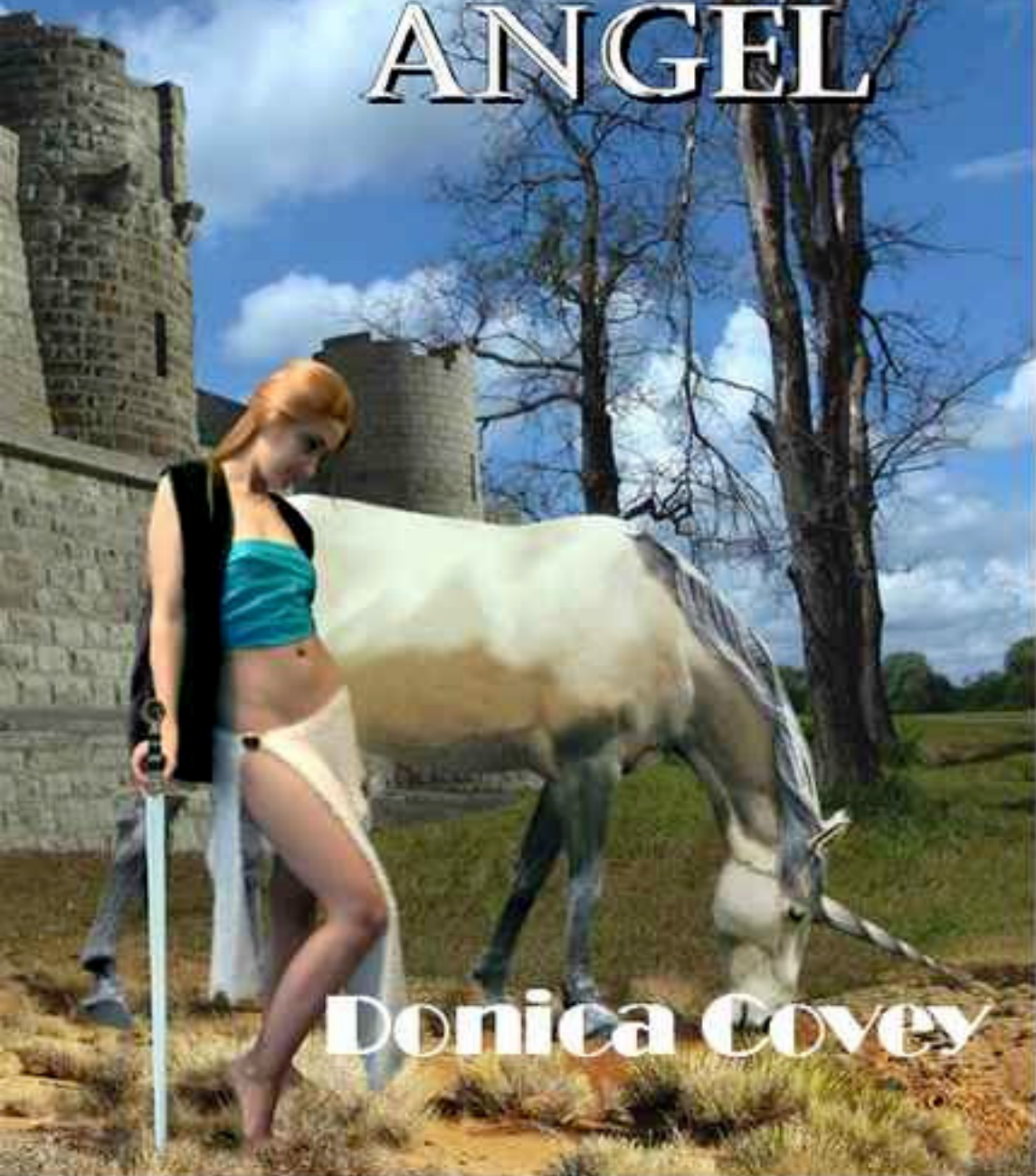




DRAGON'S ANGEL



Donica Covey

Dragon's Angel
by Donica Covey

Champagne Books

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Champagne Books Presents

Dragon's Angel

By

Donica Covey

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Dedication

To Becka for sitting up late with me, critiquing my work, encouraging me, and keeping me sane (at least trying to). And to a belfry filled with some truly amazing bats. Thanks ladies, you're the best.

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One

Keely Morgan pulled into the parking lot behind the bar. A single white light stood on a pole in the middle of the graveled lot. Gooseflesh skittered up her spine. This was a bad idea. She'd never been here before, had never even seen it before, yet she'd inexplicably known it was here and exactly how to find it.

Her mind hadn't been her own in days. Her dreams were filled with dark, smoky confusion; her days filled with images of green fields and unusual skies. Why come to a strange place, a bar no less. And alone? She wanted to start the engine and drive straight home but a force stronger than her will was at work.

She got out, locked the car and followed the broken concrete sidewalk to the front. A battered sign identifying the place as the Wandering Minstrel Tavern swayed slightly in a sudden gust of wind. She briskly rubbed at the ripples of goose flesh along her skin before reaching out for the brass plated door knob.

She pulled open the barrier and entered the room. Never having been a bar person to begin with the smell of thick smoke and stale beer nearly choked her. She needed a good strong breath to steady her nerves, but inhaling such a conglomeration of odors wasn't something she could handle.

Keely kept a hand hovering near her nose while she made her way from the door to the bar stool nearest the exit.

The bartender, a man in his fifties, had bushy gray eyebrows arching over dark brown eyes. He flashed her a yellow smile. "What can I get you?"

"Just a Coke, please."

"Sure thing."

There weren't many people. A couple sat at a table against the far wall. They were obviously engrossed in a heavy conversation.

An older man sat a few stools away. He was a heavysset man. His dark hair fell to his collar; a large mustache completely concealed his upper lip. He wore large metal-framed glasses, and when he looked her way, his gaze roamed down and then back up her body.

She quickly looked away and in her nervous state almost knocked over the glass she hadn't even notice the bartender set in front of her. Her hand trembled as she lifted the Coke to her lips and sipped at it. The hair on the back of her neck prickled. She felt the invisible weight of someone watching. Using the mirror that ran the length of the wall she scanned the room.

There, in the back of the room. A pair of golden orbs studied her. Golden? She couldn't resist the pull that dragged her off the stool. She walked past table after table—drawn on an invisible string.

She closed the space between her and the eyes. As she plowed through the smoke, his image cleared. Those eyes belonged to a handsome man with dark coloring. He appeared to be in his early thirties.

His eyes were actually a deep shade of emerald green. A strange golden cast circled his irises then the odd shade started to glow. It was ridiculous. She was only imagining things. Sure, it looked like his eyes were glowing. It wasn't possible. Lack of sleep. Mental decline. It was merely hallucination. Keely stiffened her backbone and gave a mental shake. She forced her gaze to lock onto his. "May I sit down?"

He merely nodded. His dark hair lay on his shoulders in a sleek line. His jaw tightened and loosened, then a slow smile worked its way across his lips. "Well?"

She sat across the table from him and swallowed hard. "Why am I here?"

He studied her face. "That is a question philosophers have debated for all ages."

"Please don't mock me. I'm serious, I need to know why I am here."

He stared holes into her very core. "Why ask me?"

She boldly returned his studying glare. "Because something inside me says you have the answer. For weeks I haven't been able to sleep or concentrate. Then tonight, I felt myself pulled to this bar, to this very table—with you. Please tell me, why I am here."

"What's your name?"

"Keely. Keely Morgan."

He inhaled sharply. His eyes widened; in a matter of seconds he'd recovered and his insolent attitude returned. "I have no idea who you are, or why you're here."

"You're lying!" she hissed. "I saw it in your face!" Keely leaned back in her chair and rubbed her temple with the heel of her palm. "What's the matter with me?"

"Maybe you need to sleep it off. I'll bid you goodnight." With that he pushed up from the table and sauntered away.

Keely watched him disappear through the hazy room. The world spun. Senseless word-like sounds echoed in her brain. That strange out of control sensation swamped her. She grabbed her purse and hurried after him. His long legged stride made it hard for her to catch up. Finally, out in the lot, she reached his side. "Please. I'm so confused I need your help."

He paused to peer down at her. "Listen Keely, go home. Sleep off the drink. Call your doctor and tell him of your *difficulties*, your confusion. You're obviously out of your world here."

She couldn't move away, couldn't tear her eyes from his. Suddenly there was hot searing pain in her head. "*Be gone*," a voice roared in her brain. The intense throbbing made her dizzy and she jerked away. She turned and ran, not looking back, never stopping until her car was parked out front of her apartment building. She ran inside her, slammed the door shut, secured the locks and threw herself on the sofa. What was happening? Maybe she really was losing her mind.

It wasn't until the wee hours, as the pink light of dawn punched between the blinds, that she finally slept.

Her alarm blared from the other room and she pushed off the sofa trying to work out the painful kinks from a fitful night on it.

She showered, dressed then went back to the living room. She hadn't ever been late for work since her first job, but this last week she'd twice overslept and been tempted to call in sick.

Today the temptation was more than she could bear. After phoning in the message she sat back on the sofa and closed her eyes. In seconds a vision filled her mind: *a little girl with silver blonde, waist-length hair stood on the soft grassy edge of a crystal-clear creek. Lavender and gold ribbons threaded through the hem and hung from the sleeves of her white gauze dress. Overhead a pale periwinkle sky made everything glow. Standing in the water before her, a white unicorn, a single crimson fleck on its flank.*

The girl pulled a jeweled dirk from her waist belt and carefully removed a large thorn from the unicorn's flank. She reached into the pocket of the dress and drew out a handful of strange orange-green leaves. After crushing them, she dipped the mass into the water then applied them to the injury with gentle pressure. The unicorn dipped his head in a low bow. She lifted her hands and placed them on his golden horn.

Pain roared through Keely's head. She bit her lips to hold back the cry that threatened to break free. She tried to sit up but the pain was too strong

Maybe she had some kind of mass in her brain. She'd seen shows where people with brain tumors had all kinds of weird visions and head pain. Once the dizziness passed, she'd call the doctor and schedule an appointment. She had to get her life back.

* * * *

Xavier Blake paced the living room. When Keely appeared, he'd seen his own confusion whirling in her eyes. Something about her name triggered a latent memory but as quickly as it danced on the edges of his brain, it disappeared.

She'd been so beautiful, her skin as pale as that of a white rose. Her eyes were a strange shade—purple—he'd swear to it. When she looked at him, he felt his soul stripped bare. What memories did she stir in him?

Xavier moved to the sofa and lay back on the cushions. His eyes slid closed. In minutes the smell of sulphur filled his nostrils, the room became dark and the walls shimmered into the texture of a cavern: *it was hot, miserably hot.*

Perspiration pooled all over his body. A sound drew his eyes to the darkest corner of the cave. Shuffling and rasping sounds drew closer. Suddenly the room was filled with a huge black dragon, his gold trimmed green eyes studied every inch of the room.

It inhaled long and deep then blew out a massive orange flame. Sounds of shrieking filled the chamber and the entire room exploded with brilliant white light. Then all was dark. The dragon was left as nothing more than a burnt husk on the bottom of the cave floor.

Pain filled Xavier's chest and head at the same time. He was consumed with heartache at a profound loss. It weighed on him, burying him beneath its load.

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Two

Keely strolled to the window and stared out. The sky darkened to a deep gray and she could sense the storms that filled the air. May in Missouri: the perfect storm season. Beginning in March the probability for severe weather, tornadoes and the like, was almost tripled compared to other times of the year. March, April, May and sometimes even into June the weather could be calm and peaceful one minute and in the blink of an eye it would turn nasty. Just like the emotional turmoil building inside her. One minute she was sure of what was going on and the next nothing made sense.

Why was she so restless? What was going on? Abruptly, the world wasn't crisp and clear. It was disjointed and, like a pair of too-small shoes, it made her feel cramped and lost.

"Aldmakeelia. You must come home. They need you. Come home."

The whisper echoed through her apartment and she spun trying to find where it was coming from. "Who's there?" she shouted.

She ran through apartment going from room to room throwing doors opened wide. She dug into closets pulling out her clothes to find the villain hiding there. She climbed into the crawl space in the top of the closet searching for a secluded tormentor. Each place she found the same thing: nothing.

She dropped on her bed and squeezed her eyes tight. Hot tears escaped the clamped lids. They trekked down her cheek

and dripped into her ears. Was she becoming mentally ill? She knew absolutely nothing of her past. Her adopted parents, Jake and Jilly Morgan, had never been able to learn of her biological family. It was like she'd just been dropped in from a cloud.

Maybe her birth mother or father, or both, had suffered some schizophrenia. She pressed a hand to her head. "Get hold of yourself, Keely."

"*Aldmakeelia*," the voice whispered again.

A sudden wave of homesickness swept over her, dragging her already sinking spirits even lower. She sat on the couch, picked up the phone and dialed her mother's number.

"Hey Mom, it's Keely."

"Honey. I'm so glad you called." There was a short pause. "But shouldn't you be at work?"

"I didn't feel well today."

"What is it? What's wrong? Are you running a fever? Have you been eating right?"

Despite her horrendous mood, Keely couldn't suppress a chuckle. "Take it easy, Mom. I'm just having a bad day that's all. I'm sure it's nothing."

"Shouldn't worry me like that. Why is the day so bad?"

Why indeed? She couldn't answer that for herself; how could she explain it to her mom? "I don't know it's just ... I feel like I'm..." She wasn't sure what to say. *Hey Mom, see the deal is I think I'm losing my mind. Hearing voices and that sort of thing.*

"Keely?"

"Have you ever felt like you didn't fit in?" Immediately, Keely regretted asking the question. "Forget it. It's no big deal, really."

"Has something happened?"

"Not really. I don't know. I'm just in a bit of a funk."

"You need a bit of a what?" Her mother's exclamation was nearly deafening.

"What? No. Funk, F-u-n-k, geez."

"Sorry. Bad connection. We all feel a little off some days, dear. It's natural. Have you been eating enough fiber?"

Enough with the diet already. "I'm fine. I just wanted to hear your voice. I'm sorry it's been so long since I called."

"When are you coming home?"

"*Come home, Aldmakeelia,*" the voice whispered louder.

"Um ... I don't know. I'll come when I can. Listen, I need to go I just wanted to give you a buzz and see how you and Dad are."

"We're fine. He's got some yearlings to get to auction in a week or two."

"Let me know when and I'll come give him a hand, okay?"

"I will. Are you sure you're going to be all right?"

"I'm sure, Mom. Thanks. Miss you. Love to you both."

She waited for her mom to hang up and then clicked off the line. What had possessed her to call home? She froze and waited for the voice. Almost on cue it came again.

"*Home,*" the pleading tone cut the air. It was so sad with an edge of desperation.

* * * *

Xavier paced the study of his family home. The deep pile of cream-colored carpet muffled his steps. Since seeing the woman last night he couldn't get her out of his mind. Something about her stirred his blood.

Images gathered and played in his mind.

A little boy with dark hair and dark eyes ran through the fields, fire consumed the dry grass. It licked at his heels as he ran down a wooded path, through trees, brittle and dry. He made his way to a cavern hidden behind a huge waterfall where he'd be safe from the destruction following him. The parched trees and underbrush fed the flames, fueling the fire into a roaring monstrous beast that lunged after him.

He jumped through the curtain of water, the fire steamed and hissed, like a ravenous snake on the opposite side. Fear made tremors ripple through his body. "Xihcoatl," the voice boomed in the cavern.

The large black dragon moved closer. It shifted and soon a woman was running to him, arms outstretched. "We must hurry. I must get you to safety."

She dragged him down the chambers, twisting and turning through the maze of stone. Her terror was as palpable as the rock walls around them.

Xavier shivered and shook his head. It felt like a memory. But it wasn't possible. The things just seemed too incredible. So, why did it feel so real?

He hurried from the room and down the marble hall to the bathroom. He breathed deeply, in, out, in, out, trying to slow his breathing, allow his heart rate to decelerate. After splashing cold water on his face he reached for the towel to

blot it off. His eyes met his reflection in the glass. Golden yellow rings glowed around the green orbs and his pupils shifted to cat eye slits.

He shook his head again and peered closer. His fingers pulled the lids apart but the pupils were round once more. What the hell?

"Xavier?"

He toweled off and stepped out of the bathroom. His mother's graceful strides brought her in from the foyer. "Hello Mother." He greeted her with a peck on the cheek.

Aramantha Blake was an elegant woman in her late sixties. Her brown hair didn't show a single strand of gray; not that she'd allow it to show if she had any. Her silky chocolate eyes sparkled, her smile could light a small city and her tittering laugh reminded him of Katherine Hepburn. He was a true momma's boy. She was his first love and to this day he hated disappointing her.

"Hello, my darling." She stepped back, her eyes studying him closely. "Is there something wrong?"

"No. Should there be?"

She gave him a playful slap on the arm. "You were out late again last night. Do I want to know with whom and where?"

"Probably not."

"I didn't think so. Have you picked up your tuxedo for Saturday night?"

"Saturday?" He scanned his memory. "Oh damn, I forgot."

"Language."

"Sorry Mother. I completely forgot the Conlon's dinner party." He took her in his arms and pressed his chin down on

her head. "You should wear that blue gown with the sapphire and diamonds jewelry set Father gave you for Christmas. You're already a hot momma, you look absolutely stunning in that."

She pulled away. "You're still going."

"Damn," he murmured.

"Language."

"Again, sorry." He hated these functions. The stuffy people bored him to tears with their talk of investments, endowments they made just to see their names listed; the vain people who pretended to care. They grated on his last nerve.

"The Staunton's will be there. Their daughter Evelyn will be there. She's returning from Europe just in time."

He smirked. *Eva-lin*. The haughty way she said her name, the upturned nose, the arrogant belle of the ball. He'd been so sure he was in love with her that he'd bought a ring. He had the date set to propose but nausea had washed over him. Still, he pushed himself to do it.

He sat her down on a swing on the back terrace of a friend's estate. The entire time he was forming the words it felt so wrong. "Evelyn, marry me. Say yes and I'll be the happiest man in the world." It had felt like a lie somehow, but he wanted her to be his wife.

She'd laughed in his face. "Marry you? I'd never marry you. I don't love you, Xavier. I'm never getting married. Not now, not ever. I'm perfectly happy with the way my life is."

His pride had been hurt, he was sure she'd broken his heart. But as time passed he realized two things: he hadn't truly loved her, and she'd have made his life hell.

"What if I said I had a date for Saturday night?"

"I'd agree most heartily. I shall be waiting and ready by six thirty. You'd better not be late."

Times like these he missed his father. Not just because the man's death left a void in his heart but also because his mother clung to him for these functions and he hated it. He didn't begrudge his mother her friends. His duty was to be with her, by her side, supporting her when he could. Still he was tired of these formal functions and wished just once for the nerve to tell her no. He was thirty years old for God sake. So why couldn't he tell her no?

"Xavier?"

He turned to look down into his mother's eyes. "I'll be ready. You know you really need to find a man."

She sighed and her eyes misted over. She pulled away from him, walked into the parlor and sat down on a Queen Anne chair. "I had a good man. For almost forty years. A wonderful man."

He went over and knelt beside her seat. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so cavalier." He seemed to be doing a lot of apologizing lately.

He took her hand and squeezed it. "I know you and Father loved each other very much. But it's been almost five years."

"Has it been that long?" she asked in a distracted manner. "Sometimes it feels like yesterday. Sometimes it feels like one

hundred." She dabbed at her eyes with her fingertips.

"Besides, I'm too old to think of dating again."

"You're a stunning, vibrant woman, and you know it."

She brushed at her eyes and allowed a grin. "I am, aren't I?" She laughed and he felt the world brighten. "You know I'd be very happy for you to have a real date, Xavier. I'm old enough to consider becoming a grandmother, in another ten years or so."

He chuckled. "I'm not ready for that yet."

"Maybe you and Evelyn can spend some time together now that she'll be back."

He groaned. "No matchmaking. Evil and I couldn't make a go of it before, what makes you think we could do it now?"

"Because *Evelyn* and you have both grown up. Although when you speak in that tone it's hard for me to remember."

"She isn't the one for me. I realized that a long time ago." He watched her face. "I'll play nicely, I promise. But don't even think about trying to set us up again. She's not my type."

"I don't think you know what your type is."

He'd never bothered to share all the details of what happened between he and Evil those many years ago and he wasn't about to rehash ancient history. Maybe his mother was right. He really wasn't sure what his type was. But he knew what it wasn't. It wasn't *Eva-lin*.

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Three

King Alistair Montrose paced back and forth in his chamber. He couldn't stop the mounting frustration. "Where is the Seer?" he shouted for the hundredth time.

A knock at the door turned his head so quickly he nearly lost balance. "Enter!" He shouted the command and slid the crown on top of his head. He'd long ago found the magic that could protect his thoughts from her, the way to seal himself safely away from her magic. As long as he wore the crown, held the scepter, and kept the single dragon scale in his possession, she could not read his thoughts, enter his rooms, or discover his secret caches of knowledge. He would stay king and she would remain under his control.

The woman's blood-red robes flowed around as she swept into the room. "You sent for me, Your Highness?"

"There is something in the air. I know there is treachery. Tell me what it is."

She nodded and poured water into a crystal chalice sitting beside the sparkling decanter on a small table beneath his window. Sweeping her hand over the rim of the glass, she put her face close and gazed inside. Her quick intake of breath made his heart stop.

"Tell me what you see."

"I see the union of a dragon and a unicorn. I see your power being stripped, and the crown wrested from your head." She turned her black eyes on him. "I see your demise."

"*Preposterous*. The Draco and Alicorno lines have been decimated. You are losing your touch, Seer."

She puffed up and leveled a gaze at him. "I see two halves. When they come together the bloodlines of both houses will surge afresh. They will take the throne and rule this land. Magic lies deep in the marrow of their bones and when the spark ignites, they will be more powerful than you. You will know pain and defeat."

For the briefest of moments he was frightened. Many years ago it had been foreseen that a union of this nature would be his death. That was why he went to such pains to eliminate the entire line of each house. Blood soaked the ground, fire stripped the lands, but he was victorious. It was inconceivable that there was any living dragon or unicorn.

The Seer still hadn't removed her gaze from him. "It was indeed a miracle that they survived, despite your best efforts."

"Tell me where to find them."

She turned back to her chalice. She was silent, seeming to be lost in the water.

"Well?"

She didn't look up, and kept silent.

"Answer me, witch."

She jerked her eyes to meet his. "I cannot find them."

"Then they do not exist," he sneered. She'd made him worry for nothing. "You're growing tiresome, Seer. If you do not stop making false conclusions I will have to find a new Seer."

She bowed low. "I tell only what I see, Your Highness. I merely mean I cannot find them in this world."

He dropped onto his seat. "Then as I said, they do not exist. There is no other world."

She didn't say anything but bowed once more. "I beg your leave."

"Granted."

He watched her sweep out of the room. When the door shut behind her, he closed his eyes. "*In this world*," her words haunted him. What other world was there?

* * * *

The Seer stalked back to her apartments. Montrose was becoming increasingly difficult. He was still able to keep her power at bay. His mind was cloudy and she couldn't read his thoughts. How was he able to thwart her every move? Whenever she tried to enter his chambers unless he'd granted her access she couldn't pass through the door or walls. How would she ever get him out of the way?

She had to find them—the descendants of the Draco and Alicorno lines. If they came to power, then not only would Alistair be defeated but she'd find herself with a shorter lifespan.

Where was their hiding place? There was no doubt they still lived, the vision wouldn't have been so clear otherwise. The hard task would be locating them.

She walked over to her caldron of water and waved a hand over the top. It took time for the images to form and she

grew impatient. Suddenly the surface bubbled. When it calmed, the descendants' location was clear.

Grabbing up the hem of her robes she dashed from the door and shouted for her most trusted guard. "Vrono!"

"Madam." He bowed low. "How might I serve you?"

"Come with me. We have a very important task."

He nodded and she led him from the palace grounds, across the fields. At the edge of the wooded glen she paused. "What you will see you must tell no one. Do you understand?"

"As you command."

"Very good." They picked a trail through the overgrown path, the way nearly invisible through the brush and trees. They came to a waterfall and she lifted her hands. The water stopped midair and she heard Vrono suck in a stunned breath. "Come," she commanded and didn't look to see if he obeyed.

The twists and turns of the cavern wound deep into the mountain. Along the rock walls and in the openings were webs of the Metilama spider waiting for the bats and insects they depended on for their survival.

The path ended at a junction with two offshoots. Which way? She closed her eyes and tried to find the answer.

The doorway to the left.

She continued forward and came to a stop at a wall covered with Delinca vines. Each deadly red flower had fifteen rounded petals and poison-coated thorns.

She opened and closed her fists several times then raised the clenched hands and began a ripping motion in the air. The

vines slowly relinquished their hold and slid, wilted, to the dirt floor.

"Exzues Ma dialamta." A swirling vortex sprang to life. She turned to face Vrono and motioned him onward. Stepping into the vortex she felt the floating sensation before the ground became solid beneath her feet.

"Madam?" Vrono's voice had a slight tremor.

"Another world," was all she said as explanation. "Now to find those we seek." She slid her eyelids closed. "Child of light, child of fire, show me the ones that I desire."

They were nearby. Foolish Xylia Blacdrake. She didn't move her son far from the portal. Then again, the progeny of Zaphin à and Altus Silverhorn was here also. The protectors of the offspring had failed. Bad for the children, good for her.

"You are to retrieve the children of Blacdrake and Silverhorn houses."

"How will I find them?"

"The woman is a small one. Her silver blonde hair is the color of the third moon. Her eyes as lavender as the Grogan sky. She is close by, standing behind a building up this black river. You must bring her to me. I want the woman at once. Blacdrake is a tall man with dark hair and deep green eyes. He will sense her distress and follow. When you have her, bring her back to this spot and touch this crystal." She handed Vrono a deep blue gem attached to a leather thong.

He slid it over his head. "It shall be done."

"Wait. You do not look like you belong."

He was dressed in the standard High Guard fashion. His long gray tunic hung over black leggings that tucked into high

black boots. An onyx metal breastplate fastened across his shoulders and his sword hung across his back suspended by a wide leather strap. His long white-blond hair fell to his waist.

She pointed a finger at him and sliced it downward through the air. Black heavy weight pants replaced his leggings. The tunic tightened and shrank to a short-sleeved shirt that accented his broad chest. His hair was pulled back and bound by a thin leather strip. The only thing remaining of his formal garb were the boots.

He looked himself up and down. He lifted his legs one at a time. "This material is uncomfortable."

"You won't wear it for long, Vrono. Now go, get the woman and bring her to me."

He bowed low. "Yes, Madam."

Vrono hurried away to do her bidding and she stepped back through the portal. Like a window, she was able to look through it and watch for his return.

* * * *

The pounding of someone on her door jerked Keely off the sofa.

"Come on K. We know you're in there."

"Yeah, K. Open up."

Her best friends, Renee and Diann, were beating the door and making enough noise to wake the dead. "Just a minute. Hang on." She ran over and undid the locks. Grabbing each woman by the arm, she jerked them inside. "What's wrong with you two? Make enough racket?"

"Why? Do you think there should've been more?" Renee laughed and pounded on a wall. "Get off your ass. Come with us and let's do something fun."

Keely let loose an exasperated sigh. "I just don't feel in a partying mood."

"Exactly why you need to come with us," Di reasoned. "The best way to get over whatever's bugging you is by going out with two of the sexiest women on the planet; dancing, maybe do some drinking and see what kind of fish are swimming."

She really didn't want to go out. She shot a pleading look at Renee then at Di. "I just want to veg out tonight."

"Absolutely not. You're turning into one of those reclusive crazy women. Next thing we know you'll be out collecting a bunch of cats."

Renee jerked her head and shot a look at Di. "Some of us happen to like cats."

"Nasty vile creatures," Keely laughed. Maybe this was the distraction she needed. "All right, I give up."

"Great. Let's go raid closets and makeup." Renee dragged her down the hall by her hand. They shoved her onto the commode while Renee took control of the hair and makeup situation. In the bedroom Di rummaged through her closet.

"Oh hey. Love the pink halter. Can I borrow it?" The walls and clothes lining the closet muffled Di's words.

"That's not what you're supposed to be doing," Renee shouted back. "Now." She pulled the curling iron from the cabinet and while it heated, she applied makeup to Keely's face.

"I'm a big girl, you know. I can do this for myself."

"I know, but it's fun."

It was no use arguing with either of them.

After her hair was properly coiffed and her makeup applied, she was dragged into the bedroom. On the bed lay an ivory sheer lace camisole and a sheer shirt in matching color. Her jeans lay under the pile and ivory ankle boots sat waiting on the floor. "Where's the lace bra that goes under the cammi?"

"I don't know," Di answered in feigned innocence.

"You expect me to wear that alone? My headlights would be shining for the world to see."

"High beams all the way Babe," Di grinned.

"No. Absolutely not."

"Come on K. For once let it all hang out."

"If I wear that, it will."

Renee and Di laughed and Keely looked back down at the top. "What the hell. You only live once, right?" She changed into the camisole and turned to face the mirror. At least the lace roses were strategically placed to cover her nipples. She slid on the jeans and ankle boots.

Di and Renee were busy going through her jewelry chest picking up and discarding necklaces, earrings, bracelets and rings.

Keely reached over and grabbed a simple silver chain with a silver unicorn pendant and matching earrings. The amethyst stones that served as the unicorn eyes sparkled in the light as she studied her reflection.

"Ready?" Renee was standing in the door chomping at the bit to get moving. "I want to dance. Let's go."

Keely shifted in the back seat of the car trying to get comfortable. Wearing this lace thing by itself was an itchy and uncomfortable experience. She was still fidgeting when Renee parked in front of the bar.

"Everybody out," Renee ordered and tossed her door open.

There was a side door on the building that was open to allow fresh air to enter and circulate through the crowded bar. Music filled the room and spilled out into the night.

