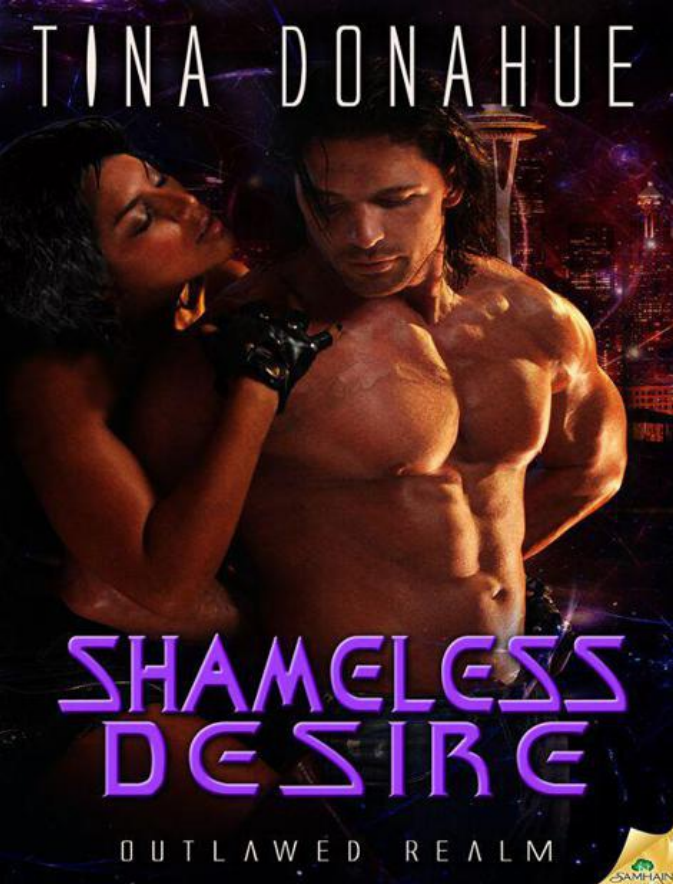




TINA DONAHUE

SHAMELESS
DESIRE

OUTLAWED REALM

SAMHAIN

Dedication

To my book buddies, Tracy and Jill.

Chapter One

He caught the woman's scent on the damp breeze. Earthy like the fragrance of the surrounding vegetation. Sensual with female musk and spices from this realm, some sweet, some warm...the same as he imagined her breath and skin.

Those fragrances and danger had led him here.

Lifting his face to the night's drizzle, he inhaled deeply, savoring her sensual aroma, picturing what she might look like, welcoming the images that followed. He envisioned her naked in the jungle where he'd once lived, the contours of her nudity bathed in the faint

light of dawn breaking through countless leaves. Moisture beaded on her shoulders and throat. The droplets glimmered much as the insects did in his dimension. Those pearls of water grew fat, slipping past her full breasts to her torso and navel. Others clung to her nipples until her heightened breathing shook them free. He sensed her excitement, her desire for him.

On his plane, she would have faced him without fear of what he was, her lips tilting in a smile, so provocative, her voice enticing. “Can you catch me?” she would murmur, then draw back her shoulders in a surprisingly arrogant stance. “Can you possible satisfy me?”

In his fantasy, he laughed at her audaciousness and waited for so much more.

Her turning and running, playing their game, demanded he follow if he intended to have her.

Never was there any doubt, not even in his thoughts. At a full run, he chased her through the foliage. Leaves slapped him. The rain that clung to their velvety contours flung in all directions. He darted around the same trees she had, breaking through the plants that towered over them. Insects scattered with his approach. In the distance, a birdlike creature called to its mate. Its full-throated cry cut through the heavy quiet.

He sensed the other males in their pack watching, waiting for him to fail so they could mount her.

Never.

He'd been alone too long, without a female's comfort and warmth, her concern for his safety telling him that he mattered.

His feet pounded the soil; his lungs burned. Every part of his being desired her. She gasped as he bolted past. An unexpected move, until she guessed his intent. Pivoting, she tried to retrace her steps. Too late. He was faster than she was, far more determined.

With one arm around her waist, he

pulled her into him. Her plush ass nuzzled his cock, making it even harder. She smelled of woman and animal need. Whimpering in submission, she turned her face to his, lips parted. He captured her mouth, thrusting his tongue inside, and growled at her wet heat, the willingness with which she suckled his tongue.

He kissed her deep, long, savagely, the animal part of him freed by passion. She responded in kind, allowing him to direct her to the ground, where she went to her hands and knees. Her hair, as he imagined it, fell forward to sweep the jungle floor. She lifted her buttocks, her openings exposed for his use. A servile

yet shameless move. Her cunt was moist, glistening with her lust. Her soft folds were plump with desire.

He dropped to his knees and brought his cock to her opening, though he didn't yet penetrate. The other males in his pack edged closer, smelling his carnal hunger. Hers. Their eyes glittered in the shadows. He knew their need.

His own was too great to wait a second more. With one assured thrust, he drove his cock into her softness and heat. His mouth sagged open on a pleased gasp. Deeply, fully he drove his rod into her until their bodies touched to prove his claim. She belonged to him...always would. Her

sheath was snug, a wondrous prison confining him in the best possible way.

Welcome sensations dashed up his chest and arms to tingle the top of his head. He pulled back and thrust, his balls tapping her ass. A shudder escaped him. He—

A stream of male and female workers to his left exited the tall beige building, stalling his thoughts. He fought the urge to fall back into the shadows of the hospital, uncertain as to what went on within. The structure was nothing like the Pleasure Palace in the realm from which he'd come. The Palace's contours were massive and black with no openings at all, the activities inside

hidden from those in the jungle. Icy white light poured from this building's many windows, too high for him to peer inside.

The woman's scent grew stronger.

He looked beyond the males and females who moved past. At that moment, the crowd thinned out, revealing a woman who'd lagged behind the others. *Her.*

The breeze seemed to pause. He no longer felt the rain sprinkling his face. Indescribable sensations pumped through him, a mixture of wonder and caution. He shouldn't stare, knowing it would bring attention to himself, yet he

couldn't resist.

A tall female, she wore jeans as he did and what he'd learned was a hoodie on this side, the navy fabric pulled up over her head, protecting her hair from the thin autumn shower, hiding those tresses from him. The few wisps that escaped were short and dark. She'd stopped in a wedge of light from the building, the harsh illumination revealing her exotic features, lush lips, coppery skin. Her fragrance wafted toward him again, the woodsy scent intoxicating, complementing her pale blue eyes, the color sheer, ethereal.

Beads of water collected on her long, dark lashes.

She shoved her hands into her hoodie's pockets, advanced a few steps, then stopped, noticing him.

Rain pattered against the concrete, matching the brisk thumping of his pulse. Music poured from inside a car, the steady throb of its bass intensifying the moment. Wind whipped past. Tires swished over asphalt.

Ignoring the incessant noise, she studied him with what appeared to be female interest and curiosity. His legs weakened at the thought that she might come to him. He imagined her drawing closer.

She remained where she was, color

rising to her cheeks, darkening them. Why? Because she feared him...or wanted him?

Heat radiated from his chest to his belly and groin, stiffening his cock. Unused to clothing, he wanted to tear away his jeans, tee and suede jacket. At the very least, he ached to approach her. Intuition warned him to remain where he was...for the moment. When she left, he'd follow. He had no choice, sensing what awaited her on the shadowed streets. Within the last half hour, the smell of a guard—one of the most hated predators in his realm—had grown more obvious, leading him to this part of the city. If the night air had been calm, he

might have located the man's hiding place with little effort. As it was, the wind kept changing direction, snatching the odor away.

To put her at ease and keep her from leaving the safety of this place, he smiled.

Her lips parted. A bead of rain slipped over the bottom one to her chin. He imagined licking it off, kissing her throat, taking her into his arms and doing so much more.

His desire didn't go unnoticed. She seemed uncertain whether to return his smile or to flee.

Stay here until the threat's gone. The

*guard will move on to a new location.
He'll stalk another woman.*

Her indecision broke. She crossed the parking lot, her strides long and purposeful.

On instinct, he advanced a step, then stopped himself from tailing her. He couldn't now, not after they'd exchanged such a prolonged glance. For him to follow too close behind would make her run, perhaps scream, bringing unwanted notice. His only option was to wait and allow things to play out as they had since he'd come to this realm, hunting—killing—protecting those he could in the hours before dawn.

The drizzle turned to a steady rain.
Great.

Good sense and a crappy day in the ER told Gwen Lalani to quicken her pace, putting as much distance as she could between herself and the hospital. Although she'd handled her usual share of trauma these past days, what had happened last week continued to haunt her.

Behind the curtain that night, Gwen had expected to see a guy who was pretty messed up, given what the emergency personnel had said. Still, she had gaped at what was left of a man

who'd been attacked either by someone who was a lunatic or in a drug frenzy. The victim's face, hands and feet were gone, the ragged edges telling her someone had actually gnawed them off.

God. Gwen had seen a lot in the ER. However, the brutality of the attack shocked the shit out of her. Two of the new residents witnessed her reaction. Quick as could be, those guys were gossiping like schoolgirls, telling their peers and anyone who would listen that they'd been afraid she'd pass out. After all, she was a mere RN. No way could they expect her to react to blood and gore as a doctor or a guy would.

Uh-huh. Gwen knew exactly how

males behaved. It had never been pretty.

In middle school, she'd been taller than most of the boys, which didn't sit well with them, so they resorted to bullying. In high school, she wasn't purebred enough for any ethnic group. Her Hawaiian, Hispanic, Caucasian and black ancestry made her the ultimate outcast. The few boys who'd asked her out wanted sex, not a relationship. No surprise, except they didn't even try to sugarcoat their demands with the I-love-you lie.

At twenty-seven, she wasn't finding her male coworkers any better.

She blew out a sigh, hating herself for

letting them and the memory of that dead guy get to her...and for allowing that other man to see it. Pausing beneath one of the trees in the parking lot, she looked back without meaning to, half expecting him to be there still, watching her.

The spot where he'd been was empty. Rain shimmered in the halo of light.

A sense of loss, or was it disappointment, rolled through Gwen. For a stranger no less. She frowned at her ridiculous reaction but couldn't stop from glancing to the left, the right, somehow still feeling his presence and male heat.

He was a hard man not to notice, even

more difficult to forget.

From her brief glimpse of him, Gwen gauged his height to be six-three. He appeared to be in his early thirties, his body in superb physical condition, lean and muscular, his skin bronzed. Like a freaking Greek god.

Shivers of delight coursed through her at the thought of running her hands over the hard planes of his body, loitering on all the best parts, pressing her face into the hollow of his neck, smelling his skin and dark brown hair. He wore it combed back, the ends reaching his shoulders, no different from a pirate in a romance novel or a sheik from a Middle-Eastern country. So damn virile, no one would

ever accuse him of being the boy next door.

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. Her breath fogged in the increasingly chilly night even as the rest of her grew fevered. She recalled his strong, masculine features and beautiful eyes. So light they had to be gray, their color nearly silver in the twilight that surrounded him. Arresting. Arousing.

The same as his smile.

A smile like that could brighten a woman's world on a dreary evening like this. It could thrill and comfort, the same as his big body and musky male scent. With his hands around her wrists, he'd

settle down on top of her, his weight deliciously confining, their faces close enough for him to capture her mouth for a kiss.

He wouldn't. Instead, he'd gaze at her while he stroked her palms with his thumbs. Tender foreplay to lull her into complacency. To prepare her for the wanton act to come. His cock would grow stiff between her legs. Her pussy would already be moist with her desire for him. He'd enter her slowly, recording her reaction as he stretched and filled her with his thick rod. He wouldn't stop until their curls touched and she had no possibility of escape.

Not that she'd try.

She'd yield without hesitation, sheltering his body with hers, drowning in his lust.

Nice. And not at all unrealistic given the glimmer of desire she'd caught on his face. She wasn't a beauty, nor was she girly, but for a moment, he'd seemed to want her.

He was surely a man who knew how to please a woman. Possibly several at once. What had he been doing here tonight? Where had he gone?

Like a damn fool, she continued to scan the lot for him. Moisture sparkled on the roofs and hoods of numerous vehicles. A blast of wind sent the rain

slashing sideways. *Jeez*. The clammy cold drove away her fantasy's comforting glow faster than his absence. Despite their momentary connection, she'd never see him again.

Time to get a grip and go home.

She darted through the lot, her teeth chattering and not only from the temperature. A sudden, inexplicable sense of dread gripped Gwen. Once more, she paused and glanced around. The area was empty of pedestrians, everyone else already inside the hospital or driving away. Leaving her alone. Unprotected. Vulnerable.

Right. In a few more seconds, the

creepy theme from that old movie *Halloween* would play in her mind. Best to stop this idiotic nonsense. She was a big girl, could take care of herself and didn't let shit worry her. Like the recent rash of missing women in the Seattle area, their bodies not yet found.

They were all young, petite, attractive. The news reports had likened their disappearances to when Ted Bundy lived here in the seventies and made the city his personal killing field, offing women without detection.

Headlights pierced the darkness, accentuating the rain. Gwen squinted at the brightness. For one wild moment, she wondered if its driver was the hot guy

she'd seen earlier...or the unknown killer. Her pulse kicked up several notches. She imagined the maniac being so desperate for a victim he had settled on her, planning to force her inside his vehicle, taking her to God-knew-where to do God-knew-what.

Fearing the worst, she stepped back.

The car turned left and moved past, its occupants not bothering to glance her way before the vehicle disappeared into the night.

She wasn't alone.

The thought startled Gwen even as she tried to dismiss it. The hairs on her arms rose up. Something was wrong.

What? Other than the obvious—that she couldn't afford a car or to live in the suburbs.

Frowning, she gripped her pepper spray even harder and continued across the lot to the surrounding neighborhood, a combination of inner city and working class that had seen better times. Failed attempts at gentrification had resulted in islands of beautiful two- and three-story historic homes surrounded by blight, trash, weeds.

She hurried past the first vacant lot as quickly as she could, telling herself tonight was no different from any other. No one was after her. She wasn't a psycho's type, being too tall and not at

all helpless. Hadn't one of the residents said it very well last week when he'd jokingly referred to her as a ball buster for teaching those self-defense classes at the hospital? You bet he had. Her kind of woman wasn't on most guys' radar, especially those looking for an easy target.

Besides, she didn't have all that far to walk and would get home safely.

Moisture rolled down her cheeks and throat. If the weather deteriorated any further, her hoodie would soon be soaked through. Huffing from her pace, she approached the street corner. The signal was red; the sign warning her not to cross. In both directions, the road was

empty. Its wet surface gleamed in the available light.

Wind whisked around an abandoned confectionary, buffeting Gwen. She shivered and turned down the street, deciding to take a shortcut through an alley in the distance. From behind, a car approached. Glancing over, she saw it move down the main thoroughfare rather than turning in her direction.

Her running shoes made slapping noises against the damp pavement, the sounds obtrusive, not seeming to belong. Leaves rustled above her, the dying ones torn free by the wind. The bass of an unknown song thumped from a nearby brick building, its curtainless upper

windows amber with light. A young boy with wavy black hair and dusky skin blew on the glass, fogging it, and then he drew a series of letters with his forefinger.

Gwen reached the vacant lot that cut from this street to the next, one over from her own. Just a bit farther to go. She'd be all right. No one was around. No one was following her.

Needing to be certain, she continued to glance back. There was nothing except darkness interrupted infrequently by dated streetlamps, their crumbling concrete facades matching the pockmarked sidewalks. Empty bags of Lay's potato chips, Cheetos and other

fast food littered the area, the cellophane crackling beneath her shoes.

With one hand around her pepper spray and the other clutching her house key, she entered the alley. Debris skittered down it, carried by the wind, the sickly sweet stink of garbage less noticeable in the brisk breeze. Yards ahead, half the length of a football field, was her street, a wall of murkiness separating her from it. Craning her neck, Gwen glanced at the many windows facing the alley, most boarded up. The ones that weren't were dark.

Go on. She'd walked this route last night and countless times before that. The only hassle she'd faced were stray

dogs crouching in the gloom, growling at her intrusion into their territory.

Tonight, even they were gone. For the first time ever, Gwen missed them. She knew she could easily frighten animals. Men, on the other hand... There might be a fight.

Again, she sensed someone watching, following.

Sudden outrage rather than fear pumped through Gwen. Halfway down the alley, she halted and turned, ready to rumble, show the jerk some of her martial arts moves.

No one was behind her.

She listened and heard nothing. Certainly not heavy breathing, except for her own.

Renewed apprehension cut through her aggravation. Gwen pivoted, ready to run the remaining distance. A faint whooshing noise interrupted her panting and the other night sounds. Before she could identify it, something hit her neck, stinging her skin.

Jesus, had someone shot her, with a fucking silencer no less?

Her hand flew up, then stalled not on blood but something else. What the hell?

What felt like a small dart had pierced the side of her throat unprotected by her

hoodie. Where in the crap had something like that come from? Suddenly, her limbs went numb. Her hand dropped from her neck before she could remove the dart.

Down Gwen went, her legs unable to support her weight, her knees hitting the broken asphalt. She heard the crack of her bones, but the pain didn't register, blunted by whatever flowed through her. A tranquilizer, she guessed. Although she tried to remain kneeling, her efforts didn't last. She fell to her side even as her mind kept screaming *run*.

Too late. Out of the shadows he came. A man she'd never seen before, hadn't noticed, his build bruising with a thick neck, burly shoulders and arms. In the

light bleeding from her street, Gwen could see his eyes were a light brown, his hair curly and black, his features and complexion not quite African-American or Indian but a mixture of races, the same as her.

He grabbed her arm.

Nooooooooo.

She fought to pull away, but her body refused to work. Helpless, she screamed, or tried; only a croak escaped.

Grunting, he put his hand over her mouth, his fingers clamped so tight Gwen couldn't bite him. Raw terror tore through her even as her lethargy

increased. Was he going to rape her? Kill her? Both? *Oh God, oh God, oh God.* Her thoughts went in all directions, most of them bad, fueled by adrenaline. She pictured him slitting her throat once he'd finished his sexual assault, leaving her to bleed to death in a trash bin or an abandoned building, her body concealed so well it would be difficult to find.

Aw shit. Her life couldn't end like this. No fucking way. She had to fight. *Come on, dammit. Do it.*

She tried so hard to move, her body broke out in a cold sweat. Perspiration mingled with the moisture on her face, stinging her eyes. Despite her efforts, Gwen couldn't wag one finger. Lifting

her arms was as impossible as flapping them and taking flight. Remaining conscious became an effort.

With too much ease, the man dragged her down the alley. Her clothes rasped against the rough surface. Her shoes bounced. *Tat-tat-tat*, her rubber heels went. *Tat—*

What's that? Even in her drugged state, Gwen felt a deeper blast of cold to the left of them and heard a sucking sound that resembled a vacuum. Was it a vent? Leading to where? Why hadn't she heard it all the times before when she'd taken this route? Why—

What in the holy hell is that?

She listened, hearing another low, menacing growl.

The man stopped at the noise, then hurriedly pulled her toward the intense cold.

The growl deepened, growing louder. Closer.

The man muttered something in a language she'd never heard, couldn't possibly understand. From the right came a snarl, followed by an animal bounding into the air, hitting the man square in his chest.

His hands dropped away from Gwen. She sagged to the asphalt, straining to remain conscious, gaping at the animal

attacking the man. Not one of the stray dogs she'd seen here before. It was larger, more dangerous, looking like a goddamned wolf.

Teeth bared and bloody, it tore at the man's face, cutting off his scream. Gwen heard his neck bones snap. Unable to keep her eyes open any longer, she allowed her lids to slip down, not wanting to witness the attack, terrified of what the wolf—or whatever the hell it was—would do to her when it finished with the man.

Rain tapped her face. Each breath was a prolonged battle. She wanted to run. She would have given a year of her life to be able to scream.

Quiet. She noticed it suddenly...the utter stillness of the night. How much time had passed? Was she still alive? Had she died and gone to some weirdo version of hell?

Her mouth fell open, but no sound escaped as someone strong lifted her up. A guy, surely. A cop who'd happened upon this nightmare? A Good Samaritan? Had she lost consciousness without realizing it? Where had the wolf gone? Where was this guy taking her?

Gwen's hands flopped helplessly as he slung her over his shoulder, his forearm firm across the back of her thighs. With quick steps, he moved down the alley.

Chapter Two

Nikoli Zorr read the news story on his computer screen, his belly churning at the brutality of the attack. He recalled what Lukan had witnessed on E4 after he and Arez had escaped the Pleasure Palace and hid in one of the realm's caves—a werewolf killing a subhuman, ripping it to pieces, feeding on its flesh. Sated and bloody, the thing stood on its hind legs and transformed into a human male. A common occurrence in that dimension.

The savagery had now come to this realm, forcing Nikoli to acknowledge what he hadn't been willing to accept

before. The shadows that had followed Lukan and Arez through the portal were certainly E4's guards and monsters. This murder was only the beginning.

Running his fingers over his mouth, Nikoli reread the news story, abc.com's version of events.

The victim's face was torn away... hands and feet gone...the man's identity unknown...succumbed to his injuries...no suspects...authorities believe the attack was due to Purple Wave or Bliss bath salts...designer drugs more powerful than meth or cocaine.

“Do you think that's related to the

girls who've gone missing?"

At Regina's question, Nikoli turned.

She was dressed for bed in the shimmery green nightgown he adored. The lightweight fabric accentuated her luscious curves. Its color matched her eyes. She'd removed the hairpins from her shoulder-length mane, shaking it loose. The reddish ends grazed her fair skin and the nightgown's straps. Her nipples—hard and erect—pressed against the silk.

He wanted to bare them to his sight and touch, lick them, pushing her question and his uneasiness aside, but thought better of it. She lingered in the

doorway to his office as though reluctant to come closer, her attention on his computer screen. It showed a photo of the bloodstained sidewalk where a group of Seattle University students had discovered the victim. At the time, the man was still breathing, clinging to life.

“I hope not,” Nikoli answered. He closed the page and offered his hand.

There was no hesitation in her response. There never was when it came to him, despite all they'd been through. She settled on his lap, burying her face in his neck. Nikoli sighed contentedly at her peaches-and-vanilla scent, her weight and warmth. He understood how lucky he was for moments such as this,

because he'd already accepted that they might not last. The portals between their dimensions and the others had once again brought more trouble.

She murmured, "The victim in that news report, he was one of the guards from E4, wasn't he?"

Nikoli rubbed her back. When that didn't relax her, he cradled her closer.

"Answer me," she said, even as she snuggled into him. "Was it one of the guards?"

He considered lying but wouldn't, figuring she'd know. "Probably."

Regina fisted her fingers in his tee.

“Why do you think the...the...”

She couldn't bring herself to say it, so he did. “Werewolves.”

“God.” Air hissed through her teeth, tickling his neck. “Why do you think those things attacked the guard? Why not someone from this realm? I mean, if they're hungry, then we're all tasty to them, right? That's what probably happened to those girls who've gone missing recently. Those things ate them. That's why no one's found their bodies.”

Nikoli tightened his arms around Regina, soothing her as she shuddered. “I don't think any werewolf harmed those girls.”

“Then where are they? My God, there’s been six missing so far that the news organizations have reported on. What if there’s more? Seattle’s had its share of psychopaths, but even our usual crop of serial killers isn’t that prolific. It’s like two or three of them are operating here at the same time. Is that even possible?”

“I don’t know. You’re the psychologist. I’m just a quantum physicist who designs household gadgets.”

She pulled back and arched one slender brow, its reddish tint matching her bangs.

He loved teasing her. It made all the other crap—escaping his home and heritage, keeping a low profile on this realm so her people wouldn't discover him—unbelievably worthwhile. “Great household gadgets,” he added. “I saw those infomercials where Cher was demonstrating them. I know.”

Regina laughed.

Her joy fed his hungry soul. Whenever he died, whether it would be today because the guards found and killed him, or years from now if he were very lucky, he wanted her laughter to be the last thing he heard.

Relaxing against him, Regina eased a

lock of hair behind his ear. He wore it longish as she liked, with her trimming it as needed. No way could he risk going to a hair salon. If he was cut accidentally, the stylist might notice his blood was thicker, richer than others on this realm. His fingerprints were also a problem, so different from anyone's on this side.

Nikoli recalled the first time Regina had seen them. Her shock had saddened him, though not for long. Following it was her willing acceptance of everything he was and had been... everything he would be.

He held her even tighter, needing to get as close to her as he possibly could.

A sound of satisfaction poured from her. She spoke softly, as though someone might overhear. “Do you think that guard was hunting the, uh, creatures?”

“Werewolves?”

“Yeah, okay, that.” She slapped his shoulder. “Answer me.”

“Fine.” He pressed his lips to her temple and cheek, so soft and fragrant he held back a groan of frustration at not taking her, at her wanting to discuss this. “I don’t believe he was hunting the creatures. I think it was the other way around.”

“Seriously?” She turned her face to his. Their lips brushed with her words.

“Why would they hunt a guard?”

He heard her question but didn't answer. Couldn't. Not now. Her breath was clean and sweet, smelling of the minty toothpaste she'd used. Her nipple poked his chest. One of her nightgown's straps had fallen over her shoulder, exposing more skin. It was dewy with youth and good health. A gentle tug and he'd have the garment pooled at her waist to reveal her full breasts.

“Nikoli.” She ran the tip of her tongue across the seam of his mouth. “Answer me.”

Was she kidding? “What was the question?”

She kissed him lightly, then leaned back. “Why would those things be after a guard?”

Who cared? He and she had this moment; that was all that mattered.

Her lips were amazing, their pale pink color the same as her nipples. At thirty-one, she looked far younger than her years, despite the heavy burden he'd put on her by coming to this realm. At thirty-four, he felt older than the universe at times, having seen too much sorrow caused by the rulers in his realm. For millennia, they'd demanded objectivity and duty from their people, denying them the freedom of emotion, the vibrancy of life Nikoli had found on this plane. With

Regina, he'd become youthful for the first time...joyous, capable of some measure of hope.

He tilted his face to her chest, craving that snowy expanse of skin, the soft swells of her breasts.

They trembled with her frustrated exhale of air. He wanted to play. She wanted an answer.

At last, he said, "I'm just guessing, but it might be in retaliation for a guard harming one of their pack on E4. They are enemies there, you know."

"I do now. Wait." She cradled his head to keep him focused on what she was saying, rather than her body.

He frowned.

She gave him one of her own. “How could they locate a guard among all the other people here?”

“The usual way.”

“Uh-huh. And that would be?”

He huffed out a sigh. “They probably smelled him. A guard’s odor would be familiar to the creatures, the same as a condemned slave or one of the rulers that hunted the unfortunate man or woman in E4’s jungle.”

“Then—”

“Uh-uh. No more questions. Just this.”
He pulled the front of her nightgown

down, exposing her tight nipples.

Her frown faded. However, she pulled back, clearly denying him.

Nikoli's hand stalled on her breast, his thumb no longer stroking her areola. He didn't want to ask but wasn't about to guess what was going through her mind. "You don't want this?"

"What?" She blinked as if coming out of a trance and seemed surprised he was fondling her. "Wait."

He held back a groan. "Sure...why?"

"If those things recognized a guard's smell, they would recognize yours, right? You're from E2, like the rulers—

oh my God.”

He didn't like the way she stared at him. “What?”

“All the males in your dimension have the same coloring, features.”

She ticked them off: the black hair, olive complexion, brown eyes, facial characteristics, powerful build. A uniformity in his race that ensured their superiority. Early on, E2's scientists had manipulated their people's DNA to produce the heartiest specimens, removing all variety and risk.

Knowing where Regina was headed with this, Nikoli decided to joke. “I thought you like how I look.”

“Adonis couldn’t be better. That’s not the point.”

“Adonis?”

She waved her hand as if his question bugged her. “A guy from Greek mythology. Handsome dude. A real hottie.”

Nikoli gave her a wolfish grin. “You think I’m hot?”

“Be serious.”

He didn’t want that. Not tonight. There was time enough for trouble tomorrow.

“I’m worried, okay?” she said, then added quickly, “If your features and

physiology are identical to the other men on your plane, then your scent would be too.”

To argue with her was futile, so Nikoli conceded with a nod, adding, “But the werewolves aren’t looking for me. I’ve done nothing to harm them.”

“They don’t know that,” she countered. “You and Vakar could be twins, you look that similar. If he and the other SOB rulers hunted the werewolves on E4, the creatures might mistakenly think you’re him.”

“That’s not possible.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Vakar’s older than I am.”

Regina spoke through her teeth. “Fine. They’ll think you’re Vakar’s son—and don’t you dare tell me he hasn’t got one. The distinction’s going to be lost on a werewolf, all right? We have to do something.”

“Right now?” Her fragrance was driving him crazy. His cock couldn’t get any harder. Tonight might be one of the few evenings they had left together. Nikoli didn’t want to waste it on fear. He increased his hold on her.

She managed to wiggle out of his grasp. On her feet, Regina stumbled back a step, then righted herself. “Call

Meelo.”

Nikoli didn't move. He figured Meelo and his mate, Damir, wouldn't want to be bothered with bad news tonight any more than he had. They were genetic engineers who'd fled E2, the same as him. They'd brought Lukan to this plane to keep the rulers from exterminating him on E4.

Clearly not ready to give up, Regina pointed at the cell phone on his desk. “Tell him what's happening.”

“What can Meelo do? He's in Arizona with Damir and—”

“I'm aware of that,” she interrupted. “But you can talk to him and Lukan. The

three of you can decide what to do about the guards and the werewolves. You talk constantly about what you can do to rescue the pleasure slaves from E4. You can certainly talk about this.”

Nikoli powered down his computer and stood. “Not tonight.”

She frowned.

Ignoring it, he swept Regina into his arms, pressing his face to her throat, smelling her hair. She resisted for a moment and then her body molded to his, her arm slipping across his shoulders. In spite of her response, he wasn’t about to believe this was the end of their discussion. All he could hope for was a

delay.

He carried her down the hall to their bedroom, the brass bed they shared. Its ivory comforter was pulled back, the pillows plumped, waiting for their use. Her shampoo and perfume scented the room, just as he liked, its colors autumnal, far different from the somber shades on E2. A gold-and-red-pattern rug lay beneath two crimson chairs that faced the large window. The sheer beige curtains didn't entirely hide the outside vegetation, the leaves blazing with fall colors—yellow, red, orange.

How he adored it here. This space was his first real home, a place of comfort and passion, so unlike the sterile

atmosphere, the oppressive calm in his realm. Nikoli recalled how often he'd watched Regina from the portal in his laboratory on E2 before taking a chance and crossing over. First, to save her from Andris and the other vampires. Finally, to remain and experience happiness.

She couldn't have looked further from contentment than she did right now.

"It's late," he reasoned, the tip of his nose to hers. "Lukan and the others will be asleep. Arez needs her rest; you know that."

Regina's expression changed, her concern turning to understanding, along

with what looked to be envy. Or perhaps it was regret. Just last week, Arez and Lukan had told them the good news—Arez was pregnant. A miracle of sorts. Arez and the other female sex slaves were bred to be sterile so they'd never reproduce, leaving them available to service Vakar and the other rulers without pause in the Palace.

Shortly after crossing over here, Damir had promised the young woman that she and Meelo would do everything within their power to reverse what the scientists had done to her. Now, Arez and Lukan had started their family.

Nikoli knew Regina wanted a baby of her own but was afraid to try for one

with him. There were still too many dangers from the other realms and this one. The two detectives, Sheehan and Goddard, continued to investigate the murder of Donald Bakshi, an inventor whose home Nikoli had brought Regina to in order to keep her safe from the vampires. Through a portal on E2, he'd seen Andris and the others murdering Bakshi, feeding on him. With the inventor's home deserted, Nikoli thought it would be a safe place to hide Regina. During their investigation into Bakshi's disappearance and death, the detectives had found her fingerprints in the man's home, which raised their suspicions about her role in the killing.

As those on this side would say—what a fucking bitch. He and Regina had managed to destroy the vampires, only to make her vulnerable to the authorities.

Unwilling to dwell on it, Nikoli assured her, “Everything’s going to be all right.” He lowered her to the mattress. “We have the means to escape if we ever need to, not that it’s going to come to that.”

He pulled a small device out of his jeans pocket, an instrument he’d built to open and close portals at will. He put it on the nightstand within easy reach, just as he always did.

“Tomorrow, I’ll contact Meelo,” he

added. "I'll speak to Lukan too."

Regina clutched the hem of his tee. "Hold me."

He intended to do far more than that. As quick as he could, Nikoli pulled off his shirt and tossed it on one of the chairs. His jeans landed to the side of the stone hearth. Regina had already laid a fire. Its bobbing flames cast the room in a delicate glow, softening the shadows. Nikoli tugged off his boxers and socks. Naked, he faced her, his cock rigid, prepared to penetrate, to pleasure.

Color stained Regina's cheeks. Her hair was a deeper red in the rosy gloom, the strands fanned out over the pillows,

her bangs pushed aside. She no longer looked like the calm, detached psychologist she played during her patient sessions, but a woman in love, slightly mussed, helpless in his presence, inviting him to take her.

Was there any doubt of his carnal intent?

Nikoli climbed on the bed, his weight shaking the mattress. He peeled back her nightgown, inch by delightful inch, to expose her calves, knees, creamy thighs, the reddish curls between her legs.

Her female musk wafted up, making his head spin. He pressed his face to her springy bush and licked her soft folds...

slick with her moisture, slightly salty. He tongued her clit.

She gasped and fisted her fingers in his hair as though to keep him at the task. Maybe that was why she didn't often cut it. She needed something to hang on to.

Smiling at the thought, Nikoli drew back his tongue and eased her grip on him. "Roll over."

A frown creased her brow. She ground the heels of her hands into her eyes and whined, "Why'd you stop?"

"So you could roll over. Go on." He kissed the inside of her upper thigh.

She shivered and dropped her hands.

“No.”

That wasn't the response Nikoli had expected. Did she want to talk again? Now? Before any words, questions or dire predictions could spill from her mouth, he headed back to her clit.

