

## Chapter One

It served as a testament to her majestic power, Lucifer McAnu reflected, that no one in the Fae realm nor the mortal could compare with the Faerie Queen when it came to being a huge, hairy pain in the ass.

Of course, if anyone ever said such a thing in his presence, he'd do his duty as one of her elite warrior Guardsmen and slit the traitorous bastard's throat. But he might feel a twinge of hypocritical guilt while he re-sheathed his silver sword.

The only thing he felt at the moment, while he slung said sword into what the mortals called a "duffle bag," was the urgent need to drink a gallon of Faerie wine and pass out under a tree somewhere. He added a change of clothes, a woodcarver's knife, an arsenal of Fae weaponry and his favorite pair of slippers to the bag. Maybe if he got drunk enough, and stayed unconscious long enough, the Queen would forget all about the mission she'd sent him on. Of course, that seemed about as likely as him abandoning Faerie for good to go live among the humans. Ugh!

A knock registered in his mind, but he didn't bother to do more than grunt and proceed to ignore the interruption. Unfortunately, said interruption would not be ignored and picked his lock with the dexterity of the Fae it was.

"Luc, Luc, Luc," the interloper chided, ambling into the room to stand beside the massive bed, his arms crossed over his muscular chest, and his face wearing a mockingly pitiful expression. "I told you it would come to no good, this tendency of yours to do your job well and with efficiency. 'Tis near enough a human trait as to be very un-Fae indeed, and it looks like I was right, now doesn't it?"

"Piss off, Fergus." Luc gave his friend and fellow Guardsman one fulminating stare from his narrowed green eyes and continued to stuff his belongings into the bag. He wadded up several extra pairs of socks and used them to pad the flask of wine he added to his gear. "The last thing I need right now is your bloody attempt at consolation."

"Oh, I didn't come to console you." Fergus shifted to lean against the bed end and automatically shook his head to keep his waist-length, auburn braid from getting pinned behind him. "I came for no other reason than to poke fun at you."

Pulling himself to his full six and a half feet of brawny height, Luc set his face into an expression as warm and soft as granite and crossed his own arms over his chest to mirror the other man's posture. "I could order you to get your Goddess-forsaken ass out of my room, Lieutenant."

"True, but you know I would simply ignore you. Your Mighty Captain of the Guard routine has no power over the one who watched you fumble your way through your first encounter with a dryad lo these many ages ago."

Fergus's grin was cocky, which made Luc itch to punch it that much worse. Instead of striking, he sighed. "The thing you fail to grasp," he said, as he grabbed the bag and headed for the door, "is that I *am* the Captain of the Guard. You're supposed to follow my orders. Without all the commentary."

"And what's the fun in that?" Fergus followed Luc out the door.

The pair padded silently along the stone hallways, their leather-booted feet making no more sound against the polished stone than their shadows did. As members of the Queen's Guard, both warriors had trained from their early days to move as silently as the stars and to strike more swiftly than a snake. The figures that scurried hurriedly out of the way as they passed by gave testament to the fact that all who lived in the Queen's realm knew well what an angry Guardsman could do.

"It might convince me to spare your life."

"I'm not worried," Fergus replied cheerfully. "You know how she hates it when her warriors fight among themselves. She'd just give you a scolding."

Considering Mab was the reason for Luc's foul mood, his friend's reminder didn't exactly up his cheer factor. "Don't you have imps you could be persecuting? Bogles that need to be driven off the palace grounds? Someone else you could be annoying?"

"Not a soul. Besides, I'm on a mission of great import." Fergus followed Luc around a corner and down another long hallway to a pair of heavy, carved doors. "The rest of the Seven and I want to know if it's true. Are you sent to retrieve the Queen's nephew? Again?"

"Aye," Luc growled, not bothering to look back. His mind occupied itself replaying the cause of his anger and inventing new and creative ways of cursing Seoc ni Flidais, only son of the Queen's dead sister, and another royal pain in the ass. "I leave immediately for Ithir."

"The mortal world?" Fergus did a double take and almost had the door slammed in his face as Luc yanked it open and strode into the chamber beyond. "I thought that was just a rumor."

"One with too much basis in fact. The Queen informs me that reliable sources place Seoc—or 'Jack Green,' as he's apparently calling himself—in the city of New York."

"Lady!" Fergus swore, following fast on his friend's heels. "Even I didn't think Seoc was that stupid, to leave Faerie for the human world. He knows our laws as well as any Fae living. No one is allowed to set foot in the land of the mortals without permission, and to walk among them...that takes balls. How could he just disregard the law?"

"I did not ask for your opinion, Fergus of Eithdne, or your assistance. It is not for you to pass judgment on my sister's child. It is not your place."

The voice from the shadows drew the pair up short. Being overheard didn't surprise Luc, but it made Fergus turn an interesting shade of green.

Their attention shifted to the far side of the large Chamber of Doors and to the dais at the other end of the room. Atop the gleaming marble platform, on a silver throne sculpted in the shape of a breaking wave, sat Mab of the Silver Bells, Lady of Many Blessings, Huntress of Spirits and Queen of Faerie and Elfhame.

She wore a diadem of bright silver in the shape of a wreath of apple blossoms perched on her bright, red-gold hair. A surcoat of russet velvet topped her gown of amber silk, shot through with silver thread, and the rich fabrics seemed to spark each time she moved. Her pale, slender feet peeked from beneath her hem, toes adorned with silver bells, and her graceful, ringed fingers tapped restlessly against the arms of her throne. Luc noted the hint of impatience and braced himself.

“You become slow to answer your Queen, my Lucifer.” Mab’s voice, low and musical, displayed a hint of petulance that made Luc wary. He harbored few charitable feelings toward her right now, and another scolding was not going to help. “We might be tempted to interpret such a thing as a reluctance to serve us.”

Beside him, Fergus stiffened, but Luc kept his gaze firmly on the changeable green eyes of his sovereign. They shifted as restlessly as the sea and could be just as deadly. “Never think it, my Queen,” he said, bowing before her. “I am come to your command, ready to complete the task you have set me. I am ever at your service, as are all of your Guard. We answer always to your majesty’s whim.”

The formal language of court didn’t make his flowery words any easier to get out. In fact, he felt more like choking on them, but only a fool told Queen Mab she was a bitch. No matter how true it might be.

Mab shifted, her brows rising. “Is that so?” Her gaze turned to Fergus and sharpened. “Does the captain of my Guard speak true, my Fergus? Are all of the Seven as loyal to us as he would make them sound?”

Fergus, too, bowed low, clearly anxious to make up for insulting Seoc in the Queen’s hearing. “Without question, my lady. To serve in the Queen’s Guard is an honor of which we Seven are well aware.” He straightened and placed his hand above his heart in a salute of fealty. “Your safety and the rule of your word are our only concerns.”

Luc fought back the urge to groan. Talking to the Queen required one to walk a thin line, and he only hoped Fergus hadn’t gone overboard with his flattery. If Mab perceived any insult as more severe than failing to flatter her, it was flattering her insincerely. When she raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips, he concealed a wince.

“Is that so, my Fergus? We appreciate the reassurance now more than ever, in this time when disturbing news reaches our ears. For we have heard rumbling that the services of our Guard might soon see a greater challenge than they have yet faced.”

Lucifer maintained a bland expression even as he swore silently. If the Queen had news for him, it couldn’t be good. The fact that Seoc had traveled unbidden to Ithir was bad enough. He really didn’t want to hear any more ‘disturbing’ news. “Any manner of service to our Queen honors us,” he said, drawing her attention away from his lieutenant. “We await your orders and will see them executed with all speed and diligence.”

The royal lips pursed again, accompanied by the lifting of her chin and an easing of the tightness around her eyes. For now, the Queen had been appeased. Abruptly, she stood, sweeping her robes behind her as she began to pace the length of her marble dais.

“My advisor has brought me word that Seoc’s little trip to the mortal realm might have put us in a more delicate situation than we first believed.” With everyone reminded of his or her place in the hierarchy of Faerie, Mab dispensed with the royal “we” and continued with a slight bend in her formality. “It seems he has not confined his associations to the Other-folk in Ithir, but has allowed his presence to be noted by the mortals as well.”

Concealing his intense un-surprise, Luc acknowledged the disclosure with an impassive stare and another internal oath. He had still held out some hope that Seoc might have used what little brainpower he possessed to keep himself confined in the Other society of Ithir. While the Fae had abandoned that world centuries ago, some races had stayed behind to live secretly among the humans. Immortals such as the vampires and non-humans like the werewolf still roamed throughout the human world, keeping their identities carefully guarded secrets. Their ruling body, the Council of Others, still kept in contact with the Fae court and would have had little problem with a visit from the Queen's nephew. But if Seoc had begun to walk among the humans as well, that meant trouble.

Luc knew better than to express disbelief or condemnation for the royal nephew's actions. Only the Queen was allowed to speak ill of the worthless dung beetle, even though it had become Luc's job to drag him back home with his tail between his legs. Such was life at court.

"Seoc means no harm, I am certain, but he must learn that his antics reflect on more than himself. Even my indulgence cannot shield him forever from the consequences of his actions."

Luc felt his eyebrows climb toward his hairline, but he kept his mouth shut.

"In Faerie I can keep his mischief contained," the Queen continued, "but I have no such control in Ithir. The human world does not bow to my authority, and therefore is a place too treacherous to allow him free rein. And so I have asked the Captain of my Guard to go after my nephew and return him to court. His presence begins to disturb the flow of the human reality, and the Others have sent word they are anxious to have him gone."

Too bad no one but the Queen is anxious to have him back, Luc thought.

"Can they not return him themselves?" Fergus voiced the question Luc knew better than to ask.

"The Others may be superior to the mortals they live among, but they can hardly be considered our equals, my Fergus," the Queen sniffed, pointing her regal little nose at the ceiling. "Seoc could elude them forever if he so chose. No, it must be a Fae to catch a Fae. Besides which, the Others harbor a great fear of their secret being revealed should they take action. They believe the humans are not ready to acknowledge the truth of their existence, and I must say I agree on that point. The inability of mortals to accept the magic before them is the reason we abandoned their realm so many years ago. I do not think they have progressed so far in the time they have had since."

Lucifer rolled his shoulders, feeling his impatience growing. "I understand, Your Majesty. I will find Seoc and return him to you with all speed, and the mortals will be none the wiser." He hitched his bag of belongings in a firmer grip and rested his free hand on the hilt of his short, sharp *sgian dubh*.

"See that they are not, my Lucifer." The Queen grasped her long skirts and lifted them from around her feet as she descended the steps of the dais to sweep across the floor toward the Guardsmen. "This task I have set you to is important for many reasons. More than my nephew's safety is at stake here. If the existence of the Others becomes common knowledge to the mortals, it would not be long before they found their way to even our realm. You must not allow this to happen."

Luc set his jaw and nodded once, curtly. "I understand," he repeated. "I will do all in my power and use all resources at hand, my lady."

Mab reached up, her cool, pale fingers cupping his stubble-roughened face, and the smile she gave him

reminded him why human and Fae alike still wrote odes to her beauty, even after a lifetime of centuries.

“If you do all in your power, my Lucifer, then I know well you cannot fail me.” Leaning up, she brushed a kiss against his cheek and stepped back, raising her hands before her and waving them in an intricate pattern that dripped trails of light from her fingertips. As the Guardsmen watched, the light wove itself together into a shimmering doorway, expanding until it was large enough to accommodate even Luc’s height.

Blowing out a deep breath, Luc stepped forward into the Faerie door and felt the warmth of the Queen’s magic surround him. As reality bent and reshaped itself, her voice reached him on a silver whisper. “Go safely, my Lucifer, and may what you find to please you, ever be yours.”

## Chapter Two

A woman could only take so much, Corinne D’Alessandro decided as she looked down at the assignment sheet her editor had just handed to her. In the past five months, she’d taken a lot: learning about the existence of vampires, watching her best friend become a vampire, learning about the existence of werewolves, watching her other best friend marry a werewolf. All in all, an eventful few months had just passed. Corinne figured it was a testament to her inner strength and resilience that she’d taken all this news without ending up in a padded room at Bellevue, contemplating her navel and holding conversations with her big toes.

But this, she thought, staring at the black print on the page before her. This just might be the last straw.

“Leprechauns?” she asked.

“Well, maybe pixies. The reports vary.”

Corinne couldn’t decide if she wanted to run screaming from the office, past her curious colleagues and out onto the streets of Manhattan, or if she wanted to bang her head against the wall a few times before she buried it in her hands and whimpered. Instead, she pushed her chair back from her paper-strewn desk and gave her editor a baleful stare. “Either way, I can tell you now that I don’t need to do an investigation, Hank. Leprechauns, pixies and sprites don’t exist. Now how about we store this in the circular file and move on to a real story, hmm?”

Hank Buckley shifted the toothpick he was chewing from one side of his mouth to the other and shook his head. “No can do, toots. This one’s hot. Even the TV stations are starting to pick it up. Don’t want us to get left in the dust.”

“Why not?” Corinne asked, her tone dry and weary. “It’s not like we’re scooping the *Times* on a regular basis here.”

“Maybe not, but we gotta give it a shot, right? Prove we’re not some sort of fly-by-night tabloid

operation.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And doing a story the worst rag in print would think twice about running is supposed to boost our credibility factor? What’d they put in your coffee this morning? ‘Cause you’re seriously high.”

“Only on the excitement of actually talking to you, instead of sending yet another email for you to ignore, sweetie. It’s the kind of thing that goes to my head.”

“Your sarcasm fails to make me laugh. As does this stupid-ass story. What are you thinking?” She waved the note he’d handed her under his bulbous nose and upped her stare to a glare. “I’m supposed to do a story on leprechaun sightings in Manhattan? For a St. Patty’s Day spoof, I might just down enough Guinness to play along, but it’s August, Hank! You don’t even have green bagels and Shamrock-mint milkshakes to tie in to. You’re a freak.”

“Actually, I’m the boss, but I can see where the similarities could get confusing for you.” Hank rocked back on his heels and drummed his hands in his pockets, making his loose change jingle. “Maybe you can do a write up on the rise of insanity among the editors of small, urban newspapers. Right after you turn in the leprechaun story.”

Corinne ran a hand through her dark hair and gave a pained sigh. “Look, Hank, if we’re slow for news, and you really want to run with this one, why don’t you hand it to Shawn? He’s always going on about how Irish he is. He’d probably eat this shit up. And I’d get to go back to my feature on the student protest arrests at Columbia.”

Hank shook his head. “No can do. Shawn is already on the Tech show over at the Javits. It’s gotta be you, kid. Besides,” he grinned, his toothpick bobbing, “you’re the one who went to all those Goth clubs a few months ago. I figured this supernatural crap would be right up your alley.”

“Well, you figured wrong. I don’t believe in fairies or fairytales, so give the story to someone else.”

“I gave it to you.” Hank gave a pointed look at the assignment sheet. “Ironically enough, that means I want you to have it. Now do you want me to fill you in on the particulars, or do you want to go it alone and get me ticked when you come back with a lousy article?”

Closing her eyes on a sigh, Corinne laid the sheet down on top of a teetering pile of manila folders, yanked open her desk drawer and dug out a bottle of extra-strength aspirin. Shaking three little white tablets out onto her palm, she slammed them into the back of her throat and washed them down with a few gulps of cold coffee. Then she turned back to the man standing beside her desk and picked up a pencil. “All right. Fine. Fill me in. But I won’t pretend to be happy about it.”

“I don’t need you to be happy. Besides, they say hardship builds character.” Hitching up his battered khaki trousers, Hank perched one hip on the edge of her desk and folded his arms across his chest. “Okay, first off, you got the first sighting back in May. Sort of an isolated incident, that one. Easy to write off. But then around the second week in June, you start to hear stories from sources all over Manhattan that pretty much corroborate each other. All witnesses saw the same thing, and none of them knew each other before they made their reports.”

Corinne looked up from the notes she’d been jotting down. “What did they see? A little green man with a top hat and a pot of gold?”



Hank ignored her. “Witnesses reported seeing an extremely fair blond man, about six feet tall, with hair almost down to his butt and pointy ears.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, for God’s sake, Hank. That’s not a leprechaun sighting. That’s an escapee from a *Lord of the Rings* convention. Some teenaged geek with way too much time on his hands dressed himself up like Orlando Bloom’s character and paraded down Fifth thinking he was the shit. Case solved. Can I go home now?”

Hank shook his head. “Not so fast, kid. I’m not done yet.” He shifted his shoulders and continued. “Now the man in and of himself wouldn’t have raised so much as an eyebrow under normal circumstances. This *is* Manhattan, after all.” Corinne grumbled under her breath, but she didn’t interrupt. “So almost universally, the witnesses initially dismissed the weird guy as just that—a weird guy. But that was before he started doing magic.”

Corinne sighed. “Did it involve dice rolls and phrases like, ‘my wizard calls on the House of Illusion to summon forth a seventh level Temporal Distortion plus three?’”

“From what I hear, it just involved a temporal distortion. Would the plus three thing have been more impressive?”

Her pencil paused over her notepad, and Corinne looked up. “What did you say?”

“Would the plus three thing have been—?”

“Not that,” she growled, her eyes narrowing. “Before that. The part where you said it did involve a temporal distortion.”

“That’s what the witnesses say.”

Corinne looked longingly at the aspirin and debated pretending she hadn’t read the warning label about permanent liver damage. “You’re telling me that Orlando waved his magic wand and opened a rift in the time-space continuum?”

“Get real,” he scoffed. “You’re just mixing metaphors. Magic wands and time-space continuums are two totally different animals. Besides, no one mentioned anything about a wand.”

Her hand inched toward the aspirin. Who really needed a liver anyway? “Forget the wand,” she snarled. “I think the rift is the material question here, no?”

Hank shrugged. “Whatever. It’s your story.”

“Are you *trying* to kill me?”

Hank ignored her, or maybe he just didn’t hear the question, since her face was buried in her arms and smushed up against the surface of her desk. It muffled the whimpering. “The witnesses claim that the man in question walked up to the wall of an abandoned building, and the bricks slid apart to let him through.”

Corinne turned her head just enough to glare at her boss through one narrowed eye. “Meaning that Orlando Bloom took a trip to Diagon Alley. Did he tap a strange badge on his shoulder and talk into thin air as if someone could hear him?”

“They said the air around the wall seemed to shimmer, but after he went through, it looked totally normal, as if nothing had ever happened. The same sort of story has been reported by individuals uptown, downtown and midtown, and that’s why I want you out there checking out if it’s true.”

“I can answer that for you right now,” she said, lifting her head and grabbing the assignment sheet to wad it up into a little, crumpled ball. “It’s not true. Now can we talk about that proposal I sent you on the Columbiastudents arrested during the animal rights protest?”

“Looks good. I’ll look forward to reading it. Right after you turn in the leprechaun article.”

“Someday you’ll pay for this, Hank. I hope you realize that.”

He shrugged and looked remarkably unconcerned. “I’ll live in fear.” His weathered face wrinkled into a grin, and he clamped the toothpick between his molars, chuckling. “Look at it this way. I didn’t make you check out the lead this spring when that cab driver said he picked up two werewolves outside Central Park. I know when a story’s complete crap.” Then he turned and ambled back to his office, chortling to himself all the way.

Corinne soothed her temper by making an obscene gesture at his back with one hand, while she used the other to rub the elbow she’d smashed on the desk when he’d made the werewolf comment. For God’s sake, those werewolves had been her friends. Well, her friend and her friend’s furry fiancé.

Throwing caution and the potential for irreversible liver damage to the wind, Corinne popped another two aspirin and slugged back the last of her cold coffee. Staring at the dregs left behind in her cup, she realized her need for caffeine superceded starting her research on the leprechaun story. Without a new dose of her drug of choice, she wouldn’t be able to so much as lift a pencil, let alone go pounding the pavement to track down potential witnesses.

Grabbing a handful of change from the bottom of her purse, she shoved herself to her feet and headed for the door. Weaving her way between the desks of her colleagues, she ignored their absent greetings as easily as she ignored the ringing of telephones and the clacking of computer keyboards. All her attention remained focused on the front doors to the *City Chronicle’s* office suite and the elevators just beyond. Those elevators were her ticket to the basement of the building and the vending machines that stood there, patiently waiting to dispense the sweet, dark nectar of the gods.

She tapped her foot impatiently while she waited for the car, punched the button marked “B” a dozen times in rapid succession as soon as she stepped inside, and stared at the digital floor indicator as it counted down. Just as the thick metal doors slid open, her pocket started to trill the opening bars to *Toccata en Fugue*. Sighing, she dug out her cell phone and flipped it open. “Yeah?”

“I give up. I surrender. This is the official white flag I’m waving in your ear right now.”

Corinne fed four quarters into the vending machine and scowled. “Ava, what the hell are you babbling about?”

“I am not babbling,” the other woman snapped, her voice crackling over the line even though the cell signal came in clear as glass. “I am informing you in perfectly rational and reasonable terms that I am throwing in the towel and washing my hands of the whole mess. I may decide to take religious orders.”

The machine button protested the amount of force Corinne used to punch it, but it yielded an icy bottle of soda with a reluctant thump. “Yeah, right. Sister Ava Immaculata. I can see it now.” She pinned the



phone between ear and shoulder so she could twist off the bottle cap. “Mind telling me why you’re in such a tizzy?”

“This is no tizzy, Corinne Magdalena. This is utter exhaustion and despair. I give up on the whole lot. I just needed to call and wish you a nice life before I left for the nunnery.”

Corinne raised the bottle to her lips and headed back toward the elevators, giving the button a much more civilized push this time. “Same to you. Leave an address, though, or you won’t get a Christmas card.”

The curse Ava muttered managed to retain an unexpected air of grace and elegance solely due to its manner of delivery. It had certainly never sounded the same on the lips of the dockworkers who usually used it. “You fail to amuse me, Corinne, darling. But then, most things fail to amuse me when so many people I’ve tried to care for turn their backs on me within the space of six months.”

Corinne swallowed fast to keep from choking on her drink. “Turn their backs on you? Going for the melodrama here?”

“What would you call it when people ignore everything you try and do for them, only to end up making horrible decisions on their own?”

“Reality?”

Ava never raised her voice, but Corinne still had to fight the urge to pull the phone away from her ear and wince. “I can see I’ll get no support from you. And why I should have thought I might is beyond me. After all, weren’t you the first rat to desert my ship?”

“Okay, first of all, get control of the metaphors, Av.” Corinne stabbed the elevator button again, since she couldn’t stab her friend. “Second, I did not ‘desert’ any ships. It’s not like the Fixes were working out anyway. I mean, look at what happened to Reggie and Missy.”

“Unfortunate, true. But that wasn’t—”

“Unfortunate? Ava, they married outside their species! For God’s sake, I still can’t get used to it. Sheesh, whoever thought we’d be talking about characters from the late, late, late movie as if they were real? It’s too bizarre.”

“Darling, I hate to break it to you, but they *are* real. Dmitri is a vampire and Graham is a werewolf. And now Reginais a vampire, as well, and Melissa is pregnant with a werewolf-to-be. This is reality. Grasp it and move on.”

“How can you take it all so casually?” Corinne demanded, giving up on the elevator and heading for the stairwell at the end of the hall. “Aren’t you the least little bit freaked out by having your entire notion of life, the universe and everything suddenly flip on its axis? Doesn’t that give you the least littlest wiggins?”

She heard Ava sigh and imagined the other woman giving one of her vaguely Gallic shrugs. “It’s an ever-changing world. One must find ways to adapt.”

Corinne seriously debated making an extremely obscene gesture, but figured the effort would be lost since Ava wasn’t around to actually see it. So she just pictured it in vivid Technicolor as she jogged up the first flight. “Yeah, right. Aren’t you the same woman who just called me up to bitch about the fact that

the two of them ‘deserted’ you and spoiled your Fantasy Fix scheme?”

“Not at all. Honestly, Rinne, what would you have me do about it? I can’t wish things back to the way they were, nor would I. Regina and Missy are happy with their impossible men. I can either be happy for them, or I can sit around and moan about how the world is not what I imagined it was.” There was a brief, significant pause. “I choose the former.”

Put that way, Corinne felt stupid, which didn’t improve her mood. She knew Ava only spoke the truth, knew her own reactions to the surreal recent developments were probably juvenile and definitely counterproductive, but try telling that to her gut. Guts, as a rule, don’t like to be reasoned with. “I know, I know,” she grumbled. “Different strokes, love makes the world go round, to each her own, Corinne is a bitch, yadda yadda yadda. I get it; I just don’t *get* it, you know?”

“There, there, dear. It will all become clear one day, I’m sure.”

“Gee, thanks.” Corinne went ahead and tucked her soda against her side so she’d have a hand free to make that obscene gesture after all. She had just grabbed the neck of the bottle again when a thought made her frown. “Hey, why are you so quick to defend Reg and Miss when you just called me up to bitch about how they abandoned your Fantasy Fix plan? That’s kind of an about face, isn’t it?”

“I just told you I didn’t call about the Fixes. I’m so over that.”

Corinne pushed through the door into the central hallway on her floor and frowned harder. “Stop. Rewind. Slo-mo playback. Say huh? If you didn’t call about the Fixes, why were you accusing me of deserting you?”

“Are you not the woman who bailed on a modeling gig booked by her struggling young agent friend, forcing the agent to scrape up an appropriate substitute just fifteen minutes before the shoot started?”

Corinne’s mouth dropped open. “Ava, that was *seven* years ago!”

“There’s no statute of limitations on betrayal, now is there?”

“Okay, hanging up now.”

“Wait. Not so fast. I called for a reason.”

“Oh, you mean a reason other than to bitch and moan at me?”

“Clearly,” Ava said, her tone changing from melodramatic to business-like in a heartbeat. “I wanted to ask you about something.”

“No, Ava, I will not ask the editor to do a full color spread on the Markham Agency. Bye.”

“Will you stop jumping to conclusions? This is another matter entirely. A matter I *thought* my friend, the talented investigative reporter, could help me with.”

Corinne lowered the now half-empty soda bottle and made a face. “No, I won’t rewrite all your press releases this month, either.”

“Then will you tell me if there’s some sort of weird serial killer running around Manhattan looking like a

wet dream and pretending to be the guy on the Lucky Charms box?”

Corinne froze right there in the *Chronicle*'s doorway. “What did you ask me?”

“You heard me. Four of my models have bailed on bookings in the last six weeks because they said they were being stalked by a leprechaun. So, either they're insane, the coke has melted their brains, or there's some freak who thinks St. Paddy is the perfect cover for a crime spree. Do you media types know anything about this?”

Corinne's response was very pithy and, she thought, entirely appropriate. She cursed like a dockhand, slugged back what was left of her soda and headed back to her desk and the bottle of little white pills waiting inside. To hell with her liver.

### Chapter Three

“Shit. I need a drink.”

Luc cocked one eyebrow and tried not to look too smug, but he was glad to see someone else react to his mission the same way he had. “I brought a flask of Faerie wine, if you'd like a belt of that.”

The other man scowled at him and opened a cabinet door to retrieve a graceful glass decanter of amber fluid. “Thank you, my friend, but as much as I would like to pass out and forget what you told me, I don't think it would help you on your cause.” He poured two glasses of brandy, the red-gold color less exotic than the crimson of Faerie wine, but also less likely to knock a grown man on his ass.

Luc's host, and his first stop on his trip through Ithir, happened to be one of the few inhabitants of the mortal world who would neither attack, nor be particularly surprised when a Faerie portal opened up in his living room. As the head of the Council of Others, Rafael de Santos had grown used to unusual occurrences.

“I don't know,” Luc said, accepting the snifter Rafe handed him. “I'm beginning to think it might be the only thing that *can* help. At least if we're shit-faced, we won't realize how much this sucks.”

Rafe looked at him over the rim of his glass. “Even dead, this would suck, my friend.”

“True. Speaking of dead and sucking, though, how's Dmitri doing? I heard he got married. And I think someone said his bride was mortal.”

Rafe grinned and nodded. “He did indeed marry, earlier this spring. And “was” remains the operative word. He wed a charming young woman, who can now discard any worries over growing old. They had a lovely ceremony. Great caterer. Even better scenery.”

“Scenery?”

The grin widened. "The bride has some remarkably attractive friends. One of whom is currently expecting the Silverback Alpha's first cub."

"Graham bit it too? With another mortal?" Luc shook his head and downed a gulp of his brandy. "What's the world coming to?"

"Mating season, apparently."

"Does that mean you're feeling the call of the wild, too?"

Rafe shrugged. "We cats are more solitary than the Lupines. The wild only calls us for short stays, not permanent ones."