* * * *

Xavier paced the room. The classical music played low almost completely buried by the voices crowding around him. At least he'd been spared a confrontation with Evelyn. So far he hadn't—

"Blackie."

Her voice effectively ended his evening. *Damn*. He shot a look toward his mother, but she was in the middle of a group of women chatting and smiling. Xavier sighed and turned to face Evelyn.

She hadn't changed much in the three years since he'd last seen her. The once waist length, sandy blonde hair now only touched her shoulders and was styled into a peek-a-boo fashion similar to Veronica Lake, one of his mother's favorite actresses.

Evelyn's body-hugging black dress made her fair skin appear too pale. Her large blue eyes didn't seem to sparkle as much as they used to.

"Hello Evie."

She tilted her chin in expectation of a kiss on the cheek. When he didn't offer it, a pout formed on her full lips. "Is that anyway to greet an old friend?"

"How've you been?" Not that he was interested but he had promised to be polite.

"I'm exhausted. The flight was long and first class? Ha. What a joke. I'm definitely going to have to see about private planes from now on."

"And miss out on the experience of meeting new people?" he jibed.

She shrugged her shoulders and placed a hand on his. "Come sit and talk with me." She gave him a gentle pull and he followed to a settee. He waited while she lowered down to the cushion.

Seating himself a good space from her he scanned the room, barely acknowledging she was there.

"What have you been doing to keep busy, Blackie?"

Her hand traced along his. "No sign of a wedding ring. That's a good sign for me." She smiled in her best seductress manner.

"Working at the investment house. No wife, yet."

"Working? Your father left you enough to live off the interest for the rest of your life."

He stiffened his spine. "I enjoy working, gives me something to fill my days. Have you ever considered working, Evil?" The word came out harsher than he intended.

She smirked at the nickname and then shook her head. "Maybe I'll just have to find a husband who enjoys working all day. My job will be keeping his nights busy. Interested?"

"Not anymore." He pushed up. "Have a good night, Evie."

He made his way to his mother and placed a light hand on her elbow. She looked up at him. "Is something wrong?" she whispered.

"No, I just wanted to let you know I was leaving. I'll send the car back for you about midnight."

She moved away them away from the main room and into a hallway. "I wish you'd stay, Xavier. I just don't understand what is going on with you."

"I don't understand it, either." He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Midnight Cinderella."

She smiled and squeezed him. "I'll be waiting for my pumpkin." She stared deeply into his eyes. "Don't be gone all night, please."

"I won't be." He hurried out the door. As he stepped into the night, he undid the tie and unbuttoned the top two shirt buttons. He stuffed the tie into his pocket and walked off down the sidewalk.

He didn't know where he was going but his steps seemed so sure he just kept moving forward. Only three years ago he'd have jumped on the chance to be with Evie. Now just the thought of her annoyed him. The people, the way he grew up, his lifestyle left him feeling unfulfilled, bored. And there was a large chunk of his life missing.

The sound of ballad rock music made him look up to see a brick building. The side door was propped open; music drew

him in like a magnet. He made his way through the crowd of people stacked inside. He found a lone stool at the bar and sat down. A prickling sensation made the hair on the back of his neck stand up and he glanced around the room. And met the gaze of the woman, Keely, he'd seen for the first time just two days ago.

Her eyes widened and her mouth gaped open. She quickly clamped it shut but she didn't break the connection of their eyes.

"What can I get you?" he heard the bartender ask.

"Whiskey neat, and a shot of Jagermeister," he answered without looking away. Her constant gaze left him uneasy. There was an intensity in the lovely purple eyes that kept him frozen in place. When the drinks were served he lifted his shot glass in her direction then drank down the alcohol.

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Four

Keely couldn't stop staring. It was him. The man who'd mocked her, laughed at her. This time he didn't look amused. He seemed confused. Until he lifted his glass. Then it was back, that derisive smile, the sardonic lift to the eyebrow.

She shook her head and tore her gaze away. Arrogant jerk. He wasn't going to take up any more of her thoughts, at least not tonight. Still, her heart raced and she felt him watching. It took all she had not to look back at him.

Someone touched her shoulder and she jumped in her seat. "What?"

Renee and Di laughed as Tol leaned down close and pressed his lips against her cheek. "Hello, Beautiful." He grinned and crouched beside the chair. "I haven't seen you in a while."

Tol. Tolepheral Davis. What a time to run into Mr. Obnoxious. "When you don't call a woman she tends to try and forget you exist."

"I'm sorry. I've been very busy." He offered her an apologetic smile.

"Yeah, busy getting busy," Scott Simpson shouted as he crowded into the group. "Damn, you look good enough to eat, Keely."

The smell of alcohol emanated from him in waves. Great, just what she needed: two drunks. Tol and Scott were pains-in-the-ass to begin with, but give them a little booze and it got worse. "Nice to see you too, Scott. Well, you guys have a

lot to do, so many women and all that. Please don't let us keep you."

"I've been hoping to see you again." Tol pressed his hand on her knee.

She reached down and picked up his fingers. "Move it or lose it."

He slid his hand away. "You're not being very friendly tonight. What's wrong?"

"Besides the fact you're an ass?"

Scott laughed and the shaking shoulders on her two best friends showed they were barely containing their giggles.

Tol's eyes darkened but he grinned. "Funny. I guess we better get moving. See you three later." He shoved to his feet, swayed slightly and righted himself.

Keely could still feel the stranger's eyes watching her every move. She stretched her neck slightly, working out a kink as she glanced over to where he was sitting.

Damn. His smile became larger and he nodded at her.

"Shit," she spat.

Renee and Di swung around to look at her. "What's wrong?" Renee asked.

"There's a guy over at the bar. Dark hair to his shoulders, big green eyes and a white toothy smile."

She could swear she heard neck muscles snapping as her friends whipped their heads over to look at him. "Don't do that," she hissed. "He's looking."

"So let him stare. Man, he's hot."

She gave Di her best withering look. "I met him the other night."

"What?" they shouted in unison.

"You meet a double d like that and you didn't share the information?" Renee frowned. "You should go over, talk to him, and then give us all the smutty details."

The code. She smiled at the reference. Many years ago they'd developed the code as their own private way of discussing the men they'd seen at the bars without being understood. DD, *Definitely Doable*. MAFW, *Maybe After A Few Drinks*. WBB, *With A Brown Bag*, NOD, *Not On A Dare*, and NFW, *No Freaking Way*. "Knock it off. I'm not interested," Keely argued.

Di grabbed her wrist and held it a second. "Nope, she's not dead."

A flush of heat suffused Keely's body. Her head swam and she became a little short of breath. She gulped air.

"Are you all right?" Renee's joking demeanor fled. "What's wrong?"

Keely grabbed her drink and swallowed a mouthful. She leaned back in the seat and waited. "I'm just a little warm. This place is too crowded. I need some fresh air." She stood up and the girls rose as well. Keely lifted a hand. "I'm all right just need to get outside for a few minutes."

"Alone? No way," Di argued. "If you think we're going to let you just wander off alone you're out of your mind."

"I'm just going outside. I'm not running off. I'm a big girl. Just back off."

Renee frowned but didn't say anything. She looked like she was still thinking it over. Finally, she nodded and sat back down. "Back in no more than ten or we call out the Marines."

"Green Berets." Keely grinned.

"What?" Di looked confused.

"I'm not crazy about Marines. Send out the Army. Special Forces, secret missions ... Yeah, definitely need that fresh air now. Be right back."

She picked through the crowd, to the side door and slipped outside. The cool breeze didn't help clear her head right away. She paced away from the door and toward the parking lot. She leaned a hip against the corner and bent at the waist then slowly straightened upright.

A sound drew her attention and she tried to track it. But almost as soon as it came, it vanished. She shivered and tried to get another breath. The spinning in her brain slowed its rotation and she felt a little better. Moving from the wall she turned to head back inside. A noise from behind the dumpster startled her and before she could cry out a hand clamped over her mouth and dragged her back into the darkness.

* * * *

A scowl crossed Tol's face. He'd pretended not to care but Keely really pissed him off. She had embarrassed him, the frigid bitch. She thought she was better than him. She was a sexy woman but she'd cut him off completely so he'd spent some time chasing tail. Seeing Keely tonight, her body barely concealed by the lace top, made him want her more than he had before.

He watched as she slipped out the door. She needed to be taken down a few pegs, and he would do it. He shoved his way outside

Where the hell had she gone? He stalked down the walk along the building but she wasn't anywhere to be seen. He slammed his hand into the wall. He'd go in and have a few more. Miss Frigidaire surely didn't pick up another guy. She could have easily made it in by the side door, it took him long enough to part the crowd to get out.

Growling to himself he stumbled along to the front door. The music, drink and possibility of meeting some sweet meat drew him back inside. He'd see her again, he knew where she lived.

* * * *

Xavier watched the drunk follow Keely outside. His nerves stretched but it wasn't any of his business. A fire started in his belly and burned up to his throat. Heat prickled his skin. A sudden overwhelming feeling of panic shot through him. Something was wrong. *Very wrong.*

He shoved out of his seat so hard the stool teetered and thumped into the wall behind him. He sprinted for the door, almost knocking down the other man in his haste.

The drunk staggered. "Watch it asshole," the man growled as he maneuvered his way back inside.

Cries filled Xavier's head and he was pulled forward. He ran around the back of the building and into the parking lot across the alley from the bar.

He wasn't moving fast enough. He felt her fear. Where was she? A small copse of trees popped up in front of him and through the branches he saw her. A man had her pushed

against the tree, one arm pressed to her throat and a hand tangled in her hair.

He hurtled himself in a running tackle into the man's side. His fist pulled back and he slammed it into the man's face once, and then a second time for good measure.

He shoved up and turned to face Keely. Tears filled her deep lavender eyes. She shivered violently and he slid off his jacket to place it over her shoulders.

Her eyes were wide with terror, she made a squeaking sound then her eyes rolled back, and she fainted. He caught her before she hit the ground. "Hey," he tapped her cheeks. "Open those eyes. It's all right. It's all over, you're safe now."

He tried to hold her while he wrestled his cell phone from his pocket.

"Nine-one-one. What is your emergency?"

"A woman was just attacked. She needs an ambulance."

"Where are you, sir?"

He looked around trying to get his bearings. "I have no freaking clue," he shouted. "A subdivision. There's like a small park or something."

"Do you see any street signs?"

He scanned the area. "No. I can't. Wait ... it says Cherry Orchard Lane."

He could hear typing in the background. "How badly is she injured?"

"I don't know. She was standing there and then she just fainted."

"Is there any blood?"

Xavier studied her as carefully as he could. "No. Her neck is red from where he had her pinned."

"What's your name, sir?"

"Xavier Blake."

"All right Mr. Blake. The ambulance is on the way. I have a squad car turning up the lane now. Do you see them?"

"No. Wait, yes there they are."

"Fine. I'll leave you with them."

"Thank you."

The uniformed officers came running over watching him warily. "What happened?"

Xavier shook his head. "I saw this guy pinning her to that tree." He looked around. What had happened to the attacker?

"The guy. I know I knocked the wind out of him. Where the hell did he go?" He scanned the area but there was no trace.

"Sir?"

The ambulance pulled in and a gurney was rolled toward them. Xavier didn't move from her side until the paramedics came over to take care of her.

When he finally moved the police were watching his every move. "Just tell me what happened," an older officer ordered.

Xavier nodded. "I was sitting in the bar down the street. I saw her walk out and some guy followed her. I got an uneasy feeling so I came outside to check. I still felt funny so I came this way and saw a man pinning her pinned to the tree. His arm was pressed against her neck." He had a sinking feeling as their eyes watched him.

"Which way did he go?"

Xavier shook his head. "I don't know. I was trying to check her out and she fainted. I called for help and when I turned around, he was gone. That's all I know."

"You just happened to 'feel' something was wrong?"

Xavier nodded. Uh oh. This wasn't good. "If I'd been the one, do you think I'd have been stupid enough to call the police?"

They exchanged looks. "Name, address and phone number."

"Xavier Blake. Eighteen-forty-nine Hallson Ferry. 314-7631."

The officer wrote it all down in his book. Xavier looked above the policeman's head and watched the paramedics roll the gurney to the ambulance.

"Is she going to be all right?" he called as they passed by. He received a dismissive shrug in reply. He turned back to the police officer. "What hospital are they taking her to?"

"Probably St. Luke's, it's the closest. Now what did this man look like?"

Xavier scratched his forehead. "White man. About thirty-five, thirty-eight, somewhere in there. He had light hair pulled back into a ponytail. He stood about, oh I don't know, maybe six feet. Weight about one hundred and seventy pounds."

When were they going to let him go? He glanced down at his watch. Almost one a.m. He pulled up his phone and the officer eyed him. "I'm checking on my mother to make sure she made it home safely."

The guy grinned and stepped away. It was the first time Xavier hadn't felt cornered by them since the cops arrived.

"Xavier. Where are you?" his mother demanded the minute she picked up the phone.

"I'm fine, Mother. There was an incident and I have to talk to the police, then I'll be home."

"Accident? Are you injured?"

"No, Mother. Someone else was. I'll explain it all in the morning. Did you make it home safely?"

"I did. You make sure you do the same."

"I will. Good bye."

"Good night Xavier. I love you."

"Love you, too."

He hung up and glanced over to find the cops grinning at him. He felt a flush creep over his face. A man his age calling in to check in with his mother. "If there's nothing else, I need to go." At the officer's nod he started walking away. Then he turned back. "I don't know her name but she was with two friends who are probably very worried about her."

Just at that moment, the two women came running up, panting and out of breath. "Keely!" the brunette cried out.

Xavier watched as one of the officers stepped up to take charge and answered their questions. Their worried frowns deepened.

Well, it wasn't any of his business. He had done his good deed for the day.

Xavier shook his head. What a mess. When he seemed to fade from their thoughts he slipped away. He used his cell to call for the car service. The need to check on Keely was overwhelming. *Keely*. Why did the name stir him the way it did?

Without warning another dreamlike scene popped into his head. *A large black dragon stood in a field of summer green grass. Directly across from it, a pure white unicorn pranced. It made slow, tentative steps closer and closer to the dragon.*

The black beast reached out a clawed paw and snatched the unicorn up in its grip. A feeling of love, peace and connection filled the air. The unicorn pointed its head toward the dragon's jaws. A skinny stream of gray smoke puffed then a sliver of flame reached out and caressed the unicorn.

It placed the white animal back on the ground and they shimmered. In the place of the two animals a couple emerged. The woman had blonde hair, the color of the moon and the man had dark hair. On their heads sat golden crowns.

Hand in hand they moved away and faded from view.

"Mr. Blake?" Xavier looked up to see two officers standing near by. A sinking feeling gathered in the pit of his stomach. He glanced around the park. His story didn't make any sense. Xavier knew it. The attacker had vanished into thin air. If it hadn't happened to him, Xavier wasn't sure he'd believe it. "Yes?"

"Sir, we'd like you to come with us and have you answer a few more questions. Maybe you could help out by working out a sketch?" The tone in the cop's voice clearly indicated he didn't believe Xavier's story.

Well, this was a hell of a way to wrap up his night. He followed the cop to a squad car. The flashing red and blue lights cut through the dark night. He blinked against the brightness and slid into the backseat. The sooner he got this

over with the sooner he could get to St. Luke's and check on Keely.

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Five

"Keely!" Renee shouted, rushing into the room. "Oh my God. Are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

Keely shook her head. "He grabbed me and dragged me to the park. He pinned me against a tree. He was saying something about black dragons and unicorns. He kept saying I had to go back to Grogan. I've never been so frightened in my life."

"I'm just glad you're all right. You are, right?" Di fretted and scanned Keely's face.

"I'm fine. If it hadn't been for that man," she shook her head.

"What man?"

"The man from the bar. The one I told you about."

"Oh. The double d? He's not only hot he's a knight in shining armor too?" Renee chuckled.

"He just came out of nowhere and slammed the man to the ground." Keely remembered watching her hero drop on top of the attacker and pummel him. When he stood up and came to her, she felt safe, protected, like she belonged with him.

She remembered looking over his shoulder and watching while her attacker pushed from the ground and vanished from sight. It was then that the world went dark. She shivered as she remembered it all.

"Keely? Should I get you a blanket?" Di fretted and pulled a cabinet open.

"No. I'm fine."

"Sure you are. We'll get you out of here and home where you belong," Renee promised.

"We should call your parents."

"No Di. Don't. Mom would freak and start in with the move-back-home-to-the-farm routine."

"You love the farm," Renee said softly.

"I do, but I like it here. My job, my friends, even you two," she laughed.

"As soon as the doctor gives the okay, we're gone."

A knock sounded on the door and all three heads turned. Keely felt her heart stop as her knight in shining armor came into the room.

Renee and Di exchanged glances. "Ahem. Think we'll go grab some coffee." Renee stood, grabbed Di's hand and led her out of the room.

"How are you feeling?" His cultured voice wrapped around her like silk and she had a sudden longing to melt into his arms.

"I'm good, thanks to you." She waited but he just stood staring. When he didn't say anything she shifted in the bed.

"Can I at least know the name of my hero?"

"Oh right, sorry. I'm Xavier. Xavier Blake."

"Keely Morgan."

He nodded. "I know. You told me the other night."

"Right. I'm not thinking quite clear yet."

"Are you hurt?" The concern in his tone felt more than just a passing stranger wanting to know out of politeness.

"No. Scared me, yes. Hurt me, no."

He nodded and slid the chair over. "I'm glad."

"If you hadn't gotten there when you did..." She shivered and he reached for her hand.

When their hands met she felt a warm flush. Golden orbs around his green eyes seemed to glow. It should've frightened her, but didn't. He was calming. She didn't feel as lost as she'd been feeling for the last few weeks.

"*Aldmakeelia*," the disembodied voice whispered again.

She tried to keep control of her actions so as not to startle him. How would she explain freaking out over a voice that wasn't really there?

He didn't move his hand. She didn't want him to.

"Thank you so much."

He leaned closer. "I'm glad I was there for you." The strange cast to his eyes intensified and for a split second she was sure the pupils stretched into cat slits.

* * * *

Xavier couldn't stop staring into her eyes. He was drawn closer. The missing pieces in his life seemed to be falling into place. Something about her pulled at his mind and he searched for the memory he could sense was just at the surface. But as hard as he tried to grasp it, the recollection avoided him.

"Keely," he began but wasn't sure what to say.

She studied him closely. "This is going to sound absolutely crazy." Her eyes shifted away from him and then back. "I don't understand what's happening to me but I feel like you can tell me why I feel so out of place. Why I feel restless."

She sighed heavily. "Listen to me. I sound as insane as that man. Geez the things he was saying. He must've escaped from the Bliss House."

Xavier scanned his memory. The Bliss House was a state mental hospital. "What makes you say that?"

"He was talking crazy. Saying stuff about unicorns and black dragons."

He jerked his head so hard his neck felt like it was going to snap. "What about black dragons?"

"I don't know. Houses with black dragons, I think." She eyed him warily. "Why?"

"I was just curious." He couldn't tell her about his waking dreams. It made him feel so off kilter to have the images in his mind. Besides, if he said anything she'd probably think *he* was crazy.

He saw her earrings and forced a grin. "He probably saw your earrings and it set him to ramble about unicorns."

She reached up and grasped the lobe between her thumb and the tip of her middle finger. Then she rubbed her neck. "My necklace!" She frantically scanned the room.

"What?"

"I had a necklace that matched the earrings and it's gone."

She seemed so distressed by the loss. He shouldn't be surprised. She'd been through a frightening experience and to have lost an item that obviously meant a great deal to her was enough to pile on the stress. "Maybe the police will find it when they search the area in the daylight."

Her eyes misted over. "This set is the only thing I had from before."

"Before what?" Why was he asking her so many questions? Easy, because he felt for her, he'd feel for any woman who'd been attacked. But why was he feeling the need to find out more about her?

"My parents told me that when I was found I had a little box in my pocket. The necklace and earrings were inside it."

"Found?"

She leaned back in the bed. "I was adopted. I was found in a park..." she paused and he felt his curiosity peak. "I have to call my mom." She looked around the room. "My purse. Renee brought it in. But I don't see it."

He stood up and scanned the room. "Maybe she still has it. You can use my phone if you like."

She shook her head. "No thanks. It will show up, I'm certain of it. I might have just left it in the car. Or maybe even the bar ... no, I don't think the girls would just leave it there," she paused. "Never mind. I'm sure they have it."

She reached for him again and he was happy to feel her touch. He slipped her hand into his and she gave him a gentle squeeze. "Thank you again so much for being there. I don't even want to think about what he'd have done if you hadn't shown up when you did."

Anger surged through him. The protective feeling he had for this woman came from nowhere and it was extremely unsettling. He slid his hand from her grasp. "I'm just glad I could help. Since your friends are here they can obviously take care of you so I'm going to leave. I'm happy that you're all right."

She smiled and he felt warmth suffuse him. "Maybe I'll see you around sometime."

He nodded. "I wouldn't be surprised. We seem to keep bumping into each other."

He walked out and closed the door. His brain fogged like it had been doing since these visions began. He leaned against the cool cinderblock wall for support and tried to fight the images. It was no use, they seemed to have a life and will of their own.

The little dark haired boy sat on the lap of the beautiful dark haired woman. A man with hair of the blackest black sat next to them.

The woman's soft voice spoke. "Xiuhcoatl, the future holds such happiness for you. The Alicorno and Blacdrake houses will unite and be more powerful than any line that ever existed in this world."

A couple entered the room. The man and woman had hair of the whitest blond and eyes of the deepest purple he'd ever seen. Behind them stood a small girl. Her blonde hair hung in ringlets around her face. Her pale lavender eyes glowed bright as she met his gaze.

The other couple moved closer and took the seats that the boy's mother offered them. She then gave him a soft push toward them. "Xiuhcoatl take Aldmakeelia out to the gardens."

Aldmakeelia. Keely. Was it a coincidence? Keely was such an unusual name and it only seemed natural that it would be a derivative of Aldmakeelia. He shook his head. Maybe the lunatic from the park wasn't the only crazy man.

"Hey."

He realized Keely's two friends were standing in front of him. "Hello."

"Thanks so much for helping Keely."

He raised his hand. "Enough. You're all very welcome. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to be going." He pulled away from the wall and paced away trying to put as much distance between the three women as he could. He stepped out the door where the car was waiting for him.

He sat down in the backseat. Through the car windows he watched the first rays of dawn begin reaching across the sky. After the night he'd just had maybe doing his drinking at home was the best option.

* * * *

The Seer watched the vortex swirl once more and Vrono stepped into the cavern. "Where is the girl?" Her shout echoed through the passageway.

"I had her but a man caught me before I could bring her." He raised his hand. From it dangled a chain with a silver unicorn. It had a dark purple stone as its eye.

"Alicorno." She paced away from Vrono. "What did he look like?"

"As you described—Blacdrake."

She uttered a curse. "You have to go back."

He bowed. "There is a problem. She was taken away by some men in blue garments."

"Then I will have to accompany you and see if I can sense her." The Seer paced away from Vrono. She hated the

thought of going to the earth world but her power to sense them from this distance was growing weak.

A wave of dizziness washed over her and she leaned against the wall for support. The vision filled her mind and made her hopes rise slightly. If she could get rid of the girl and seduce Blacdrake, then she would inherit his powers and rule the kingdom. With the power Blacdrake would tap into upon his return he'd be formidable indeed. If they united she could share his power. She was a powerful witch in her own right, but it wasn't enough. Montrose still was strong enough to control her. Once she melded with Blacdrake her power would multiply twofold and she would be nearly immortal. When she conceived an heir of Blacdrake she'd have all his powers. The vision of the Blacdrake had shown him to be very appealing. Bedding him would be a pleasure.

Another thought crossed her mind. The Alicorno descendant had powers of her own. All that was required was the girl's return to Grogan. When the Seer had her brought back she could get those powers. A knife to the heart would strip the power from the girl. Then the power would be transferred to the Seer. Between her own power, the girl's power and Blacdrake's she'd be completely invincible.

Invincible.

A smile crossed her lips and she pushed away from the wall. "We have much to do." She turned and headed back through the vortex.

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Six

Keely sat on the sofa in her apartment. Renee and Di were fussing over her. All the way back to her place they had taken turns chewing her out for being foolish. Then they complained about their own stupidity for letting her leave the bar alone.

"Would you guys stop please?" She grabbed a large throw pillow and pulled it to her chest. "I've had enough for one night, I just want to rest and be alone."

"I don't think you should be alone," Renee argued.

"Shut up, Renee!" Keely exploded.

Renee and Di exchanged looks of complete shock. "Okay." Renee dropped onto a chair. "I'm sorry, I care. Is that so bad?"

Keely shook her head. "Not at all. I love you—both of you—for caring about me and wanting to take care of me, but I'm fine. I just want to be alone and get some rest. I'll take a nap and then call my parents."

Renee exhaled and stood up. "Fine. You need something, anything, and you call me."

"I will." She started to stand.

"We know where the door is. We'll be waiting for a call."

"Thanks, you guys. Sorry I spoiled your night."

"There's always next time."

Keely shivered violently. "No. No next time."

"I'm sorry, Babe. I shouldn't have said that."

"Don't worry about it. Bye."

The girls left and Keely went to the door to make sure the locks were secure. The memory of the man's hand across her mouth made her whole body tremble. Hot tears stung her eyes, her legs went weak, and she crumbled to the floor in a small heap. Her stomach twisted into knots and her palms began to sweat. What the hell had she been thinking walking out of there by herself?

Look at these clothes. No wonder Psychoman grabbed her. She looked like she was on the prowl. She ran to her room and stripped out of the revealing shirt. After peeling off the jeans she donned a pair of sweats and an extra large t-shirt.

She dropped on the bed and buried her face in the pillow. While it could've been so much worse, it was still a nightmare. Hard sobs wracked her body and tears soaked the pillow. The light of dawn peeked through her window, as her eyelids grew heavy.

"Trust Blacdrake, Aldmakeelia," a voice whispered in her mind. *"He is your lifemate. He will guard you and bring you home."*

"Lifemate?" she mumbled the question just before exhaustion and sleep weighed her down.

* * * *

Xavier walked into the house and his mother came darting into the room. She grabbed him and scanned him all over. "What happened? Are you hurt? Where were you? Why weren't you home?" The questions rapid-fired at him.

"I took a walk and stopped in a bar for a drink. After I finished I went outside to walk around and get some fresh air.

I saw a man attacking a woman so I stopped him." He clamped his jaw tight. She already knew all this from his earlier call; now he had to go through it all again. He peered into her worried eyes and sighed. "Oh dear. Is she all right?"

He nodded. "Scared, but the doctor thinks she's fine."

"You could've been killed interfering like that," she fretted. "But I'm very proud of you." She kissed his cheek.

"Have you been up all night?"

"Of course. You tell me there's been an accident but give me no details and I'm supposed to be able to sleep?"

"I said incident, not accident." He moved into the parlor and sat down on a loveseat. "Mother, I have some questions."

She sat in her Queen Ann chair opposite him. She looked every bit the royal of the chair's namesake. "All right. If I can."

He cleared his throat and tried to form the questions. "I know you and Father adopted me. Where did I come from?"

"Well Dear, when a man and woman love each other very much," she began with a broad smile.

"I'm well acquainted with that aspect of it."

"Yes, and that concerns me greatly."

"Can we please be serious?"

She sighed. "There wasn't much history about you. They found you abandoned in a church near the convent off Orchard Boulevard. You were small and frightened. Only three years old and you cried so for your mother."

"Did I have anything with me?"

She shook her head and pursed her lips. "Not that I recall. Nothing but the strange little black suit you wore. Oh. There was also your stuffed dragon."

He sat up straighter. "Stuffed dragon?"

"I guess you don't remember him. You called him Draco and you slept with him every night."

"You didn't happen to keep it, did you?"

Again she shook her head. "There was an incident when you were five. You had a nightmare and threw it into the fire. Why so curious now? You've never been interested before."

"No reason." He stood. "I'm going up to bed. You should too, you look pale."

"Thank you." She grinned and when he extended his hand she took it. Hers felt chilly in his.

"Mother, are you feeling all right?"

"Of course I am. But you're right, I believe I'll lay down for a bit. Walk me up?"

He nodded and when she placed her hand on his arm he covered it with his and escorted her up the winding staircase. Once she was safely deposited into her room he strode to his own.

There was one consolation: at least those annoying pictures in his mind couldn't possibly be real. He was only three when his parents adopted him. The children in the latest vision were five or six, at least.

"Xiuhcoatl. She's in great danger. You both are, but she needs your protection. Go to her."

His gaze darted around. There was no one else there. So where had the voice come from? Curiosity got the better of him. "What danger?" he asked the empty room.

"The Seer and her servant are coming. They will kill her; you must not let that happen. Bring her and come home, Xiuhcoatl."

"I am home." *And obviously losing my mind.*

A soft whisper of breeze brushed past and he felt the touch of lips on his cheek. There were no open windows, so where had the wind come from?

* * * *

The Seer emerged from the vortex and shifted her view from side to side. If anyone had seen them she'd have had to take care of the problem. Fortunately there was no witness.

Vrono stood by her side. While his clothing was still the earth realm jeans and shirt, she had to do something about her robes. She snapped her fingers and was changed. The pants and shirt were more binding than her robes and she felt immediately stifled.

"We need to hurry. I don't like being here," she grouched.

Vrono agreed. "Can you sense her?"

The Seer held up the silver unicorn and chain and murmured an incantation. The chain stretched out from her fingers and pointed the way. She followed its direction and soon a large building loomed into view. "She's inside."

Vrono nodded. He reached for the door and tried to pull it open but it was securely locked. "How will we get in?"

"You've lost faith already?"

He shook his head and stepped back. The Seer placed her hand on the vertical bar and pulled. The door slid open easily. She followed the pull of the silver chain up the steps. Excitement surged. Any minute now the girl would be hers.

