of the room had shifted somewhat—well, for the male half, anyhow. Men nodded and smiled at Cleo and patted Michael on the back. The females glared at Cleo, except for a few nymphs who gave her come-hither glances.

Curiosity won out shortly after he fetched a red wine for her and some imported blood for him. It started with vamps surrounding them, many of them fascinated by Cleo, who shone like a sun amid their darkness. Eventually others joined the group, most smartly staying away from the topic of Hell and Cleo's many rude nicknames.

At one point she tugged on his coat. He leaned down and she whispered, “I need to freshen up. I'll be right back.”

“I'll come with you.”

She glared at him. “I don't need your help to go pee. I'll be fine.” Head held high, she walked through the room and people scattered for her, which was funny given many were bigger than her and wielded power of their own. She disappeared through a doorway that led to rooms providing freshening up, among other things, and he tried not to fidget.

“I must say, Michael,” said a dulcet voice from his left. “You do

find the most interesting people to associate with."

Michael forced himself to look away from where Cleo had disappeared. It wouldn't do to slight the queen of the Fae, Mab herself. "Evening, Your Majesty. You're looking lovely." While beautiful in an unearthly way, Mab's lush frame and platinum hair paled in comparison to Cleo's beauty. At least in his eyes.

"So what does your roommate think of your paramour?" asked Mab, her veiled curiosity not fazing him one bit. She did love strife, especially when she caused it.

"Julius is very glad to meet up with Cleopatra again, of course," said Michael in a smooth lie. Mab's outwardly friendly appearance hid a devious mind that reveled in plots. Living for an eternity could become boring. Mab amused herself often at the expense of others.

"I'm surprised at you, Michael. I would have thought you more interested in a person who lives a life of purity. I never pegged you for a man who enjoyed a woman of *experience*."

Michael heard the insult and offer in her words. Unfortunately, he couldn't hit the queen. The Fae wouldn't like that, and besides, Cleo still hadn't returned and his unease over that fact was growing.

"Excuse me, Mab. I need to locate my friends."

"You mean your whore?" Mab's pleasant expression transformed in a blink of an eye to that of the shrew she'd become.

Michael's eyes narrowed and when he replied, his voice was colder than the arctic winds that blew from the north. "Careful, Mab. You tread on thin ice."

"Oh please, like you'd start a war between our kind over a woman."

"Try me." Michael didn't wait for Mab's reply. His instincts screamed at him to find Cleo. He strode with long steps to where his inner radar said she was. Halfway across the ballroom, he sensed it. *Cleo's in danger.*

Chapter Seven

Cleo needed to escape from the microscope she found herself under. Mind, she'd expected it to be a lot worse. She had a feeling her escorts were the reason most of the insults weren't snidely given to her face.

Nice to see Marc's been busy with his usual smear campaign. I really have to start a rumor of my own about his small pencil dick.

Cleo peed, because apparently, even though she'd died and served her time in Hell to come back as something not quite human, she still had bodily needs that couldn't be ignored. She washed her hands and then checked in the mirror to see how her makeup and hair were surviving. Good thing too, because it was the only reason she saw the woman come up behind her with a syringe.

Cleo whirled and kicked out, glad she'd worn stilettos. They made an effective and fashionable weapon. Of course, her blow would have worked better had the woman actually been human or close to, but no. A shimmer later and a hulking gray demon with pointed teeth grinned at her.

And it wasn't alone.

The door opened and two more women entered who, instead of turning tail and running, dropped their glammers to show the beasts beneath.

Next time maybe I will bring Michael along to wipe my snatch, because damn it, I hate it when the odds are stacked against me.

"Sorry, but my dance card is full," she taunted, which made one of them break their closing-in ranks to rush her. She ducked under the swinging fist decorated with claws and jabbed back, her manicured nails finding and puncturing one of its eyes. It bellowed in pain, a sound she echoed when her hair was caught in a tight fist and yanked back.

Through tearing eyes, she saw a demon approaching her, the needle held high.

Damn it, I hate shots.

Julius stayed well back of Cleo when he saw her heading to the washroom. He only followed because he couldn't bloody well help himself. Since discovering how wrong he'd been about her, all he could think of was how much he still loved and desired her. He wanted to fall on his knees and beg her forgiveness for his hateful words, beg her to give him another chance.

He also wanted to rip out every single malicious tongue that spouted the hateful garbage that just a day before he'd, like a fool, believed. *How could I have been so blind?* Of course, he'd been nudged for a long time to hate Cleo. Hurting from more than losing her, he'd found the lies easier to believe. They made hardening his heart and surviving possible.

Now, though, everything had changed and with Michael's words came a glimmer of hope. *I've got a chance to ask for forgiveness and bask in the glory that is Cleopatra.*

He leaned against the wall a few feet down the hall from the door Cleo entered. Lost in his thoughts and imaginary speeches, he only barely noticed the first woman who followed, and a short time later, two more. It was their lack of scent that made him take notice and approach the door.

All beings had a smell—vamps smelled of darkness and death, the Fae of sunshine and spring, the merfolk of salty oceans, and humans of mortality. A lack of scent could only happen through subterfuge and magic. Just as these thoughts clicked into place he heard thuds and then Cleo's cry.

With no care for himself, he burst through the door, snapping the flimsy lock, his shoulder taking the brunt of the thick wooden door. He

scanned the area and sized up the situation. Not great. Julius first launched himself at the demon with the needle pointed at Cleo, hissing as the demon he dashed past scored along his ribs with its claws.

He managed to wrench the arm with the claw holding the syringe up and away from Cleo, who did her part by slamming her heel down onto the demon's instep.

He couldn't spare time to watch her, for the demon he'd rushed came back swinging, and behind him he sensed the air currents moving and ducked in time to avoid a nasty head swipe. Julius laughed, battle fever coursing through his veins.

"Come on, you ugly bastards." Julius followed his words with jabs that made the demons around him scatter, just enough for him to pull the silver dagger he kept sheathed down his spine for special occasions.

He was momentarily distracted when he saw Cleo fly past him to crash into a wall and fall heavily to the floor, an act which really pissed him off. With a fierce yell, he spun, slashing and stabbing. Cleo didn't move, and Julius worked his way toward her, dropping the demon that approached her with a slice to the back of its knees. But somehow the number of demons in the room had multiplied from the initial three.

Julius took up a defensive stance in front of Cleo and used his vampiric speed and dexterity to keep the beasts back.

Come on, Michael. Where are you?

He'd no sooner thought that than there was a commotion at the door. Michael, with his blond hair floating about his head and looking like the avenging angel he'd once been, plowed into the room, his fury dropping demons left and right. Behind him, jewel-colored fairies flitted in with their rapierlike swords.

The demons knew they were defeated, but they fought to the death, unable to call a portal in the house of a Fae, which was magically protected from such invasions. One by one, the beasts were dispatched into greasy black clouds.

The danger gone, Julius dropped to his knees and lifted Cleo. He saw the puncture wound, an angry red spot on her arm, and cursed.

Michael was instantly by his side, his brow furrowed. "Is she

okay?"

"They've drugged her. My guess is they had orders to subdue her and bring her back."

"Let's get her home." With Michael clearing a path, no one daring to cross his thunderous expression, Julius followed, Cleo cradled in his arms. A bittersweet feeling crept over him. He'd hoped the next time he held her like this he'd be carrying her off to bed for some bliss. He'd never expected his first touch would happen as she lay bloody and unconscious.