“Wait,” she said.

Again?

“I have a better idea.” She yanked off her nightgown, pitching it to the left. The garment landed on top of her small TV.

“Back,” she ordered. Palms on his chest, she pushed him.

Nikoli resisted, still wanting to play.

Regina didn't seem as impressed with

his strength as he did. She drew her nails down his pecs, circling his nipples, leaving bursts of pleasure in their wake. He forced down a swallow. She parroted his earlier question, “You don’t want this?”

He fell back, hands pillowing his head, legs spread, her willing sex slave. “Do whatever the fuck you want. Just don’t make me wait.”

She grinned. “We’ll see.”

“We’ll what?”

“Quiet,” she cooed, “you’re talking too much.”

Nikoli would have retorted if not for

her hand on his cock. She cradled the damn thing much as her pussy would. Her fingers squeezed it gently. She moved them up and down his length, creating enough friction to make his legs stiffen and his toes curl.

He thanked her in his own language, babbling the words.

“Good?” she murmured.

He babbled some more, telling her it was beyond great and not to stop.

Not understanding E2’s language, she did.

Damn. “Regina,” he gasped. “Don’t...” He couldn’t finish.

She'd straddled his body and was now taking his cock inside her precious cunt, though not all the way. She stopped lowering herself onto him and whispered, "You want me to stop?"

"No."

"But you just said 'don't'."

"I didn't mean—I was wrong, all right? Go on. Please." She was making him nuts.

"Oh, okay. If you say so."

He made a face at her obvious sarcasm.

She responded by taking all of him inside, then tightened her inner muscles

around his rod.

He sucked in air, then sighed it out. Nothing could describe the sensations her actions created within him. They were too powerful. A gift only a God could have given to his mortal charges. No matter how many times they'd made love, Nikoli was still astounded at her body's miraculous tightness and heat.

"Thank you," he breathed, his hands on her hips to keep her steady as she pumped.

Regina worked their bodies with unbridled lust, the ends of her hair dancing over her shoulders, her breasts quivering. The bedsprings squeaked to

join in the music they made—her body's slap against his, her whimper, his groan, and finally her silence that told Nikoli how hard she concentrated, determined to hold off, not yet ready to surrender.

The way she gritted her teeth said she'd lost the battle. She came on a prolonged moan followed by a tattered sigh. He followed, grunting at the intense pleasure rushing through him...currents of delight wrapped in warmth, pulsing surges that left him panting, speechless but didn't drain his strength. The males in his realm were bred to sustain erections for hours. Each orgasm made their cocks harder than they'd been before climax.

Having been born in this less advanced dimension, Regina collapsed on top of him, her cheek on his shoulder, her breath puffing against his neck.

Nikoli wrapped his arms around her.

“Thanks,” she panted.

He kissed the top of her head.
“Welcome.”

“We still need to talk.”

Nikoli pressed his face into her hair, pretending not to have heard.

“I know you’re not asleep.” She cleared her throat and swallowed. “You can go at this all night.” She tightened her sheath around his thick, hard length.

Unable to stop the inevitable, he asked, “Are you sorry I helped Lukan and Arez?”

“Huh? No. Never.” Huffing with the effort, Regina pushed up and cradled his face, her thumb on his lower lip.

“What?” he asked when she simply regarded him, saying nothing.

She answered with a deep, wet kiss that was as good as his orgasm, maybe better. That was lust. This was tenderness, respect, love.

Finished, she rubbed her nose against his bristly cheek and whispered, “I just want everything to be all right. Please tell me it will be. Make me believe it.”

He caressed her with care that said she mattered. To him, she was life—all that existed on any of the planes. He wanted to ease her worry with hearty assurances but couldn't. So, he said nothing, kissing her instead, unwilling to think of the danger that waited just outside this house.

What horrors might be unfolding in the city tonight.

Chapter Three

Disconnected images flashed in Gwen's mind, not unlike a dream.

She saw herself standing outside the hospital, exhausted from her twelve-hour shift, her face lifted to the sky. Drops of water pelted her face, feeling oddly warm, like a shower.

She wanted to brush the moisture away, but couldn't. Her arms were leaden. She couldn't feel her legs. Why? In the distance, a dog barked. No, wait. The fucking thing howled like an unholy creature from a monster movie.

Run, dammit. Get out of—

She couldn't move, not even to swallow. Holy crap, what was happening? Darkness surrounded Gwen, pressing in. Goose pimples rose on her arms from the clammy air. She shivered.

A strong arm, a man's, tightened around her, holding her close. Who was he? Why was he doing this?

The answer edged close, only to skitter away. She struggled to bring it back and wished she hadn't, suddenly recalling a sharp prick on her neck, followed by a stinging sensation. The dart she couldn't pull out. Falling to her knees in the alley. An ugly goon dragging her deeper into the shadows, toward an area that was too cold. Weird whirring

sounds from some kind of motor that hadn't been there before. A wolf attacking.

She sucked in a breath.

The man caressed Gwen as though to quiet her fear. Heat seeped from his body, penetrating her damp clothes. He was clearly strong and carrying her. To where?

The hospital? Was he a paramedic? Had the thug or the wolf injured her? If so, why wasn't he using a gurney? Where was the ambulance?

Gwen fought like hell not to black out. Her lids were weighted, impossible to part, similar to when she'd had too much

to drink. More pictures flickered in her mind.

She was back outside the hospital, her gaze locked with the guy she'd seen there tonight. He smiled at her as he had earlier, the gesture welcoming, engaging, filled with male heat and promise she couldn't resist.

Was he the one who carried her? How was that possible?

Her arms swung back and forth with his next steps, these uneven as though he was climbing a set of stairs. His shoes smacked against them, the pressure of their combined weights causing the wood to groan. The odor of damp

vegetation obscured all other scents. Branches rustled in the persistent wind. Rain drummed hard, sounding like someone typing at warp speed on a computer keyboard.

She heard the rasp of metal against metal and tried to place the sound. Had he inserted a key into a lock?

Hinges squealed briefly as he opened the door...an all too familiar noise. As known to Gwen as the home's scents, lavender and vanilla from the Febreze that Staci, her cousin and roomie, always sprayed.

He'd brought Gwen to the modest house she rented? How did he know she

lived here? Had she told him? When?

She worked her mouth, trying to ask. Hell, she would have been happy to make one frigging sound but couldn't. Helpless and silent, she recorded his entrance into her home. The hardwood floors registered his movements just as the outside stairs had. He closed the door, then negotiated the darkened interior with surprising ease, not bumping into the coatrack or disturbing the beaded curtain Staci had hung in the living room's arched doorway.

The multicolored crystals clacked against each other with the blast of air that had pushed inside. Wind chimes near the front window tinkled like tiny

bells, not slowing his pace in the least.

He moved with confidence, as though he'd been inside countless times and knew the layout...or he could see very well in the dark.

Into the hall he went, bypassing rooms. Gwen worried that Staci would come out of her own room and ask what was going on. Not a smart move. The girl had barely survived the so-called accident her former boyfriend had caused. Who knew what this shit would bring?

Just stay where you are. Do not make a sound.

Staci didn't. Rain pattering the roof

and the man's steady breathing were all that broke the silence.

With that, Gwen remembered...her cousin was still at the hospital, working her shift at the gift shop. If Staci stopped for a drink or dinner before returning home or if she decided to study for her classes, she wouldn't be back for hours.

Relief flooded Gwen. A curious sense of well-being banished her concern, not only for her cousin but also for herself. From the drug the thug in the alley had put in her? Who in the hell was he, other than a rapist? Since when did sexual predators use tranquilizer darts instead of their fists or the threat of a knife or a gun?

What would he have done to her if that wolf hadn't come along? Where was it now? Had it...?

Gwen's thoughts halted at the man entering her bedroom, scented with her perfume, a floral fragrance with a hint of musk. With unexpected gentleness, he lowered her to the mattress of her pine bed. The cheap linens rustled beneath her, the ends puffing out with her weight. She lost all of her breath in a noisy sigh and looked up.

His face was above hers, its planes illuminated by the streetlamp's honeyed light spilling through her window. As she'd suspected earlier, his eyes were gray, fringed with long, dark lashes.

Beads of rain dotted his damp hair. A few errant strands clung to his cheeks.

She stared at his mouth, mesmerized by the tiny drops of water on his plump lower lip, aching to touch it. Somewhere deep inside, Gwen realized she should have been terrified. Deeper still, she understood that he wouldn't harm her.

With great effort, she lifted her hand. It trembled spastically, at last going limp. Just in time, she managed to rest her fingertips on his chin, rough with his coming beard, his skin chilled, his breath deliciously warm.

Who are you?

He regarded her, his expression a

mixture of tenderness and mounting arousal. Water dripped from his hair, splashing on her throat. He smelled of something primal and needed. The strong, fearless male every woman longs for, at least in her dreams.

Was that what this was, or was she hallucinating?

Somehow, Gwen didn't care what it might be. Soul-deep desire throbbed through her, pushing all caution away. Clumsily, she ran her thumb over his chin.

He smiled now as he had earlier in the hospital's parking lot.

This time she reciprocated, sensing

her grin came out lopsided from the drug's effects.

If that bothered him, he didn't let on. He leaned down to kiss the sides of her mouth.

Gwen's lips trembled at his surprisingly tender gesture. Grateful tears stung her eyes. She tried to grab his damp tee—not wanting him to pull back and leave her—but her fingers wouldn't work that well.

Stay. Please.

He brushed his lips over hers in answer, the tip of his tongue spearing into her mouth.

Aw, God. Not even as a horny teen had her body responded as willingly. Ribbons of pleasure rippled through Gwen. She suckled him deeper, their kiss exploring, then impatient, hard, uncivilized, the sounds they made feral and welcome.

It satisfied for a moment before they each had to have more. He pulled at her clothes, clearly wanting them off. Gwen struggled to do the same with his, but she was still too lethargic. Only her heart and mind raced with what she wanted, had to have.

She heard her hoodie hit the floor, not remembering him taking it or her tee and bra off, yet he had. Coolish air skimmed

her rain-chilled skin. Her nipples grew even harder. He warmed them with his hands, pulling a longing sigh from her.

No, don't stop.

He did, trailing his fingers down her torso to her belly. Her muscles quivered in response. He paid them no heed, continuing to her jeans, where he worked the button and fly.

Suddenly, she was naked and so was he. How had that happened? When? If Gwen could have managed a frown, she would have, disappointed that she'd missed him stripping.

Her bedsprings creaked as he climbed onto the mattress and unfolded his nudity

over hers. Air whooshed out of her at his imprisoning weight. It was a gratifying balm, his body's warmth the answer to her persistent yearning. Rarely had Gwen felt as wanted by a man, as safe.

With his knees, he separated her thighs and settled between them, his rigid cock against her pussy that was moist with need, thrumming with carnal hunger. He cradled her breast, his thumb stroking her nipple. At the same time, he claimed her other nipple with his mouth. He swirled his tongue over the tip.

Oh wow. The sensations he created were fucking amazing. They registered clear to the back of Gwen's throat. Her skin flushed with heat, piercing her

stupor. She drove her fingers through his hair, clutching it, demanding he remain with her.

His actions said he wasn't going anywhere until they were both satisfied.

How long might that take? A few hours? A day? Week? Month? What happened after it was over?

Shit, don't think of that now.

The bad crap would come later. It always did.

As though he'd read her thoughts or sensed her body tense, he lifted himself on one elbow and regarded her. Gwen didn't like the uncertainty she saw on his

face. She wanted longing mixed with a whole lot of lust.

To encourage him, she rubbed her groin against his, surprised she could do so, her ability to move coming back. He got the message quickly from her carnal maneuver, his expression evolving from concerned to just this side of savage.

Good boy.

He grabbed his cock, running the crown up and down her damp slit, positioning the meaty head on her opening.

Gwen gulped air at what was coming. She drew her legs back to give him the greatest access. At her blatant invitation,

he offered another smile and pushed inside, entering her in one hard, dominant—

Huh?

With a start, Gwen came to. From where? A dream? Nightmare? Perspiration ran down her chest, the chilly air licking it, bringing on a shiver. She stared at her shadowed bedroom, the rectangular designs on the wall from the streetlamp's glow.

It was obviously dark outside, still late. Or maybe early. Gwen couldn't be certain. Panic pumped through her, eating away any residual fatigue.

Unwilling to look at her clock just yet,

she patted the bed linens to her side and felt nothing but cotton sheets, cool to the touch, not warm from a body.

His.

Her mouth went dry as images filled her mind of the man outside the hospital carrying her into this house, climbing on the bed, mounting her.

She saw his hair swinging forward with each powerful thrust. His shoulders and pecs tensing as he pounded into her. Prominent veins corded his throat. Several ran down his biceps to his muscular forearms.

Swooping down, he slanted his mouth over hers.

Gwen touched her lips. They were somewhat sore as though from a lingering, impassioned kiss. Her cheeks stung, slightly irritated. From a man's stubbled cheeks scraping them?

Shit, she didn't know, couldn't be certain. Swallowing hard, she concentrated on her pussy to see if it was—

Her hand halted on the curls between her legs. She was fucking naked. Hurriedly, she touched various parts of her body, just to be certain of her state, at last searching her neck for where that dart had pierced her skin. Unless that was a dream she'd had.

Gwen winced when she reached the point of entry. Oh crap, oh damn, oh shit. The surrounding skin was swollen and sore. That fucking thing had hit her. She hadn't dreamt it.

As quietly as she could, Gwen pushed to a sitting position and looked over. The numbers on her digital clock glowed red in the gloom. Nearly an hour and a half had passed since she'd left the hospital and all that weird shit that had happened in the alley.

So what now?

Steeling herself, she turned and stared at her bath.

The decorative nightlight was on, its

Christmas-tree design a mixture of red, green and silver, casting the room in a festive glow.

Gwen's heart banged against her chest. In front of the sink he stood, running a washcloth over his bare arms, as sinewy as she remembered. His naked back was broad and muscled, a male in his prime. He'd pulled his jeans back on and his running shoes, unless he'd never had them off to begin with.

Her hand dipped down, heading for her cunt, though not yet touching it. Gwen wasn't certain she wanted indisputable proof that he'd entered her and had climaxed, spilling his ejaculate.

She held back a nervous groan. At that same moment, the front door jiggled slightly as though pushed by the wind. Gwen knew better. Its wood was sticking with the humidity. On a faint crack, it opened. Staci. Shit, shit, shit. Of all the nights for her to come home on time. Why couldn't she have gone to the hospital library to study? Why hadn't she stopped at Mel's for a drink and a burger?

He'd heard her too. His body went still. He cocked his head as though listening.

Staci's light steps echoed in the living room, moving toward the hall. She bypassed her room and headed for this

one.

No, don't, dammit, go back!

The uneasiness Gwen felt before returned now. She had no idea who he was or what he'd do when faced with two conscious females.

As Staci reached Gwen's bedroom, he left the bath, his full focus on the young woman as though she was the intruder.

“Hey,” the girl murmured, rounding the jamb. “You asleep al—”

Seeing him finally, Staci didn't finish, flinching instead as he moved toward her.

“Hold it right there,” Gwen shouted, surprised she could. “I fucking mean it.”

With her command, he stopped, his attention darting from Gwen’s face to the Lady Smith revolver she held in her shaky hands. A rash of home invasions had convinced her to buy the weapon months ago. She kept it under her spare pillow each night, using it as protection for instances like this.

Okay, maybe not like this. He was one good-looking dude. He’d carried her from the alley, away from that psycho and the wolf, brought her here, undressed her...possibly made love to her. Even if it had been no more than a dream, she’d enjoyed it. A fucking lot.

However, if he tried to harm Staci in the least, Gwen was prepared to blow his goddamned head off.

Chapter Four

He stared at the weapon in her hand, larger than what the guards used on E4 when they wanted to take down its creatures and the pleasure slaves. He'd seen more than one of his pack stagger, then fall when struck by the dart. He would never forget what followed. The guards or rulers taking aim with their crossbows, cheering as the deadly points pierced throats, hearts, bellies, eyes.

Unwilling to meet that fate on this side, he didn't dare move. The drug's effect had worn off the woman but wasn't completely through her body as yet. Her arms trembled slightly, as did

her breasts. Full and round, the brownish nipples constricted, reminding him of how her skin had felt and tasted earlier when he'd been in bed with her...when they'd been alone. He wanted that now, imagining those hard buds in his mouth, his tongue sweeping over their bumpy contours, pulling a soft, feminine moan from her.

“Gwen!” the other female cried.

A name? *Her* name? He thought as much and pulled his attention from Gwen to regard this new woman more carefully than he had earlier. She was against the wall, her body pressed to it as though she'd expected him to tear her apart.

He would if she threatened Gwen. Taking her down would be an easy matter.

She wasn't as tall as Gwen and appeared several years younger. Her hair was long enough to fall past her breasts, its color similar to the sun on this side, the ends fanned over her pink tee. Whereas Gwen's skin was a rich, exotic color, this female was quite pale. Only her eyes were dark, a deep brown shade. Given what he'd already witnessed on this realm, the males here would consider her beautiful, her delicate features perfect.

He preferred Gwen's. Striking, sensual. A contradiction to her eyes,

their color so very cool, like the morning sky in this realm. However, he'd seen heat in them when he'd undressed her, recalling her wanting smile, the flare of desire each time his hands lingered on her body.

“What are you doing?” the pale female cried to Gwen. “Who is that?”

“Don't know,” she said.

“What? Are you kidding?”

“Just stay where you are, Staci. I'll handle this.” Gwen spoke to him. “Who are you?”

Uncertain as to how his answer might affect her, he crossed his arms over his

chest to prove he meant no harm.

She continued to breathe rapidly, taking in his full length, pausing when she reached the bulge between his legs. The hard line of her mouth softened. His cock got even thicker, his body aching for hers as much as he sensed hers did for him.

In the last seconds, her nipples had constricted even more, becoming hard brown peaks, accentuating the length of the tips. He dug his fingers into his arms, frustrated that he couldn't lick or touch them.

She must have noticed his desire. Quickly, she pulled the sheet to her

breasts while keeping her weapon trained on him.

“Who. Are. You?” she insisted. “Do you even understand English? Do you need me to say it in Spanish or some other...?”

He interrupted. “I’m Kuma. I understand the languages on this side.”

She blinked slowly as though waking from the effects of another dart. “Kuma? The languages on this side?”

He nodded.

Her brows drew together. “Right. Is Kuma your first or last name?”

“My only one.”

“Just like a rock star, huh?” Gwen’s expression registered her increasing suspicion. “Where are you from? And don’t you dare say Seattle. I’m not buying it with your accent. Where were you born?”

He had no idea what to say other than the truth. Hopefully, it wouldn’t frighten her too badly. “E4.”

“E what?”

Kuma inclined his head to Staci. “The female’s a member of your pack?”

Gwen made a face. “My what?”

“She isn’t a threat to you?” he pressed.

“Of course not,” Staci said. “What are you talking about? She’s my cousin. We share this place.” She started toward the bed.

Kuma stepped in her way.

Staci stopped. From the corner of his eye, Kuma saw Gwen drop the sheet and clutch her weapon in both hands again, waving it at him.

“Hey,” she snapped. “I told you not to move.”

“What’s he doing here?” Staci shouted, her attention darting from Gwen’s naked chest to his.

“How’d you find this place?” Gwen

asked him. “How’d you know to bring me here?”

Thankfully, the wind had blown from her home to him. He’d simply followed her fragrance, and it had led him in the correct direction. “It bears your scent.”

“Huh?” Staci said.

Gwen gaped at him. “What kind of an answer is that?”

“How’d he get in here?” Staci cried.

He spoke before either of them became unmanageable. “I used what those on your side call a key.”

Uncrossing his arms, he gestured to the small metal device he’d left on a

side table. Faint light from the outside glinted off it. Behind the furniture, the illumination created a stain of brightness on the wall. Small, dark shapes wiggled down it, a silhouette of the rain streaming over the windows.

“You dropped it,” he added to Gwen.

She glanced at her wet clothes piled on the floor. “You undressed me.”

Kuma nodded, recalling every moment. The wondrous feel of her dewy skin, how chilled it was from the rain, warming her with his hands and mouth, his face above hers, meeting her beautiful—

“You put me to bed,” she said,

interrupting his thoughts.

“Seriously?” Staci blurted.

Gwen shot her a look, then spoke to him. “Answer me.”

He hooked his thumbs in his front pockets. “I had little choice. You couldn’t move on your own. You had trouble staying awake. The dart drugged you far more easily than it does those on my side. I saved you from the guard.”

Staci blurted, “What dart? What guard? My God, Gwen, is he saying you were attacked tonight?”

“By a guard,” Kuma repeated, his attention never straying from Gwen.

“The wound from his dart is on your neck.”

Her hand flew to it. Just as quickly, she pulled her fingers away, pushing them through her hair instead.

It was a darker brown than his, far shorter too, the ends pointing in all directions, looking wild, as though she'd just run through E4's jungle with him in pursuit. Kuma imagined catching her, them tumbling down to a bed of leaves, coming to rest in each other's arms, their mouths touching, her nudity molded to his.

“What happened tonight?” she asked.

He regarded her breasts. With her free

hand, she yanked the sheet back up, covering herself again.

“Tell me,” she demanded.

He sighed. “I already have. I saved you from the guard.”

“What fucking guard?” she growled. “Are you talking about one from the hospital? That guy in the alley wasn’t anyone I’ve seen at work before.”

Staci gasped. “You were attacked in the alley? What were you doing walking down it? You know it’s not safe.”

“It’s okay, all right? I’m fine. I’m just not sure what actually happened.” Gwen pointed her weapon’s muzzle at his

groin. “But you’re going to tell me, got it? What happened out there—start to finish. Where’d that wolf go? Does it belong to you? Did you bring that damned thing in here?”

She craned her neck, clearly trying to see more of the hall.

Staci did the same, then backed away quickly, her hip hitting the dresser behind her. Figurines on top wobbled. She gave them a quick glance and turned back to him. “There’s a wolf in here?”

He nodded.

“Are you nuts?” Gwen snapped. “Where in the hell did you put it? What are you doing with a wild animal?”

He debated the best way to answer. How was a male from his side supposed to tell a female from this realm that he was the wild animal, then keep her from attacking because she saw him as an even bigger threat? Given her weapon, Gwen had the advantage...for now.

Kuma saw no choice except to talk her down, explain who—or rather what—he was. His heritage was something he'd had no control over, no different from her eye and skin color. It just was.

At last, he said, “The creature you saw attacking the guard was me.”

This couldn't be happening. It was too

damn weird. Maybe she was still unconscious and dreaming, having the mother of all nightmares.

“Do you want me to show you?” he asked. Not waiting for her answer, he lowered his hands to his jeans’ button and fly.

Staci made a strangled sound that could have been fear or arousal. “Is he going to strip?” she breathed.

Appeared that way, which made Gwen wonder if this would be the first or second time he’d done so tonight.

“Stop it right there,” she ordered, frowning at how weak she sounded. As though she wanted him in the buff. “Just

take me through this verbally. Your name's Kuma. You're from E4. You're not a man, you're a..."

Gwen couldn't continue without shivering or laughing at how outrageously screwed up this was.

"Werewolf," he said.

Staci made a gagging noise. "What?" She spoke to Gwen. "He's on drugs, right? I should call 911, get the cops over—"

"I'd be gone before they ever arrived," he said to her, then asked Gwen, "Is that what you want?"

She chewed her lower lip, not certain

whether to tell him to get lost or to see this through, whatever it might be. He wasn't on drugs as Staci had claimed; his eyes were too clear, his touch too enticing, at least those parts of it she recalled. He was as sober as she was. His thought processes, however, were definitely off. Maybe he was a psychiatric patient...an extremely hot one who thought he was a wolf, having seen the one in the alley.

Where had it come from? Where had it gone?

Didn't matter, as long as it wasn't in here, and it was not. The damn thing would have been jumping on her furniture, destroying it, leaving its drool

all over the place. There were no sounds of crashing glass or splintering wood, only Staci's rapid breathing and the pounding rain breaking the quiet.

"Do you?" he murmured when Gwen didn't answer.

His manner was nonthreatening, his baritone gentle. Despite Gwen's misgivings, she couldn't deny that he had seen to her safety after the attack tonight. Her being here proved it. So did the cruel scratch marks on his arms.

Lowering her revolver, Gwen pushed to all fours to get a closer look at his injuries. In the gloom, the lacerations appeared black. She recalled when he'd

been in the bathroom. He must have been washing the blood off. If those gashes were from the wolf, Kuma would need rabies and tetanus shots. She stated the obvious. “You’re hurt.”

Her breasts appeared to entrance him. His Adam’s apple bobbed with his hard swallow. “I’m fine.”

Spoken like every other man she’d ever known, so macho they’d deny a bullet to the heart. “Screw that. You’re still bleeding.”

He ran his fingertips over the wounds. They narrowed instantly, closing to thin lines as they healed.

Gwen gaped. “Oh my God, how’d you

do that?”

“Do what?” Staci asked, moving toward him.

Kuma regarded her. She stepped back and flapped her hands. “I won’t come any closer. Don’t hurt me.”

“He won’t,” Gwen said, even though she didn’t reach for her gun again. Somehow, she knew she wouldn’t need it...at least not against him. “I don’t understand any of this. What you just did, it was a trick, right?”

“No.”

“Then how—”

He interrupted, “The experiments the

rulers conducted on my kind millennia ago allowed us to heal ourselves to some extent, as long as the wounds are superficial. For serious injuries..." He stopped, a pained look racing across his face.

"What?" Gwen asked.

His expression changed, as though he noticed her again. "The rulers wanted to use my ancestors to benefit their kind as warriors, fighting whatever battles they faced. They bred us for strength, resiliency and intelligence. We're able to adapt quickly, learning customs, languages, whatever we need to survive."

Their kind? His kind? Rulers? Gwen forced down a swallow. “I get it that you’re not from here.” It took her a moment to continue. ”That is, Seattle or this country.”

“This plane,” he said.

That didn’t sound good at all. Before Gwen could stop herself, the words rushed from her. “Are you saying you’re from another planet?” Was such a thing even possible?

“Not another planet,” he said. “Another realm. E4.”

Staci moaned.

“It’s okay,” Gwen said to her, not

wanting her cousin to make this worse than it already was. He'd just healed himself when that wasn't at all possible, and now he was claiming to be from another realm, whatever the fuck that was. How could that be? Did this country's scientists know about this? Had the nitwits caused the phenomenon?

“No matter how shocking you find what I'm telling you,” he murmured, “it's the truth.”

That remained to be seen. “Where exactly is this E4 realm?”

“Beneath your plane, closer to the planet's core. From the stories my ancestors passed down, there are five

dimensions on this planet. The one we're on now is known as E1, the nearest to the sun."

And E4 was called that because it was three realms down? Made sense in a crazy sort of way, not that Gwen wanted to believe any of it. She stared at his arm again. What he'd done had to be a trick. Maybe he performed as a magician when he wasn't in alleys, carrying women home after psychos had attacked them.

"You sense I'm not one of your kind, but you want more proof," he said.

"What's he talking about?" Staci asked.

Gwen lifted her shoulders. “What proof do you have?”

He rested his hand on the metal button of his jeans. Was he going to strip now and show her his goods? Gwen had no doubt they’d be as magnificent as the rest of him. His biceps were deliciously toned, his smooth chest solid with well-defined muscles, his belly flat, the bulge behind his fly weighty, his balls and cock no doubt pendulous, smelling of—

“Watch out!” Staci warned.

Gwen froze as he approached the bed. To her surprise, he didn’t reach for her gun, nor did he strip and give her some much needed loving. He simply held out

his hand to her, palm up. His fingers were long, the tips blunt.

Snatches of tonight returned, his hands tracing her body's contours, his fingers tugging at her nipples, dipping between her legs, demanding yet pleasuring.

An intolerable urge to press her face to his palm and kiss it gripped Gwen, until she saw what couldn't be possible.

Leaning back, she turned on her ceramic lamp, then took his hand in both of hers, studying it in the pale light.

“What is it?” Staci asked.

Gwen couldn't speak. He had no lines on his palms. His fingerprints, if you

could call them that, were a single round circle at the tip of each digit. He hadn't been kidding. He wasn't from anywhere near what he'd called this realm... dimension...plane.

He must have sensed her fear, because he curled his fingers over hers, a decidedly tender gesture given his raw masculinity and size.

Gwen lifted her face to his and whispered, "Who are you?"

Chapter Five

A dog's bark awakened Regina.

It was an ordinary sound she was used to, yet there was an odd quality in the animal's yapping...a hint of fear behind its menace.

Propping herself on one elbow, Regina regarded Nikoli. He'd draped his arm over his forehead. His fingers were slack, lips parted, his chest rising and falling steadily, proving how deeply he slept.

The dog's barking turned to whimpers, which soon quieted.

Regina's pulse continued to thump

even as she ordered herself to relax. Even if the animals were disturbed, it couldn't be by anything that didn't belong in this neighborhood. No vampires, certainly. She and Nikoli had seen Andris, Sazaar and the others trapped in the void between the dimensions, their fangs bared, their ungodly shrieks muted by the vacuum. The creatures had perished seconds later, never to return.

Regina wished she could have expected the same from Detectives Sheehan and Goddard. More than once, she'd sensed them tailing her around town, waiting to see if she'd lead them to evidence that she had murdered

Donald Bakshi.

When the detectives had first questioned her about the man, Regina told them she had no idea who Bakshi was, because she didn't.

"Then why did we find your fingerprints at his home on Bainbridge Island?" Sheehan had asked.

She'd danced around that awful question and the others they'd posed, her mind reeling. It wasn't that she and Nikoli hadn't been careful. They had, with Regina insisting they clean up after themselves, leaving no trace of them having been in the inventor's house. Unfortunately, that had the detectives

commenting on how immaculate the place was.

“It was as though everything had been wiped down,” Sheehan had said.

“Except for the doorknob in the bathroom,” Goddard cut in.

They’d found her prints there, the one spot she’d missed.

A new dog began to bark, this one closer to Regina’s house. The sounds it made were just as frantic as the first animal’s were, then mournful, betraying its alarm. Surely not because two detectives approached her house.

For a moment, Regina almost hoped

for that. With Sheehan and Goddard, she at least had constitutional protections. They wouldn't dare storm her home to harm her or Nikoli. However, with those who lived on his plane and the other dimensions, all bets were off.

She slipped off the bed as gracefully as she could, glancing over to see if she'd awakened Nikoli.

He remained on his back, his features relaxed, untroubled. Past him, on the nightstand, was his handheld device. A small metal box that appeared unremarkable. To the casual observer, it might have been a trendy TV remote or a space-age smart phone. Nikoli had built it months ago, using the instrument to

open a portal between the dimensions so Lukan and Arez could escape the Pleasure Palace on E4 and come to this realm. Since the day of their liberation, the device had never left Nikoli's side, always ready should he and Regina need it to flee whatever came their way next.

Like E4's guards and werewolves?

A wave of queasiness had her swallowing quickly. She pulled her gown from the TV, slipping into it as she padded down the hall to his office. Two long tables took up most of the space. Strewn across the polished wood were schematics and materials for his newest inventions. Innovative gadgets that were far beneath his expertise as a quantum

physicist but allowed him to earn a living undetected on this side. A streetlamp's light bled past gaps in the shutters, falling across the items, among them a half-finished bowl of Cap'n Crunch cereal drenched in maple syrup.

The concoction was one of Nikoli's favorite meals, along with macaroni cooked in pickle relish, and vanilla ice cream topped with vinegar. Just thinking about it made Regina gag. The weirder the combination, the more Nikoli seemed to crave the food, reminding her how different their physiologies were. For the rest of his days, he couldn't risk eating chocolate. On E2, the rulers had manipulated their people's DNA so the

delicious treat was poison, used to execute malcontents.

Goddamn pricks. What horrors were they up to tonight? What new tortures were they developing?

Regina stopped gritting her teeth and turned to the window, the steady patter of rain catching her attention. When had the second dog stopped barking? Why? She ran her hands up and down her arms in an attempt to warm them. The air was humid, oppressive, its damp scent coppery, reminiscent of the stench of blood.

She went to the window and waited to hear another animal barking, this one

down the street, proving that whoever... or whatever...had been outside had moved on.

Rain beat against the roof and tapped the windows, filling the quiet. Her lungs started to burn. She'd been holding her breath and hadn't even realized it.

Go on, look. Nothing's wrong. You're imagining it.

Her hand trembled as she reached for the shutters. She parted them just a bit and leaned closer, peering outside.

The upscale residential street was shadowed, the dark interrupted only by a series of streetlamps that created pools of yellow light, illuminating the slanting

rain. Regina regarded the glistening puddles, dripping vegetation, parked cars, seeing nothing—

Oh shit.

She stared at the house directly across the street, the shadow near its front porch. Within its perimeters stood a man. The gloom hid his features, but he was tall, the contours of his body youthful and strong, his long hair worn loose to his shoulders.

No, no, no.

Regina snatched her hand away and stumbled back a step, then moved forward and closed the shutters. The wood made a sharp clack that sounded

too loud and ominous. Had he heard it? Was that possible? He'd faced this house, clearly staring at it. Why? Who was he? What was he? A guard who'd seen Nikoli and noted his resemblance to the rulers, or a werewolf that had caught his scent and wanted to tear him apart?

No fucking way was she going to let that happen.

She started down the hall to alert Nikoli. He'd activate his device. He'd take them from here...to where? How long would they stay? When would it be all right for them to return? Would it ever be safe? If not, how would they survive wherever they went? How

would they...?

Regina halted before her panic became uncontrollable and she did something stupid. Like begging Nikoli to transport them to a location that would make them more vulnerable than this place. If that guy outside was a creature from E4, no way could he get into this locked house unless he broke down the door. That, she'd definitely hear.

She returned to Nikoli's office and hurried to his computer, ignoring how late it was. She needed answers fast, and as much help as she could possibly get. The moment she had Skype up, she clicked on the green call button. Seconds later, Lukan's image came on the screen.