At the door to the girl's room she stopped and hesitated. The sound of voices filled the hall. She grabbed Vrono and drew him into cover of a doorway. She waved her hand across each of their faces, and they became cloaked against the prying eyes of passersby. It wouldn't do to get caught at this moment.

The people hovered in the hall, talking incessantly. The Seer's temper flared and she was sorely tempted to use magic to remove them, permanently.

They finally opened a door and disappeared inside. Now to get to the girl. Before moving back to the open, the Seer closed her eyes and concentrated. "Her name is Keely. I sense confusion, fear, and pain. The girl is weak. This is the perfect time to move in and take her."

Vrono fell into step beside her. He had something on his mind, she could tell. She focused her concentration on him and read his thoughts. She let loose a cackling laugh. "Yes, Vrono. After I've accomplished my goal you may have her for a time."

He smiled at her. "Thank you, Madam."

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Seven

Keely sat up in bed. She had drifted off and, though her dreams were wildly jumbled, they weren't overly frightening. She crossed her legs Indian style and sat up on the mattress. Now that she'd had time to gather herself she needed to call her parents. Not to tell them of the attack, that would be a mistake. But the park had triggered something. A memory. Was it a fluke that the park where she'd been grabbed was very near the place where she'd been found as a child? Maybe she was just all confused from the night of restless sleep.

She reached for the phone and dialed her parent's home. It rang twice and she almost hung up but her mother picked up on the third ring. "Keely, twice in three days. What a nice surprise. What's wrong?"

"Nothing really, I was just curious about something."

"What has your mind preoccupied?"

"I know I was found in a park when I was little. What park was it?"

"I don't think it had a name. It was in a little subdivision in Chesterman. Named for some kind of tree, I think."

Her palms began to sweat. She wiped them on her t-shirt hem. "Cherry Orchard?"

"That might be it. Yes, I think it is. Why?"

What was going on? She hadn't thought about her life before her parents took her in, so why was it all bubbling to the surface now?

"Keely?"

"Oh, sorry. I was just curious. Renee, Di and I went out last night and I ... ended up in a park. It seemed kind of familiar and I was trying to figure out why."

Her mother's laugh came across the line. "Sweetie, I doubt very much you remember the place. You were only three."

"Right, yeah, of course."

"Aldmakeelia, danger," the voice shouted in her mind and her head nearly split from the pain.

She sucked in a breath and almost dropped the phone. "Damn," she whispered as she grasped her head and squeezed tightly.

"Keely what happened? Are you all right?"

"I'm getting a migraine. I'm sorry, Mom, I have to go. Love to you and Dad. Bye." She didn't bother waiting for her mother's parting words but clicked the phone off. Her head was pounding and her skull felt like a burning sword slicing it apart.

She went for an aspirin and heard a noise outside the door as she passed. A faint knocking began. She looked out the peephole. There was no one there. Keely turned away.

In front of her eyes her attacker appeared. The same man from the park. She darted her gaze from his evil face to the front door and back again. How had he got in? He menaced closer a nasty grin on his lips. She opened her mouth to scream but couldn't utter a sound.

Red rings appeared around the irises and he soon looked the part of a demon from hell.

"No!" she finally found her voice, screamed and took a running step away. She ran into an invisible barrier blocking

her path. She tried but couldn't get around it. The man's iron grip clamped around her wrist and yanked her backwards.

"Time to go back Aldmakeelia," a woman's voice said. It was a different voice than earlier. She jerked around, trying to break free.

A screeching laugh filled the room and Keely was stunned to see a woman appear just as the attacker had. She was almost the same size as Keely. She had an olive complexion and her eyes began to glow red as the man's.

"What do you want?" Keely shouted. She jerked her arm trying to break his vise like grip on her arm but couldn't escape. "Please. Please let me go. I don't have much money but you can have what I've got. Take anything you want, but please let me go."

"The only thing we want is you."

At the woman's evil grin, a sickening terror welled up from her stomach and began to cut off her breath. Keely's heart hammered in her chest and goose flesh rippled along her skin. What were they going to do to her?

The woman stopped in her tracks then turned to the man. "We've got to hurry. If we don't, he'll arrive and ruin everything. We need to reach the vortex."

The words swam in Keely's mind. Him? Vortex? "I don't understand. Please let me go." Again she yanked back on her arm. Again to no avail.

"Be quiet," the woman's voice roared in her ears and her head once more felt like it would shatter.

Dread stunned Keely into silence. The man who held her was watching her with heat in his eyes. This couldn't be

happening. She tried to keep the terror at bay but it was no use, it filled every cell in her body.

The woman threw a hand in the air. "Blacdrake senses the fear. We must hurry so he will follow us and through the portal."

Blacdrake? Portals? "What the hell is going on?" Keely demanded in a piercing scream.

The woman opened her hand and slapped Keely across the face. "I said be quiet."

The man clamped his free hand over her mouth. Keely stopped moving, her heart slamming triple time beat into the walls of her chest. Blood pounded through her ears. The man's hand was smothering her. She couldn't breathe. Panic kicked her back into action but the struggling was just as futile as before. She inhaled but her breathing was nearly choked off by the large hand clamped tightly over her mouth. Her lungs burned. Blackness gathered on the edge of her vision. The world spun.

* * * *

Xavier felt terror but it wasn't his, or his mother's. It was Keely's. He jumped up and ran out the door to the garage. The tires on his Porsche squealed as he sped out the garage and down the street. He didn't know where he was going but for some reason he knew how to get there. He stopped in front of what he somehow sensed was her building, leapt from the car, then sprinted up the steps.

He threw all his weight into the apartment door. It gave way easily. There was a lamp smashed on the floor and an

overturned chair; all clues that she had put up a struggle. Had her attacker stalked her home from the hospital?

A feeling of absolute terror rushed in a wave over him and he froze in place. He was sure she was standing next to him, but as he spun in all directions she wasn't anywhere to be seen. After several seconds the feeling faded and it was as if she was getting further and further away from him.

"Return to the park, Xiuhcoatl. She needs you," a voice directed him.

He raced back down the steps and drove the car like a madman along the many twists and turns. He ran across the lush grass and slammed to a stop at a large oak tree.

A woman dressed in strange robes stood near a swirling pattern of blackness. She turned to him. "This is the only way to save her. You must enter or she will die. Hurry Blacdrake, hurry so that she may live." The woman grasped his hand and tugged him toward the swirling hole.

There was no time to consider any other alternative. Xavier followed the woman into the abyss and the ground fell away. He was suddenly floating, suspended from nothing. He would have been confused and more than a little uneasy if not for Keely's panic filling his mind. In less than heartbeat he was standing on dirt in dark cavern. The image of a child being dragged by his mother shot through his mind. This was the cavern in his vision.

He turned to the woman who had led him here. "Where am I?" He spun on his heel. "Where is Keely?"

She closed her eyes and placed a hand on his arm. "Xiuhcoatl Blacdrake you are home."

"What did you call me?"

"Merely your name. You are Xiuhcoatl Blacdrake."

His mind whirled in massive confusion. How the hell had he gotten here, where was here? "Where is she?"

"I don't know. But you can find her. Use the magic that is your birthright, focus on her and it will lead her to you."

"Wait. Magic? Birthright? What the hell are you talking about? Who are you?"

"I am the Seer. An oracle, if you will. I see future events, past events, I can read minds. I can serve you well."

"If you're so powerful *Seer*, then tell me where she is," he sneered.

"You must do this for yourself Xiuhcoatl. Search your mind, search your memories. Close your eyes and picture her. You already feel a connection. Embrace it, encourage it, let it envelope you. The power to find her, to save her is your own. Let it awaken."

He felt Keely's pain and could sense the man's none-to-gentle-touches. Images of her being raped filled his mind. Rage suffused him. *She was his*. "How do I find her?"

"As you found her before, in the park. The way you found her home. Concentrate, let your heart guide you to her."

Xavier opened his mind and focused on Keely's pleas for help. The magnetic pull led him off into the cavern. The twists and turns of the path didn't confuse him. He knew this place as well as he knew his own hands.

The path led to an open chamber. He stopped in the opening. In the center of the room, his heart tried to lurch from his chest. A man held Keely to the ground, straddling

her legs with his own. His hands were groping her breasts. She silently cried while straining to break free.

Anger surged and fire shot from Xavier's hands. "Leave her alone!"

The man turned, his eyes widened with shock. He rose from the ground, jerking Keely up with him. He spun her around, placing her ahead of him. Keely's face was stark white, her eyes round saucers, and even from the feet separating them he could hear her heart pounding.

"I will kill her if you come any closer."

It seemed as if the man's eyes peered at something behind Xavier, but he refused to turn around. His attention was riveted to the scene before him. He stepped closer and then paused. He met Keely's fear-filled lavender eyes.

"Keely, focus on him. Think of him releasing you." He urged the mental words toward her. She shot him a look that said she'd heard his silent urging.

Her eyes closed and before Xavier could blink she'd slid out of her captor's grasp. A silver dagger appeared in her hand. She whirled to face the man and without second thought, thrust the knife into his chest. She stumbled backwards and Xavier caught her in his arms. He held her tightly as the man dropped to his knees. Blood bubbled from the corners of his lips but no words came, only the gurgle of blood in his throat. Then he fell forward, his face thudding on the hard-packed dirt floor.

Xavier turned Keely into his chest and held her close. "Are you hurt?"

"No." Keely's confusion filled her voice. "What happened?"

He pulled her back to arm's length and looked into her eyes. They were lighter than before. "I'm not sure if I know."

"How did you get me the knife? How did I hear you when you didn't speak?"

"I don't know, Keely. I have no idea what's happened to us. I don't even know where we are."

* * * * *

The Seer quickly checked her altered appearance. She ran her hands through her dark hair and the strands lightened from deep brown to white-blonde. It wouldn't do for the girl to see her true form.

The Seer stepped out from behind Xiuhcoatl. She took no small pleasure in the way the girl shivered in Xiuhcoatl's arms. "You are home in Grogan. Now that you are back you can fulfill the prophecy and save us from the tyrant King Alistair Montrose."

"Who? What is all this? Where are we?" Xiuhcoatl asked again.

"This is tiresome." The Seer motioned for them to follow her to a second chamber. The cool darkened room was illuminated. Rocks formed long benches into the walls and she urged them to sit.

"Before I explain, Aldmakeelia, you need to take a moment to breathe." She motioned into the air and produced a chalice of cool water. She pulled some herbs from the pocket on her robe and sprinkled them in the water. "Sip this, it will help calm you."

She handed to chalice to Keely who eyed it skeptically as she accepted it. "What did you put in it?"

"Merely peace-inducing herbs. Maldeca, Jungroot, and Uniforca." The Seer placed the cup to her lips and took a drink. "See, nothing harmful." She handed the cup back to the girl.

"I don't understand. How did we get here? Wherever here is?" Keely turned to face Xavier. "What is he doing here? How did he find us? What did that man want?" Images of her attack flooded her. "I know what that man wanted," she murmured softly and the glass tipped in her trembling hand.

"Drink," the Seer urged gently. Lull them into a sense of peace, then strike. If she made one small misstep Xiuhcoatl would kill her to protect the girl.

After several seconds, Keely sipped the contents.

"Now for the explanation. Many years ago King Montrose and his dark forces swept over the country. He craved power. He yearned to rule, alone. His forces attacked en masse killing all who refused to capitulate to his will. He murdered his rivals, wiping out entire clans. But the power over his land of Kimoore wasn't enough. He had to rule the entirety of Grogan. He made it his mission to destroy all houses of royalty so that he would have no competition for the crown.

"Only two houses could truly stop him: Alicorno and Draco. The houses of Unicorn and Dragon. According to prophecy a union between the unicorn and the dragon would result in more power than this world has ever seen. They would defeat Montrose. Their reign would be just and peaceful. Their descendants would grow in power and this world would

change from the desolate land it has become, into a lush world filled with harmony. No one would starve. There would be an end to bloodshed and war."

She watched the pair exchange unconvinced glances. "Xiuhcoatl, when confronted with Vrono's brutality you were able to summon your magic and shoot fire from your hands. It is part of your power, your birthright. You have many gifts. You can control the weather: bring on rain, lightning and thunder. You have the ability to see clearly in the darkest of night. And it is plain that you and she are lifemates; how else could you explain the telepathic message you sent her?"

He seemed to consider her words. "It's not possible. I'm just a man."

She shook her head. "Oh no, you are so much more than that. You are a king. Search your heart, Xiuhcoatl."

"Stop calling me that. My name is Xavier Blake."

She nodded. "That is the name you were given by the parents who raised and love you. But the parents who bore you, the ones who took you to safety, who loved you more than their own lives, gave you the name Xiuhcoatl Blacdrake."

She faced the girl. "You are Aldmakeelia Alicorno and you are destined to be queen. Even now the powers you hold grow. Your eyes prove it. As the magic gets stronger, so your eyes lighten."

The Seer pierced the girl's thoughts. Although Aldmakeelia merely frowned on the surface, her mind was whirling, trying to accept the pieces and complete the puzzle. "If that's true, what are my powers?"

"Teleportation. Imagine an object, any object and it will appear."

The girl shook her head but closed her eyes.

"You don't have to close your eyes. Just think."

"A queen and king need crowns," she smirked but when the jeweled objects appeared in her hands she trembled and they dropped to the floor. "What the hell?"

"Your magic. You can make anything you wish appear. You are also telekinetic. You can move anything with your mind. You can heal with the touch of your hand."

"You both can also shift."

"Excuse me?" Blacdrake asked.

"You shape-shift. Blacdrake, you can shift into a dragon. Your lineage is descended from Basiliscus who came from the fire at the very core of our world. At will you can shift from this form to that of a large black dragon. Then you will be able to take to the sky and with the vision you have, will be able to spot something as small as a field mouse from as far as five hundred miles away."

She turned back to Aldmakeelia. "You have the power to shift into the form of a pure white unicorn."

She must be very careful how much she revealed to the girl. If all her powers developed fully then she could see the Seer in her true form and know that betrayal was imminent.

Aldmakeelia stood and paced the chambers. "Powers? Magic? I'm just a woman. A human, no-nonsense woman. If I was this all powerful being why couldn't I do magic before?"

"Your parents felt it would serve to protect you if they bound your powers. They would only begin to awaken when

the time was right for a revolt. When Montrose would be at his most vulnerable. That time has come. This is why you found each other."

"I want to go home. I don't want any of this. I just want to be left in peace." Aldmakeelia walked over to a crystal protruding from the rock wall. "My mom and dad must be going out of their minds missing me."

Xiuhcoatl nodded in agreement. He moved to stand beside the girl. "This is all very interesting but I have a life and I'm ready to return to it."

At least they didn't make inane comments about mind tricks, or spout out about disbelief. She'd come this far, it was time to see how much further she could push. Letting the girl return could be done but it wouldn't be wise. If the girl was allowed to leave, then at any point in time she could be summoned by Blacdrake. "I understand you care for your adoptive parents a great deal, both of you, but you must think of what you mean to this world. People who are in agony, starving and being tormented—you could save them. Please have mercy on us. If, after you defeat King Montrose, you still want to leave there will be no dispute. But please, stay and help us."

"This isn't my world." He shot Aldmakeelia a glance and then shook his head. "*Our* world. We have families and friends we have to get back to."

"I just want to go home," the girl muttered again.

The Seer was angry, but she hid it from them. She needed them, well him anyway, and the only way to get to him was

through the little twit. "If that is your wish. The portal is this way."

She led them down the pathway to the large cavern and walked to the wall. She passed her hand in front of the rock and waited. She did it a second time then turned to look at them. "I don't understand it. My magic has opened this portal before. What has happened?" She fretted the hem of her robe sleeve. "I'm afraid there is no way to return you. At least not at this moment. I beg your forgiveness but I hadn't counted on my trip to take so much out of me. I will try again soon, I promise. For now may I take you some place more comfortable, maybe you'd like some food and wine?"

Aldmakeelia inhaled sharply and her disappointment was easily readable on her face. She turned an exhausted face to Xiuhcoatli. "I really want to go back."

The Seer watched as his arm stole around Aldmakeelia's waist. "We'll get back, I promise."

She nodded and turned to face the Seer. "I suppose there is nothing left for us but to go and rest."

The Seer turned to lead the way out of the cavern, a smile played on her lips. They really didn't have a choice in the matter. She wasn't going to let them go. Not now, not ever.

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Eight

Keely stayed close to Xavier as they followed the strange woman through the cave. They came to an opening with a large waterfall curtain. The Seer stepped through the water and Keely kept hold of Xavier's hand as they passed through and emerged atop a large boulder in the middle of a small river. Along the banks, deep green trees, unlike any she'd ever seen before, stood tall. Sunlight dappled the brush and grass beneath the majestic giants. She was amazed to find the sky was a strange periwinkle color.

Xavier was also gazing around with wonder on his face. Her mind spun out of control. This wasn't possible. It couldn't be real. "I'm going to wake up in my bed," she mumbled. "Any minute now."

"Did you say something?" Xavier asked.

"I said that I'm dreaming and soon I'll wake up in my stuffy apartment to find all of this has been some kind of weird nightmare."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "At least you're dreaming of me," he said with a small grin.

"Just wait until I have you in a suit of gold armor."

As the words came out his hand jerked away and he stood before her, sunlight glinting off the bright gold armor. A large sword clutched in his hand and a medieval helmet on his head.

He teetered precariously and fell into the water. The sword clanked against the armor and his head slammed into the

rock they were standing on. "Keely? Get rid of this, would you?"

Thank God for the helmet. "Oh Xavier, I'm so sorry."

The Seer came close. "Shh," she hissed. "Do you want to alert everyone of your arrival?"

Keely shook her head no. "How do I get rid of it, or undo it, or whatever?" she whispered.

"Command it away; it will go."

Keely nodded and the suit of armor vanished as quickly as it appeared. "I'm sorry, Xavier. But at least I can be comforted in knowing this isn't real so you won't hold it against me for long."

He smiled and pushed up from the ground. "Hell of a dream we've got going on."

The Seer made a low noise that almost sounded like a growl. "This is not a dream, this is very real. You must be very careful, Aldmakeelia. Your power is still new and it may be uncontrollable at times. I will help train you to use it but first we must get you to safety. King Montrose has a very powerful witch. She will alert him of your arrival, if she hasn't already done so, she will do it soon."

Keely rolled her eyes. *This was ridiculous.* She shook her head and clutched Xavier's hand. "I can't wait to see what my imagination dreams up next," she whispered.

The Seer swung around, a knife in her hand. She sliced the palm of Keely's hand. The blade burned as it cut through the soft flesh. Keely gasped in surprise and drew back her hand. Xavier shoved her behind him. "What have you done!" he roared.

The Seer stood her ground. "Quiet. You need to remain quiet. I have to convince you both that this is not a dream. Lives depend on what you do and the sooner you accept this fact the sooner you can do what is destined."

Keely didn't pull away when Xavier pressed his hand on hers to stop the bleeding. He tore at his shirt and wrapped it around her hand, knotting the material to keep pressure on the wound.

"Aldmakeelia can heal herself just as she can heal others." The Seer turned to her. "Heal yourself, child."

Keely had to wrap her mind around everything. If she was dreaming the pain wouldn't have felt real like this, right? "How?"

"Remove the bandage and trace the cut with your finger."

Keely nodded and did as she was instructed. The blood had begun to coagulate but it was still oozing slightly and the gash in the skin burned. She traced the index finger of her left hand along the incision. As her finger traced, the skin closed and the pain subsided. It was incredible. She'd done it!

She kept glancing at the Seer. If her coloring were a bit different she would look like the woman who had helped kidnap her. Discomfort skittered through her.

The Seer met her gaze and her eyes hardened for a split second and then softened. There was something about this woman that wasn't right.

Xavier took her hand. The injury was healed. "You're going to come in handy during this battle."

"That's not funny." Keely frowned.

"Who's joking? Apparently we really are living this. If we have to fight this epic war with some mad king then someone who can heal themselves and others will definitely be needed."

"I don't trust her," he heard Keely say. He opened his mouth and saw her give a small shake of her head. He'd heard her in his mind.

"What do you mean?" he sent the message back. Having a mental conversation with another person was such an odd sensation.

"She looks like the woman who helped what's-his-name grab me."

He felt the heat prickle at the tips of his fingers but once more Keely shook her head. *"That woman had dark hair and olive skin. But their facial features are very similar. Also there is something I get, some kind of impression that feels wrong. What do you want to do?"*

"I don't know. I guess our only choice is to go along and see what happens next. But if we are living this destiny thing then we need to think. The king is evil, well so she says. If that's true and he does have so much power then there will be people who will want to stop us."

She shivered. *"How will we know who to trust?"*

"I haven't figured that out yet."

The Seer stopped at the edge of a town. All around, the poverty was obvious. Malnourished children with dirty faces watched them. People dressed in rags scratched the ground in an effort to bring forth the crops that were browned and

dry. The people avoided meeting their eyes. Mothers pulled children indoors and locked themselves in.

He looked at the Seer. "What is this?"

"An example of the life the people live thanks to King Montrose. He starves them into submission. Come."

They walked through the village and exited on the other side at the edge of a large green field. People of all ages worked in the meadow. Whatever they were growing was healthy and bright. "I thought you said the people were being starved."

"Those crops belong to the king and those who govern the towns on his behalf. If any of the working class takes even a mouthful they are found and punished. The way of this land is harsh and needs a change."

Xavier was overcome with pity for the starving. Anger for the ruling class made a small dart of flame flash from his hands. A stray leaf in the road caught the blaze.

Keely jumped back. "Water," she shouted and the liquid appeared, dousing the flare. "Apparently I'm not the only one who needs to be careful."

He ducked his head. "Sorry. I'll be more careful."

"See that you are," the Seer commanded.

They traveled for hours and he could tell Keely was becoming tired. Her face was pale and her brow beaded with sweat. To be honest, exhaustion was building inside him as well. He'd never been one to do a lot of exercising. How he held up this long was a shock to his system. "We need to take a break."

"No. We have much further to go. It's not safe out here on the roads."

Keely sat down in the dirt. "I can, what was it teleport, right? So why can't I just zap us to wherever it is we are supposed to be?"

"It's not a safe idea. You still can't control your powers."

Xavier dropped down beside her. He looked up at the Seer. "We can't keep up this pace. She needs a break, so do I."

"You are going to do battle but you are too weak to go the distance? How do expect to be victorious when you give up this way?"

"Look Seer," Xavier started. "We'll get there, but for now back off."

Keely sighed and leaned against him. "What we need are mo..." she clamped her hand over her mouth but it was too late, two Harleys appeared in the road before them.

"What on Grogan are those things?" the Seer gawked in disbelief.

"Motorcycles," Xavier answered and realized that it didn't do any good to tell her that. The Seer would have no clue what a motorcycle was. "What do you use for transportation here?"

"Balmocks."

"What the hell is a balmock?" Just as Keely asked the question three beasts appeared before them. The animals looked like someone took a gorilla's body and made it the size of an elephant. It had four legs that came to split hooves like a cow. The neck was long like a camel, the head like an

anteater, and the tail of a possum. The body was covered with hair that resembled a wooly mammoth with light tan spots on the dark black hair.

What he assumed was a saddle sat on its back and leather that resembled a halter covered the face with reins that ran up each side of the neck. "I'm guessing those are balmocks?"

The Seer nodded and stepped to one. All three knelt on the ground and waited. She looked at them. "Come along."

"We could just take the bikes," Xavier argued.

"You would draw too much attention. Let us go." She mounted one of the balmocks and waited for them to join her.

"I don't like this," Keely said to Xavier's mind.

He was getting more accustomed to her mental messages. It was kind of nice to be able to communicate without speaking. *"I'm not crazy about it either but it's better than walking,"* he answered back.

She let him pull her to her feet and walked slowly to one of the animals. It made a sound like a cross between a baby's cry and an elephant's trumpet. The unfamiliar sound made her flinch and he could sense the shock and fear mingle together. "I don't want to touch that thing."

The Seer shook her head. "Get on the damn thing before the guards fly overhead and find us."

"You never mentioned flying guards," Xavier made sure his voice low and harsh.

"I didn't think we'd leave the safety of the trees. Come on, hurry," the Seer urged.

Xavier grabbed the reins of one of the animals then climbed into the saddle of the other. He pulled Keely up and

placed her behind him. "Ride with me until you get used to it. Hold onto the lead of that one until I figure out how to steer this thing."

She took the straps in one hand and clutched his waist tight with the other arm. *"We're going to die. These things are going to run off or drop onto the ground and roll over on top of us."*

"Relax. Animals can sense when you're nervous and it makes them jittery. I'll take care of you." He pulled the reins and the animal responded. *"It's just like riding a horse."*

"Last time I looked this wasn't a horse."

Her body finally relaxed into his and he felt comforted by the heat coming from her body. The sun began to sink lower into the horizon but they kept moving. Keely's breathing had evened out and her grip loosened. He knew she was asleep so he used one arm to hold her so she wouldn't slip off the animal.

He could send mental messages to Keely, would it work if he tried to send a message to the Seer? *"How much further?"*

"Another ten or fifteen kiltomenics."

"What the hell is a kiltomenic? Where I come from there are miles and kilometers."

She didn't reply at first, but he knew she was thinking. *"I'm not sure what the equivalent is in your understanding."*

He shook his head. Damn it. How much longer before they arrived at their destination? Where the hell was she taking them anyway? Keely's concern had mirrored his own.

How did he know they could trust this woman?

Keely jerked and his hand automatically tightened. "Where are we?" her voice with thick with sleep.

"I have no idea. I don't think she knows either."

"It's getting dark. How long have I been asleep?"

"I don't know what the equivalent is *in her understanding* but I'm sure it's been a couple of hours."

Keely shifted behind him. "I've not had my legs spread this wide in a long time."

He knew without even seeing her face she was blushing when she realized how it sounded. Wicked images of her danced in his mind and he felt her fist connect with his back. It didn't hurt but he hadn't been prepared for it. "What was that for?"

"As if you don't know." He felt her pull away from him. "I rode a friend's draft horse a few times and like a Clydesdale they have such a wide back that there is no way to keep from practically doing the splits in order to stay on."

He couldn't control the images of him mounting her and this time he'd steeled for the punch he anticipated.

"You're terrible."

"I can't help it if I find my *lifemate* sexy."

She was silent and he searched her feelings. He could sense that she was as attracted to him as he was to her. He sat a little straighter in the saddle. He tugged on her arm and she pressed into his back.

He had managed to push the thoughts of her from his mind. "I was able to send a telepathic message to the Seer."

"I wonder if she has a real name. You know like maybe Alice or June or Stephanie or something."

"I doubt it. I mean, think about it. According to her my birth name is Xiuhcoatl and yours is Aldmakeelia. I don't know that you'd find those names in any baby book."

"True that. It's just weird to have to keep calling her the Seer." She paused and her spine stiffened. "*Seer. Oracle.*"

He wasn't following her. "*Yeah?*"

"She said one of her powers is to read thoughts. If she can read thoughts then she knows we don't completely trust her. Xavier, if she's an enemy then she'll be able to know what we're thinking and planning on doing."

He hadn't considered that. If she could read his mind, was there a way to block her intrusions?

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Nine

The Seer was slightly amused by the girl's curiosity of a true name. At one time, many, many ages ago she'd been known by the name Ziretonia. But that was another lifetime.

She stopped her musings when they began discussion of their distrust of her. He wanted to block her reading his mind. She couldn't let it happen. She had to gain his trust before he figured out how to accomplish that goal.

The stupid girl was so suspicious. If she learned to read people around her then all the Seer's plans would go up in smoke—literally if Xiuhcoatl caught her. He wouldn't hesitate to use the dragon breath to remove her permanently.

"We're almost there, just over the next rise," she said to distract them.

As the large rock and mortar palace came into view she sensed Aldmakeelia's nerves grow taught. The girl felt threatened, it radiated off of her like a wave from the ocean. She suspected they were riding into a trap.

The Seer smiled. The girl wasn't stupid. "To help you learn about your new world I should tell you, the castle ahead is in ruins. A powerful family known as the Gryphineos once lived here. They have been chased from their homes and most of the bloodline is dead. King Montrose found them guilty of treason when it was learned the Gryphineos were hiding a handful of Draco survivors."

She felt Aldmakeelia's curiosity rise and waited for the girl to ask about her lineage. She didn't have long to wait.

"You've told us quite a bit about the Draco house. They seemed to be great. What of the Alicorno?"

"They were quickly obliterated. They tried shifting into the guise of simple equines but King Montrose had visions to see through the disguise. They were slaughtered mercilessly, almost all of the line died on that one spot, in that single day. The blood stained the ground and even now new plant growth comes up red. The only person Montrose allowed to live was slowly tortured to death." She shook her head in mock pity.

In truth it was she who killed the one believed to be the lone survivor. Montrose wanted to breed with her and bring about a powerful offspring but the Alicorno fought him every step of the way.

Montrose was already powerful but if he had mated with the Alicorno the offspring would indeed be more powerful and she'd never be able to overcome his hold. There was no way to corrupt the Alicorno magic. It was impossible to turn the purity of good into the darkness of evil but a child born to Montrose and an Alicorno would be easily influenced.

The Seer attacked the unicorn in her room and used a large sword to bring her to the floor. Then while the Alicorno, Zaphin 'a Aldmakeelia's mother, was down, the Seer grasped the horn in her hands and, with a burst of power, cracked the horn. It broke off and with the horn removed, the Alicorno died. But the Seer was able to make use of the magic the horn provided. The Seer scraped the horn and collected the fine silver dust into a golden chalice. The power in the dust was enough to heal all of Montrose's soldiers during the battle that brought the king to the throne.

Now that Aldmakeelia was here, she would make the girl shift and then remove her horn to create more tonic.

The Seer pulled the balmock to a stop before the castle. "We need to hide them in what remains of the barn."

Xavier slid off his mount and helped Aldmakeelia down. "I'll take care of them," he said and led them off.