At the doors to the manse, Queen Mab herself stood and Michael finally slowed down only long enough to say, "I am most displeased with the hospitality this eve."

"I assure you, I had nothing to do with this." She wrung her hands in distress.

"And yet somehow your guards didn't detect demons infiltrating. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't annul the truce."

Julius didn't gasp but many others did. The truce was what kept the vamps from hunting and feeding off the Fae. That Michael would even suggest annulling something he'd worked hundreds of years for bespoke just how angry he was.

"Let's not be rash." Mab, usually the queen of cool, blanched. "I swear I will find out who allowed the breach in security and punish them."

"You'd better," said Michael, his voice cold. "Else I will hold you responsible, and you really don't want that."

Michael stalked out without waiting for a response, and Julius strode after him, holding in a smirk as Mab screeched at her retainers to find who'd let the demons in.

The limo waited out front, which Julius didn't bother questioning. Michael could do many things he couldn't, so things like limos being ready without notice no longer took him by surprise—much.

Michael slid into the car first. Julius handed Cleo into Michael's waiting arms and then got in, slamming the door behind him. A light flicked on and Julius could see Cleo's face. She looked pale and her breathing was shallow.

Michael ripped up his sleeve. "I'm going to give her blood."

"Are you sure that's wise? It's probably just a sedative," Julius protested, even as he knew his friend was right.

"And if it's not?" Michael tore his skin over the artery in his wrist until dark, rich blood welled up. He pressed the wound to Cleo's lips. "Drink, little goddess."

Julius expected her to suddenly wake and spit the blood back at him, but showing just how little he knew of her, the real her, she drank. Sluggishly at first, then quicker as the blood hit her system and acted as an adrenaline rush.

One moment she was sucking avidly at Michael's wrist as he sat beside her, the look of concern on his face shifting to one of bliss, and the next she was straddling him and had him in a lip-lock.

Julius figured she'd forgotten his presence, for she devoured Michael's mouth fervently, her dress riding up to show off her tanned thighs. Her body rocked against Michael's lap, an erotic motion that made Julius grow rock hard. How he wanted to feel that passion directed at him.

As if she heard his thoughts, she broke off the kiss and turned to look at him, her eyes glowing with an unholy light. Her lips, moist and red, curled into a sensual smile.

"Kiss me, Julius," she ordered.

"But Michael..."

"Says you may. And before you ask, his blood seems to be having the oddest effect on me. I can sense his thoughts. His desires. Through him, I know you still want me. I also know that you and he have loved women together in the past. It sounds *fun*. Now stop arguing. I want you both. *Now*."

It wasn't a declaration of love, but neither was it an invitation he could refuse. Julius slid closer until their lips met. He was lost with that first touch in the storm that was Cleopatra.

Her lips melted under his and parted. Her tongue slipped into his mouth, sliding erotically over his fangs. Julius shuddered with want.

When she turned away, her lips leaving his with a wet slide, he

opened his eyes to see her kissing Michael again.

He watched his friend's hands as they stroked down her straight back to grasp her buttocks. But they'd played like this before, and Julius knew he'd get another turn at her mouth. In the meantime, he had a body to become reacquainted with.

Julius knelt on the car floor behind Cleo, who still straddled Michael's lap. Not quite high enough to reach the soft skin on her neck, he instead drew down the hidden zipper at her back, exposing her smooth, tanned skin. The material spread open down to the crevice of her ass. Starting at the middle of her spine, Julius kissed his way down her back, sliding his hands inside her dress to curve around her waist. Her skin burned, desire making her feverish. Julius absorbed her warmth, basking in it, for since his death, cold was his constant companion. She was like a sun, one he could touch and use to heat himself. His mouth had just reached the dimple above her ass when the car stopped.

Julius didn't want to leave the cocooning warmth of the car. *What if she changes her mind once inside?*

But he didn't have a choice, for Michael, cradling Cleo gently, clambered out of the car with more grace than a human man could ever hope to achieve. Julius followed him as he carried her down the stairs to his room, but when Michael entered, Julius stopped several feet away, unsure again of his reception.

Michael turned and both he and Cleo looked at him. They said not a word, but Michael suddenly let Cleo down to stand on her own two feet.

She held his gaze. With a shimmy of her hips, her dress pooled to the floor in a silken mass, leaving her naked to his view.

She turned and sauntered out of sight, but not for long. Julius, as if reeled in like a fish on a line, came stumbling after, clumsy with desire. What male could resist her siren allure? Or her perfect heart-shaped ass? Shedding clothes, Julius came to stand at the foot of the bed. Michael, nude already—the vamp was truly fast—lay on its sheets, his back propped by pillows. Cleo crawled up between his legs, and Julius caught a bird's-eye view of her cunt, pink and glistening. It called to him.

When she stopped moving, locked in a kiss with Michael while on

her hands and knees, Julius knelt behind her and bent to run a wet lick up her silken slit.

Oh the sweetness.

He held her cheeks spread so that he could bury his face against her cleft, her musky scent driving him wild. He drank from her like a man dying of thirst. Forgotten in the pleasure of the moment were his past and the pain; right here, right now, for the first time in forever, he lived again.

She moved and Julius awoke as if drugged. She hadn't gone far, just to the side, so she could lie on her back. Her thighs were hiked and parted, the invitation clear. However, before he dived back into pussy heaven, he paused to watch Michael as he bent his head over her breasts. Julius found himself stroking his cock as he watched her clutching at Michael's head as he tortured her nipples. Her little cries of pleasure made his shaft jerk. Thicker and longer than he ever remembered getting, he slapped it off her clit. She arched and cried out.

Julius slapped her cleft again. As she bucked, he slid his cock into her quick. Just as rapidly, he withdrew it and smacked her swollen nub again.

Michael had stopped his nipple sucking to watch him with glittering eyes. "Slap her again, Jules. I think our little goddess likes that."

Again and again, Julius spanked her with his cock and after each hit he slid himself into her, not far or long enough for her to grip him. He was afraid to, for she was so damned hot and wet, he'd blow too quick. It didn't help that her face was flushed with passion and each cry she voiced brought him closer and closer to the edge.

"Fuck her," ordered Michael.

"Please," panted Cleo, her eyes opening just enough for him to see the glazed passion in them. She writhed on the sheets, her body gleaming with sweat. With a groan, Julius plunged his cock in, deep. She cried out and tried to buck, but Michael held her down. Julius pumped her quick and hard, her scorching channel squeezing him all too well. He pulled out, panting before he could come, wanting to prolong it.

Michael, sensing his dilemma, gave him a moment to regain control. "Get on your hands and knees, Cleo. I want you to suck me while

Jules there fucks your pussy from behind."

Michael spread his legs and Cleo nestled between them, her mouth quickly latching on and sucking Michael's cock. Kneeling behind her ass pushed up into the air, Julius had a great view of her head bobbing up and down. For a moment, he almost asked to switch spots, but her buttocks beckoned him. He slapped her flesh lightly, loving the way the cheeks quivered. He ran his cock, slick with her juices, down the crevice of her ass. He let his head poke at her pink rosette. She tightened and moved away from his prod.

He laughed. "I can't wait to fuck that sweet hole of yours while Michael fills your cunt."

