



*Bedtime Story
for a
Stolen Child*

Anna Mayle

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Resplendence Publishing, LLC

<http://www.resplendencepublishing.com>

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Daytona Beach, FL 32176

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Copyright © 2010, Anna Mayle
Edited by Christine Allen-Riley
Cover art by Les Byerley, www.les3photo8.com

Electronic format ISBN: 978-1-60735-205-1

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Electronic release: October 2010

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and occurrences are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places or occurrences, is purely coincidental.

Dedicated to Sally Mayle-Iler. She always reads my work, even when it gives her nightmares, she doesn't complain even when I call her in the wee hours to tell her I have no talent and one story or another has devoured what's left of my brain, and she has never stopped believing that I could move mountains.

Thanks mom.

Chapter One

He had been there a long time. On the good days, he couldn't remember how long. On those days, he floated in color and sensation and pretended to be a prisoner of his own mind rather than one in body. He didn't notice the stale air in his cell then, or the current of magics which constantly danced over and inside of him, raping him more deeply than flesh ever could. He ignored the fact that at any moment, *They* might return. He ignored the possibility that *They* might take from him anything and everything that they desired, including his humanity. That *They* would open his cell to a world gone mad, and mold him to match it. On the good days, he didn't have to worry if the Fair Ones would love him or hate him, lust after him from afar or beat him, fuck him or play puppet while he was made to dance on razor strings. On a good day, he could breathe.

It wasn't a good day.

He'd been petted and pampered until one of his owners had become too excited, then he'd been stripped and rammed down hard onto an impressive length and split painfully while the others still cooed over him. When *They* grew bored of the diversion, he was thrown into his cell again. Deprived of all his senses and shifting uncontrollably, trying to remember what he'd looked like as a man, trying not to lose any more of himself than *They* had already stolen, he folded into what he thought to be a fetal position by memory alone. Being unable to feel himself bend, he couldn't know if he was squeezing his legs too tight, or if he'd missed them all together and was only floating in a jumble. He could see, but only a kaleidoscope of colors, no hint of reality or form through the faerie dust.

He hated that dust. It made his blood heat and his body become liquid. It made his legs spread and his cock hard. It made him want and need and beg, and he hated it as much as he craved his captors' cocks while on it. *They* broke him with it, over and over, and one of these

days he wouldn't be able to piece himself together again. But when he was on the dust, he didn't care.

I cannot forget, he reminded himself in the soundless void. *I am a man. I think I am a man. I was a man, once. I had a name. Leinad...no, that is the name They gave me. A shadow, a mirror. Leinad is a mirror. Daniel.* "Daniel! My name is Daniel!" he screamed without sound. He couldn't remember his own voice. He was losing himself. *Or am I Leinad now?*

A smell brought him from his musings. Air, fresh, clean and crisp.

Leinad choked on it, the sensation of oxygen in his long unused lungs overwhelmed him. He felt something solid beneath him and began to drag himself through the thick nothing and toward the wonderful smell. They did this too, at times. Teased him with hints of his world, watched him crawl to them in desperation, struck him down painfully then hugged him, letting his blood coat their hands while They rocked him like a beloved house pet who'd almost gotten outside. He should have learned, but like the animal They'd made of him, his instinct always won. And so he would crawl, every time. If he was lucky They would just rape him and throw him back in his cell. If he was unlucky, They would hold him down, force the faerie dust upon him, then skin him inch by inch while he writhed and begged for it. Then if he was lucky, he wouldn't be conscious long enough to lament his decision.

Leinad was very unlucky.

Instead of the whip though, instead of the knife or the cold fingers, he felt soft loam and plants beneath his palms. He blinked the colors from his eyes, rolled onto his back and stared up at the sunlit sky framed between a canopy of trees.

"My name is..." he said cautiously, and flinched at the hoot that echoed in his words. He hadn't held on to himself tight enough.

The sound of a door opening caused him to sit up and look through the thick woods to the cabin beyond them. He knew that cabin. He'd been born there. He was home.

Leinad held his head in his hands and laughed.

* * * *

The road hadn't been paved for a while. In fact, the further he drove, the rougher it became, until the jeep was practically dancing with the force of its bouncing. It reminded Daniel of that fairy tale about the girls who were forced to dance until their feet were broken and bloody. His mind supplied a strange image of the jeep, tires ragged and blown, oil dripping from the undercarriage, as it kept jumping and dipping in the rocky back roads.

Daniel didn't remember the roads being that bad, but then again, he hadn't been back to the family cabin since he'd been a kid. Maybe back then he'd enjoyed nearly vibrating out of his seat. Or maybe the car from their childhood had better shocks than his pieced together Franken-jEEP.

"Dude! Either learn how to drive, or let me do it," came the gruff and annoyed voice from the back.

"He lives," Daniel deadpanned and grunted as they hit a particularly large pothole.

His brother Matthew peeked a sleep tangled head over the seat and asked, "Are we there yet?"

"Yes," he nodded. "I am now driving in circles for my own amusement, look at how we glide over the smooth—" He winced and held back a curse when another bump made him bite his tongue.

Matthew smirked. "You deserved that."

Daniel refused to answer. He suckled on his tongue a bit, grimacing at the coppery taste of his blood.

"Where are we?"

"On a road," Daniel teased. "In the woods."

"No shit, Sherlock."

"There probably is, actually. This is the woods and there are a lot of animals."

Matthew groaned and let himself fall back to sprawl out once again in the small Jeep bed.

Daniel smiled to himself and kept driving. His brother was eight years younger and acted half his age most of the time, but when he wasn't cranky from days of endless driving, he was decent company.

"Put on some music or something," came the gruff voice in the back again.

He sighed and slid a CD into the player, happily singing along to Kimya Dawson until Matthew threw half of his body over the seat to steal the disk and replace it with something death metal and deafening.

Both brothers asked in tandem, "Are you sure we're related?"

There was a short, bemused silence before they began to laugh. Matthew climbed into the front seat and flipped through the music they'd brought with them. "So...what do you think of all this?"

He glanced over at his brother before shrugging. "Lynn wants us all together on the anniversary. She's lonely, and she's our sister."

"And what if she wants to try a séance or something? Isn't the first anniversary a good time for that?"

"Matthew, I'm a folklorist, that doesn't mean I believe in those things. I just study the stories."

"But would you try it?"

Daniel's eyes shifted off the road to Matthew and he frowned again. "What is she planning?"

"Nothing."

He narrowed his eyes. Matthew was lying. "Matthew..."

"She's our little sister, she's lonely," he mimicked Daniel's voice and finally settled on Damon Marley as an acceptable medium on the music front.

The older brother remained silent.

"Would it be so bad? To try it?"

"Yes," Daniel insisted. "It won't work. It'll only upset her."

Matthew sat back in his seat and refused to talk about it anymore.

Eyes back to the road, Daniel gave a soft sigh. He and Matthew had never seen eye to eye when it came to their little sister. Three years Matthew's junior, eleven years Daniel's, Lynn was joy and exasperation, caring and comedy all wrapped into a tiny, five-foot five-inch package of dynamite.

"You know, if you say no, she'll look at you."

"Mmm."

"She'll *look* at you."

"Yes, Matthew," Daniel sighed. "She'll look at me, and I'll instantly want to wrap the world up for her in a big red bow."

"You can't resist a damsel in distress," Matthew teased.

"Uhuh." Daniel's tone was pure sarcasm.

Matthew grinned. "See. You can't deny it!"

"Unlike you, I can have the urge without trying to follow through."

Matthew gave a strange, hacking cough, and Daniel realized that his brother was convulsing with laughter.

"Matthew."

"Did you just call me a man-whore?"

"No, Matthew. You aren't good enough to get paid for it," Daniel quipped and grinned at his brother's indignant noises. "Oh look. We're here."

"So...séance?"

Daniel stopped grinning.

From his place amongst the trees, Leinad watched the loud contraption come to a halt. He blinked his eyes, feeling them grow rounded. His sight became perfect and sharp, focusing on the men who climbed from the vehicle and headed for the door. *What are they doing at my cabin?*

The smaller was human, as human as any were. He stood on the short side, with dull dirty blond hair cut in a messy fashion to fall into his plain brown eyes. He had a pleasant form but nothing to draw attention. He was only a man.

The other one...

Shaking his head with a rustle of feathers, he sought to dispel the remaining traces of the faerie dust from his sight and skin.

It was still there.

The man was tall, a few inches over six feet. He had deep brown hair with shades of blond and ginger giving it a chestnut hue. It was long and tied back at the base of his neck. His eyes were brown like the man beside him, but deeper, almost glassy, like the eyes of a doll. There were gold flecks in those eyes. He was slim, but from the lines visible in his sleeveless shirt, he was put together with firm, chiseled muscle.

If one were blind, they might mistake him for another human, but Leinad could not. That one's true form was fighting to be seen past the flimsy mask.

One of the Fair Ones was walking toward his home talking with a human who might have been his brother, and it was wearing Leinad's face.

The visage was flawlessly correct from the strong profile, Roman nose and wide, sensual mouth, down to the strange scar on his bottom lip that he'd received as a baby falling from his crib. He'd been so young, not quite two years old, but he remembered.

Of course he remembered. That was when They'd come for him. He had fallen, and They'd scuttled out of the shadows like insects, ripping him away and leaving another shadow

behind, another...he shook his head again, violently this time, and breathed heavily, trying to gain control of his heart. Trying to calm down and think past the faerie dust in his eyes.

They had lost interest in him. They'd misplaced him in their apathy. Leinad had seen it happen before. He'd wondered where those forgotten playthings had gone. In his darker moments, he'd imagined they were dead, killed as just another form of pleasure or entertainment for Them. In his deeply hidden dreams though, he saw them free. Free to go home and find their families. He had yearned so much to be forgotten like that, to be given back his life.

He felt his arms blur to wings before giving a great heave with them, propelling himself into the air.

He was finally home.

But home had gone on without him.

Chapter Two

The two men had barely gotten their feet on the porch of the cabin when the door slammed open, and they found their hands full of happy nineteen year-old. “Dan! Matt!” Lynn squealed while they squawked, and in the midst of all that noise, the three of them fell backward into the dirt at the bottom of the steps.