The Seer went to the Alicorno's side and placed an arm across her shoulders. "I know that this must be frightening for you, child. To be in a strange land with people you don't know and learn that your destiny is to fight a dangerous enemy. I know I'd be terribly frightened if I were in your position. Believe me, I will use all my power and resources to ensure your safety."

The distrust was palpable and it took a great deal of her willpower to keep from turning on the girl and killing her right there. "I will not allow anyone to harm you, Aldmakeelia."

"Please stop calling me that. I prefer Keely."

The Seer bowed. "As you ask, Keely." She remained by the girl's side as they walked up the broken stone steps to the large wooden door. Weather had warped the lumber and it hung at an angle from rusted hinges.

The smell of must filled the air inside the citadel. The sound of dungrats came from dark corners of the room.

"What died in here?" Keely asked as she muffled her nose and mouth.

"Gryphineos," the Seer answered simply.

* * * *

Guilt wracked Keely. People had died in this house—no, this castle—and she was making offhanded remarks. She wandered through the room with the scurrying sound of creatures moving in the dark made her skin crawl. "What's that sound?"

"Dungrats," came the answer.

Rats? If they were anything like rats in her world then she was in for a horrible night. "What's a dungrat?" she asked, hoping for a reassuring answer.

"They are small animals the size of a man's foot, furry, with long tails and sharp teeth. They are wicked creatures that aren't deterred by much. They will protect their territory with everything in them. They have also been known to attack on the offensive, so watch yourself."

"Xavier?" Keely called. She needed to feel his comforting presence.

"I'm here. Let me see if I can give us a little light."

When nothing happened, Keely was disappointed though she tried to keep it from him.

"I'm sorry Keely, I'm trying."

"I know. Maybe you have to get angry for it to work?"

She saw pictures forming in his mind. Pictures of herself being grabbed, being cut by the Seer, and pictures of what he imagined the murder of their family lines had been like.

Fire gathered in the air and now she saw him standing, palms facing forward as the flame ball grew larger. He studied the room. Across from them was a fireplace. He pushed the flames into it.

The light made the dungrats come running from all over and Keely couldn't contain the shrieks that welled inside. She bounced from foot to foot to stay away from them.

A stream of fire brushed past her and she watched as Xavier burned every one of the vile animals that came into view. They made horrible noises, sounds filled with pain while they roasted where they stood. She hated to see anything die but that didn't stop the flood of relief when they were gone. Hopefully there weren't any more. She still wouldn't be able to sleep tonight.

Xavier's stomach growled and she moved to his side.

"What sounds good?"

"Steak, fries, chocolate cake. I don't know, the list is long."

"Pick something and I'll make it for you."

"Steak medium well, baked potato with all the trimmings, and large beer." He grinned.

She pictured the items in her mind but they didn't come. She turned to the Seer. "What happened? I thought I could pull stuff out of the air."

"Those things are of your world. Not of this one."

Keely turned back to Xavier. He had taken care of her, been her protector and didn't seem to be going anywhere. She could feel that his heart was warming to her. It was almost as if he thought the whole being lifemates thing was going to happen.

"Xavier wants a steak and potato and he's going to get it." She concentrated hard trying to bring the food into existence. Her head began to ache and throb but she still didn't give up.

"You did it!" the Seer sounded shocked.

"Why are you surprised? You said I could do it."

"But no one has ever been powerful enough to bring things from the other world."

Keely grinned. "Gee, guess I'm better than you thought."

"So it seems," she thought the Seer muttered. *"Did I hear her right?"*

Xavier nodded. *"She almost seems threatened by you. We're going to have to stick close together."*

"Don't worry, I'm going to be all over you."

"Promise?"

"Even in this situation you can be a horn dog."

"When this is over you'll find out how much of a horn dog I can be."

She shook her head. *"Why is it men can only think with one part of their anatomy at a time?"*

The Seer cleared her throat. "You should get some rest. Tomorrow is going to be a long day. We've got to get you in touch with people who are more than ready to rise up against Montrose."

Keely imagined three soft beds and they popped into the room. She sat down on one and sank into the deep mattress. "Might as well be comfortable." She lay back. How in the world was she supposed to get any rest with someone who could read her mind, a room where dungrats could appear at any second, and Xavier, who was beginning to make her blood heat up?

"I knew you wanted me," his teasing voice floated into her mind.

"Go to sleep before I imagine a mallet and knock you out with it."

"Night Keely," he said.

The fire crackled and popped. Any other time the sound would've soothed her but as the night stretched on she wasn't able to even close her eyes.

Xavier was sleeping soundly and the Seer seemed to be as well. Keely was restless and frustrated that sleep was so elusive. She stood from the bed and walked over to the fire. She searched around and found a large dried piece of wood and touched one end to the fire and, using it as a torch, lit the way as she wandered down the hallway.

What had the Gryphineos been like? If there was Draco, who were dragons, Alicornos who were unicorns then it would stand to reason that Gryphineos would be the mythical gryphons right?

The dark hallway had high ceilings and seemed never ending. She walked on; the light landed on the base of a staircase. She followed the steps up to the next floor and looked into the first doorway. It was a huge room, vines grew in through the broken windows, and cracks in the stone, but at one time it had been quite opulent. Faded carpet spread across the floor and, where the rats hadn't chewed it, she made out details of gryphons woven into the design.

Beneath the vines she saw the edge of a frame. She pulled the growth away to reveal the picture beneath. It was a faded painting of a family. A man and whom she assumed was his wife. They were surrounded by children: a teenage boy and girl behind them, two small girls in the forefront and a baby

on the mother's lap. The outline of a gryphon could be made out just inside the frame.

Sadness filled Keely. The happy family that had once existed was no longer there because some tyrant became overly greedy for power. If the tales the Seer told happened to be true, as they seemed to be, Keely wouldn't rest until she'd helped avenge the senseless deaths.

"Aldmakeelia," she heard whispered.

A sweet perfume filled the air and an apparition formed before her. The woman had deep purple eyes, silver blonde hair and pale skin. Around her neck she wore a silver unicorn suspended from a thin chain. The eye of the unicorn was an amethyst stone.

"My daughter, you're home!" The ghost reached out and hugged her.

Keely jerked away and darted across the room. Things were getting freaky for her again. Just when she was beginning to come to grips with her situation something new popped up and threw it all into chaos, again.

The sadness in the woman's eyes tugged at Keely's heart. "Mother?"

"I am. I've missed you so much, but now you are here at last. You've discovered some of your powers already. Beware of the dangers that are ahead of you." She reached out once more and this time Keely allowed herself to be wrapped in the translucent arms. "Now please, daughter, you must be careful. The man who is with you is indeed your lifemate, a Blacdrake. Trust him. He will guard and defend you. You will

fight by his side. Gathering an army will not be an easy task but you can do it."

"How will I know whom to trust, mother?"

"One of your gifts is the ability to read a person's aura. Those who are willing to fight beside you will have shades of golden yellow, blue, green and red auras. Those who wish you ill will be surrounded by a halo of the deepest black. Your enemies will have eyes that burn a bright red when angry and have a red halo around the pupil in normal state.

"But people who are loyal to the Silverhorn house will have purple or blue eyes. The ones who are loyal to the house of Blacdrake will have green or yellow eyes. Trust yourself, Aldmakeelia. It is in you, all you must do is listen. Beware of the one who even now is planning on how to destroy you. Beware of the witch."

"How do I know who the witch is?"

"Beware the witch," the ghost said again before she faded away.

"Mother!" Keely cried. "Please come back."

She was a little girl running through the park, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Please Mother, come back. I'm afraid. I need you. Don't leave me."

Pain shattered her heart. Once again her mother had abandoned her.

* * * *

Keely's anguish pulled Xavier out of sleep. He sat up in bed, frowning. Where was she? He peered into the flickering

firelight. Her bed was empty. He flung his feet over the edge, stood and went in search of her. "Keely? Keely! Answer me."

He rushed up the steps taking two at a time. He passed two rooms without even pausing. Thanks to their ever-growing connection he knew where she'd gone. He flung open a door at the end of the hall and in the dim light he found her on the floor, knees drawn up to her chest, arms wrapped around them. She rocked back and forth as tears streamed down her face.

He ran to her and knelt on the stone floor. "Keely, baby, what is it? What happened? Who hurt you?"

He reached for her but as his fingers made contact with the skin on her arms, she froze. "How can I help you if I don't know what's wrong?"

She finally sagged against him. He stroked her hair while holding her shivering body close. "Tell me."

She nodded against his chest. "My mother. She came to see me. She told me things, and then she left me. Just like she did when I was little, she simply turned her back and disappeared."

Her mother? Her *dead* mother? In a strange place, middle of the night it was most likely she'd seen shadows that made her think her mother had come. She didn't need to hear his rationalizations. She needed comfort, in the cool light of morning they could be rational. "She had to leave you Keely, to protect you. Just like my mother had to leave me."

"Don't you think I understand that? In my head I know it, but it still hurts. Her perfume filled the room and I recognized

it even before I saw her. When she held me in her arms I realized how much I really missed her."

He held her closer and poured what he could into her. "We'll avenge them. Make Montrose pay for all he took from us, from everyone."

She sniffled and pressed her face against his chest. "She warned me to beware of the witch."

"What witch?"

She shrugged. "She didn't say, but she did tell me something I didn't know. Something that the Seer didn't mention. I can read auras."

"Read what?"

"Auras. Colors of light that surround a person's body. She said that anyone who is friend will be yellow, blue or red, their aura, I mean. But our enemies will have black auras. She also said that people we can trust would be identifiable by their eyes."

"How?"

"Purple, green, blue and yellow eyes mean friends. Those with red eyes are evil." She sat back. "That guy and the woman with him had eyes that glowed red."

"That monster is gone and I won't let anyone else get close to you."

"I know." She looked up at him in contemplation. "The Seer has purple colored eyes. So that makes her friend."

"That's what your mother said, right?"

Keely nodded. "But I'm interested in seeing what color her aura is."

Xavier kept her close to him as they descended the steps slowly and quietly. If he could telepathically communicate, could he also have the ability to read minds the way the Seer did? Surely he could, that wouldn't be major leap. The first one he'd try it on would be the Seer.

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Ten

The Seer awoke the minute he disappeared upstairs. They were together. Something had happened. She strained but wasn't able to see what they were doing.

Light descended the steps and when they came into view she could finally read their minds. The girl had learned she could read auras. How had she figured it out? Seer had to remember the aura-cloaking spell quickly.

She didn't move and kept her eyes closed. If they believed she was asleep then the aura cloak would work. Asleep, a person's true self could be read and it wouldn't take Keely long to figure that out.

The spell came to mind and she mentally chanted it. "*Cleanatre, desginatia, aurolus.*" She felt the girl's careful study of her body and waited. If the spell hadn't worked they would know what she really was and Blacdrake would incinerate her.

"*It's blue,*" Keely's silent communication came through.

"*Good, at least we know she is on our side.*"

She felt Blacdrake trying to probe her mind. She formed a vision of the battle and showed her standing beside them aiding them in war. He hadn't fully developed the ability to mind probe so her ruse would work, at least for the time being. Once he left her mind she allowed her breathing to relax. She would have to move her plan along faster than originally thought. They were learning things far too quickly for her taste.

He had Keely's hand in his. "*Come and lay down with me. I'll be a good boy, promise.*"

The sound of them crawling into his bed made her angry. If Blacdrake fell in love with Aldmakeelia there would be no separating them. Time to set them against each other.

* * * *

Keely nestled down into Xavier's arms. It made her feel complete, at home. She inhaled his scent. It was masculine, woodsy, with a hint of musk buried there.

If she had to be a lifemate to someone she could do far worse than Xavier Blake. Or was it Xiuhcoatl Blacdrake? By either name he was the man lying beside her. The gentle brush of his hand against her cheek left a feeling of heat in its wake. His touch was intimate but not sexual. It made her feel cherished, something she wasn't used to. Sure her parents had made her sense how much they cared for her but parental affection was so different from the love of a man.

She placed her arm across his chest and pressed closer to him. She could definitely get used to this. He kissed the top of her head and she snuggled even closer. Maybe he was falling in love her. She was already more than halfway there. It would be disappointing if she were the only one who fell.

She felt him reaching into her mind and she pulled away slightly. Was he trying to read her mind? How could she stop him? A thought occurred to her: if she could practice on blocking his mind then maybe it would develop her ability to block the Seer.

"Xavier?"

"Yes?"

"Are you trying to read my mind?"

"Guilty. I was able to read the Seer's and I wanted to see if I could read yours."

She nodded. *"Then we can work together. Practicing I mean. You can try to read my thoughts and I can try blocking yours."* She moved back into place against him. *"Wait. You read the Seer's mind? What did you find?"*

"She seems to be telling the truth. I saw the image of her fighting along beside us, helping us defeat this king."

"That clicks, I suppose. I mean, her eyes are purple and her aura blue." She pursed her lips. *"I still don't completely trust her. It's just a nagging feeling."*

"Until she proves that she is on our side, we'll watch her. Now try and get some sleep. We can worry about the rest later."

Keely closed her eyes and settled. It was all so overwhelming. Being attacked twice in less than twenty-four hours, the fear, the sudden abduction from her life to a world she didn't know all jumbled and confused her.

Had her parents realized she was missing? Were they eaten with worry? She shouldn't have been alone. Then again, if she had her friends would've been in danger.

When the man, Vrono, had her in that cavern she knew what he was capable of. His hands tearing her shirt, roaming all over her, his mouth claiming hers. She had felt his hand as it slid into the waistband of her pants.

"Be grateful I want you so much. She's vowed to kill you, only my lust for you is keeping you alive. For now." He'd grunted as he pried her legs apart.

She squirmed and kicked, trying to get away from him. It had been so futile to fight. He was so strong. He grasped her wrists into one of his hands and she felt his hand just above her ... She cried out and jerked. No one was coming for her! He was going to rape her and then the woman was going to kill her. "Oh God!" she screamed. "Help me. Please someone help me."

Then Xavier was there. He had his arms around her, holding her. "It's all right baby, you're safe."

* * * *

Keely's pain once again tore him from sleep. He knew what she was dreaming, reliving the terror of the attack again. If the bastard weren't already dead Xavier would take great pleasure in killing him. Only this time it wouldn't be so easy and would be far more painful.

He pulled Keely close, stroking her hair. "It's all right baby, you're safe now. No one is ever going to hurt you again."

She cried out still in the grip of the nightmare. His visions showed her fear being acted upon. He saw the man ripping Keely's pants from her body and forcing his way into her. When the man looked up, it was him and not the kidnapper who was violating her.

"Keely!" He shook her. "Keely baby, wake up. It's just a nightmare baby, come on wake up."

Her eyes flew open and her face drained of all color. She twisted and pulled struggling for release. "Leave me alone. Let me go." She frantically clawed at his arms and pulled so hard she fell from the bed, hitting the floor with an impact that forced the breath from her body.

He formed flame in his hands and hung it over their heads. He saw Keely dragging herself away from him. "I'd never hurt you, Keely. You have to know that."

She shook her head, her already pale skin blanched making her eyes appear a deeper purple. "Don't touch me."

"Look at me, closely. You will see that it was only a nightmare. It wasn't real, will never be real."

The Seer, roused by the commotion, hurried to his side.

He looked up at her. "Help me calm her," he barked.

The Seer plucked a golden cup from the air and sprinkled herbs into the water. She moved to Keely's side crooning words he didn't know but could sense the calm she was trying to convey.

"Hush now, child. It's going to be all right. Drink this. It will chase away the fright and make you see that it was only a terror in the night. Not reality but a dream."

He watched Keely drink from the cup. As she swallowed the soothing liquid, her color returned and the haunted look in her eyes slowly abated.

"Are you all right now?"

"Get out of my head!" she shouted and smothered her face into the Seer's robes.

She was scared of him, and there was nothing he could do to assure her he was no threat. She still wouldn't let him near her. *"Keely. My eyes, they are green, right?"*

She wouldn't look at him, not at first. Finally she faced him. He felt her trying to read his soul. Her eyes shot open and she jumped to her feet. "Oh my God. To think I trusted you."

She tripped over something near the door, but pushed herself up and disappeared into the dark.

"Keely." He ran after her. She was absolutely terrified, *of him*. He knew that in the dream he was the one who was attacking her. He'd seen it too. He had to show her he would never do something so evil.

As the sun rose, the dull blue of the sky became painted with an orange and pink mixture. Maybe the light would make it easier to find her. He tried to sense her, but the feeling was dissipating. Suddenly it was gone. "Keely," he shouted again.

"You'll alert the entire country side of your presence," the Seer hissed from behind him.

"She's scared and she has no idea where the hell she is. Who knows what kind of hazards are out there? If this king does have an advisor warning him about us being here, then he'll know to look for her. If he got his hands on her..." The thought made him shiver and another flash of angry flame shot from his hands.

"We'll find her, Xavier. Have no doubt. Trust yourself. Your connection grows with every minute that passes. You'll soon be able to sense her no matter where she is, then we'll convince her she is safe with us."

"Then we need to get moving. I refuse to let her be away from my side for too long. If anything happens to her..." He headed for the dilapidated stable and let out the balmocks. He waited for the Seer to mount and then he climbed on top of his. He once more took the lead of the other balmock and he paused to see if he'd be able to reconnect with Keely.

"Keely please. I need to find you. It's not safe out there. Let me know where you are so I can come and get you."

There was no response.

"Why the hell can't I sense her? The connection seems to have shorted or something! You could find her Seer. Use your magic to locate her and take me wherever she is."

The woman bowed her head. She didn't move, didn't say anything and he probed her mind trying to learn if she was able to find Keely anywhere.

He knew before she told him that she'd not sensed Keely anywhere. Damn. Where had she gone?

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Eleven

Keely ran through the underbrush. Thorns and twigs tore at her clothes and tangled in her hair. She'd trusted Xavier and he'd betrayed her. His eyes hadn't been green they were red! The aura surrounding his body was black. She'd allowed herself to let him in, began to fall in love, only to be tricked. If he could disguise himself so well, he must have more powers than she thought, than they told her about.

Trees grew so close together it was like trying to force her way through a curtain made of bark. They'd walked or ridden for most of the day, so far away from the cave and her chance to return home. She twisted and turned. Which way was she supposed to run?

She fell over a rotted log and landed on her face. There was a snapping sound. Pain splintered into her arm and shot up her shoulder. Trying to stretch out her arm sent shockwaves of agony into every pore. Just what she needed; on top of everything else she'd managed to break a bone.

She sat down on the log that had caused the fall and allowed tears to trickle down her cheek. The arm began to swell and the pain intensified. Her fingers were rapidly shaping into sausage links, her wrist looked like someone had shoved a tennis ball in the space and her stomach turn flip-flops.

Keely flashed back to the cave and the knife cut and remembered something: she could heal herself. She reached around and passed her hand over the break. Bones cracked,

pulled and snapped. For a second it was as painful as the break had been, but gradually the pain subsided. Within minutes it was as if she'd never broken it at all.

The smell of smoke wafted on the air and she followed the scent trail while trying to keep concealed behind the trees. Ahead sat a circle of small huts made from wood boards with large spaces between them. Obviously they wouldn't keep out the cold. Did it even get cold here? Sure, it must. That castle had a fireplace, didn't it?

She pulled her wandering mind back to the scene before her. A fire burned in a ring placed in the center of the circle. People wearing medieval style jerkins and leggings sat on logs near the fire. They ate from cracked bowls with their fingers. They had dirt on their light yellow faces.

The smell was far from appetizing but curiosity pulled her nearer. Leaned on nearby trees were tools that looked like rakes, scythes, and maybe a hoe.

She stepped down and a twig snapped. Everyone glanced up. The women leaped up and ran into the huts. The men jumped up too and went for their tools, which they brandished as weapons. Bent forward, they moved with menacing steps toward her hiding place.

She stepped out from the protection of the trees. "Please don't hurt me."

One of the men, who seemed much older than the rest, stepped to the front. His dark eyes slid from her head to her toes and back up to meet her eyes. He sucked in a breath. "Alicorno escenden etrunay."

The only thing Keely understood was Alicorno. She nodded. "I am Alicorno. Aldmakeelia Silverhorn."

"Otnay possimble. Ictrey. Eresy," another man spoke up.

"Esh esdre adlo," a woman from the back of the crowd said.

What were they saying? She had to make them understand she needed help. "The Seer and Blacdrake are chasing me."

"Eresy?" the second man replied.

"Ecdablak on viel?" the first man asked.

Maybe she was getting this. Eresy was Seer? She focused on their words. So the second man had thought it was not possible, that it was a trick. But the last question was something about Blacdrake. Evil. "Yes," she nodded vigorously. "Blacdrake with Seer."

"On menyma, otn edfri!" the first man argued.

Damn. Where was a translator when she needed one? Translator. If she could make things appear, could she make herself understand them? "He is working with the Seer."

"It be not," the first man spoke.

She could understand them! It was a powerful rush that she'd made herself understand another language. It was a little hard, like trying to interpret Latin into English but she was able to make sense of the words. "They brought me here. The Blacdrake, Xavier." What was his name in this place? "Xiuhcoatl Blacdrake. He is going to help the Seer kill me."

"Come ye to sit." The man took her hand and led her to the log bench. "I can't think it be true. The Seer work with King Montrose," he said and spit on the ground.

She watched as the group all followed suit, spitting at the mention of the king's name.

"It not be true," the second man shouted. "Blacdrake be on for Grogan not for evil."

"Quiet Tiengl. To listen to the Alicorno."

"My name is Keely."

The man nodded. "I be Salde. This be my tribe the Quiblek." He took her hand. "Ye be hungry."

The smell coming from the cracked wooden bowl was less than appealing. "I'm not hungry but I thank you."

Slowly people came from their huts to look at her closer. Keely peered at each of them. Their eyes were bright emerald green; their auras were light yellow green. They were on her side. "I was told we were brought here to fight Montrose," she began and waited as the people all spit on the ground. When they were finished she continued. "The Seer told us to unite, fight the king and rule. But she lied. I don't know who to trust."

"That be true, Alicorno. It be in the tablets. Alicorno and Blacdrake to war with king and be save the world. Ye be the one the tale promised."

"But he's planning to let her kill me." How was she going to convince them? "I had a vision that he was going to ... harm me and then allow the Seer to kill me."

"Be the light seen?"

"Light?"

"The light that him has on body."

"Oh. His aura. It's black. His eyes are red."

"Then him no be Blacdrake."

"Be it trick by Seer?" Tiengl asked.

"Trick?"

"Seer be big magic. Be change for to see."

She could change her looks? "The Seer. She is tall as me, with hair and eyes like mine."

Every Quiblek around her shook their heads no. "She be dark. She be red eye mad," Salde explained.

Had she changed her appearance? "Her color was light blue."

"There be chant to say and make light color want. Ye see blue on Seer, there be not blue."

Keely inhaled deep. "If she can change her light, can she also change the look of another?"

Tiengl nodded. "Said be one her magic."

So the witch had tricked her. "Xavier doesn't know she's evil."

"Ye find he. Big magic changes him to be for to kill. Him for to be rule and be power no stop."

She could call to Xavier with her mind. Maybe she could warn him. How far away would her magic reach? "*Xavier. Don't trust her, she's the witch. She works for Montrose.*" She waited for him to answer but none came. They were too far apart.

* * * *

The Seer heard Keely's call and deflected it from Xavier. "I think I've found her. This way." She turned her balmock away from the direction of Keely's cry and down the path to her home. She would ensconce Xavier in her stone palace and

work on him until he did her bidding. He was a strong mind but she had never failed before, she wasn't about to fail now.

She slowed her beast down and rode side by side with Xavier. "Did you not hear her call?"

He shook his head. "I thought I did but there was a single sound and then it was gone."

"She must be too far. As we ride closer then you should hear her."

He nodded but the concern he felt for Keely was obvious in more than just the Seer's ability to read his mind. It wouldn't be long before the bond would be too strong to break.

"Xavier?"

"Yes?" he answered, distracted.

"I have been thinking of something. I told you of the king's advisor."

"Yes."

"The advisor is also a Seer. One with great magic. More than you or Keely possess. One with the ability to change one's appearance. What if the woman who has been with us, claiming to be Keely is actually one of Montrose's spies?"

She had his attention. "How would I have been able to read her nightmare, feel her pain?"

"With powerful magic of a Seer anything can be created. The truth can be distorted. Some Seers have the power to control the mind, within a certain point of course."

He reined his balmock to a halt. "What if I think you are the one who is pulling the puppet strings?"

"What have I done to make you distrust me?"

"Not telling us everything. Like Keely's ability to read auras, or how to tell who is enemy and who is friend."

"But Keely cannot read auras."

He quirked his eyebrow at her. "What do you mean? Alicornos can read auras."

She shook her head. "That isn't one of an Alicorno's powers. They are able to heal the sick and injured, they have the power of teleportation, and telekinesis, can even communicate telepathically. But reading one's aura is a power that only the strongest Seer controls. Even I do not have that power. That means she isn't just a spy, she is the king's advisor. We must be prepared to defend ourselves."

She had him focusing on all her words now it was time to go even further. "How much do you really know about this woman, Keely?"

He seemed to be considering his answer. "I met her only a few days ago. We barely spoke and then when she was grabbed the first time and I was somehow drawn to her rescue. Then again yesterday."

"So as far as you know she could not even be an Alicorno but merely someone who was meant to trick you into coming to Grogan in order to destroy you and keep this destiny from being fulfilled."

"How can it be fulfilled without an Alicorno?"

She shrugged. "I can't see that. But a Draco's power is so strong that if you have a union with someone from an equally powerful house then maybe the two of you would be able to win the battle."

She prodded his mind and found the kernel of doubt that showed promise of taking root. "My home is another half day journey from here."

He still hadn't kicked his mount ahead. There were questions whirling in his mind. She waited for him to ask them and she was already formulating her answers.

"If Keely isn't the Alicorno, then who is?"

"I don't even know if any still exists."

"But you were so certain."

She nodded. "I was, but I seem to have been wrong. Please accept my apologies. There is one thing I am not wrong about and that is that your presence here is known by King Montrose, and if we do not keep hidden he will find us both. Death will not be quick or painless."

She could tell there was a dark side in him struggling to surface. This was exactly why there had to be the union between the unicorn and the dragon. The girl's gentle nature would keep the beast in him under control.

He was wavering on the edge of doubt. A few well placed pushes from her and he would step over that edge. Then his desires for control and power would consume him.

"He knows the truth, that even without an Alicorno you will have the power to destroy him. You can be the one to rule all of this land instead of him. You can be the supreme being in all of Grogan."

He leaned back to rest on his arms. "If she is the enemy then it's even more important we find her and stop her."

"By any means necessary?"

* * * *

Any means necessary? Could he kill her if it came down to it? She had felt so right in his arms. She had felt like the other half of his heart. Had it all been a trick? The pain she'd projected into him had felt so real. Her body close to his was a spark to the memory that was igniting a slow fire inside.

He didn't want to go back, only forward. It had taken less time than expected to accept his destiny. He was a warrior, destined to be king. He had created fire, was able to read minds and communicate with Keely telekinetically.

Was she the one he shouldn't trust or was it the Seer? Keely had said auras and eyes revealed the truth about who was on his side and who was against him. If she lied about one thing then it was all a lie.

Images filled his mind. Keely plotting his destruction. Keely going to the king and setting a trap for him then reaching out to draw him to her with her siren song.

He knew in his bones that he was going to be king. He wanted—needed—the power that he somehow understood would pass to him at the death of the old king.

Power. Nothing in the world would stop him. The only thing left to do was stop the traitor before she could whip the people into frenzy against him. "Bitch," he spat and fire burned the dust beneath his balmock's feet.

"I know where she is." He turned his mount back and then disappeared into the thick woods. He could sense her; she wasn't alone. Small strange looking people surrounded her. In a few more paces she'd be within his reach. Anger surged and

the trees around him began to crackle as orange flames consumed them.

He broke through the trees. Short, odd-looking people raced around in confusion, screaming, desperately searching for an escape route.

The houses went up like matchsticks. He scanned the crowd searching for the white blond hair of the woman who was going to try and stop him before he could get all he deserved, all the control and power he craved.

"Where are you hiding her?" he demanded. "Where is the witch?"

No one answered, they were too busy scurrying out of his reach. Flames flowed from his fingers. There were screams as buildings around the rushing people exploded.

Keely stepped from inside a smoldering cottage and into his path. "What are you doing? Stop. The Seer is the witch, she is the one who is going to betray you, betray all of us."

He slid off his balmock and stormed toward her. His hand lashed out and he grabbed her around the throat. "You are the only one who deceived me, witch."

She clawed at his fingers, trying to loosen his grip. "Think. Please, Xavier. Think." Her breathing was becoming raspy. "Remember." The light in her, that he'd liked so much—was dimming. She gave a ragged gasp for breath. "Who knew the path to here?" she whispered. "Who told us of the ... legend?" Her eyes closed and her body went limp.

Pain shot through his arm. He twisted around as an arrow buried in his bicep. A second pierced the material of his shirt but exploded into ashes before doing any damage. He

dropped Keely's body and began destroying everything in sight. All around him the forest disappeared into walls of fire.

No one would stop him, he was going to be king and they would deal or die.

He spun in order to track who had signed a death warrant with the arrows. No one came into view. The fire, the trees or something else shielded them.

He turned to make sure Keely was dead, but her body had disappeared. "Where is she?" he roared.

What was left of the trees shook. Leaves fluttered. Branches crashed. Several thumped to the ground.

"I'm not sure." The Seer surveyed the area. "She must've used her magic to escape."

"She won't get far." He jerked the reins and spurred the balmock into a shuffling gallop through the fire.

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Twelve

Her throat burned, and when Keely tried to sit up dizziness assailed her.

"Be ye still," a woman spoke before Keely collapsed into a coughing fit. "He be Blacdrake and be to kill us," she cried.

Keely opened her eyes. She lay on a pallet of straw. Around her were soot covered faces filled with tear-dimmed eyes. "How many are hurt?"