Michael chuckled when her head stilled. "Oh my sweet little goddess, so worldly in some matters but virgin in others. Never fear, what we propose will bring nothing but pleasure."

She didn't answer, just resumed her deep throating which, as Julius remembered, was quite excellent. He let his cock slide away from the temptation of her anus and into the moist heat of her sex instead. He dug his fingers into her fleshy cheeks at the pleasure of it.

He wouldn't last long, and aware of this, he slid one hand under to find her clit. As soon as he touched it, her channel clamped down around him. Julius almost blew his load. He withdrew from the tight suction of her sex and then slammed back home. Back and forth he seesawed as his finger worked her nub. Too quickly, and before she'd come, Julius hit the brink and with a cry of ecstasy, he thrust one last time into her and came.

His body had no sooner stopped shuddering than he found himself lying on the bed beside Cleo, still on her hands and knees, her eyes closed in bliss. Michael pumped between her thighs, the curve of her buttocks slapping against his groin as he pounded into her willing flesh. She keened as Michael pistoned into her.

Watching a couple fucking live was erotic, especially when the woman was Cleo, and Julius found himself hard again. He slid himself under Cleo's heaving body. He used one arm to lift himself enough to tongue her clit, not an easy feat, but an exciting one that had him fisting his cock.

Already sensitized, he almost came from surprise when he felt Cleo's hand wrap around his shaft. She tugged at him until he shifted to give her mouth access. He bucked as her lips sealed around his rod and sucked. The sensation was incredible. To distract himself, he plied himself to her clit. When she orgasmed, she screamed around his cock still in her mouth and Julius heard Michael grunt as he came at the same time. With so much pleasure going around, Julius let go and shot his cream, which she swallowed with evident pleasure.

Then, in a tangle of exhausted limbs, they fell asleep.

* * * * *

Cleo woke first in the pretzel and she blushed at what had transpired. She could blame it on the blood Michael had given her. She could blame it on curiosity, or even the erotic image she'd seen in Michael's mind as she kissed him, drunk on his essence. But truthfully, the threesome came about because she wanted it. She wanted both men—Julius because he reminded her of a time where she was important, revered, and in love, and Michael because he looked past all the crap and liked her for, well, her.

Thing was, now that she had both of them, naked in bed with her, she didn't know what to do next. Should she sneak out with dawn approaching? What happened to them anyway when they slept? In Hell, there were no vamps, for supposedly their souls were gone, taken or transformed somehow in the change. What she did know she'd gleaned from movies, a neat twentieth-century innovation along with television. For the curious, yes, they had cable in Hell. Satan loved the television networks for they were corruption unchecked.

As she pondered her next move, Michael opened his eyes, so brilliantly blue and beautiful. Even though the initial blood rush had faded, she still felt tied to him and she could sense him at the periphery of her mind.

"You feel it?" he queried.

"It's almost like I can read your thoughts."

"It's because we're made for each other. Over time, this bond will deepen and you'll be able to truly read my mind."

"That will make it hard to hide things from me then, won't it?" she said jokingly.

"I love you. Why would I hide anything?"

His words stunned her to silence. Tears pricked her eyes, but she couldn't brush them away quickly enough.

"Please don't cry," he begged.

"I'm not," she lied. "Damned dust."

Beside her the bed shifted and Julius opened a lazy eye to peer at her and Michael. "This is getting a little sappy. What do you say we fuck and forget about all the emotional shit?"

Cleo laughed as Julius eased the tension with a crude attempt at humor. But questions remained, and she had no intention of waiting until they woke up tonight to have them answered. "So what's next?"

Michael answered, "We take one day at a time."

"But where do I sleep?" *And with whom*, she thought but didn't say out loud.

Michael rolled her until she lay on top of him. "You sleep wherever you want. Keep your room, or sleep down here with me or Julius. It's up to you, but just so you know, Jules and I won't be sharing a bed together unless you're in it and we're getting wild."

"What happens when you sleep? Do you, like, die or something?"

The chest she lay on rumbled as Michael chuckled. "We don't die, but our core temperature does drop so we're not exactly warm cuddly blankets."

"And he snores," piped in Julius.

Michael glared at him. "You're one to talk."

Cleo giggled. "In other words, I should keep my room, for now anyways."

"And not for a few more hours," said Michael with a suggestive leer.

A knock on the door made Michael sigh in regret. "Coming," he called out, yanking on some pants. He went to the door, opened it, and

murmured with someone in the hall. After closing the door, he went to a chest of drawers and grabbed a clean shirt. "I've got to check on something with Thaddeus. I'll try and make it back soon. Don't come too much without me." With a hard kiss on Cleo's lips and a grope of her damp cleft that made her squeal, he left her alone with Julius.

Suddenly shy, Cleo avoided looking at him. He, being a man, of course felt no such qualms and he rolled her under him in one swift movement that had her gasping, "What are you doing?"

"Making sure you can't ignore me," he said with a thrust of hips that left no doubt as to how happy he was to see her.

"You've got my attention." She still couldn't look him in the eye. His accusations of her being a whore still stung and after the way she'd practically dragged him into a threesome, she was surprised to see him smiling instead of slinging bitter barbs.

"First I need to say how sorry I am for what I said yesterday. It was uncalled for and unnecessarily cruel."

"Yes, well, I imagine the shock of coming face-to-face, not to mention my involvement with Michael, might have had something to do with it."

"Don't make excuses for me," he said in a biting tone. "Yes, I went through my own version of Hell after I died, but that doesn't give me an excuse for my behavior. You lived through Hell and yet, you're not bitter."

Cleo couldn't avoid his face anymore and she met his gaze. "Yes, but I earned my punishment. Your torture was the product of a sick bitch."

"He told you?" A muscle ticked at the corner of his jaw.

Cleo nodded. "He didn't want me to hate you."

Julius smiled suddenly, and Cleo was momentarily transported back to a time when their love had been the whole focus of her life and happiness. "This might sound stupid, but does this mean you don't hate me?" he asked, a hint of uncertainty in his eyes.

Cleo reached up to cup his face in her hands. "I could never hate you, Julius. You've always had a piece of my heart. That will never

change." Then she kissed him, a soft and sweet kiss to show him she meant what she said.

And as she made love to Julius in Michael's bed, she enjoyed his touch, found pleasure she'd reunited with him again, and she discovered something. While Julius had a part of her heart and always would, Michael owned her soul, tarnished as it was.

Chapter Eight

Cleo left Michael's bed at dawn after one last two-man romp. Michael, as if he'd sensed she and Julius needed to speak, stayed away just long enough for them to come to terms. When he returned, Cleo thanked him without words for the gift he'd given her.

She'd decided to sleep alone in her gold room for the moment even as she fought an urge to snuggle with Michael. But with her and Julius' reunion so fresh, she didn't want to unduly hurt Julius by showing a preference for Michael. Funny how sleeping with a man, and not just any man but her first love, made her realize how much she cared for Michael already. *It makes no sense for I've known Julius longer, but with Michael it's like I feel more than love, it's more of a spiritual connection. Like coming home.*

She slept out of sheer exhaustion, but her mind whirled and she woke from troubling nightmares where the only clear thing she remembered was pain.

Needing to exercise a muscle other than the one between her legs, Cleo headed outside. The grounds surrounding Michael's home were huge, with a massive meandering garden. Cleo hooked her iPod buds into her ears, and to the pulsing rhythm of Lady Gaga, took off at a brisk jog.