Daniel’s breath was knocked out of him as he took the full weight of both his siblings straight to the gut. He opened his mouth to join in their good-natured teasing and greetings, but a sound caught his ear, feathers. He only heard one flap. The wings would have to be huge to make such an audible sound. He twisted his head around as well as he could with Matthew and Lynn still pinning him down, but he could only make out a large, blurry shape flying up into the setting sun. It almost looked...human?

Nah. This was where all of those urban legends and angel sightings came from. It was just a really big bird, probably carrying something that dangled and made it look bigger than it was.

“Daniel? Earth to Daniel.”

He faced forward again and was almost struck in the nose by Lynn’s hand waving in front of his face. “Hi, Lynn.”

“What were you looking at?”

He heaved and managed to roll his siblings off of him, then stood and reached down to haul them to their feet. “A really big bird.” He looked back in the direction it had flown, but there was nothing there.

“Well then maybe we should go inside.” She started to tug them toward the open door. The smell of herbs and candles wafted out to greet them.

“Lynn,” Daniel warned.

His sister gave a smile so innocent that it would have made angels feel guilty in comparison.

"No séance," he insisted.

"Come on! What's the worst that could happen?" she wheedled.

He glared at Matthew who only smiled and shrugged. Oh yeah, they'd planned this.

"You can go take your showers and get comfy, and I'll set everything up. I'll even bring in your bags."

Daniel closed his eyes. His stomach felt queasy. He'd seen the shattered look on people's faces when they realized that the last glimpse of their loved ones was really the last time they'd see them. He hated that look. Daniel would do anything to never see that pain in Lynn or Matthew, but they wanted it so badly. "These rituals don't really work," he tried again, pleading silently for her to believe him and let them all move on.

"You're a folklorist. Haven't you ever heard of them working?"

"I've heard a lot of people who think they've worked," he insisted. "But I haven't seen it."

"Maybe you will this time," she pushed.

"Lynn."

"Please? I'll never stop wondering if I don't at least try it."

Matthew was watching him carefully, eyes serious and waiting. Lynn was bouncing in front of him and begging. He was going to regret this, but...

"All right."

Lynn squealed in glee and jumped, wrapping her arms around his neck in a tight hug before running out to the jeep. "Go shower, I'll take care of everything! Meet in the living room in twenty minutes, it'll be dark enough then."

Daniel stood still, willing Matthew to stay quiet. He should have known better.

"So...what were you saying about urges and follow through."

He refused to dignify that with an answer.

"Manwhore," Matthew goaded, and ducked his brother's attempt to grab him.

Daniel sighed and looked out at the thick woods around them, and his little sister struggling with Matthew's huge duffel bag. She was smiling ear to ear. Like she'd won an epic battle and her prize would be their parents.

He could understand her want. Knew what it felt like to be the one who survived. They all knew that feeling. With legs that felt like lead, he shuffled into the house and the bathroom, turning the shower on hot as it would go. The room quickly filled with steam, and Daniel sat on

the floor, back against the cold porcelain of the old claw foot tub, and rubbed his eyes to take the images away.

It had been a stormy afternoon, winds so high that they shook the house. Daniel and Matthew were home to celebrate Lynn's graduation, and the whole family had gathered in the dining room with a cake and a few candles since the power had gone out and the storm clouds made it dark enough to be uncomfortable. He remembered looking up to see his dad wrap an arm around his mom's waist. She leaned her head on his shoulder and they looked on with pride, watching their family celebrating together. Then there came a large cracking sound, and they had just enough time for the pride to fall to shock before the giant maple tree just outside the back door snapped and fell. The wood had been rotting on the inside without anyone noticing. The wind hit it just right. It collapsed at the perfect angle, and the roof fell in on their heads.

When he'd woken, all he could see were his mother's cloudy, lifeless eyes. All he could hear was Lynn screaming.

Daniel shivered and stepped into the shower, letting the scalding water burn that moment away for a little while. He could understand Lynn wanting a different last memory of their parents. He was only trying to be the rational one.

Peering through the steam-fogged window, Leinad watched his double step into the spray of water that came from the wall. His eyes wandered the hard planes of muscle until one droplet or other caught his attention and he followed it on its path. He should be furious over the theft of his face...of his life! He should want to rend this creature into tiny pieces and scatter them over the Faerie Veil like rain. Instead, he watched the kiss of water upon the sun bronzed and weatherworn skin. They were worshipping the creature, those drops, clinging to his every line and curve, his every crevice, like the hands of a thousand lovers working together only to please him. They slid and kissed and mated upon his skin, joining, flowing together until they were forced to separate from him at the end of their journey, and slink down the drain in shame for their forwardness.

Leinad felt a stirring of hunger inside of him at that image. His stomach burned a steady pulse of heat, and his groin tightened in anticipation. He felt a groan building in his chest, but held it back, his hand snaking down to press against his wakening cock, not enough to arouse him any further, but enough to stave off any further stupidity. The creature before him was one of Them. It had taken his face and family from him, those humans who were traveling with it might

have once been his siblings, now they were only strangers. The Fair Ones had taken his very humanity. He clenched his jaw and slipped back into the shadows, unwilling to give in to the charm exuding from that body. He couldn't.

A soft groan made its way to Leinad's ears, and he took in a sharp breath. His sensitive hearing told him of a sliding of flesh against flesh. Most likely just the Other washing travel dust from himself, but with the hot bulge of arousal pushing more and more insistently against his palm, his mind supplied other, less innocent reasons for the sounds. His heart sped a bit at the feelings rushing through him, the sight of that form, the knowledge that he was just on the other side of the thin wooden wall. Water was kissing supple skin; hands were roaming over tight muscles; fingers playing over the hard abdomen then lower, brushing soap slick hands over the thickening between his thighs...

Leinad fell back against the side of the cabin, hands covering his indiscretion while he tried to get his breath under control. He didn't understand that rush of lust; that connection he felt with the Other. He shouldn't feel such things. He was meant to get his life back, take vengeance on the usurper. But with those ragged breaths reaching his ear, whether from arousal or pain, his legs spread a bit wider of their own accord and he bucked his hips forward, pressing into his hand. It was like he was on the dust again. The heat pooling in him, the world spiraling down into lust-filled madness. He had been well trained, to react so strongly to the presence of one of Their kind. He wanted to be sick at the thought. All he was, though, was aroused. Painfully.

He fumbled with his britches, loosening the ties until he tumbled out into the cool evening air. It was glorious. The sounds behind the wall, the image of the water and the feeling of his fingers playing fire over his cock.

"This isn't a good idea."

Leinad jumped guiltily, the voice boosting him up to orgasm. His eyes rolled back and he gave a soundless cry, spilling himself out onto the grass at his feet. But the words from the other side of the wall weren't meant for him. The Other was only talking to himself.

That glorious feeling turned sour in his stomach, and Leinad looked down at the ground, kicking dirt over his spunk in disgust. What had he been thinking? He was still reeling under the affects of Faerie . That had to be it. To get so excited over water and flesh.

Maybe those who were forgotten never really escaped. Maybe the Dust in their veins drew them back to the Faerie one way or another. Maybe it was all another game, and he was still their pawn...

No! They must have lost interest. They must have.

The water in the cabin turned off, and Leinad quickly tied his pants and slipped around to the front of the wooden structure. They would start their ritual soon. He wanted to see what would happen.

He wanted to see the Other again.

The thought made his pulse quicken.

Something was very wrong with him.

The water loosened knots of tension Daniel hadn't even noticed before. He sighed and leaned his head back; trying to look at the situation from every angle he could, to weigh every outcome. He couldn't see a happy resolution short of the séance actually working. And he knew the chances of that happening.

He absentmindedly scrubbed himself with the soap that must have sat in that shower stall for years. It smelled like their mother, lavender and honeysuckle. Lavender was meant to be soothing, he recalled as he massaged a dab of the stuff into his hair. Usually going through those motions calmed him, gave him time to breathe. It wasn't working. He couldn't completely let go of his tension. Something was wrong. The only thing he could attribute it to was the séance, or maybe he was anticipating Lynn's reaction to the inevitable conclusion.

"This isn't going to work." He sighed, dipping his head under the spray to rinse out the last subtle hints of the soap. He still smelled like flowers.

A movement at the bathroom window drew Daniel from his musings. He wiped the condensation from the glass to glance out, but all he could see was the forest. It had been a big shadow. He'd thought it looked like a man, but there weren't neighbors out their way for miles.

"Probably a deer," he reasoned, thinking back to the large bird. He must really have been giving in to city life if a couple animals were making him edgy.

The spray's temperature cooled a bit, and Daniel realized just how long he must have been standing there. He quickly turned off the water and reached for a towel to dry himself. Lynn was probably pacing outside of the door.

Daniel forwent underwear and slipped, bareass, into his jeans again.

Sniffing the shirt he'd had on, he wrinkled his nose at the smell and bundled it up with the underwear, leaving them on the floor to wash later.

A knock on the door interrupted the brisk toweling he was giving his hair, and Daniel let the terrycloth fall to his shoulders. "Out in a sec," he promised. Daniel used the end of the towel to continue to dry his hair with one hand, opening the door with the other. The sudden clashing of steam and the cloying smell of incense and candle smoke almost chased him back into the bathroom.

He coughed. "Lynn, I think you overdid it a little," he said as he entered the living room.

Lynn smiled. "It creates atmosphere," she explained.

"It creates migraines," Daniel corrected. His gaze met Matthew's across the room, and his little brother looked like he was in hearty agreement. Giving in to the inevitable, Daniel sat beside Matthew at Lynn's makeshift altar.

The couch cushions had been placed on the floor in lieu of actual pillows. The coffee table was swathed in silky scarves of various colors and patterns. Crystals had been placed in a pentagram formation over the cloth. There were candles at the tip of each arm and one in each corner—white, rounded, votive things that she'd probably found in the basement for use during power outages. In the center of the pentagram was a crystal bowl, filled with water. Bottled, if the lack of cloudiness and floating particles was anything to go by.

Lynn shut off the lights and joined them, kneeling on her own cushion. She sprinkled some herbs into the water, and Daniel caught the scent of rosemary. For remembrance.

She began a chant made up of nonsense words that she'd probably found in some new age how-to manual, and Daniel rolled his eyes. Matthew looked like he was trying very hard to take the whole thing seriously, but Daniel guessed that the teddy bears printed on the scarf nearest his place were sorely trying his reserve.