Luc stifled a chuckle. "Yeah, so I've noticed. But I admit that's a relief for me. I need all the help I can get finding Seoc. The last thing I need is for you to go off after some cute little furry thing and leave me to do this on my own. Or worse yet, some cute little mortal thing."

"Be careful, my friend. Your arrogance and Fae-centrism are showing."

Luc shifted in his seat. It wasn't that he disliked humans, precisely, but he couldn't understand how an Other like Dmitri or Graham could possibly have a lasting relationship with such a...mundane creature as a human. What could they possibly have in common?

"But you needn't worry," Rafe continued, twirling his snifter. "It shouldn't be difficult to find a man so determined to be seen as the Queen's nephew."

"You obviously don't know the Queen's nephew."

"I have not had that pleasure, no. But if he continues as he has been doing, I can hardly avoid the issue."

"Right. So if you were all so anxious to have him back in our hands, why didn't you do something about it?"

Rafe's shoulders lifted in a lazy, boneless shrug. "We talked about it, but we agreed that things would go much more smoothly if we didn't try to handle this ourselves. The last thing we want is to have an inter-dimensional incident on our hands."

Luc frowned.

"Like the kind that would happen if reports reached Mab that her nephew was being returned in a bucket," Rafe explained with a pointed look. "Some of our people have difficulty remembering their manners during a good game of chase, Luc. Even a Fae prince can look like prey if he's running fast enough."

"Great." Luc drained his brandy and set the glass aside. "So I get no help from your people because you can't manage to keep your fangs to yourselves?"

"I never said we wouldn't help, just that we didn't want to do this on our own. Dmitri, damn his pale, chilly hide, has already volunteered his assistance. Which is the least he could do, considering he left his position as head of the Council to me when he married." Rafe rose, crossed to a heavy, mahogany desk,

and rifled through a drawer. "Of course, his idea of 'assistance' and mine do not exactly match. He seems to feel he's doing his duty by leaving you this."

Luc took the piece of paper Rafe handed him and scowled. "What is it?"

"It is the name and contact information for a reporter with a small local newspaper. She is a friend of Dmitri's mate."

"You want me to go to the press? That's the plan?"

"Let me remind you of the 'Dmitri' part of that statement. *Dmitri* left you that, not I." Rafe resumed his seat and stretched his legs out before him in an elegant sprawl. "But the idea is not for you to let her interview you for the front page, friend. We thought someone like Corinne might have information resources that could be helpful in the search. If people have been reporting strange things in this city, they're likely to turn up in the *Chronicle*, which means that Corinne is likely to know about them."

Now that sounded almost helpful, even if the idea of involving a human made him a little wary. "You said this woman is a friend of Dmitri's mate. So she knows about the Others?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"But what?" Luc felt his eyes narrow into a glare.

"Corinne is perfectly aware of the existence of more than humans in this world, but from all accounts, the idea doesn't exactly thrill her. In my experience, she maintains a certain wariness around those she knows not to be human."

"Don't tell me she's some kind of racist."

Rafe shook his head, his mouth curving up at one corner. "I wouldn't go that far. She gives no evidence of hate, just wariness. She's perfectly polite and friendly with Dmitri and Graham and the other pack members she's met, as well as myself. I just don't think she trusts us." He grinned. "You two should have a lot in common."

Luc snorted. "Right. Does this Corinne think you're going to make a snack out of her?"

"Something like that." Rafe nodded to the paper Luc still held. "That's why we've given you her information, rather than telling her about you and suggesting she help out. We think things might go a bit more smoothly if you practice a wee bit of discretion when you ask for her assistance."

That didn't sound quite so helpful. "What do you mean by 'discretion'?"

Rafe's grin flashed quick and sharp and full of humor. "Lie."

"Oh, that'll make it easy to get on her good side. What, is she supposed to help me get Seoc back to Faerie out of the goodness of her heart?"

"If I were you, I wouldn't mention the word 'Faerie' at all."

He sighed. "I don't have time to spin an elaborate story to pacify some human who's afraid of her own shadow. My goal is to find Seoc as quickly as possible and get him out of Ithir as quietly as possible."

That doesn't leave me with a lot of time for pussyfooting around."

"I'm not suggesting you do." Rafe raised his glass to his lips. "I'm also not suggesting you think of Corinne as being afraid of much of anything."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ava, you terrify me."

"You're a wuss."

Corinne drained her glass of wine and rolled her eyes. "Still, if this is the revenge you have planned for your models for missing one shoot, I'm pretty sure I don't ever want to get on your bad side."

"You've been on my bad side before. You survived. Though I do reserve the right to inflict further revenge as I deem necessary." Ava crossed her elegant, silk-covered legs and leaned back in her immaculate white armchair. "Actually, Leena and Marlie have each missed two shoots now, which not only puts them on my shit list, it also qualifies them for a lower step on my pay scale. I don't dick around when it comes to business."

Curling her legs up under her on the matching white sofa, Corinne had a fleeting hope that her black socks wouldn't stain the upholstery. No matter how many times she visited Ava's apartment, the flawlessly decorated, spotlessly white surroundings always managed to make her feel like she'd just been rolling around in a mud pit. And that made her want to actually go roll around in a mud pit and track it all over the apartment, but that's just because she was spiteful.

"You'd think anyone you represent would know that," she said, setting aside her empty glass and rebalancing her notebook on her lap. "Are these the same girls who reported being stalked by—er, by the..."

"By the Lucky Charms guy? Yes, although they described him as something a little closer to the guy from the Tolkien movies."

Corinne made a face. "So I've heard. Did they file police reports or anything?"

"Hardly. That would have required brain power and clear thinking, for which neither of these girls has the capacity."

"That doesn't explain why the first person you decided to call about the whole situation was me."

Ava shook her head. "It wasn't a matter of choosing between you and the police, darling. The police couldn't do anything, since the girls had no evidence of any crime. I called you because I thought that if the situation extended outside of my clients' empty heads, someone in your line of work would have heard of it." She leveled a meaningful glance at her friend. "Clearly, I was correct."

"Unfortunately."

"So, what's going on?"



“I have no bloody idea.” Setting her notebook aside, Corinne let her head fall back onto the sofa cushions until she stared directly up at the plaster-detailed white ceiling. “First off, it’s just the weirdest damned thing I’ve ever heard of. I mean, people all over Manhattan reporting sightings of a leprechaun when it’s nowhere near the seventeenth or March and so far as I know, the city has not been pumping crack into the drinking water. All these witnesses tested as sober when they were questioned.”

“By the police?” Ava arched a slim, dark eyebrow.

Corinne snorted. “Hardly. Oh, a couple of them tried to file police reports, but they hadn’t seen any crimes being committed, and they were talking about fairies, for God’s sake, so the cops pretty much laughed them back out the door. No, the recorded statements we have are from a couple of tabloids and two fairly respectable PIs.”

“But there’s no evidence that any of these reports have any sort of credibility, is there?”

“Nope.” Corinne turned to look at her friend. “Have I mentioned I want to watch my boss be devoured by a pack of rabid gerbils?”

“Not yet. Gerbils?”

“They have small teeth. It would take longer than wolves or hyena.”

“Ah. Nonetheless, I have a feeling this story isn’t going away.” Unfolding her tall, elegant frame from her seat, Ava rose, collected the empty wine glasses and carried them back toward her kitchen. “I saw Mindy Daniels, from the TV station, at the Four Seasons this afternoon. She said even their program director is thinking of putting someone on it.”

Corinne groaned, loud enough to be sure Ava would hear her in the other room. “Shoot me. Just shoot me now.”

“Ha! Not if you’re going to bleed all over my carpet.”

“Remind me why we’re friends again?”

Ava reappeared in the living room holding the receiver from a cordless phone. “Because I just called a cab to take you home so you wouldn’t have to stand outside waiting in this heat, and I charged it to my account.”

“How is that a reason? Yeah, the cab is nice, but doesn’t that mean you’re kicking me out?”

“You said you wanted to leave by ten so you could get an early start in the morning with those, quote ‘loathsome interviews.’ End quote.”

Corinne sighed. “Right. So I suppose I can let this one slide. But I still don’t know what it says about me that I continue to hang out with you after the Fantasy Fix thing.”

“Let’s not start that again.” Ava picked up her friend’s backpack and held the straps while Corinne slipped into it. “I still say there’s nothing wrong with seizing the moment when a sexual fantasy just drops itself in your lap.”

“The only thing that’s dropped into my lap recently,” Corinne said, “is this damned story. And look how

far that's gotten me."

As she led the way to the door, Ava looked back over her shoulder and arched her brow. "You never did have any patience, Corinne, darling, but I'm sure you'll get yours one day."

Corinne snorted. "Knowing my luck, mine is the damned leprechaun."

## Chapter Four

Luc waited outside the human's apartment building for an hour before impatience got the better of him. When he'd talked to Dmitri and Regina after leaving Rafe's house, they had given him the woman's address and informed him that while her schedule varied, she usually arrived home by nine or so during the week. According to Regina, weekends presented more of a challenge.

"Corinne likes to...stay active," Dmitri's bride had reported. "And she's certainly not lacking for a social life. She just isn't the sort of woman to sit at home and wait for Mr. Right to call. She's too busy going out and killing time with Mr. You'll Do."

Regina sounded charmingly diplomatic when she said that, and Luc didn't have the heart to tell her a woman who enjoyed sex was hardly likely to shock the Fae. Humans were the only creatures he could think of off the top of his head that actually got hung up on sex. Regina, for instance, had even blushed when she told him about her friend. Only the repressive look on Dmitri's face had kept Luc from laughing. The vampire clearly doted on his new wife and would not take kindly to anyone embarrassing her by laughing at her modesty. Luc had been glad to leave them to their wedded bliss.

He had found Corinne's building easily, but after an hour outside in the steamy August weather, his patience ran out. He slipped through the front door behind another tenant, using a simple masking charm to remain unnoticed, then he took the stairs to the fourth floor and found apartment 405. Checking to be sure no one was around, he cupped her doorknob in one hand and placed the other over the deadbolt, trying to decide how badly he wanted the chance to look around before the owner returned.

"You know, when breaking and entering, I hear it's customary to make sure no one is around before you begin."

He turned at the sound of the voice to see a dark-haired, dark-eyed human woman striding down the hall to stop a couple of yards away from him. Judging by the photo Regina had showed him, the owner *had* returned, but he obviously hadn't looked at that photo closely enough. The woman standing in front of him now did things to his libido that photo hadn't even dreamed about. Damn, but she had caught him off guard.

He knew Rafe had said that Regina's friends all seemed to be remarkably attractive for humans, but for Lady's sake, Luc was Fae. He lived among the most beautiful females in creation, served as elite Guardsman to one who probably reigned as *the* most beautiful, so he certainly shouldn't be feeling this

surge of lust for a human.

Besides which, humans were just so...human. They had nothing special, not compared to an Other or a Fae or any of the other legions of creatures living in the worlds. No powers, no gifts, not even any real talent to speak of. Like a lot of others in Faerie, Luc had always thought of them as being a bit primitive and undeveloped. So why the hell did the sight of Corinne D'Alessandro to go directly to his groin?

She didn't so much surpass the normal notions of human female beauty as expand them. She had rich, olive skin and thick, dark hair the color of the onyx Mab wove into her crown every Samhain. She was taller than the average human, too, though still a good head or more shorter than he, and she had the sort of solid, human figure many Fae thought of as coarse and common. Luc found it tempting. Her curves made his hands itch to trace them, and her very substantiality seemed to call to him, made him ache to feel her press against him, heavy and warm and real. He wanted to hold her, to taste the curves and angles of her clear, classical features, to learn the earthy truth of her scent and the richness of her flavor.

What in the Lady's name was wrong with him?

"I did check," he said, shaking some sense back into himself and stepping away from the door. "You weren't there a second ago."

"Well, I'm here now. So if you plan on robbing someone, I suggest it not be me, since I can give the police a really good description at this point." Her gaze swept over him, maybe a little slower than necessary and that pleased him, before her chin jerked up and she crossed her arms over her chest. "And if you were actually here to try and sell me something, I'm already not interested."

"Not guilty, on either count. I was just looking for the woman who lives in 405." He pretended ignorance and waited for her response.

"Do you know her?"

"No, but I know friends of hers who gave me her address and suggested I look her up."

He waited for her to identify herself, but she just raised her eyebrows. "Really. What friends? And what's your name, while we're at it?"

He felt his mouth quirk. "The friends are Dmitri and Regina Vidâme, and if I admit to being Luc Macanaw, will that make you Corinne D'Alessandro?"

"That depends on how you know Reggie and Misha and whether or not you can show me some form of ID."

Ah, New Yorkers. Luc hadn't spent all that much time in Ithir, but it didn't take long to recognize a native of this mortal island. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a wallet full of the little details humans found so important. He kept it at Rafe's house for his occasional visits. "Driver's license?"

"It's a start."

She didn't approach, so he tossed the wallet to her and watched as she flipped it open and examined the small, plastic card that bore his photo. Her eyebrows shot up. "Lucifer?" she read. "No wonder you introduced yourself as Luc."

She spent a minute looking from the photo to Luc and back again before she closed the wallet with a snap and tossed it back to him. He assumed that he passed inspection, because this time when she met his gaze, hers looked warm and playful and assessing. He watched her hips sway gently as she crossed the short distance between them and fitted her key into the door.

“It’s too bad Regina sent you over here,” she said over her shoulder as she opened the lock. “I was hoping you were a present from Ava. You’re just the sort of Fantasy Fix I could learn to enjoy.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Corinne really hoped Luc couldn’t see how badly her hands trembled as she unlocked her door and led the way into her apartment. It wasn’t just because she found it damned embarrassing, but because she didn’t want him scared off by her intense desire to throw him down and have her way with him right in the middle of the hallway. She’d never wanted a man this fast or this badly before, but Luc made a heck of an exception to her rule.

When she had turned down the hallway to her apartment, her thoughts still centered on the story of her nightmares and the ridiculous interviews she would have to conduct tomorrow if she ever hoped to get it off her desk and onto Hank’s. So the last thing she expected to see in front of her doorway was a man fully engaged in breaking and entering her apartment. The fact that he turned out to be waiting for her was as unexpected as it was exciting, because this guy rated off the charts on her own personal drool-o-meter. Maybe she had been such a good girl that Santa was sending her present early. Either that, or she was hallucinating.

Okay, so a burglar wasn’t most people’s idea of an appropriate Christmas gift or heavenly reward, but Corinne had had a hard day and it had been weeks since her last date. She could be forgiven for a little bit of drooling over a man that gorgeous, even if he did have a larcenous streak. So her relief when they sorted out who he was and what he wanted turned into something very profound. It made her feel better knowing she hadn’t been lusting after a thug.

At least six-five or six-six—er, six- *six*—the man towered over not only her, but over every other man she’d ever dated, including the six-foot-two construction worker she’d drooled over for most of last summer. This guy wasn’t just tall, though; he had brawn to back up his height, with the kind of muscle definition most men would kill for.

His skin had a coppery-bronze hue, and his eyelashes were thicker and darker than any man’s had a right to be. They made his crystal-green eyes stand out and emphasized the dark, rich coffee color of his hair, which was at least long enough to be clubbed back into a ponytail. She couldn’t see how long it was, but her fingers already itched to run through it.

Long hair on a man pushed all her buttons, especially when it was just that particular shade, that brown so dark it looked black until the light hit it just right and pulled out those rich, chocolate highlights. She wanted to feel that hair wrapped around her while she climbed on top and rode him straight on ‘til morning.

Dear Lord!

Fighting hard to gain control of her hormones and her drooling, she flipped the light switch and led her unexpected visitor into her web—er, her living room.

She liked her apartment, which was probably why she intended to renew her lease when it came up next month. After a couple of years in the place, she thought she'd succeeded in making it cozy with large, overstuffed furnishings in warm, earthy shades and golden wood floors sparsely covered by colorful area rugs. She had been aiming for comfort and durability, but now fluffy pillows and ScotchGuard were the last things on her mind. All she could think about was how the sofa cushions would sink beneath her knees if she pushed him down, opened his faded black jeans and impaled herself on what she suspected had to be a truly impressive cock. Judging by the fit of those jeans, it looked like a pretty good bet.

Clearing her throat, Corinne shut the door behind them and shoved her hands into her pockets, instead of down his pants. What had gotten into her?

"So," she said, mostly to distract herself from the subject of his pants, and what waited inside, "you were lurking outside of my apartment for a reason, huh?"

He smiled, a small, restrained smile that made her desperate to nibble on something, like his earlobe. Or his cock.

She swore silently. She *had* to get control of those thoughts!

"I was going to stop by your office," he explained, "but by the time I called, they told me you'd left for the night. So I decided to see if I could catch you at home."

He could catch her anytime, and she'd probably thank him for it. Maybe even ask for more. Sheesh, she reflected, striding to the sofa and sitting down so she could cross her legs and press her thighs together without the move being quite so conspicuous. If anyone deserved to be named after history's most famous fallen angel, it was this Lucifer. She could picture him arguing with an irate deity. She could almost picture him winning. But she couldn't picture him harboring any jealousy toward mortals. Why should perfection get jealous? Besides which, if he had the same effect on all women that he had on her, the man clearly didn't need to see anyone as competition.

She forced herself to respond casually. "Now why did Reggie give you my name? Are you a friend of hers? Because she's never mentioned you." Trust me, I'd remember if she had.

"Well, I need a favor." He took a seat on the other end of the sofa and watched her through ridiculously green eyes. "But I'm more of a friend of Dmitri's, actually. I only met Regina last night. I've been...out of town."

Corinne felt her libido screech to a halt. She pried her gaze away from his crotch, where it had wandered completely without her knowledge. Honest. "Damn it," she muttered under her breath. "All the good ones are married, gay or another species. Shit."

"What was that?"

Her cheeks flushed, and she shook her head quickly, trying to hide her disappointment as she uncrossed her legs. "Uh, I was just wondering how long you've known Dmitri."

"Not as long as you're thinking, I assure you." His mouth remained unsmiling, but he was clearly amused. She wondered how he managed to do that, express things so clearly when his expression rarely changed. "I am about the furthest thing from a vampire you can get. This tan is the real thing. Sun-induced." He paused and leaned conspiratorially closer. "I don't suffer from the furry form of PMS,

either. I promise.”

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion, even as she felt herself begin to relax. Her libido certainly wasted no time in revving back up. She re-crossed her legs, the move inching her a tiny bit closer to him. “Are you reading my mind or something?”

Lucifer’s eyes twinkled. “Nope. Just your face. You’d make a pretty lousy poker player. Plus, Dmitri warned me you weren’t wild about people like him and Graham.”

When he put it that way, it made her sound like a racist. Species-ist. Whatever. “I like Dmitri and Graham just fine. They’re great guys.” And, no, she did *not* sound defensive, thanks. “It’s just a little new to me. How long have you known?” She refused to contemplate the surrealism of this conversation, or the fact that she’d apparently moved a few inches across the sofa cushions. She’d heard of magnetic men, but this was ridiculous.

“Years. I met them at a club in midtown about ten years ago. I admit it was weird at first, but you get used to it. So,” he said, shifting against the sofa cushions to bring himself a little nearer to her. “When I mentioned I was looking for someone to help me out, Misha mentioned you. Are you available?”

Oh, in all sort of ways. How do you want me?

She bit the inside of her lip until she could come up with a more reasonable—and less desperate sounding—answer. “I suppose that depends. What was it you needed help with?”

He stared at her, his eyes glinting wickedly. “The same thing you do, actually.”

Somehow she doubted he needed help keeping his panties from getting any damper. “Yeah, right.”

“It’s true. I’m looking for information, and I have to figure that if you’re an investigative reporter, that’s probably what you’re looking for too. Am I wrong?”

She raised an eyebrow and shifted closer. That had sounded suitably vague. “What kind of information?”

“It’s a bit of a long story.”

Corinne stifled the urge to suggest he tell her all about it while she got him naked. And was it her imagination, or had he been staring at her breasts before he gave that last answer? And, oh dear, she was close enough to touch him now, wasn’t she? “I’m not so sure how much help I’ll be if I don’t know what you want.”

Corinne wondered if Luc could see her eyes glazing over and her tongue hanging out. What was it about this man that made her ready to strip naked, open wide and get all acrobatic with him on the strength of a ten minute acquaintance? She had never been shy about sex, but this struck her as a wee bit excessive. It was a damned good thing he’d told her he wasn’t a vampire or anything, or she’d be panicking at the thought of him knowing what was going on in her dirty little mind. He had to be able to guess, though, considering the fact that during their brief conversation she’d managed to shimmy from one end of her sofa to the other until she had practically climbed onto his lap.

Blushing, and mortally embarrassed, she uncrossed her legs and made a move to push herself up out of her seat altogether, but he stopped her with a hand on her leg. On her thigh, actually. Her upper thigh. So



high that the edge of his hand brushed lightly against her shorts-covered pussy when she inhaled sharply.

How likely would he be to press charges if she just attacked him now? He saved her from finding out.

“Right now,” he murmured, leaning close enough that she could smell his spicy, minty breath when he spoke, “what I want is a little different from what I told Dmitri and Regina.”

Corinne heard choirs of angels, but that might have just been the huge echoing relief she felt when she finally gave in and buried her fingers in his sinfully dark hair.

“Oh, good,” she murmured, reaching her mouth up to his, “because they know too damned much about my sex life as it is.”

## Chapter Five

The first touch of her lips felt like home and tasted like brandied cream.

Luc growled his pleasure against her mouth and scooped her up into his lap, obsessed with getting closer to her. To hell with his scruples, with their different species, with the fact that she probably only wanted him because of the magic he exuded. At this point, he didn't care. All he cared about was that he wanted her in a way he'd never wanted another woman, and she was willing to give him what he needed. Everything else could sort itself out later.

Her lips parted eagerly for his tongue and he plunged deep, seeking the unpolluted taste of her, the flavor that lingered in the soft, inviting recesses of her mouth. He could sense in her the same lust that threatened to send him over the edge, which wasn't helping his struggle for control. It was a strange twist of fate that humans should find something about the Fae so irresistible when their people had chosen to live so far apart, but there it was. Not even glamours could hide the fact that the Fae were magic, nor keep some humans from sensing it. Corinne's lust was her reaction to that sense, and it was driving him out of his mind. Not that he minded if she lusted after him, but he still didn't know how to treat her. He knew humans and Fae were physically compatible, but he'd grown accustomed to taking the women he wanted without the elaborate mating rituals humans observed, and he didn't picture a human woman appreciating the bold sexuality so common among his people. Besides, somewhere in the back of his mind, he had the feeling he should care that it really wasn't him she lusted for, it was the magic he couldn't hide, not even behind the strongest glamour.

All Fae possessed glamour before all other magics, the simplest and yet most potent power they wielded. By casting a glamour on himself, a Fae could alter his appearance in the eyes of any living being, even other Fae, if he had particularly strong talents. It accounted for all the stories of the seductive beauty of his race. Tam Lin had indeed been captivated by the beauty of the Queen of Faerie, but at least a little bit of that beauty had come from Her Majesty's particularly strong glamours. Those very tricks usually proved the undoing of any relationships between Fae and mortal. For some reason, humans tended to get all bent out of shape when they discovered their perception of their lovers was based on a web of pretty

lies, and Luc guessed Corinne would be no exception to that.

He hadn't used a glamour to enhance his looks, just to disguise them. After Rafe's warning that Corinne held suspicions about anyone from a different species, they had decided Luc should use his magic to make himself appear human to Regina's friend. He didn't even use a big spell, just a few simple incantations that reshaped his ears into a more human (meaning, less pointed) form, softened some of the sharper angles to his features, and disguised the glow of enchantment all Fae wore like a visible aura. But a glamour was a glamour, and human senses occasionally got just enough of a taste of the magic that powered it to find it very seductive indeed. He was willing to bet Corinne wouldn't appreciate the difference between a big lie and a small one.

Still, with the taste of her lingering on his tongue, he wasn't all that sure he cared. All that mattered to him right now was the taste of her, the feel of her under his hands and the warm, musky smell of her arousal filling his senses.

"Mm." Her throaty moans drove him crazy. This human he'd been afraid of shocking apparently didn't know she was supposed to be significantly less aggressive than a Fae woman. Her hands released their grip on his hair and dove between their bodies. She shifted position, throwing one slim leg over his and turning until she straddled his lap, but she never interrupted their kiss. Their mouths fed on each other as she slipped her hands between them and attacked the buttons of his now too-tight jeans.

Luc barely remembered to stop himself from releasing them with magic. Instead of whisking them both naked with a flick of his fingers, he had to endure the maddening slide of her fingers over his engorged cock, the brush of knuckles against his shaft, as she struggled with metal and denim. When she finally got the last of the buttons open, she moaned her relief against his mouth and slid her hands inside the open jeans to close reverently around him. Slim, feminine fingers curled around his cock, measuring his width and assessing his hardness. Lady knew, there was no way on Ithir he could possibly get any harder, short of turning completely to stone. And even then, it would be a close call.

Her other hand burrowed lower until she could cup his balls in her palm. The satisfied purr she gave when she did that almost finished him in her hands, and he'd be damned if he'd let go of so much as a drop of his seed before he got inside her.

He tore his mouth from hers just long enough to strip his shirt over his head and toss it away. Before he had time to grasp the hem of hers, she dove headfirst for his bare chest and laid her warm, clever tongue against the hollow of his throat. Shit. Between her stroking hands and her darting tongue, he didn't stand a chance. So much for trying not to scare her. At this point, it was either scare her or disappoint her. Easing her hands from around his cock and other, more sensitive bits, he went for the fear.

In one dizzy rush of motion, he stripped her T-shirt over her head and tumbled her back onto the sofa. Before she could do more than blink up at him, he had her shorts, shoes and socks off and was kicking his jeans off to join the pile of abandoned clothes on the floor. Naked, he forced her legs wide apart and settled himself in the saddle of her hips, his cock poised at the entrance of her already weeping pussy.

Bracing the weight of his torso on one hand, he curved the other around her breast, flicked his thumb over her erect little nipple and grinned down at her.

"Hey," she protested, even as she parted her thighs wider and wrapped her smooth, golden legs around his hips. "You're not fighting fair. I was enjoying myself."

Luc ducked his head until he could scrape his teeth over the delicate tendon along her shoulder. "I'm not

fighting at all.” He inhaled deeply to capture her scent. It was a heady mix of honeysuckle, clove and warm, willing woman. “And I’d much rather we enjoy ourselves together. What do you say?”

He rocked his hips against hers, savoring the music of her whimpering gasp. The entrance of her pussy bathed him in hot moisture, easing his way, luring him inside her waiting passage. Goddess, he couldn’t wait to be inside her.

Teeth clenched, he rose up above her, watching the arch of her throat as she threw her head back, the fluttering of her eyelashes when he gently kneaded her full breast. He eased his hips forward until the head of his cock pressed hard against her entrance—not inside her, but poised to thrust home. “Well?” he demanded through gritted teeth. “Do you want me, Corinne?”

Her eyes flew open and glared up at him, snapping with heat and need. She released her grip on the sofa cushions and sank her nails deep into his shoulders even as she locked her ankles together more firmly behind his back. “What do you *think*?” she hissed as she drew into a tight coil of energy beneath him and used the strength of her legs to slam her hips up hard against his.

His cock sliced deep inside her, driving into her like a battering ram, but she flowed slick and hot in welcome. He could feel her heels digging into his spine, but he didn’t care. All he cared about was the feel of this woman beneath him, around him, lifting her hips to meet his thrusts as he began to fuck her with a fast, brutal rhythm.

Corrine cried out, her head dropping back to the cushions even as her hands clutched frantically at his shoulders. She tugged as if to pull him nearer, and Luc obeyed, pressing their sweat-slick bodies together from neck to groin as he continued to pound her cunt. He’d never felt anything as amazing as this woman’s body and the sensations it created in him. He fucked her as if he wanted to crawl inside her skin, to get so close to her that not even the air could separate them.

The feel of her breasts cushioning his chest drove him crazy, almost as crazy as the pleading whimpers that issued from her parted lips every time he hilted inside her. He crushed her mouth under his, swallowing those whimpers, catching them on her tongue and returning them in the form of his own deep, rumbling groans.

For hours he fucked her—or what seemed like hours to his fevered brain—but in the end, she was the one who climaxed on an echoing scream, leaving him to follow when he could. With the strength of her internal muscles milking his shaft, it didn’t take him long. Three hard, endless thrusts later, he exploded, emptying his entire self into her, until all he could do was sink heavily atop her and wonder whether this amazing woman was really human after all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Corinne lay beneath him, pussy throbbing, lungs aching, muscles burning, and struggled to remember the last time she had been this wrung out by sex. She couldn’t. She’d never experienced anything like it. It had been like being hit by a tidal wave, lusting after him the minute she saw him. The urgency and desire... it had been like being under a compulsion, giving her no choice but to take him as soon as possible.