She enjoyed running for exercise; it limbered her muscles, made her blood circulate, and best of all, allowed her to clear her mind. Even though the thoughts plaguing her lately were of the good kind, she still felt a need to sort through them. It still amazed her that she'd found acceptance and affection with Michael. He was perfect and in his presence, she felt happy.

She was also still trying to come to grips with Julius coming back into her life. Her first love, who had not only apologized for his actions, but appeared to also care for her still. It made her glad they'd come to an agreement about her, to share her, for given the choice, Cleo knew who she would have chosen. But she had no desire to hurt Julius, whom she loved also.

It shocked her and still made her blush that she'd taken two men to bed with her—and then had the tables turned as they took turns taking her. Shocking or not, she'd enjoyed it and, like a glutton, wanted to indulge again and again. She even found herself intrigued by the idea of a dual penetration even though the idea of anal sex had previously repulsed her. *Oh to be sandwiched between them, their bodies pumping me.* Heat, the lust-filled kind, roared through her body and the crotch of her panties got soaked. Twilight couldn't arrive soon enough for her.

She smiled to herself as she planned how to greet them. Perhaps I'll splay myself across the dining room table amid decadent desserts with lots of whipped cream, chocolate, and other gooey sweet things. The idea of feasting off their bodies as they feasted off hers made her shiver. If one bite makes me come hard, I wonder how two bites would feel?

She needed to stop thinking about all the erotic delights they could partake in else she was liable to fall to the ground and masturbate, to the shock of the gardening staff.

Singing aloud the lyrics to "Bad Romance", she pounded through the winding paths. She sensed instead of heard she wasn't alone. She didn't panic, for she knew lycanthropes, among others, patrolled the area. But when the really big fucking demon landed in front of her, she skittered to a halt.

This isn't good.

Cleo had made the erroneous assumption that Marc wouldn't be stupid enough to attack her so soon and on Michael's home turf after his ignoble defeat at his hands. Wrong!

She popped the earbuds out, and while she couldn't see the demons drawing around her in a tightening noose, she could smell their distinctive sulphuric calling card.

And she didn't even have a knife. *Fuck*. Stupid and complacent, still basking in the glow of the previous eve, she'd forgotten to never assume anything, especially where her safety was concerned. She took quick stock of her options, of which there were few. While she found herself weaponless, she did have a strong pair of lungs and she managed to let out one earsplitting shriek before the demon squad dived on her.

Cleo fought hard, every blow she aimed hitting with squishing and cracking effect, but they overwhelmed her with sheer numbers. She went from attacking to defending herself in short order. They didn't kill her, though they could have. Their goal seemed to lie in incapacitating her, and they were succeeding. Cleo sank to the ground, her body aching and her ears ringing.

Oh this isn't going to end well.

* * * * *

Michael woke abruptly with Cleo's mental cries of pain and request for help ringing in his head. He'd no sooner slammed his bedroom door open than he was joined by Julius. Together they rushed to the main floor of the house and the doors leading outside.

They didn't need to speak, for through his bond with Michael, Julius also felt Cleo's fear and pain. Then suddenly it was gone.

No, wait, Michael could still sense her, but faintly, as if she were at a great, very great distance from him.

Julius, not as strong as him power-wise, tore at his hair and railed. "No! She can't be dead. I just found her again. Fuck!"

Michael spoke to calm the younger vamp. "She's not dead, but she's hurt and needs our help." *But how?*

The sun outside still blazed deadly bright and while Michael could stand it for a short period of time, Julius, weaker due to his age, was housebound during daylight hours.

Michael cursed, for he wanted to visit the site of her attack while it was fresh to locate any clues that Marc Antony might have left. He had no doubt as to who'd dared invade his property.

Where has he taken Cleo?

A patrol of lycans led by Thaddeus came pounding up to the patio doors and Michael flung them open before stepping back with his arms crossed, a forbidding look on his face. He barked, "What the fuck happened? Can anyone explain to me how my woman in the midst of my garden surrounded by guards was attacked and abducted?" His voice, while low and controlled, nevertheless rang with fury and the lycan guards as one dropped to their knees, except for their leader.

Thaddeus stood straight as he admitted his failure. "The infiltrator sent in squads to penetrate the walls in numerous locations at once. Given their numbers, we sent all available guards to repel the attack, leaving the lady alone. I take full responsibility and await your punishment."

Michael rubbed his face as Julius stalked up to Thaddeus and glared at him.

"You couldn't know they would use a portal to get onto the property. It should have occurred to me and I should have taken mystical measures to prevent it." Hindsight was a bitch.

"I still should never have left her alone though. I failed you."

Julius hissed at Thaddeus' words and flashed his fangs.

"Back off, Jules," said Michael, not needing a show of dominance right now. "We'll come up with a fitting punishment later. For now, what can you tell me about the site where she was attacked?"

"We scoped the spot out and it would appear there were eight demons and something that smells of Hell but is neither demon nor human."

"Marc Antony," spat Julius, angrily pacing in circles.

"We knew that, but I was hoping for a clue as to where they'd taken her."

"I'm not sure if it's a clue, but my men and I caught a whiff of something alien."

"You mean a scent you've never come across before?"

"No, alien in the sense that it's not of this world. I've smelled the brimstone of Hell and the stench of demons. I've smelled the sunshine of Heaven and angels. Things mortal all have a scent that mark them too of

this world. This was not of this world or the higher and lower planes." Thaddeus shrugged, unable to better explain.

"So, what, he took her to another planet?" Julius in his misery wasn't using his brain, but Michael, who'd lived longer and had a clearer view, understood the clue.

"Limbo; the place that separates the mortal plane from Heaven and Hell. It has to be, for were Marc in Hell, Lucifer would have him back in custody."

"Great. So we know where she is. How do we get there?"

Michael's gut tightened. He didn't know. "I'll find a way, even if I have to make a deal with the devil."

"Did someone say my name?"

The sudden stench of brimstone sent the lycans scattering to circle the figure emerging from an ash cloud. It was the head denizen of Hades, none other than Satan himself.

"Lucifer. Glad you could come." Michael hugged the Lord of Darkness, who even after his expulsion from Heaven had never forsaken him.

Julius' eyes bugged. "You're friends with the devil?"

Lucifer, in his businessman guise, turned his head—one hundred and eighty degrees in a freaky show of power—to answer. "Got a problem with it, boy? If your soul wasn't already taken, you'd belong to me. I'm still miffed about you turning into a vampire and robbing me. I had great things planned for you in the pit."

Michael couldn't help but chuckle at Julius' blanched face. "See, being a vampire has its advantages. And don't be such a wuss. Cleo survived her punishment and is better for it."

"Ah yes, Cleopatra, queen pain in my ass." Lucifer swiveled his head back to face front where it belonged. "Please don't tell me this is about her. I just sent her to live in the modern world. Surely she can't have caused that much havoc in such a short time, although I wouldn't put it past her."

"Cleo's been taken."

"And this is a bad thing because?" asked the lord of the pit with an

arched brow.

"Because I've marked her as mine."

"And I will too as soon as we get her back," said Julius, determined not to be left out.

Both of Satan's brows popped up in surprise. "My, but the little queen has been busy. Two of you, eh? Well, you're braver beings than I. Did you know the damned were going to vote her in as my queen without caring if I wanted her or not?"