"Ancestors who have come and gone before us, be guard and guide," Lynn spoke in a singsong voice, deep and soothing. "Angels who ferry the souls we have parted with, bring them forth. Gatekeeper, guard the gate and protect those both living and passed. We, of blood and bond to them, call forth the spirits of Maggie and Dominic Tessel. Souls of the mother and father." She motioned for the boys to join hands with her and each other and continued the nonsense chant.

This is where the crash of thunder should come, Daniel critiqued in his head, Lights should flicker, air should get cold. Maybe have a little fog, some eerie—

A loud, tumbling rumble, followed by a sharp shattering sound made them all jump. Lynn's eyes were so wide that he could see the whites all around them. Matthew swore and stood up quickly, and Daniel looked outside, to see if it had really been thunder.

His body froze. His eyes were probably as wide as Lynn's. There, in the front window, was a face, looking directly at him. He opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out, it felt like his heart was racing up his throat while the rest of time had stopped. Then he took in the features and almost laughed out loud. It was him. He was just looking at his reflection in the glass.

The reflection smiled...but Daniel wasn't smiling. Shock-addled, he actually reached up to make sure that his mouth wasn't somehow forming that expression without his knowledge.

It wasn't.

"I think it came from the attic." Matthew was saying. "Probably a squirrel got inside and knocked over some of the stuff mom kept up there." He hit the lights and strode to the stairs.

"I'm coming, too." Lynn scrambled to her feet and hurried after him, not wanting to let him go alone.

"Daniel?" Matthew prompted then realized that his brother wasn't moving. "Dan." He hollered and smirked a bit when his brother jumped again.

"I'll check outside."

Lynn looked confused. "But it didn't come from outside."

Daniel wasn't about to tell them that he'd smiled at himself, and it was freaking him out. So instead, he forced the fear out of his voice and mumbled something about finding the squirrel and ran for the door. He'd seen it, he was sure. His entire body was wound tight with anticipation of what might be waiting out there.

Chapter Three

Leinad watched their ritual curiously. There was no magic in it, nothing shifting in the air around them. The crystals on the altar gave off a slight prism of magic, but it wasn't magic, just the pale human kind, and their different auras clashed and dimmed one another. The crystals weren't compatible. It was like watching Fae children play at being human, hilarious and nowhere near convincing.

Then he scowled, because obviously at least one of Them had been very convincing, hadn't he.

There was a noise from above them, and, as if the Other had heard his thoughts, it turned and met Leinad's eyes. They stared at each other for a while, unflinching, unblinking, then Leinad began to smile. He could feel the fear radiating off of the Other. It didn't know what it was, what it was doing. It didn't know its power anymore. To that particular Fair One, Leinad was the monster.

He liked that.

Leinad slipped back into the protection of the trees. He would wait there for his prey to come to him.

He was not disappointed.

Daniel burst out the door and swung to the side, facing the window he'd seen it in, but no one was there. He cautiously stepped down from the porch and scanned the clearing. Everything was still, not abnormally so, but still as any forest at night. Leaves rustled, insects buzzed and chirped, but nothing was out of the ordinary. It was too normal, after what he'd seen through the window.

His heart pounded hard in his chest, and he could hear it above all the other sounds, as if he were wearing a stethoscope. His muscles bunched, ready to flee, ready to fight, waiting for it to show itself. Daniel stood there in his bare feet and ragged jeans, frozen to the ground. He kept expecting rain, a storm. There were always storms in the movies during moments like these, but nature had missed her cue. The situation didn't feel complete, and yet the moment couldn't have been more ominous if some dramatically orchestrated music had been stalking through the air around them ready to strike its crescendo.

As if it could read his thoughts, the creature swayed slowly into view, a Cheshire cat's humored smile carved upon familiar lips, beak, lips. The eyes, equally familiar for a moment, widened and darkened to those of an owl. The hair, one moment long and thick and chestnut brown as Daniel's own, became infested with feathers of white and brown, then slipped back to normal again. Equally bare feet sporting the talons of a bird of prey, powerful and splitting the earth with each step, became finely boned and human. The ragged brown and white jacket undulated in the slight wind and with the thing's movements phased from feathers to canvas to feathers.

The monster made a sound half way between an owl's screech and laughter. Daniel wanted to run, but he couldn't move. He didn't know if he was frozen in shock or by some mystical means. This went against all logic and into the realm of the stories he collected. He was staring at the boogie man, a werebird, a shape shifter, he was staring at himself.

"So human, at first glance," the chirping voice trilled.

Daniel stared, and flinched a bit when it kept moving forward.

"Grew so adept at reading Them, but you... What is going through your mind?"

The oddly intense stare was broken when the owlish creature tensed and looked toward the cabin. There was movement inside then he heard the call. "Daniel?"

His head shot up, terror giving way to panic. That was Lynn's voice!

"Daniel? Where'd you go, man?"

Matthew! His eyes shot back to the creature. If they came outside, it might attack them. Those talons, hands, talons, feet, talons could rip them the shreds and Daniel wouldn't be able to do a thing about it. "D—" He croaked, voice tense as his muscles tightened with emotion. "Don't hurt them."

The lips smiled again and he saw fangs. Fangs! This wasn't happening, couldn't be happening!

“Daniel? Come on! Matthew was right, it was just a squirrel, it knocked over some boxes,” Lynn called for him in an exasperated tone. “If I find out you got scared by a little séance, I will mock you without mercy.”

He heard Matthew open the door and ask Lynn, “Where did he go?” in a puzzled voice.

Too close!

“I could do it,” the creature promised. “Could string their pieces up through the trees like garland. They would scream, I don’t like screaming, but if one tears out their throats first, they would not make noise for long.”

Daniel shook his head, neck too tight, almost unwilling to move in that simple gesture. “No.”

“You will stop me?”

Daniel could hear Matthew’s steps on the porch. In another moment, he would walk around the house and see them, then it would be over. He met the thing’s owlish eyes steadily and promised, “I’ll come with you. You can take me instead. I promise I won’t scream.”

The smile widened, and the arms shot forward, enveloping him in feathers and canvas. The world dropped out from under them. Daniel closed his eyes and let the darkness swallow him.

* * * *

When he awoke, there was something soft beneath him. Daniel’s foggy mind whirled in place a moment before the gears clicked and the mechanism jerked to a start. He jumped up into a low crouch, scanning the area around him. The trees were growing so tightly together that they made a wall all the way around. He was trapped. A stream of water flowed in from cracks between the trunks on one side, making a small pool in the rocks below them, flooding under the huge and twisting roots. There was a fire in the very center of the strange ring, jumping and crackling, further filling the clearing with the scent of woods and sap. Pine, even though none of the trees around him were pine. In fact, Daniel had never seen those types of trees before. They were massive and old, trunks covered in a strange golden bark, but deep green just underneath and pulsing through as if the bark were some kind of smoky crystal. The roots twisted from the earth in mad knots that reached through nearly the whole clearing, only dipping into the ground around the fire, as if they were bowing to its heat. He had been settled in a nest of feathers, snuggled between two of the roots, but near enough to feel the fire’s touch.

A tingling in his back made him turn. The thing lounged upon some of the tangled roots growing in a throne-like manner. Watching him. It looked like a heathen god. Daniel didn't like that image. It made him think of sacrifices.

"You..."

"Me," it chirruped.

He asked the first question that came to him. "Why do you look like me?"

"I don't," it corrected. "*You* look like me."

He stood on shaking legs and glowered at the calm, still smiling thing.

"That isn't possible. Why would I look like you?!"

"Good question. Think hard."

Daniel had no idea what he was meant to think of.

"Broken."

"I'm not broken!" he growled bravely but tensed and tried to back away when it moved to stand.

It rose in a flowing motion, so smooth it almost didn't look as if it were really moving. More like it simply had always been standing, and Daniel had only seen things incorrectly to think otherwise. The overall affect was disconcerting. When it began to walk closer, he noticed that the birdlike features were brought out by the light of the moon through the trees, giving it the ever changing effect from before. Daniel wondered which image was real, or if they both were. Would it be able to exist in daylight, or was it like a vampire, and harmed by the sun's clarity? His musings caused him to lose focus, which was brought back to him in a rush when that face, that strange, shifting countenance, was only a breath from his own. He threw himself backward, but the hands caught him, human hands, no matter if they were scaled and tipped with talons, they were still human, somehow. "Taking it back," the thing insisted.

"Taking what back?"

It studied him as it spoke, "My life, my face. I'll take you, too. Bonus, for being a slave to your kind for so long."

Daniel's lips parted, though whatever he'd been about to say was instantly stolen, along with his breath. The moment before he spoke, the creature was there, slick tongue slipping past Daniel's chapped lips and into his unguarded mouth. He gasped and tried to fight its hold, but it was too strong, too sure. He gradually felt his will to run slipping away, as if the creature were sucking it from him by way of his own captive tongue.

It was surreal. He couldn't understand what was happening, let alone why. He was aware of the odd fact here and there, but his mind refused to put things together in any kind of rational order.

The monster smelled nice. Like the smell of the spring woods at dawn. He tried to blink and only then did he realize that he'd closed his eyes. They opened again, quickly, he needed to watch it. No telling what it would try if he didn't.

It was obviously trying to suck his face off through his mouth.

I am going insane.

There was a faint taste of wood smoke, black licorice, and cloves.

Daniel clenched his teeth shut in desperation, but missed the thing's tongue.

It licked him! Licked against his cheek and nipped at his nose before laving the crease of his lips.

"Stop!" He swung his fist, wincing when he connected solidly against where an ear might have been hiding beneath the feathers. Its head snapped hard to the side then struck back around with the force of a cobra, latching onto Daniel's neck. The fangs hooked in solidly, and he realized they were barbed, like tiny fishhooks.

He curled his fingers into fists, only noticing afterward that they had been resting, one against the beast's chest and one against the side of its face. Daniel found himself clenching it closer to him. The longer they stayed locked in that unmoving tableau, the more confused Daniel became. He couldn't quite recall what he was doing there, why he was fighting, if he was fighting. The teeth were motionless, and the ache from them a dull, echoing throb.

Then it pulled back.

He screamed. The barbs hooked into his flesh and tore their way to freedom. Blood gushed to the surface, but the bite had missed the vital arteries. Not by much, but it had missed.

"Apology. You made me angry. Shouldn't do that."

Daniel scowled. He was about to retort when it lowered its face to lap at the torn flesh of its bite mark, then capture his mouth again.