Wary, she checked for any lingering signs of that driving need, but it seemed to be gone. Oh, she still wanted him, but this time she felt she could wait another few minutes if she had to. Though she’d like it if

she didn't have to.

He covered her like a blanket, even if he did weigh a hell of a lot more, blocking out the lights. Her closed eyelids probably helped with the whole light-blocking thing, but who was she to quibble? At the moment, she probably couldn't even spell quibble, and she was too busy trying to catch her breath to try.

Mental note, though. As soon as she could remember how to write, she needed to send Reggie a thank you note. This was by far the best present she'd ever received.

Luc stirred above her, nuzzling the curve of her shoulder, stroking his hands down her sides to cup her ass for an affectionate squeeze. Humming in pleasure, she shifted beneath him, stretching abused muscles and not even wincing at the resulting aches.

"Are you okay?" His deep voice sounded even deeper, more like a rumble of distant thunder. She felt it as much as heard it.

"Mm, I thought I was pretty damned fabulous, didn't you?"

He chuckled, his shoulders shaking beneath her fingers. "Oh, absolutely. But I was actually wondering if I hurt you."

If her eyes had been open, she'd have rolled them. "Oh, please. Is that like in a manual all men read or something, that you all feel compelled to ask afterward?" She turned her head until she could reach his shoulder and taste the salty tang of his skin. "Trust me, I'm not easy to hurt, and if you did manage it, I can guarantee I wouldn't have come screaming. Pain equals not my kink."

He grunted in satisfaction and pulled her closer, his half-erect cock still buried inside her. It flexed with the movement, as if waking up from a comfortable doze. Corinne wondered what his average recovery time was like.

She debated seeing how much effort it would take to find out, but couldn't work up the energy to exert herself. She felt too warm and sated and cozy to get all ambitious like that. Though now that she thought about it, being able to breath would be nice.

She nudged his shoulder. "Luc?"

He grunted but didn't move. Typical male.

"Luc, I hate to ruin the mood here, but you're getting kind of heavy, and I'm starting to think those spots I'm seeing might be a sign of oxygen deprivation rather than just good sex."

"Great sex," he corrected, but he was already wrapping his arms around her and flipping so that he lay on his back on the sofa and she draped over him instead. "But yeah, since I probably outweigh you by a good hundred pounds."

Corinne definitely approved of the switch. He made an excellent mattress. Extra firm for comfortable support. Now she had room to stretch, which she did with great satisfaction, the friction of her skin gliding over his bringing a satisfied smile to her face. Satisfied, hell. She probably looked like the Cheshire cat. Only bustier. And most definitely hornier.

Bringing her knees up alongside his hips she decided maybe she did have the energy to test his recovery

time after all. She pushed herself to a sitting position, which sent his cock deeper inside her and made her smile turn a bit too naughty to be compared to a character in a children's novel. She planted her hands on his chest and lifted her hips, feeling him harden fully inside her, before sinking slowly back around him. Oh, yeah. Definitely naughty.

She opened her eyes, wanting to watch his face while she rode him. She wanted to see if she could read his reactions and drive him as crazy as he'd driven her. Judging from his expression, she thought she might be off to a pretty decent start. His eyes had narrowed to sharp slivers of green so intense they seemed almost to glow. The color looked even darker and more vibrant than she remembered. In fact, everything about him seemed more intense than it had an hour ago. His eyes looked more exotically slanted, the slash of his brows, darker and sharper. His cheekbones seemed more prominent, and the line of his jaw looked like it could have been chiseled from granite.

Blinking, Corinne shook her head as if to clear it. Apparently, great sex could affect a person's vision, too.

Luc's hands closed around her hips, fingers biting into her flesh as he encouraged her to sink more heavily onto his cock. He guided her into a steady rhythm of long strokes designed to make her feel each individual inch of penetration and withdrawal. She moaned when he began to thrust his hips up to meet her down strokes, the force driving him deep enough to tickle against the mouth of her womb. He filled her so fully she thought he might begin to pour out of her ears in another minute or two.

Her hands clenched in the unyielding muscle of his chest, and she locked her elbows to keep her arms straight and give her even more leverage to ride him faster. He matched her pace seamlessly, his body flowing into hers, muscles bunching and shifting beneath her.

"Bend down."

He gave the order in a voice so harsh with gravel it took her a moment to realize it was more than a wordless groan.

"Bend down," he repeated. "I need to taste you."

Well, in that case... She bent, bringing herself within reach, until his mouth closed hot and strong around her nipple, and she whimpered in pleasure. He drew on her with hard suckling motions, as if he could draw her heart out through her breast. The little bud contracted, beading tight against his tongue. The feel of his mouth on her sent shockwaves straight to her pussy and she cried out, wrapping her arms around his head to cradle him closer.

He rewarded her with a delicate nibble, then his teeth closed around the base of her nipple and bore down, not hard enough to injure, but more than hard enough to make her clench tight around him. Holding her nipple prisoner, he flicked the sensitive tip with his tongue in a rhythm as fast as a hummingbird's wings. She moaned, loudly this time, and felt the coil of tension inside her wind even tighter. If she didn't come soon, she was sure her heart would stop, undone by the strain.

Whimpering, she wrapped one hand in the long, silky strands of his hair and slid the other between their bodies, finding her clit and circling it with urgent fingers. He moaned against her breast and lifted her torso away from him.

"Sit up," he growled. "Sit back where I can see you. I want to watch you touch yourself while you come."

“Then don’t blink.” She threw her head back and worked her fingers faster even as she slammed her hips against his at a frantic pace. Three strong thrusts and the scrape of her fingernail against her swollen flesh, and she was done. She came on a long, quivering moan, her pussy clenched tight around him, milking his cock with strong, rippling pulls until he joined her in the shattering pleasure. Wanting to see his face while he came, she forced her eyes to open and watched as his jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed and his mouth twisted into a fierce expression. Then his eyes flew open as well and their gazes locked, green to brown, while he poured himself into her.

That’s when she noticed the glow.

At first she tried to blink it away, but the glow remained, a bright, golden aura that radiated from him like a halo. It made her eyes widen and her jaw drop, but when she tried to withdraw the hand that had been wrapped in his long hair, the strands shifted and exposed a graceful and decidedly pointed ear.

“Oh, shit,” she whispered. “What the hell are you?”

## Chapter Six

He stiffened as if she’d just scalded him. “What do you mean, what am I? What do I look like?”

“If I knew that, would I be asking?” Her voice sounded slightly hysterical, even to her, but damn it, she’d never fucked a man with pointy ears and glowing skin before. “But you sure as hell aren’t human.”

“Shit. You can see the real me, can’t you?” He didn’t wait for an answer, just swore again and pushed himself into a sitting position. “I can’t believe it. Of all the women in all the worlds, it had to be a frickin’ human.”

Corinne didn’t stop to ask him what the hell he was talking about. She was too busy being shocked by what she’d just discovered. Please, oh please, oh *please* do not tell me I just fucked some kind of monster.

As mantras went, it wasn’t terribly PC, but then, she didn’t terribly much care.

She felt him tense beneath her, which reminded her she was still on top of him, still filled with him, and she scrambled to separate herself. She only managed to get as far as her knees before his hands shot out and caught her, tumbling her back onto the sofa. He pinned her there with his body, stretched above her like before, only this time, he didn’t look all drowsy and sated. He looked angry. And dangerous.

“Well, that’s one way to kill the mood,” he growled, catching her flailing hands by the wrists and pinning them down beside her head. “Did anyone ever tell you that you can be kind of a bigot?”

Corinne jerked at her hands, which was kind of like jerking against iron manacles, and scowled up at



him. “‘Bigot’ is a religious term, you jerk, so unless you’re some sort of foreign god or something—” She froze and practically *felt* herself turn green. “Oh, shit. You’re not some sort of god are you?”

He snorted. “If I were, you’d think I’d have a better way of dealing with your little tantrum than just pinning you down and trying to reason my way through your thick skull, wouldn’t you?”

She indulged in a single sigh of relief before she went right back to trying to squirm her way free. “I have an idea for you. How about you forget trying to deal with my ‘little tantrum,’ and get your sorry, no good, lying ass *off of me* !”

She managed to free one hand just long enough to whack him squarely across the jaw. It wasn’t a little girly slap, either. She curled her hand into a tight fist and planted him one. He responded by cursing in a language she didn’t recognize and getting a better grip on her wrist this time.

“I’ll get off you when I’m good and ready,” he said, rearing up to avoid her snapping teeth, “and that’s not going to be until you calm down and listen to reason.”

“Reason with this!” Bucking madly, she launched her knee toward his groin, hoping to send his balls careening into his throat, but all she hit was smooth thigh. The man had reflexes like a cat on speed. Before she could even swear about missing, he had her flipped onto her stomach, with her wrists pinned together behind her and his free hand wrapped around a fistful of her dark hair. The bastard even put his knee in the small of her back to keep her still.

“See what happens when you refuse to behave like a civilized adult?”

As God was her witness, he would pay for that tone of voice. “Who are you to talk about civilized?” she demanded through clenched teeth. “At least *I’m* human.”

He laughed at her. “And you think humanity is the highest pinnacle of civilization? Baby, you have got a whole lot to learn, but I don’t really have the time to teach you.”

“If you’re in such a damned rush, how about letting me go and getting the hell out of my apartment.”

“I can’t. I wasn’t lying about needing your help.”

Her jaw would have dropped in shock if her face hadn’t been pinned to the sofa cushions. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You honestly think I would help you now? What sort of crack are you smoking?”

“A different brand from you, obviously. Do you get some sort of charge out of acting like an unreasonable brat?”

“Brat?” She *had* to be hearing things, right? Because he could not have just called her a brat. “Excuse me, Mr. It’s-So-Mature-To-Solve-An-Interpersonal-Conflict-With-Physical-Force, but I think you’re losing sight of the big picture here. How am I the one acting like a brat, when you’re the one who lied to me, seduced me, turned out to be something other than human after vowing to me you weren’t, and is now pinning me down to my own sofa and practically twisting my arms out of their sockets?”

“First off, unless you have some old shoulder injury you haven’t told me about, I’m putting absolutely no strain on your arms by holding them this way.” He gave her a second to respond, but she kept stubbornly silent. She was not in the mood to tell him he was right.

“Secondly,” he continued, “I never said I was human; I just said I wasn’t a vampire or a werewolf. And I’m not. And third, I wouldn’t be pinning you to your sofa if I thought for one second I could trust you to sit up and talk to me like a reasonable being.”

Corinne growled. “You haven’t addressed the lying.”

“I was getting to that, but I was going to give you the opportunity to behave before I got to the complicated parts.”

She sneered. Into the sofa. Which sort of ruined the effect. “How generous of you.”

“Can it.”

He moved quickly, pulling her up to her knees, shifting her pinned hands in front of her and dropping her onto her ass. At least now she was sitting up, but he still kept a firm grip on her wrists, and now she could see the ticked off expression on his face. She wasn’t ready to admit that he had any reason to be ticked off.

“If you can sit here and listen like an adult, I won’t pin you again, but if you try to run or hit me, you’re going back down. Understood?” He just sat and stared at her, obviously waiting for a response. She managed a disgruntled nod. “Good. Now, about the lying.”

She glared up at him. “Yes, let’s discuss the lying.”

“Give it a rest, Corinne. What would you have done? I needed your help and I knew you don’t trust Others. It was the easiest way for all of us.” His beautiful mouth turned down in a frown. “You sure as hell weren’t supposed to find out I’m Fae.”

“You’re what?” Corinne heard the words, but for the life of her, she couldn’t manage to make them make sense. If she’d thought her life was surreal when she’d been in Regina’s nighttime wedding to a vampire business tycoon, that had nothing on her present situation.

“Fae,” Luc repeated. Seeing her blank look, he sighed. “As in Faerie.”

Corinne couldn’t help it. She burst out laughing. “Sure, Tinkerbell. Pull the other leg while you’re at it.”

He growled. “That’s half the problem with you humans. We leave your world for a couple of thousand years and either you forget all about us, or you reduce us to cheery little balls of pink tutu-clad good cheer.”

Every time she tried to stop laughing, a chuckle escaped. She just couldn’t keep from picturing him two inches tall and wearing pink tights. At least, until she really looked at his face, and then she sobered right up. “You’re serious? You honestly want me to believe you’re a Faerie?”

“No, I want you to believe I’m Fae. Faerie was just the most convenient word I could use to make you understand. Faerie is a place. Fae means a being from Faerie. Calling someone a Faerie is like calling someone a France.”

Corinne nodded, then shook her head, then nodded again. Then she just sat there and felt confused. “Okay, what kind of crack am I smoking? Because this has got to be a hallucination.”

Shaking his head, Luc sat down next to her and rubbed his hands over his face. “No such luck. For either of us.”

She scowled at him. “What do you mean, ‘for either of us’? You’re not the one who just got sucked into the *Twilight Zone* .”

“Neither are you. Give me a break, Corinne, but this can’t be *that* big a shock. You already knew about vampires and werewolf. What makes the Fae so different?”

“I fucked one.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Being Fae is not contagious.”

She scowled. Again. Maybe her face was going to freeze that way. “But this changes...everything. You don’t understand.”

“Yeah,” he muttered. “I do.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Luc understood only too well. In fact he understood things Corinne knew nothing about, and damned if this wasn’t the worst of all possibilities. The last thing he wanted—or needed—while he was stuck in Ithir looking for the Queen’s nephew was to find his heartmate. But here she was, and apparently no happier about it than he was.

It didn’t help that she had no idea what was going on and he didn’t have the time to explain. Hell, he didn’t have the energy to explain either, not when the entire thing had broadsided him out of nowhere. Finding a heartmate didn’t exactly happen every day. As far as he knew, it didn’t even happen every lifetime, so how was he supposed to explain to a human that Fate had determined they were meant to be together for all eternity? The mind boggled.

He could understand her feeling that everything had changed, though, because it had. The minute she had looked at him and seen through his glamour, reality had reshaped itself, from a romp with a human he needed to complete his mission, to the first union with his heartmate. Just like that.

There was no other way she could have seen through the magic. Glamours didn’t fade in a couple of hours, and they didn’t require maintenance. Once cast, they just existed, for weeks or even years until the Fae who cast them called them back. Even another Fae shouldn’t have been able to see Luc’s real appearance once the magic had been cast. No one was supposed to be able to see the truth. Except for a heartmate.

The gods definitely appreciated a little irony.

Anu had. According to legend, the Great Goddess of the Fae had created heartmating. Disappointed by her Fae children and their tendency to hide behind pretty masks and to shape the appearance of things to suit themselves, She had placed them under an enchantment of sorts. According to Anu’s wishes, while the Fae might continue as masters of Illusions, that great power would be balanced by a great vulnerability: Love’s Truth. From the day she first commanded it, each Fae had to recognize that at the moment he mated with his true love, their hearts would be irrevocably bound and the Fae’s power of

Illusion would never again deceive his heartmate. Even if all the rest of the world believed in the Fae's spells, his heartmate would see through the magic to the truth.

It made a romantic story to tell the little ones, but it wreaked havoc on Luc's plans. If Corinne was his heartmate, he wouldn't be able to charm her into helping him, nor would he be able to leave her with a peck and a thank you when he was finished. She was his now, and leaving her—ever—had ceased to be an option.

He turned to say something, and got a mouthful of denim. Corinne had snagged his jeans from the floor and flung them at his head, probably wishing they were something more like a rock.

"Put something on," she snapped. "If you're planning to give me a long-winded explanation about how you didn't do anything wrong by *lying* to me and *luring* me into *sex* under *false pretenses*, I'd really rather neither of us was naked."

She pulled her T-shirt on over her head and yanked her shorts up her legs, leaving her bra and underwear on the floor. He swallowed a groan. Right, like knowing about that wasn't supposed to distract him.

He tugged on his jeans anyway, buttoning up without taking his eyes off her face. "I really don't think either of us has time to—"

"It's either start with the truth-telling, or go straight to the apartment-leaving and my-life-getting-out of." She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him, and he couldn't help thinking that expression about glaring and daggers might have some basis in fact. He had to stop himself from checking for puncture wounds.

"Fine," he said, gesturing for her to take a seat on the sofa, "but get comfortable. This is a long story."

## Chapter Seven

The story wasn't that long, but it still left Corinne with the same feeling she'd had after reading *War and Peace*—the one that went something like, "Du-huh?" She understood the part about his reasons for coming to... well, he kept calling it "Ithir," but since she wasn't quite ready to deal with any "alternate realities" stuff, she'd just stick to saying Manhattan. The part about him being a personal Guard to the Faerie Queen and having been assigned to come here and fetch the Queen's nephew back to... where he'd come from... made a sort of fantasy-novel sense, but after that, he lost her.

"I still don't get why you didn't just tell me why you needed my help in the first place."

He rubbed his hand around the back of his neck and raised an eyebrow. "And you would have immediately leapt to my aid and made everything all right?"

Her mouth twisted. “Well, no. But I probably wouldn’t have hit you.” *I wouldn’t have fucked you, either*, she thought, but she left that part out.

“I couldn’t risk it. I really do need your help if I’m going to find Seoc before he causes any more trouble.”

Seoc—pronounced “shock” as near as she could tell—sounded like he’d gotten a bum deal from his relatives back home. All he’d apparently done was take a tour of the city, and where was the harm in that? “What’s so dangerous about him being...here? I mean, you’re, er...Fae...and you’re here. The world hasn’t come to an end yet.”

“I’m not trying to make it come to an end. Seoc might be. The problem really isn’t him being here to begin with, it’s that he’s interrupting the flow of reality for mortals.”

She felt that “du-huh?” thing coming over her again.

“Okay, look at it this way,” he said. “Why do Graham and Dmitri and the Others work so hard to keep ordinary mortals from becoming aware that they exist?”

“Because they’re afraid of how we’d react, that’d we’d try to exterminate them or put them in a lab and study them or something.”

“Right, because they know that humans are not willing to acknowledge right now that what they think of as the supernatural—as magic—exists.”

Corinne nodded. “Yeah, they think we’re primitive morons.”

He sighed. “Compared to most other species, you are. Primitive, not morons. Werewolf were around for millennia before humans appeared on Ithir, and even though vampires were once human, they have a much deeper connection to magic than their human cousins ever did. And Fae...well, we left Ithir about the same time humans started realizing that round things made nifty accessories for the bottoms of their sleds. In relative terms, humans are like infants to us.”

She couldn’t decide if she felt confused or just insulted. Or maybe both. “Right. We’re the cosmic equivalent of amoebae. Great. But that doesn’t explain why it’s so important to interrupt this Seoc guy’s tour of Ithir.”

“Actually, it does. The Fae left Ithir because the humans couldn’t wrap their minds around our magic, and rather than hide, like the Others, we removed ourselves from this world and closed the doors after us. But what do you think would happen if someone found the doors and showed everyone where they were?”

Put like that, the idea made Corinne squirm in her seat. She could imagine just what would happen. People would either be frightened or fascinated. The frightened ones would try to destroy what they didn’t understand, and the fascinated ones would trample it in their eagerness to experience it for themselves.

Luc nodded. “Exactly. A person can learn to cope with a shift in their reality, but *people*, as a group, are a different story. If Seoc keeps this up, he’s going to open those doors. Then Ithir and Faerie will both suffer for it.”

“Suffer, how?”

“Faerie would be overrun by humans. Some of them would be honestly curious, but some of them would be afraid or greedy or malicious and would destroy the world we’ve spent centuries building for ourselves.”

Yeah, she could see where that would suck. As much as she wanted to defend her fellow humans from being maligned, people did tend to be a hell of a lot stupider and more selfish than a person could ever be. As a reporter, she’d seen enough of the destruction people could create to know that.

She must have hesitated too long for his taste, though, because his eyes narrowed in a glare and he growled his next sentence.

“Then there’s the fact that if the balance between Ithir and Faerie shifts, all of the creatures we took with us when we left would come pouring back into your world. When was the last time you saw a real live nightmare?”

“Do you count?”

Okay, that was a low blow, but damn it, this was *weird* !

“I’m serious, Corinne.” He sounded as if he was scolding her, and she fought the instinct to apologize. This was *her* world he was turning upside down, not the other way around. “This is bigger than your pique, damn it. Now are you going to be reasonable and help me out, or are you going to hide your frickin’ head in the sand and make me do this on my own?”

“I ought to.” Her teeth clenched so tightly she had to spit the words to get them out. How dare he take her to task for not leaping at the chance to become some sort of comic book crusader? “I ought to just leave you to do this your damned self. If I was dumb enough to be lied to, I must be too dumb to help, right?”

“Has anyone else ever told you that you bring out the urge to commit violent acts?”

“No, it’s just you.” She watched him close his eyes, take three deep, slow breaths, and unclench his fists. She counted to ten along with him.

When his eyes opened again, the glazed look had faded a little and he spoke with excruciating politeness. “Would you please fill me in on what you’ve heard about Seoc? Where he’s been seen, who reported it, that kind of thing.”

She might as well, she decided. He didn’t intend to take no for an answer—she could tell that just by looking at him—and maybe if they put their heads together, they could actually figure out where this Seoc guy had gotten to. Maybe Luc would even see some pattern to the witnesses that she had missed. “A rabbi, three models, a sex shop owner and a bartender.”

He scowled. “Walk into a bar, or are stranded on a desert island? I don’t have time for this, Corinne.”

Corinne rolled her eyes. “I’m answering your question about what witnesses there have been to the ‘leprechaun’ thing, not setting up a bad joke.”

Luc snorted. “Somehow I’m not convinced there’s a difference.” Pause. “They thought he was a



leprechaun?”

“What? Is that one imaginary creature who really is imaginary?”

“No, they’re real. But they’re short, ugly, foul-tempered little bastards. You can’t mistake one for being Fae.”

“Yeah, well, the witnesses must have missed that day of Things That Don’t Exist 101.” She retrieved her backpack from the floor where she’d dropped it and brought it back to the sofa. Digging out her notebook, she flipped open to the section marked, “What Did I Do to Deserve This?” and skimmed through her notes. “None of the initial reports were all that much help. They all saw basically the same thing: tall blond guy, brick walls, bright lights, disappearing trick. Of course, the initial reports are more like third-hand scuttlebutt, since the police weren’t exactly interested in filing reports on the ravings of folks they assumed should be in Bellevue.”

“Did the witnesses talk to anyone other than the police?”

“A couple of tabloids, a PI or two. Those reports aren’t much better, though.” She snapped her notebook shut. “That’s why I had intended to start doing interviews tomorrow. I need to talk to the witnesses firsthand if I’m going to get to the bottom of anything.”

Luc nodded. “Great. Then that’s what we’ll do.”

“Um, excuse me?” Had he not been paying attention for the last 45 minutes while she’d been ripping him a new asshole? “What’s with this ‘we,’ white man? This is my story, and I’ll do the research if it kills me. I’ll even agree to share my information with you, but you are not coming along with me on my interviews.”

“Yes. I am.”

She rolled her eyes heavenward and prayed for patience. “Why do I always have to deal with the difficult ones?”

“Has it ever occurred to you that maybe you’re the one who’s being difficult?”

“Considering that I was living my life and minding my own business until you showed up and turned it all upside down on me? Hmm, let me think.” She pursed her lips, tapped her index finger against them, stared up at the ceiling and counted to three. “Um, no.”

“Does this mean we’re going to fight again?”

His long hair had come loose from its club while they were fucking like bunnies, and he hadn’t bothered to pull it back again. It draped over his shoulders and bare chest like a blanket of dark silk, making her palms itch to stroke it. Clearly he wasn’t playing fair, to have hair like that.

She ignored the endearing, adorable-little-boy look on his face and crossed her arms over her chest. “No, actually. It means that you’re going to vacate my apartment before I get testy, and I’m going to do my interview alone tomorrow. If you manage not to piss me off between now and then, I’ll even be sure to tell you what I found out.”

He heaved a sigh of bone-deep weariness and rose to his feet, stretching to his full six and a half feet of

height so he could tower over her with ease. “Yeah, we’re going to fight.”

The man was as thick as the *Sunday Times*. “We. Are. Not. Fighting.” She took care to enunciate each word, just in case English wasn’t his first language. Who knew? Maybe they spoke something else in Faerie. “You are leaving, I’m going to bed, and if you want to know how my interview goes, call me tomorrow night. Got it? Good.”

She stomped toward the door, trying to pretend that he had actually made a move to follow. She wasn’t that gullible.

“You have no idea how badly I wish I could just put you under a sleep spell,” he said, from his very not-moving spot near the sofa. “It would make my life so much easier.”

Corinne could feel herself blanch. The idea that he could use magic on her had never occurred to her. Of course, she’d never known a Fae before. “You could do that?”

“Not to you,” he grumbled.

“Thank Go—er, I mean, how come?”

He hesitated. “For the same reason you could see that I wasn’t human before. My magic doesn’t work on you.” She opened her mouth to ask him why not, but he cut her off. “It does work on other people, though. Which is one of the reasons why I need to be with you at your interview tomorrow. I’ll be able to tell if the person you talk to is lying. I might even be able to help him remember details they can’t consciously recall.”

If that was true, it might be useful to have him along, but she’d be damned if she planned to let him know she felt that way. Instead of agreeing, she heaved a pained sigh. “You’re not going to give up on this, are you?”

Luc shook his head. “Nope.”

“Fine.” She scooped up her notebook, scribbled out the address of interview number one, ripped out the page and held it out to him. “Then meet me here tomorrow at ten a.m., and we’ll see what we can find out.”

He glanced down at the address and his mouth quirked. “The Pink Pillow?”

“Yes, I agree that it’s a ridiculous name, but that’s where our first witness is. He’s the owner.”

“Ah, the sex shop owner. I’m really glad it isn’t the rabbi.”

Corinne refused to laugh. “Ten o’clock,” she repeated, crossing back to the door and yanking it open.

He looked out into the hallway, then back at her, and a slow, wicked grin spread across his face. “Oh, Corinne,” he murmured, stepping closer to her and pushing the door gently closed. “Guess what else I’m not giving up on?”

\* \* \* \* \*

He saw the protest register in her eyes before she even opened her mouth, and he stopped it with his tongue. He had more interesting things in mind than protests. Sinking deep into the moist cavern of her mouth, he immersed himself in her flavor again and moaned. Lady, but she tasted good. She heated his blood like Faerie wine, but went to his head twice as fast. Both of them, in fact. He was hard the instant he touched her.

He filled his hands with her, wrapping his arms around her and lifting her against him. One palm cupped her ass, kneading gently, while the other curled around the back of her skull to hold her in place for his kiss, if kiss was the right word. He wanted to devour her.

The small noises she made in the back of her throat shot through him like magical energy. They sounded soft and helpless and docile, so unlike the woman who made them, and the contrast fascinated him. He traced them to their source, tearing his mouth from hers to forge a trail to her throat with licks and nibbles and consuming kisses. With his tongue pressed against her skin, he could feel the vibrations rumble through her vocal cords every time she made a sound, but knew he still hadn't found the source. These noises came from deeper inside her.

"Luc." She pressed her hands feebly against his shoulders, but he refused to budge. When he had his hands on her, the last thing he felt inclined to do was to let her push him away. "You realize..." she was panting, "that this...uhn...this isn't solving...anything?"

"I don't care."

"Right. Well. In that case."

She stopping pushing him away and wrapped her legs around his waist, hooking her ankles together behind his back and holding him tight. He grunted in satisfaction and looked up from exploring the delicate skin over her collarbone just long enough to scan for a doorway.

"Which way is the bed?"

"Left."

He took the doorway to the left, walked down a short hall and saw the partly open door to her bedroom. Shouldering his way inside, he carried her to the side of the too narrow bed and dropped her. She bounced on the springy mattress.

"You need a bigger bed." The complaint didn't stop him from shucking off his clothes and setting straight to work on hers, but he thought it needed to be said. He was a big man, and since he intended to be spending a lot of his time in the future getting horizontal with her, it seemed important to have the proper surface. "This is too small for both of us."

She stripped off her shirt and sent it flying across the room. "So either learn to be inventive, or find someone else to crawl into bed with."

The thought left him cold. Corinne was his heartmate. Now that he had found her, he wouldn't be crawling anywhere with anyone else. Ever again. Rather than stifling him, the thought comforted him and he found himself looking forward to a future full of this prickly human.

"I think not." He reached out to grab her by the ankle and pull her to the side of the bed. She slid easily

across the cool bedspread and ended up with her hips balanced on the edge of the mattress and her legs dangling over the sides. He solved that problem by kneeling in front of her and hooking her knees over his shoulders. "I think I'll just improvise."