"Yes, she has a certain *je ne sais quoi* that is intriguing. But we're getting off tangent here. Marc Antony's taken her—"

"That vile Roman dog!" Satan roared and around the room dozens of decorative candles lit with a whoosh.

"As I was saying, he's taken her into Limbo. We need your help to get there and bring her back."

"And what's in it for me?" asked the devil slyly.

"I don't suppose you'd do it because we're friends?" asked Michael hopefully.

"This is business. Dinner next Saturday with your woman if you save her will be for friendship. So what do I get out of it?"

"Marc Antony," Julius offered.

"That goes without saying but I would have eventually gotten him anyway. Sending you to Limbo where I don't hold any dominion is risky. While I've never met the master of that realm, I know it's not the friendly type and may view the extraction of not one but two occupants as a hostile move."

"I offer my soul." Thaddeus spoke and Lucifer turned to face him as Michael shouted, "No."

Thaddeus, though, had made up his mind. "I think it is a fitting punishment seeing as how my dereliction is why Cleopatra is caught in Limbo in the first place." To his credit, Thaddeus didn't flinch as Lucifer stalked around him, sniffing and eyeing him like a choice piece of meat.

"I accept." Suddenly a contract appeared in Lucifer's hands along with a plumed pen.

Michael snatched it and scanned the document quickly. Well

versed in Satan's methods, he looked for a flaw in the wording, but the contract for once was clear without the usual double-talk. Not happy with it, but knowing he had little choice if he were to save Cleo, Michael signed his name with a flourish, followed by Thaddeus.

In a blink the contract disappeared. Lucifer rubbed his hands together. "Are you all ready to go or would you like to put some more clothes on first? I hear Limbo's quite chilly."

Hating to delay, but not keen on performing a rescue mission in thin track pants, both Michael and Julius quickly hit their rooms to dress. Michael added a long leather duster to his outfit—just in case Cleo needed it—before he rejoined the party in his living room.

The lycans, all wearing uncertain expressions, still ringed Lucifer, who stood smiling benignly. At their return Lucifer turned serious and he addressed Michael in a low tone. "Be careful, old friend. Limbo is a place of shadows and echoes of both the past and future. Tread carefully."

Satan stepped away and his trademark grin flashed. With a flourish of his arms and a coiling of power that tickled along Michael's exposed skin, a portal appeared in the room, a sucking black maw that made Michael think of a galactic black hole. *Here's to hoping we succeed and return.*

"Shit." Michael whirled to face Lucifer. "You will hold the portal open until our return?" Michael cursed his error in not making this point clear in the contract, his turmoil over Cleo's abduction rendering him stupid.

"I can't keep it open that long. But because of our friendship, I will open the portal every hour for the next four hours. It's the most I can do, for a portal to a domain not my own is taxing on my strength. So mark the landmarks well when you enter and don't tarry."

Michael didn't need to hear the "or else" to understand if they didn't hustle and get Cleo back to the portal, they could end up stuck there.

So long as I find her, I don't care. At least we'll be together.

Julius and Thaddeus fell into line behind him as he stepped from his living room into the chilling grayness of Limbo.

Cleopatra's Men by Eve Langlais

Chapter Nine

Cleo regained consciousness and wished she hadn't. Her body was afire with pain. But the joke was on her captor, for she'd been tortured by the best in Hell. Using the knowledge she'd gained over time, she pushed the agony into a little box in her mind and locked it away. It didn't make it all disappear, but it allowed her to focus on something other than the urge to scream and plead. *Never show weakness.*

She peered around, not recognizing where she found herself. *Hmm, gray and cold, not Hell or Heaven, and this definitely doesn't look like Earth.* Had Marc managed to take her to the moon? Not that it mattered. Despite where he'd taken them, once she freed herself, she'd find a way to escape.

One thing she did recognize was the device that held her. More famously known as the rack, it was quite commonly used in the Middle Ages to hold prisoners spread-eagle, making it impossible for them to move while they were tortured. That she hung on one was not reassuring, especially when Marc Antony appeared wearing only leather pants, his hairy barrel chest bare. From experience, she knew this was his mode of dress for when he planned a bloody torture. When she'd asked him once why, she'd assumed his answer would be to keep his clothes clean, but no, the sick bastard said he enjoyed the feel of the blood on his skin. He believed it granted him some of his victim's strength. Sanity was not one of Marc's strong suits.

Cleo didn't show him her fear. She refused to give him the satisfaction, especially knowing how it excited him. Instead she smiled at

him cockily and hoped to antagonize him by dying quickly. That was, if she was capable of dying. Lucifer had never outlined what her restrictions and capabilities were when he'd thrown her out of Hades to live again.

"Well, isn't that just like you to have to tie up a woman so you can get some action. You know, they have something called Viagra in this time for puny-dicked men like yourself who have problems getting it up."

His meaty fist flew and landed with a cracking blow. Her head snapped to the side and she blinked at the black spots that danced in front of her eyes. She worked her jaw and turned back to face him with a smile.

"Aren't you a big man, hitting a woman while she's tied? Why don't you let me down and try that again?"

Marc just chuckled, an evil sound that actually made her shiver. He didn't reply to her taunt. Instead he walked away to a ring of stones. He snapped his fingers and flames rose, but like the rest of this place, they were dull colored—weak yellows, washed-out orange, and reds bordered with black. He threw something in the fire, but crane as she might, with his broad back blocking her view, she couldn't see what he did. After a while, he turned around and her eyes widened, for he held a glowing red brand.

That's going to leave a mark. She hated the fear that tightened her stomach into a knot. She hated even more the cold sweat that broke out all over her body, a visual indicator Marc noticed.

"Not so cocky anymore, are you, bitch?" Marc's free hand dropped to his pants and he rubbed the growing bulge.

Cleo made a moue of distaste but said nothing, hypnotized by the approaching glowing brand, the brightest thing in this gloomy place.

"Where shall I mark you?" Marc mused. "Your breasts?" He tore the fabric from her upper torso, baring her. The cool air made her nipples tighten. Marc licked his lips. "Maybe I should brand your pussy?" Again he ripped clothing from her, or tried to. Her track pants stretched and bagged the more he tugged. Furious, Marc threw the branding rod to the ground, and with both hands, removed her bottoms and threw them in the fire.

He snatched back up his rod—the metal one—and jabbed it at her

stomach.

She braced for the searing pain, but while hot, the brand wasn't heated enough to burn anymore after Marc's delaying tactics. "Ooh, that feels good. Do it again." Cleo laughed, somewhat hysterically, knowing it would drive Marc nuts, but after all, what did she have to lose?

He stalked back to the fire pit and heated the brand again. Cleo tugged at the chains that held her. She really didn't hold out much hope for escape. She just prayed she didn't disgrace herself screaming if the pain became too great. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

"So where are we?" she called, trying to stall for time, not that it was doing her any good.

"Welcome to Limbo," he said, not turning around.

"Limbo? How did you manage to finagle a way here?"

Mark answered as he strutted back to her, holding the brand glowing anew. "I didn't find a way, the way found me. Someone made me an offer I couldn't refuse and gave me everything I needed to complete my revenge." The gleam in his eyes was maniacal and Cleo thrashed at her restraints. She even prayed to the one being she trusted.