Wrong, this is so wrong, why can't I stop it? What's happening to me? Can it really take my face like this, or is it as insane as I am? I'm imagining...what's wrong with me? Oh my God!

They stayed locked in that startling place, tongues dueling, no longer sure if it was a fight, a game, or a mating dance. Bodies slowly came together as the bird creature dragged him closer and closer. They fit like two pieces of the same broken line, coming together in fits and starts,

creating a road they would need to travel, but that neither could see alone. It could have been one of those defining romantic moments, the meeting of a soul, if it weren't for the fact that one of the pieces was hyperventilating.

Oh my God, kept running through Daniel's mind. He could feel the face against his shifting, skin flecking with feathers and tongue long and sharp, then soft and round, the appearance and disappearance of those fangs, and the hardening and joining of lips and nose to something more resembling the down-turned beak of a barn owl than a mouth. His body was melting against his will, sliding intimately against the creature, and all he could do was chant No, no, no, no-no-no in his head. There was something thick and hard poking him in his inner thigh, and he balked inside at the realization of what it must be. *I must be dreaming. No, it's too real to be a dream. I'm hallucinating. I'm about to be raped by a figment of my imagination. When did I lose my mind?* He couldn't help it, Daniel began to laugh hysterically.

The thing pulled back at the odd bouncing of the chest pressing against his. He let go completely and stared as the man fell to his knees, laughing, tears streaming over his stubble roughed cheeks.

"Broken."

He could only nod as the laughter refuse to abate. *So this is what hysteria feels like.*

A harsh slap brought him back to sanity and gouged four deep gashes across his face.

Daniel stiffened and threw himself backward, tripping over a root to land in the makeshift nest, sending feathers everywhere.

The creature stared, unblinking, neck cocked at an impossible angle.

Like an owl, Daniel noted again. The strange man reminded him of a barn owl.

"Better?"

He shook his head. "What do you want from me?"

"My life." It blinked then and looked vaguely contemplative. "And you, my pound of flesh."

The man shook his head again. "I don't understand."

"Soon," it promised, then the world began to get fuzzy around the edges. Daniel didn't even have time to panic before he was pulled into darkness once more.

Chapter Four

Daniel woke to Lynn shaking his shoulder and Matthew looking around the woods with a scared, but watchful gaze.

"Daniel? Thank God you're all right!" Lynn cried and hugged him tight. "What did this? Those claw marks, I haven't seen anything like them before, they're almost human."

Almost human. It was an apt description. Daniel himself only felt almost human at that moment. "Did I pass out?"

"It looks like you got mauled." Matthew worried over him and hauled him to his feet. "Let's get you inside."

"How long was I gone?"

"What do you mean how long? We went to check the attic and when we came downstairs again, you were laying out here in the dirt. We thought ..."

Lynn buried her face in his chest, and Daniel felt horrible for making her worry.

Matthew was practically leading Daniel by the hand to get him into the house. Daniel was zoning out. "If you saw something, why didn't you tell us?"

Something? Yes, a face, the owl, man, owl. He'd seen him through the window.

Then ...

Something, something like...like what? Like a dream? A nightmare? But he had the marks on his face. And the faint taste of wood smoke in his mouth. Daniel pulled out of his sister's arms and ran for the bathroom. He was going to be sick.

* * * *

The circle of trees felt empty without the Other there. Leinad refused to think about what that might mean. He had obviously been given some of the Fae gifts when They took his identity from him. To be able to create the trees around him, something must have rubbed off.

Or maybe it was transferred to me in their cum, he mused. Faerie magic, a sexually transmitted disease.

He focused and watched tiny balls of light dancing off of his fingertips, then he relaxed and watched the glowing orbs fade, shifting back into the moonbeams he'd called them from.

Leinad was more Other than the Other. He watched the crackling fire, mesmerized by those flames, and remembered the feeling and taste of that body in his arms. His revenge, his dust, his obsession. The shadow may remember what it is at some point, but by then, Leinad would have already claimed it, raped it, owned it completely. Then even if it killed him in the end, he would have that. His revenge and for once, his pleasure.

It was the least that creature owed him.

Slavery for slavery, and he doubted it would take a full thirty years for the Other to remember itself and kill him.

"Daniel" was getting off easy.

The lights were too bright. Daniel knelt on the floor of the country bathroom. The cheerfully smiling pictures of kids in bonnets and patchwork clothing felt like they were mocking him while he was face first in the toilet and revisiting dinner more closely than he would have liked.

"Daniel?"

He ignored the softly worried voice in the doorway and heaved again. The acidic bile burned his throat. Exhausted from the effort, he laid his head on the porcelain seat and kept as still as possible. Somewhere in the far corner of his mind, his common sense was screaming that he was obviously in shock and should be doing something about that. Though with the sting of barbed teeth still throbbing in his neck and shoulder, and the feeling of those talon tipped fingers seared into his flesh like an invisible brand, all he could focus on was that sensation. It was playing on a continuous loop through his body.

He shivered, face slipping a bit on the seat, and felt disgusted. He was so disconnected though, he couldn't tell if it was disgust at his current position, at the trace of those invisible fingers, or at the fact that he was, in a dark and hidden part of himself, still imagining that shifting tongue wrapping around his...and craving it.

"Daniel."

That was a stronger voice, matching the arms that were hauling him to his feet. Hadn't they already done this?

"You're bleeding all over the place, Dan," Matthew pointed out. "And that is really not a good place to be laying in. You have open wounds, dude."

He thought of the hand that had scored his face and fell back to his knees to heave again, but there was nothing left to come up.

Cool fingers, distinctly feminine, human fingers, traced his brow, guiding his head back up from the cool seat. "Matt, can you find the first aid kit?"

"Sure."

"Come on Daniel, let's get you to the couch," Lynn coaxed.

He stumbled after her, only half aware of the world, the rest of his mind was sifting through mental file cabinets, trying to find a legend about something even similar to that ... that *thing*.

"It couldn't have been a vampire," he muttered. The teeth had been wrong, and it had been out in the sun earlier—if that bird he'd seen had really been the creature. That seemed likely.

Lynn stared at him a long moment before responding. "Good to know," she reassured him.

"What's good to know?" Matthew asked, crouching on the floor by his sister and offering her the medical kit.

"Dan says it wasn't a vampire," she explained with a nervous looking smile while she carefully dabbed antiseptic wash on the neck wound.

Matthew blinked at her, then at Daniel, and back at Lynn. "Um...good?"

"Could have been a skinwalker, wizard, fae, possibly a child of Osirus."

"Uh, Daniel?" Matthew interrupted his musing. "You don't even believe in séances."

"Mm."

"And now you think you were mauled by a..."

"Were-owl."

"Right." Matthew gave Lynn a sidelong look full of concern.

"It looked like me." Even to himself, his voice sounded detached...almost absentminded.

Lynn ignored them both, cleaning each of the marks across her brother's face and carefully applying butterfly strips where needed. It was a mess.

Matthew made a choked sound and tried to hide a smile.

That little noise broke through the shock. Daniel looked up sharply. "Why are you smiling?"

"I just got this image stuck in my head of you attacking your reflection like a scared kitten or something." he couldn't hold back a snort of amusement.

"You think that this is funny?" Daniel scolded. "That thing said it could kill you. It isn't funny. Look at me!" He jerked forward and grabbed Matthew's chin, forcing his younger brother to stare at the stitches of white strips bisecting his face. "This was collateral damage. It slapped me. This happened because it slapped me, and didn't think about those damned talons! It could...it could..."

"Daniel." Lynn pulled him back to the couch. She stared at him, willing him to look at her, but he wouldn't break contact with Matthew's eyes.

"Shit, Dan," Matthew finally cursed. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Daniel looked away and stood up on shaky legs. "Thank you for patching me up, Lynn. I'm going to bed." He left them staring after him for the second time that night. Daniel wasn't in the state of mind to care.

* * * *

Something was tickling his thigh. Light, almost not a touch, it was moving over the skin on the inside of his leg just firm enough to brush the soft pale hairs there and cause the laughter inducing sensation.

Daniel squirmed and gasped lightly when the touch brushed deliciously close to his balls. He licked his lips and canted his hips just a bit forward to capture the feeling. It was still soft, soft and smooth, some separate touches but others all in a line and held together. The softest razor edge he'd ever experienced. Like a feather.

A feather! He stilled, unwilling to move the blanket lest he see something he didn't want to. It was like the nightmares he'd had as a child, of being surrounded by creatures who meant him harm and being unable to move in case they saw him. He used to hide his head under the covers and lay there, panting and terrified until the sunlight scared away the shadows, but this time, he couldn't hide that way. The monster was under the blanket with him.

That touch moved again and the muscles of his thigh jumped, a full body shiver wracking his broad frame. He was ashamed that it wasn't completely fear which caused it. Near enough, though. It took all of his will to move a hand, slowly, toward the sensation. Waiting for those sharp fangs to bite down, waiting to come into contact with knotted and feather strewn hair.

I shouldn't be this terrified. I'm a full grown man! I shouldn't be afraid of monsters in the dark!

He despised the owlish creature for stealing away his comfort and giving him such a childish fear. At least he wasn't hiding in the closet. *God, no, the closet would mean he wasn't in my bed!* Why couldn't he ... no, it. It's an it! One crisis of identity at a time, thank you! Why couldn't it be a closet monster. Closet monster. *Good God, tell me I'm dreaming. This is a nightmare. Delusion. I'm going insane. I never recovered from the accident and I'm lying in a coma somewhere, living a nightmare world inside of my head!*

He felt his own leg and shifted the hand inward, down his hip and up around the outer thigh. Any moment...

Then he felt it, and his hand clamped down. Jumping into an upright position, he yanked the offending thing up to meet his eyes.

A feather. A single owl's feather which had slipped into his briefs, probably from that ridiculous nest he'd been laying in before.

He closed his eyes in the exhaustion that only comes from the sudden absence of fear and gave a hiccupping sound. It might have been a laugh if not for the hollow and desperate edge to it. Crushing the feather in his fist, he fell back to the pillow.

Wait, I wasn't wearing briefs.

His eyes opened wide, and he screamed when he came face to face with an owl's gaze and that mouth with its Cheshire grin.

"Stole my face," it accused, and reached for him.

Daniel slammed his head into the wall when he jerked into wakefulness. He swore and bit his lip hard enough to make it bleed. His cock was straining in his Y-fronts as if he'd had an amazing wet dream, and he drew his legs up to himself, hiding the offending organ from his own eyes, hiding his depravity. Something was wrong with him. But he should be glad, right? It was only a dream.