Even with her worry, Regina couldn't help but stare. He was the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen.

The Arizona sun had deepened his bronze complexion and lightened his blond hair. He still wore it shoulder length, thick and wavy. His blue-green eyes were as exquisite as Regina recalled, his features straight out of a woman's erotic fantasies. Meelo and Damir had created Lukan to be the perfect specimen of a man so that he—and the other slaves like him—could satisfy the rulers in E4's Pleasure Palace, indulging their every wanton vice.

“Regina.” His deep voice was a little

cautious. Although she and Nikoli spoke several times a week with him and the others, they'd never called this late.

Leaning toward the screen, he murmured, "Is everything all right?"

She wished.

"Lukan," Arez called out in the background. "Where did you go? Come to the bedroom, I want to show you this."

He looked torn, as though he didn't want to deny her, yet couldn't leave without knowing why Regina had called.

"More baby things?" she asked, forcing herself to make small talk and

celebrate their happiness so long in coming, so well deserved.

Lukan smiled like the proud papa he was going to be. “Arez and Damir are buying out all the stores. I keep telling them the baby won’t stay small long enough to wear everything.”

“Then you’ll just have to make more babies, won’t you?”

His brows lifted as though the thought hadn’t occurred to him. Men—you had to love them.

“Regina?” Arez hurried into camera range and sat on Lukan’s lap. Against her chest she held a wad of rainbow-colored garments, all tiny and adorable.

“I want to show you this...this...stuff.”

She looked at Lukan to see if she'd used the correct word. Her English was still shaky, her voice sultry, her accent thick. On E4, where she'd spent the first twenty-six years of her life, Arez hadn't been allowed to speak unless it was to beg the rulers or guards to take her, punish her, use her as they willed.

Regina clenched her jaw to keep from swearing at the cruelty and injustice the young woman had suffered.

“Clothes,” Lukan corrected.

Arez repeated the word.

He ran his knuckles over her cheek.

“Perfect...but Regina didn’t call to see what you bought.”

Despite his gentle gesture and tone, Arez gave him a frown and turned back to the screen, looking hurt. “You don’t want to see my stuff—my clothes?”

“Of course I do,” Regina said, unwilling to disappoint Arez in the least. “Show them to me.”

The young woman smiled, her breathtaking features luminous with joy.

As they had done with Lukan, Meelo and Damir had created Arez to be everything an E2 ruler would want in a female sex slave. Her hair was thick and black, falling to her waist, her eyes an

astounding violet shade, more arresting than Liz Taylor's had ever been. With her lovely features and caramel-colored complexion, she didn't look quite real.

"I like this one the best," she said, holding up a green romper decorated with yellow daisies. "It reminds me of out there."

"Outside," Lukan corrected gently.

"Out...side," she repeated, enunciating each syllable.

He nodded.

She touched his shoulder. "Where there's freedom. What we'll eventually give to the other slaves just as soon as

we find a way.”

Regina pressed her fingers to her mouth, fighting emotion at the girl’s comment, what the rulers had denied her kind. Conceived within an artificial womb and then taken from E2 to E4’s Pleasure Palace, Arez hadn’t known anything else until Lukan’s rescue. She’d never seen the outside, didn’t know plants and fresh air existed. During her and Lukan’s first nights in Seattle, they’d slept in Regina’s backyard, not wanting to be trapped in the house, confined by walls as they’d been on E4.

“Do you like it?” Arez asked. She held the garment closer to the computer screen. “It’s all right, isn’t it?”

The girl's need for reassurance saddened Regina further. On E4, the rulers and guards had never allowed the slaves to make a decision, have an opinion or need. They treated them as objects, not living, breathing people. Regina would have moved heaven and earth to make certain nothing else bad ever happened to Arez. "It's adorable."

"And so soft." She rubbed the garment against her cheek, moaning blissfully as she did. "Our baby won't mind wearing clothes, not like I did."

Regina nodded to say she understood. Until Arez had crossed over to this realm, she'd never worn clothing. Pleasure slaves weren't allowed that.

They hadn't even been given names. The rulers tracked them by their genetic code. On each one's inner wrist were what appeared to be a series of moles that formed symbols, similar to a DNA profile on this side.

Lukan hadn't only saved her from all that, he'd christened her Arez, a word that meant freedom in their language.

A new surge of sympathy welled in Regina. It was a moment before she could trust her voice. "No matter what your baby wears, he or she will be perfect. How is anything else possible? Look at the two of you."

Arez pressed the garment to her

throat. “I don’t care if it’s what you call pretty on this side. I just want it to be safe.”

“It will be,” Regina promised. She and Nikoli would see to it, no matter the danger it posed to them. How could they not? “Is that all the clothing you have?”

“Oh no, there’s bags and bags of it. Damir found a mall we hadn’t been to before.” Arez slipped off Lukan’s lap and bent at the waist so Regina could still see her. Her hair swung forward. She pushed it behind her ear. “Don’t go. Let me get it. I want to show you.”

Regina had been hoping for that. The moment Arez rushed from the room,

Regina spoke to Lukan, “Have you, Damir and Meelo been following the reports about the recent murder in Seattle?”

He glanced over as though checking to see if Arez was out of earshot. Turning back to the screen, he used the same subdued tone Regina had. “Meelo and I watched the newscast the other night.”

“The victim was one of the guards that followed you through the portal, right? One or several of the werewolves attacked him, right?”

Lukan looked uncomfortable. “The reporter said it was because of drugs.”

“You don’t believe that. I can see it

on your face.” Regina leaned toward the screen. “Help me out here. I’m worried about Nikoli. His features are identical to the rulers. What if the guards see him here accidentally? What if the werewolves come after him thinking he hunted them on E4?”

“They’d have to find him first.”

“By smell, correct?”

He glanced over again, as though something off camera had caught his attention or he needed to stall for an answer.

“Lukan, please.”

On a heavy sigh, he nodded. “Yes,

they would find him by smell.”

Regina gripped the arms of her chair. “A few minutes ago, I looked outside to check why the neighborhood dogs were barking. I saw a man across the street.” She described his body shape, the length of his hair. “Does that sound like the creature you saw on E4 when you and Arez were hiding in the cave?”

Lukan’s frown deepened. Once more, he glanced over, checking the area to the side of him. “I can’t say for certain.” He faced the screen again. “The creature we saw wasn’t wearing clothes.”

Regina held back a groan. “Yes, I know, but he was young and strong,

wasn't he? His hair fell to his shoulders?"

"It did, but that doesn't mean who you saw outside tonight is one of the creatures from E4."

"Yeah it does," she argued. "No one who looks like that lives on this street. The dogs weren't only barking, they sounded scared." Before Lukan could debate her, she asked, "How many guards and creatures followed you over here?"

"I don't know. Arez and I saw nothing more than shadows. I was barely conscious after the guard hit me with his dart." He whispered, "Why?"

Regina's gut continued to twist, making her nauseous. "Is it possible that more guards are coming to this dimension other than those who crossed over with you and Arez?"

"How could they? Why would they?"

Because Vakar had sent them. Surely, he'd concluded that someone had helped Lukan and Arez escape. That someone could be Meelo or Damir. It could also be Nikoli, even though everyone on E2 believed he was dead, thanks to his father. Domm Zorr had lied to protect his son, claiming that Nikoli had died fighting the vampires. The rulers had bought his story, even giving Nikoli a state funeral.

Regina could only imagine Vakar's rage at Nikoli having duped him. Could he already know Domm had been in on it?

If Vakar did, he hadn't let on to the man. Domm hadn't opened a portal to warn his son. Could be Vakar was biding his time until his plan was well in motion—using his device to open portals on this side, ordering the guards to locate and capture Nikoli, dragging him back to E2 for execution along with his father.

Regina bit her lower lip so hard she tasted blood. She wanted to scream or put her fist through the wall but forced herself to remain calm. To try to reason

this out as Nikoli and his people would. The Seattle metro area had more than three million people in it. The guards locating him here, even accidentally, would be like finding the proverbial needle in a haystack.

A good thing, until she remembered the help they might get from the werewolves that had also crossed over with their superior sense of smell.

“Regina?””

She blinked, then blurted, “The guards are coming for Nikoli. One of the werewolves is already here. I know it. We have to do something.”

Chapter Six

Gwen stood next to Staci in their snug kitchen, both of them staring at the back door, listening for sounds from outside. Mortal screams. Animal snarls. Carnage.

Nothing. For the moment, everything was as it should be.

Yeah, right.

Minutes earlier, Gwen had asked Kuma who he was while her mind had added, *what are you?*

He might as well have been reading her thoughts, or perhaps he saw the panic on her face, because he'd released her hand and stepped away from her

bed, his attention moving to the hall.

At the time, Gwen wondered if he intended to leave, not wanting to explore why the thought pained her.

Staci had saved her from such sentimental musings. “What’s wrong?” the girl had asked him, rocking on her heels as though she would have liked to move closer but didn’t dare.

“Something’s coming,” he answered.

Gwen hadn’t asked what, nor had Staci. They watched him release the metal button on his jeans and lower the fly. The zipper’s rasp sounded louder than it should, the same as the pounding rain and Staci’s hitching breaths.

“What’s he doing?” she asked Gwen.

Wasn’t it obvious?

The edges of his jeans fell away from his body, revealing his hairy groin, his muscles taut and rippling. He toed off his running shoes and stripped, his clothing smacking against the hardwood floor. He stepped out of his jeans. Naked. Unashamed.

Staci made a whimpering noise not entirely devoid of pleasure. Gwen couldn’t blame her. He was magnificent. His cock long and thick, the head plump, reddened with desire. Thick veins snaked up the rigid shaft. Gwen would have given up a year of her life for the

privilege of burying her face in that part of him, licking his hard rod. She snuck a peek at his face. Her pulse leapt even as her bones seemed to go soft.

He stared at her like a man intent on passion...or a male animal during the rut. Three steps and he'd be back at her bed, climbing on it, unfolding his body over hers, trapping her beneath his weight and warmth.

A wanting moan bubbled up in her throat at the thought. Helplessly, she regarded him. His rich mouth she knew, there was no longer any doubt about that. They had kissed when he'd first brought her here. She recalled the pressure of his lips, his tongue seeking entrance,

wanting to touch hers.

Had she responded as he deserved?
Had she touched him enough to satisfy herself?

Gwen figured she hadn't.

An artist might as well have sculpted his smooth pecs and torso, they were that masculine and perfect, his nipples the color of damp earth. Remembering the odd circles on his fingertips, Gwen studied his navel, a small half-moon, similar in shape to the bellybuttons of people on this side.

She didn't linger there. Once more, his erect cock captured her full attention, the root of it surrounded by a nest of

dark curls, his ruddy balls plump and lightly furred.

His powerful thighs tightened; so did his calves as he shifted his weight. Was he going to come to her now? Would he mount her in front of Staci? Gwen weakened even more, not minding that in the least, desiring everything he could give.

He turned to the bedroom doorway.

Gwen leaned up. The mattress shifted and squeaked with her weight. “What is it?”

“One of them,” he answered.

She didn’t ask “*Who?*” sensing he

was referring to another man like the one who'd attacked her in the alley.

“What’s he talking about?” Staci cried.

Ignoring her cousin, Gwen asked, “Do you hear him?” The only sounds she caught were the rain and Staci’s frightened panting.

“Not yet...but his scent is growing stronger.” Kuma lifted his face and sniffed the dank air.

Not about to press him for details, Gwen murmured, “Don’t you worry. I have a gun. I’ll blow his fucking head off.”

Kuma regarded her weapon on the bed, its metal dull yet deadly in the lamp's weak light. "No. He's mine. The same as the other. They'll pay for what they did."

Before Gwen could ask what in the hell he was talking about, Staci gasped, "Oh my God."

Gwen's mouth sagged open, but no words or sounds escaped. The hair on Kuma's legs, thighs, torso and arms grew at frigging warp speed, becoming longer, denser, resembling dark brown fur. His limbs shrank, so did his hands. His nails turned into claws. The physical agony it caused him was evident in his strangled growls, while his face...

Jesus.

His lips, now black, pulled away from his teeth, no longer human but that of a predator, his canines long and deadly.

He dropped to all fours as the transformation continued, elongating his nose into a snout, turning his body into that of a formidable wolf. In a corner of Gwen's mind, she heard Staci's frightened moans and hoped to God her cousin didn't make any sudden moves. Gwen knew she should have reached for her revolver, just in case, but didn't. The thought of shooting Kuma...harming or killing him...wasn't something she figured she could do.

He sniffed the air as he'd done when in human form, then trotted into the hall, his tail swishing, the end of it curling around the jamb.

“Hey,” Staci shouted, grabbing Gwen’s arm before she could reach the doorway and follow. “Where are you going?”

“Stay here. Shut the door and lock it. Take this—use it if you have to.” She pushed her gun into Staci’s hand.

“What? Wait!”

Gwen couldn’t. Naked, she ran down the hall toward the front door, then stopped, not seeing Kuma there. Backing up several steps, Gwen peered into

Staci's room. The dangling beads on the girl's vintage lamps created smudges of colors—red, yellow, green, blue—on the ceiling and walls. Her bed's scarlet comforter was undisturbed, no indentations from Kuma's paws to say he'd jumped on it to glance out the window.

Gwen checked the hall bath next, squinting at the bright fluorescent light. He wasn't in the shower, trying to see out the small window at the top of it.

In the kitchen, she found him. He paced in front of the locked back door, his nails clicking against the gold-flecked linoleum.

“You don’t have to go out there,” she said.

He bared his teeth and growled.

She frowned. “You could get hurt. I have a fucking gun to protect us.”

He rammed the side of his body against the door, rattling the wood and glass.

Damn. Before he burst through the window or morphed back into a man and opened the stupid thing himself, Gwen got it for him.

He dashed into the small backyard, rimmed with vegetation, heavy with menacing shadows. Tree branches

dipped to the ground under the pelting rain. Small pools of water and fallen leaves dotted the thick grass.

He halted in the middle of the yard and glanced back, his eyes silvery in the dingy light, intelligence burning in them along with something human...yearning, affection. As though he needed her to be safe, it was important to him.

Gwen leaned against the jamb, clutching it for support. Rarely had she been precious to anyone, especially those who should have protected her.

She'd never spoken to her father. He refused to acknowledge her existence, while her mother had too many problems

of her own to deal with a child. If not for Staci, Gwen wouldn't have known what family was supposed to be. Kuma's concern reminded her of what she'd missed. It touched something deep within her, so long denied, urging Gwen to go to him, to cradle him close.

Before she could, he bounded away into the darkness.

That had been ten endless minutes ago. As she had earlier, Staci grabbed Gwen's wrist now, keeping her from reaching for the doorknob.

"Oh God, please," she said, "don't go out there."

"I have to." Gwen yanked free. "What

if he's hurt? I can help him."

"You're a nurse, not a vet."

A what? "Hey." She glared at her cousin. "He's still a man—a decent, brave, honorable man, got it?"

"I don't get any of this," Staci hollered, gesturing wildly. "We should call 911. They'll know what to do." She headed for the wall phone.

Gwen slapped Staci's hand away from the receiver. "Uh-uh. No way are you calling the cops."

"Why not?"

"Are you serious?" Gwen swung her hand in the direction of her bedroom.

“You saw what Kuma turned into in there. How long do you think he’d last if someone outside saw what he did—what he’d become? They’d take him down like a fucking rabid dog.”

Staci pressed her fists to her chest, her pose reminiscent of a little girl scared shitless. “We can’t just let this continue. It’s nuts.”

And the guy in the alley hitting Gwen with a tranquilizer dart wasn’t? If not for Kuma, she’d have been raped, dead or worse by now. “He rescued me tonight, Staci. He didn’t have to do that. I’m not going to let anyone harm him.”

“Maybe someone already has.”

Gwen got in Staci's face and bared her teeth at the girl. "Don't say that. Don't even think it. Where's my gun?" She curled her upper lip at Staci's empty hands. "Did you leave it in my bedroom?"

"Don't worry. It's on the nightstand."

"Fucking lot of good it'll do us there. Go get it."

"So you can leave and get yourself killed?" Staci backed away and crossed her arms beneath her breasts. She tapped her foot against the floor. "I don't think so."

Gwen lifted her chin to the ceiling and sighed. "I'm not going to get killed."

“You’re not going out there either. If you haven’t yet noticed, you’re naked.”

She’d forgotten about that. “Get my clothes.”

Staci pushed out her lower lip.

“Please,” Gwen added. “Someone has to let him back in when he returns. Do you want that to be you?”

“And disappoint him?” She arched one blonde brow. “I saw how he kept staring at you.”

Heat rushed to Gwen’s face and throat. “You’re crazy.”

“Maybe, but I’m not blind. I do remember what a guy looks like when

he's interested."

Gwen wasn't about to debate the point. She would have changed the subject, but it was already too late. Staci's fight had gone, her sigh seeming to deflate her. Her shoulders sagged as though she had no choice other than to accept that a man would never look at her with passion again.

A few short years before, Staci's beauty had enticed many guys, mostly the wrong kind, like her last boyfriend. His actions had changed Staci forever, stealing her confidence, the future she thought she'd have. Reflexively, Staci reached for her shoulder but didn't touch it, no doubt reluctant to feel the horrible

scars her clothing hid.

“You all right?” Gwen asked.

Staci waved her hand as though to dismiss the question.

Gwen murmured, “I’m sorry this shit happened tonight.”

“Don’t be. You’re okay...and he is a great looking guy.” Staci’s expression grew thoughtful as though she was recalling Kuma as he’d stripped, his potent, magnificent form. “Really great looking,” she added, “considering.”

That he was a werewolf? Yeah, he was definitely hot in spite of that—maybe because of it. As rattled as she

was, Gwen wasn't certain what she should be thinking or feeling. She rubbed Staci's arm. "Get my clothes and the gun, okay?"

"Promise you won't leave."

"Like this?" She gestured to her nudity, far less perfect than Staci's had been before her injuries.

Staci gave her a wan smile, then paused just short of the hall. "One more thing."

"Sure—what?"

"If he gets back before I return, please do not do it with him on the table." She flicked her hand at the bright yellow-

and-chrome furniture, a retro set Gwen had picked up at a yard sale. "I eat there, you know."

Gwen rolled her eyes, but it didn't stop her from imagining herself on the furniture, nude and vulnerable. A feast for Kuma's eyes, mouth, hands. He'd order her to pull back her legs and she'd obey, wanting what he did. Her pussy would already be wet, aching for him, the coolish air glancing off her damp folds, bringing on a small shiver.

He'd warm her with his hands, dragging them from her inner thighs to her cunt, spreading her even more, exposing her to all he desired. With ease born of confidence and hard male lust,

he'd enter her, his rod burrowed deep, making her feel taken, used, enjoyed. Before she could catch her breath, he'd slide his hands past her curls to her belly and onward to her breasts. Not stopping there, he'd wrap his fingers around her wrists, holding her arms to each side, trapping them as he plowed into her, his thrusts so savage the table's legs would jump and scrape the floor.

She'd moan long and loud. He'd—what? Groan? Bellow? Howl?

The thought of him behaving like an animal should have troubled Gwen, but it didn't. Despite her nudity, her skin stung with heat, her nipples were so hard they hurt, while her pussy pulsed,

hungering for him to fill—

“Here you go.” Staci tossed Gwen a clean pair of jeans and a tee.

She tugged them on, biting back a moan as the crotch rubbed her unappeased pussy. “Where’s my gun?”

“Still on your nightstand. Bitch all you want,” Staci added hurriedly, “but I’m not bringing that thing in here. You want a mindless slave, get a pet. I’m not the good girl I used to be. Just ask the cops.”

Gwen zipped her fly and used the softest tone she could. “That SOB you lived with caused all the problems. How many times do I have to tell you, it wasn’t your fault.”

The girl shrugged. “So much for love, huh? And thinking you found Mr. Perfect.”

Aw, sweetie. “There are good guys out there, you’ll see.”

Staci pulled in her arms, an instinctive move of protection, to make herself as invisible as possible.

Gwen would have given her a hug if not for the tapping sounds she heard, different from the still-falling rain. Parting the curtains on the kitchen door, she saw Kuma—in human form—on her back porch. Moisture streamed down his hair, plastering it to his skull and neck. Ribbons of water coursed over the solid

lines of his body. He'd turned his face to the side, his attention on something in the distance.

She opened the door, grabbed his arm and pulled him into her kitchen. It wasn't easy, given his superior strength and size. However, surprise gave Gwen a faint advantage. Handing him a dishtowel, she asked, "You all right?"

He blotted his face and nodded.

Gwen didn't want to ask but couldn't help herself. "Was anyone out there?" Had he killed that person? Had he eaten —

Uh-uh. No way did she want to think about that.

“No,” he said. “The scent faded. He must have gone.”

There was a God. She bolted the door and peered through the curtains one last time to make certain her backyard was still empty. Not seeing anything that didn't belong there, she spoke to Staci. “Grab a towel from the hall closet and get his jeans.”

Gwen went to the thermostat and set the heat to eighty-five degrees. She wanted to ease the chill Kuma must have felt from having stood on her porch in the buff. If not for Staci's presence, Gwen might have used her body, hands and mouth to do the job. “It'll be warm in here in a few...”

She didn't finish, noticing Staci wasn't moving except to chew on the edge of her thumb as she regarded Kuma's balls and cock. His rod was more flaccid now than earlier, but still awesome.

"Hon," Gwen prodded, "he needs a towel and his jeans."

"Ah, sure." Staci backed out of the kitchen, her attention still riveted to his groin. She bumped into the jamb before pivoting to go down the hall.

When her cousin was finally out of sight, Gwen went to him and spoke as quietly as she could, "What happened out there?"

“Nothing.” He tossed the wet dishtowel on the counter and faced her, all naked and sexy, as though it were the most natural thing in the world for him to do. On his realm, it probably was.

It took a great deal of effort for Gwen to concentrate on his face rather than the other delicious parts of him. His irises were gray again, no longer that odd silvery shade. His lips were a faint pink, not black, his nose well defined, not at all as it had been when he’d left a few minutes ago, and how she’d seen him earlier tonight in the alley. “You killed that man who attacked me.”

“I kept him from harming you,” he countered.

Right. How could she have forgotten that? She sure as hell hadn't been able to erase the awful images of Kuma going at the thug. "You tore away his face. That happened to another man days ago. I saw his body in the ER. Did you..." She couldn't continue.

"Another of my pack did that."

There was more of his kind here? Gwen clutched her elbows to keep from shivering. "The man's hands and feet were missing. Why? Are his fingerprints and toe prints like yours—nothing but single circles? Were you afraid a patrol unit would see them?"

He regarded her. "What's a patrol

unit?”

“Cops...police...the authorities... guards that keep people safe.”

“You have such a thing here?”

Clearly, he wasn't that familiar with the way things worked on this side. Or, at least, how they should. “Some might argue that we don't, but yeah. Answer me. Why were his hands and feet missing?”

“Without hands, he can't hurt or kill any longer. If he has no feet, he can't follow those he preys on.”

“Here you go,” Staci said for the second time tonight as she hurried back

into the room. She held the towel and all of his clothes—jeans, tee, suede jacket—at arm's length, as though afraid to get closer to Kuma even as she resumed ogling him.

In silence, he rubbed himself dry and pulled on his jeans, leaving the rest of his garments in a heap on the linoleum. A Chippendale's stripper couldn't have captured Gwen's attention more. She noted the dark hairs hugging his arms, his muscles flexing with each movement. In a few more seconds, she'd be on her knees before him, begging him to do her.

Maybe it was time to stop behaving like a sex-deprived virgin and get a handle on this. She pulled out a chair.

“Sit down, please.”

The moment he did, Gwen sank into her own chair and leaned toward him, resting her hand on his arm. A shiver of delight ran through her at how solid and masculine it was. “I want to know everything,” she murmured. “Tell me about the rulers you mentioned, the guards, the experiments. Why you’re here. How long you intend to stay.”

She talked too much. Not that Kuma minded. He enjoyed the silky sound of her voice. Those melodious sounds, along with her touch, kept him from answering her, driving away every word

he'd ever known, dispelling each thought.

All that remained was stark need, the urge to pull Gwen into his arms, capture her mouth, run his hands down her lush body. Lose himself in her heat and scent. She smelled of life, of freedom, the kind he'd known in the jungle when the guards weren't hunting his kind and the rulers weren't slaughtering them.

Gwen pressed her fingers into his forearm. "Please," she whispered, "tell me."

He slanted a look at Staci. She was biting her thumb and shifting from foot to foot, seemingly uncertain as to whether

she wanted to stay and hear everything, or flee and spare herself the horror.

As though the girl had read his thoughts, she lowered her hand and frowned. "I'm not leaving." With more resolve than she'd shown earlier, she sank into the chair on the other side of him, rather than the one that was the farthest away. No doubt, so she was close enough to stop him from mounting or harming Gwen.

"I'm from E4," he began.

"Yeah, we know," Gwen said, "you already told us that." She ran her thumb over his wrist.

A surge of warmth rushed through

Kuma, stiffening his cock even more, making it difficult for him to breathe, to think.

“Who are the rulers?” Gwen asked.

He cleared his throat. His words still rasped. “They were once my people when our worlds began.”

“Worlds?” Staci asked.

He clarified. “Realms. Dimensions.”

“Five of them,” Gwen said. “If they were once your people, then your kind didn’t always come from E4?”

“No.” He tightened his fingers into fists.

Gwen noticed, pulling her hand back.

Before she could move too far away, Kuma wrapped his hand around her wrist, holding it gently, not caring what Staci thought.

“My anger isn’t with you,” he explained to Gwen. “It’s because of them. My people were born on E2, the same as the rulers. Those in charge sent my ancestors to E4 as punishment, for their crimes against the realm. Long before the current rulers thought to build the Pleasure Palace—with sex slaves to indulge their every whim—E4 was a prison without walls without any chance of escape.”

“A penal colony,” Gwen mumbled. “Like Devil’s Island.”

Staci leaned closer. “Is E4 surrounded by water?”

Kuma shook his head. “It’s a jungle, a twilight world, the sun far fainter there than it is in this dimension. The plants are enormous and golden, the creatures bigger than anything you have here. Men and women weren’t only banished there, the rulers ordered E2’s scientists to experiment on them. To see how they could manipulate what your side calls DNA.”

Gwen sagged in her chair but didn’t pull her wrist from him.

Grateful, Kuma stroked her with his thumb, savoring her skin’s velvety

texture.

She whispered, “They turned your people into werewolves?”

Staci made a gagging sound.

He pretended not to notice, concentrating on Gwen. How could he not. In the room’s pleasant light, she was silky warmth, her rich complexion as inviting as her scent. He’d seen how she responded to his attention earlier, the deepening rose in her cheeks, the surrender in her eyes. He noted a flicker of it now within her concern.

Unfortunately, her worry won out.

“Worse than werewolves?” she

asked.

He nodded, then added, “Most of those beings died off, unable to survive the hunt for food and predator attacks. Only my kind and what the rulers refer to as subhumans remained and thrived.”

“Sub—what?” Staci croaked.

“Creatures that are somewhat human in appearance,” he explained. “However, they’re not as advanced as the ones in my pack. They have no language. They behave and communicate like animals.”

“Why?” Gwen asked, her arm tensing as she made a fist. “What would possess anyone to do something like that?”

“They wanted to see how much they could change their own species. They used E4’s prisoners to further their goal, altering their features so they no longer resembled them, enhancing the mental and physical abilities of some. When they discovered they could breed beings that were part-human, part-animal—the perfect warriors—they conducted those experiments, stopping only when they couldn’t control them as they liked. They tried to exterminate my kind then, but were unable to completely eradicate the line.”

“And that’s why you escaped here... to this dimension,” she said, “to avoid being killed or used for whatever other

sick thing they planned to do.”

He shook his head, recalling the last time he'd been on E4, watching the two pleasure slaves in the bowels of the cave. The man was tall and blond; the woman had long black hair. They fought off the guards as best they could until a tranquilizer dart hit the male slave in his shoulder. On the edge of consciousness, he urged the female to move back. The cave wall behind them glowed with energy and liquefied, allowing them to go through it. Guards chased them. Kuma and several in his pack followed, the portal sucking them deeper inside, bringing them to this place.

“If you didn't escape,” Gwen said,

“then why are you here? How’d you get on this side?”

“A portal opened on E4. I entered it to follow the guards who were chasing the two pleasure slaves who escaped. The gateway brought all of us to your plane.”

She looked as though she were trying to digest that. “Okay...so how did the portal open?”

“I don’t know. It just happened over there. Here, I’ve seen the guards use an instrument to create an entry back to E4. After they point it, the air grows cold and—”

“There’s a weird sucking sound,” Gwen cut in. “Right?”

“Yes. You heard it tonight.”

“Unfortunately.” She appeared far more troubled than she had earlier. “These guards, they’re the rulers’ personal security force?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“They’re there to keep the rulers safe from your pack and the subhumans?”

“Only if the rulers are in the jungle. For the most part, the guards keep the pleasure slaves from knowing there’s a world outside of the Palace. They withhold food or whip the slaves to make certain they’re always obedient. They use them for whatever vice they desire.”

Staci covered her face with her hand.

Gwen muttered something beneath her breath, then asked, “Have you tried to follow the guards again so you can return to your realm and people—pack?”

He thought of Zule, his mate on E4, a female he’d loved. For him, her smile and body had always been welcoming, her future his to protect. He’d failed her in that, not being at her side when danger came. Upon his return, he’d found her brutalized. Murdered.

“No,” he muttered. “Here, the guards have no Palace in which to hide. It’s easier for me to locate and stop them from what they’re doing in this realm.”

He cradled Gwen's hand within his own, his touch far gentler than his words, his resolve unwavering. "To kill as many of them as I can."

Chapter Seven

The quest hadn't gone well.

Etaw huddled against the building's rough façade, a stance he'd never taken on E4. There, he was a feared guard. On this realm, he was too vulnerable, hunted like an animal. Nervously, he fingered the device that would bring him back to his dimension, wanting to use it, knowing he could not. Flight wasn't possible until he finished his mission.

“Bring me one of the werewolves that escaped,” Vakar had ordered earlier. *“And another female. If you expect to please me, do not return without them.”*

Etaw's sole purpose was to gratify E2's highest ruler. To please Vakar was to assure an ample supply of food and access to the pleasure slaves, female and male. To do with them what he willed, while also escaping punishment or death.

Sweat ran down his face and stung his eyes. He blinked it and the rain away, knowing he had to concentrate in order to survive this.

From his vantage point, he regarded the body in the alley—Purlo's—another guard from E4. Each of the man's limbs ended in a grisly stump, his feet and hands gone. Blood pooled in the crevasses where Purlo's throat and face

had once been. Five dogs stood near his corpse, their hind legs stiffened, tails tucked in, showing their apprehension. Intent on smelling death, they paid Etaw no heed.

He used their distraction to think, plan. He could fire his tranquilizer darts to immobilize them but decided against it, not wanting to waste his weapon on something he couldn't bring back to Vakar. A quick glance revealed there wasn't anything in the vicinity that he could use to startle the dogs, except himself.

At last, he bolted from the shadows. The animals scattered. Several yelped. One remained, refusing to leave its find.

Hackles raised, lips pulled back, it snarled.

Etaw halted, not moving forward, nor did he retreat.

Emboldened, the stray padded closer, head down, teeth bared.

Etaw's skin crawled. However, he held his ground—his only choice—and waited. He'd battled werewolves before and hadn't died. This creature wasn't nearly their size, nor did it own their cunning and ferocity. The animal inched closer, the sounds it made intensified, bristling with menace.

That's it. Come nearer. Nearer still, you stupid... Now!

As hard as he could, Etaw kicked. The toe of his shoe struck the dog's jaw. It flew back and landed on its side. Blood poured from its mouth. The other animals scurried from their hiding places and out of sight.

He rushed to Purlo's body, taking the man's weapon and remaining tranquilizer darts. Once they were in his pockets, he looked for Purlo's device that opened portals. Leaving it here for those on this plane to find was unthinkable.

On and on he searched. The device wasn't anywhere on the man.

Etaw's hands shook, his agitation and

panic mounting. He didn't see the device in the space surrounding Purlo. Had one of the dogs been curious as to what it was and taken it momentarily like a piece of meat or a bone?

He glanced up and down the alley, not spotting the instrument, uncertain what to do next. Follow the animals to the street they went down and search there? He took a few steps in that direction, then, on a hunch, returned to Purlo's body, hefting the man's torso, rolling him to his belly. Etaw's breath rushed out on a relieved sigh. Somehow, the device had fallen beneath Purlo's shoulders.

Pocketing the instrument, Etaw again scanned his surroundings, wary of the

male humans on this side. However, his greatest fear was of the werewolves. They were deliberately hunting him and the other guards who kept crossing over on Vakar's orders.

Was one of the creatures close again now, its murder of Purlo not enough to satisfy? Was it...?

He flinched at a noise, a popping sound heard frequently on these streets at night. Muted screams followed. Seconds later, there was the sound of a motor.

Etaw shifted his weight, terrified to stay, afraid to leave.

Frozen with indecision, he considered what it would mean if he returned to E4

without a prize. He'd witnessed what had happened to others when they'd failed Vakar.

E2's highest ruler had sent additional men here to search for the first guards who'd crossed over in pursuit of the pleasure slaves. Three men from the second group came back without anything to show for their efforts. Vakar ordered stakes driven through their hands and feet, which secured them to trees in E4's jungle. There, he left them for the subhumans and werewolves to feed on.

Etaw shuddered at the memory of the men's screams, the thought of claws and teeth tearing at his flesh while he was

still conscious and trapped. He had no choice except to face that or remain here and hunt.

Steeling himself, he bolted down the alley to another part of the city. Hopefully, he'd locate a vulnerable female before the werewolves found him.

Gwen debated whether to press Kuma on what he'd said minutes ago. Since then, he'd fallen silent, his expression troubled as though he was reliving some horror in his mind. She sensed it didn't have anything to do with him killing the guard tonight.