The woman dabbed the corner of her eye. "Know not. Leaves like breeze blow and people flee when village burn by Dragon."

Keely pressed her hand lightly to her throat. Xavier had tried to kill her. Her vision had been right. He had to be stopped.

The sweet floral scent filled the room, burying the acrid smell of smoke. The apparition of her mother once more appeared. This time it had more substance and when her mother moved to sit by her side she was almost solid. "He betrayed me, Mother. He killed innocent people."

She shook her head. "No one died at his hand. He is being seduced into using his power for evil, but he has yet to kill an innocent soul. Until he does there is still a chance for you to save him." Her mother's gentle hand touched her burning neck. "Do you still wish to save him?"

Did she? "I don't know that I can. The Seer has so many powers and Xavier is becoming ever stronger. I won't be able to stop him."

"There is still time, my daughter. You should not underestimate the powers you possess. Don't forget the many who will join the cause and help you be victorious."

"I've seen what he's done to the people who were merely talking to me. I can't imagine what he will do to anyone who chooses to fight against him."

"The army that would be gathered to fight on the side of you both will still serve you if you have to destroy him."

Keely wanted to cry at the thought of losing him. But here was no time for tears, not now. If Xavier was going to try to take over Grogan and be a cruel tyrant then she had to stop him.

"I don't know the land, Mother. I don't know where villages are."

"I be here to lead ye," she heard Tiengl say.

Keely looked over to find the little man standing by some browning bushes. His clothes were torn and burned. She rushed to him. "Are you hurt?"

"Warm, but me no harm." He flinched slightly and she saw the blisters on his hand.

"I thought you said you weren't hurt."

"Burn wee bit. Bad it not be."

She took his hand in hers and blew on it gently. As her breath cooled his skin, the blisters disappeared. "I keep forgetting," she said and turned to her mother.

Her mother smiled. "It is coming naturally. Soon you will direct it completely. Each day will find you stronger than the one before."

"So where do I start?"

"Remember the things I told you to look for? The auras and the eyes. When the time comes you will find amazing things inside yourself."

"Can't you just be straight with me and tell me what you keep hinting at?"

"When you need it, the power to shift will be yours. As the unicorn you will be able to outrace the wind. You will be able to elude Blacdrake if he truly cannot be saved. The horn that you possess will be able to heal the sick by just a few scrapings taken from it. So even when you cannot physically reach someone in need your power can still be there to help them."

Keely's temples were pounding. Her shoulders sagged and it took almost all her effort just to breathe. There were so many people suffering. There was so much to do; she wasn't sure she was up to the task. "I just want to go back to my normal life, my friends, my boring job, tiny apartment and my parents."

Her mother's eyes took on a sad appearance. "I am so grateful to them for keeping you safe. I just wish I'd been there."

She reached for her mother's hand and pressed it to her lips. "I understand why you did what you did. I had a good life, but I don't know that I'm cut out for all this magic stuff."

"Its part of who you are. There is no removing it. Now that it has been tapped into, it is going to remain. I know you are afraid, uncertain and miss your ... other home, but think of the people who are in misery now, and who will continue in torment if Xiuhcoatl is truly evil and takes control. This world

could well be destroyed. Then you too will have innocent blood on your hands.

"If after you fulfill your destiny and save Grogan you still want to return to the other world you will be guided there. If you choose to leave now, you will not be allowed to change your mind and return. You will have helped in the destruction and will be unable to reverse it."

It weighed heavily on her. She could turn away, go back to a relatively safe little world and continue on doing menial, mundane tasks or she could stay and help save millions from oppression, brutality and death. "Just call me Wonder Woman," she mumbled.

Obviously her mother didn't understand the reference but smiled anyway. "That's my daughter. Tiengl will lead you to the next village and then you will travel from town to town until you have found everyone who is willing to join forces with you. As word spreads, more and more will band together and you will have your army."

"If I must, um ... if I have to kill Xavier, how can I overpower him?"

"The power of your horn. Shift to your unicorn state and drive the horn into his heart. It will stop him and he will reduce to ash."

"How do I shift?"

"When the time comes to need the transformation you will feel it and it will happen." She stood and was translucent.

"Wait. There is still so much I'm not sure about."

"I'm never far, my child. But this is your time and you must fulfill your destiny." Her mother vanished and Keely looked down at Tiengl.

"We need to pack. We've got a hard journey before us."

He nodded and dashed out the door.

Keely walked around the room, healing the ones who were burnt or suffering from smoke inhalation, and did her best to comfort the shaken.

A young boy of twelve or so walked over to her. "Go with ye?"

"What's your name?"

"Nasderath."

She knelt down and placed her arm around the boy's waist. "Nasderath, I'm sorry but you can't come."

"Be me grown."

"I see that, but I need you to stay with your people. They need strong protectors. This is what I need."

He set his jaw stubbornly and she traced her finger across his cheek. "You would do as I ask, yes? You want to help me in this course?"

He gave a vigorous nod.

"Then I need someone to guard these people and keep them safe until I can get my army built."

He looked dubious, but finally nodded. "Be me the guard. But ye will come for me when gather army?"

She grinned and ruffled his hair. "I will." She walked out the door and waited for Tiengl. He scurried about, gathering as many supplies as he could. "Wait Tiengl. They will need

those supplies more than we will. I don't think those meager provisions will supply."

She cupped her hand and imagined a large cask full of water that never emptied. She also created a hidden door in the ground for safety, a second cellar filled with food that would never run out. "This will hold you until we return. I just wish I could do more."

"Be ye kind, there be no more ye can do. It is good for we. Soon tribe come to we and safe we be."

She nodded. Inhaling a steadying breath she looked down at Tiengl. "Ready?"

"Be we gone," he answered.

Keely waved goodbye to the Quibleks and set off on the path behind Tiengl.

* * * *

The Seer stood in the arched doorway watching Xavier pace the great room. His desire for power was consuming him. Soon there would be no stopping him. If only he'd managed to kill just one of those rotten little creatures then the evil that was a small speck in his heart would grow. If he killed the Unicorn then his transformation would be complete.

She smirked. With the girl out of the way then she would find nothing to prevent her from joining with Xiuhcoatl, bearing the most powerful child this world had ever seen and ruling it all. Her lineage would live on. Once Grogan was conquered, there were other worlds to control.

She walked into the room and stopped at his side. "Sit and rest. It's been a hard day for you. So much turmoil, confusion and hurt."

He dropped into one of the large chairs. "I'm exhausted."

"Understandable. The power drains you until you learn how to control it."

"Then why didn't it last night or yesterday morning?"

"Because you only used a small amount. Today you destroyed an entire village and forest. That took a great deal and you need to regain your strength."

"How soon do I kill Montrose?"

So hungry. This battle wouldn't take long thanks to the beast before her. "Soon my love, very soon."

* * * *

"My love?" he looked at the Seer. "My love? I don't think so, witch." *What made her think he was going to accept her?* He stood. "I have no desire for you."

"You only desire power," she replied, her head held high. "If you and I were to join there would be power unlike any ever known before."

"That's what you said of a union between me and Keely." Thinking of her made a spot inside ache. He relived the feeling of his hand around her throat as she struggled to breathe, to beg him for her life. The ache inside became almost overpowering. What had he done?

"She's going to try and stop you," the Seer whispered in his ear. "You want power more than anything else. If she

succeeds, you will find nothing but death. You must stop her before she stops you."

He struggled to push aside the feelings he had for Keely. If he went soft on her now he was setting himself up for destruction. He couldn't allow that. "The king sent his forces to her already?"

"Yes. Soon he'll bring her to him and everything she knows will be used against you. Montrose will keep his throne and the suffering the people knew before will be nothing compared to what is in store for them."

Suffering? He should care but he couldn't muster it up. The people would raise his food, pay his taxes, put clothes his back and fortify his army. Who cared if they suffered? "That's not my concern. Getting rid of Montrose is my only interest."

She patted his hand. "Then we will have to make a plan."

A niggling pricked his conscious and he felt a brief moment of guilt. He didn't care that people were suffering? He examined his heart.

No, he didn't. They were simply a means to an end. "The people believe this great prophecy of a union between me and an Alicorno?"

"Yes."

"Then let's give them one."

Her eyes flew open in shock. "But you can't. She will destroy you, she's not who she claims to be."

He rose and placed a hand on her cheek. "Alicorno have your coloring. If the people believe you are of the house then they will support me and help me in not only defeating Montrose but in finding and killing his witch."

She released a cackling laugh. "You will indeed make a great ruler. You are the puppet master."

He flashed his eyebrows. "I am the great Xiuhcoatl Blacdrake, descendant of the house of the Dragon. There is no one who can succeed in defeating me."

"That is true."

He knew she was calculating something. He peered into her mind and found it. She wanted to rule as his queen, have his child and fight alongside of him in the coming war. He gripped her shoulders and pulled her close to him. "I can read your mind now, Seer. Don't think you can plot anything without my knowledge."

After pushing her away, he crossed the room to a window. "I will need an heir one day, but I may not want you."

"There is no one in the kingdom with more power than me. Allow me to give your son life."

A son.

A son would help rebuild the house of Draco. A son would help protect from all challengers to the throne. But would the boy grow up to be competition?

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Thirteen

Sitting in the Seer's home he watched as the sun set once more on the world. His world, and it would literally be. He shouldn't be so indecisive. It was a simple matter really. He would be the one with the entire world at his feet. How could anyone ignore that?

Keely's image came into his mind's view and he thought of the way she felt in his arms. The soft silk of her hair and the warm touch of her body as they shared his bed, it made him burn with not only physical desire for her, but for the spiritual connection they shared. She made him complete. Since they'd been separated he felt a hole in his heart. A part of him was missing and he didn't know what to do to get it back.

The small voice was becoming louder again. The one that was warning him that all wasn't as it seemed. That he needed Keely. The mental intrusion came through and chased away the images. He could sense the Seer probing his thoughts. He had to block her way into his mind. The only way to truly know what he was to do would be to listen to his heart.

Her intrusion was gone and he leaned back in the chair. Had he been successful? "I'm going for a walk," he called and headed for the door.

He stepped into the darkening evening and ambled through the abandoned, desolate pasture. He strolled to a large rock under a copse of trees and sat down to do some true soul searching. He'd never wanted money, power before.

He'd grown up in an affluent family but it hadn't ever been important before. Why was it suddenly so overwhelming?

"Xiuhcoatl," the voice came from the trees.

"Who's there?" he demanded. He wasn't sure exactly how it had happened but a large sword appeared in his hand. It had a blade that gleamed in the evening light, and a hilt made of jeweled gold that fit perfectly in his grip.

The trees trembled and a red dragon appeared above him. Shock reverberated through him. He was too stunned to move.

"Come," it ordered.

Xavier forced his legs to move and he stepped next to the large beast. "What?" Had his tone sounded as insolent to the dragon as it had to his own ears?

The dragon shifted and became the ghostly shade of a man with dark hair, a broad chest and a stubborn set jaw. "Xiuhcoatl," the man spoke. He closed the distance between them. "Do you know me?"

Xavier studied him and then shook his head. "I don't think so."

A pained look momentarily filled the man's eyes then it was gone. "I shouldn't be surprised. I died before your second year had been seen."

"But you know me?"

The man nodded. "I am Xanthus Blacdrake. Your father."

Xavier felt his breath catch and his legs wobble. His head swam. Is this the way Keely felt when she met her mother? "My father?"

"I am. I know of your struggles, Xiuhcoatl. I have been where you are now. The temptation of power, the calling to the side of evil. It is so strong and it will remain so until you finally make a choice. If you choose to use your gifts for dark purposes, then you will be forever in its clutches. There will be no return."

"So all I have to do is say I'm not evil and I won't ever be?"

His father smiled. "Not as easy as that, my son. Though you choose the path of white there will always be the temptation for power."

Xavier paced away and then back. "So, now wait. If I go bad, I can't go back, but if I go good I can always possibly go bad? What the hell kind of sense does that make?"

"I do understand. I have struggled with that my entire life. Now in death I can say that the struggle made me stronger when I was alive."

"Did you ever waver?"

"Only once did I have any doubts. But your mother, Xylia, gave me her support to lean on. It has been that way since the beginning of time. Draco's and their lifemates have always had the ability to help their mates remain strong in the fight against the influence of dark magic."

Xavier needed to do a little leaning right at that moment. The talk of lifemates brought Keely's image to his mind. If he chose the path of the white he would have no one to help him fight the temptations. "I don't know what to do, Father. I have no one to lean on save the Seer."

His father jerked his head up and his black eyes glittered hate. "The Seer? The woman you are with now? I thought she was the Alicorno."

"No. Keely, the Alicorno, left. But the Seer is of white light," he studied his father's apparition. "Isn't she?"

"The woman has glamourised, there can be no other explanation. The Seer is not to be trusted Xiuhcoatl. She is the advisor to Montrose. She has always had aspirations of power and wealth for herself. She only uses her position to create a foothold for herself." His father stroked his chin. "You must not let her influence you, Xiuhcoatl."

"My name is Xavier."

Xanthus smiled. "I know that, too. Your mother told me the ones who raised you in the other world gave you a name that is in the family line."

Xavier's confusion must've shown on his face because his father spoke again. "All of the house of Draco has had a name that begins with an X. Your mother told me she had whispered the suggestion into the ear of your adoptive parents and they took it to heart."

Everything seemed so wild and turned upside that the song "Tradition" from one of his favorite musicals popped into his head. He had to force concentration back. "All right, so if a Draco needs a Draco to help them keep on the path of good, then I'm screwed. There is no Dragon left."

"True. But destiny says you are to unite with the unicorn. The purity of the magic that flows from her line through her veins will help keep you strong."

Xavier gave a wry laugh. "That ship has sailed. It's not possible. What am I supposed to do walk up to her and say, 'gee honey, sorry I tried to strangle you. Want to marry me anyway?'"

"I did not say it would be easy. You will have to earn back her trust. Only then can you get on the right path. That is the way you choose?"

That was a good question. "I don't know. It's hard to know where my thoughts go. As you said, I do battle with myself. What do I do? How do I decide?"

"Clear your mind. Listen to your heart." Xanthus moved to his side and nudged the back of his knee. "Sit on the ground."

Xavier did as commanded. He looked up at the other man. "Now?"

"Now inhale a deep slow breath, hold it several seconds and then exhale."

Xavier did, and repeated the action a number of times. Peace settled over his heart as images danced in his mind. Images of a successful battle. Scenes of prosperity: fields filled with healthy green plants; people smiling and happy, safe in the knowledge their world was once more set to rights.

These images were chased by darkness. An overwhelming sense of power flooded him. He was strong. He would be all-powerful. He would victorious. "I will be king," he muttered. "I have decided."

The other man's pupils changed from round to slits. The skin began to toughen and red scales formed along the arms. Soon the red dragon stood before him. Flames sparkled in the

puff of gray smoke the dragon expelled. "So be it," the great beast growled then shoved from the ground. It took to the sky, and faded from sight.

* * * *

Just as the sun rose Tiengl and Keely bid goodbye to the Quocalk village with a promise to alert them when it was time for the army to assemble.

The sun had climbed high into the gray blue sky and still they had not found another encampment. "Tiengl, is there not another village near?"

"Be it not away much."

"Are these people also Quocalk, or are they Quiblek?"

"No. Be they Brimborion."

She chuckled wryly. "A map might be helpful. And a scorecard to keep them all straight."

Tiengl looked up at her and she could see it on his face he didn't understand what she meant. How to explain scorecard? "Forget it," she said with a sigh.

"Be map drawing, yea?"

"Right. A piece of paper with all the villages marked on it. Also, all the waterways and mountains. The location of the king's palace and places we can set up for the people to gather, hide when they need to. Do you have a map?"

He scrubbed his chin. "Me no. But Brimborion have draw. They you help."

"Good."

They continued the steady pace, but by sundown Keely's feet were throbbing intensely. She sat down on the ground,

slipped off her shoes and rubbed them. Under the trees it seemed that the grass was healthier. It was green and a moist, silky soft moss was under foot. She wriggled her toes in the springy vegetation, leaned back and closed her eyes. "Tell me about the Brimborion."

"They be long. Not like Quiblek or Quocalk. They be dark skin and light eyes. Hair dark like when fire burns."

"Are they kind?"

"Be good, but can be fight bad."

She sat up. "What do you mean?"

He scratched his head. "Me say my *pokkomesa*, him say no my *pokkomesa* and try to take the round from me. Me him say no."

She called the image to mind of two little boys fighting over a ball. "Sounds like a couple of kids," she pressed her lips together. "They're quarrelsome."

Again Tiengl looked confused.

"I think I understand. I just wish it was all more clear." She slipped her shoes and socks back on. "What I wouldn't give for a nice hot shower." At her words rain began to fall in at a steady pace. "I'm going to have to watch what I wish for," she cautioned herself again.

"Water," Tiengl sounded so excited and watching him dart out from under the trees to dance in the rain lifted her spirits.

She stood out in the open and felt the gentle drops land on her skin. It wasn't heavy by any means but the steady fall would mean they'd be soaked to the bone by the time they arrived at the Brimborion settlement.

Her steps were becoming uncomfortable. She'd been grabbed while still in her old flannel pants and oversized shirt. The water made the material heavy and the waist of the pants pulled and sagged low. She had to keep hitching them up.

Maybe the Brimborion's would have clothes that would fit her. The sound of the Seer's word of caution popped into her head. She may not trust the other woman but the thought of the king finding her by her magic halted any further wishing. "How far?"

"Ell," Tiengl answered.

"Okay?" What was an ell?

There was a motion in the bushes beside them and it had nothing to do with the water coming down in a fine sheet. Something was there. "Who's there? Come out here, now."

The branches parted and man stepped out. He was large, standing well over six feet. His deep red hair grew in patches all over his skull. His skin was a dark muddy brown shade. His chin was long, wide but narrowed suddenly to a point. There were rashes of light white bumps on his face. "You are a Brimborion?"

He looked afraid and started to dash away.

"Him be Brimborion," Tiengl said while his head nodded vigorously.

"Please miss," the man's hushed voice was nearly drowned out by the soft pitter-patter on the leaves.

"Why are you so afraid? I'm not going to hurt you." She stepped closer to reassure him and he jerked backward.

"Please miss," he begged again. "You are Alicorno?"

"Yes."

He bowed low and then righted. "You have to leave.

The Dragon was here. He threatened to burn us out and we were ordered to let him know if you arrived."

"Was anyone hurt?"

"No. But he was pure evil."

"He can't be evil," Keely sighed wistfully. She studied the man's face. "I think you're right. I just don't want it to be true."

"His hands, your breath," Tiengl argued.

The memories of Xavier's hands around her throat made gooseflesh appear on her arms. "I know." She turned her attention to the Brimborion. "What is your name?"

Brimborion extended his hand. "I am Abhorson Chital."

"I am Keely." She accepted his hand and her blood flow to her fingers was restricted by his brief but firm grip. "My pleasure," she smiled politely. "How will he know I'm here?"

"He said to think of him and he'd get the message, then he'd come."

She sagged into the ground, her spirits weighing her down. "I don't think I can do this, Tiengl. I know that what's happening now is a horrible thing and I have got to do something about it, but I feel so powerless."

"There are many who have been waiting for you to come, M'Lady," Abhorson said as he lowered his body beside her. "We've longed for the day when you'd come and save us. Most of us will join and fight alongside you."

She nodded and patted his hand. "Thank you, Abhorson." She shifted in her spot. "I just feel like I bring death and

destruction wherever I go. I won't be able to battle him alone, but I don't want anyone dying because of me, either."

Abhorson jumped to his feet. "We will fight and, if need, die because we are ready for freedom. Is it wrong to fight for what you believe in? Is it a bad thing to die for the good of others?"

"No. Actually my world, I mean the one I grew up in, was established by people who were willing to die for what they believe in." She pushed up from the ground. "Take me to your leader," she said with a chuckle.

Tiengl and Abhorson exchanged questioning looks but Abhorson stepped in front of her and led her into his village.

The people were all as tall as Abhorson, their hair, skin tone were all the same and each one had different white bumps on their faces. Maybe the bumps were just part of who they were? She hated to question Abhorson about it, for fear of offending him. She pushed the question aside and studied the people surrounding her.

The people in the town watched her with curious eyes, and one set sent a chill down her spine. Even though the auras around her were warm yellow and the eyes a lovely shade of cornflower blue she still had the feeling that not all was well.

"This is the Lady Keely Alicorno," Abhorson announced. He waved his hands beckoning them all to come closer. "She is the one prophesied to help us defeat Montrose and the Seer. We will gather under her and band with our brothers who despise our vicious king. Those who stand on the side of right will stand on the side of Lady Alicorno in this battle."

"Long live Lady Alicorno!" shouts filled the air. Again the positive energy of the people swept over her.

"We need to plan," she shouted over the crowd. "I have already spoken to the Quiblek and Quocalk. They are awaiting word to meet in the forest. I want to you gather all the weapons you can. Those you do not have, forge them. Then I will send word for you to meet me and we will bring our march against Montrose. Victory for the people of Grogan!"

"Victory. Victory," the shouts echoed.

She turned to Abhorson. "You will need swords, shields, helmets, arrows, bows, knives. Everything."

He nodded. "It will be done as you wish, Lady."

Keely still couldn't squelch the uneasy tremors rippling through her. Something felt off but she couldn't pin it down. She decided the best thing to do was amble through the village and meet the people. Something she'd failed to do in the Quiblek and Quocalk towns.

Every face she saw was filled with hope and kindness. She went from hut to hut meeting and greeting the populace. The last hut she came to was in more disrepair than the others. There was no real sign of life. When she knocked on the door it creaked open, so she pushed it in to see if there was a problem inside.

A fine layer of dust covered most of the surfaces in the room. Against the wall lay a large pallet of old straw. It didn't look as if anyone had lived there in quite some time. She turned to leave and bumped into a Brimborion. The female Brimborion was as tall as Abhorson but much more thin and with a hard glint in her blue eyes.

"Oh sorry, I was just checking to make sure everyone was all right in here." Keely sidestepped out of the way

"No one lives here," the woman growled, pushing past her.

"You don't?"

She shook his head. "No. My family did at one time but they are all gone now. Montrose destroyed them."

"I'm Keely."

"Good for you. Now leave."

She studied the woman's aura and could find no black or even gray there. She must be a friend so why did the hair on her arms rise? "I'm here to make sure Montrose and his men pay for all the crimes they've committed."

Two steps brought her within arm's reach. The Brimborion grabbed her in strong hands and squeezed painfully. "You are nothing. There is no standing against them. You will only bring more death, more misery. You should leave and not return."

Keely tried to jerk from the bands clasping her arms but couldn't break free. She stiffened her spine. "Can it be worse than what you have suffered all these years? Are you really willing to give up when freedom can be so close?"

The woman shoved Keely backward. She stumbled to find her footing but crashed against a brittle wooden table. The woman stepped forward and loomed over her. "You don't think it can become worse? You are a stupid girl. Anyone who sides with you is a fool and Mikanna is no fool."

Keely stretched to work out the stabbing pain in her back. "You're Mikanna?"

The woman kicked at her. "I am. Now leave."

Keely pushed up from the ground. "We will defeat Montrose and you will see that life can be better." She turned and stalked out of the hut. Her back ached from the fall but it was already lessening.

Abhorson crossed the compound and came to her side. "What's happened?"

She dusted her palms on her pants. "Nothing." She looked around at the way the people were dressed. Surely there would be clothing that could fit her here. "Is there someone who could lend me extra clothes? I'm soaked and dirty. I'd really like to clean up."

"I'll find some," he promised and turned away.

I should've summoned some. They have nothing and I'm taking away from them. Before she had a chance to let Abhorson know she'd changed her mind he was standing before her a large deep brown tunic in his hand. "It was my sister's."

She took the tunic from him. "Thank you, Abhorson. And please thank her for me."

A pained look crossed his face. "She's dead. The Mannanggalla who work for Montrose killed her when she refused to give the last of the crenewheat despite the law. By the time I arrived she had been murdered."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." She knew that Montrose had been evil and that his militia had no scruples but this was the first time any detail had been given regarding the nightmarish treatment the people had suffered.

She accepted the bundle with an attitude more befitting the memory of his sister before she slipped into a nearby hut

and changed. She pulled on dark green leggings. Fortunately, Abhorson's sister wasn't an overly wide woman.

Keely pulled the brown tunic over her head. It hung down past her knees and the sleeves were made like bells. She gathered the waist and tied it off with a bit of string she found folded into the clothing. She raked her fingers through her hair and tried to work out the knots that had formed in the locks. What she wouldn't give ... she cut off the thought. No more thinking or wishing for incidental things. From now she was only going to use her power for things that were needed for survival.

She picked up her soaked sneakers and groaned. Even though the leather no longer squashed and oozed water with every step they were still heavy and uncomfortable.

"Lady?" a feminine voice called from the other side of the wooden door.

"Yes?"

"May I enter?"

"Of course."

A girl, no more than ten, walked in her eyes downcast she held out a pair of slippers. "I made these and I thought you could use them."

Keely accepted the soft material. They were a deep brown almost the same shade as the tunic. The soles were thick, comprised of several layers of the flexible leather like material. They felt like pliable kidskin and seemed to be the perfect size. "Thank you for such a gift, but I shouldn't take these from you."

The girl frowned and Keely knew she'd hurt the child's feelings.

"I shouldn't take them, but I will think of you every time I wear them. Thank you for your kindness." She sat down on the ground and pulled them on her feet. The leather thongs that held the two pieces of leather together reminded her of a pair of slippers her grandmother had worn many years ago.

Standing up she was pleased to find the soles really did serve as wonderful protection against the hard packed dirt. The shoes themselves were light and more comfortable than anything she'd ever worn before.

She touched the girl's shoulder and together they stepped out into the open. Keely finally felt like she fit in this world. No longer was she easily identifiable as an outsider.

"Eat, him say," Tiengl said as he walked up to her side.

"I really think we need to move on. We need a map of the land so I know where to go next and where to tell my people to meet."

"Draw big, him do."

"Great." She walked over to find Abhorson, a second Brimborion man and a woman. "Tiengl says you're making me a map?"

Abhorson nodded. "M'Lady, this is Tybalt and his woman Massala."

Tybalt stood and bowed low. His wife Massala curtsied her respect. They retook their seats and Tybalt continued to run what Keely assumed was the equivalent to a charcoal pencil along a piece of stretched material. "Here is the way our lands are divided up. All belong to Montrose. But Montrose

has handpicked guards who govern each region. All this," he said and indicated the areas surrounding the Brimborion, the Quiblek and Quocalk villages. "Belong to the Mannanggalla. These are monasteriense."

"What kind of monsters? I know that Montrose is a monster but I need to understand what I'm up against."

"Mannanggalla are about this tall," Tybalt explained as he stood up and measured a height to his chin. "They are white of skin, red of eyes, black of hair, and teeth of points. They not only suck the spirit from those of us who live here, but also our crops."

"They sound like vampires," Keely mused softly. "In my world a vampire sucks the life blood from its victims and if the prey drinks of the vampiric blood they become vampires as well. But according to legend there are ways of defending yourself against them. Holy water, a cross, a stake through the heart or a ring of garlic flowers."

Tybalt, Tiengl, Abhorson and Massala looked extremely bewildered. "We have not heard of such things."

"Great. Okay, what do your legends say about Mannanggallas? Is there any tale of how to stop them?"

Tiengl paced away from the crowd and back. "Me hear of one thing. Jengeluru."

"Yes," all three Brimborion agreed.

"What is it?"

Tiengl employed a piece of bark and cleaned off an opening in the dusty ground. "Has long vines." He drew out a long snaking line. "Mighty pokes." He drew nasty thorns growing out of the sides. "Leaves like this," they resembled

saw blades. "The berry is big, like this." He took his hands and with fingers extended pressed them into a ring. "Inside berry like blood. Scrape inside hard, gather juice."

She tried to picture what this plant looked like in her mind. If the drawing was only half scale then the vines would be about six feet long. The central bush about four feet and the berries were about a foot in diameter. They sounded like blood filled coconuts.

"Where do we find this bush and how do we use it?"

"The bush grows in the middle of the Sanmises mudland. It lies here in the center of our county. It is protected by mud that swallows, trees that eat flesh, and dungrats as well as strange creatures that have no names," Massala explained. "No one goes there. So the Mannanggalla know they are safe from anything that could be used to stop them"

"How does it work?"

Tybalt leaned back into the log. "To protect against them you must twist the vines together and braid them. Then you lay it out around the place you wish to protect. The thorns of the vine catch the Mannaggalla's tails on them. The Mannanggalla cannot bear heat and sal salis. Place a flame around them and sprinkle in the sal salis. This turns the flame to bright blue and it will devour them."

"Then we need to get to that vine. Show me on the map where this mudland is and I'll go."

"You not go," Tiengl shouted frantically. "Send Quiblek, Quocalk or Brimborion. Her not go," he shouted and faced the three Brimborion.

"He's right, M'Lady. If anything were to happen to you we'd all be lost."

"I won't sacrifice one of you. Now show me," the tone was a command and it seemed they had no choice but to obey.

Tybalt traced on the map from the Brimboration village to an empty space in the center of the province. "It lies here. But there are dangers untold. Please think again."

"I have to go, if this plan will stop the Mannanggalla then it would destroy one of Montrose's factions. He will suffer a blow to his guard. Then in the next territory we will find the guards and learn how to decimate them. If we systematically destroy his defenders then we will have a better chance of outmaneuvering him."

She stood and walked from end to end of the path before their seat. It would have to be done in unison to avoid any chance for them to be prepared for the attack. She trailed her hand down her face.

She couldn't stop the chuckle that escaped her. Was it only two days ago she'd felt ill prepared for this task, daunted by the enormity and even sure it was all a dream? Where was the self-doubting foolish girl she'd been then? The old Keely was gone and hopefully she wouldn't be back. *Time for the new Keely to wind to life and save the day.*

"How far to the first village in the," she studied the map—according to the drawing they were in Montrose Mannanggallia—"In Sluagh Montrose?"