The feather, crumpled and broken in his fist, mocked him.

* * * *

The birds were only just beginning to sing. The sky hadn't lightened enough to be noticeable yet through the thick canopy of the forest trees. Daniel didn't notice.

Leinad watched him from the shadowed vestibule just off of the kitchen. Daniel didn't notice him either.

He didn't mind.

There was the soft sound of footfall before she spoke, so Leinad wasn't surprised by the voice that broke the stillness.

"Daniel, do you know what time it is?"

The man looked up from the kitchen table and stared at his sister.

The girl slipped into a chair beside Daniel and stole his mug, taking a large swig before making a face and spitting it back out. "This coffee is black." She made the complaint sound more like concern. "And it's cold."

Daniel looked back to the thin black box he'd been staring at before. "It's been sitting there a while, Lynn."

"Daniel," the sister, Lynn said again. "How long have you been up?"

He rubbed his hands over his face in the gesture of a man too tired to be having that conversation. The pressure against his wounds made him flinch though, and he visibly steadied himself. "Four hours, give or take."

"We went to bed at twelve-thirty," Lynn said, disbelievingly.

"Yeah."

She just watched him, completely quiet. Leinad knew how that felt. The Fair Ones used to stare at him until he broke down and begged Them for it. For anything. This was different though. She was human. And the look in her eyes was worry, not mirth.

Daniel didn't hold up against the staring any better than Leinad had. "I got up again at one-fifteen."

Lynn sighed. "Exactly four hours. So you do know what time it is."

"It's on the computer screen," he admitted.

"Of course." She ran her hands over her face just like Daniel had. Leinad wondered if it was something they picked up from a parent or from one another.

Daniel frowned at his sister's distress. "I had a dream, and I couldn't sleep."

"About the thing that attacked you?"

He nodded.

Leinad gave a small smile.

"What are you reading?" she asked, motioning for him to pass her the box he'd been staring at for the last few hours. Computer was the word Daniel had used, but it didn't hold any meaning for Leinad. Just one more thing They had taken from him.

He scooted it over to her and stood up to empty his coffee cup and fill it with hot coffee, this time thinking to add cream and sugar. "I hate it black."

"The Haunting of Saint Thomas?"

Daniel nodded and leaned on the door frame between kitchen and vestibule. His arm went up to massage his neck a bit, and Leinad watched the play of muscles as he moved.

"Why are you reading this?" Lynn pressed.

"It's about werewolves."

"It's fiction."

"Well, fiction is based on some bit of truth a lot of the time." Daniel pointed out. "I've narrowed it down to either a were-owl, or a Changeling."

The strong curve of Daniel's back was almost mesmerizing. Leinad crouched down on hands and knees and crept forward until he was close enough to smell the scent of him through his sleep pants. He slowly rose to his feet, less than an inch between his chest and Daniel's strong back. He leaned forward, a little more, a little more, tilting his head and closing his eyes as he inhaled the scent of his neck. If Daniel even shifted, he would feel him. The risk was exhilarating. Leinad almost hoped he'd be felt.

"The creature that attacked you?" Lynn questioned softly.

He nodded, and Leinad had to pull back quickly, his lips had grazed Daniel's neck. He held his breath but there was no reaction. Daniel hadn't felt it. He moved closer again. His chest felt full, his heart beating in thick pulses that mirrored the slow, involuntary motion of his hips. Intoxicating. Beautiful.

Lynn was silent a while before she finally asked, "Why?"

"It was a man, but it was also an owl, a barn owl. The moon seemed to make it shift, so I thought of the werewolf legend," he explained. "As for why a Changeling, it kept saying I'd stolen its face, and it wanted it back. Changelings take a person's face and replace them."

"But that only happens to kids, right?" Lynn reminded him.

He disagreed. "Not always, just usually. There have been cases where adults are taken, at least in the stories."

Opening his mouth in a silent gasp, Leinad's mind played over the "taking" of Faerie prisoners. His shaft swelled, and he bit his lip hard, trying to ignore his body's betrayal and focus only on Daniel. Daniel was his. His prize for living through it. His prize for his life lost.

"Stories, which are based around some bit of truth," she parroted.

"Right."

She shut the computer and stood. "It's really early."

Leinad ducked away from Daniel when she walked up to her brother and took the cup from his hands.

"You need to go back to bed."

He stared at the coffee as she poured it down the sink.

"Daniel."

"I'm leaning toward Changeling," Daniel admitted. "We don't call them the Fair Folk because we like them. We call them so because we're afraid of them."

Lynn looked confused. "What?"

"It's from an Irish legend, about the Faerie."

Leinad nodded, alone in the shadows. It was true.

"Daniel, you have to go to sleep," Lynn begged. "You're scaring me."

"I don't mean to," he promised.

She didn't look relieved. "Just...please? Go to sleep?"

Daniel closed his eyes and sighed. "Give me five minutes."

Lynn kissed his cheek. "Okay." And left the kitchen, probably to go back to sleep herself.

With her gone, Leinad moved slowly forward again. He stuck out his tongue, licking the back of Daniel's jeans as he stood, undulating closer and closer, just shy of touching. His cock was getting hard, it nestled at Daniel's ass, but only the smallest touch. Daniel shifted forward, away from the contact, but it was a subconscious move. He didn't turn.

When he stepped out of the doorway, Leinad was hard pressed to keep from following him into the light. He stayed in the shadows, though.

Daniel opened his computer, typed something in and stared at it.

Leinad watched, waiting.

"Come away, oh human child. To the waters and the wild, with a faerie, hand in hand," he read. "From a world more full of weeping, than you may understand."

"Faerie is worst. It's a bad bargain," Leinad spoke up.

He was gone by the time Daniel turned on the vestibule lights.

Chapter Five

"I think I'm going insane," Daniel said to the empty room.

He'd been sure that he'd heard... His blood ran with ice at the realization that the creature could get into the house. It could have been there the whole time he'd been in the kitchen. It could have really been in his bedroom before. Nowhere was safe from something that already defied all reason.

He slid to the floor, legs too shaky to hold him anymore.

The thought of that *thing*...the thought of it so close...

So close.

He closed his eyes and bowed his head in shame. The thought was equal parts arousing as it was terrifying. He let his head fall back, banging it against the wall and cursing at the sharp stab of pain through his skull. *At least it stopped that train of thought*, he reasoned, rubbing the tender spot carefully.

He closed his eyes, only for a moment, but when he opened them again, the creature was kneeling on the floor in front of him.

"Clumsy," it noted.

Daniel's pulse rate spiked, his eyes felt like they would bug right out of his head because of the sudden pressure building up behind them, the complete and utter knowledge that the situation should have been impossible by all laws of nature. He opened his mouth, but covered it quickly, muffling his own cry. The last thing he wanted to do was bring Lynn and Matthew running into the middle of things by screaming.

"You keep injuring yourself," it continued, as if Daniel hadn't been fidgeting on the floor and making a fool of himself.

That comment annoyed Daniel, who promptly reminded the creature, "You're the one who sliced up my face!"

"Your fault," it insisted.

"I made you claw me?" he scoffed in disbelief.

"You made it possible for Them to take me," the creature blamed him bitterly. "I did not hold onto my form well enough after the last round, not used to having the owl inside. Too new."

Daniel took in the shifting of jacket to feathers, the spray of them sifting in and out of skin and hair. In the artificial light, the two forms seemed superimposed upon one another, as if neither was sure which should take the lead.

"Did not mean to cut you."

That was likely the closest he would come to an apology. Daniel didn't pay it any mind, his attention had been caught by something else the bird-creature had said. "The last round?" he whispered. Every muscle of his body was tense, ready to spring if there was an opportunity, ready to run. But it was too close. *Keep it talking. Watch for the talons. Ease away, slowly.*

"Torture," the creature clarified. "Yours liked to put different things inside of me. That practice was not always a sexual one." It shifted, its hips giving a slow and lazy roll that made Daniel's mind instantly jump to sex. Like it was remembering the feeling of something deliciously long and thick filling it's ass.

It took a moment for Daniel to bring his mind back into the moment and the conversation. His heart was racing, and it wasn't with fear anymore. He couldn't understand the longing, the hard jolt of lust he'd felt when the creature moved its hips just so, or licked its lips, beak, lips. The overlapping of its human and were-bird forms was giving him a headache. Both forms were giving him an ache of a different nature. He moved surreptitiously to hide the bulge growing in his jeans.

"Your kind did a lot of things to me," it continued. "It was easier to hold on to myself when it was only sexual." The last was said as if it didn't realize it had spoken out loud.

The words brought him up short. Daniel's answering voice was incredulous. "My kind? I don't even know who you are! I don't know who did what to you, but it wasn't anything to do with me!"

"You know," it prompted. "Deep down. You'll remember enough to kill me someday. Until then, make reparations for Them."

He didn't understand. His head felt heavy.

The creature probably noticed Daniel's confusion, because it elaborated. "The Other, Fair Ones, the Faerie."

Daniel shook his head. "I'm not insane. You are."

"Probably," the creature admitted with no hint of emotion.

"You're a Faerie."

It shook its head. "No. I've just contracted the virus of their magic."

"What are you?" Daniel pleaded. If he could just know, maybe he could make sense of everything. The lust, the terror, the strangely civil moment they were sharing just then...there had to be an explanation.

It cocked its head, owl's eyes overlapping familiar human ones while it stared at Daniel with his own face. "I am Daniel Tessel. They called me Leinad, in Faerie."

Daniel glared at the thing. "Stop the mind games! I'm Daniel Tessel."

"No," Leinad corrected. "You are the Changeling who stole his...my...life."

It was like a pit opened up where Daniel's internal organs should have been. A black hole, pulling him into a cold death from the inside out while the event horizon froze his body in the moment. It was ridiculous, insane, impossible...and it rang with truth, even if he couldn't remember it. *But a faerie? Me? Why would I have stayed? The Changelings don't stay, they run away, turn on the families, sometimes kill them, but they don't stay.*

Leinad was watching him...no, the real Daniel was watching him, as if he were waiting for the memories to come flooding back in.

"I don't remember," he whispered.

"Speaking it louder will not make it any more or less true," Daniel noted.