With a wicked grin, he bent toward her and sank his tongue deep between the tender folds of her sex.

He heard her cry out, but vaguely, since the blood rushing to his head made it difficult to hear anything. She tasted crisp and rich and tangy on his tongue, as smooth as cream and as complex as aged whisky. His tongue traced patterns through her cleft, seeking out the subtle variations of taste and texture, the sensitive places that made her whimper and cry out.

When he closed his teeth around her clit, she moaned, and when he suckled it like a little nipple, she bucked against his mouth. He felt her fingers burrow into his hair, sifting through the strands, cradling him to her. He growled and flicked his tongue against her captive bud, feeling it pulse with the beat of her heart.

Her thighs quivered around his head and he stroked the soft inner skin, tracing the shift and play of the muscles there. They led his fingers higher, over pale golden skin, tight black curls and damp petals in a thousand shades of rose. Her cunt parted for his fingers as it had for his tongue, and he pressed deep inside her entrance, listening for the hitch in her breath, the telltale change in her breathing. Her hips lifted off the mattress, fell back when he eased a second finger past the snug opening to glide over the slippery walls within.

"Luc!"

He hummed a response, fingers twisting, sliding, searching for the sweet spot inside her that would send her even higher. When he found it, she cried out, a breathless, shaken sound, half gasp, half moan. It echoed in his head and teased his hunger even higher. He retaliated by shifting his hand until his thumb glided over the tender spot just below her entrance, pressing against a thousand tiny nerve endings and sending her quivering into climax.

He needed to join her.

Giving her clit one last fond stroke of his tongue, he pushed her legs off his shoulders and let them flop bonelessly to the floor. When he moved out from between them, she pressed her thighs together as if to protect the tender flesh, or to preserve the ripples of sensation coursing through it. Either way, Luc didn't intend to let her get away with it. He lifted her gently and turned her, positioning her on her stomach in the center of her bed. He snagged three pillows from against the upholstered headboard and lifted her hips to stack them beneath her. They elevated her bottom off the mattress, lifting her toward him and putting her pretty pink cunt on display. That was a sight he wouldn't mind getting used to.

She made a curious murmuring sound while he positioned himself behind her, but it turned into a long, low moan when he positioned the head of his cock against her entrance and began to press slowly inside.

This time, he wanted to savor her. Their previous matings hadn't satisfied his hunger, but they had taken the edge off it, so now he could concentrate on moving slowly and feeling every single sensation as a new and exciting experience. He felt the way the folds of her cunt spread around his cock, the way the tight ring of muscle at her entrance gradually stretched to let him inside. He felt the opening of her passage, the miraculous way her body conformed to his, as if her pussy were molding itself to his size and shape so that it would always embrace him as if custom-made for his cock. He had never felt anything more perfect.

Corinne's back arched beneath him, pressing her bottom firmly against him. Her breathy moan lasted the entire length of that first stroke, as if he pushed the sound out of her with his cock. It ended on a gasp just as he sank fully inside, but then she angled her hips, lifting her bottom higher and he slipped inside her another inch. They both gasped, and suddenly, slow didn't seem like the most important thing anymore.

Grasping her hips in his hands, Luc held her still as he began to ease out of her. She whimpered and tried to thrust herself back on him, but he controlled her easily. He wanted to watch while he eased out of her slick cunt, to see her moisture glistening on his skin, to watch with amazed hunger as he sank back inside, disappearing into her inviting depths.

He could feel the tension building along his spine, feel the urge to move faster, to pound her hard in a headlong race toward orgasm, but he beat it back. It felt too good to be inside her. He didn't want it to end.

"Damn it!" The blankets beneath her muffled her voice, but he could hear the urgency in it and his mouth curved in a tight smile. "God, Luc, what are you doing? Why—ah!—why are you taking so...so long? Just—ah!—just...damn it, just *fuck* me!"

He leaned forward, curving his body along her back until his mouth brushed her ear. "But that's what I'm doing," he purred on a long, slow, outward stroke.

"Not...fast...enough."

He thrust in, sliding endlessly, reversed, easing out for aching minutes. "Fast," in for the space of ten heartbeats, "is," out ten more, "overrated."

She screamed into the mattress and began to struggle. She fought to spread her legs, to get her knees under herself for leverage, but he held her thighs snugly between his own. She braced her palms against the bed, but he put his over them, laced their fingers together and stretched her arms high above her head. She was moaning endlessly now, pinned beneath the weight of his body, unable to move, unable to do anything but allow him to stroke slowly and deliberately into and out of her helpless body. He felt like a god.

"When this...is...over," she panted between instinctive cries, "I...am...going to...make...you...pay!"

He chuckled against her ear and worried the lobe between sharp, white teeth. "I'll look forward to that."

"Just...remember."

His tongue teased the hollow behind her ear and felt her reaction in the trembling ripples around his cock. "By the time this is over," he said softly, "you won't have the energy to curse my name."

That was her only warning.

Rearing back, he dragged their joined hands down to the bed beside her hips and braced them there as he launched himself into a breathless, frantic rhythm. He pounded against her cunt, cock slicing deep in time with their racing heartbeats. The tension had taken over, lust guided his movements and all it wanted was moremoremore, fasterfasterfaster. He threw his hips against her, vaguely hearing the slap of his hips against her ass over the roaring in his ears. He felt his muscles coil tighter and tighter, felt her cunt close hotter and hotter around him. She cried out, something desperate and incoherent and he answered her

with a powerful thrust that reached the mouth of her womb and sent them both spinning into the dark sunburst of climax.

She trembled beneath him and he poured himself into her. When they were done, his muscles melted into hers, and they collapsed to the bed as one body, one breath, one soul. Heartmates.

## Chapter Eight

Corinne woke to the feel of clever teeth nibbling at her spine and silky dark hair tickling her skin. She frowned. "That was a damned sneaky way to avoid being thrown out of somebody's apartment."

Her voice sounded raspy with sleep, what little of it she'd gotten, and her muscles felt soft and pleasantly achy.

"Mm, maybe," he said from somewhere around the bottoms of her shoulder blades, "but it was effective."

She snorted. "Yeah, and you saved on your hotel bill."

She could feel his mouth curve against her skin. "Last time I checked, Graham didn't plan to charge me for the room. But you never know. He's damned capitalistic for a werewolf."

Surprise had her craning her head to look at him. "You're staying at Vircolac?"

"Uh-huh." His tongue traced a pattern between two vertebrae and his hands slid up and around to close over her breasts. "I usually do when I visit. It's convenient. And his cook is damned talented."

She rolled her eyes and turned her head to stare across the room at the closet door. "I can't believe Missy didn't warn me about you," she muttered.

"Graham's mate? I haven't met her yet." He slid back up the bed and curved his body around hers, like spoons in a drawer. His hands squeezed her breasts affectionately, and his lips brushed lightly over the top of her head. "But I heard a lot about her. He's smitten."

"He'd better be, after everything she went through for him." She flipped onto her back and leveled a meaningful glance at Luc. "Fair warning, the minute you tell me about some weird Fae sexual tradition involving being hunted down like a stray dog, or fucking in front of a live studio audience or something, I'm outta here."

He raised an eyebrow. "So then I imagine you don't want to hear about the four purified virgins, the consecrated gourds and the chocolate pudding, huh?" She felt her eyes widen for a second before he broke down and laughed. "Don't worry. No mate hunts for the Fae. Although we do really like chocolate pudding..."

She punched him. “And I like butcher knives, so watch it, beagle.”

He grinned unrepentantly. “I couldn’t resist. You have some of the most ridiculous notions about Others. And you’re so cute to tease.”

“Remember how cute I am when I’m amputating body parts.” She mumbled the threat more out of a sense of obligation than any real intentions, and he must have understood, because he looked remarkably unafraid. She would have to work on her delivery.

A glance at the bedside clock told her she was half an hour late for work, which mattered not a lot. Technically, she had set this day aside for interviews, so she didn’t need to go to the office at all, unless she drew a complete blank with tracking down any of her witnesses. Still, as attractive as the naked man in her bed might be, she did need to get up and get started.

Hiding an enormous yawn behind her hand, she pried Luc’s arm from around her waist and pushed herself out of the bed. She stood for a minute beside it, making sure everything worked before she headed toward the bathroom. “I’m going to go take a shower,” she called over her shoulder. “If you’re still here when I get out, I suggest you at least have breakfast ready. It’ll go easier on you that way.”

She heard him laughing through the closed bathroom door and contemplated opening it to tell him she hadn’t been joking. Oh well. He’d figure it out.

A hot, hot shower managed to steam away most of her morning brain fog and a good bit of her temper as well. Somehow with the water beating down over her head, relaxing her muscles and pinkening her skin, she found it a lot tougher to hold on to last night’s anger with Luc. After all, it wasn’t technically his fault that she’d been forced to acknowledge the things in the stories her grandmother used to read her before bed every night actually existed. That had happened when Dmitri and Graham had barged their way into her friends’ lives and opened her eyes to a side of reality she’d never really had any desire to see. Clearly, this wasn’t about what she wanted.

If it had been, she would be happily living her life, secure in the knowledge that vampires and werewolves didn’t exist and fairy was just a derogatory word for a homosexual male. Life had been simpler, then, and a whole lot more appealing.

Working a handful of herbal shampoo into a lather, she acknowledged that as much as she would prefer not to be in the position of having to help find an escaped Fae and return him to his homeland, the fact that she was in that position really wasn’t Luc’s fault. And as convenient as it was to blame him—his shoulders were *more* than broad enough to bear the burden, after all—it wasn’t really fair to do so. Damn her for being conscientious.

In the end, as much as she wished she could go back in time to the part of her life before her best friend had become a vampire, and her other best friend had gotten knocked up by a werewolf, it just wasn’t going to happen. She’d learn to deal. But honestly, that was almost the worst part—the fact that she *could* learn to deal. Shouldn’t there be some sort of psychological syndrome that described the reaction of a person’s mind to something that it couldn’t handle? An impressive-sounding condition that made a person retreat to a sort of catatonic state where she sat in a room all day drooling and drawing crayon pictures on the padded walls? Because Corinne could understand if that’s where she had ended up. The fact that she’d ended up in bed with a Fae warrior and had no real problems with it... that was the part that freaked her out.



But aside from the pointy ears—and the glowing and the magic and the being a different species thing, a less than helpful voice in the back of her mind pointed out—Luc seemed like a nice, normal guy. The sort of guy she'd been hoping she'd meet one day. He was sane—or at least as sane as she was—employed, handsome, sexy and he could do things with his hands that... She shivered. Never mind that, the point was that no matter where Luc came from or what sort of being he admitted to being, it barely fazed her. She didn't know whether to feel proud or panicked.

She ducked her head under the shower to rinse away the shampoo and the remaining soapsuds and flipped off the water. She towed dry, wrapped her long hair in another towel and padded cautiously back into the bedroom to dress. Luc was nowhere to be seen, so either he really had taken off, or he was at least pretending to take care of breakfast. Somehow, she saw him as more the roast a hunk of flesh over an open fire type than the scrambled eggs and freshly squeezed juice type, but since she couldn't hear the fire alarm, she decided to go with cautious optimism.

Panties, bra, red tank top and khaki shorts passed for her ensemble of the day and she carried a pair of white tennis socks and white canvas sneakers with her into the kitchen. She braced herself for Luc's potential absence, then had to brace herself again not to let him see how pleased she was to find him piling toast onto a plate and carrying it to her tiny kitchen table. He looked up at the sound of her footsteps.

“Honey?”

Corinne cocked an eyebrow. “Yes, snookums?”

He grinned. “I meant, do you have any honey?”

“I dunno. Check the cabinets.”

He started opening doors while she sat down at the table and pulled on her socks and shoes. By the time she finished tying the laces, he had the honey on the table along with jam, butter and a plate of segmented apples, chunked bananas and the neatly sliced corpse of the kiwi she'd bought on a whim and hadn't figured what to do with.

“Thanks.” She popped a piece of banana into her mouth, swallowing just as a thought occurred to her. “Um, are you a vegetarian?”

Luc looked up from spreading thick layers of butter and honey onto his toast. “No, why?” She nodded at the meatless breakfast, and he smiled. “No, I'm just a lousy cook. I never saw a stove until the first time I came to Ithir. We don't have them in Faerie.”

Corinne swallowed a bit of toast. “How do you cook?”

“We don't. We use magic.”

“Oh. Well, I suppose that's gotta be convenient.”

“Very.” Her kitchen was so compact that he didn't even have to get up to fetch the thermal carafe from her counter. He just twisted around in his chair and snagged it before turning to offer it to her. “Want some?”

Her mouth was full of jammy toast, so she just nodded and held her mug out for him. He poured it full

before topping off his own and filling his plate with more toast and fruit.

Because she was watching him, Corinne didn't notice anything wrong with her coffee until she took a big sip. Then she sputtered. "What the hell...?"

Luc look up. "What's wrong? If you don't like Earl Grey, why was there a boxful in your cabinet?"

She choked, reached reflexively for her coffee mug, and jerked back as if she'd been stung. "Tea?" she coughed. "You made me tea?"

"Is that wrong?"

"It is if you want to live to see tomorrow." Holding her mug at arm's length to be sure the foul, watery brew in it wouldn't do her any further injury, she carried it to the sink and dumped it down the drain before pulling her Krups automatic drip to the front of the counter and putting on a pot of coffee. "How the hell am I supposed to get through the day with nothing but leafy water to fortify me?"

Luc sat back in his chair, cradling his cup and watching her with an expression of baffled amusement. "I didn't realize you needed fortification."

"I do if I'm going to spend my day interviewing people about this leprechaun thing."

"Fae thing."

"Whatever."

Before the coffee even finished brewing, she pulled out the pot and poured herself a cup. She'd taken her first sip before she even sat back at the table.

"Who are we going to talk to first?"

Corinne looked at Luc and sighed. "Why are you so determined to get in my way?"

"I'm not. I'm just determined to do my job." He sipped his tea and raised an expectant eyebrow. "Well? Who's first?"

She gave in quickly, if not particularly gracefully. "Walter Hibbish."

"The rabbi?"

"The sex shop owner."

Luc blinked. "Right. Was his the most recent sighting?"

"Of course. I'm not an amateur at this kind of thing. That's why my business cards say, 'Investigative Reporter.'"

"I wasn't trying to imply otherwise."

She rolled her eyes. "And you really think we're going to get anything done if we spend all our time bickering like this?"

He shrugged. “Think of it as our own personal version of good cop, bad cop.”

Corinne sighed into her coffee to hide the fact that bantering with him had quickly become one of her favorite pastimes. “Yeah, if we can’t win them over with charm, we’ll baffle them with non-sequiturs.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The blazing pink neon should have been their first clue. Of badness.

Walter Hibbish’s sex shop, the Pink Pillow, turned out to be one of those places people gave directions to using the phrase, “you can’t miss it.” Corinne couldn’t. No matter how much she wanted to. She spotted it from a block and a half away.

She strolled through the East Village beside Luc, stubbornly taking her time, both because the heat could choke a horse and because every step they took away from the cocoon of her apartment made her more uncomfortable with the situation. Here she was, not just accepting the existence of the Fae along with vampire, Lupines and werecats—oh my!—but she couldn’t seem to keep herself from fantasizing about one particular Fae warrior becoming a permanent part of her life.

The thought first ambushed her in the lobby of her apartment. She’d stopped at her mailbox on their way out and the jerk in 407, who had the box next to her, had elbowed her trying to wrestle a padded envelope out of his box and hadn’t even apologized. Luc had tapped him on the shoulder, informed him of the oversight and waited until 407 got a good look at him, went pale, and hastily apologized. That’s when Corinne caught herself thinking that she’d forgotten how nice it was to have someone around who cared enough to defend her from the small realities of everyday life.

When she’d realized what she was thinking, she’d gone a little pale herself, but being a largely independent sort, she’d shaken it off as an aberration and moved on. But then when they’d been walking down the street, he taking the outside to keep her away from the curb, she reading through her mail, he had asked her what about the junk mail that had filled her box was making her laugh. And she’d found herself reading parts of a particularly ridiculous flyer to him out loud. They had laughed together, and she’d thought how much she enjoyed talking to someone who seemed to understand her slightly warped sense of humor.

Damn it, she didn’t *want* to want him around. He had stormed into her life without a by your leave, had turned her world upside down, given her the most amazing orgasms of her life and recruited her for some sort of top secret Fae mission. And now he was invading her thoughts, and making her like him, and he wasn’t even human. She had to get a grip on herself.

It took some serious mental coaching. She had to remind herself that she hadn’t asked to find out about Faerie, or Seoc or any of the other things he had told her, that he was interfering with her story and derailing her investigation. That he kissed better than any man she’d ever—

No! That was precisely the kind of thought that led to trouble, and she had to banish it immediately. She was busily nursing her mad, reminding herself that he was a stubborn Fae advantage-taker when they entered the realm of the pink neon.

She reminded herself that just because he’d convinced her of the logic of their working together—and

the fact that he wanted to and he was bigger so she should suck it up and deal—didn't mean she had to be happy about it.

So, all in all, she'd managed to work herself into a big frothy lather when she yanked open the glass door of the shop and stepped into the pink hell of her foulest nightmares.

Apparently someone had taken the shop's name a little too seriously. The walls glowed with a high-gloss paint the same sickeningly intense shade as Pepto-Bismol. They seemed to radiate an unearthly light that even the dark, cheery red trim around the windows and doors and along the floor and ceiling couldn't moderate. Everywhere she looked, she saw evil, and she wasn't talking about the sex toys; she meant the décor. Pink marabou and dyed faux fur clashed hedonistically with silk, satin, velvet and brocade in all the horrifying shades of pink, rose, red, scarlet, mauve and the occasional purple a body could imagine, and Corinne had a damned fine imagination. Unfortunately, another five minutes in this place, and she'd need that imagination, because she could feel her retinas being seared off where she stood. She heard Luc's pained inhalation beside her and hoped his own sense of taste was as offended as hers.

Since they had decided Corinne, as the one with a legitimate reason to be poking around and asking questions, should be the one to poke around and ask questions, she took a deep breath and mustered up the resolve to walk deeper into the badness. Swallowing back a surge of nausea, she blinked her watering eyes and fixed her gaze firmly on the maroon carpet, not looking left, right or up as she made her way across the floor to the counter in the corner of the shop. Luckily, her field of vision remained enough that she could see the counter getting closer to her knees before she walked into it, and stopped. Bracing herself for the sensory onslaught, she looked up to meet the entirely disinterested gaze of the clerk behind the register, a young woman with black-tipped blue hair, purple lipstick and enough shiny silver facial piercings to give an airport metal detector a heart attack.

Sighing, Corinne fished a business card out of her pocket and slid it over the counter. "We're here to see the owner."

Shiny barely looked up from her puffy pink emery board. "Yeah? Who're you?"

Corinne glanced down at her card and back up at Shiny. She waited a heartbeat. "We're with the *Chronicle*. He knew we'd be coming by." So it was a little fib. She had called and left a message. Walter Hibbish *should* know, if he 'd checked his machine.

"That so." The clerk snapped her gum and went back to filing.

Corinne resisted the urge to take out several days of frustration on Miss Unconventional and Uncooperative. Instead, she leaned over the counter and bared her teeth. It was supposed to look like a smile. Sort of. "Why don't you go tell him we're here. Don't worry. We'll wait."

This time, Shiny actually lifted her head and sized them up. Well, her glance slid right over Corinne before she sized Luc up. If the amount of time she lingered there was any indication, she seemed to be having the most trouble with his crotch. Corinne was about to get Shiny's attention by yanking hard on the silver ring in her eyebrow when Luc distracted her. He leaned over the counter, flashed Shiny a charming and patently insincere smile, and added his weight to Corinne's.

"Please," he purred. "We'd appreciate it."

Corinne wondered how much the flirtatious Fae would appreciate a trip to the emergency room.

Her mouth curving in what might have passed for a smile, had she been three days past dead, Shiny shrugged, slid off her stool and gave a weary sigh. "If you got nothin' better to do." She disappeared through the door behind the counter without another word but with one last, lingering glance at the fly of Luc's jeans. She just missed the new nickname Corinne invented especially for her, but that was likely a good thing.

Grumbling under her breath, Corinne gave Luc a sour glare and slung around the miniature backpack she used in place of a purse. If he kept up that sort of behavior, she wouldn't have to convince herself he was scum. He'd take care of it for her.

She flipped open the clasp and pulled out her small notebook. Might as well make use of the delay to scope out the store. If this sorry excuse for a lead ever panned out into an actual story, her observations of the nut of a witness's nutty place of business might prove useful. She certainly didn't intend to speak a word to Lothario Luc.

Rummaging for a pen and wishing she could put her sunglasses back on without feeling like a moron, she looked around the shop, this time tuning out the horrendous décor and the presence of the Fae warrior beside her. She didn't need to notice it again to know it would play a prominent role in describing the place. Some things a girl could never forget.

In a city full of sex shops, they tended to boil down into three categories. On one end you had the kind of place that flourished in the heyday of Times Square, before Giuliani and Disney got hold of it and cleaned it up nice for the tourists. Those were the sleaze museums, the places where anyone in their right mind wore rubber gloves, a biohazard suit, a good disguise and still thought twice about touching anything. They catered to the lowest sort of hustlers and vagrants and anyone with a quarter and a strong stomach who wanted a couple of minutes alone in a dirty viewing booth. Come to think of it, no one in their right minds would step foot in one of those to begin with, biohazard suit or not.

Then you had the upscale shops, the ones that made the papers for reasons other than arrests and crimes committed there. They had well lit, tastefully decorated retail spaces, with polite, well-educated and well-informed staff that took care to be both helpful and non-intimidating. They carried quality products and catered to couples looking to add spice to their relationship, or to women who were too intimidated or embarrassed to step foot into a less welcoming environment.

Then you had places like the Pink Pillow. Somewhere between trash and good taste, it sold a huge selection of goods at reasonable prices in a neighborhood you wouldn't be afraid to walk through under normal circumstances. The staff was iffy—clearly—but they probably didn't have any serious criminal history and they could ring up a sale easily enough, even if they couldn't discuss the chemical components in lube like a Nobel scholar. These shops retained just enough of the sleaze factor to give the average conservative a thrill, but not enough to scare him or her away from stopping by to stock up. In fact, if she hadn't been so grumpy, Corinne might have had some fun browsing. While she appreciated the Religious Sexes of the world, her pocketbook appreciated the Pink Pillows.

In reality, aside from all the...pink...there really wasn't anything wrong with the shop, or its merchandise. Looking around, Corinne spotted half a dozen brands she recognized, from the maker of flavored massage oils on a small multi-tiered shelving unit to the silicone dildo manufacturer occupying a prominent place against the wall. She wondered briefly if that much familiarity with the world of sex toys said something about her character, but shrugged it off. Everybody had to have a hobby.

"Are you going to ignore me for the rest of the day?" Luc spoke from right behind her, apparently bent on following her through her tour.

“I’m thinking about it.”

“Because it’s not my fault that woman was staring at me.”

“I never said it was.”

Luc sighed, but he fell silent.

She scribbled down notes as she walked through the shop, which turned out to be a good deal bigger than the average Manhattan storefront, or at least the average storefront in the East Village. There seemed to be plenty of room for attractive displays and for the half dozen other customers to avoid each other as they browsed. In fact, if it weren’t for the godawful pink everywhere, Corinne might have made it a point to come back, but she couldn’t think of a good reason to risk permanent vision impairment when she already had Blowfish bookmarked on her web browser.

She raised an amused eyebrow at the life-sized, blow-up boyfriend who stood propped up next to a colorful display of condoms, but her attention really caught on the far side of the shop and the table stacked high with edible goodies. She had a deep weakness for the combination of sex and chocolate. But not chocolate pudding. She wasn’t a freak like some people.

The body paint got a cursory glance—she preferred to go with real chocolate syrup, since it tasted so much better—but she lingered for a moment on the raspberry bindi before her eyes widened and her hand shot out to snag a long, thin box with an intriguing cover illustration.

“Ooh,” she murmured to herself as her mouth slid into a grin, “chocolate tattoos!”

She dropped her notebook on the table and flipped the box over to scan the information on the back, trying to block out the mental picture of stenciling her name in chocolate on some choice body parts of the Fae warrior who still trailed after her with his hands in his pockets and a scowl on his face. Maybe she could add a the word “Mine” across his ass in those gothic-looking chocolate capital letters...

“You know, at some point we’re going to have to stop fighting.”

Corinne looked up from the chocolate. “Why is that?”

“Because eventually, we’re going to run out of things to fight about.”

She snorted. “Sure we are.”

“That’s it.”

She heard the growl, but before she could so much as blink, the tattoo box was snatched out of her hand. Luc wrapped his hands around her waist, lifted her and plunked her ass down on the display table, bracing his arms on either side of her so she couldn’t get away.

“Now,” he snapped, leaning forward until his nose practically rubbed up against hers. “Do you mind telling me why you’re being such a brat?”

## Chapter Nine

Luc watched her look away and fought the urge to grab her chin and force her to look him in the eye. She was driving him crazy. He felt like for every step he took forward with her, she pushed him two steps back. For Lady's sake, she was his bloody heartmate. Would it kill her to try and be civil to him?

He'd noticed something was wrong before they got to the store, but he'd been hoping he'd just imagined it. Ever since they'd left her apartment, her mood had gotten progressively worse and she'd gradually stopped speaking so much as a polite word to him. He couldn't figure it out, either. She'd seemed fine when they'd woken up tangled together in her bed, and normal while they had breakfast in her tiny kitchen. Well, sharp-tongued as usual, but normal for what he knew of Corinne D'Alessandro. Nothing all that unusual had happened between her apartment and the Pink Pillow. He was at a total loss to explain why she'd suddenly turned from an adorable if sarcastic woman to a hostile army of one. He wanted to know what the hell was going on.

"Sorry," she mumbled, sounding about as sincere as a mermaid apologizing for singing.

"No, you're not," he snapped. "And I want to know why."

She shrugged and remained mute, which just made him want to shake her. Lady! Who would have thought a human woman could be so damned hard to understand? He was starting to think the only time he could expect her to react to him honestly and openly was when he was making love to her. And as appealing as it might sound to spend the rest of his life buried in her sweet cunt, he had a few reservations about its practicality.

Still, he wasn't above pressing the only advantage he had. He reached around her to grab a small bottle from the table and let his chest brush against her nipples with the movement. He heard her quick inhalation and felt a grim sort of satisfaction. Straightening up, he held up a small glass bottle filled with reddish-brown massage oil so she could see it. "Cinnamon," he said. "The vanilla's good too, but it doesn't make the skin tingle quite the same way."

He saw her eyes widen and let his mouth curve up at one corner in a small, almost menacing smile. Her gaze seemed glued to his hands as he twisted the top off the bottle and covered the top with the tip of his middle finger before upending it to coat the pad with the oil. While she watched, he eased the low neckline of her tank top down another inch and slipped his hand beneath, snaking inside the cup of her bra to rub the infused oil directly onto the skin of her nipple.

"Luc!" Her cry of protest sounded choked and breathless. "We're in a public place!"

"No one can see."

Her head darted from side to side as she looked around, but it was true. Shiny hadn't yet returned from the back, and there were only two other customers in the store, both of whom intently perused the selection of erotic DVDs with their backs to Luc and Corinne. She didn't relax, though.



“I can see,” she hissed, grabbing hold of his wrist and trying to pull it out of her shirt. He didn’t budge, except to move to the other breast and coat that nipple in turn with a thin film of cinnamon oil. When he flicked his nail over the little nub, both nipples immediately contracted into tight beads.

He leaned forward to whisper against her ear. “See what I mean? About the tingling. I’ll bet your nipples feel hot and tight and buzzing right about now. Don’t they, Corinne.”

He saw the shiver she tried to repress, and the way her hips almost shifted restlessly before she brought them back under control. She pulled back to stare at him, her teeth clenched in frustration. “Why are you doing this?”

He shrugged. “It seems like the only time you manage to deal with me, face to face, with no baggage and no bias between us is when we’re making love,” he said. “And since I want you to be honest with me now...”

He let the sentence trail off and watched as his words sank in. Her eyes narrowed and her jaw tightened, but at least this time he knew she had a basis for her anger.

“You’re a bastard, you know that?”

“How much choice are you giving me?”

“I didn’t ask for this,” she said suddenly, eyes meeting his directly and openly for the first time. “I didn’t ask for this story. I didn’t ask to discover the world of Faerie, or for the Queen’s idiot nephew to go gallivanting through Manhattan, and I sure as hell didn’t ask for you. So cut me a little slack, okay?”