A look of horror crossed Massala's face.

"We never go to Sluagh," Tybalt said.

Keely looked from one to the other. For once even Tiengl had nothing to say. "What's so bad about Sluagh?"

"It is the land of the dead," Abhorson said quietly. "Anyone who enters the land does not return."

Tybalt cleared his throat. "Some have returned..."

"See," Keely said and pointed at Tybalt. "There have been some who've come back."

"...as shades," Tybalt finished.

"Ah. But they weren't me and they weren't fighting for the right."

"No one who is Sluagh will fight for the right. The ones who reside there are evil beings. They are fewer in number than we here. But every spirit they take adds another to their force."

"So there are no villages in Sluagh Montrose?"

"None that have ever been told of," Abhorson answered.

"Then tell me where I should go to find the next village."

He took the map and trailed his finger down along the outline of Montrose Mannanggallia. "In the land of Montrose Jiggoi there are twelve villages spread across the land. The first village, the home of the Wasike people is a three-day journey."

Keely scanned the map. Traveling to each village on the entire of Grogan would take her well over a year. There had to be a way to gather her forces sooner. "I need to spread the word much faster than I'm able to do right now. Sending out messengers would save me from having to make so many stops, but it will still take forever to gather an army."

A lone figure stepped out from a covering of brush and approached her. It was a man with golden hair, light blue eyes and a radiant smile. He projected an aura of goodness and purity. She felt immediately safe from just one look. "I can help." He spoke with a soft accent that was akin to someone from Ireland in the earth world.

"And you are?"

"Bellerophon. I am a Pegusian. Word of your arrival has brought joy to us. We are going to help you in anyway we can. Tell me what message and I'll relate it word for word to my people who will in turn be sent as messengers to every village of Grogan."

Keely felt elation wash over her. She moved closer to Bellerophon and hugged him tight. "You are the answer to my prayer," she shouted excitedly. "All right, I need all who are willing to gather any weapon they can forge and meet me," she looked at the map. In the middle of Mannanggallia was a forest that according to map legend was densely populated and should offer plenty of hiding places as well as secluded meeting areas. "We meet in the forest of Dantera in four weeks."

Bellerophon bowed. "Our future queen is most wise and beautiful." He took her hand and pressed a kiss against the skin. "I will see that your message is spread loud and clear. We shall reunite in a quaterniorum."

He took a running start, then suddenly large white wings spread out from his back and he was soaring across the sky.

She should've been shocked but nothing could surprise her any more. She turned back to Tiengl. "Now to the mudlands for the Jengeluru."

Abhorson rose. "He can remain here, I'll guide you to Sanmises."

She glanced down at Tiengl but instead of the disappointment she expected he was smiling. "All right." Keely nodded. "Then let's go get a plant."

He started out of the village and into the thick foliage of the woods. His long legged strides made it hard for her to keep pace but she struggled along.

Strange animals made howling and chirping sounds from the trees around her. Heat seemed to radiate from each tree. Soon the air felt like a sauna, the moist heat making her breathing difficult.

A thick root rose from the ground and when her toe connected with it she felt a sharp pain. "Ouch."

"No M'Lady," Abhorson shouted and ran towards her.

Before he could reach her, branches like arms dropped down around her. Skeletal wooden fingers knotted in her hair crushing her in their grip. She struggled trying to find a loose spot but the pressure was becoming too great. Bark closed in tight. "Help me," she screamed and thrashed.

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Fourteen

Xavier stood drinking in all the peacefulness and let his mind wander. Three moons were visible against the evening colors overhead. On the gentle breeze, a light scent tickled his nose.

"Help me." A cry broke through his skull.

"Keely!" She was in trouble, hurt and terrified. He turned in the direction of her fear and rushed headlong. As he ran, a change took over his body. It felt longer, lighter and stronger. He looked down to find the ground many feet below him. From his back, large wings pumped the air and he rose up and up. He was suddenly soaring high above the tops of the trees. His vision had altered. He saw in the colors of thermal imaging. There were dark blues and purples of the roots of trees and the stream that wound its way between the giants. He scanned the ground while his senses were focused on Keely. Her scent trail was stronger in his new dragon form than it had been before. The mental connection was also stronger. He followed the pull drawing him closer to her.

Her screams grew louder, her agonizing pain nearly ripping him apart. He landed and scanned the area for her. Her shape was red and yellow with exertion as she struggled to break free. The tree was wrapping its bark and branches around her, constricting tighter with each breath.

Once more he stood on two legs in his human form. When he lifted his hands, fire shot from his fingertips, engulfing the tree and filling the air with a putrid odor of burning flesh.

"Keely!" he screamed and ripped through the burning branches.

She was slumped against the trunk, sweat streamed in tracks down her soot-covered face.

He ran forward and grabbed her up in his arms. Dashing back through the flames he carried her over to a lush patch of moist grass.

"Keely?" He was frantic with worry. She wasn't stirring. Deep tracks from the texture of the rough bark were buried in skin that was red with small blisters. It must be that she could heal herself in her unconscious state for her skin slowly cooled. He watched as the blisters faded and her skin returned to its smooth state.

"M'Lady," Xavier heard a man shout and turned just as he rushed forward, a large log clutched in his hands. It swung toward Xavier's head.

Xavier ducked and twisted from the path of the blow. "Wait," he shouted, his hands in the air.

"You are the Blacdrake. You mean to kill her and destroy us all," the man roared and lunged at him again.

Xavier sidestepped the headlong butt and pivoted on his heel. "I'm not going to hurt her."

"You lie. You're as evil as Montrose." The man's anger floated off in waves.

Xavier finally grasped the man's arms in his hands and squeezed slightly to force the man to release his hold on the wooden weapon. When it hit the ground he turned the man around into a locking hold. His arm was around the man's

neck; he held on tight enough to subdue, but not so tight as to do any harm. "Now will you listen to me?"

"Do I have a choice?" the man growled.

"I'm not going to hurt Keely. She is my lifemate. We are destined to fight together and destroy Montrose."

"You've already tried to kill her. You're working with the Seer. All you care about is collecting the power for yourself."

"I know I've screwed up, but listen to me. I'm not evil. I've chosen my path and it's for good. I've chosen Keely and Grogan's freedom."

"I don't believe you."

Xavier shoved the man hard and watched as he hit the ground. "If I was going to kill you I'd have done it by now. I'd have left her in the fire and lit you up brighter than the Fourth of July before you even knew what hit you."

"Fourth of July?"

Xavier shook his head. "Never mind. Get me some water for Keely."

The man still didn't look as if he believed Xavier. But when he stared down at Keely, Xavier could read the man's love for her in his eyes.

For only a split second Xavier was overcome with jealousy but almost as quickly he realized the love wasn't of a romantic nature but of respect and admiration. "Hey! Water?"

The man nodded and jumped up. "There is a spring beyond those trees."

He waited. "Go on."

"And leave you here with the lady? I'm not touched in my head."

Heaving a sigh Xavier decided to avoid any further arguments and went to the spring himself. He ripped off a piece of cloth from his shirt and dipped it into the cool water.

When he walked back the man was holding Keely in his arms. He gave the man a none too gentle nudge out of the way, placed his arm under Keely's head and dabbed at her face with the wet material.

She stirred and her eyelids fluttered. A soft look in her eye was shoved aside by the look of fear. "Abhorson!" she cried and tried to struggle out of Xavier's arms.

"I'm here, M'Lady."

Xavier watched her inspect the other man, Abhorson, for any sign of damage or injury.

"I didn't hurt him. I heard the sound of your screams, felt the agony of the crushing against your body and I had to come."

"So you could watch?" She didn't bother hiding the angry edge to her voice.

"No. You needed me and I came."

"Right. All of a sudden I should trust you?"

Xavier inhaled a deep breath. Anger would do him no good, he'd do nothing but destroy any faith she might still feel for him. Still, he couldn't quite tamp down the irritation. He scrubbed at the base of his skull. "Like I told him." He motioned toward the man she'd called Abhorson. "If I wanted to hurt either of you, I'd have done it already. I'm the one who destroyed that damn tree and saved your life."

He moved a step closer and reached out to caress her cheek. She flinched away and pain splintered inside him. "I'm

so sorry, Keely. I made such a mistake. I thought the Seer was on our side—she made me believe that. Honest. When I saw the truth, I knew I had to get away from her and back to you as soon as I could."

The mistrust in Keely's eyes hadn't left. "I tried to tell you. I tried to let you know, but you wouldn't listen." Her eyes glittered with a hard edge.

What more could he do? "I don't know how many other ways to say I'm sorry. How to make up for what I've done. We have to get rid of Montrose, then everything else can fall into place."

She shook her head. "I can't rely on you."

She turned on her heel and walked away leaving him staring open-mouthed. He couldn't let her go. He ran to her and grabbed her arm. He spun her to face him. All at once Abhorson materialized between them.

"Leave her alone!" Abhorson brought his fist into a crashing blow on the side of Xavier's head and he dropped to his knees.

The world pitched for a minute. Xavier rubbed his head as he sagged on the ground. "Keely." His head throbbed like it was filled with hundreds of angry bees. He spoke around the noise. "You know you can see into my head, right? I mean, you read the auras and stuff. Look at me. Really look hard. Even if I could disguise my mind to you, I can't disguise my aura."

* * * *

Keely paused and studied him closely. It was true. His aura was no longer the deep almost black gray color it had been before. There was no longer any red in his eyes.

She wanted to believe him. Desperately she wanted to believe. He'd begun to mean so much to her, someone who understood how hard this strange world was. Still, there was no denying what he'd done. "The Seer could change her appearance too."

Pain. Real honest to goodness pain projected from his mind and filled her head.

"I'm here to help. We have to stop Montrose. Period. We have to make this world better for everyone here."

That was true. The suffering of everyone she'd seen in this world so far had practically ripped her heart in two. "All right. But know this Xavier, I've gotten stronger. I can and will take you down if you step one centimeter out of line."

She forced a wall up to block him from seeing into her mind and it seemed to work. He watched her eyes and nodded. "I won't disappoint you again. I swear."

She looked at Abhorson. "It's all right. He can join us."

Abhorson opened his mouth to speak out against her decision, but he just shook his head and led the way back to the camp. Keely followed, praying she'd made the right decision. She could be leading a lot of people to their destruction.

"I've made some mistakes, Keely," he mumbled. "I almost ... I—"

His sorrow touched her. "I know. But you didn't kill anyone. If you had..."

"If I had it would be too late to save me."

Curiosity ate at her. "What made you see? I mean, I didn't get through to you, so what did?"

He stopped short. "My father."

"What?"

"My father. I mean my ... what would he be? My dragon father? My biological father? Whatever. He told me truths about myself, my family, and the Seer. He helped me know the true way of things. I don't want what the Seer offered. Sure, it was power, pure unadulterated power. But it would also have been a miserable existence." He took her hand in his. "I won't ever be able to completely kill my desire for power, Keely."

His admission caught her off guard. She inhaled a sharp breath and jerked free from him.

"Please hear me out. It's in my blood, my nature, to crave power, wealth, and all the trappings that come with it. But I know that with you by my side, it can be tempered. You can be the one to help keep me on an even path. On the path of good."

She scrubbed her hands together then reached up and ran her fingers along her neck. "That's a lot to put on my plate. How can I be responsible for keeping you 'good'? That has to be up to you. No one can force you on the right road."

"No, but I know your purity, your light. You can help keep my demons at bay."

He needed her. She couldn't just wave her hand and have it be done. No, if she were going to keep him in the right

she'd have to be with him almost daily. "That's a lifetime job, Xavier. One I'm not sure I'm up for."

Keely began walking back to the village. Abhorson fell into step beside her and she reached out to pat him on the arm. "Thank you, Abhorson."

"I will always be here, M'Lady," he said softly and glanced over his shoulder at Xavier.

With her power she tried to mind-probe Xavier again. All she found there was truth. She saw the picture of him and his father standing beneath a copse of trees. She watched the man become a red-scaled dragon and fly from the ground.

What was the saying: Keep your friends close and your enemies closer? That would definitely apply to keeping Xavier with her daily. Her confidence in her own abilities was growing constantly. She could take on Xavier if she had to and some how she knew she could win.

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Fifteen

The Seer focused all her thoughts on Xiuhcoatl and Aldmakeelia. She trembled with rage. She had lost to that silly Alicorno? It wasn't possible! Somehow she'd swayed Blacdrake away from this path. He now knew his heart, had chosen his stance. The course against Montrose and even worse, against her.

She shook her head and lifted her chin. She rushed to the lower chambers of her palace, to her magic tomes hidden beneath a glamour shield. There had to be some way of defeating the two of them. She'd find the answer and then return to Montrose. She'd need the king for a while longer but soon it would be time to do what should've been done long ago: kill the man and take over his throne.

After she destroyed the Unicorn and the Dragon so much power would fill her being that nothing could stop her. It would have been nice to have Draco sire an heir to her power but it wasn't necessary. There'd be other willing partners later.

She shoved the door to her lower lair and it opened with a groan. A flash of bright light illuminated the space and she summoned the scrolls forth. She unrolled the first parchment, scanning it for any answer to the riddle but saw nothing. She tossed it aside and opened a second one. Again there was no aid in the scrawlings. "There has to be something, some way," she growled throwing the second parchment to the floor.

A third and fourth roll also show nothing. Then she found it! It was so simple she threw her head back and the cackle split the room. Just make a fine powder of dust from Delinca vines. She had to gather a large basket of petals, a second basket of thorns, and crush them into a fine powder. This powder would then be sprinkled over Aldmakeelia and Xiuhcoatl. The poison would seep into their blood, the dust would be inhaled and they would die relatively painful deaths. It would make them immobile. They would appear dead but they would still feel every touch, every cut and then finally the end would come. Oh yes, Seer decided, Delinca powder would be the perfect punishment for the interlopers.

When they were down, she'd force Xavier to watch as she cut the heart out of his lifemate. Just before death, when the girl shifted into her unicorn form, the Seer would remove the horn. Then Xavier would die. His pain would be so great at watching Keely's demise it would be close to impossible to make it any worse. But, by the gods of Lyre, she'd find a way.

She replaced the scrolls and made her way back outside. The most poisonous Delinca vines grew in the cavern. She hadn't destroyed all of them when she and Vrono passed through the stone to the portal.

* * * *

King Montrose stormed into the great room. All around men jumped to attention. Serving girls bowed their heads and averted their gaze. He knew they all trembled at his rage. Good.

"The Seer has not returned but I know *they* are *here*," he roared. "Villages are giving them aid and refuge. These traitors must be destroyed."

What good was his power—the magic he'd gleaned from his artifacts—when he couldn't find his enemy and when his advisor seemed to have betrayed him? There must be a way of crushing the villagers to heel. There was no way to corrupt the magic of the unicorn. But the dragon, that was a different story. All he had to do was follow the secret magic he'd stumbled upon years ago. He grinned and pointed at a handful of serving women. "Come with me."

They exchanged frightened glances but did as he commanded. He led them trembling, into a private antechamber and shut the door. He smiled at their apprehension. "Not now. Right now you are going to do something for me."

None spoke. They waited patiently.

"Each of you will take large baskets, the largest you can carry, and fill them with fire toads."

Gasps echoed in the room. Fire toads were deadly when threatened; they secreted a type of slime that, while it painfully scorched on contact with flesh, it had the power to provide a shield of invisibility. Of course, few people knew this.

He cleared his throat and met each eye. "Fill the baskets completely. Bring them back and place them in the large golden tub in my second chamber. The tub must be filled to the rim. Do you understand?"

He glared into each face and they all met him with a nod.

"Fail me in this and you will suffer a fate that will leave you praying for death. Speak of this to anyone and I will have your tongues removed, from the neck up."

The women scattered to the corners of the chamber, shaking. He could tell they didn't know if they'd been dismissed or not. "Do it now!" They rushed from the room as if the hounds of Basilicus were on their tails.

He placed his crown on the small table near the wall. He didn't need it except for when the Seer was present. For now, it seemed as if she wasn't going to return. It was up to him.

He lit a torch, pressed a stone in the wall near his bed. A panel slid down into the floor. He stepped into the secret passage. The long, narrow tunnel led down into the bowels of his castle. The smell of old parchment and the sharp tang of smoke from the tallow torch filled the air. Here was where he kept all his private treasures. The tomes discovered during his early years. The highest prized golden disks, the glittering jewels extracted from the homes of the great houses of Grogan. The Alicorno possessed large stones in various shades of purple. The Draco had stones of fiery red and the Gryphineos with their flashing amber gems. Not even the Seer knew of this hoard, and it would stay that way. With the magic of his dragon scale he was able to shield the passageway from her knowledge.

He reached the old heavy door and pushed it open. The ancient thongs holding it to the wall creaked with strain but finally opened. He went in and jammed the torch into the wall slot then began to rifle through leather bound books lining the shelves on the far wall. He had known he needed large

amounts of the fire toads but the exact measurements were mists of memory in his mind.

He found the page and studied it. To be able to imitate the Dragon Flame, the fire breathing power of the dragon, he had to ingest the fire toad meat, with the skin and fire-producing glands intact. It would take several platters of meat. Would five baskets of toads be enough?

To use the cloaking spell the toads must be gutted and their blood and intestines collected in a bathing basin. The paper said he had to soak in the horrible concoction for several hours. The thought made him quake with revulsion.

But, reading further, he realized one thing even he hadn't remembered: not only would this give the power of invisibility, it also gave the power of flight and the ability to transform into one of the accursed beasts. This power was only available for the space of a few hours. He would need a large concentration of toads for the time and power he needed.

He could make it look as if the Dragon had caused the destruction and then the people of his world would refuse him aid. Montrose smirked in satisfaction. There was more than one way to beard a dragon.

* * * *

Xavier reclined in the grass at the edge of the village. Each eye he met was filled with distrust and even some held downright hatred. He couldn't blame them. How would he have felt if he'd waited a decade or more for the one who would save him, only to be betrayed?

Still, it grated on his last nerve, making his blood heat up and his hands itch.

Give them time, Xavier. We're all unsure of what you really are. I know that if you harm an innocent, then you're beyond redemption.

Keely was seated near a hut, at a table that had been shaped from the stump of a large tree. Her expression was softer than it had been. The look in her eyes offered him a glimmer of hope and helped to calm his burning ire. *I'm trying. I really am trying.*

I know.

She turned away and bent over some kind material. Her face scrunched as she studied it closely. Abhorson and two other men were seated near her.

It then dawned on him. She was no longer wearing that huge ratty shirt and sagging sweatpants. She was dressed in green leggings with brown leather shoes on her feet. A large brown shirt hung to her knees.

She stood up and walked across the village. He couldn't take his eyes off her. Her body posture had changed: she stood taller and strode with much more confidence. When she faced him, he almost laughed. She looked like a female Robin Hood. Errol Flynn had nothing on her costume.

Her hair had become lighter. How was that even possible? It had a ... a glow. It shined in the sunlight. A gentle breeze floated and a few strands caressed her cheek.

He imagined his fingers caressing her soft skin. His lips touching hers. The feel of her in his arms. He had to get his mind off that trail of thought. No matter how much he desired

her, they had to focus on saving the world. Superman and Wonder Woman?

She jerked up laughing and looked at him. For a minute her eyes sparkled and he wished he knew what was so amusing that it made her spirits lift that way.

I've decided I want to be Xena.

What?

When I spoke to my mother, I referred to myself as Wonder Woman. But now I think Xena is more appropriate.

He nodded. *My warrior princess. So I guess that would make me Hercules?*

Suddenly her lighthearted mood was gone. Her face contorted with pain and she doubled over with its weight. Xavier looked up as a man with blond hair and large white wings soared to the ground and landed before Keely. He bowed low and stood back up.

Xavier couldn't understand what was being said but from the look on Keely's face, it wasn't good. She still appeared to be in pain but when he tried to scan her mind he found it blocked.

What's wrong?

She didn't seem to hear so he stood and rushed toward her. "What's happened?"

"Montrose." She was shaking and her already pale face was ashen. Xavier was afraid she'd faint.

Forcing his way past the winged man, he took her in his arms. "What about Montrose?"

Tears streamed down her face. "The Quiblek. They're gone." Her body wracked with hard sobs. "Montrose's guard

knows about us. He found out they offered me aid and he destroyed them."

Her pain ripped through him and at the moment he knew he'd do anything to make sure she never suffered like this again. "He dies," Xavier growled between clenched jaws.

The man with the wings looked down at him, his eyes wide. Xavier met the stares of the rest of the group. "He dies," Xavier said again.

* * * *

Keely's heart felt as if it had shattered. Something wrong was in the air and a sudden blow doubled her over, stealing her breath and sucking her into a dark hole. She could see the carnage in her mind. The entire Quiblek village had been consumed in a raging fire. No one had escaped. For a heartbeat Keely suspected Xavier. But it couldn't have been him. He hadn't left the village since last night. When she wasn't able to watch him, different Brimborions had taken up the task.

The Seer must have been behind it. But how? Did she have the power of Dragon's Flame? The destruction had been so great. The entire race had been completely obliterated with the intensity of the fire. *Dragon's Flame*? How had Keely known it had been that kind of force?

She looked up into Xavier's eyes. *I have to know an honest answer. Is there another dragon?*

What?

Is there another dragon?

No. I would know if there was, wouldn't I?

Would he though? Would they? Were there others of their kind out there? The Seer had said they were the only survivors but the woman had lied before. *I need to try to summon my mother.*

Xavier nodded and stood to help her to her feet. Keely walked away from the small group.

"M'Lady?"

"I just need to be alone for a little while, Abhorson. Please." She walked away from the village and into the dark trees. A log lay on the ground and she sat on the rough, damp bark. "Mother, I need your help."

"I'm here, Aldmakeelia."

"If there were other Dracos, other Alicornos, Xavier and I could sense them, couldn't we?"

Her mother's shade nodded. "It's in you to sense others of your kind. You were able to sense the pain and loss of the poor Quibleks before you even knew of their destruction."

"And the Dracos?"

"Xiuhcoatl would know if they existed."

"Then, what had the power of the Dragon's Flame?"

Her mother shook her head sadly. "I don't know, my daughter. I don't know."

"The Seer," Keely said and felt anger surge. Keely knew she and Xavier hadn't seen the full measure of the woman's powers.

"I do not know. The Seer is very powerful in truth, but I don't think she has the power to become a true dragon, for even a short period of time."

"I don't know what we're going to do. I have no idea what we really are up against. With the total decimation of the Quiblek I'm afraid for anyone else who may side with us. Those who might have dared join our cause will think twice now. Even if they don't, I don't know if I can sacrifice innocent lives in a battle. What would that accomplish? This great fight to win Grogan and save the people, only there won't be anyone left to live in peace."

"You are a true leader and a great queen. Don't give up, my child. There may be some who are frightened, but for the most you will find people of the same mind as those out there. There is no wrong in dying for the right."

"I wish no lives had to be lost."

"I know. Death is a painful experience for everyone, but for ones like us, empaths, we feel it stronger."

"Empath? I only felt a little from the violence. I don't feel any emotions from the ones around me."

"You're still learning and developing. It will take time to bring your gifts forth. If we had been able to raise you..." Her mother's shoulders sagged and her sadness radiated in waves from her body.

"I know. I am learning. I will do my best to battle my inner demons so that I can lead the fight against our enemy."

"I am proud of you, Aldmakeelia. You are so strong, so beautiful and so wise."

"Thank you, Mother." Keely watched her mother's shade fade from view and closed her eyes. The transformation inside had been gradual but now that she'd found herself she wasn't going back. If she could only get a handle on her

wavering resolve. They needed to fight. War was violent and lives were lost; it hurt to think about it. But, if they didn't stop Montrose the people would continue to suffer not only the gradual death by starvation or beatings but now they could be completely obliterated.

Keely?

She turned in Xavier's direction. "I'm all right, I guess."

"No you're not." He sat down beside her and took her in his arms. "You're hurting, you're confused, and you're trying to decide where to turn next. You don't have to do this alone. I'm here by your side. It's my destiny, or whatever."

She wanted to lean into him, to lean on him, but the uncertainty of it all clutched at her.

Trust him, my daughter. Support him, guide him, and love him. All will be well if you only have faith in each other.

Thank you, Mother.

"Keely?"

She faced Xavier. "It's *our* destiny." She snuggled into his arms and allowed the comfort he'd offered.

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Sixteen

The Seer stopped dead in her tracks. Dragon power had been used. It rippled across the land and slammed into her mind with such force she almost fell backward. She closed her eyes and concentrated. It wasn't the Blacdrake. Who was it?

She focused to the point that tiny blood vessels in her nose broke and the crimson trail trickled down her face, dripping from her lower lip onto her robes. She couldn't sense the one who controlled such power. There wasn't another living member from the house of Draco. None except Blacdrake. Who had wielded such power? No matter how hard she tried she couldn't find the source.

For a moment she was unsure of which way to turn. The power shift didn't mean she should discontinue her plans. It was actually more imperative that she continue on her course. The sooner she gained the powers she coveted, the sooner she'd be able to face this sudden threat.

* * * *

King Montrose closed himself off in his private chambers and dropped to a seat under the window. He'd done it. He'd been able to imitate the dragon and all his powers. It was an exhilarating experience. The power coursing through his veins made him unstoppable, but now exhaustion seeped into his body. The rush from earlier was fading quickly. He raised his hand for fire to come but he merely produced a small puff of gray smoke then it completely died out.

No matter. He knew the secret. Now that he'd become so powerful he would find the Seer and make her pay for her failure. After so many years of cowering in fear that she would discover his secrets, he would eliminate the threat.

* * * *

Keely tossed on the ground next to Xavier. Fear and pain washed over her and filled his senses. His eyes flew open and he came alert for any threat. He sat close to her, pulled her into his arms and searched her mind for the cause of her distress.

She was standing motionless on the edge of the flames. The cries of the suffering filled the sky and pierced her heart. She was unable to save them. She was defeated, empty, and guilty for her inability to rescue them from their death. He projected himself beside her.

In the dream state he took her in his arms and poured his love and support into her. *"It wasn't your fault honey. You couldn't have stopped this. We will avenge their deaths."*

"But they died because they were going to follow me. I feel so helpless, Xavier. I feel as if I'm failing and I haven't even begun yet."

"You are not failing. It takes time to build an army, to plan your attack, to right all the wrongs that have occurred."

"You don't sound like Xavier any more."

"I don't quite feel like the old Xavier either. You've changed too, Keely. You've become so brave, so strong, and so confident. Don't lose that now. You're going to be able to

get this job done. We will fight Montrose, we will defeat him and we will rule, together. We will be fair, just, and worthy."

"I'm so afraid. I don't know if I can keep putting these people at risk. I know this is something we have to do, but it tears me up inside when I think of what is in store for them, not just those who side with us during the battle, but what will happen to them if we loose."

"We won't lose. I promise you, we won't."

He felt her slipping from the dream and he pulled away. Her eyes flittered opened and he gazed into their amethyst depths. "I won't let us lose."

She smiled at him and placed a hand to his cheek. "I know you won't." She leaned into his chest and sighed contentedly.

He would never disappoint her again. She had planted herself firmly into his heart and all he knew was the longing to be with her, to hold her, to support her and to protect her for the rest of their lives.

"I love you, Xiuhcoatl," she said in a faint voice as her breathing evened out and she drifted back into sleep.

It was the first time she'd ever used his birth name. The way she said it; the soft inflection of her voice warmed his entire being. "I love you too Aldmakeelia, my lifemate."

* * * *

Keely rolled over and stretched. Xavier was by her side. When the nightmare had begun to take hold of her, he'd come into her nightmare, brought comfort, replenished her confidence in herself and their shared destiny.

He was now sleeping soundly; she took the time to study him. He was almost perfect. His jaw strong and handsome, his body well shaped; not one of those body-builder types, but still well muscled with broad shoulders and strong arms that made her feel comforted, safe. When they were open, his eyes were a deep green that seemed to hold her captive in their gaze. His smile lit her soul, and at times she ached to feel his lips on hers, his hands on her ... she trailed off the thought.

"Go on," he urged.

Keely's body went tense and she met his gaze. There it was, right there, the look that made her felt like she would melt. His green eyes began to glow; the golden halo around the iris widened and took on the look of molten gold. His pupils became slits and desire shone bright. He gave her a broad smile.

He traced her lips with his finger. "Your lips are so soft."

A tremor raced through her. His voice was husky and it made her begin to smolder.

He slid his fingers through her hair. "Silky." He rose up and moved his face closer to hers. His hand slid down her cheek. "Like satin."

His face pressed closer and she felt his breath on her lips. His tongue glided along the outline and she shuddered. He pulled her close to his body and hers felt like it was on fire.

She laced her fingers in his hair and pressed as close to him as she could. She wanted to feel every part of him, body and soul.

"Aldmakeelia, I love you so much. I don't know when it happened but it's so deep baby, I need you. Now, tomorrow and always."

"And I you, Xiuhcoatl."

He released her and she watched as he gazed around them. He shook his head and stood. "Come with me."

She took the proffered hand and let him lead her from the village. The trees deepened the night but she wasn't afraid. He seemed to be able to sense exactly where they should go and she really believed he offered her safety.

He stopped suddenly and fell to the ground, pulling her gently along with him. With his body along side of hers, all thoughts of imminent war, of possible danger fled from her mind. He pressed her back into the soft earth and his hands trailed along the side of her body. "I need you, Keely."

The tunic slid up and his hand on her thigh slowly worked up toward her breasts. All the while his kisses made her body feel as if she were a bright torch.

Her breath caught and he pushed her top up higher revealing all of her to his hungry eyes. His hand burned as he slid it underneath the waistband of her leggings. Her body shivered with delighted anticipation of the pleasure to come.

His mouth blazed trails across her body, making her moan, stoking her flames of desire.

"I need you, Keely. Please?"