Daniel's mind stumbled over that. *If that thing...if that man, was Daniel, Who am I?*

"Think of me as Leinad," the real Daniel bade him, running harshly taloned fingers up the inside of Daniel's thigh. "You can be Daniel for me. Thirty years. I've been Leinad too long."

The hand brushed over Daniel's cock, and it jumped in expectation, pressing up into the touch. "W—what are you doing?"

Leinad stared at him but pressed a bit harder, ringing a moan from him.

Daniel's legs began to spread apart for the touch before he tensed again and scurried away and to his feet. "Stop! What if Lynn or Matthew comes in?"

The feathers rustled and shifted as Leinad climbed to his feet. "They will not come if you do not want them to."

“What?”

“They will not come,” Leinad insisted.

He glared at the man-turned-creature. “They’re human beings, you can’t just dictate what they will or will not do!”

Leinad turned and walked away, through the vestibule and outside, as if he’d suddenly lost all interest in the conversation.

Without thinking, Daniel followed him. He was tired of being scared.

The moment he cleared the door, strong hands gripped his shoulders and swung him around to slam him back against one of the wide old trees surrounding the house.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t know!” Leinad yelled back in aggravation.

Only then, did Daniel notice that the feathers were bristling, and the flesh was trembling. Those eyes so like his own, were unsure, almost as if... “You’re scared.”

Those same eyes narrowed in anger. “I’m looking at the thing who stole my life! And all I can think of is the texture of your skin and press of your cock. I’m not scared, I’m furious. What are you doing to me? Since the moment I saw you, you’ve been doing something to me. Confusing my senses. It’s like you’re dosing me with dust, constantly.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Daniel argued. He watched Leinad carefully, like a mouse trapped by an owl’s deadly regard. He was trembling, he couldn’t help it. The dream, the feather, the kiss, the research...he felt like he was losing himself. Then again, if his research and Leinad were to be believed, he’d already lost himself years ago.

As if he couldn’t hold Daniel’s gaze anymore, Leinad jerked away from him and began to pace back and forth, closer and closer to the tree line as if there might be some solace for him within it. Daniel’s head swayed slowly from side to side while his eyes tracked Leinad in his restless movement. He never actually made it to the trees. He couldn’t. Neither of them could walk away. Something kept pulling them together, something beyond their control.

Control, he used to have control. Once upon a time, he’d been so sure and so confident and very much in charge of his place in the world. At that moment though, his every fiber was focused only on the being prowling before him.

“Why are you doing this to me?” he begged, when the creature’s constant motion became too much.

Leinad looked up—his huge, owlish eyes blinking and feathers bristling.

"I hate this," Daniel rasped, clenching his fists.

The shifting man froze mid-step, and turned all of his attention on him.

"You come into my life, threaten my family, stick your tongue down my throat, haunt my dreams like you were meant to be there, and then you turn around and tell me that you *are* meant to be there. Not in my dreams, but in my life. That it isn't my life. That I stole it from you. Do you know how ridiculous that sounds?" He emphasized his point by pushing the downy chest hard enough to make the other man stumble back. "And then, to top it all off, because that just wasn't bad enough, you have the gall to...to touch me, like that. To claim me like that. Fuck you! Leinad, or Daniel or whoever you are. You don't own me! No one owns me! And I don't want this! I hate this! I hate you!"

Leinad's eyes blazed, and his mouth curved in a sensual smirk, as if Daniel's anger was some kind of erotic showing. He swayed forward. Daniel dodged to the side and backed up quickly until he hit another tree and couldn't go any further.

The soft glow of starlight seemed brighter, somehow. It dappled the strange, birdlike man in an ivory sheen. He looked like some savage porcelain doll, come from a forgotten world. Unlike a doll though, he was...captivating. His hips rolled as he moved, his tight britches stretched and clung to them, to his thighs, his...

Daniel's entire body gave a slow, delicious throb, and he forgot what he'd been angry about.

"You hate this. Do you think I do not?" His hand rose to cover one side of his face, as if he was resisting the impulse to hide. "I do not simply burn for you, I ache," Leinad groaned. His hand slid, as if compelled, down to his long, pale neck. Then lower. His fingers teased his taunt stomach and finally slipped to touch the growing evidence of his interest. He barely brushed it, but left his hand there, finger tracing, teasing. "I ache for you, I pulse inside, like a slow continuous tide, and every throb pulls me toward you." He stepped slowly forward.

"Every..."

Step.

"Delicious ..."

Step.

"Pulse."

Step.

Leinad's chest heaved, his large eyes dilated and full of a longing so deep that it passed lust and danced the border of agony. "I throb in time with your heartbeat," he groaned. "I ache."

He took one more step, until they were inches apart.

"Hate? No." He reached forward and ran his fingers carefully over the gashes his talons had made. "It would be bearable if I could hate you, I think. But I don't." He let the palm caress those wounds and slide upward, to tease the dark strands of Daniel's hair. "I yearn for you." The questing hand cupped the nape of the startled man's neck. Daniel had not expected that hand to be so warm, almost human.

Daniel knew he was flushed. His chest rose and fell in short, heavy gasps, exquisitely aware of every portion of the other man's body. Of how close they were standing. The play of his breath over Daniel's own parted lips.

Leinad's voice dropped to a husky purr. "To hold you."

Daniel leaned forward instinctively, and found himself cradled in arms so strong that he felt fragile against them.

"To smell you." Leinad dipped his head to the crook of Daniel's neck and Daniel gave a shuddering sigh as the feathered man inhaled deeply and nuzzled there. "To know you." His breath ghosted over the oversensitive flesh, and Daniel's body gave a long, full shiver again.

So decadent, carnal, like he held an orgasm inside, and it was washing over him in waves, making him come again and again before he was even fully hard. All from Leinad's voice.

He was damned. Well and truly damned.

"To own you." The beast—the man—Leinad, moved again, until their noses touched, then he slowly cocked his head to the side. "To know every secret place." His lips were so close...

Daniel couldn't take it anymore "I'm your creature." He gasped in a deep and need-filled whisper.

Leinad had only to tilt his chin forward and they were joined again, mouths locked together and hips grinding in one slow undulation, before they both lost what small bit of control they had left.

It was hard for Daniel to remember why he'd craved control so much when he found himself pushed to the thick, moss-covered floor of the forest and covered completely by his panting double. Leinad's bare chest glistened with a sheen of sweat and his cock, God, his cock was so full. Firm and thick, and Daniel could feel it against his groin. Even through his jeans and Leinad's britches, he could feel it lengthening, pressing up and toward him. He wrapped his legs

around the feathered man's back and groaned when the position lined them up perfectly, bulge to bulge.

He whimpered into the other man's mouth.

Those succulent lips smiled, and the questing hands left his hair and neck to make quick work of the cloth that separated them.

Daniel gasped in beautiful shock when the cool morning air touched his turgid length. Even the chill couldn't wilt him, it was too much. He grew harder, impossibly, and pearly drops of pre-cum slipped free, lubricating the both of them and making the slide of flesh on flesh smooth and glorious.

He was caught, well and truly owned, and he didn't care. As long as Leinad would brand him with the heavy and pulsating shaft that was playing against his like a bow to a violin. He wanted that length inside of him, stretching him, burning him. He wanted to feel the cum jet against his innermost walls. He wanted the press of that hard, muscled body, crushing him into the ground while they fought to crawl into one another's skins until there was only one person left.

In that moment, he understood. He ached.

Leinad wriggled, and Daniel moaned in complaint when their cocks were separated from one another. Until he felt those taloned hands carefully spreading his cheeks and exposing that delicate entrance.

When the Changeling licked him, down there, Daniel gasped. When he blew over the freshly moistened pucker, Daniel screamed.

"Shh," Leinad cautioned, the sound sending another breath over the hole and causing the man to make a sharp cry that ended in a whimper. He arched his hips up and keened. The other man chuckled before delving in again, to lap at the sensitive flesh until it loosened enough to push his tongue inside.

"Oh! Oh! N...no," Daniel pleaded, his body pressing into the delicious sensations. His head was thrown back, eyes shut tight as he fought to keep his wits about him. "Don't..." He yelped when the tongue twisted inside and grew longer, sharper. He remembered the sensation of it changing in his mouth, but this... The long appendage wrapped around a small knot inside of him and the world imploded. The orgasm, that had been lapping through him since the beginning, gathered in his stomach and churned there, growing and throbbing until Leinad flicked his tongue over that place again. Daniel's hips shot up, his back arched impossibly. He opened his

mouth to scream, but the experience was so overpowering that it had stolen his voice. His vision went white, and his whole body tensed exquisitely while stream after stream of pearly white strands shot from his slit and decorated his belly, his chest, even his face. He was panting so hard that he wondered if any air was actually getting through to his lungs. When his body had reached the peak of his tolerance, he fell back to the soft cushion of the moss, shudders claiming him like aftershocks.

Leinad crawled up his prone form, that wicked, talented tongue gathering the evidence of his passions and savoring them like a rare delicacy.

“You don’t have to...” he breathed.

“You taste good,” Leinad murmured, reaching between them to stroke the spent organ nestled in a patch of chestnut curls.

Daniel groaned when his cock twitched at the attention. “I’m not a teenager anymore.”

“Thirty is younger than teenage for one of Them.”

The tired man blinked while his pleasure-blown mind tried to process that. All he could think of were remarks about cradle robbing, and those seemed inappropriate considering his companion. He must have said something out loud, because Leinad grimaced and shook his head.

“I have done something wrong if you can still talk.”

Daniel was about to correct him when Leinad spread the prone man’s thighs wide, and that long, thick, and still steel hard cock was pressed into his opening in one smooth thrust.

It should have hurt. Daniel didn’t remember any lube, any preparation except for that wonderful, gifted tongue. But instead, it was a slow burn that had his newly all but spent cock hardening again in rapt determination. His cock was Leinad’s biggest fan. It praised him, it wanted more. Wanted to be with him forever.

Daniel could see its point.

The Changeling scooped up his legs so they were locked over those sweat-shined, muscular shoulders. Another scream was torn from Daniel when it sent that perfect member deeper inside. He was so completely owned—spread and speared and writhing in abject delight upon the shaft inside of him. He was in ecstasy. Rapture. Bliss. His vision was going white again, and Daniel canted his hips up to meet the rapidly deepening thrusts of his keeper.