Oh Michael, I know it's stupid to wish for this, but if only you could find me and save me just like the knights do in fairy tales.

Limbo stretched barren and gray in front of Michael. Despair touched him with icy fingers and the futility of their mission sank his spirits.

But only for a moment. Shaking his head, Michael shook off the mental lapse caused by Limbo itself, almost like a spell, one that touched the spirit. He warned the others, "We will prevail. Don't let the atmosphere of this place fuck with your minds."

Julius still looked doubtful, but Thaddeus, not one to care about odds, smiled at him, easily repelling the depressing pall that tried to sink them before they began.

The site where the portal had opened was empty of landmarks. Unacceptable, for if they were to find their way back to escape, they needed to return to the exact location. Sizing up the situation, Thaddeus kicked off his boots and left them in a pile in front of the portal location.

On top of them he placed his clothing as well and then shifted into a huge white wolf.

"Good thinking," said Michael. One problem resolved, he turned his attention to the next—locating Cleo. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on his link with her. He sensed her, but only faintly. He tried to focus on a direction and spun on his heel, using his body as a dowsing rod. The vibes in this place, though, messed with his abilities. He rotated several times before he finally had to admit he couldn't find her this way.

"I don't suppose you can sense which direction she's in?" he asked Julius hopefully. Julius, who'd not bitten Cleo, shook his head, his eyes shadowed as he fought against the pall that tugged on him. Thaddeus, however, raised his nose and sniffed. With a yip, he bounded off across the featureless plain leading them into the wasteland.

Michael jogged after Thaddeus, his speed useless until he had an actual direction. He used this frustrating pace to mentally catalog what he saw. Limbo, while illuminated, was a land of shadows. Overhead the sky gaped an empty gray with no sun to warm the ground. How they managed to see was a mystery, and he wondered if night and day existed in this place. And did time pass the same way over here as back on Earth?

Not a living creature did he see as they traversed the vast plain, but every so often, from the corners of his eyes, he caught flickering shadows that dissipated when he looked directly at them. Unnerving, but given the way the shadows seemed to avoid them, he didn't bother pursuing them. After running for a while, the landscape changed, if one could call the addition of a few boulders and stunted trees an improvement. The gnarled trunks were gray like everything else, the branches twisted, and if they'd ever borne leaves there was no sign of them either in the limbs or on the ground. It baffled the mind to even think of how they came into being, for this land was so dry. So dry and dusty. The filth of it coated his skin, his clothes, and filmed on his tongue.

They ran for hours, or at least it felt that way in this never-changing place. It was hard to tell. Michael's internal clock insisted they'd missed the devil's deadline, which he refrained from mentioning to the others. Julius just stumbled along behind him and hadn't spoken since the portal.

As for Thaddeus, though still in wolf form, he too had begun to lag.

Michael knew he should have sent them back to escape while they had the opportunity, but he had a better chance of saving Cleo if he had help. Selfish or not, he'd doomed his companions to either rescue Cleo with him or die trying.

Michael immediately noticed when Thaddeus, with a sudden second wind, gave a low growl and bounded forward over a small rise.

Michael drew on his strength and pounded after him. He topped the rise and beheld a nightmare.

Enraged, he took in the sight of Cleo—*my woman!*—naked and struggling, trapped upon a rack, her limbs chained. A man, wearing only breeches, approached her holding out a lit brand. With a speed only one his kind and age enjoyed, Michael raced to her, arriving in time only to throw himself in front of Cleo.

The searing brand smoked against his heavy leather duster and the man who held it staggered back and his eyes grew wide at the interruption.

"Get them!" screamed Marc Antony, spittle flying.

Even as Michael lunged at the bastard who dared hurt his sweet goddess, demons came pouring out of the sky. How he and his companions had failed to notice them was a subject to ponder for another day. Survival became key as Marc Antony, as those of his slimy reputation did, slipped away in the turmoil, allowing his minions to fight his battle.

And what a battle. Michael prided himself on his skills as a fighter. He'd led God's armies for a reason—he was the best. But even he couldn't prevail against overwhelming odds, although he gave it his best shot.

He tried to make a stand in front of Cleo, but sheer numbers pushed him away from her. Julius and Thaddeus were also furiously engaged, but while he hated to admit it, short of a miracle, they'd never win.

I'm sorry, Cleo. I didn't mean to fail you.

Chapter Ten

Cleo couldn't believe it when Michael appeared like an avenging dark angel and confronted Marc Antony. For a brief moment, she felt hope, then the demon horde descended, and since she was tied to the rack, she could only watch the unfolding horror. While only half a second before she'd warmed knowing her men cared enough to seek her, her heart chilled as she realized Marc Antony, anticipating them, had laid a trap, a deadly one.

Michael and Julius, even against the odds, fought valiantly. Swinging and slashing, every stroke of their daggers and thrusts of their feet landed a deadly blow. But it wasn't enough. Even with Thaddeus' help, the wolf tearing bloody chunks by the mouthful, they were losing.

Blood dripped from their wounds and their pace slowed while off to the side, Marc Antony laughed.

Cleo's vision blurred and a reddish haze descended. How dare he! It wasn't enough the man used and humiliated me in my first life, but now that I've found peace and happiness in a rare second chance, he thinks to take it away.

Anger, pure and white-hot, burned through her. At first she thought she imagined it, but as her rage grew and she seethed helplessly, she realized she was glowing and getting brighter by the moment. She wondered what else her fury might have given her other than glow-in-the-dark abilities.

With a scream of rage, she pulled at the bonds that held her. The

chains snapped like flimsy thread and she laughed, an evil chuckle whose sound made Marc Antony turn to her. He beheld her with a dropped jaw.

"Dirty whoreson. How dare you think to hurt me and my consorts?" In the sudden quiet, her voice boomed and echoed in the barrenness.

"Wha-what are you?"

Cleo smelled his fear and she grinned—not a reassuring look, apparently—for Marc squeaked like a frightened mouse and turned to run.

"I am Cleopatra, goddess and queen and you will obey me!" She screamed the last bit, all of her ire and frustration flowing out in a cord of power that jerked Marc to a halt and spun him to face her as if he were a marionette on strings.

She flicked her hand and his feet left the ground. Floating toward her, he gibbered, spittle running down his chin as he stared around madly, seeking aid.

But his minions no longer supported him. They'd stopped fighting and knelt with their faces pressed to the dusty ground.

Cleo tapped her chin thoughtfully as she considered the man who'd terrorized her for so long. "What should I do with you? Hmm?"

"Send him back to Hell. We promised him to Lucifer to be able to save you."

Cleo didn't look at Michael but she understood the implication. She needed to send him back to Hell to save her men. She didn't understand how, but with this power coursing through her, she knew she could do it. But first, she wanted to make sure Marc Antony understood that she wasn't to be messed with any further. *Me or any other women. We've been his victims long enough.*

Drawing on the power coiling all around her, she spoke as she punished him, old style. "For looking upon me as a means to power, I blind you." Marc wailed as his eyes disappeared, leaving sightless sockets. "For the abuse you heaped on me and others, I take your hands." Smooth stumps waved around as he wailed even louder. "For your rape and humiliation of women, I leave you impotent." Cleo heard the wince of the

men and demons alike behind her as they watched the scene play out. "And finally, for your lies, I take your words." The keening abruptly cut off. "Enjoy your stay in Hell." With a final flourish, she sent Marc Antony away, to Hades, she assumed. She wasn't too sure with her new power.