She couldn't answer, it was too hard to breathe. Yes, *Xavier*, she whispered into his mind.

His touch was gentle as he stripped her garments and then removed his own. His skin was hot against hers and as he slowly entered her. She sensed that she was truly loved.

You are mine. Now and forever Aldmakeelia. Forever. He supported himself on his hands as he looked down on her. *You are mine,* he said again. This time it was more of a question than a statement.

His needed reassurance stirred her heart. He needed to hear it and she would answer him truthfully. *Now and forever, Xihcoatl.*

He growled and captured her lips with his.

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Seventeen

The Seer crushed the final Delinca bloom into the powder and wrapped it tightly in a cloth bag made from a Metilama spider web. The joining between the Alicorno and Draco had already occurred; she had felt the surge in the positive energy that surrounded all of Grogan. *Damn.*

"Seer!" a voice boomed from the courtyard.

It was Montrose. *Damn.*

The door pounded and ripped open. "You have failed me, Seer. They are here. You guaranteed they wouldn't survive. Explain!"

She glanced down at the Delinca powder. "I won't let anything stop me," she swore and picked up the bag.

Rage was quickly chased away by uncertainty and then fear. Montrose, the great conqueror was afraid. He was rummaging through the sack gripped tightly in his hand but she couldn't tell what he was looking for. "I may spare you a painful end if you tell me how the dragon power was produced."

His face paled. "I found the secret. I used a spell to make it happen. A formula to give me the power."

"You found a spell?" she sneered. How was it she didn't know about this? "Tell me."

His eyes darted to the bag and back to her face. "I found it in an ancient scroll. I have the formula at my castle. I can show you."

"You will." She grabbed hold of him and chanted an incantation that took her from her keep to his private chambers. "The spell."

He nodded and opened the secret passageway. He was full of surprises. The things inside stunned her. She cast a studying glance in his direction. Montrose wasn't overly smart. How had he managed to conceal this from her? The little troll must have discovered some very powerful magic.

He would give it to her and then he would pay.

He moved from her side and pulled out a scroll from a shelf dug into the wall then handed it to her. "It's here."

She accepted the parchment and unrolled it. "Tell me true Montrose, how have you been able to seal your mind from me?"

His body trembled and his gaze swept the room. She didn't need to read his mind to know he was looking for an escape. Finally, he looked back at her. "It's the crown. It protects me from your intrusions."

"Why is it I didn't know of this room? How have you kept me out?"

"The scepter and the dragon scale."

Interesting. According to myth as long as he possessed the dragon scale and scepter anything he wished to be held invisible, anything he chose to close off, would be protected. Myth? No. She would claim them as her own. "Where are these objects now?"

"The crown is in my chamber. The dragon scale and the scepter are here." He opened a small chest and pulled out the

items in question. He passed them to her. His body trembled, his face chalky white.

"I should've killed you long ago." She paced away then materialized a dagger and spun to drive it into his chest.

Blood spewed from the wound and splattered across the wall. His eyes slowly glazed and he sagged in her arms. One threat to her power gone, it was time to rid herself of the others. She rolled up the scroll then returned it to its hiding place. She examined the scale. It's dark green surface reflected green, gold and blue in the torchlight. Her power was building. Soon nothing would keep her from conquering this world and the next.

She called for the Delinca packets. "Alicorno and Draco, now you will die."

* * * *

Sunlight dappled heat on his face and Xavier opened his eyes. Keely lay next to him, her body barely covered by the tunic he placed over her after they made love. *Love*. He couldn't tear his eyes from her. She was so peaceful. So beautiful. His.

A sound from the brush to his left made him jerk to his feet and he scanned the area. Someone was there, but whom? "Keely, wake up."

Her eyes flew open and she began to sit up while trying to keep the tunic in place. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure. Get dressed."

She nodded and pulled on the tunic then hunted out and pulled on her leggings. "What is it?" she asked again.

He still shook his head. He couldn't get a line on whatever it was but knew they weren't alone. "Can you sense anything?"

He didn't look back but he sensed her mind reaching out. *I don't know. Something ... it's not right, Xavier. We should go. We need to get back to the village.*

He nodded and reached for her hand to lead her back to the group.

The Seer stepped out from the brush to block his path. "It's time, Draco." She held a pouch in her hand.

He felt Keely's fear and moved to shield her. "That it is." He summoned his power and flame burst from his fingertips.

The Seer cackled and rose from the ground to float above their heads. Then she tossed a fine dust at him and the tiny particles coated his skin. Keely was sprinkled with the powder as well.

"Keely." He reached for her hand. "You've got to get us out of here."

Her face appeared almost frozen. The powder coated her porcelain skin. She nodded and reached for his hand but lines creased the corners of her eyes. It seemed to require all her strength to grasp his hand and pulled him close. He felt them begin to move and they were soon materializing in the village.

"You must hurry and leave!" he shouted to the Brimborions.

Abhorson's gaze flicked from him to Keely. His eyes widened as he grasped the situation. "Hurry. Hurry!" Finally the people in the village scrambled.

Bellerophon rushed from his hut. "What's happened?"

"I'm not sure." Xavier turned to Keely, but she didn't appear to be hearing. "Keely." She swayed slightly then her legs crumpled. Before anyone could reach out, she hit the ground with hard thump and lay still. He ran to her side and pulled her into his lap. Her eyes were open but she was barely breathing, her heartbeat was nearly impossible to detect.

Xavier searched her mind but found only darkness. "What the hell is happening?"

Bellerophon shook his head. "I don't know." He grabbed Keely from Xavier. "I'll take her to my people. Maybe our healers can figure out what happened."

Xavier tried to tamp down the rising anger. He hated to let her go, was afraid to see her leave. "I'll take her."

"I can travel faster. You need to get these people to safety. I'll come for you when I've gotten her secreted away."

Xavier paused for a moment more. Keely would want to know her friends were safe. "Fine. Go. I don't know how close the Seer is."

Bellerophon nodded and took to the sky.

Xavier turned back to the villagers. "You don't have time to take anything with you. Run!"

Abhorson gathered his people and led them from the village. Xavier fell in behind them casting continuous glances back, watching for the Seer. His mind was beginning to cloud and his body felt heavy but adrenaline pumped through him.

Ahead, a Brimborion woman carrying a child stumbled. He reached down and quickly pulled her upright. She was soon sprinting ahead of him.

He was having trouble keeping on his feet, the world seemed out of kilter. He threw one last look over his shoulder and then forward. The Seer was somewhere behind them. His senses couldn't respond no matter how hard he tried to force them.

His body slowed in responding to his orders for movement and heat rose. Was it flames of anger or was it fever? He slipped off the path and into a deep covering of brush. A stream lay a few steps ahead and he slipped into the cool water without stopping to remove his shoes. He sank beneath the surface letting the cooling water ease the all-consuming heat.

The water flowed over him in a gentle wash. He didn't feel quite as hot as before but his body was still slow and heavy. He had to keep awake. Where was Keely? What had happened? Had Bellerophon reached his village? Had the Pegusian healers been able to help Keely?

He had to get his body back under control.

* * * *

Keely felt like she was floating. Bellerophon held her close as his wings pumped behind them. What was happening? "Where is Xavier?" she asked. There was no reply and she realized she hadn't actually spoken the words. She tried to lift her arms but they wouldn't move. Why couldn't she move?

Air rushed over her body. She smelled the spicy scent of the redwood-like trees.

Bellerophon landed and her body jerked as he ran across the ground. Things darkened and it took a moment to realize she was no longer out-of-doors but inside a dark room and being placed on a soft mattress.

"What's happened to the Lady Aldmakeelia?" a woman's voice asked and soon she bent over Keely, lines etched across her face, the skin between her brows puckered with worry.

"I'm not sure. She and the Draco appeared in the village and they started yelling for people to get to safety. Suddenly the Lady collapsed. She hasn't moved since."

The woman lifted Keely's arm and held her wrist tight. Keely willed her hand to move, but nothing happened.

"I feel no heartbeat." The woman leaned down and pressed her ear against Keely's chest for a several moments. "There is no movement."

Tears gathered in the woman's eyes and Bellerophon pulled her close. "Torina. Not the Lady." His tears soon trekked down his cheeks to mingle with Torina's.

"But I'm alive," Keely tried to shout. How could they not know? Her heart *was* beating. She *was* breathing. Panic raced over her. "I'm not dead. I'm not dead!"

"Where is Blacdrake?" Torina asked.

"I promised to fetch him as soon as I had the Lady in safety."

"How can the prophecy be fulfilled now?" Torina sobbed. She dabbed at the tears on her cheeks. "You must go and find him."

Bellerophon nodded. "I'll return as soon as I can."

"Please Bellerophon. I'm not dead." Xavier could hear her calling out when she was in trouble. He'd know she wasn't dead. *Xavier, please I need you*, she sent out the plea and prayed he'd hear her.

The door opened and Keely sensed Torina was no longer in the room. It seemed as if hours passed before she returned with several other Pegusian women. They were sobbing too. Their sadness radiated to Keely.

"Please. I'm not dead."

"As soon as Blacdrake arrives we'll prepare for the burial."

At Torina's words Keely's blood turned to ice. Burial?

The women moved around her. She felt the chill as her clothing was removed and then the warmth as she was bathed. Sweet scents filled the air as they applied oils to her skin.

She was moved and jostled like a doll. Soon she was dressed in some fine silk material. Something touched her head and then she was looking at the room through a veil of lace. Torina lifted the lace and carefully pressed Keely's eyelids closed.

They were going to bury her alive!

Please Xavier, I need you now, she sent the pleading call out once more.

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Eighteen

Xavier panted hard. His body began to respond. Not much, but it was loosening up—some. He slipped down into the water and it took all his strength just to keep his head above the surface.

He felt a calling, a deep pain filling his mind. Somehow he managed to flop himself on the creek bank and with small handfuls of grass and earth, he pulled himself out. His strength waned and he dropped stomach-down on the ground.

His breathing seemed to be getting easier and he pushed upward with his arms. The muscles bunched and strained with his movement but he was finally able to make it not only off his stomach but onto his feet. He stood on weak legs and staggered in place trying to get his bearings. Pain. Fear. Loss. The emotions tugged him closer and closer to the path he'd veered from.

The Seer appeared from nowhere and loomed before him. "You're still live?"

He wavered but stared her in the face. "I am. But you won't be." He summoned the firepower.

"Even if you kill me you will fail. Keely is dead."

Xavier froze in place. Dead? His Keely. "You lie, witch. I'd know if she was dead."

She shrugged. "Search for yourself. The pain, the emptiness you feel can only mean her death."

He focused all his energy on Keely. He couldn't sense her. "What have you done?" he roared and fire erupted around them. "You bitch. You will die!" he shouted as he fed the flames with his rage.

"Will I?" The Seer laughed and disappeared.

Xavier continued to rage; the fire grew with each passing second.

"Lord Blacdrake," he heard someone calling above the crackling flames.

He began to pull back as he followed the voice that called him again and again. Finally, nothing but smoke and ash surrounded him.

The Pegusian gradually lighted to the ground. "I've come for you, Lord Blacdrake. The Lady," he choked and tears filled his eyes.

A black hole devoured Xavier's soul. Keely was gone. "I know," he said brokenly.

"I will take you to her."

Xavier nodded and allowed the Pegusian to transport him to a village in the slopes of green mountains. White houses with silver roofs dotted the landscape below.

When they landed, Bellerophon led him the house where Keely lay. Her body was still. Xavier didn't bother to try and hide the tears. "My Keely. Aldmakeelia, my lifemate. How can I go on without you by my side?"

Around him the Pegusians trickled from the room leaving him alone with the one woman he loved more than anything in this, or any other, world.

He knelt close beside her. She was dressed in a silver gown laced with amethyst ribbons. A fine lace veil barely concealed her beautiful face. Calla lilies and roses in shades of silver and purple were twisted together and formed into a long vine had been placed lovingly around her body. The air was filled with mingling sweet fragrances. There was a wave in her lovely hair that had been framed around her perfect face.

Xavier lifted the veil and placed a kiss on her cold lips. "I'll love you forever, my beautiful Aldmakeelia. The Seer will suffer greatly before I finally kill her. I will continue the fight. I will win the battle for you."

His tears dropped to her cheek and he gently brushed them away. His rage returned as he thought of the Seer and Montrose. They wouldn't live to see another day.

He stormed from the house and out into the streets. "I'm going after the Seer and then Montrose. Who will fight with me?"

A chorus of '*I will*' erupted into the sky.

"Let us go!"

Xavier ran down the street to the edge of the settlement and as he ran, he felt the transformation. His arms lengthened and broadened. His face stretched and the bones inside crackled painfully. His legs became heavier and his skin slowly shifted into black scales. When he opened his mouth, a deafening roar split the sky. His body lifted from the ground and he soared through the amethyst sky.

"We follow the Dragon," Bellerophon shouted and soon an army of winged Pegusians filled the sky to follow in his wake.

* * * *

Keely tried to force movement but nothing happened. What was wrong? Why had Xavier been unable to sense her life? His heart had appeared shattered and his rage consumed him. Even now she could feel what he thought, sense what he was doing. He was going to battle the king and his witch. Keely could see the sky filled with white winged bodies soaring all around Xavier's dragon form.

She sensed the people on the ground. They were chanting, shouting, and running to a large field. The war was coming and all she could do was lay here and wait to be buried. There had to be some way. There must be.

She felt a presence and the fragrance that signaled the arrival of her mother filled the room. "My daughter. You must fight this. You can do it, Aldmakeelia. It is in you to conquer this."

Keely strained to communicate with her mother but it wasn't working. She felt her mother's gentle touch. "Please, help me," she begged but no words came.

Her mother continued stroking her cheek. "Trust yourself, Aldmakeelia. Have faith in what you can do. You have the power."

Keely struggled against the invisible bonds that held her in their death like grip. Straining she poured her energy into breaking through. Slowly the heavy feeling began to subside. She blinked open her eyes. "Mother?" she whispered.

"I am here. Keep trying."

Keely finally found the strength to sit up on the bed. Her body trembled and her breath came in heavy bursts but she was up. "You knew I lived. Xavier..."

"You forget I am of the spirit land now."

The door creaked open and Keely faced the front. Torina stood inside the doorway and sagged heavily against the frame. "By the gods of Lyre," she screamed and appeared as if she would faint dead away at any second. "You live. Oh my Lady!"

Keely glanced at her mother and realized the shade had slipped away unnoticed. "I'm all right, Torina. You must help me get to the battlefield."

"But my Lady, you are so weak."

Keely stood and rested her weight on the headboard to get her balance. She drew herself to her full height and stiffened her spine. "Torina. I must get to Xavier," she commanded in her best empirical voice.

Torina studied her for a moment and then a small smile slipped across her lips. "Yes, my Lady."

Keely looked down at her burial attire. "I'm going to need something else to wear."

"Yes, my Lady," Torina dropped a small curtsy and ran out the door.

Keely heard the excited chatter from the streets and when the door opened a handful of women entered. They handed Keely another pair of leggings, these were a light blue color, and a shorter tunic in a deep navy. Navy blue slipper boots were handed to her and when Keely finished dressing, she flicked her hair over her shoulder. "I need to fix this."

A young woman nodded and stepped forward. She gently dragged an ivory comb through Keely's long tresses and began plaiting it into two long braids down her back then the braids were encircled around her head and fastened in place.

"Take me to the valley, and Blacdrake."

Torina once more curtsied and stepped outside. She took hold of Keely's hand and lifted her into the air. They soared over the trees and forested lands, past the desolate desert, and over a large mountain pass.

Below, shouts echoed off the hills and smoke billowed up from the ground. She felt pain, she felt death, she felt fear, and it overwhelmed her.

When Torina deposited her on the ground, Keely pushed her way through the fighting men and other creatures. Blood soaked the grass in places making it hard to find traction.

Ahead of her, through smoke and the sweat that had begun to flow down her forehead, Keely spotted Bellerophon.

"Bellerophon," she shouted and rushed to him.

"Bellerophon." He still didn't seem to hear her. She reached his side and slapped a hand on his shoulder.

He spun on her a wild look in his eyes a large sword lifted in the air. When he realized whom she was his sword dropped and his mouth gaped. He blinked several times in disbelief.

"My ... Lady?"

She nodded and gently touched his hand for conformation.

"Where is Xavier?"

His senses finally returned. He looked out over the chaos.

"I don't know, my Lady. We were attacked and scattered. I'm not sure where he disappeared to."

She nodded and ran from him, searching the fight for Xavier. As she passed by the injured, she paused long enough to work her healing magic on them before rushing on. "Xavier," she screamed the telepathic message.

There was no reply. A horrible sense of dread and death slammed into her body. Where was Xavier?

* * * *

As the Seer soaked in the vile concoction described in the scroll and ate the disgusting platter of meat she kept watch in the gazing crystal. Soon she'd have the power she needed and would swoop into the battle. She'd destroy them all with her fiery breath. She'd cloak herself as she charged in for the kill. "No, it's not possible," the Seer screamed when she saw Keely running across the battlefield. "How does she still live?" Her shouts reverberated through the chamber and the crystal shook violently.

Had she gained enough to be able to use the dragon power against the Dragon and the accursed Unicorn? It had better be enough. There was no more time. She shoved from the blood filled tub and grabbed for her robes.

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Nineteen

Xavier's great wings beat the air as he dipped low over the enemy encampment. He belched white-hot flames that decimated tents and weapons, and scattered the soldiers.

He pulled up into the sky, climbing higher and higher. Then he dove straight down, gaining momentum and spraying another shower of flame over the army.

Soldiers darted from the protection of the trees to fire arrows at him. He roared a laugh at their futile attempts to stop him. Didn't they know his scales were impregnable?

A bolt jarred into his body. Shock mingled with the pain that sliced its way through his chest. He was soon hurtling to the ground. He landed with such force that the air was slammed from his lungs. The pain sent shock waves all the way to his talons. He lay momentarily stunned before looking skyward. A large black dragon landed in front of him and began stalking closer. Its scaled lips pulled back in a sneer revealing large pointed teeth with elongated canines. It had bright red eyes and razor thin claws. Another dragon? It wasn't possible.

The great jaws opened and he was showered with coals of flame. The belched flames enveloped him in a scorching embrace. The heat licked its way up, over and through his body.

He trembled as his skin replaced the scales; he dragged his way from the massive claws as the great dragon lifted its

foot and brought it back to earth. It landed just shy of his head with such force that the ground beneath him rocked.

Where the hell had it come from?

A chorus of screeching voices filled the air and Xavier looked up to find a mass of winged creatures soaring overhead. The color, the shape of their bodies all indicated they weren't the Pegusians. Who were they? Were they friend or foe?

One swooped down and caught him up in its massive paws. The large beak resembled that of an eagle on steroids. The eagle wings beat and the lion's paws held him tight. It was a Gryphineos. But that still didn't answer his question: friend or foe?

The creature landed and placed Xavier a distance away before it shifted into the form of a man. Xavier was weak from the fiery exchange with the dragon and he didn't know if he had the strength to do battle so soon. His fists clenched at his sides. If he had to he could.

The strange man bent into a deep bow. "My Lord Blacdrake. I and all in my house serve you and the Lady Alicorno."

Some of the tension seeped from Xavier. "I'm glad to have you. We will need all the help we can get."

The man stood and looked into Xavier's eyes. "I've not seen the Lady."

Xavier's pain flashed fresh. "The Lady is dead. The Seer murdered her."

The Gryphineos didn't try to mask his shock. "But what of the prophecy?"

"We will still overthrow the evil Montrose and this day will see the death of the Seer," Xavier roared.

"Then we're off." The Gryphineo took a running leap to the sky. His transformation back into the gryphon was seamless and apparently pain free.

Xavier charged skyward himself and shifted back into his dragon form. This battle would end soon.

* * * *

Keely rushed through the army, healing the injured as quickly as she could reach them. The pounding of great hooves could be heard and she looked up to find human headed centaurs galloping into the fray.

Behind her the battle cries split the sky and she spun around to find great two legged creatures rushing toward her people.

These creatures struck some memory, but she couldn't place it. The beasts had great trunks, with strong muscular human-like legs. Their heads were massive and covered with hair. Huge tusks protruded from massive jaws in their snouts. She met the dead eyes of one of the beasts. It slammed through the fighting men and bolted straight for her.

As the monster barreled forward she sidestepped and searched for some shelter. She would never be able to outrun the monstrosity. Not in human form anyway. She ran and forced her transformation. Four sleek white legs carried her swiftly from the monster and up a large slope. She heard a low growl and looked back over her shoulder in time to see

the creature collapse to the ground, a large axe protruding from its head.

A centaur bowed low then galloped off to rejoin his troop. Overhead, gold and brown gryphons glided on wind currents. The sound of rushing winds filled the air as wings propelled the majestic beasts through the sky. The creatures cast shadows over the great stone bipedal dinalopes.

More soldiers spilled out of the surrounding trees. As the men fell, blood stained the ground beneath them. Where was Montrose getting his army? It seemed never ending.

Gryphons swooped. Their great paws spread wide, the razor-sharp claws catching the sun as they extended from their sheaths and grabbed soldier after soldier, then tossed them from great heights. The creatures' shrieks drowned out the cries of the men as they hurdled to the ground.

Destruction was all around as Keely crested the hill and looked onto the battlefield below. So many lives were lost. The pain and smell of death filled her every pore. If only there had been a way to end it without this senseless slaughter.

The ground shook and she looked up to find a dragon standing before her. Its bright red eyes bore into her soul and she collapsed to the ground from the pain. She shook off the shards of agony beating her limbs. Keely's unicorn self rose to stand face to face with the great dragon.

Sunlight glinted off her silver horn. Its reflection danced in the dragon's eyes. *Xavier*, her mind cried before she lowered her head and plunged forward burying her horn deep into the massive creature's chest between three diamond-shaped scales.

A scream of pain ripped through the air and in her human form she was flung from the body. Fire flashed and the dragon's body exploded in flame. The smell of burning flesh filled the air, making her stomach churn.

Her body ached in its every pore. She searched to her depths but couldn't find the strength to stand. She dragged her way to a small tree and used it to pull up onto her feet. She leaned against the sapling for support and vomited. Bones cracked and pain cut into her once again. Keely dropped on hands and knees to the stony ground.

The battle would soon be over. She knew it as she knew she'd killed the dragon. Who had it been? Xavier was the only Draco, was it he? No, it couldn't have been. Through blurry eyes she studied the ash and scorch marks on the ground and somehow sensed the answer. It was the Seer. She'd been the one in charge of Montrose's army.

Once the opposing forces realized their leader was dead they would quickly surrender.

So much had been lost. Now the pain could come and, with it, the tears she'd tried for so long to hold at bay. Tonight there would be many to heal and bury, and cry for. By morning the body count would be well in the thousands. Foolish greed and pride. An entire world almost destroyed for the sake of fleeting power. The insanity of it all made her ill. Why would anyone be so willing to sacrifice their entire world just to claim the crown for the short span of life?

A large black dragon swooped to the ground and shifted to human form. Soon she was wrapped tightly in Xavier's arms.

He brushed away the hair from her eyes. "You're alive! Have you been hurt?"

She pulled away to look closely at him. "Everything hurts, Xavier. My body, my heart, my soul. I've never felt such pain. How senseless to sacrifice so many. Why did those men keep fighting?" She collapsed against his chest. "The killing. The pain each soldier felt before they died, I felt. The anguish tore me apart. Oh god," she cried and jumped behind the tree to be sick again.

"I felt the pain too," he said softly. "I'm damn sorry it had to be this way. It's going to take a long time to rebuild, but Grogan will move forward. This world is safe and will be better than the one that has passed. This is the dawn of a new day and together we'll make sure this never happens again."

She wiped the corners of her mouth. Then commanded a large flask of water appear. She rinsed out her mouth several times and when he tore a piece of his shirt she soaked it and washed her face. "A new day and a new life," she agreed and when he reached for her, she didn't resist but allowed him to support her.

He scooped her into his arms and she nestled against his chest. It hurt to move, it hurt to breathe, but around them the sounds of the battle were slowly dying. Before long her people would need her to heal their injuries. If only she could heal her own hurt. She could heal the physical pain of course, but the mental anguish would last forever.

"I'll be here with you, Keely. Lean on me," Xavier said softly and pressed a kiss on the top of her head.

Dragon's Angel
by Donica Covey

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Twenty

Keely leaned into the soft lush grass under a large tree just outside of the Pegusian town. Montrose had never been found but Keely was certain he was gone for good. Most of his army had surrendered and there were still regiments trickling in to lay down their arms.

There had been far too many deaths. Over five thousand in the battle alone. That didn't include the village of Quibleks who had been massacred.

She reached up to wipe away the tear that slid down her cheek. The number of injured had been overwhelming. She felt her strength waning with each one she healed.

"Keely."

She looked up. Xavier dropped to the ground next to her and took her hand in his. "How are you feeling?"

She inhaled a long breath and let it out slowly. "I'm tired, still weak, but I think I'm better."

He scooted closer and pulled her into his lap. "It's going to take a while for life to get back to normal." He slid a finger under her chin and tilted her face up to his. "You're very pale. You feel too thin. You've got to take better care of yourself, Keely. These people depend on you now. I'm depending on you."

"Don't you mean they are depending on us?"

He kissed her. "Us then." He kept her close to his chest. "We've got some decisions to make."

"Some is putting it mildly. Where do we start?"

"Us. I want you to be my wife. I don't know what their weddings are like here but you're mine. I want it official."

"I want that too. But what of the bigger picture? The people need food, they need shelter."

"If we are going to be the new rulers, the king and queen or whatever, we're going to start out right. With you as my wife."

He was adamant, and she adored it. "All right, we find out what the official marriage thing is here. Then we ... Oh Xavier," she jerked away from him. "A wedding."

* * * *

He had been expecting happiness but instead he felt sadness, confusion and loss. "What's the matter, baby?"

She sighed. "My parents. I always imagined them at my wedding but if we're married here, then we can't, I mean they can't..."

His mother's image danced in his mind. If she were robbed of his joy she'd be crushed. She was probably out of her mind with worry now. "My mother's probably crazy right now. I just disappeared off the planet. Well, so to speak."

Keely nodded. "My mom and dad. All my friends, they must be worried sick." She sagged against his chest and he felt her tears soak his shirt. "We'll never see them again."

His heart ached at the thought. "My mother's an amazing woman. I really want to see her, to let her know I'm all right. That I'm alive, that I'm happy and I've finally found the one woman made for me."

"We can't. There's no way back. If we leave we can't ever come back."

He closed his eyes. "There has to be a way. We're these all-powerful beings so why the hell can't we do this?"

"I don't know, Xavier."

"I just had a thought. We've established that the Seer was a liar. She said we couldn't travel back and forth. Maybe that wasn't the truth either."

Keely still hadn't raised her head. "My mother said the same thing though. She said if I chose to leave, to turn my back on our world that I could never return."

"But we didn't turn our backs. We stayed. We fought. We won. Surely that means something." Did it? God he hoped so. "We'll find a way. I promise."

She still wasn't convinced. She pulled away from him and pushed to her feet. He watched her walk away, her shoulders slumped, sadness hanging over her like a veil.

What could he say? What could he do?

"Xihcoatl."

He turned in the direction of the voice. A woman's shade stood in front of him. Her dark hair was gathered into a knot under a red net. Her green eyes filled with moisture.

Her appearance stirred a memory in his heart. The woman from his dreams. Was it possible? "Mother?"

She nodded and stretched out her arms to him. "Oh my son." She cried and wrapped him in a warm embrace. "I'm so proud of you." She leaned back and studied him close. "So strong. So wise. So handsome. My son." Tears fell to the ground.

"Oh mother, I've wondered about you. I've wanted to see you."

"I couldn't come to you before, but now I can see you one last time before I must leave."

"Leave?"

"We must move on, my son."

He turned to face his father. "Move on," sadness tinged his voice. "I've only just met you both and now I've got to lose you again."

"It's the way of life. One generation leaves so another can live. Fulfill the destiny that has been written for them."

"I know. It's just so unfair."

"We'll always be watching over you." His father looked off in the Keely's direction. "We'll be watching over your family. Our grandchildren. Their grandchildren and their grandchildren."

Xavier scrubbed a hand down his face. His family. His children. "I'll miss you. There is so much I need to learn."

"You'll learn it. Together you and Aldmakeelia will learn it. Take care of each other. Always put her needs above your own. Follow your heart. It will not lead you astray."

"Good bye, my son." His mother stepped forward and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

A soft gentle breeze caressed his skin and when he looked up his parents were gone. Profound loss filled him and was quickly washed away by a peaceful understanding. While they were forever gone from his reach, they would always remain in his heart.

* * * *

Keely brushed the tears away from her eyes. This world had become hers. She'd even managed to go all this time without thinking of her parents or her friends. Now that she did, the pain was so deep. She wanted to go home, if only long enough to tell them goodbye.

"Aldmakeelia." Her mother stood beneath the trees, sunlight dappled on her face.

"Mother," Keely choked.

Her mother came to her and hugged her close. "I know your pain. I know your struggles."

"I miss them so much, Mother. I just want to say goodbye. I want them to know I'm alive and that I'm all right."

"I know, my darling daughter. I know."

"I can go to them. I know I have the power to open the portal but if I go I can never come back."

"Do you truly feel this is your world?"

Keely nodded and looked into her mother's eyes.

A man's voice floated on the breeze. "Aldmakeelia."

Keely and her mother faced the man who was walking up to join them. He was familiar. It suddenly struck her. "You're my father."

"Yes. You are every bit as beautiful as your mother. You have her strength. Her gentle spirit. I'm so proud of you. You've won the day and saved the world. You're now set on the path that you were always destined to walk. You will be a kind queen. You'll be a strong and loving wife and mother."

Keely froze. "Wife and mother." She loved Xavier. She couldn't wait to be his wife but their wedding should be a

happy occasion but the pain she felt right now would never allow that to happen.