They couldn’t hold a steady rhythm, too wound, too close, too desperate. He felt the mushroomed head rubbing against the very core of him, teasing the delightful bundle of nerves that Leinad’s tongue had been so enraptured with. Closer and closer, until he was stroking it with

each rock and press of his hips, until a hot gush against that place inside of him sent Daniel over the edge again. Finally, two voices raised in a cry that felt like it should have shaken down the world.

Leinad collapsed on top of Daniel, his still pulsing cock slowly slipping free, to nestle against Daniel's inner thigh.

They lay that way for a long time, chasing breath and thought but not quite able to catch either.

Leinad cradled the side of Daniel's face, closing his eyes and swallowing hard when he nuzzled into the touch. "I will not let you go, you know."

Daniel raised his own hand to trace Leinad's face. "I know."

"You truly are my creature, now."

He gave himself over; no more will left in him to fight. "I know."

Chapter Six

Daniel woke to the sun shining in his eyes. He had a moment of disorientation, wondering how his room had gotten to the other side of the house, and if he'd left his boots on since he had grass in his bed. Then the weight on his chest and the trees above him registered in his sleep fogged mind.

Leinad breathed deeply, still lost in slumber, using Daniel's entire body as one large pillow. It was oddly endearing. The other man had buried his face in the juncture of Daniel's neck and shoulder, hiding his face from the light.

I guess he can be out in the sunlight then, Daniel thought inanely. He raised a hand to stroke back Leinad's hair and marveled at the lack of feathers. It was like looking at his twin, like the taint that the Faeries had put into Leinad couldn't hold up in the presence of the daylight. His hands were large and strong, but tipped with nails just like Daniel's own. He dropped his questing fingers to play with that human hand, enjoying the change.

"Daniel?" The voice was just like his, no echo of a hoot or a trill. It was...nice.

"I think this makes me a narcissist," Daniel joked.

"It's still there," Leinad warned. "The sun only dampens its hold."

Daniel nodded and sat up slowly.

Leinad, unwilling to let him go completely, sat up with him, ending up cradled between his legs, his own wrapped around Daniel to rest on the grass behind him.

Studying his face on another was odd.

"What?" Leinad asked, annoyed.

"You're me. Really me."

The man scowled. "We have had this conversation already. You are me. I am not you."

"This is confusing," Daniel grumbled. "How do I explain you to Matthew and Lynn?"

"You don't have to."

The nonchalant answer made Daniel angry. "They're your brother and sister, shouldn't you care a little more?"

Leinad met Daniel's eyes squarely. "They are not." He leaned forward and captured Daniel's lips. It was more an order for silence than a kiss.

Daniel was not to be cowed. He pulled away and pushed against the other man's chest, to keep him at bay. "You can't have it both ways!" he insisted. "If you are me, then they are your siblings!"

The other man looked up at the sky and asked, "What time is it?"

The sun was up above the trees and on the other side of the house. "Probably one or two."

"Do you not suppose they should be awake and looking for you by now?"

Daniel's eyes went wide and he leaped to his feet, toppling Leinad to the grass. "What did you do to them?!"

Leinad's eyes narrowed in an exact approximation of Daniel's. "I have been here with you since you last saw the female one, if you would recall."

"You have magic."

The blank face was back. "Not enough to be in two places at once."

Daniel stared at the house and shook his head. "So why aren't they out here? We're right in the yard!"

"You didn't want them here."

The pitying tone in Leinad's voice scared him more than the anger had.

"Daniel."

"You mentioned that before. That they wouldn't see us if I didn't want them to. Did you put some kind of spell on them?"

"You did." His voice was soft but sharp, almost like the blade of an approaching knife that had become hazy through the mist of tears.

Daniel's insides felt hollow again. He ran naked into the house and began calling out, "Lynn! Matthew!" But something had changed, he could feel it. A pressure inside of him had eased, but it wasn't refreshing, it was terrifying. "Where are you?"

"Daniel." Leinad spoke from behind him.

“Shut up!” he hissed and made his way upstairs. “Lynn! Matthew! It’s passed noon! Get up!”

Their bedrooms were empty.

“Daniel.”

“Shut up! Where are they?”

Leinad sighed. “Know that they are here.”

That brought him up short. He turned from the empty room and stared at the other man.

“They are behind you, look.”

He blinked, unsure of what to say to that, and turned around.

They were lying in the bed, curled up like they used to when they were kids, there was even a space open for him to climb in and keep bad dreams away. Daniel watched their chests rise and fall and their eyes shift beneath their closed lids. It suddenly struck him as too perfect, almost scripted.

“I put a spell on them?” he asked Leinad, his voice tight.

Leinad nodded.

“What did I do to them?”

The man was standing close, so close that Daniel could feel his warmth. So close that the breath of the words caused his skin to prickle with goosebumps. “You kept them here.”

“In bed?” It was an empty question. The truth was already there, in the back of his mind. But he silently pleaded with Leinad to deny it.

“In this world.”

The scene played out behind Daniel’s eyes as he watched his siblings’ sleeping forms. There had been a large cracking sound, and they had just enough time for the pride to fall to shock before the giant maple tree just outside the backdoor snapped and fell. The wood had been rotting, the wind hit it just right, it fell at the perfect angle, and the roof fell in on their heads.

When he’d woken up, all he could see were his mother’s cloudy, lifeless eyes. All he could hear was Lynn screaming. Then the groaning of wood and the snap of a support giving way. Silence. Matthew had watched him with wide and pleading eyes. His body half buried ... ten feet away from his head. The smell of blood, while he’d pulled himself from the ruins of his life. “I...I brought them back.”

Leinad shook his head. "Only their shadows. Almost like creating a Changeling. You interact with them, when others are with you, they see them. When you are not there, they cease to be, and no one remembers them until you return. You've linked their essence to you."

Daniel felt sick. His knees refused to hold him and he fell to the floor in shock. "If I didn't want them to see us..."

"They wouldn't exist until you called them."

He was a monster. He was worse than Leinad. Daniel couldn't breathe. "Do they know?"

Leinad shook his head. "They only remember what you think they should. They only act the way you think they would act."

"I did this." His voice was brittle. "I've been directing them, scripting their lives, it's all in my head. Everything was all in my head. What else have I caused? Did I make that tree fall? Did I kill them in the first place?"

A strong, too familiar hand gripped his shoulder and Daniel looked up into hard, gold flecked eyes. "It is time to let them go."

"Did I kill my family?" he demanded.

Leinad's face was unreadable as he responded. "They were *my* family, and no. You just didn't save them."

"I couldn't."

"You didn't know that you could," he corrected. "Now you know. It's time."

Daniel focused on the bed, on the realization that they weren't real. Focused on the memory of their deaths. Tears coursed over his cheeks as his heart was imploding and taking his soul with it piece, by pain wracked piece. He gave a strangled sob as the blankets settled over an empty bed, and felt two arms encircle him from behind. Daniel went limp, and just let himself be supported. He didn't think his body would obey him. Nothing made sense. He wasn't human anymore.

No. He never had been.

"What will I do now?" he choked, despondent. "Who will I be?"

Leinad gave a shark's smile, burying it in Daniel's rabbit soft hair. "You will be my creature."

The Changeling turned in the once-human's embrace and stared at him with shock-shattered eyes. "I am your creature," he breathed, grabbing onto that fact like a lifeline.

"Yes," Leinad hissed in satisfaction and the beginnings of arousal. He watched the broken Fair One with a predator's eyes. The large man didn't look half so large anymore. "Mine."

That declaration earned him a kiss as Daniel leaned forward, closing the small space that separated them. His lips were dry from panting, swollen from the kisses they'd shared earlier, out under the trees. When he pulled back and bit his lip, Leinad pressed him down onto the cold, wooden floor. "You're so calm. I've seen you angry, but I haven't seen you sad. Aren't you sad?" Daniel asked.

Leinad nipped at the Changeling's lip again. "In Faerie, they took...I can't be human anymore. Maybe I've lost the ability to feel sorrow."

The grieving creature beneath him sobbed and reached out, to wrap shaking arms around Leinad's neck. "Teach me how to be one of them then. I don't want to feel this."

Daniel's request sent a cold trepidation up his spine. "You don't want that," he assured him.

"I do!"

"No." Leinad refused, a tight feeling taking hold of his chest. He leaned closer to Daniel's tear dampened face and tried to ignore the swell of some unnamed feeling in his throat. "They don't feel. They don't feel anything naturally, not pain or anger, or love. Why do you think They take us? Do you really want to remember our family and feel nothing but a vague interest?"

Glassy brown eyes stared at him in horror. "No."

Leinad had to look away, those haunted eyes scored his heart. Bending in the Changeling's embrace, he sucked at the Other's nipple, wetting it with his tongue. "I can't teach you to be Them."

He knelt in the vee of Daniel's spread legs and hummed in contentment. With slow and precise movements, eyes ever locked with his lover's, Leinad lifted one of those muscled limbs, and turned his head just enough to wrap his lips around the prone man's toe.

Daniel gave a squeak of surprise, body aroused and mind obviously in turmoil.

Leinad lifted his head from the task long enough to offer. "I can make you feel something else, though."

"That's...what are you... oh!" he gasped. The light of realization dawned on his face, and he paused only briefly before nodding and softly begging. "Please."

Leinad played the writhing man like an instrument. His hands rubbed into the pads of Daniel's feet while his tongue claimed each toe in turn, fellingating them in a teasing promise of

what might happen when he moved higher up Daniel's body. He moved slowly forward, lips caressing and tongue wetting each inch of skin. He made slow and steady love to the backs of Daniel's knees and had him gasping and spreading himself wide before his cock had even been touched. He panted, biting his lip and rolling his hips, raising them up in a vain attempt to draw the attention of that wonderful mouth to them. Leinad ignored the obvious but silent begging and instead, his attentions moved over Daniel's chest and neck. He remembered feeling the kind of desperation he could see in Daniel. Starved for any kind of touch, deprived of all of his senses for so long that he just had to feel something. The tightness in his chest grew, and he felt the unfamiliar sting of tears in his eyes. How long had it been? Since he'd cried in sorrow?

The Changeling gyrated and desperately pressed himself into any bit of the other man that he could. And he ached. Leinad could feel the man's need as if it were being absorbed each place they touched. God how he ached.

Daniel was out of control. He was acting like a slut. A whore. Leinad's whore. But that was all right. Leinad didn't mind it at all. Daniel was Leinad's creature. He was close. Daniel was so hard that one touch might have finished him. So he didn't touch. He simply moved up again.