As Gwen formulated and dismissed another question in her thoughts, Staci suddenly shot to her feet. Her hip rattled the table.

“I need a beer,” the girl said, then spoke to Gwen. “You?”

Hard liquor was more like it. Too bad she didn't have any on hand. Holding back a weary moan, Gwen nodded.

Staci inclined her head to Kuma. “Him too?”

Did werewolves drink beer? What about their preference in food? Did they eat what regular people did, or would that somehow hurt their digestive systems? Not knowing the answers,

Gwen lifted her shoulders.

Staci didn't ask Kuma what he wanted. She returned from the fridge with three Heinekens and put one in front of him.

“Have you ever had this before?”
Gwen asked.

He studied the bottle. “No.”

“Here.” She removed the cap and handed him the brew.

In true wolf fashion, he sniffed the top of the bottle and made a face.

“Get him a bottled water,” Gwen told Staci, then turned back to him. What she'd meant to say died in her throat.

Kuma frowned. “Did you hear something?” He regarded the back door.

Gwen placed her hand on his, stopping him before he stripped again and began another transformation. Even though she couldn't discount what he was, having seen it firsthand, she didn't want a repeat. How in the hell was any of this possible? Where had the dimensions come from? Were their origins as mysterious as what had caused the Big Bang? Did the government know about this?

How could they? Those fools couldn't balance the freaking budget.

She tried to reconcile what was

happening with the world she thought she knew and couldn't quite get there. A moment ago, she'd been about to ask if Kuma wanted something to eat when she recalled the fallen guard, his gnawed-off body parts. If what Kuma had said was true about the guard mistreating the pleasure slaves, the prick probably deserved what he got. Even so...

“I didn't hear anything,” she said and plowed ahead, figuring she'd have to find out the truth eventually. “Do you want something to eat?”

Staci dropped the bottle of Mountain Mist water in front of him, backed up and guzzled her beer, not stopping until a good portion was gone. She wiped her

mouth with the back of her hand. It didn't stop her belch. "Oh—sorry."

"What do you eat?" Gwen asked him.

Staci pressed her beer bottle to her forehead.

"Meat," he answered.

Gwen wasn't about to ask what kind or from what species. "We have hamburgers and steak—that's meat from animals on this side. Do you want it cooked? Raw?"

Groaning, Staci sank to her chair.

Gwen shot her a frown and focused again on Kuma. "Have you ever had cooked meat? Do you cook meat on

E4?”

“At times,” he said, “when my pack is well hidden from the guards.”

“What about here, on this realm?” Staci asked.

He shook his head. “It’s not necessary. Every night there are containers of cooked meat behind some of the buildings.”

She made a face. “You go through the trash for your food?”

Gwen figured that was far better than him eating the guards he’d slaughtered. “It’s not like he has money to buy it,” she said, opening the Mountain Mist.

Staci stopped running her tongue around the lip of her bottle. “Then how does he live? Where do you live?” she asked him.

He took the water from Gwen and finished half of it before answering. “In a building a short run from here.”

Gwen pictured her neighborhood, guessing he’d taken up residence in one of its many boarded-up houses. “Where did you get your clothes?”

She could see his jeans weren’t a perfect fit. However, they did look relatively new and surprisingly clean, except for a few dark stains on them and his jacket that might have been mud or

blood. As Staci had earlier, Gwen took a healthy gulp of her beer. She scrunched her nose at the bubbles stinging it.

Kuma ran his hand down his jeans, his expression saying he didn't much like them. "I took them from a man in another building, similar to the one where I stay. He wasn't dead," he added quickly. "He fell asleep after putting something in his arm."

Heroin? Most likely. Given the quality of Kuma's garments, Gwen figured the junkie was a rich kid from Bainbridge Island or one of Seattle's tony suburbs, come to the inner city for his drugs. She wondered about Kuma surviving on the street. Did he wash in

public restrooms as so many of the city's homeless did? Or did he wait until night and bathe in Puget Sound and other bodies of water when no one was around to watch?

How strange this dimension must seem to him, how terrifying when he'd first crossed over. Not that E4's jungle sounded any better. Kuma indicated that he'd taken...or eaten...the guard's hands and feet so the man wasn't a threat any longer.

Not wanting to dwell on the picture that created, Gwen recalled him saying he hadn't tried to return to E4, that it was easier to hunt his enemies here. "Earlier, you stated the guards would pay for what

they did. What was that?”

He tightened his fingers around his bottle.

Afraid he'd crush the plastic, Gwen pried the drink from him and hazarded a guess. “They hurt one of your family...a member of your pack?”

“Zule. My mate.”

“Like your wife?” Staci asked.

What else? He'd said her name with such reverence, it troubled Gwen more than she would have liked. She didn't know him. Hell, he wasn't even fully human. Somehow, that truth didn't stop her from envying Zule for still having his

adoration.

“You have no reason to fear her,” Kuma said.

Gwen’s cheeks prickled with heat. She wanted to avert her gaze but didn’t. Within the pain in his eyes, she saw longing too.

The same as when he’d been above her in bed, their lips so close, breath mingling, giving her a sense of safety and comfort she’d rarely experienced, along with a burning need to have him inside of her, taking what he willed, while offering—

“What happened to Zule?” Staci asked.

Gwen kicked her cousin beneath the table.

Staci bared her teeth.

“It’s none of our business,” Gwen said to him. “You don’t have to tell us.”

“I want to.” He laced his fingers together and squeezed them. His body trembled with what appeared to be rage. “When the guards are in the jungle, they generally stay within sight of the Palace so they can run back and hide there if need be. Everyone in my pack knew to keep their distance from that place. They’d heard tales of females who’d ventured too near. What was left of them after the guards or rulers engaged in

their assaults. I never believed the guards would come so deep into our territory to attack. They're the worst sort of cowards. I allowed myself to become complacent. For that, I'll never forgive myself."

Gwen reached out to touch him, to offer whatever comfort she could. He didn't seem to notice. She brought back her hand.

"On the day Zule died," he said, "her mother was ill. Zule was tending to her while the others in our pack hunted for food. Without our protection, the guards risked coming near and struck."

Kuma's knuckles blanched from the

pressure he exerted. “Her mother told us four of the guards surrounded her daughter. They used a calming dart to subdue Zule, then ropes to tie her wrists to her ankles. They laughed, telling her to run if she could. She couldn’t move. The tranquilizer stopped her from turning into a wolf. Her mother was too weak to transform and protect her. She knew her daughter was going to die.”

Oh God. “You don’t have to say anymore,” Gwen cut in. “It’s okay, really.”

“I want you to know,” he insisted, his chest rising and falling with his harsh breaths. “You need to understand why I have to kill them.” His gaze turned

inward, as though he were picturing his mate's death in his mind. "One after the other mounted Zule, taking her as they did the pleasure slaves. When they were through, they debated how they would kill her. One wanted to toss her into a pool of water to see how long it would be before she drowned. Another suggested nailing her to a tree so the predators could feed on her while she was still breathing. At last they decided to simply slit her from throat to belly, leaving her corpse for the subhumans and other creatures to consume."

Gwen shuddered.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Staci said.

“No, you’re not,” Gwen warned her, then spoke to Kuma. “I’m so sorry.”

He didn’t look at her. She sensed his shame and would have said something to dispel it, but what? “How many of them are still over here?” she finally asked. How many had he killed so far?

He spoke through his teeth. “The ones who first came over are dead now. The ones who are still arriving are—”

“Whoa,” Gwen interrupted. “They’re still coming over?”

“Vakar’s sending them.”

“Who?” Staci asked.

“Wait,” Gwen said to her, then turned

back to him. “Earlier you said you wanted to stop them from what they’re doing on this side. Did you mean hunting the two pleasure slaves who escaped?”

Where had they gone? Were they also dead?

Kuma loosened his fingers and slumped in his chair. “No, that’s not what I meant. The guards are taking females from this plane for use in E4’s Pleasure Palace. Vakar, the highest ruler, realized it’s easier to abduct women from your realm rather than to have them bred and grown for his use on E4.”

Staci’s mouth fell open. “Huh?”

Gwen kicked her again. This time, her cousin didn't seem to notice. "How do you know this?" Gwen asked Kuma.

"Before I attacked the guards, I listened to them speaking about it. In the beginning, Vakar ordered them to abduct females and males—some rulers prefer those of their own sex. The males proved too difficult because of their size and willingness to fight. The guards began to choose ones who were asleep, like the man whose clothing I took. Those males didn't last long on E4. They had a sickness that made them scream and tear at their skin when they were awake."

"Drug withdrawal," Gwen said, then

added, “what you saw that man put into his arm caused the sickness.”

“Then why do they take it?” Kuma asked.

“They’re idiots,” Staci muttered. “Stupid fucking brain-dead idiots.”

He regarded her and continued, “Vakar finally settled on females alone. Even though they were easy for the guards to take down, once the tranquilizer wore off, they weren’t as submissive as the usual slaves. Vakar and the other rulers like that. These new females posed a challenge.”

One could only hope. Gwen tried to swallow and couldn’t; her mouth was

too dry. The horror of what had happened in the alley, how bad it could have turned out, returned in full force. “That’s why that man, guard, whatever, attacked me tonight.”

Kuma studied her mouth and breasts. A new wave of heat shot to Gwen’s face, chasing away her fear, replacing it with female wanting and need.

“He needed to return with a prize,” Kuma said.

God, she loved his voice, smooth and deep, promising all sorts of decadent delights.

“However,” he added, “the rulers wouldn’t have kept you for pleasure.”

Not expecting that, Gwen blurted, “No?”

“Why?” Staci asked.

For the first time, he focused on her fully. “They prefer your type. Smaller, with long hair, looking as a female should.”

Gwen frowned. What in the hell did that make her? Dog meat? She wasn’t beautiful like Staci, but she wasn’t that freaking awful.

“What would they have done to Gwen?” Staci asked, clearly getting into this.

“It’s okay,” Gwen said to Kuma.

“You can spare us the gory details.” She spoke to her cousin, “I probably would have been washing the pretty girl’s lingerie or serving their food, you know, sort of like here.”

“The rulers would have hunted you in the jungle like a wild animal,” Kuma said. “They would have taken you down with crossbows. They kill those who aren’t to their liking and the ones who aren’t perfect.”

With that one awful word—perfect—Gwen looked at her cousin before she could stop herself. Staci’s face had already turned bright red. As she had earlier, she pulled in her shoulders as though to hide herself.

“I saved you from that and worse,” Kuma said to Gwen.

She mumbled, “What could be worse than that?”

“I’ve heard the guards talk about keeping some of the females for themselves on E5.”

Before he explained what that meant, giving her and Staci more nightmares, Gwen pushed to her feet. “We need to go to bed. That is,” she amended, when she realized what she’d said, “we need to sleep. It’s late.” She gestured to Kuma. “You can use my bed.”

“You’re crashing with me?” Staci asked.

“No.” She checked the lock on the back door once more, then led the way to her bedroom.

The animal part of Kuma hesitated, feeling constrained by the house. Blood pounded within him. His body ached to be free, to run, to kill.

The human part of him resisted and won out at the sight of Gwen leaving the kitchen. Before she got too far from him, he followed.

“See you in the morning,” Staci called out.

He didn’t bother responding. He sensed the girl’s fear of him, along with

her carnal interest. Not that it mattered. He wanted Gwen.

She'd stopped in the middle of her bedroom, her attention on the weapon she'd threatened him with earlier. "Have you ever used a shower?"

"What is it?"

Her shoulders sagged a little. "Guess you haven't. I'll turn on the water. Take off your clothes, step inside and wash off. I have several kinds of soap and shampoo." She breathed hard before continuing, "I'll open the containers for you. Use what's inside. Whichever one you like best."

"Why?"

She halted in the doorway to the bath and regarded his feet. “Because you’re filthy from being outside.”

He took in Gwen’s length, enjoying what he saw—a ripe female, sensual, provocative. On her neck were several streaks of dirt from when she’d touched the dart’s entry point. He gestured to it. “So are you. Will you take off your clothes and shower with me?”

She stared as if he’d lost his mind, but her yearning gaze told him another story. One of a woman who was as lonely as he had been, who was as wanting of his presence as he was of hers.

Kuma crossed the space that

separated them. He cupped Gwen's face in his hands and ran his thumbs over her downy cheeks.

Her lids fluttered. She closed them on a quiet sigh and released her weight into him.

It was all the invitation Kuma needed. He brushed his lips over hers as he had earlier, teasing the seam of her mouth with his tongue, craving entrance.

Gwen granted it. She whimpered as he deepened their kiss.

Her response nourished those parts of Kuma that had wasted away when he'd lost Zule. He gathered Gwen as close as he dared, his embrace too tight, yet she

didn't seem to mind. Gwen slanted her mouth to allow him greater access. She followed his lead as a female should, encouraging him to indulge in her scent, how she felt, tasted.

He couldn't get close enough. She couldn't seem to either. They turned in slow circles with their deepening passion, arms wrapped around each other, hands moving up, down. At last, Kuma cradled the back of Gwen's head so she couldn't abandon him or the moment. To make certain of it, he planted his other hand on her ass, using it to force her against his cock, demanding she feel his erection.

His desire made her wild, just as he'd

hoped. She pushed his tongue from her mouth, then filled him with hers even as she tugged on the waistband of his jeans. He did the same with hers. They undressed each other, their fingers and limbs getting in the way. How he detested wearing any clothing. It stopped him from feeling her skin, from knowing her heat.

After too long a time, they were finally nude. Kuma reached for her.

Down the hall, a door closed, followed by the sound of running water and something falling to the floor. Staci muttered loudly, the words she'd said meaningless to Kuma, her aggravation quite evident.

Gwen rushed to her own door, shutting it. Leaning against the wood, she wet her lips and looked everywhere but at him.

Kuma's belly clenched at her sudden unease. He sensed it wasn't because Staci knew what would happen in here or that she might hear it. Gwen's real concern was far more disturbing. He went to her and spoke quickly, "I won't change. It's within my control. I'll remain a man. You have nothing to fear even though I'm different from—"

He stopped at her fingers on his lips.

"Different?" She smiled. It was glorious, illuminating her exotic beauty.

“I’m the different one, at least in this realm, dimension, whatever you want to call it. I’m a mutt with more ethnicities than I care to count. My mother was a prostitute, which made me very careful about birth control. Been on the pill forever. No way am I having kids and doing to them what my parents did to me. My mother couldn’t deal with a child. My father was one of her johns. He never wanted to see me or even acknowledged my existence. He’s a corporate attorney from one of Seattle’s finest families. Staci’s from that side, not my mother’s. Like you said, that guard made a mistake by picking me. Staci’s the kind of woman he really wanted.”

Kuma heard her heartache and wondered about a father who could deny his child, a mother who didn't have enough love for her. He eased Gwen's hand from his lips. "Why are you talking so much?"

A look of offense crossed her face. She tried to take her hand from him.

Not letting her, he said, "You know I have to have you, no other woman. Tell me what you want."

Gwen's frown faded. She curled her fingers around his, her expression as tender as her gesture. "You. In the shower. With me."

With no hesitation, he followed her into the bath.

She lifted a switch on the wall. Light poured down on them.

“Too bright?” she asked.

Almost as bad as the sun on her side. He tried not to squint. “Is it too much for you?”

“No freaking way. I don’t want to miss anything.”

Kuma liked how that sounded and the way she stared at his cock. “It doesn’t bother me. Leave it on.”

“Will do.” She went to a flowered curtain, pulling it aside. The rings at the

top rattled over a long gray pole. Gwen bent at the waist.

At the sight she presented, Kuma forgot to breathe. Her cunt was rosy and plump, her dark curls glistening with moisture that signaled her excitement and hunger for him.

She turned two devices that squealed a bit. Instantly, water poured into a long white container.

It was as amazing as the other marvels he'd seen on this plane, but not what he wanted. He grabbed her hips.

She slapped his hands. "We shower first. Trust me, you won't regret it." She pulled a knob on the wall. The water

changed direction, coming from a circular device above her, falling like rain.

Gwen stepped inside. Moisture beaded on her hair, face, nipples. She offered him her hand.

Smiling, Kuma took it, eager for this new adventure. He flinched as the water hit his shoulder and throat.

She laughed softly. “Too cold?”

It was warmer than he’d imagined it would be. Not answering, he used his body to back her into the wall.

With her palms pressed to it, Gwen looked at him from beneath her lashes.

“Aren’t you going to ask what happens now?”

She wanted to play. He stopped grinding his cock into her curls, and squeezing her breast, forcing himself to be patient. “Are you going to transform into something else as I did? Should I be afraid?”

“Terrified,” she whispered and eased a lock of hair behind his ear. “I’m going to do you so hard and long you’ll be limp for a fucking week.”

He kissed her cheek, savoring the salty taste of her skin, its musky fragrance, weakened and energized by it. “What’s a fucking week?”

“Heaven.”

“What’s that?”

She stopped running her thumb over his cheek and sighed, as though he’d said something to irritate or hurt her.

“What’s wrong?” he whispered.
“What have I done?”

“Nothing. It’s not you. It’s your situation.” She gave him a wan smile. “Heaven is everything wonderful that you’ve missed on E4 because of that bastard Vakar and the guards. Those lousy, motherfucking—” She stopped and shook her head, clearly trying to temper her rage.

Kuma slipped his hand beneath her chin and turned her face so she had to look at him. “Are you all right?”

“Fine. Great. No more questions, got it? Just this.” Deftly, she slid away from his grasp. “Lean against the wall.”

“Why?”

Gwen touched his mouth in answer, tracing it with her fingers, then ran her hand from his chin to his throat.

Kuma swallowed without meaning to. Sensations he'd never experienced before wound through him, further diminishing his strength. On a prolonged sigh, he slumped against the damp wall.

“Stay where you are,” she murmured. “Nothing bad’s going to happen. I’m only going to wash you.”

She took two items from a shelf, holding the white one in her right hand, the green in her left. “Which of these soaps do you like most? Which fragrance is the best?”

“The one that smells like you.”

Gwen beamed with his answer. “Excellent choice.”

Her throaty tone made him even harder. If they’d been on E4, he would have pulled her to the ground and quieted her with his kisses, driven his cock into her heated sheath to trap her

even further. In this realm, he waited to see what she'd do next, both frustrated and excited with the delay in having her.

Gwen rubbed the green bar between her hands to work up lather. Bubbles dripped from her fingers, landing on his thighs as she studied his torso. "What's this?"

She touched a scar on his side and quickly found another and another, her fingers stroking the jagged skin, unmistakable outrage and sadness on her face. "These look old. They couldn't have happened on this realm like your other injuries." She ran her fingers over the cuts he'd healed earlier.

Kuma wrapped his arms around her waist, needing to draw her close.

Resisting, she wiggled out of his grasp. “Did those freaking guards do that to you on E4?”

“A long time ago, when I was young. Before I was big enough to fight them off.”

“Pricks.” She kissed the first scar. The heat of her mouth radiated from Kuma’s torso to the tips of his fingers and toes. He gritted his teeth to keep from making any sounds that might frighten or deter her from continuing.

Gwen lavished affection on each of his former wounds as though they still

pained him.

If not for her attention, Kuma wouldn't have noticed them at all. His memory of getting hit by the ruler's arrow would always be with him, but he no longer felt its sting, the agony of his father pulling the weapon out, his mother laying her hands on him so he'd heal and survive, killing those who harmed them. All he knew at this moment was how Gwen soothed and aroused every inch of his flesh.

She sank to her knees, pressing her face to his groin, smelling his male scent. His toes splayed, then curled. He dug his nails into his palms to maintain control.

Gwen stole it, licking his dark curls, running her soapy hands over the length of his cock, fondling his balls. They were so tight the pain of not having her became intolerable.

“Enough,” he gasped. “I have to be inside you.”

She shoved his hands away, not allowing him to pull her to her feet. “You will be,” she cooed.

The back of Kuma’s head hit the wall. He gasped at Gwen’s mouth on his crown. She tongued the small indentation at the top and moaned as though she loved the taste of his pre-come. He grunted at her licking his full length, not

knowing how much more of this he could endure.

She stopped suddenly. Before he could ask why or order her to continue, she lifted his shaft and pressed her lips to his sac.

A moan of delight poured from him. He shot to his toes, then came right back down, his heels slapping the wet surface.

Gwen paid him no heed. She explored his right ball with her tongue, then eased it inside her mouth.

He mumbled words from his own language, telling her she had to stop. He needed to come inside of her.

Not understanding what he'd said, she persisted, tending to his right ball, then moved to his left, making his knees sag.

His body trembled uncontrollably. Kuma wasn't certain how much longer his legs would hold him. Gwen didn't appear to notice or care. With her hands on his ass, she released his sac and took his cock into her mouth.

It was beyond wet and amazingly hot.

Uncivilized sounds poured from him, proving his animal heritage. He pushed back to his toes and came down hard. His shaft slipped down Gwen's throat until she had all of him inside, her nose touching his groin. An even rougher

moan tore from him. He tried to catch his breath and failed.

She pulled at his buttocks, separating the cheeks, her fingers running between them, pausing on his anus.

Kuma clenched his teeth so hard they made a noise that told him they might break. He didn't care. Wave after wave of pleasure flooded him at Gwen exploring his anus while moving his cock in and out of her mouth, her lips suckling his thickness, tongue licking the bumpy skin at the back of his crown.

Providing him with a glimpse of heaven. Just as she'd said.

Kuma came on a loud groan that

turned to a bellow. He cursed himself for making so much noise, fearing he'd frighten her, but couldn't help himself. The savage within him had to have its due.

The sounds he made continued to fill the small bath. His come spurted into her mouth. Gwen didn't pull away as he'd expected. She drank his ejaculate and licked him clean as though she wanted far more.

Eager to give it, Kuma grabbed her arms and pulled Gwen to her feet.

Water dripped from her lashes. Damp hair clung to her forehead.

“I have to be inside you,” he growled,

repeating what he had earlier.

She grinned. “You were—you will be again in a few...”

“What is it?” he asked when she didn’t finish.

Gwen frowned at his cock. “You’re still hard.”

That was a problem on this side?

“How’s that possible?” she asked.
“You came. I know you came.”

“Only once.”

Her brows shot up. “You have to come several times before you go soft?”

“No.” Was that a problem? “It doesn’t

matter how many times I climax. It's always several hours before I'm no longer able to penetrate a female."

Her brows lowered. She slumped against him. "Aw, God, don't play with me. Tell me this is really happening. That it's not some sort of weird wet dream."

He hadn't a clue what she was talking about. However, her throaty tone and the way she ran her fingers over his nipple to his pit, stroking that dark hair, told Kuma all he needed to know. "It's the way my kind are on E4."

"You can do this for hours, huh?"

Kuma acknowledged her question

with a deep, lingering kiss. She whimpered and moaned, her hands travelling his shoulders, torso, ass. Again, she separated his cheeks.

Not about to let her take charge again, he cupped her buttocks, using them to lift Gwen off her feet.

She tore her mouth from his. “Wait. I’m too heavy.”

She had no idea how little she weighed or the full extent of his strength. “Stop talking,” he ordered and claimed her mouth once more.

Slavishly, she accepted his tongue and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, her legs around his hips. He took her

easily, thrusting his cock into her juicy cunt, driving his full length inside, shuddering at how tight and hot she was.

Gwen flexed her inner muscles, creating more friction between them, telling Kuma how much she wanted him.

It was a gift he hadn't allowed himself to hope for as this evening began. One he wasn't about to waste.

He pounded into Gwen. Their bodies smacked into each other, the noise lewd, his feral desire for her threatening his restraint. His physical endurance and power was more than she could have imagined. Too easily, he could harm her, when all he wanted was to give

pleasure.

Pulling his mouth free, he pressed his lips to her throat and licked her wondrous skin.

She made a soft, feminine sound that brought out more of his inner beast, along with tenderness from his human side. Kuma succumbed to those emotions as he'd never been able to on E4. There, strength, cunning and a thirst to kill had ruled his world so he, Zule and the others could survive another hour, another day.

In this place with Gwen, he felt welcome and safe. It wouldn't last, he knew. Nor did he care to dwell on that,

grateful for these few moments.

He kissed her again, with less caution than he had before, his hunger out of control. She matched it with her own, as fearless as the females on his side.

They made sounds that were more animal than human, their bodies straining with unfulfilled need. Closer, closer his climax came, as did Gwen's. Kuma felt it in the way she clutched his shoulders and dug her nails into his skin to mark him.

He liked that.

He pumped harder, faster, giving her everything she desired and he had to have.

They came as one, groaning, panting, finally sighing.

Kuma gulped air. Gwen worked her muscles around his still-rigid shaft.

“Amazing,” she whispered. She dropped her head to his shoulder.

He stroked her back, enjoying how she clung to him for support. “Tired?”

“No.” She brushed her lips over his neck and gave him an open-mouthed kiss that sent more heat to his groin. “You? Even a little bit?”

Her acceptance of what he was, along with her passion, sustained him more than his genetic heritage. “Not until

we're through.”

As far as Kuma was concerned, that wouldn't be until well past dawn.

Chapter Eight

The man was a freaking sex machine—rough and sensual—an untamed animal in the best sense of the word.

He struggled against his newest orgasm as Gwen soaped up his cock. He bitched and moaned as she insisted on washing the rest of him, wanting to touch every delicious inch.

“Quiet,” she ordered, stroking the hair beneath his arms, pressing her face to those dark, fragrant tufts.

He sucked in air and blew it out. “I thought you were going to wash me.”

In time. Gwen licked his underarms,

tickling him, smiling at his deep laughter. She ran her soapy fingers over his torso and groin, down his thighs, between his toes. They curled. Bending down, Gwen kissed them.

Kuma whispered, “What are you doing?”

Gwen hadn’t the faintest idea. She’d never behaved like this with any other guy. With Kuma, submitting to and honoring him seemed as natural as breathing. “This is how we wash over here.”

“By kissing toes?”

She suppressed a giggle. “Yep.”

Back on her feet, she shampooed his beautiful hair, long, silky, thick. She might have bathed him all night, if he hadn't put a stop to it.

“My turn to wash you,” Kuma insisted, once more using his body to trap Gwen against the wall. He soaped her breasts and the curls between her legs, lingering on each area while suckling her throat.

God, he was fucking good at this, a carnal god. Gwen gripped his hair and directed his mouth back to hers. Kuma filled her with his tongue, his stubbled cheeks scraping her skin. It was delicious pain, as needed to Gwen as her next heartbeat and the life-giving air

flowing through her lungs.

She sighed in contentment as he went to his knees. He separated her soft folds and sniffed her sex.

Nice—oh.

He licked her again, then circled her clit with his tongue.

It was too much and not enough at the same time. Gwen pulled at his hair as he suckled her erect nub. She groaned, panted and wiggled within his grasp. He didn't stop until she whimpered with her staggering climax, unable to withstand any more.

He continued anyway, licking her

despite her protests until the water turned coolish. Back on his feet, he rested his forehead against hers. “Enough of this.”

Not bothering to towel them off, he carried Gwen into the bedroom with an ease that stunned her. She’d always been the big girl, too tall, not feminine enough. With him, she felt downright dainty.

The moment he had her on the mattress, Kuma stretched his body over hers. He smelled of her soap and shampoo with a hint of his natural musk...masculine, wild. She liked that the best.

Lacing his fingers through hers, he kept her hands to each side, lovingly restrained. His kiss was long and hard with absolutely no inhibition, just as she wanted.

Gwen sucked his tongue deeper into her mouth. She wrapped her legs around his lean hips. Her nipples jutted against his chest. Did he notice their hard peaks? Did that please him? Or was he concentrating on his still-erect rod between her legs, wanting entrance again?

Even though they'd gone past the point of being total strangers, and she hadn't been a virgin for many years, this felt incredibly new to Gwen. It was as if she

hadn't understood the beauty of sex until now. For the first time in her life, she was with a man who was as much of an outcast as she was. Hunted on his side, unwanted on this one. Until now.

She fought to get her hands free of his grip. The moment he let go, Gwen wreathed her arms around his torso and pressed the pads of her fingers into his back, making certain to be careful when what she wanted was to rake him with her nails as she had earlier, behaving like some untamed night creature.

He must have understood her need, because he deepened their kiss, telling Gwen without words that whatever she wanted to do was all right with him.

Good, good boy.

She dragged her nails down his broad back, leaving new marks, making her claim. The thought excited Gwen beyond reason. Her tongue played with his for a few seconds more, until it failed to satisfy her mounting desire. Pulling free of his kiss, she pressed her mouth to his throat and suckled his skin. Marking him there too. Making him hers.

How long that would last, she didn't know and wouldn't allow herself to care. She had him for tonight. Who would have guessed such a miracle would happen?

On a growl, Kuma twisted his big

body, releasing himself from her, though not before Gwen had given him some very impressive hickeys. Even in the subdued bedroom light, she saw the dark red stain on his neck and grinned.

Kuma returned her smile, then got right back to business.

“Hey,” she blurted, “what are you doing?”

“Rolling you to your belly.”

Gwen could see that. He’d done it so easily, she might as well have been a piece of paper he’d flipped over. Strong didn’t begin to describe his physical prowess. Tender didn’t come close to the way he touched her next.

With great gentleness, he positioned Gwen on all fours. With his hands on her inner thighs, he pushed them apart until he'd spread her, exposing her pussy. It ached with lust.

He rested his fingers on the small of her back, directing her to arch it and lift her ass.

Gwen did so without hesitation, fisting the sheets in her hands, prepared for anything.

Kuma brought back his hand and didn't touch her again. His lengthening silence allowed her to notice the thumping rain and whipping wind. What was he doing?

She hazarded a peek and blushed like a schoolgirl who'd never heard about sex or men's carnal appetites.

Kuma sat on his heels, staring at her openings, his expression intent, hungry as though he wanted to devour her.

“Fuck me,” she begged.

He blinked as though coming out of a triple X-rated fantasy. “Quiet,” he ordered. His gaze still explored her.

Her cunt tightened, craving his touch, wanting him inside. More moisture streamed from her sheath, readying her for whatever he had in mind.

He touched her soft folds. Gwen

flinched. “Sorry,” she breathed. “I didn’t mean to—”

She stopped, then moaned as he circled her anus with his forefinger, probing it lightly. Would he take her there first?

She’d never allowed that with any man. She’d never trusted them not to harm her.

With Kuma, she yielded, inviting him to use her for their mutual pleasure.

He explored her anus, each touch registering in her cunt, exciting her further. The mattress shifted as he went to his knees and moved between her legs.

Gwen relaxed her body as well as she could, given her anticipation. Perspiration coated her neck. If he didn't make his move soon, she'd be screaming at him to do—

He mounted her vaginally. In one hard, ruthless thrust, he was all the way inside. His fleshy balls tapped her body. His fingers headed for her clit and stroked it.

A riot of sensation shot through Gwen. Her head buzzed. She curled her toes and moaned, “God, yes. Don't stop.”

He didn't. With wanton desire, Kuma thrust into her as though they'd been doing this forever because they were

bonded for life. That was how wolves behaved, wasn't it? Staying with one mate.

If not for the guards on E4, he would have been with Zule tonight. Gwen wanted to feel bad for him and a woman she'd never know but couldn't. Already, she wanted him too desperately, squirming in delight at his cock and fingers satisfying her. She was one moan away from climax when he stopped pumping, his hand falling away.

Shit. Why? "What's wrong?" she panted. "Did you hear something—oh crap, did you smell someone's scent?"

He pressed his face to her shoulder

and inhaled deeply. “Yes...yours.”

Okay, so there weren't any guards outside ready to burst in and hurt them. “Nice.” Gwen grinned like a lunatic at him licking her back. “Play with my pussy—cunt—sex—between my legs.” She wasn't certain how much slang he understood. “I want to come. Climax. Do you understand what I'm saying?”

“I do, and you will.”

Not with him pulling out of her, she wouldn't. “What are you doing?”

“Enjoying you.”

He ran his fingers from her pussy to her anus, using her natural lubrication to

moisten her tight ring. *Lord, lord, lord.* Gwen dropped her head to the mattress and gripped the bed linens for all she was worth.

Never having been taken in this manner, seldom having a man to sleep with, she didn't have condoms on hand. Although that would have disturbed her with anyone else, it thrilled her with Kuma. She wanted his skin against hers, even in this.

He didn't rush to mount her. Instead, he drew out the pleasure as though following some primordial script that told men how to put women at ease in order to deliver the greatest satisfaction. He worked the tip of his finger inside

her passage, exploring its narrow confines. Given how big of a man he was—and so blessedly hung—Gwen had no idea how he'd manage to get all of his cock inside.

If Kuma thought the same, he didn't show his concern. He withdrew his finger and rubbed the tip of his crown against her opening. Gwen breathed in sharply, surprised at how sensitive that part of her was. Torrents of sensation travelled from it to her nub, already aching for his touch.

He ignored it. Inch by magnificent inch, he worked his stiffened rod into her smallest opening. Gwen lifted her ass farther, delivering herself to him,

wanting him deep.

Kuma didn't stop until the base of his cock was snug against her body. The pressure was incredible and deliciously base, making her feel more female than she ever had. Gwen moaned in delight. He puffed out a breath, then cradled her with surprising affection, his cheek to her shoulder. As well as she could manage, Gwen turned her head to kiss his temple.

He offered a sound of contentment and eased back, his hand returning to her exquisitely sensitive clit. As he pumped in and out of her, he also rubbed her tiny nub.

Oh my freaking God. Gwen squirmed, trying to get away from too much stimulation, uncertain whether she could take it. With Kuma's cock imprisoning her, she had little choice. Within seconds, her climax crept close. She bit her lip to keep from crying out, her fingers digging into the mattress, her body twisting beneath his.

He continued without pause, as though he understood what she required.

Defenseless against his actions, Gwen lost all of her air on a noisy sigh.

The sound seemed to free something deep within Kuma. He behaved like a man possessed, thrusting and rubbing

with flawless grace. Gwen cried out, the noises she made sounding choked. Perspiration bathed her skin. She gulped air. It did little to calm her. Her arms and legs turned rubbery at the orgasm consuming her.