"You're home, Aldmakeelia," her mother began then she glanced at her father. "I know you aren't happy. If you could go back, what would you do? Would you return to Grogan?"

Keely stood in silence. This was really her world. This was her home. She loved her mom and dad, loved and missed her friends, but in her heart she knew this was where she belonged. "Yes. I just want to say goodbye."

Her mother nodded. "Go back to the portal. Take Xiuhcoatl with you so that he may say goodbye to the mother who raised him. You know how to open it?"

Keely nodded. "I pass my hand in front of the stones and chant, 'exzues ma dialamta'."

"That's correct. You will be able to see the earth world through the mist. Then all you do is step through."

Keely nodded. "But if I leave..."

"You have done your duty. You've done all that was foretold. You are one with the people of this world. You will be allowed to return. You must close the portal behind you and if you fail to return within exactly twenty-four hours then the portal will remain closed."

Keely nodded. She was elated at the prospect of seeing her family again. Twenty-four hours didn't allow much time for goodbyes, but it was more than she'd had before.

"Thank you, Mother, I'll see you again soon."

Her mother shook her head. "No, Aldmakeelia. I've come to tell you goodbye as well."

"What?" She gazed one parent to the other and back again. "I don't understand."

"We've done our duty. Now it's time for us to move on."

"But what if I need your guidance?" She cast her eyes upon her father. "I've only just seen you and now you're going away?"

"You are a strong woman, an intelligent woman. A kind and just leader. You don't need our guidance. Trust your heart, lean on Xihcoatl and let him lean on you. Support each other. Love each other. Cherish each other and always be patient with each other."

Keely was crying again, but this time for the permanent loss of the parents she only just met and would never see again. "I love you both. Thank you Mother for your help during this."

Her mother smiled. "You didn't need me, Daughter. You had your heart to lead you."

"I love you."

"We love you." Their words carried on the wind but they had disappeared from sight.

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Twenty One

Keely stood in front of the stone wall and reached for Xavier's hand. "Are you sure you want to do this?" Was she asking him or herself?

He gave a reassuring squeeze. "I'm sure. I need to see my mother one last time."

Keely tried to shore up against the pain she felt. "Then let's go." She lifted her hand in front of the stone. "Exzues ma dialamta." The stone began to shimmer and she could see the earth world though the swirling mists. She looked up into his eyes. "Are you still sure?"

He nodded. "I'm ready. Are you?"

She swallowed hard and nodded. Side by side they stepped out onto the grass of the park. A warm breeze ruffled the flowers on the cherry trees ringing the park around them. "We need to know exactly what time we stepped through."

He scanned the area. A couple sat on a bench, their backs to Xavier and Keely. He led her by the hand over to the bench. "Excuse me, can you tell me the time?"

Keely watched the couple stare at her and then Xavier. Keely realized how out of this world they must look. "The time please? We're late for a party."

The man nodded. "Eleven thirty."

"Thanks."

They stepped away from the bench and Xavier's arms stole around her waist. "Your place or mine?" he asked her with a saucy grin.

"I guess we should start with yours. My parents live a good distance away."

"It's not going to be easy."

"I know."

They didn't speak again until they were standing in front of Xavier's home. The Blake home. He paused and seemed to have trouble gathering his thoughts. "Xavier?"

* * * *

Xavier took a deep breath then led Keely up the steps. What was he going to say to his mother? Something witty like 'Hey Mom, guess what? I'm from another world and I'm actually headed back. So good luck and good-bye.' "What do I say?"

Keely touched his hand. "Say what your heart tells you to say."

It sounded so simple. Did Keely realize his mother would be completely alone now? What would Aramantha Blake do without her son? His resolve wavered but he felt Keely's strength seep inside him. He reached out and rang the bell.

For long moments no one came. Worry suffused him; had his mother become so ill, so depressed since he vanished that she'd had some kind of attack or stroke? He banged on the door.

It creaked open and a tuxedo-clad butler stepped from behind it. "Mr. Blake!" the man exclaimed and Xavier was grabbed tight and pulled inside. "We've missed you. What happened?" The man collected himself and stepped back. "Your mother will be thrilled."

"Where is she? Is she all right?"

The man shook his head. "She's been terribly distraught over your disappearance. She's in her room."

Xavier pulled Keely by the hand and led her up the steps. He took them two at a time and he could feel Keely struggling to keep up. "I'm sorry." He tried to force himself to slow down but it didn't seem possible. He stopped outside his mother's room and rapped on the door.

She didn't answer right away and he knocked a little louder. He heard sounds coming from inside the room and finally her voice called out, "Come in."

Xavier opened the door and stepped inside. "Mother?"

She paled and let out a cry, then she leapt from the bed and grabbed him close. "Oh my baby. My son. Oh Xavier," she wailed and covered him with kisses. "Where've you been? Oh, my son's come home."

He squeezed her close. "I've missed you."

"Three months. For three months I've searched for you. For three months I've worried, prayed, cried and pleaded. Where have you been?"

Where indeed? "Mother, I've been ... away. I've only come to see you one, umm," he cleared his throat harshly, "one last time. I've got to go away again."

She pulled back in what appeared to be a combination of shock and horror. "Away? Go? No Xavier, I won't allow it. You can't go away."

Again Xavier cleared his throat. "Mother, darling, I have to go. There are people who need me. Desperately they need me. It's where I belong."

His mother studied him closely and he saw the moment when she spotted Keely. "Who is this? Why are you dressed like that? Where have you been? Where are you going?"

The rapid-fire of questions was laced with uncertainty and just a trace of panic. "One question at a time, dear. This," he reached and pulled Keely to his side, "is Keely. She's my life ... going to be my wife. We've been to ... our home. Our birthplace. We are dressed like this because..." Yeah, why are you dressed like some performer in a renaissance fair?

You can do this Xavier, listen to your heart, Keely whispered in his mind.

"Mother, you need to sit down. This is going to take a lot of explaining and we don't have much time."

Aramantha leaned on his arm for support as he guided her to the bed.

"Mother, the family who gave me up. I've found them."

She made a sharp, pained intake of breath. "Found them?"

"Yes. Keely and I were both from the same place. Our parents gave us up to..."

"To protect you?"

He stared at his mother open mouthed. "How did you know?"

"I didn't. What's this all about?"

"Mother, my world isn't here. It's far away and I've got to go back there. I've only come to let you know that I'm alive, well, happy and in love with the perfect woman."

"When will you come back to see me?"

It was killing him, he knew it would destroy his mother. How could he do this to her. He felt the weight of Keely's

gentle hand and found the courage to answer. "I'm not coming back."

"What?" his mother wailed and threw herself into his chest. "Your father's gone and now you're leaving. I'm going to be alone, Xavier." She stopped and took a deep breath. Her composure was a hard fight but she finally seemed to be getting hold of it. "You are a grown man. I understand that. I know you've found someone whom you think will be the perfect wife. But how can she be so perfect if she's taking you away from your home? And you'll never return? What nonsense is this?" She gave Keely a hard, dagger filled look.

Keely tensed beside him and Xavier straightened. "Keely has not brainwashed me. She's not part of a cult who is going to see my end. She and I are just different now. We've found a world where we belong. We've got to go back to that world."

"I don't understand. I just don't understand."

"I doubt you ever will, Mother. Not completely. You know I've struggled with my life. That I've felt disconnected, like I was lost in a world where I didn't belong."

His mother's nod was barely perceptible.

"I know why, now. I've found my place. My home. My world. Keely and I are going back but we have to stay away. There can be no phone calls, no letters, no emails."

"But why?"

"I don't know how to make you see." He sat and gathered her hands in his. "I'm ... we're from another world. One called Grogan. In this world I'm going to be a king. This world, the people in it, they need me."

His mother stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "Going away? Yes I see."

He almost laughed. "No, I've not lost my mind. Keely?"

She nodded and moved over to the bed to reach for his mother's hands. She recoiled from the touch and cast another harsh look at Keely.

Xavier shrugged and lifted his hands into the air. He formed a small ball of flame and rolled it from hand to hand. "I'm a dragon."

Aramantha choked and Keely reached out to support her sagging frame. "Merely an illusion," Aramantha whispered.

Xavier sighed. "Mother, I'm a dragon." He reached for her and focused his energy on shifting just his hand into the dragon's claw.

"My God." Aramantha pressed into her pillow. "The medicine. The doctor has me on a medicine that is obviously too strong. Hallucinations. Nightmares."

Xavier exchanged a worried look with Keely. He turned back to his mother's pale face then sat down on the edge of the bed and took her frail hand in his. He'd never noticed how fragile she really was. "Mother, I wish I could help you understand."

"I wish my son were truly here," Aramantha choked and sobbed.

"How do I convince you it's not a dream?" he asked more of himself than of his mother.

Xavier, I'm so sorry, Keely whispered in his head.

He nodded at Keely and placed his mother's hand to his lips. "I love you, dear, and I'm going to miss you. I wish we

could stay but that isn't the path destiny laid out for us. I'll think of you always."

He shifted on the mattress and took her in his arms. "I'll never forget everything you and father did for me. The home, the love, the guidance, all of it. I pray you'll be well and there will be times we'll both feel as if our hearts are breaking but we must go on." He pressed a kiss into her hair and pushed up from the bed.

Aramantha reached for him, sobs wracking her thin frame. "Please don't leave me. Come back."

"If I could stay I would but..." He hated that he was breaking her heart. Why did it have to be so hard? He should be able to do his duty and be able to see his mother. Even if they only exchanged letters. "I am sorry. But I've got to go. We still have to see Keely's family and tell them goodbye."

"But why must you leave so soon? You've only just arrived."

"That's the way it is. We only have twenty-four hours to say our goodbyes."

He straightened and forced the stiffness in his spine. He had to be strong. If he fell apart now, if he wavered, he may never be able to go back. Grogan would need strong guiding hands to rebuild it. There were still small factions of Montrose's people that flared up, though it was coming less frequently. He belonged by Keely's side and they belonged in their world.

He looked down at his mother one last time. "Goodbye."

She reached for him and he had to compel the pivot on his heel and the stiff steps to the bedroom door. If he paused

now he wouldn't have the strength to leave. Each step was hard fought as he headed for the door. Leaving this home, leaving his mother was going to be the hardest task he'd encountered yet.

Keely stepped beside him, took his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

He couldn't look at her, but he nodded. They stepped from the bedroom and he closed the door behind them.

Aramantha's crying tore at him but he didn't stop.

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Twenty Two

Xavier was silent as they left the house. His pain was deep but his resolve hadn't wavered. This was the only way, she could feel it, could read it in his mind.

He opened a garage door and for a moment the sheer number of cars inside dazzled Keely. How could anyone drive so many vehicles?

"I just chose one for the day and one for the night," Xavier tried to joke but his tone came out flat.

"We've got a long ride ahead of us. My parent's farm is a bit away, like five hours."

Five hours. She felt panic. Ten hours for the drive there and back, they'd just spent four hours with Mrs. Blake. So already almost fourteen hours were accounted for. Keely still had time to spend with her family assuring her she was fine and happy but her life wasn't here any longer. How long would it take to break her mother's heart?

Xavier opened a panel and punched in some sort of code on a door. It opened and he selected a set of keys and moved to a vintage mustang.

He opened her door and then went to his side. The engine roared to life and they pulled out into the early morning. Dread washed over her as they merged onto the highway and sped south.

"I know it's going to be hard, Keely." He reached and took her hand.

"It's the right thing. What we're supposed to do, and it hurts so I guess that means it's right."

He offered her a halfhearted grin. "I've never been good at being good. It was always more fun to be a little naughty."

"The thought of never seeing them again..." She couldn't speak past the lump in her throat. A tear trickled down her cheek.

"I know. I'd always thought I'd find the perfect woman, settle down in the house with Mother, run the business and raise a bunch of kids with her bouncing them around the house, spoiling them rotten and making it hard for us to keep the kids in line."

"You make it sound so appealing," Keely chuckled softly. "I imagined my wedding, my father walking me down the aisle, giving me away. Then my husband and I would buy a little piece of land down near the farm and start our own ranch raising beef, maybe a few hogs and chickens. We'd have a large garden and I'd spend all summer tending to the garden, canning, cooking, cleaning and watching as my husband taught our kids how to ride horses and ATVs. After the kids went to bed we would sit on a porch swing and star up at the stars twinkling in the deep velvet night sky."

He sighed and she saw the images dancing in Xavier's mind. "I guess we'd be in completely different worlds. I can't see myself working a farm."

"I can't see you there, either," Keely admitted sadly.

"Which exit?"

She brushed at a tear. "Next one. Go right and stay in the left lane."

He was quiet once more and she leaned her back into her seat. Her eyes closed and she imagined her parents' reaction to the news. Her father would probably want to shoot Xavier, because it was his fault she'd been missing. That was one hurdle Keely would have to leap over.

Then there would be the disbelief, the argument, the pain, and finally the goodbye.

Xavier had been so strong, could she find that same strength?

I'll be here to give it to you as you gave it to me.

She inhaled a ragged breath. Her chest constricted painfully. Already it hurt and she hadn't even seen her family. Xavier was trying to offer comfort and she wanted to soak it in, but it was hard.

She had always been so sure that one day she'd find a strong man to love her and they'd spend a life working together. They'd set up house close to her family and share Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthdays and anniversaries. The happily ever after every little girl dreamed of.

She was getting part of that. A man she adored and a world that needed her. Soon would be a family of her own to raise. She hated this. She deserved a happily ever after dammit! Why did it have to be so black and white? Why couldn't they have it both ways? She scooted across the seat and stared out the window as the miles passed by.

The rest of the drive the only communication between her and Xavier was directions to the farm. When they pulled into the drive in front of the large stone house where she'd grown up, panic washed over her.

It was still early in the day and life seemed normal. That wasn't going to last long. A dog darted under the car and Xavier slammed on the brakes. "I didn't hit it, did I?"

Keely smiled. "LB has a thing for tires but she's a smart dog. She knows when to dodge."

He nodded and parked the car. "Ready?"

"No."

"We've got to do it. Our time's running out."

"I know."

Jake Morgan's tractor rolled up and Keely jumped from the car. "Daddy!"

"Baby! Where've you been? What happened to you?" He cut his eyes toward Xavier. "Who the hell is that?"

"Daddy, this is Xavier. He's my fiancé."

"What?" her father roared. "Who is he?"

Keely started again. "He's a good man, Daddy. He's strong, intelligent, and so brave. And he makes me very happy."

Her father's finger trailed under her chin and lifted her face to his. He stared deep into her eyes. "Right. I can see how happy you are," sarcasm laced his words. He glared at Xavier again. "We've been worried sick about you. Police have searched for you. Even the FBI popped in and did some investigating. This man was the last one seen around you. Then the both of you disappeared. I want to know what in hell happened."

"I know you've been worried. I'm sorry. I'll explain it all to you and Momma." She pulled back. "Where is she?"

"Up at the garden. You better get up there and let her know you're alive." His eyes jerked back to Xavier. "You go. We're going to have a little talk."

"Daddy, please be nice. Xavier is wonderful. He saved my life."

"What?"

"I'll explain to you both in a few minutes. I'll be back." She turned and ran to the old barn behind which the large garden was fenced. The gate stood partially open. She found her mother bent over a large head of cabbage. "They look healthy this year."

Jilly Morgan jerked up in shock. "Keely? My Keely?" She shouted and grabbed Keely up in a warm embrace. "Where have you been? What happened to you? Are you all right? You're thin. Oh my." Tears streaked down her cheeks as she pulled back to study Keely and then she squeezed her close again.

Keely hugged her mother back. "I'm fine, Momma. I need to talk to you and Daddy. It's very important."

"Oh Keely! I've been so worried. So scared. You have no idea what thoughts raced through my head. The police and your friends all said the last time anyone saw you, you were with some man."

"Xavier."

Jilly's eyebrow lifted. "Xavier?"

Keely nodded. "Yes. He's so wonderful. We're going to be married."

Her mother's face was quickly masked with shock. "Married? To the man who kidnapped you? Oh Keely! It's

that, oh what's that syndrome called, when you fall in love with your kidnapper?"

"He didn't kidnap me. He actually rescued me from the man who did."

"I knew you were abducted. Oh my baby, did he hurt you?"

Keely wasn't sure how to answer the question. If she said yes it would only bring her mom more pain. If she lied it would be even harder. One look in her mother's eyes answered the question for her. "No, Momma. He didn't hurt me."

Jilly scanned her once more. "You've seen Daddy?"

Keely nodded. "I've got to talk to both of you. It's very important and I don't have much time. Please come with me."

"Not much time? What are you talking about?"

"I'll explain it all. Just come to the house with me."

Jilly nodded and took Keely's arm.

* * * *

Xavier watched Keely run up a weed-grown gravel path. He felt the man's anger and he wasn't sure what to say or do. "Mr. Morgan."

Jake studied him. "What have you done to my daughter?"

"I fell in love with her."

The older man didn't say a word. His glance didn't change and the anger in his eyes was just as strong.

"I'd never hurt her." He felt the guilty flush creep up his neck as he remembered his attack on her. His hands around her slender neck as he tried to squeeze the life from her. He

regretted that whenever he thought of it. Keely was his lover, his life, and he would never harm her again.

"I don't believe you, boy. I can see it in your eyes, you're lying."

"I love her."

"It's not as simple as that. I know a man who claimed to love his wife, but he beat her whenever the hair touched him."

Xavier exploded. "You think I'd do that Keely? I made one mistake and I've got to live with it forever but I swear to you no one will ever, ever touch her in anger again. Never. I'd kill any man who even thought of it."

Jake Morgan's face turned a mottled maroon shade and his eyes squinted. His fists formed at his sides. "Kill? Mistake? What kind of a man are you?"

"I'm the man who's going to marry Keely. I'm the man who's going to stay beside her, father her children, give her a safe home, and will be with her until the last breath is expelled from my body." He felt Keely come up behind him. "I'm sorry, Keely. He just made me angry."

"I know." She answered softly.

He watched her mother and father exchange questioning looks. "I think he'd really do it."

"Do what?"

"Shoot me."

She laughed and took her mother and father by the hand. "We need to talk."

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Twenty Three

Keely paced her parents' living room. The dark wood panel had always intrigued her. The old Cuckoo clock, sent from Germany by a loving cousin, still hung on the wall. An old grandfather clock in the hallway chimed the hour and half hour.

"Keely?"

She faced her father. Xavier sat on a chair close by to give her the strength she was going to need. "I'm marrying Xavier. We're moving away and I don't think we'll ever be coming back."

Her mother gasped loudly and her father's face turned an ugly mottled red. "Just as simple as that?" He turned to Xavier. "What have you done to her? I'm going to..." He didn't finish but shoved out of his chair and grabbed Xavier by the neck of his shirt.

"Daddy!" Keely cried and rushed to pry him from Xavier. "Please, you don't understand. Xavier didn't do anything to me. Everything he's done has been *for* me."

Her father still hadn't released his grip on Xavier and she could see him getting as angry as her father.

"Please just sit back down and let me tell you what I've got to say."

For a moment longer Jake held on to Xavier and then shoved him away. Keely watched her father stalk back to the sofa near her mother. "I know this is going to be hard for you. It's hard for me. It was hard for Xavier to tell his

mother, too." She inhaled a steadying breath. "I've met my birth parents."

Her mother's face reflected the same shock Aramantha had worn. She shook her head to push the thought away. "Mom, Dad, I know where I come from and I've got to go back there. My life has a purpose, a meaning, and I've got to go back and live that new life."

"I've loved you all my life. You've given me so much more than you'll ever realize. Leaving you is the hardest thing I'm ever going to have to do. The fight against giving in and staying here is the hardest battle I've ever fought and trust me, that's saying a lot. But I have to go. Please try and understand."

"How can I understand? You're going to leave us for God knows how long. Letters and phone calls won't be the same as seeing your face."

Keely swallowed hard. "There won't be any phone calls, no visits, and no letters. Where we're going, well it will be impossible for us to communicate with you. With anyone."

"But you can't just leave. Disappear off the face of the earth again? Keely, you've got to think this over."

"Mom, it has to be this way. I've got people who need me, a world that depends on me, and I have to go back to them."

"People? A world? A life? Keely you're not making sense."

"This is ridiculous," her father shouted. "You're not going anywhere. You're home and you're staying here. That man," he pointed at Xavier. "I don't know what he's done to you, but we're going to break the spell he's holding over you. We're going to keep you here and safe."

"It's not possible. If I don't hurry and get back now I won't be able to go home at all. Xavier and I will be cut off from the world we belong in."

"This just doesn't make any sense," her mother muttered again.

"Look Mom, I don't know how to make you see. The parents who gave me up, they did it because they had to. They did it to protect me and make sure I was raised in safety then one day I'd go back and save the people I was intended to save. Xavier and I did that, together. He and I are going to be married and live there for the rest of our lives. Leaving without saying a word to you killed me but there wasn't time. I couldn't get to you until now."

Keely's dad radiated concern and confusion. "He's drugged you, hypnotized you, something."

She shook her head. "No Daddy. It's all true. I don't belong here any more. No matter how much it hurts, no matter how desperately I want to stay, I can't."

"You waltz in here, announce your going to marry a complete stranger and that you're disappearing again. You're going to rip our hearts out again?"

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Isn't it a little late for that?"

She looked from her mom to her dad. "I know it's difficult but this is the way it has to be."

"Then go." Her father's voice was harsh. "Get out. You say this isn't your life, that this isn't your world, fine. Get out. Go find the people who dumped you. Turn your back on the ones who have loved you all your life. Go on. Get out of here."

She tried to read the emotions behind his words but her pain was clouding her power. "Daddy, please don't."

"Please don't what? Be angry that you've decided we don't mean anything to you? Be angry that you're bound and determined to make the biggest mistake of your life? Well, live it. Go on, but don't think you can just come back here begging when it blows up in your face."

"Jake," her mother cautioned.

"No. She runs off for three months, puts us through hell because we thought the worst and we find out she ran off with some man? No. I'm done with it. Have a nice life." He turned and stormed out of the house.

Keely watched him leaving and felt the life fade from her. She turned to her mother. "Momma?"

Jilly stood and embraced her. "Your father's hurt. He's confused and you know what he's like when he gets angry. I'll talk to him."

"I don't want to leave this way."

"Then don't leave," her mother pleaded.

"I have to."

Jilly pulled away. "Then I guess this is it. If you change your mind, I'll be here."

"I know. Thank you, Momma."

"Be happy."

"I'll try."

Keely felt Xavier stand beside her and place his hand on her back. "I know," she whispered to him.

The front screen door closed behind them and Keely stopped on the stone porch. Under a canopy of crabapple

trees hung the old swing, the weather worn fabric and bent bars showing its age.

Her mother's hummingbird feeders were full with the small birds darting in and out getting drinks of the nectar. Her father's tractor rolled down the drive past her. Jake never looked back.

What was left of Keely's heart cracked and she felt as if her world had completely shattered. She should change her mind. It wasn't too late. She could send Xavier away, mend the fences with her dad. Tell her family that it was all a mistake, that she didn't want to go. Tell them she wanted to come home and live on the farm again. Pretend as if she'd never heard of Grogan or Xavier.

"Keely, you don't mean it. Do you?" the ache in his voice was overwhelming.

She turned and looked into his eyes. Love and pain. "We can stay here. We can live here and find our happily ever after right here."

"You said it yourself. I don't belong on a farm." He turned and walked down the steps. He opened the door of the Mustang and got in. The engine turned over and she could only watch him.

* * * *

Xavier sat in the car and stared at Keely standing on the steps. "Please come with me. Please, Keely. I need you. Isn't that what you said to me, that you needed me?"

She didn't move. He could see the tears flowing down her face. Her heartbreak was so strong. She wasn't going to come

with him. She was going to turn her back and walk away from the life they were supposed to share. From their destiny.

"You can't do it. Think of all you've done. Think of all we've still got to do."

She shook her head and stood rooted on the steps. In the distance, he saw her father's tractor mowing in the field and Keely turned to watch the large rotating bars cut down the long grass.

Xavier knew she wanted to run to him. She wanted to go and beg her father to forgive her and assure him she'd never leave. She glanced back at Xavier and stepped off the porch. She turned and walked away from him and off to the fence that separated the pasture from the house.

She'd chosen them over him.

He backed the car out of the drive and turned down the highway. He still had a life to lead, with or without Keely. Could he do it?

Without her, why bother?

Maybe he should go back to his mother and resume his old life.

The other world had been there before he and Keely arrived and it would be there long after they'd gone. The hardest part of living anywhere was knowing he'd have to be without her. "Bye Keely. I will always love you."

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Twenty Four

Keely watched Xavier drive away. He'd left her behind. She'd never see him again. Had she made a mistake? Choosing her family over her heart?

The soft purr of the engine faded away and panic hit her full on. She'd made a horrible mistake. She needed Xavier. She belonged with him. No matter where they lived she belonged by his side.

She slogged through the long field grass, across the freshly mown lawn, ran down the drive and along the highway, her heart pounding with each step. He'd left her and he was never coming back. "Oh Xavier, what have I done?"

A mile passed. Her lungs burned. Her legs trembled and her mind reeled. She had to get him back.

"Xavier, can you hear me? I need you so badly. Please come back. Please come back," she cried over and over. The highway sloped ahead of her and it became difficult to force her legs up the incline.

"Please Xavier." Exhaustion filled her. Her entire body ached and burned. How far ahead was he? She chuckled wryly. That Mustang with the 4.7L V-8 engine would be long gone.

The highway headed into a steep drop and momentum of the angle pulled her downward. The strip of road was desolate of houses. All along the highway was National Forest. It wasn't a well-traveled road so if she dropped off no one would even notice.

"Xavier," she cried again and finally stopped running. She sat down in the ditch and tried to catch her breath. Her body's trembling became harder and a stitch in her side tore up her ribs.

She lay back in the deep grass and closed her eyes. All she was supposed to be. All she had ahead of her, gone in the blink of an eye.

The sound of a passing car barely registered. He was gone and wouldn't come back. Too far away to hear her call. Too far away to know she'd made a mistake. Too far away to know how much she needed him.

* * * *

Xavier heard Keely calling. It took ten minutes to find a suitable and safe place to turn around then he whipped the car back in her direction.

Where was she? The road was empty. Trees seemed to stretch for miles. He slowed the car to a crawl as he closed the distance between them. She was here, somewhere. But where? *Come on Keely, talk to me.*

Xavier?

That's it baby, talk to me. I'm here.

He scanned the road and when she stood up in the ditch his heart slammed into overdrive. She hadn't turned her back on him. She had chosen him and life by his side.

He stopped the car and jumped out. He grabbed her up in his arms and swung her around. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too. I'm so sorry, Xavier. I'll live wherever you decide. Here or Grogan, I don't care as long as you're beside me."

He couldn't let her go. She felt so right in his arms. Finally, he pulled her to the car and pressed her against it. He fisted his hand in her hair and his lips claimed hers. Her mouth, warm and sweet opened to him. Her tongue slid around his and his body trembled with desire. He leaned his face away from hers. "Whatever you want is fine by me," he whispered.

He continued to hold her and he listened as her thoughts whirled in her brain. She wanted to stay. She wanted to go. Which was the right answer?

"Listen to your heart, isn't that what you're always telling me? Well, listen. What is it telling you to do?" He knew her answer even before she said it. They were going back. He nodded and opened the door for her. "Then we better go. We've got a long drive ahead of us and our time is running out."

"I know." She sat down in the seat and turned to look up at him.

He couldn't resist, he had to kiss her one more time. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too."

He slid in, turned the car around to head for Grogan. For home. He reached for her hand. It fit in his perfectly. Her skin soft, silky and warm. She felt so good, so right. "We're going to be all right Aldmakeelia. Together we can face anything. Together we will be stronger, and happier than ever before."

Dragon's Angel
by Donica Covey

"I know Xiuhcoatl. Together always. Lifemates destined for greatness."

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Epilogue

Xavier stood on the grassy slope watching two of his children, Alexino and Xatia, splashing through the small crystalline creek. Keely sat under a tree holding their newest baby, Aramantha Jilly, a sprightly little girl with light amethyst eyes and porcelain complexion.

His pride swelled with each second. His wife, a wholesome gentle woman, and a wonderful mother, was also a temperate queen who ruled with an even hand and kept him on the path of light.

It had been years since the old king was defeated and all around Grogan peace and prosperity reigned. Crops grew lush and green. People were healthy and happy. Their life was perfect.

"Father," his oldest son Xochitl called and raced up the hill from the tree line.

Xavier looked down into his son's deep green eyes. "Where have you been?"

The golden rings around the child's irises glowed. "I've found something wonderful, Father. In the woods there is a beautiful waterfall and when I stepped behind the curtain of water I found a large cave. The tunnel was deep and narrowed in places. But that's not the most amazing thing. I found a strange place in the stone. A whirling window. It was a place unlike any I've ever seen before. What is it?"

"You have been told not to leave the path cut for you. Roaming the woods is dangerous."

Xochitl dropped his eyes for a split second then looked back up at him. "I felt drawn there. Like something was pulling me forward. What is it, Father? Why did I go there?"

It sounded so like Keely's first words to him. He reached down placed a hand on his son's shoulder and led him to a tree. He sat down and pulled the boy near him. He inhaled a deep breath. He knew this day would come. Grogan history the children learned wouldn't be complete until they learned of the portal. How will to explain it to him?

"It's all right, Xavier. You'll find the words," Keely bolstered him.

"A long time ago your mother and I came through that very portal. We came to fulfill our destiny."

About Donica

Donica Covey spent most of her childhood making up stories starring herself and the hunky actors of her time. From there blossomed a love of fiction. Family members were convinced that she would either be a politician or a writer. Thankfully she chose the latter. She makes her home in a suburb of St.

Louis with a large loving family that includes a teenage daughter and a grown son, daughter-in-law, and her Ulisi ageyutsa Alyx, as well as one clingy Cairn terrier. When she can break the chains from her computer she can be found reading, hiking, ATVing or hanging with her friends.

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