When Leinad settled his lip upon that place at the base of his neck that sent shivers running through the creature, Daniel finally broke. He gave a hard shove, and Leinad, who hadn't been expecting the change, was toppled and found himself quickly caged between the Changeling's thighs. His weeping cock rubbed teasingly at the cleft of Daniel's ass. He began to struggle then, not liking the new position, terrified of being held down and owned by one of Them again. He had no strength though. Daniel leaned down and whispered into Leinad's ear, "Good boy, Daniel." and bit down hard on his tender lobe.

The cry that erupted wasn't one of lust, but of pain. Leinad stared up at his own face and body, his own arms. He felt his own hands sliding back and giving his member a slow caress before delving into the body that was his. Trapped there, between the legs of the Changeling, he realized that he might not have escaped at all. The Fair Ones could be playing with him. This could all be in his mind while he floated in that cell, full of nothing. He gave a sharp cry, painful and full of denial.

Then Daniel pressed down and took Leinad completely inside of him. He stared up into his own eyes, need-filled and shattered, and understood. Neither of them were in that place anymore. They had both escaped, only to capture each other. They were both prisoner and jailer and they had done it to themselves.

Leinad found that he didn't care. He was sheathed completely inside of that tight, warm channel. He pulsed and the walls encasing him pulsed back.

"Daniel!" he screamed and wriggled.

Daniel rolled his hips, the thick, mushroomed head of Leinad's cock stroked hard again and again over that wonderful place inside of him. His whole body was hot, burning up, and he couldn't seem to get enough.

Leinad forced himself into a sitting position and took hold of the Changeling's hips, lifting him up and shoving him down hard into his lap, that thick rod cramming inside hard and fast, over and over again.

Daniel was flushed and panting, beads of sweat slid over his muscular chest, trailing over the firm pectorals and down his taught abdomen, to disappear into the thatch of chestnut hair surrounding his straining cock.

"Oh! Oh god!" he sobbed. "Harder, please, break me! Break me!"

With a growl, Leinad bent his head forward to lave the tempting sweat from Daniel's throat, then licked his way down the straining chest to capture one tightly beaded nipple between his teeth.

"No! Stop teasing me!"

He wouldn't listen. He bit down on the delicate pink nub and twisted, earning a scream before licking it in an insincere apology and capturing the next one. The Changeling's cries were making him impossibly harder. He was nearly in pain. He moved his grip to the well-defined arms and pushed Daniel backward, slamming him to the floor and thrusting in again, over and over until Daniel wasn't crying, so much as keening.

The sound was broken each time Leinad pounded forward, each time he stole Daniel's breath. It was beautiful. He threw his head back, forced himself fully inside one last time, and came with a howl that echoed harshly around them, quickly joined by Daniel's own scream as he gave in and let himself go.

They lay there, slick with sweat and semen and wrapped so intimately around one another that they couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

Daniel spoke first, voice raw from screaming and words still choppy as he fought to get his breathing under control. "There won't be any happily ever after. Will there?" he gasped.

Leinad looked down at the finger and hand shaped bruises already starting to darken all over the other man's body and felt slightly ill at the destruction he'd wrought. He followed the

trails of blood from ear and nipples across sun kissed skin, over the rapidly rising and falling chest and to the face of a man who had lost too much.

"There won't be a happy ending," Daniel clarified softly.

"Never," Leinad promised, a hint of regret hiding in his dark voice. "Happy endings are made by finding the perfect moment to look away. You don't have that luxury." He bowed his head, unwilling to look at the creature he hated and loved in nearly equal measure. "Neither of us does."

"Then what are we doing?" Daniel asked quietly, clinging to the only person he had left, his only connection to this world.

Leinad didn't respond, just stared at him with those unfathomable eyes. He wanted to offer some form of solace, but he couldn't remember how.

Daniel must have sensed something in his silence because he ducked his head until he could meet Leinad's gaze once more and spoke. "I think...even if I'm not human, I think I lo—"

"Do not make vows your blood cannot keep," he scolded softly.

"I'm not." Daniel sounded as if he were trying to convince himself more than Leinad. "If I have enough magic to hold the dead here, then I have enough magic in me to overcome my blood."

Leinad shook his head ruefully. "It is that very blood which gives you your magic. Yours is a changeable kind."

"I love you."

The Fae touched man couldn't look away from those solemn, inhuman eyes. "We shall see." It was all he could promise. He wanted to believe Daniel, but how could he? When Leinad knew how fickle Their love could prove.

"Leinad?" the Changeling asked with a choked voice. "What will we do?"

He blinked and shook his head. "Live. It's what humans do."

Daniel shivered. "I'm not human."

"No," Leinad agreed and sat up, pulling Daniel with him until they were both on their feet and walking through the sad and empty house and into the warmth and light of the world beyond.

About the Author

Brought up in the woods and wild, in a place almost forgotten by time, I learned that the best moments in life are the ones filled with the spirit of the earth and family around you. Second best to that is the moment I got an Email saying 'Bedtime Story for a Stolen Child' was being published. My name is Anna Mayle.

Anna loves to talk to her readers and can be found at www.annamayle.com

*Also Available from
Resplendence Publishing*

***Ryland's Sacrifice* by Kim Dare**

Principles don't pay tuition fees. When Ryland's math scholarship disappears overnight, he has two choices. He can borrow money from fellow student Jason Burrows, who has very interesting ways of collecting debts. Or, he can volunteer to be thrown to the werelions.

One night spent playing the part of a willing human sacrifice will give him enough money to finish his PhD. It seems like a good deal-right up until the moment he finds himself naked, blindfolded, bound and surrounded by lions.

***Marrick's Promise* by Kim Dare**

Marrick thinks that being thrown to the lions will be the ultimate adrenaline rush, and he's not disappointed. But his plan is to try everything life has to offer once. He has no intention of visiting the lions again.

Blaine and Luther don't expect to give any of the human sacrifices they share another thought once they leave the den. This man's different. They have no intention of letting this one go. The only question is, while they are willing to share Marrick with each other, are they willing to share each other with a human who could become as important to each of them as they are to each other?

***Extinction* by Carol Lynne**

Professor of Environmental Science/Wildlife studies at UNLV, Jack McBain has spent his adult life trying to track a legend overheard during his youth. Born and raised in the Canadian Province of Newfoundland, Jack remembers his grandparents telling stories of a race of people eradicated by European settlers in 1829. According to the legend, the Beothuk people didn't die out as first thought, but were transformed into wolf shifters.

When Newfoundland wolves began to appear in great numbers, the European settlers began killing them under the guise of population control. In 1910, the last of the Newfoundland wolves was shot, making them one of the few extinct species of wolves in the world.

Following spotty leads, Jack begins to track what he believes are Beothuk/Newfoundland shifter wolves. His search leads him to the Lake Mead National Recreational Area outside of Las Vegas. There, on Spirit Mountain, he finally comes face to face with not only the shifter he's been looking for, but the man of his dreams he didn't know he needed.

***Tropical Hedonism* by Dakota Rebel**

After a boating accident, Sean Harris wakes up staring into the eyes of a handsome doctor. Even when he discovers that he is on an island within the Bermuda Triangle, and there is no way for him to get back to his old life, he can't be too disappointed if it means being stuck with the doctor.

Dr. Wesley Carpenter cannot believe that the younger Sean Harris would want anything to do with him. After half-heartedly turning down the advances of his patient, he realizes that resistance is futile.

The men find themselves falling for each other quickly, but ghosts from their pasts and outside influences try to get in the way of their happiness. Sean and Wesley may be on the island forever, but neither is sure if that guarantees they'll be able to continue their *Tropical Hedonism*.

***Mind F*cked* by Mia Watts**

Sage has the ability to read minds, but only in high passion moments when thoughts transmit at a higher frequency. But the gift is double-edged. Sage is inordinately handsome. Some might even say he's a walking orgasm. So what's a half-breed to do when every person he meets seems intent on seducing him, and how will he know if the man he chooses will love him for more than his looks?

Joe has never been the object of anyone's lust before. Now Sage, the hottest guy he's ever laid eyes on, has Joe starring in his sexual fantasies. It would be perfect if only Sage could shut up for one minute, and quit talking about his own hotness—or about how he can read minds.

Meanwhile, Joe and Sage must secure the last three Zodiac Stones and prevent their theft while they wait for exhibition. Can they put their sexual tension aside long enough to stop a clever thief? And even if they do, will Joe's heart be a casualty of their inevitable fling, or could Sage really be looking for more than a one-night stand?

Also Available from Resplendence Publishing
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***Wolf in Men's Clothing* by Dakota Rebel**

Little Red Riding Hood has nothing on Rhys. On his way to his grandmother's house, Rhys' car breaks down in the middle of nowhere. Fortunately for him, there is a big, bad rescuer watching and waiting to sweep him off his feet.

***Just Right* by Bronwyn Green**

When Department of Natural Resources officer, Gwendolyn Locke, hits a black bear on the way home from work one night, her entire view of reality changes. She discovers that shape-shifters exist, and she's just become Goldilocks to three gorgeous, very aroused men who also happen to be werebears. Being snowbound has never been so hot.

***Open Sesame* by Mia Watts**

Alister Baban overheard a business discussion that netted him and his Uncle Cassimer a lot of money. When the Simsim Group stock crashes and declares bankruptcy within weeks, the owners immediately suspect the Babans of playing dirty.

Oz Adamo, one of four brothers who owned Simsim Group, agrees to abduct Alister to obtain information and win back the lost pensions of former employees.

Tied to a bed and lusting after his captor, Alister fights the sexual attraction he has for Oz. They want information and he isn't about to give it. But Oz loves a good challenge, and shrewd, serious, sexy Alister is naked and his—at least for now.

***Heart of Ice* by Brynn Paulin**

Kai is perfectly unhappy with his life. Cast into a role as shop boy and forced into marriage to save his family, he sees nothing good in his future. In fact, his betrothed, Gerda, seems to hate everything he enjoys. Especially winter and his attraction to dominating his partners. His prospects look grim...until the Snow Queen arrives.

Wyn has spent her life alone, living vicariously through those who love winter. When she learns of Kai's predicament, she knows she must save him. If only she could save herself. She craves his dominance, but there's one tiny thing standing in their way. No human can touch her without experiencing chilly agony. And that might bring any relationship to an icy death.

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