Her glow faded somewhat as did her anger, but she still exuded radiance as she turned to face her men.

Julius and Thaddeus watched her with stunned looks. Actually, Julius seemed a little frightened of her, but Michael, showing not an ounce of fear, strutted to her. Through the gaps in his long coat, she could see his chest was bloody with gouges. His hair was tousled and his expression grim, but in his eyes she could see his love for her.

She held out her hand and he took it unhesitatingly. "Thank you for coming for me."

"Always, my little goddess." He pulled her into him, hugging her naked—and now that the adrenaline and magic had dissipated—shivering body. He shrugged out of his coat and draped it around her.

"Am I truly a goddess?" she wondered. It's a possible explanation for what happened.

"I hope so, because we missed our portal back home. Do you think with your new magic you can create one so we can go home?"

"I don't know." But for the man who was the other half of her soul, and for the other who held a piece of her heart, she'd try.

Cleo clamped her eyes shut and pictured her bedroom with its golden bed. She poured her will into that vision and when she heard Michael say, "Good girl," she knew she'd succeeded.

She opened her eyes and saw a swirling portal in front of her. Julius dived through first, followed by Thaddeus still in his wolf form.

Michael nudged her toward the portal, but Cleo held back, wanting to do something with their moment alone. "Wait. I want to say something." She took a big breath and gazed up at her vampire angel, the love shining so clear from his eyes, a love for her alone. "You know I would do anything for you, Michael."

"I love you too, Cleo, as does Julius." He hugged her again, his strength enveloping her.

She kept her eyes locked to his. "I know you both do. And while I care for Julius and love him, only you are the other half of my soul."

His smile was radiant and his possessive words even more warming. "I will never let you go and woe to whoever would hurt you. As you've seen, I will go to any lengths to protect you. You are my life, Cleo, and while I might share your body for pleasure, know that you belong to me and I to you. Forever."

He kissed her, his lips hot in this place of cold breezes, and he remained lip-locked with her as he moved with her into the portal. They stepped out into her bedroom surrounded by a chilling wind that blew from the portal and swirled around them for a moment before dissipating.

"Brrr! Close that door," said Julius with an exaggerated shiver.

Before she could do a thing, the portal closed on its own and took her last dregs of adrenaline with it. Cleo winced as all of her injuries decided to make themselves known. At least they'd begun healing, though slower than she liked. The dirt caking her body, however... She grimaced. *I need a good scrubbing, but at least I'm home.*

Michael disappeared only to reappear a moment later naked. He stripped his leather duster from her and swept her into his arms, carrying her into the bathroom. The tub was already filling with water and with a splash, Cleo saw Julius run past to hit the water.

Michael went more slowly, cradling Cleo against his chest. She hissed when some of her abrasions from the beating she'd taken met the warm liquid. Michael cursed and pulled her back out of the water.

"Bite me," he ordered.

"Gee, aren't we a little impatient?"

"Cleo, I meant bite me for blood. Although you can do the other later when you're recovered."

"I'll be okay," she argued even as all the aches and pains of her capture came to life as the adrenaline faded.

"Cleo," he growled. "Drinking my blood will heal you more quickly."

"And what if I don't want to?" she said stubbornly. It was one thing for her to drink it by accident when she was unconscious, but quite

another to bite into her lover and suck at him as if she were some kind of leech.

"Fine. Don't take what you need to heal. But don't think you'll be getting any bedroom action until your injuries are gone."

Cleo frowned at Michael. He stared back at her implacably with his arms crossed over his chest. "Fine. I'll bite you, but the sex had better be worth it."

Both of her men chuckled and Cleo winced as she slipped into the water and clasped her arms around Michael. "Oh, I promise it won't be an experience you'll forget," he said, and brushed his lips across her temple.

Cleo buried her face in the hollow where his neck met his shoulder, inhaling his masculine scent. She stuck her tongue out and ran it across his skin. Then, before she could think twice about it, she bit down hard.

Blood filled her mouth, its taste sweet and coppery. She swallowed, knowing she should be grossed out, but instead, as before, euphoria swept through her. Conscious this time, she felt her body as it healed, the process actually pleasant. Even yummier was the effect on her libido. She went from mildly interested to fully aroused in no time at all.

She moaned against his skin as she lapped at him. All the nerve endings in her body were highly sensitized and every touch sent thrilling shock waves throughout her. Even something as simple as rubbing her body against his made her channel tighten and quiver.

"Mmm, you taste so good," she purred, sliding her lips up to the lobe of his ear. "And I feel even better. You know what I want now?" She slipped a hand under the water to grab his cock. "I want what you and Julius promised me. I want you both in me, pleasuring me."

Michael shuddered in reply as he found her ass cheeks and then kneaded them. Julius slid in behind her, his body pressing against her, his hard shaft poking at her backside.

Michael caught her mouth with his, his forceful kiss parting her lips and leaving her open for the invasion of his tongue. Cleo kissed him back just as hard, turning the tables by catching his tongue and sucking it.

Not to be left out, Julius buried his face in her hair and found the sensitive spot on the back of her neck. He sucked it, knowing from

experience how she enjoyed it. She clutched at Michael although, squeezed between their two bodies, there was little chance of her falling. Lost in sensation, she mewled when the body at her back moved away. She opened her eyes and turned her head to find Julius sitting on the side of the tub. Michael gripped her around the waist and lifted her to sit on Julius' thighs, his hard cock pressed up against the crack of her ass.

With glowing eyes, Michael parted her thighs, and with a wicked grin that showed some fang, licked his way up her thigh to her cleft. But instead of placing his mouth on the part of her that ached for his touch, he only skipped over to her other leg and moved his lips slowly again.

Julius kept busy as well, cupping her breasts while he stroked his thumbs across her erect nipples. She leaned her head back against Julius' shoulder and he dipped down to nibble on her collarbone.

Michael continued his torture, blowing on her sex, and she could feel her pussy lips tremble as her honey seeped from her. When his mouth finally touched her, a ripple went through her sex, a precursor to the climax to come. Delicately, he licked her, his tongue slowly tracing its way around her pussy until she wanted to scream. She grabbed at his hair and tried to guide him, but he chuckled, his breath tickling her.

"Please," she begged as Julius pinched her nipples. She gasped and bucked on his lap, her body yearning for fulfillment.

"What do you think, Jules? Shall we show her the advantage of having two lovers?"

"Oh, I think it's past time."

Julius leaned back from her and something cold trickled down the crack of her ass. Before she could turn to see what Julius was doing, Michael cupped her face, drawing her forward for a kiss. Her mouth busy with his tongue, she couldn't say a thing when a finger followed the liquid pooling in her crevice. The finger rubbed the oil around her rosette and her breathing quickened.

Michael distracted her, his fingers finding and stroking her clit, his expert touch making her moan against his mouth. So aroused was she that the penetration of the finger in her ass only barely registered. It was uncomfortable and odd, but she ignored it as Michael's digits slid into her

damp slit, pumping her. A second finger popped into her ass, stretching her tight ring and making her squirm forward and away from the invasion.

But the guys held her wedged between them. Thus caught, she didn't have a choice but to get used to the fingers that probed her. They popped out and Cleo sighed in relief only to squeak at the feel of Julius' thick cockhead poking.