“No.”

Her eyebrows shot toward her hairline. “No?”

“No,” he said. “I’m not cutting you a damned thing. You’re not the only one in this situation, Corinne, so stop looking at it from the point of view like you’re the victim. I didn’t ask for it either, but it’s my job and I’ll do it anyway. Sometimes that’s the way it works, after all. Sometimes no matter what you want to do, you can’t do anything but what you have to do.”

“And I have to be happy about helping you find the Faerie Queen’s idiot nephew?”

“No, but you do have to get used to me being around.”

“Because you’re not leaving until this is finished.” She sounded tired and worn out. “Right. I get it. So let’s get the hell on with it.”

Damn it, she just wouldn’t understand until he laid it all on the line, would she?

“No,” he said, catching her chin in his hand, and holding her gaze with his. “You have to get used to it because I’m staying whether this gets finished or not. I’m not going anywhere, Corinne, because you and I are together from now on.”

He watched as his words registered with her and enjoyed the parade of expressions across her face. Excitement, lust, shock, confusion and terror all made an appearance as she studied him. His brain told him he should gloss over it, pretend that it hadn’t happened, or that he’d been joking. When his heart and

other assorted parts encouraged him to just rephrase it from, “you and I are together” to, “you’re mine and I’m going to spend the rest of our lives fucking you senseless,” he thought his words made a good compromise. Because his other parts offered a really good argument in favor of option number two.

She pursed her lips, and he banished the thought of what he’d like her to purse them around. “You certainly work fast,” she said, slowly, almost visibly fighting the desire to panic.

He shrugged. “What can I say? I’m decisive.”

“And you’ve decided this?”

I’ve decided lots of things, including that the best way to keep you from fighting with me is to get inside you as soon as possible and to stay there as long as possible. “Fate has decided it. I’m just along for the ride.” Tact, he reminded himself. Tact. “I’m as shocked by it as you are.”

She barked out a laugh that didn’t sound at all amused. “Somehow I doubt it...”

“I swear it, Corinne. I’m not trying to make your life difficult. That seems to be an unavoidable byproduct of having met you. But if it’s any consolation, I’m as gobsmacked by the whole thing as you are.” He saw her hesitate and tried an engaging smile. The captain of the Queen’s Guard rarely bothered with engaging smiles, but if his looked rusty, maybe she wouldn’t notice.

“I don’t see how you can be.” She shifted her weight, the move cocking one hip to the side and drawing his eyes down like a lodestone. She had gorgeous, curvy hips, not large, but distinctly feminine, and he imagined them cradling his own, tilting higher as he sank his cock deep inside...

“You at least seem to know the rules of this,” she continued, “but I don’t. I have no idea what’s happening. I feel like I’m on some sort of roller coaster in the dark so I can’t even tell when I should be getting ready to scream.”

He jerked his mind out of the gutter—or out of her, anyway—and scowled. “Why should you scream? Is the idea of having me in your life really that terrifying?”

She sighed. “No. And yes. I don’t know. You’re just...” She hesitated. “You’re not what I was expecting in a lover.”

“You mean I’m not human.” He didn’t mean it as a condemnation, just as a truth. He knew Corinne was wary of the Others, including him, and he couldn’t really blame her for it. After all, he hadn’t exactly held the best possible opinion of humans in the past.

“That sounds so...”

“Yeah, it does. But it’s understandable.” He sighed, set aside the cinnamon oil and took her by the shoulders, cupping the curves in his hands. “Look, I’ll make you a deal. You stop turning into a goblin every time you get scared about something, and I’ll try my best not to scare you, okay? But if I’m going to do that, you’ve got to tell me what’s going through your head, not just push me away and assume I’m on the opposite side of the war here. Deal?”

She hesitated, her wide brown eyes searching his face for something. She must have found it, or found something she wanted because she pursed her lips and nodded slowly. “All right. It’s a deal.”

“Thank the Goddess,” he sighed, flashing her a grin and tugging her neckline back into place before lifting her from the table and setting her back on her feet. “Now, should we get back to business?”

Before Corinne could respond, Shiny reappeared from the back of the store, followed closely by a bald head that peered around the heavy curtain and fixed on Corinne.

“You’re the reporter?”

\* \* \* \* \*

The bald head barely waited for her to nod. In fact, he might not have. “Come on in back. I’m right in the middle of something.”

The head disappeared and Corinne blinked. “Who was that?”

Shiny shrugged. “The owner. You better hurry up. He won’t wait around for you.”

Corinne couldn’t decide whether to feel upset by the interruption, or intensely relieved. Luc might have been ready to steer the conversation back to business, but she still had a few questions she was dying to ask. Like, “What the hell are you talking about?” Still, apparently Shiny was right and Hibbish didn’t intend to wait around for them.

Cursing fate, she pushed through the heavy drape and hurried through a short entry and around the corner of a shelving unit. She took advantage of the privacy of that small entry to pluck at her bra and shift the material over her nipples. Damn Luc! The stupid things were still taut and tingling from his application of cinnamon oil, and the sensation of arousal had leaked south. She fought the urge to press her thighs together and hurried to catch up with Hibbish. She took about three more steps before freezing in place with the abruptness of a gunshot. Good Lord! What had she just walked into?

She heard a chuckle behind her and a gust of warm breath against her ear. “When he said he was in the middle of something, I didn’t think he meant anything quite so...literal.”

Corinne swallowed and felt Luc’s hands settle on her shoulders. He had stepped into the back room right on her heels, and since he was so much taller, he had an unobstructed view of the sight that greeted them. She could only wonder what it looked like from his angle. “Um, me either.”

She did try to look away. She even wondered if she should have stared at the hideous pink walls outside for a little longer so she could have been struck blind by the garish colors. That way she would have been unable to see the horrific sight now before her. Sheesh, she thought, can this day get any weirder?

In the back room of the shop, the man she assumed was Walter Hibbish stood hip deep in a pile of mostly naked bodies with a camera pointed straight at some of the most naked bits. Okay, the most *unclothed* bits. Naked might be a bit misleading, since they all seemed to be covered with something that looked like pastel-colored whipped cream.

“Sorry I can’t take a break to talk to you,” the shop owner said in between snaps of his shutter, “but this stuff is gonna be on the shelves next week and I need to get these shots done and printed up for the display. A little to the left, Hildie. Good. Is that okay?”

Corinne blinked and grabbed for her composure. “Well, I would have said to try it with that top leg a bit more bent, but yeah, it looks fine to me.”

Luc snorted behind her.

“Oh, I meant—hey, wait. I think you may be right. Deb, try bending your top leg just a little further toward Maura. Great.” The camera snicked again. “Hey, good call, Ms...?”

“D’Alessandro.” Corinne stepped forward, figuring that if she pretended she wasn’t in a room with a pile of naked women, a man she wanted to jump on and spend a few hours licking, and a weird middle-aged man with a camera, then she should be able to conduct this interview just fine. As long as her damned nipples would calm down. “Corinne. From the *Chronicle*. Sorry, but I thought you were expecting me.”

“No. Should I be? We already run a regular spot in your paper. More tongue, Lil. Fabulous!” He glanced over his shoulder at her and spotted Luc standing beside her. “Who’s he?”

Luc beat her to the punch. “Luc Macanaw. I’m an associate of Ms. D’Alessandro’s. Thanks for agreeing to meet with us.”

Corinne’s eyebrows shot up at hearing that. She supposed he could call the mad bunny fucking they’d indulged in last night “associating,” but she could think of a few other words to describe their relationship. Still, she supposed none of them would shed a lot of light on things for Hibbish. Nor did he really need to know about them. She was about to forget it and forge ahead with the questions, but something distracted her. Specifically, five pair of feminine eyes distracted her when they turned at the sound of Luc’s deep voice and took on the bright gleam of interest. She fought back an urge to curl her fingers into claws or to slap a sign on Luc’s back reading, “MINE!” And just in case they missed seeing that one, she’d put another, permanent one someplace lower. But now that she’d had time to think, she decided the second tattoo wouldn’t be on his ass, and it wouldn’t be made of chocolate.

Shit. This jealousy thing was going to get real old real fast.

Hibbish seemed to notice the looks, too, but he had a slightly different reaction. He crowed. “That’s it!” he shouted, camera snapping frantically. “That’s *exactly* the look I need. Hold it. Hold it. Perfect! Wonderful!”

Corinne’s teeth clenched so hard she feared lockjaw, but Luc didn’t seem to have any such trouble. In fact, he flashed the heap of women a playful grin and reached for a tall, black can from the assortment on a nearby table.

“Kissy Kreme?” he asked, his eyebrows rising.

“Yeah. Great find. Come on, Jennie, smile for me.” Hibbish paused to adjust a flash umbrella, then resumed shooting. “It’s brand new, but I know it’s gonna be big. It’s fun, colorful, all natural. Customers are gonna eat it up.”

“I think that’s the point,” Luc said, his voice low and clearly intended just for Corinne. That damned murmur of his was lethal. She watched, feigning disinterest while he flipped the can over and began reading from the blurb on the back. “Sweet, creamy and sensual—just like the perfect lover should be.”

He looked up at her with an intent expression that she’d have to be dead not to be affected by, but she covered her melty-ness with a snort. The last thing he needed was another advantage over her. At least,

she hoped she'd done sufficient melt-coverage, but his eyes just sparkled at her as he continued to read.

“Kissy Kreme brings a new dimension to your love play in five unique flavors that blend wholesome ingredients with wicked intentions. Cover your lover’s tastiest bits with the sweet flavor of raspberry, mint, chocolate, orange or strawberry flavored genuine cream and delight your senses to the fullest. Because kisses taste better when they’re creamy. Bon appetit!” Hmm, sounds yummy,” he said, looking back up at her with speculation and intentions that went well beyond wicked. “Don’t you think, Corinne?”

“Come on, girls, act like you’re having fun, will ya? It’s great stuff,” Hibbish said. “Go ahead. Give it a try.”

Luc’s mouth twisted into a subtle curve, the one that seemed to eat away at the ability of her knees to actually do the job of supporting her weight. “Thanks. Don’t mind if I do.”

The man’s mouth ought to be outlawed, Corinne decided as she watched him check labels until he found the one he wanted. Lifting it from the table, he extended his free hand to her and made her stomach to a little back flip or thirty.

“What do you say? Care to try?”

When she found herself all but blushing like a virgin, Corinne drew the line. She hadn’t let a man intimidate her with sex appeal since Tony Melitti in the ninth grade. Squaring her shoulders, she cocked one eyebrow, put her hand on her hip and let the other brush teasingly across Luc’s upturned palm. “Absolutely,” she purred in her best Jessica Rabbit impersonation. “But you go first. So I can watch.”

“Thanks. I think I will.” Predatory intent radiated from his big, beautiful body as he caught her hand in his and sidled right up next to her until she could feel every inch of his body pressing up against her.

Sweet Molly Malone, the man felt like heaven. All heavy, roped muscle and exotic scent, he gave off heat like a blast furnace, but Corinne already knew he was a hell of a lot nicer to curl up to during a cold snap. She watched his crystal green eyes go all lazy and seductive and fought back the urge to wrap her arms around his neck and scale him like a prison wall. Just the thought of wrapping her legs around his waist and feeling his hands cupping her ass to hold her steady made her pant. She could almost feel those enormous hands of his kneading her muscles again, easing the burning ache in her nipples. She remembered the width of his thighs holding her open, the length of his cock driving deep, so deep, inside her aching pussy...

The hiss of the spray can yanked her back to real life before she came just from her fantasy. If thinking about him drove her to the edge of climax, she’d hate to think what might happen the next time she got her hands on him.

He already had his on her. Eyes gleaming, he held her gaze captive while his fingers pulled the neckline of her tank top and the strap of her bra to one side, exposing the golden slope of her shoulder. The can hissed again as he pointed the nozzle at her bare skin and painted a line of thick, pale blue whipped cream from the side of her neck to the edge of her shirt. Then his head lowered and she felt his breath in hot contrast to the refrigerator cool of the cream.

“Chocolate pudding aside,” he whispered as her breath froze solid in her chest, “I’m really more of a raspberry fan myself.”

His head dipped and his lips parted and her world spiraled out of control when his tongue slid hot and moist over her cream covered skin.

Her head fell backward as if her spine had melted, and that's pretty much what Corinne felt like—a great big boneless pile of goo. Well, if goo could feel horny. She pressed her chest against his, the pressure offering a slight easing of the ache in her breasts. His tongue licked and stroked muscles and nerves and tendons as he ate the cream from her skin. His lips pressed and teeth scraped, and it felt like he touched each separate nerve ending and coaxed it to quivering alert. Her knees felt like jelly and her stomach had filled with hyperactive butterflies, while her head swam a leisurely backstroke, content to let him feast on her flesh as long as he wanted. If she was lucky, it would be a long, long time.

The click of the camera shutter barely penetrated her consciousness, but the loss of his kisses did. He pulled away and straightened to his full height. She whimpered and reached up to pull him back toward her, dying for more of his magic touch.

“Oh my God, you two are amazing!” Hibbish let his camera fall to his chest, dangling from the woven strap while he buried his hands in what was left of his hair and tugged in a gesture of mental overload. “I've never seen anything like it! Tell me what you charge. I'll pay anything! Anything you want, just so long as you sign a photo release so I can use that shot on the Kissy Kreme display. Name your price.”

Corinne barely registered the shop owner's babbling as English, her senses still reeling as she fought to keep from climbing Luc's body like a rope wall. With her eyes still locked on Luc's face, she saw his expression sharpen as he turned to the shop owner-cum-photographer.

“Anything?” he repeated.

Hibbish nodded. “Absolutely. That picture I took of you two is gonna sell a whole truckload of Kissy Kreme. It's the least I can do.”

Luc squeezed Corinne's hand, as if encouraging her to keep silent. He clearly didn't understand the potency of his own kisses. Like she'd recovered the power of speech already. Ha! “We appreciate this, Mr. Hibbish. Can you start by...?”

“Whoa, wait a second there.” The man held his hands out in front of him and backing up a half step. His friendly expression closed down like a Popsicle stand in October, and he shook his head. “If you're here lookin' for Walt, I'm afraid I can't help you.”

That nearly managed to yank Corinne out of her lust-induced fog. She frowned. “What? I thought you were Walter Hibbish. I looked it up. The Pink Pillow is owned by Walter M. Hibbish.”

“And Harvey Weitzel. That's me. We're partners,” Weitzel explained. “But I haven't seen Walt in nearly a week.”

“Have you reported him missing?” Damn, that news threw Corinne for a loop, but her instincts were kicking in now. Maybe this story could turn into a real *story* now. “Do you know where he was last seen?”

“Yeah, I reported it, since he hasn't returned any of my calls, but I'll tell you the same thing I told the police.” Weitzel turned away to begin breaking down his equipment from the shoot. “I know nothing about where he might be. Walt and I never lived in each other's pockets, and when one of us wanted to take a little break, we never felt the need to explain it. He could be anywhere. Chances are he'll turn up



in a week or two. You can try back then.”

“I won’t need to try back then. I’m working on a story, and I need to talk to him now.”

“Then I hope you got a nose like a bloodhound, cause I can’t think of any other way for you to find him.” Weitzel gave a regretful shake of his head and zipped his lens into a protective case. “Sorry I can’t tell you more. But if you wanna do an article on the store instead of just on Walt, I’d love to help you out. The publicity would be great.”

Corinne blew out a frustrated breath and shoved her notebook back into her bag. “Sorry, but I have to run that by my editor first.”

Weitzel looked disappointed for a minute before he shrugged it off and offered her a smile. “Oh, well. That’s how it goes I guess.” He picked up a can of Kissy Kreme and handed it to Luc. “Here. Take a freebie. Just for making a wasted trip. Tell your friends about it, too. We’ll be all stocked up by Wednesday.”

By Wednesday, Corinne sincerely hoped she could forget the Pink Pillow had ever existed, but she just nodded and left the thank yous to Luc. He seemed to be good at them.

“Look, I’m sorry you went through all this trouble for nothing,” the shopkeeper said. “Even if the photos turned out good for me, it’s like you wasted a trip. Why don’t I walk you out and tell my girl out front to give you a special discount. Anything you want, twenty percent off.”

“Thanks, Harvey, that’s very generous of you,” Luc said, taking Corinne by the elbow and guiding her forward. “We appreciate all your help.”

Weitzel shrugged as he set aside a soft-sided camera case and led the way toward the doorway they had entered through. “No problem. I wish you luck on your story. Sorry I couldn’t give you more information.”

“Yeah, me too,” Corinne muttered under her breath, stepping back out into the shop with Luc right behind her. They exchanged pleasantries with Weitzel, but when the curtain fell closed behind them, she crossed her arms over her chest and immediately dropped them back to her sides. She gave a frustrated sigh. “Fabulous. Just what I needed. Now I’ve got a great big blank of information on a great big nothing of a story. What the hell am I supposed to do now?”

She supposed she could head back to the office and dig up the list of witnesses Hank had given her, just on the off chance she could scare up another interview today. It just seemed like a lot of work for a story she’d rather see die a slow and undignified death on page 41. Below the crease.

“You could help me pick out a few things that would...console us until we decide what to do next.”

Luc’s suggestion almost startled her. She’d been so caught up in her disappointed musings she’d forgotten he was standing right next to her, which made her feel totally ridiculous. After all, what woman in her right mind could forget a six-foot-six-inch tall hunk with gorgeous hair, a killer smile and a can of minty fresh whipped cream?

Her eyes dropped to the can and she felt a renewed surge of lust. “I could, couldn’t I?”



## Chapter Ten

Luc 's mind filled with two primary thoughts as he hustled Corinne away from the shop and down the street. On one hand, they needed to figure out what it meant that one of the last mortals to make contact with Seoc had disappeared without a trace; and on the other, he needed to understand why the taste of Corinne D'Alessandro went to his head faster than Faerie wine.

The one little taste of her in the back of the sex shop had nearly snapped his control, and he hadn't touched anything more intimate than her shoulder. It made no sense. For a man who'd learned the finer points of sex from nymphs and dryads, a man known as one of the most desirable warriors in Faerie, he couldn't fathom why this little human should make his blood heat and his cock harden. For Goddess's sake, he'd spent the entirety of last night having her as many times as he could manage. He should be sated with her. Even knowing she was his heartmate couldn't really make him understand. But it did give him some interesting ideas for the Kissy Kreme, the chocolate tattoos and the sheer, silk scarves they'd picked up with their discount.

"Can I ask you a question?"

The sound of her voice surprised him. He'd been so caught up in thinking about her, he'd almost forgotten about her. She stared up at him with those wide, earth-colored eyes, and he felt his blood head back south. "Sure."

"What do you think it means that Hibbish has gone missing? I saw that look on your face. You have some sort of theory?"

He weighed his words for a moment before he answered. "Not so much a theory as a whole lot of questions that I'd really like to have answered."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You don't think there's anything weird about Hibbish disappearing?"

"I think weird is written all over this story, but then, I think it's weird that this story revolves around the nephew of the Queen of Faerie, so I'm hardly a proper judge. I'm more interested in what *you* think is weird."

He sighed. "I think it's weird that Hibbish has disappeared."

"Weird how?"

It must have been the lunch hour, because the sidewalk had begun to fill up with pedestrians, and Luc had to pull Corinne out of the way of a small gaggle of young people who seemed oblivious to the fact that they were expected to share the world with anyone else. He grimaced. "Come on. We can't stand here and chat all day. I saw a coffee shop down on the corner. Let's grab a table, and we'll swap

theories. And maybe some more of that foul brew you love will put you in a better mood.”

“My mood is just fine.” She scowled, but let him guide her down the block and toward the table the waiter assigned to them inside the café.

“Right. That’s why we had to fight it out in the middle of that store.”

She had the grace to look abashed. “Okay, so it’s greatly improved.”

“And think of how much further it will improve after a cup of coffee.” Personally, he didn’t see what humans liked so much about the dark, bitter brew, but if it made Corinne happy, he’d be happy to provide it. He thought he heard her murmur something about torture, revenge and Altoids, but when he glanced up at her, she just smiled sweetly. The expression gave him the willies. Talk about unnatural. He gave her order to their waiter, along with a request for a pot of Darjeeling with lemon and turned back to her.

“So what’s your theory about the weirdness?” she asked, as soon as they were alone again.

He paused, taking a moment to weigh his answer. It wasn’t so much a matter of deciding how much of the truth to tell her as deciding how to tell her so she would understand without getting freaked out.

“Have you ever heard of a changeling?”

Her eyes widened. “Isn’t Hibbish a little old to be a victim of Fae kidnapping?”

He ignored her question. “Okay, so you’ve heard enough to know that in the past, some of the more...unethical among the Fae used to exchange their own, sickly offspring for healthy human babies that they then raised as their children in Faerie.”

“Yeah, which is why I pointed out that Hibbish doesn’t sound like anyone’s golden-haired cherub.”

“I’m not saying he is. Let me finish, okay?” She nodded and he took a deep breath. “Well, that hasn’t happened in a long, long time. Not since the very beginning of our time out of Ithir. Eventually, the term changeling came to mean the offspring of mixed parents. One Fae parent, and one human.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“I’m still leading up to the point. As magical as the Fae are, one of the magics that is forbidden to us is the one that allows us to travel freely between our world and Ithir. That’s one of the reasons why taking human babies back to Faerie stopped, because in order to make the trip, the Fae would have to not only find the right baby and make the switch, they’d also have to find the nearest door between the worlds and get the baby through before getting caught. It just got too tough. And since the Queen could hardly afford to seem like she approved of the whole practice, she didn’t exactly make those doors easy to find.”

He closed his mouth as their waiter approached and waited until they’d been served before leaning forward to continue his tale. “But some Fae continued to find them, and worse than that, some humans found them, too, and a few came into Faerie looking for the lost children. Once, a human man managed to convince some of his neighbors that the Fae were responsible for the death of their crops and their cattle and they formed a small army to attack us. That was an extreme example, but it made an impression on the Queen. Eventually, she decided to close almost all the doors between the worlds so she could control the passage of anyone into and out of Faerie.”

“Sort of like the Berlin wall of alternate realities, then.”

Luc gave an amused snort. “Well, I suppose there are worse analogies. Anyway, all but five of the doors in Ithir were permanently sealed, and the five that were left were all charmed so that while they opened at different corners of the world in Ithir, in Faerie, they all open into one room in the Queen’s palace.”

“And she’s a one-woman border patrol?”

“She makes the decisions of who passes, yes.”

Corinne frowned. “Then how did Seoc get here to begin with? For that matter, how could you have gotten here in the past?”

“I had permission,” he said. “And we think Seoc snuck through a door when the room was left unguarded.”

Her eyebrows climbed toward her hairline. “I bet you’re the head of the Queen’s Guard, aren’t you?”

He scowled. He should have known she’d make that damned connection. “Yes, I am. And while I had a man stationed there the night Seoc went through, he was distracted from his duty, and it is ultimately my responsibility to make sure that kind of thing doesn’t happen.”

“I wasn’t saying it’s your fault. I just want to have my facts straight.”

“Well, the fact is that it doesn’t matter how Seoc got here, because he’s here now.”

“And he’s the reason why we’re having this conversation.” She frowned. “Wasn’t the point of this conversation originally to discuss why Walter Hibbish disappeared?”

He had to give her points for persistence. “I’m getting to that.”

“Get faster.”

“Fine. I think Hibbish disappeared because Seoc was trying to cover up what he’s been doing here and Hibbish saw something he wasn’t supposed to.”

Her eyes widened. “You think Seoc killed Hibbish?”

“No, I think he sent him through a door.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Corinne did her best to try and wrap her mind around the information Luc was giving her, but she just didn’t think her brain was that flexible. It would have to be a contortionist.

She shook her head. “But you just said that the Faerie Queen closed all the doors between Ith—um, between here and Faerie. So how did Seoc send Hibbish through one?”

“He didn’t. At least, he didn’t send Hibbish through to Faerie. I think he sent him into limbo.”

Her jaw dropped so hard, she almost heard a crash. “He sent that guy into eternal nothingness?”

Luc’s mouth curved in a brief grin. “Not exactly. Limbo isn’t any one specific place. It’s what we call the place between any two worlds. It doesn’t technically exist, so a being who can do magic can shape it to be anything he or she wants.”

Corinne grimaced. “You sound like a theoretical physicist.” She knew whereof she spoke. She’d dated a theoretical physicist for a while in college. She still got occasional flashback headaches. “Okay, so Hibbish is... somewhere that’s not here and not Faerie. But what was Seoc doing that it was so important for no one to see him do it?”

“I think he’s looking for the door.”

“What door?”

“One of the five remaining Faerie doors is here in Manhattan,” he explained, topping off his tea and adding a fresh slice of lemon. “That’s how I’ve always gotten here in the past. This time, Mab opened a new door for me, but she’s the only being I know capable of still using that kind of magic. Seoc needs to know where the permanent door is, and I think he’s trying to find it.”

“But what’s so bad about that? If all of you want him to go back to Faerie, and he’s trying to find his way back there, why not just let him? Or better yet, help him find it and get him home even quicker.”

“Because I don’t think he’s looking for it so he can use it to go home. I think he’s looking for it so he can prop it permanently open.”

He said it so gravely and with such a forbidding frown on his face that Corinne could only speculate. “And that would be a bad thing.”

He nodded. “*That* would be the thing I told you about last night. *That* would allow anyone and anything that wanted to travel between our worlds to do it. *That* would upset the balance between them. *That* would do all of those other bad things I told you about last night.”

Corinne blew out a breath. “Right. So then it’s important for us to stop him.”

“You could say that. But first, we have to find him.”

## Chapter Eleven

They ended up back at her apartment for a brainstorming session, but Corinne was very careful to put the bag of goodies from the Pink Pillow in her closet, out of sight if not out of mind. They had definitely

*not* picked up any cinnamon oil, though. She didn't trust Luc with it. She saw the way his glance strayed every so often toward the bedroom while they sat on her sofa and tried to figure out what to do next.

"Do you have a last reported location for Hibbish?"

She shook her head. "Well, not unless you count the Pink Pillow."

"The name of someone who may have spoken to him recently?"

"Aside from his business partner, who I didn't know about before today, I'm guessing maybe the PI who my editor got the original information from." She flipped through her notes. "Actually, hold on a minute." She skimmed over the information she'd jotted down and raised an eyebrow. "It looks like one of the other witnesses is the one who originally convinced Hibbish to talk to the PI. Marc Ingram. The bartender."

Luc looked up from the notes he was making for himself. When he'd started to do the note-taking thing, she'd looked at him a little funny. Somehow in her head, the brilliant, rugged detective didn't need to make notes on his cases. It seemed somehow...soft. Maybe she'd watched too many Humphrey Bogart movies. "Really? Now that's interesting. I wonder if maybe we should talk to Ingram."

"I'm way ahead of you, big guy." She had the cordless phone in her hand and had already started dialing. Luc watched her curiously.

"Landslides, can I help you?"

The voice over the phone was feminine and brusque, but polite, and Corinne held up her finger to Luc to indicate he should be quiet. "Hi, um, can I talk to Marc, please?"

The woman on the phone sighed. "He's not scheduled until eight," she snapped. "And since he already missed one shift without calling, I doubt he's going to have time to talk to anyone tonight. Not if he wants to keep his job."

The receiver clicked in her ear, and Corinne hung up with a half-shrug. She told Luc what the woman had said and watched him process the information. "Maybe we need to go down to that club tonight and talk to Mr. Ingram."

She checked her watch. "It's only one o'clock now. That's a hell of a lot of time to kill."

He cast her the sort of sidelong glance that made her simultaneously suspicious and horny. Of course, the way things were going, she wasn't sure he had any glances that didn't make her horny. "Well, you could tell me what it is that you plan to do with those silk scarves you picked up earlier."

She smiled at him, a small and mysterious shift of her lips. "Fat chance, buster. I don't share my secrets easily."

Luc leaned forward until she felt his breath tangle with hers. His own smile was slow, intent and predatory. "I'll bet I can convince you to tell me every single detail."

"Betcha can't."

She licked her lips, and watched his eyes darken, as if he could barely restrain himself from catching the

pink tip of her tongue between his teeth. She'd love for him to prove her wrong, especially if he were inclined to use forceful methods of persuasion. Forceful, naked methods.

"Want me to try?"

Corinne fought the urge to wrestle Luc down onto the carpet and sexually assault him in defiance of rug burn and stiff muscles and all the other downsides to floor sex. As it was, she could feel her palms itching and her pussy getting damp. Some people might find the news surprising, but she never had been into overpowering her partner. Maybe she'd been missing something.

Still, she couldn't resist just one tug to this particular tiger's tail. "Better men than you have failed."