Kuma grunted, an enchanting male sound that peaked her nipples even more. He came without inhibition as she had, but he didn't stop. His persistent thrusts shook the bed, its legs tapping the floor.

Through a fog of satisfaction, Gwen wondered what Staci must be thinking about all the noise.

Kuma didn't give Gwen a chance to

dwell on it. Sated finally, he bent over her, lips to her shoulder, hands on her breasts, fingers playing with her nipples.

With each flick of his thumbs, she panted her approval, loving what he was doing. Given the pressure inside her anus, she knew he was still hard, and had to ask, “Did you come?”

“I did.” His breathy whisper skipped across her skin, tickling it. “As I told you before, I’ll be able to mount you for hours.”

No kidding. He was one helluva guy in more ways than he probably knew. “I may need to rest before the eighth or ninth time.” She wanted to laugh in

delight but didn't dare, fearing he'd misunderstand.

"Then I'll allow you to rest," he murmured.

What a doll. Gwen smiled, until she considered something she really didn't want to think about. "If I fall asleep, you won't leave, will you?"

His fingers stalled on her nipple.

Not a good sign. All at once, Gwen was alert, the warm, fuzzy feelings from a moment ago gone. "We need to talk."

He pulled out of her.

"Hey," she said, panicking as he left the bed. "Where do you think you're

going?”

He gestured to the bath.

Oh. In the available light, the head of his cock glistened from his ejaculate. “Don’t take too long.”

He padded inside. Gwen scooted across the mattress, watching him at the sink as he worked the faucets until he got the water to the temperature he liked. He ran a damp washcloth over his groin and rod. Still erect, frigging gorgeous.

She wanted more of it and him. No way could she allow herself to sleep tonight.

He returned to the bedroom with

another washcloth.

Gwen regarded it, then him, suddenly struck by what he was doing. He'd lived in a jungle all of his life. She blurted, "How do you know to wash off after what we just did?"

"As an adolescent, I watched the guards. When they hunted the slaves in the jungle and mounted them, or had the slaves penetrate them instead, they always did this afterwards. Right before they killed them."

Gwen was sorry she'd asked. Not waiting for his direction, she went to her hands and knees and lifted her ass. She moaned as he ministered to her. The

damp terry was wonderfully warm, his touch light and loving, telling Gwen she was important to him. He liked who she was.

She smiled softly.

He tended to her for minutes, neither of them speaking. It wasn't necessary. Serenity replaced their previous ardor, this new feeling as wondrous and possibly more powerful.

At last, he finished and tossed the cloth into the bath. It smacked against the tile floor.

Gwen looked over. He'd scooted to the edge of the bed, too far away. Dropping to her side, she faced him and

spoke fast. “I have the next week off from my job. I work seven and take off seven—days, that is. I want you to stay here with me. I don’t want you out there.”

With his forearm across his thigh, he leaned toward her and eased a wayward strand of hair behind her ear.

She turned her face into his hand

“I need to kill the guards,” he said.

He’d announced it with such troubling ease, Gwen stopped kissing his wrist and frowned. “What about the others in your pack? You said one of them had killed the guard I saw in the emergency room. How many of your pack are over

here? Don't you communicate on a regular basis with each other? Why can't you tell them to take care of the rest of the guards?"

He brought back his hand. "You're talking too much again."

"And you're not talking enough." She pushed up and sat cross-legged on the bed.

His attention dropped from her face to her breasts to her pussy, remaining there.

Thank God some part of her had his full consideration. "Answer my questions."

His brows inched up. "There were so

many.”

Yeah, sure. He wanted to dodge the issue. “Start with the first I asked and work your way through the others.”

He sighed loudly, as all guys do when they can't BS women. Falling to the mattress, he rested his arms above his head, revealing the dark brown hair in his pits.

It was too much of a temptation for Gwen to resist. She bent over and pressed her face to that part of him, as she had in the shower, inhaling deeply of his soapy, musky scent.

Kuma chuckled as she tugged on several strands with her teeth. “What are

you doing?”

She kissed his pit and straightened.
“Waiting for you to talk to me.”

He looked like a man ready to bolt. Considering his talent for turning into a wolf, he wouldn't even have to pause long enough to pull on his clothes.

“Please,” Gwen begged. She ran her fingertips down his taut belly.

His muscles quivered. He murmured,
“Five.”

“What?”

“Five in my pack followed me into the portal. Only Teeko and I managed to survive in your realm. The last time we

spoke, he said he smelled a ruler here. I told him it was impossible, but he insisted. We don't know why someone like that would be on this side or if he was responsible for the two slaves escaping E4. Not that it matters. We'll have to kill him as we're doing with the guards that keep coming over."

Gwen snatched back her hand. "Oh, fuck that. You can't keep murdering people."

"Guards," he corrected, his expression growing dark. "And a ruler. Both abuse the pleasure slaves without a thought to their pain. I've seen them force slaves out of the Palace when the rulers want to hunt them with crossbows."

They do that to women younger than you because the rulers feel they're too old. I've heard them speak of it. Some slaves are murdered simply because they didn't obey quickly enough."

She shook her head, not wanting to hear it.

Didn't stop him. "That's now the fate of females from this realm, unless the guards take them to E5. From the stories my ancestors passed down, it's a dimension of ice and fire, so far from what you call your sun, it's always dark there, the land frozen. However, there are pockets of heat from the planet's molten core. It's within those rings of warmth that the guards are bringing the

women they abduct and doing whatever they want with them. Rape, murder, both. It depends upon the female, whether her appearance pleases them for long periods or not. Whether she's perfect or —”

“Okay, okay, I've heard enough.”

He brought down his arm and rested his hand on hers. “Then you know why I have to do this.”

“I didn't say that.” She turned her palm to touch his. “You could get hurt or...” Gwen shook her head. She leaned into him and whispered, “What if the guards hit you with one of those darts and bring you back to E4? They'd torture

or kill you, probably both. Are your parents still alive? Do you have siblings? Brothers? Sisters? Do you have children?"

With each question, he'd pushed into the mattress as though to put distance between himself and her. "Why?"

"Do you want them to witness your return to E4? You getting tortured and —"

"My mother died giving birth to my brother, who didn't last the day. The guards took down my father when I was still a boy. Zule was pregnant when they murdered her."

Shit. She shouldn't have asked. He

was right; she talked too much, not that it stopped Gwen from continuing. “I know you want to get back at them for what they did to your father and Zule. I know you want to protect the women over here, but surely there has to be another way.”

He pulled his hand from hers. Gwen brought it right back, holding it to her chest. He might have been ready to die in this realm, but she wasn't about to allow it, not without one helluva fight.

“There is no other way,” he argued, “unless you're willing to let the guards harm women from this dimension so that I'm protected. You can't have everyone's safety.”

Of course she could and would prove it to him, no matter what it took. They didn't even know each other, but dammit, there was a connection, and not only because he'd saved her. It had more to do with the kind of man he was. Already Gwen had allowed herself to get closer to him than she had any other guy. With him, she didn't feel diminished or demeaned. What if he was the home she'd never had? The family she'd longed for? What if he was her future? A long, wonderful future.

There had to be a way to fix this.

Her thoughts raced, pausing on one possibility. She could go to the cops she'd met while working in the ER and

tell them she'd been attacked, show them the wound on her neck. She'd lie and say other women had come to the hospital with tales of similar assaults. She could convince them to put out an alert to the media. The newscasts would warn Seattle that there was another murderous nut in their midst.

It could work.

Unless the cops started asking questions of her coworkers, who'd say they didn't know what Gwen was talking about. The officers would wonder why she hadn't reported her assault immediately to them or at least gone back to the hospital after she escaped the maniac who'd attacked her. They might

start investigating her background. They'd come here and would see Kuma.

No. Couldn't happen. She wouldn't put him at risk...nor could she allow the women here to be sitting ducks for creeps from another dimension.

“Do the guards ever attack during the day?” she asked.

Curiosity and a touch of caution flashed on his handsome face. “They're more comfortable in the dark, as my kind are.”

“Because there're fewer people outside watching? Or because the sun's so faint on your side? They can see better at night.”

His frown deepened. “Why are you asking about the guard’s habits?”

“Because it’s nearly dawn.” She gestured to the clock. “My guess is, they won’t be active when it’s light outside. We’ll have until tonight to make a plan.”

Somehow, Gwen was going to ensure that no guard abducted another woman and that Kuma didn’t get hurt or killed.

Chapter Nine

Behind Nikoli's chair, Regina paced. Watching her from his computer screen were Meelo and Damir, their expressions as neutral as Nikoli's despite what was happening on this side...what it could mean to all of them. Their absence of emotion was a vestige from their days on E2 and made Regina nuts.

She stopped at the edge of Nikoli's table and leaned against it, trying to find comfort in what had happened minutes earlier. After trying for two solid days, Nikoli had finally located his father in a remote lab the older man used on

occasion. Using his device, Nikoli opened a portal. Where their kitchen wall once stood, a gateway appeared, its barrier as clear as glass and more impenetrable than steel to keep all intruders out of E2. Domm Zorr had regarded his son with no surprise or affection. Except for their age difference—with those years turning Domm's hair white and lining his face—he and Nikoli were identical in appearance.

With maddening calm, Nikoli had told his father about the guards and werewolves coming to Regina's realm.

Domm said nothing. He didn't even blink.

It was more than Regina could bear, and so she'd told Domm the score. "Vakar must know Nikoli's here. That's why he sending guards to this plane. He must also suspect that you helped Lukan and the others to escape. Please, you have to come to this side where we can protect you."

Domm regarded her as one would an obnoxious child or a future daughter-in-law he didn't much like. "The guards are collecting women from your side for the rulers to use as pleasure slaves on E4."

"Are you serious?" she blurted. "How can you be so sure?"

"They've invited me to join them in

enjoying the newest of the women.”

Revolted, she backed away from the portal.

If that offended Domm, he didn't let on. Calm as could be, he continued, “I declined, of course, telling them I had important work to do for the realm.” He paused, then added, “Their invitation assures me that I have their trust. They don't know Nikoli's still alive.”

“Maybe not now,” she argued, “but they'll figure it out soon enough if one of the werewolves leads a guard to him. At that point, Vakar will guess what you've done. The longer you stay over there, the more danger you're in.”

“I can’t leave. It’s my duty to remain so I can do everything possible to stop what they’ve done.”

Regina fought the urge to scream. This wasn’t the time for him to play Rambo and possibly fuck things up even more. “Talk to him,” she insisted to Nikoli.

He conversed with his father in their language. Whatever they discussed, their voices remained monotone, betraying none of their feelings. Only the speed of their words told Regina they might be arguing.

At last, Domm held up his hand. Nikoli fell silent. The older man spoke to Regina. “I can do more good here than

I could by hiding on your side. I won't leave. Vakar will never know what I've done or what I continue to do."

Regina wished she could be as certain. She returned to the monitor. Like statues, Meelo and Damir waited for her to speak.

"I know you guys are as worried as I am," Regina said. "So come on—think." Their intellect was far more advanced than even the most celebrated genius on this plane. While her kind had been living in caves and discovering fire, Nikoli's people had already located the portals between the realms and had banished the vampires to this dimension, which caused no end of grief, much as

E4's guards and werewolves were managing now. "There has to be something we can do."

Damir glanced at Meelo. He could have been Nikoli's father or Domm's twin, they resembled each other that closely, even with the brutal scar on the side of Meelo's face. A reminder of his perilous journey to this plane with Lukan and Damir. She was an exact replica of Sazaar, Nikoli's former mate who'd fallen under the vampire Andris's spell. Like all of E2's women, Damir had the same delicate features, long blonde hair, dark eyes, pale skin.

At their continued silence, Regina sighed. "Help me out here."

“We’re trying,” Damir offered, “but we don’t know of any way—”

“Wait,” Regina interrupted, having a sudden thought that should have occurred to her earlier. It was such a damn simple solution. “Can’t you close the portals they’re coming through? That would keep more guards or werewolves from entering this realm.” She turned to Nikoli. “We did it with the vampires. We can do it again now, right?”

He ran his hand over his mouth and shook his head.

“Why not?” she pressed.

“We’d have to be in the same vicinity as they are to do so. Even if we did

manage to run into them in such a large city, the guards would use the devices Vakar's giving them to find another area of entry."

Damir spoke. "Are you certain you saw one of the werewolves in human form the other night? Couldn't it have been one of your neighbors?"

"No." Regina frowned. "They don't stand on their front lawns in the dark, staring at this place. Right now, we can't even leave the house."

"You won't let us," Nikoli said beneath his breath.

"You're right about that," she countered. "No way are you going out

there and getting attacked or drugged and dragged back to E2, no matter how confident your father is that it'll never happen.”

As she paced past him, Nikoli turned in his chair, slinging his arm over the back of it. “You can’t keep canceling your patient appointments.”

Regina waved her hand in dismissal. “I’ve only been out for two days. Carly’s rescheduled them. I’m not leaving you here alone until I’m certain you’re not going to be shot with a tranquilizer dart as Lukan was when he...”

She paused, her thoughts interrupted

by something else she hadn't considered. Returning to the screen, Regina spoke to Damir. "Is there an antidote to what the guards use on the darts? Something's that fast-acting? Let's say instantaneous?"

"Yes." She paused, a bit of shame registering on her lovely face. "I should have provided it to Lukan when he crossed back over to E4 for Arez. I didn't think of it. I didn't consider that Vakar would have the guards follow them to the cave. I should have, but I—"

"It's all right," Regina said, "we were all under a lot of strain at that time. Now, about the antidote."

"Yes, of course. You'll have to

prepare it.”

“Not a problem.” Regina grabbed a pad and pen from Nikoli’s desk. “Tell me the ingredients, portions, what to do, and I’ll do it.”

Nikoli cut in. “You’d have to leave the house to get the materials.”

Regina gripped the pen even harder.

“You’re going to break that,” he said.

“Do the guards only hunt at night?” she asked Meelo.

He exchanged a glance with Nikoli. “I can’t say for certain, but it’s probably likely, given that they’re used to the subdued light on E4. Any brightness, like

that from the sun, would disturb them as it does Lukan and Arez. Even now, they're not able to withstand its intensity for extended periods of time."

"Arez is still doing okay, isn't she?" Regina asked. "Her pregnancy's going well?"

Damir grinned, the kind seen on this side, not the stoic, sterile smile from her people on E2. "She and Lukan are at a bookstore, buying instructions on how to raise their baby."

Regina fought laughter and tears. They'd been through so damn much, she wanted nothing except their happiness, which brought another worry. "Do you

think the guards could be searching for her and Lukan?”

“Not here,” Meelo said, his outrage protective, the same as a father’s. “We’re in the land of Arizona now.”

“They couldn’t possibly guess where we’ve gone,” Damir added. “They’re not perceptive and cunning like the werewolves. They follow Vakar’s orders, nothing more. Vakar knows very little about your realm.”

Regina hoped it stayed that way. “I need those ingredients,” she said, putting pen to paper. “And I need all of you to keep thinking about how we can get rid of those SOBs for good.”

He needed to hunt. He needed to kill. The urge for revenge pounded in Kuma's blood even as the rest of his body reacted to Gwen's mouth on his throat, her womanly scent and heat.

On a helpless groan, he gathered Gwen to him, his length pressed against hers. She responded by suckling his neck, marking him again as she'd done the past two days, unwilling to let him out of her sight.

The first evening when he'd tried to leave, she'd stood in his way, blocking the bedroom door.

“You’re not going out there,” she’d said. “I’m not letting you get yourself killed.”

She was naked and so defenseless against his strength, Kuma warned himself not to smile or to sigh at how her concern moved him. To reassure her, he tried to reason. “The guards are too stupid and slow to catch much less kill me.”

He ran his hand down her arm. She made a low, purring sound. With as much gentleness as possible, he took her wrist to ease her aside.

Gwen sighed, then pushed all her weight against him, using surprise to

knock him back. His breath huffed out. He flapped his arms to keep from falling to the floor. Once he'd regained his footing, he gaped at her.

She smiled. "I've taken self-defense classes." She sobered. "Hell, I give self-defense classes at the hospital to women whose boyfriends and husbands have used them as punching bags. Trust me, I would have beaten the crap out of that guard and blasted him with pepper spray if he hadn't shot me with that dart."

"But he did," Kuma growled. "That's why I have to go out there and see that he doesn't do it to another woman."

"No fucking way. I won't let you."

He laughed. "You think you can stop me?"

"I already have, and I'll do it again." She put up her hand as he approached. "Not only do I have a gun, I have handcuffs. I'll cuff you to the damn bedpost to keep you here if I have to."

She was talking too much as she always did. Saying things he didn't understand. "What are handcuffs?"

"Restraints made of metal. They go around a man's wrists to keep him from escaping."

Kuma regarded the pleasant room, so snug and warm, protected from the night's dampness, scented with her

fragrance and his. He didn't comprehend any man not wanting to be here or why she would have found handcuffs necessary to make him stay. "You've used them in the past to imprison men in this room?"

"What? No. Of course not." Gwen screwed up her face. Her rich complexion darkened with more color. "It's a sex toy, like a dildo."

She was confusing him again.

Her shoulders sagged. She mumbled, "A dildo's a rubber version, a fake version of your cock, all right?"

He regarded his erect rod, the skin reddened and stinging from him burying

it within her so many times. Kuma sensed Gwen was equally sore, not that it kept them from wanting each other again and again. “Why would any woman crave something like that rather than a real man?”

She regarded him with renewed disdain. “Not every woman has a man, so she finds ways to satisfy herself.”

Poor woman. “I have to leave.”

“No.” She pressed her body against the door, arms flung out to each side, nipples jutting. “There has to be a way to do this without you putting yourself at risk each night.”

He studied the pale blue vein on the

side of her right breast, wanting to lick it. “There isn’t.”

“There has to be.”

Before Kuma could stop her, Gwen was on her knees, slipping his cock into her mouth, so welcome and warm. She lapped his crown, dipping the tip of her tongue into the small slit, enjoying the first of his pre-come.

He gave in too readily and allowed himself some happiness, even though he knew it couldn’t last. She was right. He was at risk with the guards. Individually, they couldn’t outrun or outmaneuver him, but if more than one or two came over at the same time, he’d be no match for their

numbers and weapons.

And so he'd stayed, listening to Gwen talk and talk and talk as she tried to reason this out, finally coming up with a plan. A few minutes ago, she'd shared it with him.

"Tomorrow afternoon, we'll make our move," she'd promised after bringing him to climax, then pressed her mouth to his throat, again defeating his purpose.

As she was doing now. With more grace than he could have managed, she moved down his body and turned, straddling his torso, her back to his front.

Unable to see her breasts, he frowned.

“Face me.”

“Not now. Later.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

She expected him to accept that as an answer? He grabbed Gwen’s hips to bring her down, beneath him where she belonged.

“Come on, baby,” she cooed. “Let me do this. I won’t hurt you.”

As though she could. What she’d done before—pushing her body against his—was still child’s play in the realm he’d come from. “Do what?”

“This.” She pushed his hands away,

then positioned her body over his, her sex near his face, her moist folds close to his mouth, her breath warming his cock.

Kuma forgot what they'd been arguing about. Was this normal behavior for females in this realm, doing this to a man once they'd imprisoned him with their imperious threats and bountiful curves? He grinned, liking it. With his hands on her ass, he guided Gwen closer. For once, she gave him no argument, gasping as he licked the length of her slit. She smelled of him, he of her, their combined fragrances heady and musky.

He tongued her clit.

Gwen stiffened for a moment, then snuggled closer, her lips hugging his crown. If he'd had the strength to speak, Kuma would have thanked her. All he could manage was a grunt and a growl, the man and beast within him responding to her equally.

Indelicate sounds poured from Gwen, revealing her mounting passion. She took him in her mouth all the way to the base of his rod. Warmth rushed through Kuma, followed by tingling sensations. Handcuffs and a weapon couldn't have imprisoned him faster. The thought of ever leaving this room seemed ludicrous. He adored everything about Gwen—how she looked and sounded,

her fearlessness, her desire to protect him.

He'd had Zule's love, of that Kuma had no doubt, but on E4 she'd deferred to his authority. He'd led and she followed.

If he'd attempted the same with Gwen, she would have laughed and fought him. She was his equal in every way. However, he was still far stronger and accustomed to more hardship than she'd ever been.

The moment she seemed on the verge of climax, he stopped licking her clit.

Seconds passed before Gwen seemed to notice. Rather than release his cock

from her mouth as Kuma had expected, she panted around it, then whined, “Dun.”

“Dun?” he mimicked.

Gwen let his rod slip out finally. She puffed, “Don’t stop—why did you stop?”

“I want to be inside your cunt,” he said. “Go on. Take me in.”

She turned as well as she could to see him and curled her upper lip.

How he enjoyed teasing her. As she would say, pissing her off. “Would you prefer to use your dildo?”

Muttering an obscenity, she kept her

back to him but did push to her knees and guided his rod into her pussy, little by little, far too slowly.

“Faster,” he complained.

“No. You’ll just have to—”

Kuma pumped his hips and drove himself deep within, stealing whatever else she’d meant to say.

“Nice,” he breathed, using slang from her side.

She muttered, “I’m glad you think so.”

He sat up. With one arm wrapped around her torso, he scooted them back so he could rest his shoulders against the wooden headboard. Once settled, he

murmured, “You do too. Don’t you dare deny it.”

“How could I? You keep interrupting me.”

“Only because you talk too much.”

She lifted her face to the ceiling. He fondled her breasts.

Gwen’s head sagged to the side. Liking her reaction, Kuma flicked her nipples. On a breathy sigh, she asked, “Do I?”

“What?”

“Talk too much?”

She was doing so now. “Yes.”

“Too bad.” She paused to take in more air, releasing it with her words. “That’s the way I am. Better get used to it.”

He would have given everything—even several years of his life—to be able to do so. Kuma wanted her plan to work but wouldn’t allow himself false hope. This moment could be all they had left and he was going to enjoy it.

He touched her pussy and thumbed her clit.

Gwen shivered. She cried, “Not yet.” Once she’d pushed herself up to partially release his cock, she slid right back down until their bodies touched.

He moaned.

The sound released her inner beast. Unconstrained, she rode him, her animal needs as strong as his. Kuma tended to her nub, forcing himself not to stroke too hard, too fast, needing to draw out their pleasure. They matched each other's rhythm, their breathing synchronized. The bed rattled with their movements. Its headboard bumped the wall.

Gwen came seconds before he did, shouting out her joy. He roared, not caring how loud the sounds were.

Several sharp raps on the door brought Kuma back to his senses. Breathing hard, he wrapped his arms

around Gwen and pushed her to the mattress, his body covering, protecting hers.

“No, don’t,” she whispered when he tried to pull out of her so he could transform. “If the guards found us, they wouldn’t knock.” She paused to gulp more air. “They’d crash down the door. It’s Staci.”

“What does she want?”

“Dunno. I’ll ask.” Gwen called out. “You okay?”

The girl shouted, “Are you?”

“Yeah, don’t leave.”

“What are you doing?” Kuma asked.

She continued to push against him, wanting to be free when he now needed her to be close.

“Let go,” she ordered. “I’m only going to the bedroom door.”

“Why?”

“I have to.”

Kuma wanted to ask *why* again, but at last he released her, expecting that she’d get dressed.

She didn’t. “I’ll be there in a sec,” she called out to Staci. Turning to him, Gwen spoke quietly, so only he could hear. “She’s alone, you understand that, right?”

“How could she be alone when we’re here?”

Gwen rubbed her forehead as though it hurt. “I mean, she doesn’t have a guy. She hasn’t had a man want her or even do as little as hold her for the last two years.”

“Does she threaten them as you did with me?”

Gwen didn’t smile at his teasing. “Just looking at her face, you’d think she was perfect—Ms. Homecoming Queen or Suzy Cheerleader.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t.” She cradled

his face and ran her thumb over his cheek. “Let’s just say she was everything a man desired. She was in Hollywood—a place in this realm where beautiful people go—trying to break into films or TV when her stupid boyfriend decided he didn’t want to work, he could make more money whipping up a drug called meth and selling it. No one on this side’s supposed to do that. It gets them in trouble with the cops. That didn’t stop him. The asshole’s lab exploded. There was a fire in his and Staci’s apartment. He got out without getting hurt at all. She didn’t.”

Gwen’s hand dropped away from him.
Kuma caught it and kissed her fingers.

She gave him a small smile. “Staci wasn’t even aware of what her boyfriend had been doing. The fire burned her back, scarring it. We have people on this plane that we call plastic surgeons. They’re supposed to be able to get rid of scars. Staci’s were too bad. No amount of cosmetic surgery will bring her skin back to what it was. She survived the fire and moved on. It was her only choice. She’s working at the hospital gift shop and going to school for her degree so she can get a job selling pharmaceuticals. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I know you’re worried about her.”

Gwen gave him a gentle kiss and

whispered, “I am. She’s still alone. Lonely.”

“You want to comfort her now?”

“I don’t want her to feel excluded. I hadn’t really thought about that with you being here. God, I can be so stupid sometimes.”

“What are you talking about? You’ve done nothing to her.”

“I’ve been with you when she doesn’t have anyone. That’s pretty damn bad.”

“You want me to leave?”

“No.” She grabbed his arm as if she intended to keep him from it. “I want you to make her feel pretty, noticed again.

Please.” She cupped his face in her free hand. “She likes you. I’ve seen how she looks at you when you don’t know she’s doing so.”

How wrong Gwen was. He was fully aware of Staci’s glances but had neither wanted nor intended to act on them.

“Will you give her some attention? Can you do that for me?” Gwen whispered.

He leaned up and kissed the tip of her nose. “I’ll do it for her.”

“You’re a doll.”

He was a werewolf, bound to one female at a time. However, if Gwen

wanted this so badly, and Staci required it so much, he wasn't going to deny either of them.

Gwen left their bed and pulled on her robe. Kuma followed suit and tugged on his jeans. At the door, she glanced back and gave him a wink.

Kuma mimicked her gesture.

Gwen answered with a grin, then opened the door.

Staci looked past Gwen at the bed and blushed. "I, ah, heard a lot of racket in here, and I, ah, wondered if..." Her words trailed off. She pointed behind herself. "I should go. I have an early day at the gift shop tomorrow, then school. I

should study for my classes.”

“You can do that later. Let’s go to the kitchen and talk, maybe have a snack,” Gwen murmured. She stroked Staci’s hair, easing several strands behind her ear. “Me, you and Kuma.”

Staci shook her head, clearly feeling like an intruder. “No, I shouldn’t.”

“Because of me?” Kuma asked. “You want me to stay in the bedroom while you and Gwen talk?”

“No,” she said too loudly, then mumbled, “I don’t want to disturb you guys, all right?”

He spoke more gently than Gwen had

ever heard him. “Does that mean you don’t mind if I join you in the kitchen, Staci?”

Kuma saying her name sparked something in the girl. Gwen saw the aching desire in Staci’s eyes for a man to notice her, acknowledge her need to be valued. Coupled with it was a whole lot of fear. Since her accident, Staci had expected nothing but rejection, so she’d buried herself in her classes and work, refusing to have fun, to let a guy get close.

Kuma would never harm her. That was a certainty. He’d never judge either.

“It’s okay,” Gwen coaxed. She

wouldn't let anything bad happen to her little cousin. When Gwen's father and his family learned he'd sired a child with a prostitute, they'd treated her like unwanted garbage, someone to be ashamed of, someone to avoid. Staci hadn't. Even when she'd been flawless with a fabulous future ahead of her, she'd sought out a relationship. "Come on."

She took Staci's hand. It was sweaty and cold. Squeezing it gently, Gwen led her to the kitchen, and Kuma followed.

He took the chair next to Staci's, while Gwen grabbed chips, dip, beer and water.

“Why do you need to study?” he asked. “What do you do in school?”

She stared at his chest. “Ah, take classes, you know?” She made a face. “Then again, maybe you don’t.”

“Tell me,” he said.

Staci rolled her eyes, but there was a hint of smile on her face. “You don’t want to hear about me.”

“Then tell me about school. I’d like to hear what it is.”

“You’re sure?”

He nodded.

With tender care, Kuma focused solely on Staci, giving her the attention

she'd missed these past years and needed so sorely.

A half hour later, their conversation flowed smoothly as though he hadn't just dropped into her life. He asked countless questions about this realm, many of them so clueless Staci giggled. He teased her gently and she blossomed at last, teasing him in return.

Grateful tears stung Gwen's eyes. *That's it, baby. Enjoy yourself. Forget all the bad.*

Staci told Kuma about her favorite TV programs. Mainly *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*.

The poor guy looked so utterly

confused by Staci's synopsis of the show, Gwen suppressed a laugh and allowed herself to relax.

Tomorrow would come soon enough, along with the start of her plan. At that time, Teeko would be here to protect Staci, just as Gwen and Kuma had agreed. Teeko would take care of the girl if Gwen or Kuma didn't return. If they—

No. Gwen refused to think of that now. She wanted to relish Staci's happiness. Once her cousin and Kuma were finished talking, Gwen needed to welcome him back into her arms.

Chapter Ten

Kuma wasn't certain if Gwen's plan would work. He did know that nothing he could say or do would change her mind. She was determined to see this through, with or without him.

In her living room, he stood next to Teeko, who'd arrived minutes earlier. Gwen and Staci were across from them, framed by the afternoon sun pouring through the front windows, sizing up this member of Kuma's pack.

"The Beta wolf to your Alpha," Gwen had said earlier.

Kuma had no idea what she'd been talking about. Thankfully, he loved the

sound of her voice. Despite how he teased her about talking too much, he could have listened to Gwen prattle on for hours.

She said nothing now, eyeing Teeko with unmistakable caution.

He was a few years younger than Kuma, not as solidly built, his dark brown hair worn shorter, his eyes a gold shade, not gray, several days' growth of beard on his face. He'd stolen his clothing, as Kuma had. It matched what most men wore on this side—jeans, a navy tee, running shoes, a jacket. So restrictive for creatures who'd lived their entire lives on E4 without any garments.

Kuma sensed Staci wanted to see Teeko nude. She kept staring at him, her color rising even more than last night when Kuma had been with her. Giving her the attention Gwen wanted.

Although Kuma liked Staci, appreciating how feminine and gentle she was, she would never be the woman he needed. Perhaps it was a good thing the girl was so clearly attracted to Teeko. In this foreign realm, the werewolf was someone Kuma could trust. Because of that, Gwen had asked him to bring Teeko here. He would see to Staci's safety while they were gone, putting Gwen's plan into motion.

Kuma spoke to the younger werewolf

in their native tongue. “You’re certain of what you’ve just told me?”

Teeko finished his perusal of Staci, his expression betraying his pleasure. “I know what I smelled. What I’ve seen.” He regarded Gwen.

Kuma stepped in front of the man, blocking his view, letting the werewolf know Gwen wasn’t available. She belonged to him alone.

Remembering his place, Teeko backed away and lowered his face in submission. Satisfied with his response, Kuma spoke to Gwen. “We should leave now.”

She didn’t move. “Can he speak and

understand English?”

“Yes,” Teeko answered as he regarded Staci, not Gwen. “I’ll be able to communicate with the female.”

Staci’s face turned bright red. She pulled her attention from the prominent bulge behind Teeko’s fly. Desire remained in her gaze. “You can call me Staci, all right? I’d actually prefer it.”

Teeko looked at Kuma for permission.

He nodded once, allowing the younger man to do that.

“And I’ll call you Teeko,” Staci said.

Gwen watched the interchange without comment. She went to Kuma,

whispering in his ear, “Tell him he better not harm Staci in any way, either physically or emotionally.”

Kuma turned his face to hers and inhaled deeply, filling himself with her wondrous fragrance. If not for the others being here, he would have taken her where she stood, causing her to cry out in delight. “He won’t,” Kuma murmured, scarcely able to control his passion.

Gwen’s expression changed, telling him she recognized his lust. Better still, she welcomed it. The sides of her mouth turned up slightly, a smile meant for him alone.

He returned it.

She whispered, “Good. Because if he did, I’d have to chew off his balls. You do know what they are, right?”

He hadn’t yet mastered all of her realm’s slang, but did know that particular word. “I do.”

“Then tell him that,” she ordered.

She was far too bossy, even for a female in this realm. Holding back a sigh, he turned to Teeko and used their language once more. “Make the female feel pretty and wanted. She’s been harmed in the past. Be gentle with her, though not too gentle. She prefers a bit of teasing.”

Teeko’s brows shot up, betraying his

surprise. “You’re giving me permission to mate with her?”

Kuma frowned. “I said teasing. There will be no mating unless she allows it. Is that understood?”

The younger werewolf snuck a glance at Staci. Her attention moved from his chest to his face. They stared at each other, suddenly oblivious to everyone else.

“I think we can leave now,” Kuma said to Gwen.

She looked skeptical. “What exactly did you say to him?”

“What you wanted,” he lied. “Come.

We need to go.”

“Wait,” Staci blurted and went to Gwen. “Don’t do anything dumb or brave, all right? Don’t let her,” Staci ordered Kuma.

“I won’t,” he promised.

Gwen rolled her eyes and spoke to her cousin. “He won’t have to babysit me, all right? I can take care of myself and I will be back. You make certain you’re all right.” She shot a frown at Teeko.

Staci mumbled, “I’ll be good.”

Kuma heard nothing but arousal and disobedience in her voice. Before Gwen

could comment on it or do anything about her cousin's lust, Kuma took Gwen's hand and led her from the house. The rain had passed earlier in the day, leaving the air fresh and sweet, smelling of the earth and vegetation. A mild breeze, chilly, not cold, ruffled Kuma's hair and brought color to Gwen's cheeks.

She laced her fingers through his and held back as she glanced up and down the street, searching for danger.

The sounds of children shouting in play and adults ordering them to keep it down mingled with the noise of vehicles and an aircraft overhead.

“I don’t smell anything,” he assured her. “The guards aren’t here.”

“You’re positive?” she asked.

“Would I put you in danger without you insisting upon it?”