The pressure was unbelievable. Cleo dug her nails into Michael's shoulders and while it wasn't unbearably painful, it was the oddest sensation.

"Push out," grunted Julius, easing his way in.

Cleo did as she was told, trying to relax, managing it only when Michael went from kissing her mouth to her pussy. But even that couldn't completely erase the stretching pressure of the alien presence in her ass. That is, until Michael bit her soft inner thigh. Caught in a sudden endorphin rush on top of the blood rush, she sighed and relaxed enough that Julius slid his shaft the rest of the way in.

Cleo still wasn't sure about the anal sex thing, especially when Michael licked the spot he'd bitten and stood. He pushed her legs up and apart, exposing her. Using the bench in the tub, Michael knelt between her legs and he smiled at her as he eased his cock into her channel.

Halfway in, he slammed the rest of his cock home and Cleo almost came. Tight; everything felt so tight and full. She moaned, her body pressed between them, afraid to move for fear she'd come too quick.

Michael controlled the pace with his hands on her waist, sliding her back and forth. That simple rocking motion drew his cock in and out of her cunt and at the same time caused Julius' shaft to thrust in and out of her ass. The sensation was incredible. Cleo's whole body tightened around them and she could no more stop herself from climaxing than she could halt a raging storm.

Rapture crashed over her as her body convulsed in pleasurable wave after wave. Michael panted while Julius groaned, and Cleo, still quivering from one orgasm, skated right into another one when, with a burst of speed that increased the friction tenfold, Michael upped the pace

and came with a bellow followed seconds later by Julius, the two of them spurting wetly inside her.

Cleo couldn't have cared less at that moment for she floated on a cloud of pleasure and never wanted to come down. It was with a blissful smile that she slipped down into the tub onto Michael's lap and allowed him to tenderly wash her.

She managed to open her eyes for a bleary moment when Julius kissed her sweetly.

"I love you, Cleo," he said, stroking her cheek.

"I love you too, Julius. Sleep well," she said, kissing him again lightly before he rose from the bath. He grabbed a towel and left her alone with Michael.

Cleo leaned back against him with a sigh. "I guess you need to find your bed too. The sun must be close to coming up."

"I am not leaving you ever again, even if I have to sleep under the bed," he murmured, nuzzling her neck.

"What, and have you wake up covered in dust bunnies? Nope. I have a better plan," she said, turning on his lap. "Want a roommate?"

"Truly?" His brilliant blue eyes stared into hers and Cleo nodded.

"I love you, Michael, and I want—no, make that need—to be with you. There are nights where I'll have to sleep with Julius so he doesn't doubt my feelings for him. But right now, yours are the arms I long to be in."

"I am yours to command, my goddess. Now and forever."

Which, in their case, could be a very long time.

Epilogue

Cleo raced down the stairs, laughing as her two men chased her. Since their return from Limbo, they'd spent a lot of time in bed fucking. On the floor screwing. In the moonlight loving. Essentially they'd baptized every room in the house—more than once.

Tonight, she'd asked to go flying to see if it were possible to have sex midflight. Julius was wary of falling, but Michael, with a confident grin, stated his certainty it could be done. *How I love him.*

A knock sounded on the front door, and in a breach of protocol that would probably tie Chester's boxers in a gigantic knot, Cleo opened the door with a breathy, "Hi, can I help you?"

Her allover body glow, which she hadn't seen since her time in Limbo, suddenly blazed to life at the sight before her. Cleo projected a quick mental thought as she lit up like a glowstick on Halloween. *Michael, I need you.*

She managed not to show any fear at the virtual army that sat almost on the doorstep. Not an easy feat considering, ranged before her, rank upon rank, were dozens of robed figures who all dropped to their knees as one.

Cleo felt Michael's reassuring presence at her back with Julius off to the side. She resisted the urge to lean back against him. Even though she knew she could depend on him, she still preferred to stand on her own two feet—except in bed.

"How come you're shining like a night-light?" Michael whispered.

"And who the fuck are these guys and why didn't the guards warn us they were approaching?"

She thought her response at him, knowing he'd catch it. *I don't think they're from around here.*

The robed figure kneeling closest to her raised its head slightly, but kept the cowl of its hood tilted down. "If I might?" said a curiously sibilant voice softly from the depths of the cowl.

"Speak," said Cleo imperiously while Michael moved to stand fully at her side, not only her lover, but her protector too.

"We have come to serve you, the true goddess."

The creature's words baffled her. "Stand and remove your head covering that I might see you, and explain yourself."

The robed one stood and lifted its arms, the sleeves falling back to show skin that glistened like gold and sparkled in Cleo's glowing nimbus. Both arms, up to where the sleeves were bunched, were marked with twining black tattoos and Cleo would wager they went farther. The face, when finally revealed, made her suck in a breath. Neither human or demon, the creature that looked back at her was unlike anything she'd ever seen.

"What are you?" she asked.

"We are the djinn, finally released from our gray prison by the goddess of light. Now that we are free, we have gathered the brethren who have been trapped on the mortal plane and hiding. We are here now to serve you, queen and goddess of the djinn. Your wish is our pleasure."

"And what do you want from your queen?" Michael asked, and as if sensing and sharing her eagerness for adventure, he linked his fingers with hers and squeezed them.

"With you commanding us, we hope to free our home, buried in the sands of the place humans call Egypt and oust those who thought to imprison us so long ago."

Cleo couldn't help it. While she loved her men, especially Michael, and the pleasant quietness of her life, she missed ruling. She missed power. *I miss being queen.*

But, tempting as the offer was, she wouldn't give up love for

prestige. She'd waited too long to find it. Before she could voice her refusal—even as a part of her screamed this was her chance for glory—Michael spoke.

“As your queen's consort and commander of her armies, we accept the charge. Hail the Queen!” Michael thumped his chest a half second before the roaring ranks of djinn did in a cacophony that made her smile.

The Queen of the Nile is coming back, and with my consorts at my side, this time I might not stop at just Egypt.

Author Bio

So you want to know a little about me? Well, I'm in my midthirties, married eleven years to a wonderful, supportive man—yes, he's a hunk—who gave me three beautiful, noisy children aged ten, seven, and four. I work as a webmistress and customer service rep from home, and in my spare time—of which there is tragically too little—I write, read, or Wii.

I was born in British Columbia, but being a military brat lived a little bit everywhere—Quebec, New Brunswick, Labrador, Virginia (USA), and finally Ontario. My family and I currently reside in the historic town of Bowmanville, about an hour or so out of Toronto.

Wow, was that ever boring! Now for the fun stuff.

I'm writing fantasy the way I like it—hot with a touch of magic. I enjoy reading and writing stories that push the envelope of what we consider normal, and I love to cross the line into fantasy. I tend to have a lot of sexual tension in my tales as I think all torrid love affairs start with a tingle in our tummies. My heroes are very male; you could even say borderline chest thumping at times. So if you want a truly sensitive man, I am not for you. That said, my men will do almost anything for the one they love. Even babysit.

I'd love to tell you more, but judging from the sounds in the living room, the children are at it again, which means I'll need a mop and loads of patience. What I really need is a robot maid like Jane Jetson had!

Visit me on the Web at <http://www.evelanglais.com>. Thanks for checking me out and hope to see you again soon.