"Honey, I can guarantee that no man like me has ever tried."

She opened her mouth to retort, but the words died in her throat when she felt the tip of his tongue dart out and stroke over her lower lip so quickly she almost thought she had imagined it. Until she looked into his eyes and saw the amusement there. She pursed her lips and test-drove her come-and-get-me-big-boy purr. "How about we see who convinces who first," she suggested. "Winner gets a prize."

"What's the prize?"

"The loser."

"You're on."

They dove for each other so fast, Corinne was surprised their skulls didn't collide in mid-air, but their lips did, and they kissed deeply and frantically as they tumbled around on the sofa cushions. Their tongues tangled, teeth nipped, lips crushed as if it had been weeks since the last time they'd touched instead of just hours. She couldn't believe any man could make her this frantic, but Luc could.

The instant she touched him, her body began screaming for him, as if he were water and she'd been lost forever in an arid wasteland. It frightened her to need him this badly this quickly, and she wondered if this was how addicts felt about their fixes, this bone-deep *need* to have him, as if she couldn't draw another breath unless he gave her the power to move her lungs.

He tore his mouth from hers and buried it against her breasts, drawing in her scent and laving the soft skin along the deep vee of her neckline with long strokes of his tongue. "Lady, I can't believe I need you so badly," he groaned. "What have you done to me that I need you this much?"

Corinne moaned, the only reply she could make. Their little game of who can do what to whom no longer mattered. It seemed kind of silly when both of them were writhing on her sofa for the second time in less than twenty-four hours. Clearly neither of them could claim immunity to the other's charms.

Neither could they claim immunity from some rather animalistic impulses either, it seemed. They tore at each other's clothing until fabric ripped, buttons popped and garments went sailing across the room to land in all sorts of locations. When Luc cast his jeans aside, she thought she heard a crash as they flew into some unsuspecting object, but she couldn't have cared less. She was too busy exploring the flesh that had been concealed under those jeans.

She wrapped her fingers around his cock and moaned her approval. He was rock-hard and hot to the

touch, the silky-smooth skin stretched taut, the mushroom-shaped head swollen and blushing red. A drop of moisture beaded on the tip like sugar syrup, and Corinne needed to taste the sweetness. Squirming out of his grip, she bent her head and pressed the flat of her tongue against the head of his cock, letting that tiny drop roll down her throat like a taste of nectar.

He moaned almost as loud as she did. “Corinne...”

She smiled and let her tongue flick against the tiny opening in his cock head before she parted her lips and took him fully into her mouth. He filled her mouth as snugly as he filled her pussy and she paused for a moment to let herself adjust to the feel of him inside this part of her. Her jaws felt stretched, but not uncomfortably so, and she could feel every beat of his heart against her tongue. It fascinated her, and she eased him a little further inside until she could feel that same pulse against her palate as well.

His hands sifted through her hair, pulling it to the side to keep it from hanging like a curtain around her and concealing the sight of her sucking on him like a lollipop. She stroked her hands up the insides of his thighs, savoring the softness of his skin before reaching down to cradle his balls in the palm of her hand. She weighed them like a sack of gold, smiling a little at the analogy. Pulling her mouth free of his cock, she bent further and stroked her tongue over the contrasting texture of his scrotum, feeling the soft skin and the hard jewels within. Gently, she sucked on each in turn, taking them into her mouth and teasing them with her tongue. She listened to the change in his breathing and gloried in the power she exerted over him. No matter how crazy he drove her, all she had to do was touch him like this and the balance returned to their relationship.

Sex made them equals.

As she pulled her mouth from him and kissed a trail up the center of his smooth, sculpted abdomen, the truth of that hit home to her. When they touched, it didn't matter who was Fae and who was human, who had powers and who didn't. It didn't even matter who was in control. All that mattered was that the magic they made together was stronger than what the Faerie Queen herself could wield. On a good day.

She pressed her lips against his, softly, felt his part in welcome. Slowly, tenderly, their tongues tangled, no longer frantic or wild, but hungry and wanting and reverent, as if Luc too understood the epiphany she had just experienced. She opened her eyes as they kissed and found him watching her. Their gazes locked as she drew slowly back and shifted to straddle him.

This time, she didn't ride him; she worshipped him. Sinking slowly onto his erect cock, she whispered with her body of his strength and virility, his courage and intelligence. With her body she compared him to a god, and he responded in kind.

Grasping her hips in his hands, he held her tightly against him as they rocked slowly together, not thrusting or withdrawing, but gently rocking like the ocean waves as with his body he worshipped her in return. Silently, he compared her to a goddess, showing her the ripe promise of her form, the depth of her tender heart. He showed her the capacity of her body to receive, and the capacity of her heart to give.

They stared into each other's eyes for hours, days, lifetimes, all the while joined together by cock and pussy in a union both elemental and sacred.

Corinne found herself fighting back tears and she shook her head in denial. She didn't want anything to mean this much, especially not sex, but she was afraid she was already much too late. This was more than sex, more than lovemaking. Somehow, when she wasn't paying attention, it had become



communion, and she feared she'd never be the same again.

In the end, their climax came upon them together, building like the wave their motions mimicked, drawing them under with a powerful force, then lifting them again to the surface and washing them ashore, clean and new and reborn.

Some people apparently had no respect for rebirth.

At first she thought the pounding was in her head, but when it was accompanied by a shout, she sat bolt upright on the sofa and stared at her front door. It practically vibrated under the force of the fist that pounded against it. Before she could react, Luc shifted her to the side, slid off the sofa and appeared at the door between one breath and the next. In his hand he held a lethal-looking silver dagger and he put his shoulder against the door before he said a word.

“Who is it?” he demanded, voice low and rough and wary.

“Luc, damn it, open the door before I open it myself. It's Fergus.”

Corinne frowned. “Who?”

“Just put on some clothes,” Luc instructed. “Wear my T-shirt.”

She pulled the too-large shirt on over her head and was reaching down to grab his jeans to hand to him when he opened the door. “Luc!”

“Luc, it's about time. I have news.”

Corinne watched, horrified, as Luc opened her front door—stark naked—to admit an enormous, auburn-haired man wearing worn blue jeans, a slate-blue T-shirt and a four-foot broadsword. And his name, apparently, was Fergus.

“What are you doing here?” Luc demanded, seeming totally oblivious that he was still bare-assed and probably reeking of sex. Corinne blushed crimson and threw his jeans at his head, half-wishing they were made of stone. Though from what she'd seen, granite would shatter on impact with something as hard as Luc's head. He looked at her a little oddly, but obligingly pulled on his jeans.

“Rafe told me where you would be.” Fergus stepped into the apartment, closing the door behind him and ignoring Corinne completely. She wasn't sure if she was insulted or relieved. “The Queen sent me after you.”

Luc cursed, stalking back toward the sofa to grab his socks and boots. He sat to put them on. “For Lady's sake, I've been here one day. What's her bloody royal rush?”

“A ripple at the Woodland Door.”

Fascinated, Corinne watched as Luc looked up from concealing his dagger in his boot and gave his friend a disbelieving stare. “That's impossible.”

“So the Queen thought, but apparently, we're all mistaken.”

“What's the Woodland Door, and why was it rippling? And who the hell are you?”

Both men turned to Corinne and looked surprised. They'd probably forgotten she was there. She glared up at them and wished she were wearing something other than Luc's enormous T-shirt, even if it did cover her from neck to knees. She'd curled her legs up against her chest so she could pull the hem all the way down to her ankles. It still left her lacking a certain amount of dignity.

Fergus spoke first, after raising his eyebrows and giving her an appraising once-over. "Now, she is not your usual type, friend. A little...ordinary, don't you think?"

"She's extraordinary enough to make you eat your teeth if you talk about her like that again," she growled, eyes narrowing in a violent glare. She had decided she really didn't like Fergus.

Luc put his arm around her and hugged her to his side, sending Fergus a glare of his own. "Corinne, this is Fergus of Eithdne. He serves as my lieutenant, when he's not making an ass out of himself. And sometimes when he is." Fergus didn't even blink at the insult. He was too busy watching them curiously. "Fergus, this is Corinne D'Alessandro."

Fergus looked from Corinne to Luc and back again. "She's human." He said it like you might say, "she's a woolly mammoth," with a sense of total disbelief, as if checking to make sure Luc had noticed.

"She's also not deaf, you Fae freak," she growled, "so you might want to try being civil. Or don't you guys have manners where you come from?"

Fergus stiffened and rested his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Corinne laughed. "Oh, right. I tell you when you're being a raving jerk and you reach for the sword. What happens if I call you an asshole? Do you have a hand grenade in your pocket?"

She might have laughed at the way his jaw dropped if she hadn't been hoping to see it rot off.

He looked at Luc. "She can't possibly see my sword. I charmed it before I left Rafe's. It's under illusion."

"Not a very good one, I guess, because I can see it as clear as day," she informed him before Luc could open his mouth. "I can see right through you. Which is why I can see what a jerk you are."

Fergus frowned. "Can you see this?"

He waved his hand around for a second before he opened his closed fist to reveal a perfectly formed flower resting in the palm of his hand. Corinne frowned. "Yeah, it's an orchid. So what?"

The Fae ignored her question and turned to Luc. "That's impossible," he said in the sort of tone that brooked no argument. "There's only one reason she would be able to see through the masking glamour on my sword, but not notice anything odd about a simple creation spell, but it's impossible. She's human. She can't possibly be your hea—"

"She doesn't know what she is, Fergus, and I don't have time to explain it to her now," Luc interrupted, giving Fergus a meaningful stare. "So why don't you let it go for now and tell me what you know about the Door."

The other Fae nodded briefly and took a seat on the edge of an armchair. "Right. Mab sent me because

she detected—”

“Um, hello?” Corinne interrupted, struggling very hard to resist grabbing them both by their hair and ramming their heads together as hard as she could. Maybe it would knock some sense into one or the other. “Person here who doesn’t know what the hell you’re talking about. What is the Woodland Door?”

Fergus glared at her, so she glared right back, but Luc turned to answer her question. “Remember those old doors between Ithir and Faerie that I told you about earlier? The ones that the Queen had closed and sealed?” She nodded. “The Woodland Door is one of those. It’s been sealed for centuries, but at one time it led from a forest here on this island to a forest in Faerie. That’s how it got its name.”

“A forest in Manhattan?”

“Well, it used to be in a forest. Now it’s in a section of lawn in Central Park.”

Corinne groaned. “Of course it is.” She had recently learned that Central Park was practically a hotbed of Other activity. Between Faerie doors and werewolf pack meetings, she didn’t think she’d ever be able to set foot in the Park again. She almost longed for the days when the weirdest things going on in there were protest rallies and creative flashers.

“Can I go on now?”

She rolled her eyes at Fergus’s petulant tone, but Luc just nodded.

“Fine. So as I was saying...” He paused to glare at Corinne. She smiled sweetly, just because she knew it would drive him crazy. It did. “Last night, after you had left, we stationed extra Guards in the Chamber of Doors. Everything seemed normal until around midnight, when Connor and Ewen said they felt a disturbance in the air. They alerted me, and I sent for the Queen.”

“What did she find?” Luc asked.

“At first nothing, and she was less than pleased. I thought she was going to banish all three of us to bogle duty for a century or more. But then it happened again, and this time we all felt it. An Undoing charm.”

“That shouldn’t do a thing, though. Mab made sure her seals couldn’t be undone by something that simple.”

“I know,” Fergus nodded, “but then we felt a Passing charm cast, and that’s when the Queen got nervous.”

Luc scowled. “That would still never be enough to open a sealed door.”

“No, but it could open a hidden one. And after the ripples stopped at the Woodland Door, he tried the Hearthstone Door as well.”

Luc’s only response was a curse, and this time even Corinne thought she understood what he had to swear about. If she understood correctly, what Fergus had just told them was that Seoc had discovered the way to open the hidden door between Faerie and Ithir, and the only thing keeping him from wreaking all the havoc Luc had described was that he hadn’t yet found it.

“Okay, I admit that sounds like it sucks,” she ventured, wrapping her arms around her knees. “But it’s

not like he's already done the deed. Why can't we just go to where the real door is and wait for him to show up? I mean, if he's trying all the doors he knows about in turn, he'll get to the right one eventually, but we just need to get there first."

"If it were that easy," Fergus snapped, "don't you think we would already be there?"

Corinne jerked back, feeling like she'd been slapped. She had never been one to count solely on first impressions, but so far all of her impressions of Fergus told her he was a creep. She snarled at him. "Listen, freak boy—"

"Stop it," Luc growled. "I don't have time to listen to you two squabble." Fergus subsided under a Captain of the Guard glare, and Corinne shut up when Luc turned a similar expression on her. "The idea is a good one, Corinne, but the problem is that we don't know where the real door is hidden."

She blinked. "Well, that's stupid. How is anyone ever supposed to use a door they can't find?"

"They aren't. They're supposed to ask the Queen for passage, and she sends them through and conceals the location of the door."

"How? You'd have to be pretty stupid not to be able to find the location of a door you just walked through."

"Yeah. Or pretty human."

"Fergus. Shut. Up." Luc spared a glare at the other Fae before turning back to Corinne. "If Faerie doors worked like physical doors, you'd be right. But they don't. A Faerie door isn't a door at all. It works entirely differently, because it isn't usually fixed to any one spot. Mab fixed the doors on the Faerie side because she always wanted to see who came into or left her realm, but on this side, she wanted to make them difficult to find, so she charmed them to open in random locations unless she specifically requested otherwise."

Corinne shook her head. "Do I detect a hint of paranoia? Still, I suppose we're lucky she was so worried, since it's kept Seoc from finding the right door yet."

"Yes, but he's had a lot more time to look than we have now," Luc said, getting to his feet with a grim expression. "If we want to get to the door first, we need to find out from the Queen where it is."

"And how do we do that?" Corinne asked. "I don't suppose she's got a cell phone."

He shook his head. "No, but then, we don't need a phone to contact her. Before we do, I want to talk to the head of the Council. I have a feeling we're going to need all the help we can get if we plan to spring a trap for Seoc."

"Okay, that's great." She shook her head. "Who is the head of the council?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Rafael De Santos. Before him, it was Dmitri Vidâme. I thought you were friends with Regina. Shouldn't you know these things?"

She quirked an eyebrow. "Yeah, well, supernatural politics really isn't my schtick. I didn't even know anyone in, er... Ithir knew Faerie existed before yesterday. How was I supposed to know there was some sort of official ambassador?"

“Someone has to maintain diplomatic ties between the worlds. On Ithir, it’s the responsibility of the head of the Council.”

“Right. Great. Looks like we go talk to Rafe then. Just give me five minutes.”

“What for?”

She was already heading for the bedroom. “So I can get dressed.”

She heard him sigh. “All right. I’m going to call Rafe and tell him we’re on our way.”

“What makes you think we plan to take a human along with us?”

Even if she’d been deaf, Corinne couldn’t have missed the sarcastic, arrogant tone in Fergus’s voice. “Because if you don’t, I’ll just follow you,” she explained. “And then I’ll get all pissy, I’ll bitch about you to Reggie and Missy, *they’ll* bitch about you to Misha and Graham, and then there’ll be this whole big inter-dimensional incident just because you got your shorts in a knot.” She stopped in the hallway door and looked over her shoulder at him. “So do you really want to go there? I didn’t think so.”

She stalked back into her bedroom to the sound of Luc’s chuckle and Fergus’s curses in a language she didn’t recognize. It was just as well. They would probably just have pissed her off even more. And she was already planning to stash a metric buttload of aspirin in her backpack to take with her. Judging by the size of the headache Fergus had given her, that might spare him from her wrath for about an hour. Two, if he’d learn to keep his mouth shut. It amazed her that one Fae could be so obnoxious and set her teeth on edge in a nano-second, while the another—Luc—could give her that scary, happy, glowing feeling in her chest. She must have lost her mind.

As she pulled a pair of beat up denim shorts out of her dresser drawer, she heard Fergus yell something impatient and rude from her living room. Eyes narrowing, she decided to make it two metric buttloads of aspirin. Just in case.

## Chapter Twelve

Five minutes, Corinne decided as she climbed out of the cab she and her two enormous companions has squeezed into for the trip to Rafe’s Upper East Side home. That’s all she needed, just five minutes of peace, of uninterrupted privacy where she could sit down, take a deep breath to try to figure out just what the hell was going on and when exactly she’d gotten on this ride that wouldn’t stop. Was it really so much to ask?

Apparently. Reggie and Missy were waiting for her when she, Luc and Fergus arrived at Rafe’s front door. They’d barely gotten the damned thing closed behind them before her friends pounced. Corinne looked to Luc for rescue, but the damned man was already huddled with her traitorous friends’ traitorous

husbands.

“All right, Rinne, spill it,” Reggie demanded, crossing her arms over her chest and fixing her friend with an expectant stare. “What in blazes is going on?”

“Yeah. Why did Graham and Dmitri drag us all the way over here mumbling something about diplomatic ties, inter-dimensional incidents and the end of the world as we know it?” Missy mustered up a damned intimidating glare, but the effect paled a bit when she began rubbing her hand over her swollen belly. She was currently three months pregnant and, ridiculously enough, halfway to term. She looked at least six months along, which was just one of the results of getting knocked up by a werewolf.

“It’s a really long story.” Corinne tried to ease her way past them and closer to Luc. Even if the fink hadn’t come to her rescue, he’d make an awfully big obstacle to hide behind, if she could move quick enough.

“Not a chance,” Reggie snapped. “Even if you could move faster than Missy, which I doubt, you sure as hell wouldn’t be faster than me. So stay put and start talking.”

“Damn it, Reg!” Corinne stopped sidling toward Luc and threw up her hands. “You know how much I hate it when you do that! I don’t care how cool you think it is that you can do it, stay the hell out of my mind!”

“I’m not in your mind, you freak.” Reggie straightened up haughtily and looked offended. “I don’t need to try and read you when you’re broadcasting so loud, a deaf dog could hear you. You should be glad I didn’t bring up what else you’re broadcasting.”

“You don’t need to,” Missy put in, her face taking on an arch expression. “I can smell it. Our dearest friend has been getting down and dirty with the man in black over there. And,” she paused, and Corinne tried not to notice that she was inhaling delicately, “the man in black is not quite human.”

“Corinne!” Reggie gasped, fighting back a smile. “I thought you only wanted to get involved with human men. I thought you said Others weren’t your type.”

“She’s clearly been fibbing.”

Blushing scarlet, Corinne was all ready to turn around and head right back out the door when Luc called her name.

“Corinne,” he said, turning away from the men’s huddle and holding his hand out to her. “Come here. I think this will all be a lot easier if we explain everything at once.” He turned back to Rafe and raised his eyebrows. “Think we can move into the living room and sit down?”

Trying desperately to act casual, Corinne ignored the stares of her friends and crossed to Luc’s side, ignoring his outstretched hand. He didn’t get offended, just wrapped it around her instead, resting his palm possessively on her hip. She pretended not to notice, but she couldn’t help seeing the way Rafe’s dark eyebrows shot up, and his normal expression of lazy amusement took on a decided note of curiosity.

“By all means,” the suave werecat said, gesturing for the others to precede him through the double doors that led to his living room. “Let’s make ourselves comfortable. Can I offer anyone a drink?”

“Sure.”

“Yes.”

“Absolutely.”

“Hell, yeah.”

Rafe chuckled. “I’ll just open the bar, shall I? That way we can all help ourselves.”

They made an odd little party as they filed into Rafe’s immaculately decorated living room. The damned thing was about twice the size of Corinne’s entire apartment. Was it, like, a rule that all the Others in Manhattan had to be obscenely rich?

Rafe settled himself behind the bar and began setting decanters and bottles onto the inlaid top, while Fergus took about three steps into the room and leaned his shoulder against the fireplace mantel. He seemed determined to be a pill.

Reggie and Missy tried to herd Corinne toward the sofa, but Luc actually came in handy and steered her to a loveseat, taking the place beside her and draping his arm casually over her shoulders. She saw Reggie start to protest, but Misha hooked an arm around his wife’s waist and sank down on a retro-looking curved armchair, pulling her onto his lap. When Reggie opened her mouth to protest, he shook his head and gave her a quelling look.

Graham just led Missy to where he wanted her to sit, helped ease her down into the chair and sat on the floor at her feet with one knee drawn up to his chest and his arm draped over it. It looked like a casual pose, but Corinne saw he had Missy completely hemmed in and gave a sigh of relief. Luc noticed and flashed her an amused look.

“Champagne, I think.” Rafe’s voice rumbled through the tense silence and Corinne looked over to see him holding aloft a black glass bottle. “Would anyone care to join me?”

“You think we have something to celebrate? You should know this matter is too grave not to be taken seriously.”

“I take many things seriously, Fergus,” Rafe said, bracing the bottle against his thigh as he eased the cork from the top. “However, I fail to see how all hope is lost.”

“Then maybe you don’t really have a grasp on the situation. Would you like me to explain?”

Corinne felt her eyes widen. “I know red hair is supposed to indicate a quick temper,” she muttered to Luc, “but I had no idea it equated to criminal rudeness.”

“Watch it, Emily Post,” he murmured back.

The man made more pop references than she did half the time, and wondering how he’d become so conversant in human culture threatened to drive her crazy. She reminded herself to ask him about it later, but right now she wanted to watch the fireworks.

“I hardly think I need any explanations from you, Fergus, nor is this the time for us to listen to you throw a tantrum,” Rafe purred. Not the way a cat being stroked purrs, but the way a leopard feasting on the



entrails of his kill purrs. “However, if you feel the need to question my understanding, I would be happy to discuss it with you. Later. Alone.”

Corinne shuddered and decided to be very sure she wasn’t around for later.

“Can we get down to business?” Luc asked, cutting through the tension and drawing all eyes off of Rafe and Fergus and onto him and Corinne. She fought the urge to squirm.

“I think that is a marvelous idea.” Dmitri shifted Reggie on his lap and spoke over the top of her auburn head. “Perhaps you could fill us in on what is happening, Luc. Rafe already told us of the reason for this most recent visit of yours to our world, but I suspect something important has happened if both you and Fergus felt the need to call us all together here.”

“The calling together was Rafe’s idea, but I’ll admit it was a good one. From what Fergus told me, I have a feeling it’s going to take all of us to wrap up this mess.” Luc reached out a hand to accept the glass of champagne Rafe handed to him and passed it to Corinne. “And we don’t have a lot of time.”

Across the room, Graham sighed and rested his right hand on Missy’s distended belly. “Then I suggest you make with the storytelling, buddy.”

Corinne watched and listened and sipped champagne as Luc filled the others in on the saga of Seoc, Hibbish and the Faerie doors. Everyone but Fergus listened intently, their faces growing grimmer as the tale came out. No one seemed pleased to hear about what was going on, and Corinne found herself feeling almost sorry for Seoc. She certainly wouldn’t want these five men—well, these four men and a sorry-assed excuse for an ill-mannered Fae—to add her to their fecal rosters. Just the thought made her shiver.

Luc must have noticed because he tightened his arm around her and began to rub his hand up and down her arm, as if chafing some warmth into her. She grimaced when she saw both Reggie and Missy make note of the motion and exchange “Ah ha!” glances. Maybe if she climbed over so she was sitting directly behind Luc, they’d forget she was there.

When Luc finally stopped speaking, Dmitri grunted. “I can see why you were concerned, *brahtok*. The Queen’s nephew is breaking at least five clauses from the concordance between our peoples. I think Rafael would agree that the Others are as anxious as you are to see him stopped and returned to Faerie.”

Rafe nodded over the rim of his champagne flute. “Of course. We will be happy to do all we can to help you.”

Luc turned his gaze to Dmitri. “Will it involve more this time than giving me someone’s name and number and wishing me luck?”

Dmitri chuckled. “If more is required, of course it will.” He cast a knowing glance at the arm Luc still had snugged around Corinne’s shoulders. “But I believe that at the time, I gave you the most important thing I could have. Do you disagree?”

Luc smiled lazily in return. “No, I don’t suppose I do. Remind me to thank you later, *brahtok*.”

“Ex-*cuseme*,” Corinne snapped, looking from one self-satisfied male face to the other, “but I’m sitting right here, and I’m not brain dead. Do you think you could refrain from talking about me as if I were an object? At least while I’m in the room to hear you?”

Luc brushed his lips against her temple, and she could feel his suppressed laughter. “Maybe. It’ll be tough, but I’ll make the effort.”

A strange squeaking noise made them both turn to look at Reggie. She sat in Dmitri’s lap, struggling to get to her feet, but he held her easily with his arms wrapped around her waist.

“That’s it!” Reggie cried, grabbing her husband’s wrists and attempting to pull his hands off of her. “I want to know what you’re done to Corinne! Have you cast some sort of weird Fae love spell on her? Have you?”

Dmitri tried to hush her, but he was having trouble speaking over his laughter. Reggie just ignored him completely.

“What makes you think I had to use magic to make her love me?” Luc asked. “I think I may be insulted.”

“Oh, no, you’ll know when you’ve been insulted,” Missy growled from the other side of the room, “because I’m about to insult you big time. What kind of dirty, rotten, manipulative, rat-faced bastard plays with someone’s emotions like that? You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Graham, let me go! I want to hit him. Hard.”

Corinne groaned and tried to squirm out from under Luc’s arm, but he was having none of it. “Would you all stop it? You, too, Mr. Grabby Hands.” She glared at Luc before turning back to her primary targets. “And you, my supposed friends who went and got involved with figments of the collective human imagination *long* before I ever *met* the guy you want to punish, who the hell do you think you are? If I want to fall in love with a three-toed tree sloth, I’d like to see you try and stop me.”

Breathing hard, she jerked back and felt her eyes widen. Had she just shouted that she was in love with Luc? Had she?

“We don’t care who you fall in love with,” Missy said. “Though the tree sloth thing might take some getting used to. But we *do* care when you have a spell cast on you by some unscrupulous Fae Lothario.”

“For your information, there is no magic involved here,” she retorted. “Luc couldn’t use magic to make me love him if he tried. He’s already told me his illusions don’t work on me. So there.” She realized that the “so there,” might come across as a little childish, but when faced with the choice between saying it or sticking her tongue out, she went with the verbal jab and patted herself on the back for her restraint.

She also braced herself for another volley of arguments, but it never came. Instead, every eye in the room turned to stare at her and Luc, and every jaw (except for Fergus’) dropped to the floor. Her friends were staring at her, dumbstruck, and Corinne had no idea what was wrong with them. She looked from face to face, reading in each the exact same expression of stunned disbelief. Finally, she crossed her arms over her chest and gave a distinct harrumph.

“What?” she demanded.

\* \* \* \* \*

Luc froze and wondered what the best way was to convey to everyone in the room that the first person to inform Corinne she was his heartmate would die a slow, gruesome and painful death at his hands. Did that need to be in writing?

“But, Corinne, are you serious? Do you understand what you just said?”

Missy was the first to recover from the initial shock of Corinne’s revelation, and Luc fought back a wave of regret. He hated to harm Graham’s unborn cub, but figured his friend would see the necessity. He braced himself to leap off the sofa and tackle her.

“If that’s true, then you’re Luc’s—”

“Missy, honey,” Graham cut in, “I don’t think it’s polite to question Corinne about her feelings for Luc. That’s between the two of them.”

“But, Graham, you heard what she said,” Reggie protested. “And she clearly has no idea of the significance—”

“Whether or not this is true, it is none of your business, *dushka*.” Dmitri’s voice was stern, but loving. “It is not your place to have this discussion with Corinne.”

Luc sent his friends grateful looks, but apparently his heartmate actually wanted him to have to kill her friends.

“No, let them talk,” she said, arms crossed over her chest, her kissable mouth turned down in a scowl. He recognized that expression better than her smile, he mused. “My friends can say anything they want to me. I can tell them myself that they’re full of crap.”

“But Corinne, you don’t understand about Luc,” Reggie said. “He’s not like other men. He’s not like humans.”

“Oh, and you’re one to talk, Mrs. Fang.” Corinne cast an apologetic look at Dmitri, who just grinned. “You’re the one who started all of this. We all led perfectly normal lives until you decided to bump uglies with a guy on a liquid diet.”

“But, Rinnie, he’s clouded your mind!”

Corinne laughed, even though Luc didn’t think she sounded all that amused. “Am I the only one who finds this scene strangely familiar, only with different cast members in the leading roles? You gonna wave a cross at me, Reg? Or maybe some—”

She paused, frowning, and looked at Luc. “What do you use against Fae, anyway? I know there was something in all those stories.”

“Cold iron,” he murmured, trying not to laugh.

“Right.” She turned back to Reggie and said, “Maybe some cold iron then. Don’t be such a hypocrite.”