Gwen’s expression changed from worried to slightly irritated, then embarrassed. “No, of course not. Besides, you can heal me like you did yourself.”

“My abilities might not work on you, nor would I ever allow you to get injured.”

“Of course you wouldn’t.” She kissed his knuckles and gave him a brave smile.

He recognized the lingering fear in her eyes but didn't address it. This was what they'd agreed upon. What Gwen felt they needed to do. If he tried to keep her from it, she'd fight him, determined to win. Worse, she might do something to trick him and leave on this journey herself.

Not about to let that happen, Kuma led her down the street. Neither of them spoke about what might happen next. If he would be forced to kill again. If he'd have to give his life to see to her safety.

Regina checked off another ingredient from the list Damir had provided, then poured the next into the ceramic bowl

and waited, her shoulders rising to her ears. If she'd measured wrong, she feared the concoction might foam or explode.

The amber-colored liquid remained stable, resembling apple juice. It smelled like it too, rather than an antidote to the tranquilizer the guards used.

Nikoli sat at the kitchen table, watching her, no doubt thinking she was crazy for even doing this. After all, they had the device he'd built to open portals at will and could use them to escape immediate danger.

He held the instrument now, turning it

in his hand absently, giving her proof they had nothing to fear.

Right. All they had to do was run and run and run as they had before, a notion Regina found unbearable. She didn't want to flee from vampires, werewolves, guards, Vakar or whatever further crap might cross over from the other realms. She needed to settle this current problem and win.

Lifting the spoon, she murmured, "Want a taste? If you like it, sweetie, I'll let you lick the bowl."

Nikoli remained slouched in his chair, long legs stretched out, crossed at the ankles. "I haven't been hit by a dart. I

won't be. Neither will you." He lifted his device, displaying it to her in his palm.

"What if it doesn't work?" She rested her hip against the counter. "What if Vakar had one of his scientists make a device that the guards are using. One that counteracts yours, jams its signal—or whatever you call it—making it useless?"

Nikoli smiled at her as though she needed to be placated, like a child who was frightened of imaginary monsters beneath the bed. "That's not possible."

"You're sure? One hundred percent? No doubt at all? Not even a teeny, tiny

bit? A fraction of one per—”

He interrupted, “Nothing’s ever that certain. But it’s not likely. We’ll be fine.”

“Because you’re hoping the werewolves kill all the guards and then forget about coming after you, a guy who looks and smells exactly like the rulers they hate? Let’s say that dream happens. Then what? The werewolves assimilate into society over here? They take remedial classes in being fully human?”

Nikoli’s broad shoulders sagged. He mumbled, “I’m just trying to get through the day, the same as you.”

Aw, hell. At his obvious hurt, Regina

crossed the room and sank to her knees at his side. “Hey, I didn’t mean to be so snotty. I’m just worried.”

Nikoli grinned. “Yeah, I know.” He cupped the back of her head, tilting Regina’s face to his. “But what I said did get you over here, right?”

She smacked his hand. He didn’t move it. She sighed. “You want to neck now?”

“I want to neck all the time.”

True. However, she had an antidote to make. Despite the warmth pouring through her, Regina wasn’t about to give in to passion. “Let go of me so I can finish.” *Let me make us safe.* “Then we

can play.”

“One batch,” he warned. “That’s all.”

She’d bought enough supplies to make gallons of the stuff, darting from store to store, always looking over her shoulder, waiting for a guard, werewolf, Vakar or something equally horrible to attack. “Sure.”

Nikoli still held on. He claimed her mouth, slipping his tongue between her lips.

Regina lost all her breath on a wanting sigh.

The doorbell chimed.

Despite its mild tone, she flinched.

Her teeth bumped his. “Sorry.” She rubbed her mouth. “Who can that be? Did Meelo and Damir tell you they were coming to Seattle?”

“No.” He glanced in the direction of the front door.

The bell chimed again. Whoever was out there wasn’t patient.

“I’ll get it,” Nikoli said.

“No.” Regina pressed her hands on his thighs to keep him from moving.

He sagged back in his chair. “If it’s a guard, werewolf, or even Vakar himself, do you believe any of them would ring the front bell?”

Good point. Andris and the other vampires had turned into bats and entered the house through the chimney, pouring into her bedroom where they'd reverted to human form...so beautiful and pale. A werewolf would probably use its body to break down the front door. Vakar and his guards would most likely disintegrate the wood and glass with one of their freaky devices.

That left several other possibilities on who might be outside. Kids selling candy for a school function, a religious group going door to door to save souls, or Detectives Sheehan and Goddard returned to question or arrest her for Donald Bakshi's murder.

“Let me answer it,” Nikoli said.

“No.” He’d be no match for the local cops, especially if they got a good look at his unlined palms and strange fingerprints.

Regina pushed to her feet. Whoever was out there was now knocking. “I’ll get it. You stay here. Please.”

She hurried into the hall and halted at what she saw behind the stained-glass windows on either side of the door. Two figures, the one on the left taller than the other. Exactly what she’d seen the last time the detectives had arrived. Shit.

The smaller one...Goddard...knocked again.

Regina debated whether to ignore them and decided against it. They'd only come back. Steeling herself for the worst, she opened the door and stared at two people she'd never seen before.

Relief flooded her. The man was ruggedly handsome, his shoulder length hair dark brown. The woman's hair was far shorter, her features sensual from a mixture of races Regina couldn't identify, her eyes an amazing and arresting shade of blue.

The young woman turned to the man and asked, "Do you smell it?"

He nodded.

Regina frowned at the odd question.

Smell what? A gas leak? These two weren't dressed in uniforms from Puget Sound Energy. Nor was there any unusual odor, only the scent of pine and cedar trees, along with air scrubbed fresh by the rain. "Can I help you?"

"We hope," the woman said. "I'm Gwen." She inclined her head to the man. "He's Kuma. Not that any of that matters."

Reaching behind herself, she pulled out a handgun and pointed its muzzle at Regina's heart. "We need to go inside now."

Staci gestured to a chair in the

kitchen, encouraging Teeko to sit while she paced. One, because of his presence, so damned male and magnetic. Two, because she was concerned about Gwen.

Teeko remained at the edge of the hall as he regarded the surroundings. After a quick glance around, he focused on her.

Staci's pulse jumped. The fierce thrumming of her heart stole more of her composure. Since Gwen and Kuma had left, Teeko had followed Staci wherever she went, not letting her out of his sight, rarely looking away.

He regarded her with renewed fascination, as if she were a prize he'd just won. What in the world had Kuma

said to him before he took off with Gwen?

Staci cleared her throat and tried to sound casual. “You hungry?”

He studied her breasts. She figured her nipples were probably getting even harder, poking against her tee’s soft fabric.

“I can make you something,” she offered. “What do you eat?”

He focused on her groin.

God, he was hot. Tall and lean, with enough muscles to take charge in any woman’s bed. His scruffy beard made Staci’s soul sing. He reminded her of a

bad-boy rocker. One she was eager to know.

Until Kuma had come along, Staci hadn't joked around or flirted with a guy for two endless years. She'd been too afraid of the inevitable rejection, pained by her scars. Kuma had eased her concerns, if only for a moment. She was still hesitant about being naked, at least from the waist up, but knew she didn't want to remain celibate forever, hiding out from life or men.

Or rather, this man...this werewolf.

Who would have believed her life would have come to this, especially the werewolf part? It should have disturbed

her but didn't. For the first time since the accident, Staci felt a smidgen of hope and acted accordingly. She crossed the room to Teeko and lifted her face to his to offer herself. For a little while, she wanted to forget about the danger Gwen had put herself in, how long it would take her and Kuma to return, whether they'd succeed or not.

For a little while, Staci wanted to forget about what she'd lost in the fire.

If Teeko rejected her after seeing her back, she'd die a little more inside. However, she had to give them a shot.

She searched his handsome face, seeing a whole lot of arousal...and a

flicker of caution. Her stomach clenched. Had Gwen told Kuma about Staci's scars, which he'd repeated to Teeko? Was Teeko recalling that part of their conversation now? Would her imperfections disturb him?

Please, don't turn away. Don't deny me. I'm lonely and scared.

She rested her hand on his chest. His heart hammered as fiercely as hers did. Possibly a good sign if caused by passion. "What are you waiting for?"

Confusion swept his face. "Kuma and Gwen or the guards." He glanced at the back door, then in the direction of the front one. "I don't smell—"

“That’s not what I meant.” She turned his face back to hers and traced his bottom lip with her fingers. “I’m here. You’re here. We’re alone until Kuma and Gwen return. That could be hours. It might be a few minutes. What are you waiting for?”

Understanding flared in his eyes that they hardly had all afternoon. This time, he didn’t hesitate. He claimed her mouth.

Wow. He wasn’t at all restrained. Staci sensed Teeko had experienced the same dry spell she had when it came to sex and needed a huge dose of carnal relief. The thought that they were both so wanting pleased her. She didn’t have to compete against his memories of another

woman or his lust for someone else.

She kissed him so hard her teeth dug into her bottom lip. Staci relished the pain, the same as his beard-roughened face scouring her cheeks. If he tried to shave his whiskers off, she'd bitch up a storm. Hell, she might even cuff him to her bed as Gwen had threatened to do with Kuma.

Sagging into him, Staci fisted her fingers into his tee. Teeko wrapped his arms around her and pressed his palms against her back.

Without meaning to, she stiffened, an instinctive reaction.

Teeko dropped his hands and pulled

his mouth from hers. “Was I too rough? Did I hurt you?”

His obvious concern touched her deeply. During the accident, Staci’s boyfriend had fled the fire, not giving her a moment’s thought. One of their neighbors—a guy she’d never spoken to—had risked his life to pull her from the flames. When she was in the burn unit at the hospital, Staci learned her boyfriend had blamed the fire on her. He told the cops that she had operated the meth lab, not him.

Fucking creep. Jerk.

“What’s wrong?” Teeko asked.

What else? She’d allowed physical

looks to rule her life. Her boyfriend had been so handsome, so perfect. She mistook that for honor and integrity.

Never again.

“Nothing,” she murmured. “You weren’t too rough and you definitely didn’t hurt me. My scars aren’t painful any longer.”

He searched her face, his confusion evident. “Scars?”

She debated how to answer him. At last, she turned and lifted the side of her tee, showing him a small portion of her back that wasn’t even the worst part. She wasn’t that brave.

There was no horror in his expression as there had always been in her mother's and father's each time they caught a glimpse of her flaws. Teeko appeared to accept who she was without question or judgment. Could be he thought all women on this side had disfigured backs like hers.

Releasing her tee, Staci faced him once more. "Come here." She drove her fingers through his hair and brought his mouth back to hers so she could slip her tongue inside.

Her knees sagged, bumping into his. He tasted wonderful, fresh and clean like the outdoors. And he wanted her. Here. Now.

Staci wasn't about to deny him. As he cupped her ass in his hands, she twined her arms around his shoulders and wound her legs around his lean hips. He carried her to the table, placing her on the edge, making quick work of removing her tee.

Given his position, he couldn't see her back. To make certain he didn't try, Staci tugged off her bra so her breasts would distract him.

He stared at her tightened nipples, his nostrils flaring with his deep breath. In a flash, he yanked down her jeans and panties, dropping the garments on the floor.

Reclined on the table, Staci braced the heels of her feet on its edge and spread her thighs. An invitation for him to take her. The room's warm air caressed her body. She felt a wave of it touch the dampness between her legs. Teeko focused on that alone, not making any move, especially the one she wanted. To make certain he knew what to do next, Staci ran her fingers over her blonde bush and murmured, "Fuck me."

"What?"

Okay, maybe he didn't understand all of the slang on this side. "Nothing. Wasn't important. Go on. Undress."

He did, taking everything off, hopping

from one foot to the other as he removed his running shoes and jeans. At last, he stood naked before her.

Damn. His chest was all smooth muscle, so well-defined Staci could count his abs. Dark hairs trailed from his navel to his groin. His cock was long, thick, fully erect, his balls rounded and ruddy, each one the perfect size for her mouth.

“You want this?” he asked. “You want me?”

“Are you kidding?” she blurted, surprised at his doubt. “Hell, yeah.” She opened her arms, welcoming him.

He gave her a wolfish grin. Totally

appropriate given what he was and the circumstances. In return, Staci smiled seductively, all of her previous uncertainty gone.

With his hands on her knees, Teeko pushed her legs back toward her chest. She wrapped her arms around her thighs and held them in place, making certain she'd exposed her cunt for his use.

Teeko licked her there first, driving his tongue inside her soft folds.

Staci gasped at the delicious sensations rocketing through her, then cried out in delight, her toes curling. How in the hell had she lived without this for so long? How could she do so

again when he left? Uh-uh. She wasn't going to go there. Whatever happened after these moments were over was something Staci refused to think about.

She moaned in renewed pleasure at him tonguing her clit. He brought her within seconds of orgasm, then pulled back and stood, watching her pant in surprise and frustration.

She gathered enough breath to whine. "What in the fuck are you doing?"

Without comment, he entered her fully with one strong thrust, pulling a prolonged sigh from her. He wasn't too rough or too gentle. He was precisely the man she'd longed for in her darkest

hours.

A corny notion surely, but Staci didn't care.

Seconds passed in which they simply gazed at each other. How she enjoyed that, savoring what appeared to be affection in his eyes.

Finally, the tenderness passed, the animal in both of them taking over. Crude noises poured from him and her as they each tried to get closer. He pounded his cock into her cunt. She grasped his biceps, digging her nails into his skin.

The table rattled with their movements. Its legs scraped the

linoleum.

Male pride filled Teeko's grunt. Perspiration dotted his face and upper chest. Staci could see he was straining to hold off, the same as she was each time he stroked her clit.

She settled the matter by tightening her sheath around his cock, adding to the heavenly friction.

Teeko shuddered. His complexion darkened even more, as though he'd run several miles. He rubbed her nub faster, harder.

On a burst of pleasure, she came, moaning as loud as she could. Stunning warmth and arousal raged through Staci.

She fought to hold on to the precious feelings but finally gave in to contentment that left her limp. Even so, she clutched Teeko's arms as he came and shouted for all he was worth.

As the sounds faded, it took little effort for her to coax him down. He rested his head on her shoulder, his mouth on her neck. She'd tamed the beast for a moment, leaving a man who needed tenderness and safety as much as she did.

Smoothing his tangled hair, she whispered, "Thank you."

He kissed her throat and snuggled closer. "I don't understand."

Of course, he didn't. On his realm, sex was natural, free of all the crap those on this side burdened it with. "You made me feel pretty again," she confessed.

Teeko eased back so he could look at her.

Crud. She wasn't ready for that much intimacy. "You should rest."

"Why? I'm still hard."

That he was. Amazing. What sane woman would go back to a normal guy after knowing someone like him? "You haven't caught your breath."

"Neither have you." He brushed a

strand of hair from her cheek.

The gesture was so endearing, Staci smiled.

“I want to ask you something,” he said.

Her smile faded. “What?” She hoped to God it wouldn’t be about her back.

“You’re what the guards want,” he said. “The kind of woman they take from this side. How could you not feel pretty or desired?”

His question was so guileless, Staci had to blink back tears. For too long, she’d believed a moment like this would never happen to her. That guys like

Teeko didn't exist. "Dunno."

"Dunno?"

She laughed softly, then cupped his face so she could taste his mouth once more in a hard, deep, lingering kiss. They necked for minutes. At last, she breathed, "Take me again."

Make me forget everything bad.

What had happened in the past. What might be occurring with Gwen and Kuma right now.

Chapter Eleven

Gwen warned herself not to make any more sudden moves, like shooting her damned gun. She had to see this through in the best way possible, when she really wanted to take off screaming.

From what Kuma had told her, Teeko claimed this house was where the ruler resided. He'd caught the man's scent on the wind, with the distinctive odor leading him here. Many a night, the young werewolf had waited in the shadows across the street, hoping for the ruler to emerge.

He never did.

A quick Internet search indicated the

house belonged to Dr. Regina Page, a Seattle psychologist, born and raised in this city. Gwen couldn't figure out what Regina had to do with any of this. No way could she be providing psychological counseling to a ruler from another dimension, could she?

This definitely wasn't the time to ask or indulge in any polite conversation. Gwen knew it was nuts to pull a .38 on the woman or to rely on Teeko—and now Kuma's sense of smell—as her guiding force. However, love made people do all kinds of strange things. No way could Gwen let anything happen to Kuma.

Regina seemed as protective of the

man who was now several feet behind her in the hall.

He'd come into it a second earlier. Tall, dark and great looking with soulful eyes, he resembled most women's dream lover, not a ruthless bastard who raped young women and men each night in the Pleasure Palace or slaughtered the werewolves for sport.

"Go back into the kitchen," Regina ordered him.

He remained, focused on Kuma.

The werewolf had bristled immediately at the other man's presence. In that moment, Gwen knew they had the correct residence. This guy was a ruler

from E4, just as Teeko had claimed.

Loathing and rage radiated from Kuma.

Although Gwen couldn't blame him for what he felt, murdering the man would leave them without answers or hope.

"Don't, please," she begged Kuma before he changed into wolf form and attacked. Her hand trembled so badly the muzzle of the revolver dipped from Regina's chest to her belly and back. The freaking weapon was heavier than Gwen recalled.

The ruler stepped toward Regina, the hardwood floor groaning beneath his

weight.

Hearing it, Regina looked over. “Stay back,” she insisted.

Kuma pushed past Regina to get to the man.

“Nikoli!” Regina rushed Kuma, ramming her body into his.

Despite his superior size, he lost his footing, his shoulder striking the wall. Regina was on him in a flash, clawing his face.

“Hey,” Gwen shouted. She swung the gun at Regina to frighten her, get her to stop.

Regina either didn't see the weapon

or didn't care. She clawed Kuma's cheek, not really hurting him but not doing him any good either, except to piss him off royally, which might make him turn into a wolf and attack her.

“Hey!” Gwen yelled again.

Kuma howled, an unearthly sound that filled the foyer and spilled to the outside.

Nikoli joined the fray, grabbing Regina to pull her away from Kuma. They all bellowed, growled or cursed.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Gwen danced between the three of them and the entrance, not knowing what to do. At last, she kicked the front door with her

foot. It closed with a bang. She yelled, “Dammit, everyone, stop. Regina, we’re not here to hurt you or Nikoli. We need your help.”

To prove it, Gwen put her gun on the accent table. She stepped away from it and lifted her hands.

Regina stared as though she couldn’t quite believe what she saw. In a flash, she broke away from Nikoli and grabbed the gun, pointing its muzzle from Kuma to Gwen and back, clearly prepared to off them both. “Who are you?”

“He’s one of the werewolves,” Nikoli said. His shoulders heaved with his uneven breaths.

A thin line of blood dripped from Kuma's face where Regina had scratched him. Hatred flared in his eyes. He growled, "You're one of the rulers."

"No, he's not," Regina said, directing the gun's muzzle at his head.

"Oh, no fucking way," Gwen said. She stepped between Regina and Kuma, prepared to take a bullet to protect him.

Kuma grabbed her arm to pull Gwen aside. With her free arm, she elbowed his gut, just as she'd learned in her martial arts classes. His breath whooshed out. He loosened his hold

Quick as she could, Gwen moved away from him and spoke to Regina,

“We’re here for Nikoli’s help. I don’t give a shit if he’s a ruler or not. He knows about the other dimensions. Right?” she asked him.

“Don’t answer that,” Regina ordered Nikoli.

On a heavy sigh, he went to her.

Gwen backed into Kuma, bracing her body against his to keep him from moving. He stiffened and growled.

“Hey,” Regina complained at Nikoli taking the gun.

“Yes, I know about the other dimensions,” he answered Gwen as he held the weapon behind himself. “And

no,” he said to Kuma, “I’m not one of the rulers. I was a scientist on E2 before I escaped it and my people to come here.”

“See, he’s cool,” Gwen said to Kuma.

His chest pumped with his lingering fury, his body coiled for revenge.

Poor baby. He’d been through so much. Gwen cupped his face, trying to soothe him, her thumb brushing away a trickle of blood.

Regina rushed past them to the front door. Locking it, she peered through the stained-glass panes. “Are there guards out there? Are they coming for Nikoli?”

“They want women,” Kuma said

through his teeth. “For Vakar and the other rulers to use in the Pleasure Palace.”

“We need to stop them,” Gwen said. “Permanently, before they harm Kuma.”

Nikoli regarded him. “You’ve been attacking them.”

Kuma’s shoulders bunched even more. His knuckles were white from squeezing his fists. “They hunted my mate, Zule, on E4. They raped her to amuse themselves, then slit her open, leaving her to die.”

Regina pressed her fingers to her mouth.

Gwen spoke to her and Nikoli. “It’s only a matter of time before the guards start hunting in groups to protect themselves from Kuma and Teeko. He’s a member of Kuma’s pack. Of the werewolves that crossed over from E4, they’re the only two left.”

Regina turned back to the front door. “Teeko’s out there now?”

“No. He’s at my place.”

“Your place?”

“Yeah.” Gwen frowned at Regina’s confusion. “I’m one of your kind, our kind, all right? Lived in Seattle all my life. Kuma saved me the other night from one of the guards.”

“How did you find this place?” Regina snapped. “Has Teeko come here at night?”

“Yeah...he smelled Nikoli. Look, I think I have a way to stop the guards, but we can’t do it without your help.”

Regina and Nikoli exchanged a glance.

Gwen sensed this wasn’t the first time they’d had to deal with those from the other realms. She saw unmistakable weariness in them. It might have worried her if not for the calm resignation she also recognized in their eyes. An inner strength that would see all of them through this crap...or so she hoped.

“Let’s take this into the kitchen,” Nikoli said.

Once there, Kuma refused to sit, standing near the doorway, arms crossed over his chest. Without asking, Gwen took a paper towel. As she wet it at the sink, she noticed the items on the counter and a bowl of yellowish liquid.

Regina went to them. “I’m making an antidote for the guard’s tranquilizer darts.”

No shit? “Does it work?”

Regina lifted her shoulders.

Gwen wanted to scream *why the hell don’t you know?* but pushed down her

anxiety for the time being and went to Kuma to clean the blood from his face. He grasped her wrist, stopping her. “Don’t.”

“Fine, do it yourself.” She slapped the wet towel in his hand and ran her palms down her jeans, drying them. “I see you have one of those devices that open portals,” she said to Nikoli. “We need it.”

He covered it with his hand. “Why?”

“To get rid of the guards for good. You can calibrate it so that once a guard is in the portal, it takes him to any of the other dimensions including E4, correct?”

Regina made a face. “Why would you

want to send them to E4? They'd just come back over here."

"Yeah, I know," Gwen said. "We can't send them to E5 either."

"The realm of fire and ice," Nikoli muttered.

Regina stopped stirring the antidote. "What are you talking about? You've never mentioned details about it before. Have you watched what goes on there just as you watched me here?"

He shook his head. "It's part of the earth's dimensions that all those on E2 study." He spoke to Gwen. "Why can't the guards go to E5?"

“From what Kuma overheard, those bastards already have an outpost there where they’re taking some of the women to use as their sex slaves.”

With her fingers to her forehead, Regina mumbled, “This just keeps getting better and better.”

“Are you thinking about E2?” Nikoli asked Gwen. “Are you hoping to expose Vakar and the other rulers by sending the guards there?”

“It’s a nice thought, but it’d take too long.” She leaned against the counter. “If your government is anything like the one in this realm, there’ll always be those who’d never believe what Vakar has

been doing or will protect him because they're caught up in it. He'd lie to stay in power. Actually, I was thinking about E3."

Regina dropped her hand and turned to Nikoli. "I've never heard you talk about that dimension either. What's there?"

"The realm of the departed," Kuma answered.

Regina's brows lifted. "Huh?"

"Each generation of my kind has heard the same tale," Kuma said to her, then spoke to Nikoli. "Is it true? Are the dead from all the dimensions trapped there?"

Nikoli nodded.

“Are you serious?” Regina blurted. “Andris, Sazaar and the other vampires aren’t really gone? They’re on E3?”

“Sazaar’s human soul is,” Nikoli said. “So are those of the other innocents the vampires turned. Andris and his kind were always evil. They had no souls. They’re gone for good.”

Regina went back to rubbing her forehead.

If they’d known each other better, Gwen would have given Regina a hug and told her this nightmare would end; it had to, for everyone’s sanity. As it was, she asked Nikoli, “Can you calibrate

your device to send the guards there? A place they'll never be able to escape?"

"Even if I could, even if I gave the instrument to you, how would you get them to enter the portal willingly?"

"Who said they'd be willing?" Kuma countered. "Set your device to take them to E3, and they'll go inside the portal. I'll make certain of it."

"Uh-uh," Gwen cut in. "We—you and I—will make certain of it."

Kuma gave her a warning look as he'd done with Zule the few times she'd questioned his authority. His annoyance did nothing to dissuade Gwen.

“How soon can you make that thing do what we want?” she asked Nikoli. “Hours? Days? Weeks? By the way, we really don’t have weeks or even days.”

He regarded Regina before he answered. “Hours.”

Gwen pushed away from the counter. “Awesome. Kuma and I can go hunting to—”

“No,” he interrupted. “You’re not putting yourself in danger.”

She frowned. “I’ve already told you, you can heal me if I’m injured.”

“And I’ve already told you, my abilities may not work on you. Because

of that, you're not getting involved in this."

"I'm already involved. You can't stop me from getting in even deeper."

Is that what she truly believed? He'd been gentle with her until now, the same as he'd been with Regina, holding back, not tearing her apart for attacking him. However, that would change quickly if it meant saving Gwen's life. If need be, he'd tie her up until she couldn't move as much as a finger. He'd gag her luscious mouth so she couldn't speak or scream and then he'd carry her back to her home and would lock her in her bedroom.

There, he'd show her what a werewolf in charge could do, right down to stripping and enjoying her as a female should be enjoyed by a male. He'd fill her every orifice with his fingers and cock. He'd make her scream in delight and forget all this nonsense about protecting him.

Her cheeks flushed as though she knew what he was thinking and wasn't certain whether she liked it or not.

Before their time together was finished, Kuma was determined she'd see things his way. That he'd lead and she'd follow.

He smiled. She arched one slender

brow.

Regina cleared her throat, breaking the charged silence. “You can heal?”

“He’s amazing,” Gwen said. “Show them. Make the scratches on your face go away.”

Kuma kept his hands at his side, refusing to perform for her or anyone.

“He can,” Gwen insisted to Regina and Nikoli.

“Okay,” Regina said, sounding as if she didn’t believe it. “Even if you do trap the guards on E3, what makes you think it’ll stop Vakar from sending even more of them over here?”

“He doesn’t have a limitless supply,” Gwen said. “Even a narcissistic SOB will figure out the guards are leaving and not coming back. He’ll shut down the plan.”

“And come up with another,” Nikoli muttered.

“Unless he’s dead,” Kuma said.

Gwen grabbed his arm. “Don’t even think it. You’re not going to E4 or anywhere else to hunt down Vakar, understand?”

Heat shot to Kuma’s face, driven by his mounting exasperation with her. He wasn’t a young boy she could give orders to...nor was she like any female

he'd known on E4. Brute force wouldn't stop Gwen. It would only make her more determined.

Reigning in his anger, Kuma patted her hand and spoke to her as he would a child. "And you're not going on any hunt."

"I have to," she insisted, digging her fingers into his arm. "You need a female to lure the guards. Have you forgotten why they're in this realm?"

"You're not the kind of woman they're looking for," he reminded her. "I've already told you that. They prefer females like Staci."

"Too fucking bad. No way is she

going to be helping you.”

“I didn’t say she was. I’ll do what I’ve always done. Wait until a guard leaves his hiding place to find a victim, then—”

“No. I don’t want another woman hurt. I’m doing this whether you agree or not. That’s final, got it?”

He frowned. “You dare speak to me like that?”

Gwen’s frown hung on for a moment more before she sighed. “Sorry, baby, but on this plane, women do their own thing.”

She ran her knuckles over his cheek.

Despite his anger with her, Kuma's skin warmed even more beneath her touch.

“Trust me,” she whispered, “it’s not a bad thing. You’ll get used to it.”

Before he could counter such ridiculous thinking, Gwen spoke to Nikoli. “Can you put a rush on that?” She turned to Regina. “And what you’re doing? It’ll be dark before we know it. I don’t want those prick guards taking another woman tonight.”

As Nikoli calibrated his device, Regina continued making the antidote. Partly because she had to finish it for Gwen and Kuma, partly to stay busy and

keep from thinking about realms that consisted of fire and ice or dimensions that housed the deceased. Would she and Nikoli be in that dead zone one day? Was that the real heaven or hell?

Suppressing a shudder, she watched Kuma pace past, going from one end of the kitchen to the other. He moved with the grace of a wild animal and with the fury of a man who wasn't used to a female speaking her mind.

For once, Gwen was quiet, regarding him as though she wanted to make certain he wouldn't bolt. When he didn't, simply circling the room to burn off his frustration, she joined Regina at the counter.

Seconds passed in relative quiet, except for the slap of Kuma's running shoes and Gwen's fingers drumming against the marble countertop.

Regina finally turned to her.

"Sorry for frightening you before with the gun," Gwen muttered. "I'm not usually like that. I'm an RN, for God's sake." She mumbled the name of the hospital where she worked. "I didn't know what else to do. I just wanted to get your attention."

She had, and then some. Not that Regina could blame her. If it had been Nikoli in danger, she would have done the same. "It's over. Forgotten. All

right?” Regina read the next ingredient on her list. She opened the can of diet Pepsi, then measured out two tablespoons.

“Whoa.” Gwen leaned toward Regina and whispered, “What are you doing? I thought that was the antidote.”

“It is.”

“Are you adding diet Pepsi to it so it tastes even shittier?”

Regina laughed. “Beats me.”

“Hey, is this for real?” Gwen complained. “Are you putting me on?”

Regina’s smile faded. “Wish that I were, but no.” She tapped the paper she

was working from. “I got this list of ingredients from Damir—she’s a scientist from E2 like Nikoli. When he needed materials to build a device to open portals, Damir and her mate, Meelo, got them from Home Depot and Radio Shack. Go figure.”

“Does the device work? Did you ever test it?”

“Nikoli brought Lukan and Arez—two pleasure slaves—to this realm from E4 before Vakar could exterminate them.”

Propping her elbows on the counter, Gwen hung her head. “How long have you been living like this? I mean, saving people from other realms, knowing they

even existed, shacking up with a guy who's not even from this dimension?"

Seemed like forever. Seemed like no more than a moment. "Not nearly long enough," Regina murmured.

Gwen looked over. "It's working for you two?"

She heard the young woman's worry. She'd witnessed Gwen's devotion to Kuma, what appeared to be her deepening love. "I'd die without Nikoli. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for him."

"Yeah, I noticed when you kept Kuma from attacking him in the hall." Gwen screwed up her mouth and straightened.

“If you’d dug any deeper into Kuma’s face, he would have needed stitches. Do it again and I’ll have to floor you.”

Regina stared at her.

“Hey, I was only kidding,” she said.

Regina didn’t return her smile. “Make certain your plan works, please. Get rid of those thugs. Send them on a one-way trip to hell.”

Gwen wrapped her arm around Regina’s shoulders and squeezed gently. The gesture was so female and comforting, Regina couldn’t help but hug the young woman in return.

“I will,” Gwen whispered. “I don’t

have a choice. I'm going to make certain Kuma's safe, whether he wants that or not. Nikoli too. I won't let anything happen to him or you. I give you my word."

Regina had no doubt of Gwen's sincerity. However, plans didn't always unfold as one wanted. She'd learned that when Damir, Meelo and Lukan had shown up here late one afternoon, uninvited and needing help.

Pulling away from Gwen, Regina said, "Nikoli."

He kept his face lowered to his device, running his thumb over its controls, changing the data inside.

“What?”

“You did build another of those instruments, correct?” He’d promised to do so after he’d raced against time to make one for Lukan so the young man could rescue Arez. The devices were Nikoli and Regina’s only means of escape if anyone...or anything...from the other dimensions came after them. “Please tell me you did.”

“Several of them.” He ran his thumb over the controls once more. “They’re stored all over the house, where I have ready access to them.”

Seriously? “And you’ve waited until now to tell me that? What if something

had happened to you and I needed ready access to them to save us both?”

“You haven’t...you won’t.” He snuck a peek at her. “I didn’t want you to think that anything bad was about to happen. I didn’t want you to worry.”

His keeping her in the dark to protect her disturbed Regina more than any crap Vakar could have come up with. She crossed her arms over her chest.

Gwen cleared her throat as though she feared an argument was about to happen. “Thank God both of you have those things now.” She spoke to Nikoli, “How’s that one coming?”

He focused on his instrument to the

exclusion of everything else, especially Regina. “I’m getting there. It’ll work just fine.”

Kuma made a noise that said he wasn’t pleased and kept pacing. Gwen shifted her weight as if Nikoli wasn’t moving quickly enough. Next, she regarded Regina with a can-you-put-a-move-on? look on her face.

Returning to her mixture, Regina read the next ingredient on the list.

Gwen moaned when she saw what it was.

“Damir swears by this,” Regina assured.

“Uh-huh. What’s the mode of delivery?”

Regina stopped pouring the cayenne pepper. Somehow, she’d forgotten to ask Damir that, simply assuming they’d drink it.

“Can’t be injection,” Gwen mumbled. “You put that in anyone’s veins and they’re facing a very nasty death.”

“Maybe not,” Nikoli said. “My physiology and Kuma’s are different from yours and Regina’s.”

“Which means there are two ways to take this?” Gwen asked. “Do we even know? Are we certain about anything concerning this so-called antidote?”

Before Regina could answer, the first notes of Kelly Clarkson's latest hit song sounded.

Gwen pulled her cell phone from her jeans pocket and looked at the screen. "I gotta take this." Pacing as Kuma was, she spoke into the phone, "Why are you calling? What's wrong?"

Kuma went to her. "Who is it? What happened?"