“Reggie is not trying to be a hypocrite, and neither am I,” Missy said in her I’m-the-moderator-here voice. “We’re just concerned about you.”

Luc broke in at that point. He just couldn't take the chance of this going on any longer. "You have no need to be concerned. I will do everything in my power to take care of Corinne. You have my word."

His loving heartmate thumped him across the chest. "What about if I want to take care of you? I'm not some helpless porcelain doll, you know."

Luc winced and rubbed the spot where her fist had landed. "Yes, I know. It was a figure of speech. Regina, Melissa, I swear to you, I will tell Corinne everything, and I will allow her just as many choices as I can. You have my word on it. But now isn't the time. We need to fine Seoc and protect the Faerie door before it's too late."

He watched while the two women looked at him, at Corinne, at their husbands and back at him.

"All right," Reggie said, without sounding all that pleased about it. "We'll give you until Seoc is back in Fae hands, but not a minute more. And we expect you to be completely honest, and to respect her wishes. Is that clear?"

Luc looked at the petite, fledgling vampire and the delicate human Luna and almost laughed, but then he looked at the eight-hundred-year-old vampire and the alpha Lupine who were their mates, and nodded respectfully. "It's clear. And again, you have my word on it."

He heard Corinne snarl next to him and looked down into her irritated brown eyes. He had the nearly overwhelming urge to kiss the tip of her wrinkled nose, but figured unless he wanted to risk losing his tongue, he'd better refrain.

"I have no idea what's going on here," she growled, "but I'm pretty damned sure it's pissing me off."

He couldn't help grinning. "I'll explain everything later, but right now, we have work to do."

## Chapter Thirteen

Once everyone stopped trying to run Corinne's love life for her, they were actually able to get to the reason they had all met up at Rafe's house—to develop a plan for trapping Seoc and getting him safely back to Faerie.

"I take it jumping out of the woods or wherever with a big net isn't going to cut it, huh?" Missy's mouth twisted into a grimace as she rubbed her belly and sipped from the champagne glass full of milk that Rafe had handed her.

"Not exactly," Luc said. "Seoc is intelligent enough to be hard to catch at the best of times, but he knows that if he's caught this time, the Queen is not going to be nearly so lenient as she has been in the past."

“Yeah. Because it’s better to catch him now, when he’s trying to end the world, than it would have been, oh say, the last billion times he’s caused trouble and gotten no more than a slap on the wrist.” Corinne ignored Luc’s horrified expression. “Either way, though, I doubt the net is going to be all that effective. Because I’m guessing even these guys don’t have, like, a magic net.”

“No magic nets.” Rafe actually let her down politely, which was more than she could say for Fergus’ dismissive snort. “But I believe we make up for in numbers what we would otherwise lack in...nets.”

Luc nodded. “As long as I can count on you all for support, I’m not worried. The trick is going to be finding the door and getting to it before he does.” He looked hopefully at Rafe and Dmitri. “I don’t suppose that particular bit of intelligence is something passed down from Council head to Council head?”

“I wish that it were, *brahtok*, but if any of the others had such knowledge, they never passed it on to me.” Dmitri shrugged. “I doubt anyone did know, however. Mab is not the sort who would trust such knowledge to an outsider.”

“Yeah,” Luc said. “The problem is that she didn’t trust it to any insiders either.”

“Um, wasn’t that the question we were going to ask the Queen?” Corinne interrupted.

She only saw four male faces grimace, because she didn’t bother looking at Fergus.

“I was hoping we wouldn’t have to,” Luc sighed. “I have a feeling she’s going to be a little...cranky.”

“Why? Because she didn’t bother to provide you with vital information before you came here? Or because it’s been twenty-four whole hours and you haven’t managed to accomplish your mission?”

Luc just looked at her. “No. Because she’s the Queen.”

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“It might be better if you waited outside.”

Corinne looked at Luc as if he’d lost his mind and reached past him for the doorknob to Rafe’s library. The host had offered to let them use the private space for their talk with the Faerie Queen. “Thanks, but I want to see this.”

He grabbed her hand. “No, really,” he repeated, slowly and deliberately. “It would be better.”

“I don’t particularly care. I’m not planning to interfere, but I want to hear this conversation. Are you telling me I *can’t* come with you?”

“Would it do any good if I did?”

“Not a bloody bit.”

“And that’s why I would never try to tell you anything of the sort. But I am trying to let you know it might be better—”

He looked at her expression, sighed and opened the library door. “Fine. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ll sign a waiver.”

“If only I believed that.”

She ignored him and strode into the library ahead of him, waiting while he closed and locked the door. She expected to see him batten down the hatches and don Kevlar, with the way he’d been acting. “So what do we have to do?”

His eyebrows shot up and she thought he turned a little paler. “*We* don’t have to do anything. *I* will take care of everything. *You* will sit quietly and try not to look directly at the Queen.”

She scoffed. “Why? Will the sight of her turn me to stone, or drive me mad or something?”

“No!” He looked appalled. “I just don’t want you to make *her* mad.”

“Hey!”

He ignored her protest, took her by the shoulders and pushed her down into a leather club chair, placing her hands on the arms and warning her sternly to keep them there. She considered boxing his ears instead, but he refused to let go.

“Now,” he said, putting his face right up to hers and looking at her the way her third grade teacher, Sister Mary Agnes, had when Corinne had gotten into trouble. “This is going to be a delicate sort of situation. Since you’re not familiar with the protocols of the Faerie court, or how the Queen expects to be addressed, I will do all of the talking. *All* of the talking. Understand?”

She glared at him. Seething.

“You will sit very still, keep your eyes on the floor or the fireplace mantel, and stay absolutely silent. Understand?”

She bared her teeth at him. If they hadn’t been clenched so tightly, she might have sunk them into something vital. Like his jugular. And here she thought only folks like Graham got the urge to rip out throats with their teeth. That was before she met Luc.

“Oh, I understand,” she said, very, very softly. “I understand that you’d better be very careful not to turn your back on me anytime soon, Lucifer. God knows you obviously can’t trust me to control myself.”

“Right,” he nodded. “So long as we understand each other.”

She watched through narrowed eyes and a strange red fog, while he straightened up and took two steps away from her chair. Facing the back of the room—probably so that he could keep one eye on her, Corinne thought with a sense of satisfaction—he reached down into his boot and pulled out the knife she’d seen when he answered the door of her apartment earlier. Then he made a strange motion, as if he were cutting a circle out of thin air, and before her very eyes, the air he had sliced began to glow and shimmer.

Corinne wasn’t precisely sure what she had expected to see, but she knew this wasn’t it. Maybe she’d

been prepared for him to recite a few lines of bad poetry, or chalk arcane symbols on the floor or sacrifice a chicken or something. Hell, even a little chanting and a stick or two of incense would have been nice, but somehow she'd been expecting magic to look a little bit more...well...magical.

This way, all she got to see was that weird gesture with the knife, and the way the circle of air shimmered, like the surface of a pond, before she found herself looking at the face of the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

Eyes the deep, stormy green of a cold-water ocean seemed to glow in a face that had the complexion of a bowl of vanilla cream. Her sharp, angular, and yet wholly feminine bone structure could make an angel jealous. Her brows were thin, dark and arching, and her eyelashes were long and thick. Her red-gold hair, worn long and loose, shone like a halo around her. Corinne felt her jaw drop and wondered if there weren't another reason why Luc had told her not to look directly at the Queen.

When she spoke, the Queen's voice was musical and her words rang from her mouth like the chiming of a bell. "Hello, my Lucifer. I did not expect to have you call me this eve. Have you word of my nephew?"

Corinne watched as the man who had refused to concede anything to her without a fight bow neatly from the waist and addressed the vision with deferential courtesy.

"My Queen, I have discovered some things about Seoc, but I'm afraid it is not heartening news."

"Yes, well, I expected as much."

The Queen's airy, dismissive tone made Corinne's eyes widen and made Luc straighten his already military posture. "You expected it, my Queen?"

Mab nodded. "Why, yes. I assumed that if Seoc were really ignoring my summons, he must be doing something worth angering me. So, naturally, I assumed he was attempting to open the door."

"And you didn't tell me?"

Even after only knowing him for a day, Corinne could tell that slow, deep, controlled tone of voice meant Luc was about one step from committing a violent act of frustration. She watched curiously, wondering if perhaps it was a really good thing that he was only speaking to a vision of the Queen, and not in her physical presence. She assumed that the Fae still frowned on regicide.

"You are my finest warrior. I assumed you would find out soon enough, my Lucifer, as I see you have." The Queen seemed to turn her head and her lips curved in a bewitching smile. "Ah. I see you have indeed found something to please you, my Lucifer. As I said you would."

"Me?"

Corinne heard the squeak, but it took a few seconds to realize it had come from her own lips. She honestly hadn't meant to speak, but the Queen's comment had caught her off guard.

"Corinne..." Luc's voice was a growl, and she shot him an apologetic look.

"Do not scold her, my Lucifer. I was indeed speaking of her, and I would speak to her now. I had hoped you would bring her to me." Ookay. Corinne could practically hear the theme from the *Twilight Zone* playing in the background, but she sat up straighter in her chair and eyed the Queen warily. "Tell



me, child, what is your name?"

"Corinne. D'Alessandro."

"Ah. Lovely." The Queen smiled. "And what do you think of my Lucifer, young Corinne?"

Young Corinne? For Pete's sake, she hadn't be referred to that way since this past Thanksgiving, when her great-aunt Corinne had died and she had finally moved up to the "big people's table" for dinner. She saw Luc watching her, a look of horrified panic on his face, and kept her thoughts to herself. "I think he's...very dedicated."

"Yes, he is. And though he dedicates himself to few things, he is unswervingly loyal to them."

Not knowing what else to do, Corinne gave a murmur of agreement.

"But what I really wanted to know, Corinne, is what you think of Lucifer as a heartmate."

"A what?" She heard Luc's groan even over her question.

"A heartmate. Surely you've given some thought as to how well he suits you? Not that you can refuse to have him, of course, but I am curious to know how a human would feel to be bound so to one of our kind."

"Bound? How he suits me? Can't refuse him?" Her voice rose an octave with each question. She was about to leap out of her chair and issue a very blunt demand that the Queen of Faerie explain just what the hell she was talking about when Luc stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder to press her down into her chair. She wanted to know what the hell was going on, damn it.

"My Queen," he began, his voice carefully controlled and only a tiny bit more forceful than usual, "I am sure Corinne is honored by your attention, but I am afraid that Seoc's actions make us short on time. We need your help if we're going to bring him back soon and safely."

Mab looked back toward Luc and frowned. If she weren't the Faerie Queen and a powerful magical force, Corinne might have come to hate her for being able to do that and still look gorgeous. Scary, but gorgeous.

"Do not speak to me as if I do not grasp the situation, my Lucifer. I am well aware of all that is at stake, as I am well aware that I ordered you to take care of it."

Corinne could actually hear Luc gritting his teeth.

"I am doing my best, my Queen, but I am afraid Seoc has had too long to plan his attack before we became aware of it. I fear that if you cannot provide us with the information we need, I will be too late to stop him from opening the door permanently."

"That would leave me very displeased."

"I know."

Corinne watched as the Faerie Queen and the Captain of her Guard eyed each other warily from across the worlds. Any second now she expected to hear a haunting whistle and see a tumbleweed blow past.

Finally, Mab spoke.

“The door,” she snapped. “I can tell you where it is, but it will be up to you to reach it before Seoc. And I can tell you that I feel he is very close. By moonrise tomorrow, it will be too late to stop him.”

“Then we’ll get to him before that.”

“Very well.” Mab pursed her lips, looked from Luc to Corinne and back again. “You should consider yourself very lucky I cannot take back the gift I have given you, Lucifer, for I begin to doubt whether you truly deserve it.”

“It is already mine,” he growled, “and you are the least of the dangers I would risk to keep it.”

Corinne thought she saw a smile tease the corners of the Queen’s mouth, but then the woman in the vision lifted her chin and schooled her face into a haughty mask. “Remember you said that, my Lucifer, for I know that I will. The door waits for now at the Old Stone Gate. I expect you to find it before my nephew does.”

While Corinne stared in fascination, the Queen turned her back on them and the vision shimmered before smoothing out, until nothing but clear air appeared where it had been. Blinking rapidly to adjust her eyes, Corinne wished she knew a technique to adjust her brain as well, but she had a feeling it was already much too late for that. Still feeling a bit dazed, she followed Luc out of the room.

Fergus and Rafe were waiting outside the door, putting the kibosh on any chance Corinne might have had to ask Luc the questions that spun through her mind. The foremost of which happened to be something like, “What the hell?”

“So?” Rafe drawled, not bothering to straighten from his lazy slouch against the wall.

Fergus put things a bit more bluntly. “Where’s the door?”

Corinne smirked and waved. “And here I thought you’d never ask. Bye now! Don’t remember to write!”

Luc growled.

“Oh, fine.” Corinne crossed her arms peevishly. “He can be uncivil all by himself then, and I’ll just take it like a good little martyr.”

Rafe stepped forward, putting his arm around Corinne’s shoulders and leading her back down the hall to the living room. She could hear Luc’s growls get louder ever over the chuckling purr Rafe was making. Could none of these men behave even halfway normally?

“Just ignore him,” Rafe said. “He’ll get over himself soon enough.”

“Fergus or Luc?”

He hummed. “Both, I imagine.”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” she said, “but we still have the tiny problem of having to work together until we find Seoc.”

“But that won’t be a problem on either count.” The problem with not looking at Fergus was that she could still hear him. “Now that we know where the door is, we can just go there and wait for him, and now since we don’t need a human getting in the way, you can just go home and we’ll work just fine without you.”

Corinne turned just in time to see Luc yank the other Fae to a stop by the braid. “The next time you speak that way to her, I’m going to break something. Probably your pretty nose,” he growled. “So *stop* . Now.”

Fergus whined. “She started it.”

“And she has now stopped.” He raised an eyebrow at Corinne. “Haven’t you?”

Ooh. So she got to play the moral superiority angle without actually having to be superior? Fabulous! “Absolutely. My lips are sealed.”

“Good. Keep them sealed. Both of you.” He released Fergus’s braid, stepped forward, peeled Rafe’s arm off of Corinne’s shoulder and replaced it with his own. “Let’s get back to the others. I only want to go through this once.”

“Sounds like more than enough for me,” she mumbled.

She didn’t say another word while he dragged her back into the living room and pushed her down onto the love seat. She even refrained from commenting during his retelling of the conversation with Mab. She was very proud of herself.

When he finished, Graham was frowning. “The Old Stone Gate? Is that supposed to be here in Manhattan? Because I’ve never heard of it.”

“I have.” Dmitri shifted Reggie in his lap and leaned forward. “I thought it was an old legend, and I cannot say I don’t still think it is. It is supposed to be a hidden gate, more powerful than anything the Fae wanted known about, here in the city in an old wooded grove. I had heard that more than the Fae used it at one time, to travel between further flung places than Faerie and Ithir.”

“But it can’t still be standing, can it?” Reggie asked. “I mean, Manhattan hasn’t exactly remained unchanged for centuries or anything. It must have been torn down or built over or something, right?”

Missy chimed in. “Yeah. It would have to be long gone, wouldn’t it? There are no real woods left here. Even Central Park was landscaped and planted to be the way it looks now. You’d have to go off the island to get a grove that’s been around long enough for the Fae to consider it old.”

“Not true,” Graham said, an expression of slow understanding beginning to light his face. “There is one place on the island that contains original woodland.”

“Inwood Hill Park.” Corinne spoke the epiphany aloud. “It’s where Peter What’sHisFace supposedly bought the island from the Indians for a pile of souvenirs, at the northernmost tip of the island.” She frowned. “But I don’t remember any old stone gates up there. It’s all hiking trails and stuff. A gate wouldn’t have remained hidden for long from all the joggers and dog walkers. I mean, it’s not as busy as Central Park, but it’s hardly desolate, either.”

Rafe shook his head. “It wouldn’t need to be. If the Fae considered it to be a hidden gate, then likely it wouldn’t be recognized as anything at all to anyone else. It could be nothing more than a crevice in some rock.”

“Well, there’s plenty of rock up there, so I suppose anything is possible.”

Luc nodded. “That’s likely where we’ll need to be then.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Fergus wanted to head to Inwood immediately, because he was apparently a big fan of the abject failure scenario. Corinne almost bit through her tongue keeping that observation in check, but she really was trying to be good, so she kept silent and let Luc explain that tomorrow would be a better bet.

“The moon will be new. He’ll need that extra help if he’s going to undo Mab’s seals. He’s too smart to try tonight, only to end up failing.”

When she later asked him to explain that without making her brain hurt, he summed it up as, “Magic. If you’re trying to get rid of magic things—in this case, the seals on the door—it’s easier when the moon is new. You want to create things, it’s better when the moon is full.”

She didn’t pretend she really understood that, but at least he’d used simple words, so she just nodded and moved on.

She really *wanted* to move on to her apartment, her bed and her very own REM sleep cycle. She got as far as standing up from the loveseat before Luc grabbed her. “Where are you going?”

She sighed. “Home. To bed. I don’t know about you, but it’s been a long day and I’m exhausted. You just said we wouldn’t be able to go to the park until sundown tomorrow, so I’m going to spend every available hour between now and then unconscious.”

He tugged her hand, trying to get her to sit back down. “Okay, but I can’t leave until I go over a few more things with Fergus and Rafe and the others.”

“That’s nice.” She pulled her hand away. “But since I’m sure you don’t need me around for the strategy stuff, I can. And I plan to. Witness me leaving.”

He snatched up her hand again and yanked, sending her tumbling down onto his lap in a heap. “No. I’ll go with you, but you have to give me a few more minutes to make arrangements for tomorrow.”

“Luc, what are you doing? Let me up” She tried really hard not to pretend she didn’t notice the room full of people watching her with avid curiosity, but the heat in her cheeks told her about how well that worked.

“No.” He tightened his arms and frowned down at her. “I don’t want you to leave without me. If you give me fifteen more minutes, I’ll be done here, and we can go home together.”

She blinked. “Did I invite you home with me?”

“Did you think you would have to?”

“Perhaps if we met in the morning to talk,” Dmitri offered through a smile that Corinne felt she was better off ignoring. “Since you had so little sleep last night. That way you need not waste fifteen minutes of, ah...sleeping time.”

Reggie punched her husband in the ribs, not that he so much as flinched. “Misha, don’t help him. He doesn’t need it. Corinne is the one we should be trying to rescue.”

“I don’t need to be rescued.”

“She doesn’t need to be rescued.”

They spoke both at once and Corinne rolled her eyes, pushing off Luc’s lap to stand in front of him and face her interfering friends. “Look, it’s not that I don’t appreciate your concern,” she said, “but I really don’t need an intervention.”

Reggie scowled. “I got an intervention.”

“You got bit by a vampire. No one is going to be sucking my blood and turning me into a creature of the night.”

“That doesn’t mean we’re not right to be concerned,” Missy said, sounding as sweet and stern as when she told her class of five-year-olds to settle down for nap time.

“Like I was concerned when my best friend told me she was marrying a werewolf and having a cub? And let’s see if I remember how said friend reacted to my concern...” Corinne blinked innocently for a second before she held up a finger in mock realization. “Oh, yeah! She told me to mind my own damned business and to make sure the baby gift was unisex.”

At least Missy had the grace to blush. Reggie just charged ahead. Or at least, she tried to. “Rinnie, you don’t under—”

That’s as far as she got before Dmitri put one hand over her mouth and flashed Corinne a grin. “Since I can guarantee my charming love is about three seconds from sinking her fangs into my hand, I suggest you take advantage of the silence to leave while you can.” Reggie’s eyes narrowed and her jaw clenched and Dmitri’s grin turned into a wince. “There, you see? Go away and have a good night.”

Luc chuckled and stood, wrapping one arm about Corinne’s waist and steering her toward the door. “We will. Let’s all meet back here tomorrow afternoon around three. We can decide how to best deal with Seoc’s capture then.”

Rafe nodded and rose to walk them to the front door. “Of course. My home is at your disposal. And just because I love you, I will even keep our friend Fergus for the night. It would upset our plans if we had to spend all evening trying to stop Corinne from killing him.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They took a cab back to Corinne's and she didn't even bother to pull away when he laced their fingers together and held their joined hands against his thigh. Instead, she actually leaned her head against his shoulder and watched the city roll past the windows.

Several minutes passed in silence while she sat with her cheek pillowed on his chest and his cheek resting against her hair. Finally she stirred, tilting her head until she could see his face. "Do you have a plan for tomorrow night?"

"I don't think it requires a better mousetrap, just stealth and speed," he said, snuggling her closer against him. "With the Lupines, Rafe, and Dmitri and Reggie on our side, we'll have that in abundance."

"So we just hide near the gate until he shows, and then jump him?"

He smiled at the incredulity in her voice. "You expected something a bit more elaborate?"

"I guess. It just seems so..." she shrugged. "Anticlimactic."

He chuckled. "A good many things are."

And then again, a good many things aren't, she thought and pressed her legs together against the involuntary ripple in her cunt. She seemed to have developed a reflex action to the thought of Luc and climaxes occurring within a thousand synapses of each other.

She fell silent again and stayed that way until they paid the cab driver and headed up to her apartment. When she unlocked the door and led him inside, she felt almost like she'd been stuck by déjà vu, but this time when Luc shut the door behind them, he reached for her immediately.

His lips settled on hers like rain, and she soaked him up as quickly as the desert floor. In fact, she got about half a second away from drowning before the niggling in the back of her mind turned into a pounding and she pulled away on a groan.

"Wait," she said, bracing her hands against his chest to keep him further than lip-length away from her. "You and I have some talking to do."

Luc groaned against her throat as he laved it with his oh-so clever tongue. "We can talk later."

"Right," she scoffed. "Like we're really going to have the energy to talk after we screw each other into a couple of senseless puddles of goo. I can see that happening."

"I have no problem with goo," he muttered, scraping his teeth against her collarbone. "That sounds fine to me. Let's aim for goo."

"No." She pushed him firmly away and squirmed out of his arms, walking around the back of the sofa to keep some sort of barrier between them. If he touched her again, she knew darned well the only things coming out of her mouth would be cries for more. "I said I wanted to talk."

He groaned and reached down to adjust the fit of his jeans. "Fine," he said. "Just do me a favor and try

and talk fast, okay?"

"Fine. I've really only got one question for you." She crossed her arms and braced herself. "What is a heartmate?"

She saw Luc tense, heard him swear and then watched while he collapsed into an armchair and closed his eyes on a sigh.

"Luc?"

He didn't say anything, but she saw him rubbing his hands over his face, so she knew he was still conscious.

"Luc," she prodded, "answer me. Tell me what the Queen meant when she called you my heartmate."

He shook his head. "Corinne, that's...I really...it's just too much to go into right now. It's complicated."

"So simplify it for me."

She watched his face carefully, noticed the wary expression in his eyes when he finally opened them to look up at her. "Baby—"

"Don't baby me. Tell me what the Queen was talking about." When he continued to hesitate, she sighed and sat down on the arm of his chair. He looked so wary and tired and vulnerable that she couldn't manage to keep up the uber-bitch routine. She stroked a hand over his tousled hair. "Look at it this way. You might as well tell me now, when I'm all tired and ready for bed. If you wait until I'm alert, I'll just have that much more energy for being mad at you."

"You have a point." He took her free hand in his and brushed a kiss over her fingertips. "But you don't really need me to tell you what you already know. It's a sort of self-explanatory term."

She slid off the arm of the chair and into his lap. "Then it's the same sort of thing as when Graham calls Missy his mate. It's like a...like a...wife?"

He rested his cheek against the top of her head and wrapped his arms around her, cuddling her close. "In a way. The Fae don't have any formal marriage ceremonies. Couples stay together because they want to stay together. If they change their minds, they go their separate ways."

"Does that mean you might change your mind about us?"

She heard the smile in his voice. "Never. I can't. To have a mate in Faerie is one thing, but to have a heartmate is entirely different. A mate is a companion you choose and discard as it suits the both of you. A heartmate is the other part of your spirit. Fate chooses for you, and the bonds last forever. It doesn't happen for all Fae, but when it does, it's seen as a blessing from the goddess Anu."

She was silent for a few minutes, listening to the echo of his heart beating beneath her ear and his words swirling in her mind. "Forever, huh?"

He nodded.

"And you're sure that's what's happened to us. It's not just the companion thing?"



Corinne heard the note of vulnerability in her voice and winced. She didn't want to turn into the weepy, clingy, needy type, but damn, this was hard. It tied her thoughts in a tangle and her stomach in knots and her heart in a butterfly net. She tried to at least keep her head down so he couldn't read her expression, but he touched his knuckles to her chin and gently raised it until he could look into her eyes.

"I'm more than sure," he said, his green eyes deep and solemn and potent. "A heartmate can see through glimmers to the truth that lies beneath so that deception can never interfere with Love's Truth. The minute you saw through my human disguise, I knew you were my heartmate. Not even the gods can change that now."

She held his gaze for the span of a dozen heartbeats before she felt her mouth begin to curve in an irrepressible smile. "All right, then," she said, laying her head back against his chest. "I'll take your word for it. For now."

He chuckled. "And what will it take before you're fully convinced?"

"Not much. Only a decade or two."

## Chapter Fifteen

Again, Corinne woke to the feel of teeth delicately nibbling at her skin, but this time it was accompanied by the hot, heavy glide of a cock sliding from behind deep into her sleep-softened pussy. She gave a drowsy moan and arched her back to deepen the contact. Strong, callused hands slid around her body to cup her breasts and knead gently.

"Good morning." Luc's raspy morning voice rumbled against her ear, the vibrations traveling all the way down to where their bodies were joined and making her contract around his hard shaft.

"Mm." It was the only answer she could manage.

Instead of struggling to speak, she reached up behind her and buried her fingers in his hair, pulling the long strands forward until they blanketed both of them, covering them in a thick, silken sheet that smelled of woodland and spice and strong, vibrant male. She heard Luc's purr, and his hands shifted. One continued to cup her breast, teasing her nipples alternately with soft caresses and gentle pinches. The other hand slid down her torso, over her ribs and down to rest on her belly. His fingers spread wide, spanning the space between her hipbones and pressing her back against him as he began to move his hips in a deep, lazy rhythm.

Corinne hummed and let her head fall back against his shoulder as she surrendered herself totally to his loving. She let his hand guide her hips, rocking her bottom against his pelvis to move his cock inside her while his fingers caught one pebbled nipple and twisted delicately. She shuddered and took him deeper.

“That’s it, baby,” he whispered, his breath another caress against the curve of her ear. “Sweet and easy. We have all the time in the worlds, and nothing in Ithir or in Faerie can compare to the feel of your pretty pussy milking my cock.”

“Ah!”

His words sent shivers racing through her and she shifted in an attempt to get closer to him. She reached one hand back, curling her fingers around his firm behind to try and urge him to a quicker rhythm.

“Good girl.” He licked the soft hollow just behind her ear and then groaned when the action caused her pussy to ripple around his cock. “That’s just right. Show me how much you need me, baby.”

She parted her thighs, curling one closer to her chest and draping her top leg over his. The position sent him even deeper inside her and she moaned again. Every stroke took him straight to the heart of her, and she felt him like gentle waves breaking over her cervix, just enough pressure to stimulate without discomfort. He was driving her crazy.

She tried to press her hips harder against him, but they were already so close that not even the dew on their skin could separate them. She whimpered and pressed her head hard against his shoulder. “Luc,” she whispered. “I need you.”

He stroked deeply. “You have me.”

Shudder. “I want you.”

He shifted his hips just a fraction, but it was enough to send his cock stroking against a sweet, special spot deep inside her. “You have me.”

She came with a quiet gasp and a rolling wave of pleasure, her pussy clenching around him, dragging him with her into the whirlpool until he poured his seed into her body and his heart into her heart.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“You have me.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The second time Corinne woke that morning wasn’t nearly as pleasant. Instead of Luc making love to her, she heard a heavy fist pounding on her front door.

“Shit. Fergus.”

Luc, already out of bed and pulling on his jeans, looked at her curiously. “What makes you think it’s Fergus?”

She gave him a sour look. “I have a doorbell. Who else would be rude enough to ignore it?”

Luc laughed, tugged his T-shirt into place and leaned down to kiss her. “Go ahead and get dressed. I’ll answer the door. And if it’s Fergus, I’ll make him promise to mind his manners.”

“Good luck,” she snorted.

He patted her ass affectionately before heading into the living room to answer the door. Corinne sighed and dragged herself out of bed, feeling a little stiff, a moderate amount sore and a whole lot content. She and Luc hadn't actually managed all that much sleep last night, but they'd managed to stay energized in spite of it. In fact, she couldn't wait to take care of Seoc so they could come back here and burn off the rest of that energy in a more satisfying manner than chasing naughty Fae.