"Staci, and I don't know. Talk," Gwen ordered the girl. She listened to whatever Staci said, then frowned and shook her head. "No, Kuma and I are all right. We're where we're supposed to be. The guy isn't a ruler. He's a

scientist. He's going to help us. What?" She listened again, her frown deepening. "No, he's not forcing me to say that. It's the truth. Why are you panting? What has Teeko been doing to you?"

Kuma's steps slowed. Lifting his face to the ceiling, he breathed hard.

"Don't tell me he's doing nothing," Gwen barked into the phone. "If he does anything to hurt you, I'll—what?" She listened again and sighed. "I don't know how much longer we'll be, but we're okay, all right? Take care of yourself. Tell Teeko he had better keep you safe. See you later. Bye."

She pushed the phone back into her

pocket and regarded Kuma. Regina noted how the werewolf pretended not to notice Gwen's scrutiny or displeasure.

"I'll be through with this in a few minutes," Regina said, grabbing the next ingredient. "You can take the whole batch."

"No," Gwen said.

Regina spoke as gently as she could. "It's all right. I'll whip up another bowl for Nikoli and—"

"That's not why I'm saying no," Gwen interrupted, gesturing to the bowl. "No way in hell am I just taking that with me and using it. I've changed my mind."

Chapter Twelve

With Gwen's pronouncement, she saw the tension drain from Kuma's shoulders. He probably thought she'd decided against hunting the guards.

Fat chance.

Regina seemed confused. Nikoli appeared pleased that he was going to get his kitchen and woman back from the intruders who'd forced their way in.

Kuma took Gwen's hand, squeezing her fingers, no doubt ready to lead her back home so they could do things his way.

Regina spoke before the others did,

“What do you mean? You can’t refuse to take this. It’s the only way the guards’ darts won’t affect you.”

“We don’t know that,” Gwen argued. “We won’t until we test it.”

Kuma’s fingers loosened around hers. “What are you talking about?”

She spoke to Regina. “Call Damir, ask her how to make the tranquilizer. Once we have, you’ll inject me with it; then I’ll swallow the antidote, testing whether it works or not.”

“No,” Kuma snapped.

“It’s the only way,” Gwen said quietly, trying to reason with him. Again,

she asked Regina, “Please call Damir.”

Kuma stepped away, turning his back to them.

Gwen hoped to God he wasn't planning to take off. If he tried, she'd have to threaten him with her gun—which probably wouldn't faze him at all—and that would leave her with the only other weapon she had, distracting him with a whole lot of sex to keep him here. No way was she going to lose him now that he was in her life.

“Go on,” Nikoli said to Regina, “call Damir.”

“I want to listen in,” Gwen said and offered her phone.

Waving it away, Regina headed for the hall. “I’ll set up my computer in here so we can all hear what she says.”

Gwen went to the kitchen door, standing between it and Kuma. If he bolted for the front entrance, she’d be in deep shit. By the time she got there, he’d be out on the street, running to who knew where, possibly gone forever.

She begged as she’d never done with another man before, “Kuma, whatever you’re thinking, don’t leave.”

His entire body seemed to tighten.

“I need you to be here for me... please,” she said.

He turned his face to the side and glanced at the kitchen wall, rather than her. Gwen waited for him to bitch, whine, or growl like the animal he was.

Kuma pressed his lips together as though he didn't trust what he wanted to say.

"I'll have this set up in a sec," Regina said, hurrying back into the room with her computer.

Minutes later, Gwen stood behind Regina's chair. Kuma remained to the side, which still gave him an adequate view of the screen. Using Skype, Regina made the call.

Gwen gaped at the image that came on

the screen. She glanced from it to Nikoli and back, comparing features. The guy on the computer could have been Nikoli's double except for their differing ages and the nasty scar on the older man's face.

“Hi,” Regina said.

The man nodded once, his attention on Gwen. Although he betrayed no outward emotion, Gwen saw something in his eyes. Curiosity? Panic? Leaning down, she whispered in Regina's ear. “Is that Nikoli's father?”

“No.” Regina spoke as softly. “All the males on E2 have the same physical features.”

Gwen wasn't about to ask why or comment on how lucky they were to be so good-looking. "Who is he?"

"Meelo, Damir's mate." Regina turned back to the screen and addressed him. "There's no need for concern. This is Gwen and Kuma." She gestured to the werewolf. "They need our help against Vakar's guards. I have to talk to Damir about the antidote I'm preparing."

Gwen's shock was just as great when the woman came on camera. Despite being fifty or so, she was freaking gorgeous.

Anxious to get this show on the road, Gwen spoke before Regina could. "Hi,

we've made your antidote, but we need to test it on the tranquilizer the guards use. What's in the stuff they put in their darts?"

The woman didn't blink or move a muscle. She might as well have been a statue.

Gwen whispered to Regina again, "What's wrong with her?"

"Nothing. The people on E2 were trained never to show emotion."

Sounded like the white-bread world Gwen's biological father had come from. "Will she help us?"

Regina turned back to the screen and

addressed her. “We really need those ingredients.”

“Of course.” The older woman gave up the goods with absolutely no inflection in her tone, despite what was in the mixture.

“You’re certain about this?” Gwen asked as she studied the list that Regina had written.

“Yes,” Damir said.

She sounded as though she had no reservations at all or couldn’t have cared less about any of this. Gwen cleared her throat and plowed ahead. “Would Kuma take the antidote differently than I would?”

With his name, he moved closer to the screen.

Damir registered no surprise at seeing him.

“He’s a werewolf from E4,” Gwen offered.

Still no reaction.

“How would he use the antidote?” she pressed.

“Injection would be best,” Damir said. “Though I advise you and Regina to take it by oral means alone.”

“Regina’s not going to be taking it,” Nikoli muttered, his attention on the device he continued to calibrate.

Kuma snorted, the sound telling Gwen he didn't expect that she'd be testing it either.

We'll see. “Thanks for your help,” she said to Damir. When Regina ended the call, Gwen lifted the list. “Do you have these ingredients here?”

“All except for numbers three and six.”

“I don't want you going out to get them,” Nikoli said, frowning at Regina.

“Not a problem,” Gwen assured. “I'll go get—”

“We will,” Kuma cut in.

She smiled. He didn't. Gwen fought a

sigh. “Fine, we’ll both go, and then we’ll come back here with them.”

Kuma’s expression said he didn’t much like her plan.

“Where’s the nearest supermarket?” Gwen asked Regina.

“About three miles. Did you drive here?”

“No. Kuma and I walked.”

Regina went to a series of hooks on the wall and pulled off a ring of keys. “Take my car. Wait.” She held the ring to her chest. “You do know how to drive, don’t you?”

“I learned when I was fifteen. Since

my last car died, I haven't been able to afford the payments, upkeep and insurance on another one."

Regina bit her bottom lip.

"Want to see my license?" Gwen asked.

"Drive slowly," Regina said. "Don't run any red lights. If a cop stops you—God, you have no idea what problems that would bring."

"Don't you worry. I've worked on more cops than you can imagine in the ER. Most of them know me. Those who don't, know the ones I've saved. I'll be fine. We'll be fine. Kuma and I."

She wiggled her fingers, wanting those damn keys.

Regina finally handed them over, along with enough cash for the purchases and directions to the store. “My car’s out front, the black BMW.”

“Thanks.” Gwen led the way down the hall, followed by Kuma and Regina. The woman watched them from the front door, hand to her throat, as if they were her children about to go out on a prom date that would end in tragedy.

Kuma followed Gwen to the driver side. At his uncertain expression, she realized he wasn’t being protective. He’d never been in a vehicle before and

didn't know what to do.

“Go around to the other side.” With her finger, she directed him there. “When you hear a clicking sound, that means I’ve opened the doors. Grab the handle and pull it toward you.”

Inside the vehicle, Gwen showed him how to put on his seat belt.

He frowned as it tightened around his body. Clutching it in his fist, he tried to rip it off.

“Hey, stop,” Gwen said. “It won’t hurt you.”

“It’s trapping me.” He yanked it up to pull it off his chest and over his head. “I

don't want to be trapped.”

Of course not. He'd witnessed what had happened to those in his pack when the guards or rulers had captured them on E4.

“Hey, hey,” Gwen said more softly this time, her hand on his. “I won't let anything happen to you. We have to wear these things, or the authorities could stop us. Look down here.” She directed his attention to the release button. “When you want to be free, all you have to do is this.”

She depressed it, and the belt slid across his lap.

Still breathing hard, he stared at the

limp nylon restraint.

“You control when you want to be free,” Gwen assured. “No one’s going to —”

A sharp rap on his window startled her, stealing the rest of her words.

Regina bent at the waist and spoke through the glass. “What’s wrong?”

Gwen swallowed and shook her head. “Nothing.” She talked loudly enough for Regina to hear. “Just getting used to the seat belts.”

Kuma fooled with his, locking and unlocking it. At last, he smiled and regarded Regina as though she was

intruding on his domain.

The woman straightened and backed away.

“Since you’ve never been in a car before,” Gwen said to him, “the forward movement might be a bit surprising. But there’s nothing to be concerned about, I’m a good driver. No tickets, no points on my license.”

“I don’t understand.”

She patted his knee. “We’re going to be fine. Hang on if you want. It might make you feel better.”

“Hang on?”

Gwen clutched the sides of her seat to

show him what to do.

Once Kuma was gripping the supple leather, she started the car, put it into gear and pulled away from the curb.

His feet slammed into the floor, clearly trying to stop the vehicle.

“Easy now,” she said, driving so slowly the few people outside glanced up and watched. “I’ll have to go faster or we’re going to bring attention to ourselves. You going to be okay?”

With his fingers digging into the seat, Kuma nodded.

Gwen accelerated down the street, following Regina’s directions to the

store. At the first red light, she rolled to an ultra-gentle stop and glanced over, staring at Kuma's face. "You still all right?"

His eyes were wide. He grinned. "I want to do this. I want to make this thing go forward as you're doing."

"It goes backwards too. We call that reverse."

"Show me," he demanded.

Gwen leaned over and kissed his cheek, enjoying the feel of his beard-roughened skin, his clean yet musky male scent. "I will...in the store's parking lot."

Before their time together ended—fifty or so years from now—she was going to teach him how to drive, watch TV, gorge on junk food. In other words, enjoy life in this realm with her right beside him because all the fucking guards here would be dead, while those on E4 would be too afraid to cross over again.

“They’re going to be all right,” Nikoli said.

Chewing the side of her thumb, Regina stared at the wall phone, no doubt expecting the thing to ring with the worst news possible. Gwen and Kuma

had been in an accident or caused one. Cops were swarming all over the wreckage, running the plates, figuring out to whom the vehicle belonged. Detectives, perhaps Sheehan and Goddard, were on their way here to question Regina on why Gwen and Kuma had been using her car. The detectives would want to know who those two were, since they were uncooperative or unconscious. Worse, they'd want to know what species Kuma was given that the EMTs noticed his fingerprints didn't match anything anyone had ever seen on this—

Stop it. Before Nikoli started to frighten himself, he left the table and

gathered Regina into his arms, needing her comfort as much as she needed his. “They haven’t been gone that long.”

She slumped against him. “Nearly an hour. They only had to buy two things. That’s all. The store’s just three miles away.”

“Could be it’s busy. Or maybe they had to go to another store because the ingredients weren’t at the first one.”

“No, you’re wrong.” Regina pressed closer. “We’re not talking about them having to buy something exotic like caviar. It’s everyday stuff that’s always there. We have to go after them. See what’s happened.”

“How? We don’t have another car.”

A low moaning sound poured from her. She dug her fingers into his back. “I shouldn’t have given Gwen my keys. I should have driven them. This is all my fault.”

“Hey.” Nikoli eased back and cupped Regina’s face in his hands. “I’m the one who crossed over and brought all of this crap on you. If anyone should be blamed, it’s me.”

She frowned. “Don’t say that. Ever.” She covered his hands with hers. “Where are the other devices you made? Promise me you’ll go with me if we have to escape. I don’t want any heroics

from you. I want to know that you're going to be with me. That you'll never leave—”

The front doorbell chimed, cutting off her words, making her flinch. “Oh shit. Who could that be? What if it's the police? Oh Jesus, do you think it could be Sheehan and Goddard? Grab your device.”

Nikoli didn't move. “Even if it is them, which isn't likely, we can't leave Gwen and Kuma to fend for themselves.”

Regina's expression changed, as though she'd just remembered them. “Grab the damn thing anyway, just in

case you have to use it. If you do, once you're in another part of the city, or another state or country on this realm, you can help Gwen and Kuma from there."

"And leave you here alone? No."

"Dammit, I can deal with the police. Now, get your stupid device."

"Stupid is right. It's calibrated to take the guards to E3. You want me to go—"

"Grab another one you made." She glanced over at the sound of a fist hammering against the front door. "Hurry."

"Maybe it's Gwen and Kuma

returning finally.”

“And they’re pounding on the door? Why, when Gwen has the key to it?”

She refused to see any possibility unless it was bad. Deciding not to argue, Nikoli went into the pantry and pulled another instrument from an empty container of oatmeal. “Wait.” He caught up with Regina at the kitchen doorway and grabbed her wrist to stop her. “I’ll answer it.”

“Uh-uh. We’re in this together.” With surprising strength, she broke free and ran into the hall.

Nikoli followed, stopping as Regina did just shy of the front door. Despite the

thickness of the stained-glass window, he could still see a bit of the street, the front of her BMW.

“It’s them,” he said. “I see your car out front.”

Regina yanked the door open and bitched, “Where in the hell have you been? Why didn’t you use the key?”

Gwen’s brows lifted. She glanced over both shoulders as though she feared someone outside might be listening. Leaning toward Regina, she said, “I didn’t want to just barge in. This isn’t my house.”

“Why have you been gone so long? What happened?”

“Nothing. I was teaching Kuma how to drive.”

“What?” Regina snapped.

Gwen made a face. “Take it easy, all right? It was only for ten minutes or so.”

On her toes, Regina craned her neck to see past the woman. “Did you hit anything? Did you bang up my car?”

“Of course not. Do you think I’d bring that kind of attention to us?”

Regina sank to her heels. “Like teaching him how to drive?”

“It’s all right,” Nikoli cut in, squeezing Regina’s shoulder. “No harm done.” He sensed Gwen’s only purpose

was to give Kuma a bit of pleasure, something he might not experience again if things went badly in his hunt for the guards.

“Let’s go inside,” Nikoli said.

Gwen headed that way. Kuma continued to regard the BMW.

“Come on,” Gwen said to him.

He remained on the front porch, clearly enthralled by the car. “I want one of those.”

Nikoli suppressed a smile. He tapped the werewolf’s arm to get his attention. Kuma reacted instantly, shoulders drawn in, teeth bared. Unafraid, Nikoli said,

“You need to come inside now. Gwen will let you drive the car again later.”

Regina frowned, “What?”

Taking the grocery bag from Gwen, Nikoli handed it to Regina. “Here you go. Everything you need for the mixture.”

In the kitchen, Gwen hovered near Regina, finally taking over once the mixture was complete. “I work with drugs all the time. You don’t, all right? I just want to make certain this is done correctly since I’ll be injecting myself with it.”

“No,” Kuma said, moving closer. “Test it on me.”

Gwen filled another syringe. “Maybe later.”

“Now,” he insisted.

She shook her head.

“Then I’ll do it myself.”

She blocked him with her arm, keeping him from taking one of the syringes. “I don’t want you hurt.”

“And you think I want that for you?”

“I know what I’m doing. Stay back.” She pushed his arm away.

He grabbed her wrist.

“Hey, you’re hurting me.”

“No, I’m not,” he growled.

Gwen twisted her arm, trying to get free. “Dammit, let go.”

Kuma’s face darkened. “No.”

She tried her earlier maneuver, pushing all of her weight into him. This time, it didn’t move the werewolf at all. Gwen growled, “I swear, I’m going to kick you in the balls.”

“Stop it, both of you,” Regina snapped.

They didn’t. Gwen continued to struggle as Kuma refused to release her.

To move this along, Nikoli grabbed a syringe, drove the needle into his arm and depressed the plunger.

“Oh my God,” Regina shouted. “What are you doing?”

He opened his mouth to speak but couldn't gather enough strength to say the words. Around him, the room blurred. Regina and the others became smudges of color, without definition.

Nikoli's legs were no longer able to hold his weight. He felt his body sinking to the floor, then stopping before he hit the linoleum, a strong arm suddenly around his torso. Was Kuma holding him? Probably. From what seemed a great distance, Nikoli heard Regina begging him to be all right, not to leave her.

As though he ever could. Hadn't he proven his devotion repeatedly? Hadn't he given up his people, his world for her? Didn't she know...?

His thoughts paused at Regina shouting something Nikoli couldn't understand. Her words were too fast, his thoughts too sluggish. As though in answer, Gwen said something. Kuma spoke next, far calmer than either woman.

Nikoli tried to vocalize, but moving his mouth wasn't something he could do. He frowned—or at least he thought he did—at a small pricking sensation on his arm, another injection, similar to that of a bee sting. During the summer, he'd

experienced that for the first time and marveled at the pain such a tiny creature could bring. On E2, there were no insects or other pests. Scientists had eliminated them millennia before to make the dimension as perfect as possible. Odd that it also made his realm too sterile, without vibrancy or passion.

“Nikoli,” Regina said, patting his cheeks. “Can you hear me?”

He could, when seconds before he hadn't been able to distinguish her words. Not only that, he now saw her clearly, his fogginess and lethargy gone. Heat and energy pulsed through him. He knew without question he could run for hours. Pushing to his feet, he shoved

Kuma's arm away. "I'm fine. Better than I've ever been."

"Your face is red," Regina cried, then shouted at Gwen, "What's that mean?"

"I'm not sure. Let me check him out." She placed her fingers on the inside of his wrist where Sazaar had once bit him, wanting to turn Nikoli as the vampire Andris had turned her.

Nikoli pulled his hand away. She grabbed his wrist again. "Don't move," she ordered.

"Why? What are you doing?"

She continued to look at the clock on the wall. "Taking your pulse. Be quiet,

please.”

Regina edged closer but didn't say anything. Neither did Kuma.

“Your heart rate's a bit fast,” Gwen finally said, releasing him, “but that could be your different physiology. You really feel all right?”

Nearly as good as he did after having made love with Regina. “That antidote's amazing. I want to try it again.”

“Not for the hell of it,” Regina said, putting herself between him and the counter. “We don't know what the long-term effects will be.” She spoke to Gwen. “What are they?”

“Nothing that I know of.”

“And what you don’t know of?”
Regina prodded.

“Even meth takes more than one hit to damage a person’s system. Just keep him away from this unless there’s no other choice except to use it.”

“Is that really necessary?” Nikoli mumbled, surprised he was even asking, amazed he wanted the antidote so badly.

“Yep, it is.” Gwen patted his arm as though she understood what he was going through. “Be grateful it works on your people, with that including Kuma. Now, we’ll see if it works on me.”

Once more, the werewolf stopped Gwen from taking a syringe. “Don’t.”

“I have to.” Her expression went from determined to troubled. “There’s no other choice.”

He softened his tone as she had. “You asked me not to leave, and I didn’t. I’m asking you not to do this or come with me when I hunt for guards.”

Gwen ran her fingers over his jaw, sighing as she did. “I’m sorry, but I can’t let you do it alone. Let go of me so I can test it.”

“I can’t do that. I won’t.”

“I will,” Regina said.

Nikoli shouted, “Wait.”

Too late. She’d already injected herself with the tranquilizer, reacting as he did, her limbs going slack, her body dropping to the floor.

Nikoli caught her. He yelled at Gwen, “Give me the antidote.”

She knocked a mug off the counter in her haste to get to the liquid. The earthenware shattered on the floor.

“Hurry,” Nikoli shouted.

Gwen cried, “I don’t know how much to get.” She dipped a cup into the mixture and shoved it at him, her hands shaking. “Don’t let her take more than a

sip of it.”

Nikoli brought the cup to Regina’s lips, praying that the mixture wouldn’t harm her. Why in the hell had she injected herself? What had she been thinking? Didn’t she know if anything happened to her, he’d die? He’d have no reason to continue living?

“Take just a bit,” he ordered and tipped the cup.

The mixture dribbled over the sides of her mouth, slack from the first drug.

Nikoli shook her. “Swallow.”

At last, she did. The change was instantaneous. Color returned to her

face, her muscles tensed. As he had, she pushed to a standing position and made a face.

“What is it?” Nikoli asked.

Gwen edged closer and touched Regina’s arm. “What’s wrong?”

She shivered. “That stuff tastes god-awful. Ewwwww.”

“But that’s it?” Gwen asked.

“Yeah.” Regina wiped her mouth off with the back of her hand, then grinned. “I feel great.”

“Awesome...but still, let me check, all right?” Gwen took Regina’s pulse as she had Nikoli’s.

“Is it too fast?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Perfect.” She spoke to Regina, “Are you craving it as Nikoli did?”

He answered before Regina could. “I’m not any longer.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Gwen frowned. “Don’t lie to me. This is important.”

“I know, and I’m not lying.” As quickly as the craving had hit, it was now gone. Had Damir realized the power this mixture had over people and included something in it to counteract the lingering effects? “What about you?” Nikoli asked Regina. “Do you still want

it?”

She kept running her tongue over her lips, her expression worsening by the minute. “No way. It tastes too crappy.”

“But it works,” Gwen said. “Whoo!” Clapping her hands, she danced in place. “I have what I need to fight and stop those SOB guards.”

Nodding, Regina went to the sink and scooped water into her mouth.

Kuma said nothing. He didn’t have to. His pissed expression told Nikoli the werewolf was not pleased with Gwen’s continued involvement.

Chapter Thirteen

Gwen slid three antidote-filled vials into her hoodie's right pocket, along with four syringes for Kuma's use. She patted her left pocket, comforted by her new container of pepper spray and the device Nikoli had calibrated for her. That was several days ago. Seemed like a lifetime.

Unwilling to dwell on what might or might not happen in the next few hours, she made certain her revolver was secure in her jean's waistband. If a guard gave her shit despite the antidote and her ability to open a portal, all she had to do was reach behind herself, pull

out the weapon and blow the SOB's head off. Then live with herself for having killed someone, no matter how much he may have deserved it.

She sighed, then shrugged. Had to be done. This was war.

Kuma watched her, arms crossed over his muscular chest, his shoulder propped against her kitchen door, blocking it.

He wasn't going to make this easy. Well, neither would she. Gwen figured she could always go out the front or escape through numerous windows if need be, because she was doing what she had to this evening. She'd hunt the guards, finding one, perhaps several, and

would send them all to hell, otherwise known as E3.

Staci handed Teeko two T-bone steaks for him to eat raw or to cook as he liked. To that, she added a container of sour-cream-and-onion Pringles, for the human side of him. Teeko focused on Kuma and Gwen rather than the food, his expression as wary as Staci's.

“Guys,” Staci said at last, “you have to quit fighting.”

“We're not,” Gwen assured. “Kuma's not even speaking to me. He stopped several days ago even before we got back from Nikoli and Regina's house. Isn't that right, babe?”

He muttered, “You should be at the hospital working.”

“I’ve got tons of vacation time saved up. I’ve told you repeatedly, I’m using it. No law against that.”

He bared his teeth. “You’re not going out there again. I won’t allow it.”

Although Gwen enjoyed his macho shit in bed, submitting as they both liked to his raw masculinity, no way would he win this battle. “You don’t get a vote. It’s my life.”

He looked like he wanted to scream. “I can do this alone.” Uncrossing his arms, he went to her. “I don’t need you out there with me.”

“The hell you don’t. I’m the bait, remember?” She gestured to herself. “Put on my tightest jeans. These suckers are so snug I can barely breathe. I wore make-up too.” She batted her lashes and licked her reddened lips.

“I don’t like it,” Kuma growled. “You don’t need it.”

Aw, such a nice thing to say.

“No matter how you try to change yourself, you’re not the type they want,” he continued. “That’s why none of them have shown up these last few days.”

Oh really. She was back to being dog meat again? Gwen didn’t buy it for a minute. “Tell that to the first guard you

ripped apart. I was good enough for him even though I'm not girly like Staci."

"Do you guys want me to do this?" Staci asked.

"No!"

Gwen, Kuma and Teeko had spoken as one.

Staci's face pinked up. She regarded Teeko from beneath her lashes, her expression all feminine and soft. It was obvious she liked his determination to protect her and had no trouble bowing to his will.

Gwen fought the urge to roll her eyes or fake a gag. "This is all your fault,"

she accused Kuma.

Genuine surprise crossed his face.
“Mine?”

“Don’t play dumb with me. We’ve gone out four nights now, and nothing’s happened. You think the guards find me that repulsive?”

“What are you talking about?” he growled. “You are not repulsive.”

“Yeah, I know.” She poked his chest with her forefinger. “You can’t get enough of me, right?” She stopped jabbing him in favor of stroking. The muscles in his pecs jumped.

Kuma cleared his throat and glanced

down at her fingers trailing down his chest to his jeans' waistband.

Gwen stroked his fly and cooed, "If you were any harder, you'd be in tears."

Snickering, Staci bumped Teeko's shoulder with hers. Color rose to Kuma's face. He shot a look at his fellow werewolf as though warning him not to smile, and grabbed Gwen's hand before she reached his balls. "I know a way to fix that."

"I bet you do." She pulled her hand from his. "But I have work to do."

"No, you don't."

"Think again. Those pricks not

showing up is your fault. You're deliberately keeping us away from them."

"I didn't catch their scent. I told you that."

"You wouldn't be lying to me now, would you?"

He leaned down to her and growled, "Have you heard of more young women who've gone missing? There haven't been any these last days."

"That we know about," she argued. "If the guards snatched a prostitute, the girl's pimp isn't going to report her missing to the police, now is he?"

Kuma regarded her, then exchanged a glance with Teeko. The younger werewolf shrugged, clearly not following what Gwen had said.

She rubbed her temple. “A pimp’s a guy who forces a young woman to have sex with men who pay him, the pimp, for —”

“I don’t care what he is.” Kuma rested his hands on her biceps, his touch firm yet gentle, not wanting to harm her. “I’m telling you the truth about the guards. We’ve been lucky not to have run into any of them. It may not last. I don’t want you to do this. You could be injured so badly even my healing powers wouldn’t be able to save you—that is, if they

work at all on your kind. You could be killed outright. I couldn't survive that."

His pain was so obvious Gwen sagged into him, wishing she could behave as he wanted, but she couldn't. They'd never be free if she gave up now. Always, they'd be looking over their shoulders, waiting for some prick from E4 to either kill him and her or to snatch more unsuspecting young women.

What did their families think? How hard did they grieve? To lose a child because of illness or an accident was something most parents could barely survive. Not knowing what had happened to a daughter, not even having the girl's remains had to be the worst

thing possible. A never-ending hell where parents were always hoping the next phone call or knock on the door would be her. That she hadn't really disappeared. She couldn't possibly be dead.

And what about the young women? What in the hell were they going through on E4 and E5?

Gwen didn't want to consider something so horrible as being anyone's sex slave...she needed to stop this insanity. Snuggling closer to Kuma, she touched the numerous hickeys she'd left on his throat, marking him as a teenage girl might have done. "I'll be fine," she whispered, "as long as you're there with

me. You'll see. We'll pick off those creeps one by one. We'll get this to end for good."

Kuma ran his hand down her back, sending a delicious shiver through her. "What if we don't?"

That wasn't a question Gwen wanted to hear. If not them, then who? No way could they go to the police, nor were the guards going to stop on their own. From what she'd heard about Vakar, that maniac would never let them. These last days the guards had just been craftier, snatching females who wouldn't be missed as readily...those forgotten and unwanted by society. No different from Gwen if she'd followed her mother's

life path.

“Come on,” she murmured and gave him a bear hug. “Let’s go hunting. Please.”

He muttered something beneath his breath but let go of her.

“Be careful,” Staci said, just as she had the last few nights.

Gwen embraced her cousin, sensing the girl’s never-ending concern. She whispered, “How many times do I have to tell you there’s no reason to worry. Kuma’s not going to let anything happen to me. Is Teeko treating you all right?”

“Oh God yeah—don’t be mad, okay?”

“Mad? If he’s who you want, I’m happy for you.” She’d kept her voice low so the guys wouldn’t overhear. “But please make certain Teeko also keeps his mind on business, which is protecting you.”

“He’s doing that, believe me. And I’m protecting him.”

Gwen held back a sigh. Staci was such a lightweight she’d have trouble fighting off a half-dead Chihuahua. “One more thing.”

The girl eased back, her beautiful features tight with worry. “What?”

Gwen whispered, “If you two lose your heads and go at it in here as you’ve

done the last couple of nights, make sure to wipe everything down before Kuma and I get back. We're tired of eating in bed."

A vivid blush colored Staci's face. Screwing up her mouth to suppress a smile, she nodded.

Gwen went to Kuma and offered him two of the syringes along with one of the vials should she be unable to get to those she carried.

To her relief, he took the items as he hadn't before, stashing them into his jeans' front pocket.

"Everything's going to be all right," she promised.

Without comment, he led the way outside.

The evening was cool and damp, the same as the first night Kuma had been with Gwen, the scents muted by the soupy air. What had been a steady mist turned to drizzle as they moved in an easterly direction, remaining in the less populated parts of the city. Places where the guards could more easily stalk their prey.

Kuma increased his pace, taking the lead as he had insisted to Gwen. He needed to detect the guard's scent before the man came anywhere near. It was

Kuma's intent to put himself between her and danger.

Of course, she'd argued with him. "You should be behind me, following in the shadows. The prick needs to believe I'm alone so he leaves his hiding place."

He countered, "The guard has to think you're unprotected; otherwise, he won't make his move. With me in front of you, he'll wait until I'm well past and thinks I won't notice anything."

That would be the guard's downfall. Once Kuma was within range of the man, smelling his stench despite the soggy night, he'd transform. He'd take the filth down wherever he hid without involving

Gwen at all. After he'd slaughtered the guard, Kuma would allow her to activate the device so he could toss the man's body into the portal, sending it to E3.

He'd protect Gwen whether she wanted him to or not, as he was doing now. With his acute sense of hearing, Kuma caught each of her footfalls from behind and every breath she took even as his attention remained on what lay ahead.

Rows of houses flanked both sides of the street, several in disrepair, many boarded up and dark. On the shadowed porches, Kuma saw the addicts, men and women unconscious from the drugs they'd taken, their bodies curled in fetal

positions against the night's chill. He didn't wonder why they hadn't sought shelter inside, guessing they feared death or injury from whomever was beyond those closed doors.

E4's jungle had always seemed a treacherous place to him, its lush beauty hiding so much terror that took the ones he loved. He'd learned this realm was no different. No matter where one went on this planet, there would always be predators and prey. Tonight, though, he'd be the one who killed.

He reached an intersection. No cars moved down the street. Its damp asphalt glistened like thousands of stars beneath the streetlights. One flickered wildly,

threatening to go out. The rain fell harder now. Blinking it away, Kuma took in the surroundings. Quite a number of these buildings had boarded-up windows, the same as the others they'd passed. Of those windows that still contained glass—mostly on the second and third floors—faint light glowed from inside, showing ceilings with water stains and cracked paint, bare bulbs hanging from fixtures, the inhabitants nowhere in sight, unaware or uncaring about what happened outside.

Kuma lifted his face and inhaled deeply. At that moment, the wind changed direction, swirling from behind, bringing him Gwen's sensuous, earthy

fragrance. His body weakened as it always did when he smelled her. Before he could take in his fill, the air current changed again, this time blowing from in front. With it came the scent of vegetation, cooked meat, the damp fur of dogs, cats, the stench of garbage and something else...an odor that was all too familiar and hated.

A guard.

Where?

The wind kept shifting, moving between too many obstacles, delivering the guard's scent only to snatch it away.

Kuma's pulse pounded. His muscles tensed, prepared for battle. He forced

himself to slow a bit, just short of an alley. Behind him, he heard Gwen doing the same, following his lead. He sensed her excitement, smelled her fear. They shouldn't have come out tonight. He should have used brute strength if necessary, hauling her into their room, cuffing her to the bed, kissing her long, deep and hard before he left without—

There. The guard's scent returned. Stronger now. Closer. It came from the alley.

Kuma didn't enter the dark, narrow space. Wouldn't, no matter his previous plan. If he had gone through with it, Gwen would have certainly followed him, not realizing the danger ahead.

He went past, continuing down the deserted street to take them in a circuitous route that would eventually lead them back to her house. Once there, he'd endure her bitching, somehow convincing her that he had to hunt alone.

Holding his breath, Kuma listened for sounds from behind. For the first few seconds he didn't hear Gwen moving and then he did.

She turned into the alley. *No*. Her running shoes hit a puddle. Its noise echoed against the concrete, the same as the pelting rain, making the night too loud.

Bolting after her, Kuma pulled at his

jacket and tee, removing them as quickly as he could at the mouth of the alley. Gwen was already well down it, a shadow looming behind her.

Abruptly, she stopped, as though she'd felt the guard's presence. Beads of rain glittered on her hoodie's fabric. A whistling noise broke through the others. Gwen's hand flew to her shoulder.

Had a dart struck her?

Yes. Kuma saw the vile thing embedded in her shoulder as she turned. Before he could think to move, she had the vial to her mouth, tipping her head back to drink its contents.

For Kuma, everything went still...the

rain, wind, sounds.

Gwen fell to her knees.

His belly clenched. The antidote hadn't worked on her as it had Regina?

Out of the shadows, the guard came. So did Kuma, a man now, though not for long. He tore off the rest of his clothing and began the transformation, his muscles, bones, tissues and skin white-hot with pain.

Seeing him finally, the guard gaped in shock but didn't back away, not yet noticing what Gwen was doing.

She had only pretended weakness from the drug. With the guard's attention

elsewhere, she'd pulled out the device and now pointed it as Nikoli had shown her. The side of the abandoned building wavered and liquefied. Behind it was blinding light.