She felt her mouth curve in a cream-licking smile. There was only one naughty Fae she wanted to waste her time on, and he fell into a whole different category of naughtiness.

She heard the sound of her door opening, and Fergus's voice followed by the even deeper rumble of Luc's before she shut the door to dress. She used the bathroom quickly, then pulled out underwear, a black T-shirt and her beat up old camouflage cargo shorts and began to dress. The shorts were slightly ridiculous in a civilian context, but they were enormously comfortable and made her feel like kicking ass, which she thought might come in handy, given their planned activities for the day. They also had a plethora of pockets so she wouldn't have to bring her backpack or a purse to the park. Something about taking a purse to a stakeout just seemed wrong to her.

Once dressed, she pulled on socks and laced up her black Doc Marten boots—perfect for hiking—and began to load her pockets. Since she couldn't hear anything from the other room, she figured the men were being macho together and discussing strategy or something, so she took the time to get everything she thought she'd need now.

She grabbed tissues and Chapstik first, then her cell phone, a mini flashlight and her keys. She was about to head for the other room when she remembered Fergus, so she grabbed her bottle of aspirin. Figuring the rattle might drive her almost as crazy as he did, she emptied a huge handful into her palm and dropped them into a clean pocket. Better lint-covered tablets than a breakdown in mid-stakeout.

Finally ready, she opened the bedroom door and found herself face to face with Fergus. She raised an eyebrow. “Do you have a problem? I'm all ready to go, and that couldn't have taken me more than five minutes, so save your bitching.” She frowned. “Where's Luc?”

The Fae didn't say a word, but something about his silence made Corinne look down, and that's when she saw the knife clutched in Fergus's hand. The sharp, glittering, blood-soaked knife. Her eyes flew wide open, and she opened her mouth to scream, but she never managed a sound. She saw a fist coming toward her, and then she didn't see anything else for quite a while.

\* \* \* \* \*

She came to swinging, which just earned her a hard slap and a warning growl. Fergus loomed over her, his handsome face twisted in a snarl before he dropped her to the ground with a thud.

Corinne felt the air whoosh out of her lungs as she landed on a conveniently placed root that threatened to give her an impromptu appendectomy. She rolled to the side with a moan. “What the hell is going on?”

Fergus didn't bother to answer. He was too busy consulting an ancient-looking map and then glancing down at an object in his palm that seemed to be glowing a sickly green color. Corinne opened her mouth

to repeat her question—only louder and with stronger language—but she changed her mind. Better to take a look at her surroundings and figure out where she was before she started asking him what was going on.

She was definitely outdoors—the tree root that had dug into her side could attest to that—and judging by what little she could see of the surroundings in the deepening gloom of twilight, she was in a hilly wooded area with her hands tied in front of her and a whole lot of New York spread out below her. Making an educated guess, she decided she was in Inwood Hill Park, and Fergus was a lousy, no-good son of a bitch. With that four-foot sword strapped to his back.

“It wasn’t Seoc trying to open the Faerie door at all,” she said suddenly as realization flashed through her. Her voice sounded unusually loud in the quiet surroundings. “It was you. Luc was on a wild goose chase looking for the Queen’s nephew while you were off testing the old doorways to see if any of them still worked, you little shit.”

Fergus looked up from his map to sneer at her. “Is this where I’m supposed to tell you the details of my dastardly plan while you saw through the ropes binding you with a carefully concealed dagger? I hate to disappoint you, human, but I’m not that stupid, and you don’t have a dagger. I searched you before we ever left your apartment. I ever took away your keys. So shut up and let me work.”

Corinne snorted. “Right. Sure. Let me make this as easy for you as possible, ‘cause that’s my main goal whenever someone kidnaps me.”

He stared down at her with contempt, his lip curled in a malicious smile. “If I were in your position, and I had seen my heartmate’s blood staining the blade of the enemy’s dagger, I think I’d reevaluate my main goal.”

Corinne stilled, her mind flashing to that moment when she’d opened the door to find Luc out of sight and Fergus standing in front of her with a knife and an evil intent. She waited for the sickening wave of grief to wash over her, and blinked when none did. After she and Luc had talked last night about heartmates and the bonds they shared, she expected his death to devastate her. So that meant one of two things: either Luc had been lying about being heartmates, or he wasn’t really dead. Since even the Queen of Faerie had gone with the heartmate scenario, she decided she would, too.

Luc was still alive, and if she knew him even a little, she guessed he would soon be making Fergus very, very sorry for his betrayal. In the meantime, she needed to stay alive and find a way out of this situation. Just in case.

“If you were going to kill me, you damned sure would have done it by now.” She used her elbows to push into a sitting position, making it seem like more work than it was so she could get her hands into her pocket for a second. She didn’t need a knife or her keys to make things tough for this jerk. “Which means you need me around for something. So forgive me for not kissing your ass.”

“Unlike the mighty Lucifer, I realize a human isn’t worthy to kiss my ass,” he snapped. “And don’t delude yourself. You’re only here in case your friends show up before I get the door open. Once I’m done with that, I’m done with you.”

She stiffened. This guy needed a class in Remedial Bad Guy 101. Telling a hostage you planned to kill her when you got what you wanted took away all her incentive to cooperate and made her that much more likely to fight every step of the way. But hey, she wasn’t going to lose her advantage by telling him that.

She scoffed at him instead. “What? Didn’t you take care of them, too, before you dragged me up here? Some criminal mastermind you are.”

He ignored her taunt, holding the glowing green thing in his hand—which she could now see looked like some kind of stone—aloft and pointing it in different directions like a compass. When he faced the hill in front of them, even Corinne could see the stone glowing brighter.

“We’re close,” Fergus muttered, “but we have to get up higher. Come on.”

He grabbed Corinne by her arms and hauled her to her feet, shoving her along in front of him as he marched up the hill. She clenched her bound hands into fists and every few feet moved her middle finger to allow a white, buffered aspirin tablet to fall unnoticed to the ground. Hey, Hansel and Gretel had breadcrumbs, she had aspirin. Kids didn’t get her kind of headaches.

They hiked over the rough terrain, which was harder than it sounded, especially given the fading light and the fact that one of them had her hands bound in front of her, but Fergus just kept his eye on the stone in his hand and pressed forward.

Corinne kept her eyes open for any chance to escape, but still bound, still walking in front of him and still wanting to get a chance to stop him for opening the door, the chance didn’t come. If she was lucky, the cavalry would come to the rescue and she wouldn’t end up having to run for her life. She liked that scenario.

Since the plan had been to meet up at Rafe’s place at three, and judging by the advancing state of dusk it was likely closer to eight, she knew Rafe, Dmitri, Graham and her friends would already know something had gone wrong. If they bothered to check her apartment, they’d probably find Luc—and they’d damned well better take good care of him—and then they’d be after her. And if any one of them used their supernatural mojo for a good cause this time, they’d have been on her trail by seven at the latest. They couldn’t be very far behind Corinne and Fergus, so she just crossed her fingers, kept dropping her aspirin trail and hoped they’d hurry the hell up.

## Chapter Sixteen

Luc didn’t just wake up swinging; he awoke swinging, swearing and strangling an unsuspecting Graham. That didn’t last long, since Missy immediately shouted something nasty and leapt forward to plant her foot on his arm. Graham used the opportunity to wrench himself out of the enraged Fae’s grip.

“Calm down before we decide to leave you to bleed to death,” Rafe said, speaking calmly over the sound of Missy’s furious chatter and Dmitri’s low chuckle. “Save the righteous rage for the one who tried to gut you.”

“Where’s Corinne?”

“Gone.” Graham rubbed his hand over his bruised neck. “Presumably with the one who tried to gut you. But there’s no blood or evidence she’s been hurt.”

“Fergus.” Luc spat the name like a bitter taste from his mouth. He relaxed a little though, because now that he took the time to breathe, he could feel that she was still alive. He would know if his heartmate had been taken from him.

Rafe nodded. “I could smell him here, but I don’t claim to understand what happened.”

“I’ve got my theories.” Luc growled as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Hey,” Reggie scolded, rushing to pressed a thick gauze pad to a sullenly bleeding wound in his side. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? You’re wounded, here!”

He tried to brush her away, but she clung like a barnacle, and with Dmitri watching closely, he couldn’t exactly put his back into it. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine. We need to go find Corinne.”

“Fat lot of good you’ll do her. What are you going to do to rescue her from Fergus? Bleed all over him?”

He started to protest, but by then Missy had assured herself of Graham’s safety and climbed on board with Reggie. “You’ve got to take care of these wounds before you go anywhere, or you’re not going to be much good to Rinnie or anybody else,” she scolded. “These stab wounds look awful”

Luc scowled. “They’d look worse if he’d been smart enough to use iron, but these are from silver. They’ll heal fast enough. But we need to go *now* before he tries to hurt Corinne.”

“He’s already hurt you.” Reggie pushed hard enough against his wound to make the damned thing throb uncomfortably. “And I, for one, don’t want to be the one to explain to Corinne that we let you run off untended and bled to death before we could catch up with her. She’s mean when she gets angry.”

“Yeah, I noticed that.”

“Then do us a favor and sit down and shut up long enough for us to bandage you up, and *then* you can go after Corinne, okay?” Missy didn’t wait for his reply but headed back toward the bathroom.

“Bring lots of adhesive tape!” Reggie shouted after her before turning back to Luc. “Right. Now that shirt has to go. Strip.”

Luc’s eyes widened and shot to Dmitri’s face. The vampire looked both amused and jealous all at once.

“Why don’t you tell us about these theories you have regarding Fergus, my friend,” Dmitri suggested, crossing his arms over his chest and keeping an eagle eye on his tiny wife as she and Missy began mopping up Fae blood. “It will distract me so I do not give in to the urge to give you a few new wounds myself for having my wife’s hands on you.”

Luc could sympathize. He spread his arms wide to give the women access to his wounds. “I’m kicking myself that I never suspected,” he said, “but now I realize Fergus was the problem all along, not Seoc. Oh, the Queen’s nephew is irresponsible and annoying, and I don’t doubt he was the Fae all those witnesses reported seeing, but it was never him trying to open the doors. That was Fergus.”

“But why would he do that?” Graham asked. “Doesn’t he have as much to lose as any of the Fae if the doors open? At least with Seoc, I could see it as a revenge against his controlling aunt thing.”

“I haven’t decided on a why yet,” Luc said, “But I think I’ve nailed the how. Fergus was the Guard on duty the night Seoc slipped into Ithir, and I think that not only did Fergus know about it, he helped, knowing that Seoc would provide the perfect distraction while Fergus went looking for the door. It wouldn’t be hard for a Guard to slip through fairly regularly on his shifts without anyone suspecting. He had access, and no one would question the loyalty of the Queen’s Guardsmen.”

“The perfect cover.” Dmitri scowled, and Luc just hoped it was at the idea of Fergus’s betrayal, and not the fact that Reggie was currently pressed up against his chest while she passed the roll of adhesive tape behind his back.

“Exactly,” he continued, figuring the distraction couldn’t hurt. “It probably wasn’t even all that tough. All he had to do was nose around while Seoc provided a red herring, and he could even use his place on the Guard to keep up-to-date on how close we were to finding Seoc. And yesterday, we gave him everything he needed to find the door.” His mouth twisted in disgust. “We practically handed the location to him.”

Missy ripped off the last bit of tape and pressed it against his skin before stepping back and handing him a clean T-shirt. “True, but he doesn’t know any more than we do. We’ll get to him before anything happens.”

Graham nodded and handed Luc the duffle bag he’d left at Vircolac. They must have brought it with them when they came looking for him. “She’s right. We know just where he went, and we know what he’s planning. He’s an idiot if he thinks we won’t find him and stop him.”

“True,” Luc growled. “He is an idiot, but he’s the idiot who has my heartmate.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Corinne cursed as she stumbled on another root. The sun had well and truly set, and the light was fading fast, making the going over the rocky, uphill terrain slow and treacherous. She’d already skinned both her knees and lost the rest of her aspirin in one big pile a few stumbles ago. She just hoped there was enough of a trail for Luc to find her.

She never doubted for a minute that he was coming for her. She just hoped he managed to get to her before Fergus succeeded in opening the Faerie door. She was still struggling to get accustomed to the fact that she was sleeping with a Fae; she definitely didn’t want to see what would come traipsing through into Ithir if Fergus got his way.

“You know, I don’t want to make you play out the villain cliché,” she said as she scrambled over a fallen tree trunk, “‘cause mainly I just want you to drop dead, but I’m having trouble with the why of this whole scenario. Why the hell would you want to open the door? You’ve got as much to lose as any Fae if humans start pouring into Faerie, right?”

“Humans are so simple minded,” he scoffed. “I couldn’t care less if Faerie teems with your detestable little species, so long as that bitch is dethroned and I rise in her place.”



Corinne paused to look back at him. “Oh, shit,” she breathed. “You’re not just an asshole, you’re a megalomaniacal lunatic, too. Oh, man, this so sucks.”

He drew back his hand and hit her so casually, she never saw it coming. One minute he was looking at her with his characteristic sneer, the next she was picking herself up out of the dirt, and wiping the trickle of blood away from her mouth. “Watch what you say, human. I still have the option of killing you slowly if you piss me off.”

“Is there really any way I can *not* piss you off?”

He paused for a moment. “No, I don’t think so.”

She wiped her bloody fingers on her shorts and watched him consult his glow-rock. “How much further?”

He ignored her.

“I can change that to, ‘are we there yet?’ but I was trying to be nice.”

“We’re nearly on top of it.” He didn’t even bother to look at her. “Now shut up and keep moving.”

She moved, but she also plotted. They were making too much noise for her to hear if anyone was following them yet. Well, to be honest, she was making too much noise. Fergus seemed to move silently, though how anyone could walk over dead leaves and twigs and loose rocks without making a sound was beyond her, even if he wasn’t human. Since she couldn’t tell if Luc had caught up to them, she tried to slow him down.

“Okay, fine,” she huffed, “I get the power goal. That’s understandable, but if you’re the one who’s been causing all this trouble, where has Seoc really gone? Was he the one who sent Hibbish and that bartender to limbo, or was that you?”

He laughed coldly. “The only one in limbo is Seoc himself. The humans are dead. I didn’t want them telling the story of two Fae wandering through their city. Having spotted Seoc was a convenient cover, but spotting me was too much to let go.”

Corinne felt her stomach turn at the callous way he related the news, as if their deaths meant nothing to him. Clearly they did mean nothing. “You little prick,” she growled.

“They were human and, therefore, expendable.”

He shoved her forward, ignoring her pained hiss. When she stumbled yet again, he hauled her to her feet and pushed her faster. He had her nearly running up to the crest of the hill, struggling frantically to keep her balance. Her breath came in shallow pants by the time he dragged her to a halt and shoved her down against the base of a tree trunk.

“Stay there.”

He wasn’t stupid enough to turn his back on her—sadly enough—but he had clearly tuned her out before she even hit the ground. Corinne propped herself up against the tree and eyed him warily. His glow-rock had turned a bright, blue-green color, the same shade as all the advertisements of the waters

of the Caribbean. That seemed to be the cue he was looking for, because he pocketed it and began to examine the rock formations and almost-caves that covered the rocky hilltop.

He was muttering something under his breath, and she really hoped it wasn't the spell that would open the door. "Now would be a really good time for the cavalry," she mumbled.

"Shut up!" he snarled. "Keep quiet, or I'll knock you out again."

She didn't doubt it, and since she really needed to be conscious, she fell silent and watched him search. She thought about trying to distract him by talking or running, but since she needed to be conscious in case the cavalry didn't arrive, she refrained. Better to gather her energy and wait for an opportunity to tackle him to keep him from magic-ing the door open. If he carried through on his threats to render her unconscious, she'd never get the chance.

She watched as Fergus began to run his hands along a crevice in the rock and stiffened when he crowed in triumph.

"Finally!" He stepped back and turned his head to send Corinne a particularly nasty smile. "Just a few more minutes, and then I can take care of you as well."

He faced the rock, spread his arms and began to chant in the same language she'd heard Luc swear in after she'd pissed him off particularly badly. She swore herself. This was it. There was no sign of Luc or the others, yet, and their time had just run out. Even as she struggled to her feet, she saw something begin to happen.

The crevice Fergus had explored began to glow, the same sort of turquoise color as the rock the Fae had used to lead them there. It began as a fine line of light and began slowly expanding until it was as tall as the Fae and nearly an inch wide. Corinne knew that in a moment it would be big enough for someone or something to pass through.

"Oh, well," she muttered to herself, gathering herself for a leap. "If you want something done right..."

She pushed off, but she never landed. At least, not on Fergus.

She heard a growl and almost simultaneously saw a blurry figure launch itself from the trees and shoulder her roughly to the side before slamming full length into Fergus. Both figures toppled to the earth and rolled around for several seconds before a hoarse shout dragged their attention to the woods. Luc and Dmitri emerged, running full tilt toward Fergus, with Reggie and Missy hurrying along behind, held in check only by Rafe's hands on each of their shoulders. In one hand, Luc carried an enormous sword that gleamed dully in the dim light that bled into the park from the city below.

Corinne's eyes flew over her heartmate, but she couldn't even see an injury. Even though Fergus's knife had been covered in blood, he must not have done any permanent damage. Relief threatened to bring her to her knees. Except she was already there, where she'd landed after the impact of Graham's weight against her shoulder had sent her sprawling. She was so close that she had to scramble out of the way of the pair before they rolled right into her.

The figure wrestling with Fergus spun away, and now Corinne could see that the one who had originally attacked Fergus had dark fur tipped with silver along the spine, and was definitely not human. It was a wolf.

Graham.

The werewolf pulled away from Fergus to let Luc get a chance at him. Even Dmitri seemed to know to hang back, that this battle belonged to the Fae warrior and not to his friends, no matter how well meaning. Instead, Graham placed himself between Fergus and Corinne and growled at her when she tried to go to Luc.

“Fergus.” Luc’s voice was a low, feral snarl that sounded almost like it was coming from Graham’s throat. He halted a few feet from the other Fae and watched as Fergus climbed slowly to his feet. “You should have forgotten about the door and kept running, because the moment you touched my heartmate, you sealed your own fate.”

“So dramatic,” Fergus sneered, “but tell me, Captain, how are you feeling? I hope you didn’t mind the feel of my knife sliding between your ribs, because I have the urge to repeat the experience.”

“Too bad you won’t get to fulfill it. I’ll give you a choice, Fergus of Eithdne. You can surrender to me and consent to be taken in irons back to our Queen, or you can die, here and now, for crimes against Queen Mab and all of Faerie. You choose.”

Corinne stood so close, she could hear the sound of Fergus’s sword hissing as he pulled it from its scabbard. Even if she had been further away, though, she doubted she would have been able to avoid what happened next. As it was, he moved so fast, she almost didn’t see him move, feinting toward Luc and then spinning around Graham’s unsuspected form to grab Corinne by the hair and pulled her across the ground until she knelt in front of him. He held her hair tightly, bracing her against his thigh while he held his sword in his other hand.

“I think you should choose.” Fergus raised his blade and pointed the tip at her throat. “Either you finish opening that door and let me pass through, or I slit your heartmate’s throat and see if she bleeds any faster than you do.”

Luc gave a roar of rage and threw himself forward, only to catch himself in mid-stride as Fergus’s sword nicked Corinne’s skin, sending a tiny trickle of blood to slide down her throat.

“Be very careful, my friend,” Fergus sneered. “I’m not feeling charitable toward the human to begin with, so it would be no hardship for me to watch her die. In fact, I might just enjoy it.”

Luc growled impotently, but he stilled and met Fergus’s gaze with rage burning in his own.

“Very good. Now open the door.”

Corinne met Luc’s gaze and saw the frustration there. His concern touched her, but it also pissed her off, because she knew right then that he was going to give in to Fergus’s demands and open the Faerie door himself. To save her. She wanted to scream in frustration. Between Graham, Dmitri and Luc, they had enough power to mash Fergus into tiny bits, but because he had a sword to her throat, all three stood there completely paralyzed. Even Reggie and Missy looked too intimidated to move. Damn it, they had to get over this little phobia of seeing her die.

“Don’t do it, Luc,” she said, her voice trembling. Not with fear but with anger.

Her heartmate spoke in an unsteady voice himself. “I can’t let him hurt you.”

“This is touching,” Fergus interrupted. “Repulsive, but touching. However, it’s also quite futile. I don’t know how I can simplify this for you any more. Either open the door, or the human dies. Choose.”

Luc swore and turned toward the glowing sliver of doorway. Corinne screamed.

“Don’t you dare!” She didn’t care about the fist in her hair or the blade at her throat or anything else. What mattered was that Luc couldn’t throw away everything he stood for because some lunatic with a superiority complex was holding a knife on her.

“Shut up!” Fergus shouted, loosening his grip in her hair so he could cuff her against the side of the head.

Idiot. That was all she needed.

She threw herself backward, screaming as she felt a huge clump of her hair stay behind in Fergus’s hand. The force of her movement sent her slamming into the ground harder than when she’d been dropped earlier, knocking some of the wind out of her. Her head landed a glancing blow against a rock, making her vision fuzz and blur.

She couldn’t see what happened next, but she sure as hell heard it. Roaring echoed in her ears, and she couldn’t tell if it came from Luc or Fergus, or the Others, or even all of them at once. She knew the cheering she heard definitely came from Reggie and Missy. She heard the sounds of a brawl, but her eyes had closed against the blinding pain in her head, and she couldn’t pry them open. Nausea roiled in her stomach and she curled instinctively into a fetal position, gagging helplessly. She couldn’t work up the strength to protest when she felt two pair of small hands hook under her arms and drag her out of the way of the struggle.

They needn’t have bothered. With odds of four against one, Fergus didn’t last long. Before they had even stopped moving, silence descended on the hilltop.

Well, silence punctuated by the sickening sound of a fist thumping violently against flesh and bone.

“Luc. Luc, stop!” she heard. “He’s unconscious. Stop before you kill him.”

Rafe. The voice of reason.

“Why should I? He touched my mate.”

“But she’s safe now. And do you want to have to explain his death to the Queen?”

A brief silence. Corinne struggled to breathe through her mouth and ride out the pain. At least the nausea seemed to be fading.

She heard a vague grumbling, then more silence until she was lifted and settled in a hard lap, cuddled close in muscular arms.

“I’m so sorry, baby.” She felt his lips moving against her forehead as he pressed his cheek to her hair. “I love you so much. I’m so sorry he touched you. I should have been quicker.”

“Fine.” Her voice cracked and squeaked, but she figured that was enough to get her point across. She was fine. Or she would be. Eventually. She needed to say something else though. She parted her lips and gathered her strength. “Love, too.” Not real clear, but he was a bright guy. Sometimes. He’d figure it out.

His arms tightened convulsively around her and she knew he had.

She pressed her face against his chest and whimpered one, critically important, word. "Aspirin?"

Then she blacked out, safe in her heartmate's arms.

## Epilogue

She got Tylenol with codeine.

After the doctors checked to make sure she didn't have a concussion, they prescribed the good stuff and released her to Luc's tender care. He had to fight Reggie and Missy for the privilege.

"Are you okay? Does your head hurt?"

She sighed. "No more than it did the last time you asked. Five seconds ago."

She cracked an eye open to see Luc's face hovering above hers. He had taken her to Vircolac to a room Graham provided rather than bring her back to her apartment. She would be more comfortable, he told her, with twenty-four hour room service.

"Isn't that what you're for?" she had asked.

He had been incredibly solicitous, so much so that it was beginning to get on her nerves. She was all for being adored, but not when he seemed afraid to handle her like anything other than spun glass.

"Do you want a glass of water? You can't have another pill for an hour, but I could do a charm if your head hurts too much to wait."

"I'm fine. Stop hovering. Either go away, or get into bed with me, because I'm about one second away from forgetting about the doctor's orders and going home myself."

He got into bed with her. "Sorry," he said, sounding sheepish and adorable. "You just scared the hell out of me when you passed out."

"I scared myself a little," she muttered, snuggling against his chest and feeling his arms close very gently around her. "But I'm fine now. The doctor even said, no permanent damage. I'll be good as new in a couple of weeks."

"I still wish Rafe had let me kill him."

She grinned. "But then I'd have gotten jealous that I didn't get a lick at him." The grin faded and she

looked up at him. "I'm glad he stopped you, though. Mab was upset enough by what he'd done, but I think it would have been even worse for her if you had."

He sighed against her hair. "She was upset. She never guessed one of her Guard would betray her."

"No one did. But at least she got Seoc back safely."

Luc chuckled. "Yeah, and he'll be using his innocence to get out of trouble for centuries."

"Hey, I would, too, if I'd been so falsely accused."

He laughed. And brushed a kiss across the top of her head. "She demanded to be invited, you know."

Corinne frowned at him. "Mab? What did she want to be invited to?"

He smiled slightly. "Our wedding."

She froze. "Are we getting married?"

"Well, since we'll be living together here in Ithir and I plan to stay with you 'til the end of our days, I thought we could."

Corinne tried to ignore the fluttering in her stomach and the aching fullness of her heart. "But you said Fae didn't get married."

"You aren't Fae," he said simply. "I thought it would make you happy."

It would make her ecstatic, she realized, but as she didn't intend to let him skip all the steps between meeting and marriage. She wanted all that good stuff, too.

"It will," she admitted, "but we're not going to do it yet."

She felt him stiffen. "Why not?"

"Because I want to date first." She pulled back to smile up at him. "Look at it this way. You know I'll say yes, which takes the pressure off, yet you still get the fun of trying to persuade me."

He laughed softly. "Ah, I understand. In that case, rest up, baby. You're going to need your strength for my brand of persuasion."

"I can't wait."

They lay together in silence for a few minutes, and Corinne felt the drowsiness caused by the drugs and the events of the past few hours start to take over. She could hear his heart beating steadily beneath her ear, and knew there was no place she'd rather be than in his arms. She couldn't wait for the future.

She didn't realize she'd drifted off to sleep, but when she woke again, Luc was gone and the clock told her she had been out for almost three hours. She rolled over and winced at the pain in her head.

"Here. Have some medicine."

She accepted the pill Missy pushed into her hand and swallowed it with a sip of water from the glass that was pressed against her lips. When she dropped her head back and opened her eyes gingerly, she saw Missy and Reggie sitting on opposite sides of her bed. “Where’s Luc?”

Missy grinned. “Graham, Rafe and Dmitri pried him away from you long enough to feed him. He was starting to turn a little gray.”

“We think they plan to get him drunk, too. Just to celebrate.”

Corinne scowled and looked around, her gaze screeching to a stop when she saw Ava watching her from the foot of the bed. “What?” she asked. “No Danice?”

“We couldn’t get a hold of her,” Reggie said. “She’s still not back from that mysterious out-of-town case she sprang on us last month. But I left a message on her machine at home, and with her secretary and her paralegal.”

Corinne rolled her eyes, then winced at the pain that caused. “It’s not like I’m on death’s door or anything.”

“Oh, we know,” Ava drawled. “But we thought she’d want a chance to grill you on Tall, Dark and Faerie.”

“Fae,” she corrected.

“Whatever. So spill it. Tell us all about him.”

“Buy the movie.”

“I’m not into porn flicks, darling. I prefer to read the book, but that takes so long, and you can summarize for me.”

“Can’t you get a life of your own instead of prying into mine?”

“Why should I?”

Corinne looked helplessly to Reggie and then to Missy for help. They just grinned at her.

“Don’t look at us,” Reggie said. “She did this to us, too.”

“It’s like a rite of passage,” Missy added. “We all have to go through it eventually.”

Corinne scowled. “That’s ridiculous. She has no right to pry like this.”

Ava arched a slim, dark brow. “Why do you think I waited until you’re exhausted and vulnerable? Now spill.”

Corinne knew when she’d been beaten, but that didn’t stop her from scowling furiously at the object of her displeasure.

“Fine,” she growled. “Until Luc escapes and comes to rescue me—which is becoming a distressingly familiar scenario—I’ll satisfy your prurient curiosity. But just remember this. One day soon, it’ll be your



turn to answer questions about your love life.”

Ava laughed. “Corinne, darling, the day I fall in love is the day I’ll answer any question any one of you wants to ask me.”

Corinne felt her mouth curve into a wicked grin, and saw the same expression mirrored on Reggie’s and Missy’s faces.

“And I’ve even got witnesses,” she purred. “I want you to remember that promise, Av, because we are going to take great pleasure in holding you to it. And love has a nasty habit of ignoring what you want, and giving you exactly what you need.”

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