Quicker than Kuma believed possible, Gwen jumped to her feet and rammed her body into the guard's. Not expecting her attack, he stumbled back, his muscular arms windmilling. With her shoulder, she slammed into him again. His mouth opened in a wide O as he fell into the portal. Its vacuum pulled at Gwen's clothing. She held on to a metal trash container to keep the void from sucking her inside. The guard was no more than a dark speck in all the

brightness as she ran her thumb over the instrument's controls, sealing the opening.

Within less than a minute, the guard was on his journey to the land of the dead, the alley again dark and quiet except for the rain and their rough breaths.

Gwen glanced ahead and behind herself. She lifted her face and regarded the buildings, telling Kuma she needed to make certain they were truly alone.

He knew they were, not catching any intruder's scent.

With her attention still darting up and down the alley, she hurried to him and

whispered, “Why’d you change? Don’t you realize someone might have seen you? What’s the matter with you? The antidote worked. Tasted like shit, but it worked.” She scrunched her face as she pulled out the dart and threw it down the alley. It made a small pinging sound upon hitting the concrete.

Gwen leaned closer and whispered again, “I wanted the guard to think I was vulnerable. At no time was I in danger. I had everything under control. Still do.”

If that were true, then she was doing far better than he was. Kuma’s heart pounded so hard he could barely keep from falling down. His fear for her had drained him of too much strength. For the

moment, he couldn't revert to human form and scream at her for taking such a foolish risk.

Crouching next to him, she asked, "Are you all right?"

Kuma bared his teeth to let her know exactly what he was feeling—the best he could do without language.

She made a face, then glanced over, searching the shadows. "Do you smell another guard? Is that why you're not changing back?"

Kuma continued to pant.

Wearing a confused expression, Gwen regarded him. "There's no one else out

here, is there?”

He swung his head from side to side to tell her there wasn't.

Her shoulders slumped as though all her anxiety had drained away. “Thank God.” She fingered moisture from her face, smearing her make-up. “It went down easier than I thought. Did you see what I did to that SOB? Damn, he looked just like that first creep who attacked me. They could have been twins, you know?”

She expected an answer when he was still in this form, helpless because of his worry over her? Kuma bared his teeth again.

Gwen stroked his head as she would a docile pet. “We can talk about what happened later. How great I was.” Her gaze turned inward as though she were reliving it. She grinned. “Where’d you leave your clothes?” After a brief perusal of the area, she curled her upper lip. “Aw crap, you dropped them in the biggest puddles here. They’re all wet and muddy now. Dammit, Kuma, you need to be more careful. At the very least, you should allow me to do my thing.”

A warning growl poured from the base of his throat.

Ignoring it, Gwen retrieved his garments. “Go on,” she whispered.

“Change back and put these on before anyone sees—”

She didn't finish. Probably couldn't, given her surprise. Faster than he'd ever done before, Kuma finally returned to human form, his body aching with the too-quick transformation. He forced his pain away with continuing anger at what she'd done.

“Wow.” Gwen gave him an approving smile as she regarded his nudity. “That was something. Here.” She offered his clothes.

Kuma yanked them from her and threw the garments aside.

Gwen arched one brow at them

landing in yet another puddle; then she stared as he grabbed her wrists and used his weight to push her into the side of a building, keeping her against the structure's gritty façade.

“Okay, I get it,” she whispered, “you’re not happy.”

He growled.

“Make that pissed,” she amended and frowned. “But this was all your fault.”

Words failed him at her ludicrous reasoning. He tightened his fingers around her wrists. Not enough to harm, but to let her know he meant business.

Pearls of rain clung to her lashes. She

blinked them away and gave him a look that said she wasn't about to back down. "You smelled the guard, don't you dare deny it. You knew he was in this alley, which meant you were supposed to turn down it. That's what you promised you'd do. But no. You decided to change our plans. You were going to lead me in circles tonight just as you have all the other—"

"Shut up."

She glared at him. "Excuse me?"

"You talk too much."

"And you don't talk enough."

"I said, shut up." Before she could

offer another word, Kuma kissed her, deep and brutal, just as she liked, and didn't stop until she was limp with arousal. Holding her wrists above her head in one hand, he used his other hand to push her clothing out of the way, and cupped her breasts. All of his air spilled from him in a hard sigh. He had to fight for control.

Her skin was much too warm, incredibly soft, moist with the rain. Wasn't enough. He needed more. Everything. Turning her to face the building, he tugged down Gwen's jeans and panties, running his hand over the furrow between her cheeks. His breath caught. Her skin here was hotter than he

recalled, sweeter to the touch, coaxing him to explore further. He did, reaching her damp folds.

A wanton grunt escaped Gwen. She didn't resist Kuma in the least as he directed her to all fours. Despite their exposure to the rain, cold, and whoever might pass by, she lifted her naked ass in invitation. Her skin appeared lighter, vulnerable in the murky light that came from the lamps on the street. On his knees, Kuma cupped her buttocks and kissed them, a gesture of worship for this small part of her.

She purred.

He murmured, "I should punish you

for what you did. I should spank you so fucking hard you wouldn't be able to sit for a week, just like that man did to the woman in the movie you showed me. What did you call it?"

"An erotic adventure, though some refer to it as porn." Gwen moved her ass back and forth, taunting him with it. "Go on, do your worst. Tie me up too. Make me pay."

He wanted to make both of them happy. He had to make certain tonight would be the last time she pulled such a dangerous stunt.

On a strangled moan, Kuma entered Gwen, thrusting as hard as he dared,

entering her completely. If there was a perfect place in this realm, this was it, him deep within her sheath. Hot, tight, so very warm she was. Gwen seemed to agree. She grunted her approval, which enticed him even more. He touched her clit, stimulating her as he pumped without restraint. The excitement of being inside her again, the relief that they'd escaped danger enriched the act.

Around them, the night's activities continued, delivering sounds Kuma had grown accustomed to. The whirr of passing vehicles, a distant siren—its shriek slicing through the night only to be cut off suddenly—a whisper of wind, the steady tap of rain. A bland background

to the sensuous noises he and Gwen made. With each of his thrusts, Kuma's body smacked into hers, a precious, needed sound. She huffed out air. Kuma struggled to take in as much as he could, barely filling his lungs.

He fought climax but still came too soon, as she did. Gasping, Kuma leaned over Gwen, cupping her breasts, warming them in his hands. Her nipples were rigid and chilled, wet from the rain. Her pussy pulsed wildly around his cock, the contractions telling Kuma she'd enjoyed herself.

Even so, he wanted to hear the words from her. He kissed her hair, damp with rain, and whispered, "Are you all

right?”

“No.”

Not expecting that answer, he held her closer. “Are you cold?”

“Turned on. I want more, dammit.” She gulped air and squeezed her muscles around his shaft.

He bit her shoulder playfully, smiling at how she wiggled. “You want me to take you again?” He could all night. He wouldn’t stop until she ordered him to do so.

Gwen looked over her shoulder, the scant light reflected in her eyes. “In bed, when we go back. Right now, I want

another fucking guard.”

She couldn't have doused Kuma's passion faster than if she'd said *you disgust me*. He frowned. “One a night isn't enough? You need to keep risking your safety?”

She sighed. “I have to have you safe too and with me...for as long as you want.”

There was no arguing with her. He recognized Gwen's building determination, her intent to see this through.

“How long do you intend to stay?” she whispered.

That question angered him further.
“Do you even have to ask?”

“Guess not.” She smiled in satisfaction, losing it quickly when she attempted to pull away and he wouldn’t allow it.

“Hey, wait,” she ordered.

He did not, taking her again, knowing she wouldn’t protest for long.

She didn’t. Gwen softened within his embrace and allowed Kuma whatever he willed, enjoying what they both required. What might be their last act of passion if events turned against them tonight.

Once Gwen made certain Kuma's clothes weren't all that wet and he assured her the night's chill didn't bother him, she insisted they resume their hunt.

During the following hour, they continued to prowl the city. No other guards attempted an attack on her or any other female. Not even the few they passed on the streets.

“Prostitutes,” Gwen whispered to him when they were well past this last group and the women couldn't overhear. “Like my mother. I lived with her until I was eight. The authorities showed up from

nowhere one day—maybe a neighbor called them, I don't know. They put me in foster care. I hated it, but it was better than what I might have faced. My mother's so-called boyfriends were beginning to get too friendly with me. God only knows what might have happened if I had stayed with..."

She didn't finish.

"What is it?" he asked, sensing her distress.

Her expression changed, as though she was recalling a painful memory. "The last day we lived together, I remember sobbing, trying to run back to her as the social workers dragged me away. I kept

waiting for her to say something. To tell them to stop. She didn't. She looked relieved." Gwen's eyes filled, but no tears fell. She ran her hand down her face, inhaled deeply and continued.

"For years, I didn't want to believe that she had never wanted or cherished me. It was too hard to accept. To this day, I'm the one who initiates contact. I've tried to stay away from her, I've tried to hate her but I can't. She's my mother. I send her as much money as I can each month to help her out."

Kuma wondered why she was telling him this. Why she'd become sad so quickly. On a hunch, he gestured to the women down the street. "Is your mother

one of them?”

“What? No.” She smiled briefly. “She’s too old to do that anymore, and she never conducted business on a street corner. Always worked out of her apartment instead. Slightly less depressing, you know?”

He didn’t. “Why?”

Gwen sighed. “Despite what my mother was doing, at least she was in her own place, not some strange man’s car.”

“These women don’t have their own places?”

“Sure, but they also have pimps. You

know, guys they're doing this for. Ones they think they love."

Even with Gwen's explanation, Kuma didn't understand a woman giving herself to men she didn't know, and all to please the one man who should have protected her the most.

"Why would their men allow them to do this?" he asked.

"Allow them? Uh-uh. It's more like they've either conned or forced these women to do this so the girls make money. You know, legal tender to buy things like food, shelter, clothing, jewelry, drugs, whatever their pimp wants or thinks he needs."

On E4, he and his pack worried about none of that, living off the land. “How do you make your money?”

“At the hospital, where I work.”

“Why don’t these women work there too?”

“They can’t.” As though she expected him to ask why, she added quickly, “It’s complicated.”

He looked back. A car stopped by one of the females, a petite woman with dark skin. Very pretty. The man behind the wheel lowered the window closest to her and said something Kuma wasn’t able to hear. She laughed a bit too hard, her sorrow and what appeared to be a

small measure of fear evident beneath her mirth. After a moment's hesitation, she climbed into the rain-sprinkled car, safe from the guards, at least for tonight.

“She didn't put on her seat belt,” Kuma observed.

Gwen laughed softly.

“What did I say?” he asked.

“Nothing. Sorry. I wasn't laughing at you.” Gwen patted his shoulder, then made a face at the mud on it. She wiped her palm off on the back of her jeans. “They won't be going far, so putting on her seat belt is the last thing on her mind.”

“Where will he take her?” Kuma asked.

“On a side street, where they won’t be seen.”

“Why not to his home—apartment—place?” Kuma wasn’t certain which word fit best. “Doesn’t he have one?”

“If he does, he probably also has a wife or girlfriend. What those on your realm call a mate.”

“Yet he asks this woman to be with him? Why?”

“He’s a selfish prick, just like the guards, hurting women rather than treating them with respect. Come on.”

She took Kuma's hand to lead him down the street. "We need to get back to business."

Chapter Fourteen

The rest of the evening proved uneventful. Gwen sensed the guards were still around, waiting, perhaps watching them, determining their next move. However, she couldn't detect them as easily as Kuma could. For once, she didn't press him on it. The slump of his shoulders as they walked back to her place told Gwen how brutal tonight's transformation had been on him.

She sucked her lower lip and wondered if his changing into a wolf then back to human form weakened his immune system or somehow damaged his DNA. Would it put him at risk for

disease? If it did, would he be able to heal himself as he had those scratches the night he'd rescued her? What if he couldn't? What if the illness was something she'd never seen, making it impossible for her to nurse him back to health? By how many years would it shorten his life?

Aw shit, why are you thinking about that now? Or ever, for that matter.

Suddenly, Gwen couldn't stop. Her mind went in too many directions, none of which she wanted it to go. How long did his kind live? He wasn't fully human. He wasn't even from this dimension. On E4, he and his pack were hunted by the guards and rulers or taken

down by one of the realm's other predators, so how long did they last if they escaped all that? He'd said E2's scientists had created his ancestors as a super species. What exactly did that mean? That he was immortal?

Maybe. But what if that only held true if he remained on E4? In this dimension, things might be different, his lifespan reduced to decades just like everyone else's. Unless his days were now measured in animal years, his heightened metabolism causing his body to break down faster, each pump of his heart bringing him closer to death.

God, don't even think that. She held back a shiver.

“What is it?” he asked, always sensitive to her smallest reaction.

Thankfully, he couldn't read her mind. She had to find a way to hunt the guards alone. Kuma was putting too much of a strain on his system by changing back and forth. That had to stop.

“I'm just a little cold,” she answered. “You okay?” Gwen rubbed his back as they reached her house.

He glanced at his filthy clothes. “I'm dirty.” He fingered the edge of her hoodie. “So are you. We should take a shower.”

He still wanted to play, despite how shitty he must have felt. God love him.

Gwen steered him toward the back of her house, entering it through the kitchen. To her surprise and relief, Teeko and Staci were fully clothed and seated at the table rather than writhing on top of it.

Staci stood so quickly her chair tipped back. Teeko caught it. “What happened?” she cried. “Where’ve you been? It’s nearly dawn. You’ve never been out that long. We thought something happened, not that we could call the cops or anything, given what you’re doing.” She continued to bounce in place. “Good God, you guys look awful. Is that blood?” She pointed at Kuma’s jeans, her hand shaking.

“It’s mud. And we’re fine,” Gwen

assured her. She directed Kuma to a chair. “Sit.”

He didn’t. “We need to take a shower.”

“You need to sit. You’re exhausted.”

“Why?” Staci circled them, taking in how crappy they looked. “What happened?”

“Did the guards attack you?” Teeko asked.

Gwen put the device on the table. “One tried. Kuma and I tossed him in the portal like he was a freaking rag doll, right, babe?”

“I transformed too fast,” he answered

Teeko and sank in the chair as though his legs wouldn't hold him any longer.

“Where does it hurt?” Gwen asked, worried all over again. “Are you experiencing more than muscular pain?”

He shook his head as he continued to rub his thighs.

“Get my Icy Hot,” Gwen ordered Staci. “And my heating pad. They're in the linen closet. *Go.*”

Staci bolted down the hall. Gwen helped Kuma out of his jacket and tee.

“I can do that,” he grumbled.

“So can I.” She handed the soiled clothing to Teeko. The younger

werewolf took them, then promptly dropped the garments on the floor.

Typical man. Gwen frowned. Teeko ignored her. *Figures.*

She dropped to her knees and took off the running shoes and socks she'd bought Kuma, perfect fits unlike the last. When she unbuttoned his new jeans and lowered the fly, he didn't argue with what she was doing. Once his jeans and the briefs she'd also purchased were on the floor with the rest of his stuff, he spread his legs, flaunting his erection.

"Here." Staci ran back into the room with the ointment and pad. "I got the—" She stopped, staring at Kuma's cock.

“You should sit over here, out of the way,” Teeko said to the girl. He pulled out the chair nearest to him. Its legs scraped against the floor, doing nothing to capture Staci’s attention.

Gwen elbowed her cousin, then inclined her head toward Teeko who was clearly jealous of his woman gawking at any male except him.

Staci dropped the items on the table and finally looked at everything in the room except Kuma.

“This will feel cold at first,” Gwen warned him, “then it’s going to get really warm. That’s okay. Nothing to be worried about. It won’t hurt you. At least

I don't think it will." She read the ingredients, having no idea what they'd do to someone from another plane. "We should test it first, just to make sure. I'll put a little bit on your shoulder—no, your hand...maybe your thumb. It might be the—"

"She talks too much," Kuma said to Teeko. "Does Staci do the same?"

The younger man nodded.

"Hey," Gwen said, lightly smacking Kuma's shoulder. "Show some respect."

"Yeah," Staci echoed.

She'd said it all breathy, like she was aroused, not insulted.

“Bring me one of the steaks,” Gwen said to her cousin.

The girl bent at the waist and studied Kuma’s face. “Is he getting a black eye?”

“No. It’s for him to eat, all right?”

“Oh. Sure.” She hurried to the fridge and back, slapping the slab of meat on the table in front of him.

Gwen resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “A plate might be nice.”

“You bet.” Staci went to get one.

With a bit of the ointment on her fingertip, Gwen wanted to smear it on his thumb but couldn’t bring herself to

do it, fearful of hurting him.

“Do you want me to eat that too?”
Kuma asked her.

She would have laughed if she hadn't been stumped for an answer. Could be with his genetics the Icy Hot would work better internally, rather than topically. “The moment I put this on your hand, tell me if it hurts, stings, burns or feels weird in any way, all right?”

He nodded solemnly.

Gwen smeared a bit of it on the side of his thumb.

Kuma regarded the area as she did. His skin didn't blister. She sighed

noisily. His head fell forward, his body slumping in the chair.

“Oh my God,” Gwen gasped, snatching back her hands.

“What did you do?” Staci cried. “Did he faint? Is he dead? We have to call 911.”

“Are you nuts?” Gwen pushed Staci’s hand away from the phone. “We can’t call for EMTs. The antidote,” she said, suddenly recalling it. “Maybe it will bring him out of—”

Teeko’s laughter interrupted her. Gwen gaped at him, then Kuma, seeing his shoulders shaking with his laughter.

Bastards. She spoke through her teeth. “So you’re all right?”

He nodded, lips pressed together as he tried to control himself.

“You think this is a joke?” Gwen snapped. “You think your survival on this plane is funny?”

Kuma sobered quickly. He regarded her for a long moment, then murmured, “I love your voice.”

At his guileless tone, heat rushed to Gwen’s face and belly. Her irritation fell away, replaced by renewed concern. “I worry about you. You transformed too fast tonight. It hurt you. I saw that on your face.”

“I’ll be fine. I won’t change so fast the next time, even if I have to kill a guard.”

Staci made a whimpering sound and dropped into a chair. With her arms folded on the table, she lowered her head to them.

Gwen couldn’t blame her. She would have liked to sleep for the next month, curled up next to Kuma in their bed, with him handcuffed to it of course. That seemed to be the only way to keep him out of trouble. “If this hurts at all, please let me know.”

She rubbed the ointment over his shoulders. He stiffened for a moment, then relaxed, no doubt because the

mixture's heat had kicked in. As well as she could, Gwen massaged his muscles, running her hands over his broad back, down his biceps, to his pecs. They flexed at her touch.

“Better?” she murmured.

“Oh yeah,” Staci said. “I think I could sleep here all night.”

Gwen exchanged a glance with Kuma. He winked. The gesture was so human and endearing, she couldn't keep from hugging him.

He cradled the side of her face and whispered, “Let's go to bed.”

Gwen's thought exactly. If she wore

him out further, he might sleep a full day, allowing her to go back out at twilight. Alone.

In the alley, Etaw stood next to Jeete, a guard new to this dimension, a mirror image of himself. Moments ago, Vakar had ordered the man here.

Jeete took in the surroundings and frowned. “You lie.”

“No.” Etaw placed his palm on the side of the building, its surface rough against his fingers. “The portal the female created *was* here. She must have gotten the device from one of the other

guards that the werewolf attacked days ago. They're working together in this. I watched them mating."

He'd seen the female's desire for the creature, his need of her. It was like nothing Etaw had witnessed in the Pleasure Palace, where rulers and guards demanded and indulged in every sexual vice while the pleasure slaves had no choice except to obey. The creature and female touched each other as though their bodies were somehow precious, not merely tools for sexual satisfaction. Their passion seemed rich and deep, not forced or faked, making Etaw envious for what they had, what he'd never known.

He might have voiced his feelings if not for the look of disbelief and disgust on Jeete's face.

Etaw reined in his emotions and spoke quickly, "Even though hours have passed, you can still feel the gateway's residual cold. It's worse than the bite of tonight's air. Go on, put your hand where I have. It's proof I'm telling you the truth."

Jeete made no move to touch the building. "Why would a female here mate willingly with one of the creatures? How could the tranquilizer not have affected her? That's never happened. You claim Huatt's dart struck her, but it must have missed."

“I know what I saw. He hit her in the shoulder. She drank something and then pretended to fall down. The man with her transformed, taking wolf form, distracting Huatt. The woman ran into him then. She pushed Huatt into the portal.”

Jeete stepped closer, crowding Etaw. “And you did nothing to stop them?”

The back of his neck prickled. Sweat rolled down it. “If I had, the werewolf would have killed me, or the woman would have also sent me into the gateway. You never would have known what had happened to Huatt and what else I learned.”

“More lies?” Jeete scowled. “The creature has a superior sense of hearing and smell. How did he not detect you?”

“I was inside that building over there.” He pointed.

Jeete regarded the structure. “Then that explains it.”

It did? “You believe me?”

“I’m repulsed by your fear, hiding while Huatt did all the work and was attacked. Coward.”

That Etaw was. He didn’t want the werewolves to tear him apart on this plane or on E4. To avoid it, he’d reasoned this out. Now all he had to do

was convince Jeete of it. “I was hunting for females inside the building when I heard Huatt in the alley. I went to that window there.” He gestured to the second floor and waited for Jeete to look up.

The moment the other guard did, Etaw continued. “Through a small separation in the boards, I was able to see what was happening. I made certain not to move, I barely breathed so I wouldn’t make any sound that the creature might hear.”

“And what of his other senses?” Jeete argued. “If what you say happened, he would have known you were here by your scent.”

“That’s not true. Listen to me, please,” Etaw begged. He had to keep Jeete from opening a portal and sending him back to E4 for torture and execution. “After Huatt was gone, his scent must have lingered in the alley, making the creature believe that it was him he smelled, not me. To a werewolf, we’d all have the same odor because we’re identical in every way. You’ve been on hunts in E4’s jungle. Those guards who’ve never been outside before are still located easily by the creatures, because they don’t distinguish one of us from the other.”

“So the werewolf didn’t detect you. That doesn’t mean you’re not a coward

for hiding here until I arrived.”

“I haven’t been hiding,” Etaw argued. “I left this place as soon as the creature and female did.”

“And it still didn’t notice you?” Jeete lifted his device.

Etaw grabbed the man’s hand to keep him from activating the instrument and opening a gateway. “Once I was out of the building, I made certain to stay downwind of the werewolf so it didn’t know I was there.”

Jeete stopped trying to free himself of Etaw’s grip. “Downwind?”

“Yes.” It was something the guards on

E4 had never considered or worried about. There, they had the advantage of their numbers, tranquilizer darts, the ruler's crossbows and escape into the Pleasure Palace if the werewolves came too close. Here, they had to be as cunning as the creatures. "With the wind blowing toward me, it took my scent away, not allowing the creature to smell my presence or approach. That allowed me to watch him and the woman without them knowing it. It allowed me to follow them and learn the biggest secret of all."

Jeete's expression flickered with surprise and skepticism. "And what is that?"

Although eager to say, for the moment,

all Etaw did was smile.

Kuma knew what Gwen was doing but wasn't of a mind to stop her until he absolutely had to.

For nearly an hour, she massaged his aching muscles, interrupting that delightful endeavor to feed him steak and the pizza he'd grown to crave, after which she told him to relax while she prepared his bath. During her absence, he told Teeko and Staci that they needed to keep Gwen safe, the same as he did. Gwen called for him finally. She'd filled the tub, encouraging him to recline in the warm, fragrant water.

His arms dangled over the sides of the fixture. Bent at the knees, his legs sagged outward, exposing his rigid cock.

Although Gwen kept sneaking peeks at his erection, she didn't encourage his arousal. With soapy hands, she washed his face and neck, then shampooed his hair, combing it with her fingers.

"I should shave you." She ran her thumbs over his bristly cheeks and down his throat.

He swallowed and sighed. "Later."

"Now."

Before she could move, Kuma grabbed her wrist.

“Let go,” she ordered.

“No. Quit fighting me.”

She didn't, still trying to free herself. It was an effort, but he finally managed to pull her on top of him, sending a wave of water over the side of the tub.

“Damn,” she complained above all the splashing sounds. “Will you stop?”

Not a chance. He kissed away her protests, determined to make her breathless and weak. Didn't take long. She pulled at her sodden clothing, wanting it off, the same as he did. Once she was nude, Kuma washed her as she'd done with him, paying particular attention to her breasts and pussy.

Gwen rested her forehead against his and moaned at him stroking her clit. “Aw God, that feels good. Don’t stop.”

He didn’t, bringing her to a quick and unrestrained orgasm, reducing whatever fight she had left, molding her into the female she was born to be with him. Lush. Provocative. Submissive...at least for a time.

Not bothering to dry either of them off, Kuma carried her from the bath to their bed. They made love until well past dawn, stopping only because he finally grew flaccid.

“Sore?” she asked.

His cock burned from him burying it

so frequently in each of her openings. A wonderful pain he needed to experience again and again. “No. You?”

“No. Sleepy?” she asked next, trying to stifle her own yawn.

Before he could lie and say no again, his stomach growled.

“You’re hungry,” Gwen said.

“Only for you.”

Despite his sentimental words, she rolled off the mattress and staggered to her feet.

Kuma pushed to a sitting position, then sagged back down, his depleted strength making it impossible for him to

remain upright. “Where are you going?”

Since it was dawn, he sensed she wouldn’t wander too far from him.

“Kitchen.” She grabbed his tee and pulled it on. The garment’s hem reached the middle of her thighs. “Be right back.”

She returned with another steak, the bacon he liked and a circular food she called meatballs.

Leaning closer, he sniffed. “Is that blood on them?” he asked.

“God, no. Marinara sauce. Eat.”

Kuma finished it all, sighing in pleasure as she rubbed the leftover sauce on his belly and groin, then licked

it off. He fell asleep without realizing he'd done so, a deep dreamless slumber he'd rarely experienced on E4. How long he was out didn't matter. The creak of a floorboard awakened him.

Quickly alert, he left the bed, and caught up with Gwen, grabbing her wrist so she couldn't leave their room. Given the streetlamp's light streaming through the darkened window, Kuma knew it was night, and she wasn't going to the kitchen to get him more food. She was dressed in a way he'd never seen before.

He frowned. "What did you do to yourself?"

She regarded the pink hoodie she

wore. On its sleeves, small decorations glittered silver in the available light. “It’s Staci’s. Don’t you worry. I asked her if I could borrow it. She’s cool with that.”

Kuma tightened his grip, his focus still on her hair, no longer short and dark but long and blonde like her cousin’s. “Answer me.”

Gwen sighed. “It’s Staci’s wig, all right? She got it after the accident because some of her hair had burned off. I thought I’d give it a try. See how I look.”

Kuma curled his upper lip as he regarded the wig. “I don’t like it.”

“Then I won’t wear it to bed, okay? You can.” With her free hand, she slapped his chest.

Such a playful gesture. Kuma struggled not to smile. “I go to bed nude.” Lifting her hand, he kissed the inside of her wrist.

Gwen curled her fingers, the tips touching his cheek.

“You were leaving,” he said, serious once more. “To go where?”

“Grocery shopping.” She leaned into him. “You ate all my food. I need to go to the store to buy more.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No.” She tried to pull her wrist from him.

Kuma wouldn't allow it. “Why not? I went with you when we needed those items to make the tranquilizer and when you bought me the clothing. When we're in the store this time, I can tell you what I want to eat.”

“I already know what that is. Just let me get it. I'll be back in a little—”

“You're dressed like Staci. Your hair's like hers. You were going to hunt guards alone while I was here asleep. Don't deny it.”

Her shoulders slumped. She muttered, “I wouldn't have to if you hadn't woken

up.”

“You’re staying, I’m going.”

“No fucking way.” Gwen tried to twist out of his grip. Before she ended up hurting herself, Kuma let go of her.

Rubbing her wrist, Gwen regarded him, her expression wary as though she was trying to determine his next move. He made none as she backed up to the door.

“I have to do this,” she said. “You’ve given me no choice, dammit. You came into my life with your wonderful smile, your tenderness, your desire for me. I don’t give a crap about the supernatural stuff or what danger I might be facing.

All I know is that I don't want this to end. I don't want to lose you. Can't you understand that? Each time you're out there, you're risking the guards finding and killing you, or someone from this plane seeing you morph into a damn werewolf. Don't you know what the authorities would do to you if they knew what you are? The guards are looking for females, not a fucking wolf. I can lure them without you. With the tranquilizer, I have the means of neutralizing the pricks. Once I do that, shoving them into a portal will be easy."

He looked like he wanted to scream at her...or hug her. Finally, he sighed. "I don't want—"

“Please, don’t say that. I’ll be fine, okay?” She opened the door and stopped at Teeko in the hall. With one shoulder propped against the wall, the werewolf regarded her. Staci was at his feet, her head resting against his thigh, her mouth opened in a lusty yawn.

Kuma went to Gwen and murmured, “You can’t get past Teeko, me and your cousin, no matter how tired she is. The other night I warned them that you wanted me to fall asleep so you could go out alone. I made them promise to keep you here, to make certain you were safe, whether you want that or not.”

Gwen faced him. “Look who’s talking. If you keep transforming, you’re

going to hurt yourself. Don't you understand what you're doing to your body? How often did you change on E4? Weekly? Nightly? Hourly?" She glanced at Teeko, then back at him. "What's the longest any werewolf has lived on that plane?"

"We have many predators there," Teeko answered. "They attack our kind frequently and—"

"Wait—stop," Staci cried. "I don't want to hear it." She covered her ears with her hands.

Gwen grabbed Kuma's arms, digging her fingers into his biceps. "I want an answer. How long does your kind live?"

You mentioned Zule's mother. How old is she? Is she still alive? Are your grandparents? Great-grandparents? Tell me, dammit."

Kuma remained calm, fearful of agitating her even more. "We were bred to live longer than your kind."

"Are you telling me the truth?" she snapped.

He was. "Yes. I wouldn't lie to you about that."

"Thank God." She sagged into him.

"I'll be all right," he assured.

"Damn right you will, because I'm not letting you put yourself at risk again."

“I transformed too fast,” he explained.
“That’s all.”

“Bull. Every time you moved in your sleep this afternoon, you groaned like you were in serious pain.”

“I was dreaming about you clawing my hands and shoving your body into mine to knock me off my feet. I like my bed play with you rough, though not that rough.”

She didn’t smile at his joke. “You can’t transform again. You don’t have to. If you insist on going with me—”

“Going with you?” he interrupted.

“If we’re doing this together,” she

amended, “then let’s play it the way I did the other night. While I push the guard into the portal, you can watch from the sidelines...in human form. You can even slug the SOB if you want. Just don’t change. Promise me you won’t.”

How could he agree to such a thing if her life was at risk?

“Please, I’m begging you.” She threw her arms around his shoulders and hugged him harder than she’d ever done before.

Her concern moved Kuma in a way few things had. Not that he was of a mind to let it rule him. “I won’t,” he lied.

“You’ll just watch, then?”

“Yes,” he lied once more.

Gwen gripped him even tighter, as though she didn’t believe anything he’d said. Didn’t matter. Tonight would play out on his terms, not hers.

He pulled her arms from him. “Let me get dressed.”

“I washed your stuff,” Staci said. She pointed at his clothes neatly folded on top of the dresser.

“Here.” Gwen handed Kuma his running shoes, cleaned of mud. She turned to Teeko. “Watch Staci, keep her safe while we’re gone, understand?”

Staci curled her upper lip. “Hey, do you mind? I’m not an infant.”

“You’re my family,” Gwen murmured. “I don’t want anything happening to you.”

The girl’s expression softened. She ran her fingers over Teeko’s, taking his hand. “It won’t.” She lifted her face to his. “Right?”

Teeko regarded Kuma with a bit of wariness and bravado, still unused to the fact that Kuma had allowed him to mate on this plane. A privilege he might lose at any moment, if he didn’t behave appropriately. Kuma saw that concern on Teeko’s face.

To acknowledge the younger man's full claim on Staci for as long as he desired, Kuma inclined his head. Teeko's expression didn't change. However, he did lace his fingers through hers.

Kuma pulled on his jacket, the suede also cleaned. It smelled as fresh as his other clothes and nowhere near as delightful as Gwen's skin. Even with all of the other scents in this house bombarding him, Kuma focused on hers alone.

“Ready?” she asked.

If he'd been truthful, Kuma would have said no. He wanted to stay in this

room with her, drinking in her warmth and fragrance, snuggling next to her in a soft bed, leaving it only to eat and bathe. A foolish dream, he knew, as long as the guards still prowled.

Wrapping his arm around Gwen's shoulders, Kuma led her down the hall to the back door and into the unforgiving night.

Chapter Fifteen

With the damp wind in his face, Etaw crouched behind a stand of overgrown bushes, his body well concealed from the house across the street.

Last night, he'd followed the werewolf and female to this location, watching as they entered the building through a back door. Uncertain as to what he should do next, Etaw had debated running away, staying as far from this place as he could.

Curiosity kept him here and finally got the better of him. With the same stealth the werewolf always used, making certain the wind was blowing his scent

away, Etaw had crept closer to the house, at last peering into its windows.

What he saw stole his breath. Next to the tall female with the short, dark hair stood a woman who was smaller, her hair long and blonde...the same as the tall woman's tonight.

Etaw blinked, then stared to make certain his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. The tall female had just come to the gate that led to the backyard. He looked at her hair, so different from the last time he'd seen her. He regarded her face, noting her features were exactly as he recalled. She appeared to be waiting. For what?

A moment later, the werewolf joined her. Currently, the creature was in human form. Together, they left the yard and moved up the street, upwind of him.

Given their determined strides, they had no idea Etaw was watching. Once more, he regarded the woman's hair. How had she been able to change its length and color in only one day? Why had she done so? Even with the transformation, she didn't resemble the smaller woman in the least.

Next to him, Jeete leaned close and whispered, "You're certain that's the female who attacked Huatt?"

Etaw was convinced of it, despite the

way she'd changed herself. He nodded.

“She’s nothing like what Vakar and our other rulers prefer in a female. Why would Huatt have chosen her?”

Because she'd been available. It had been as simple as that. No doubt, Huatt had planned to transport her to E5, where he and the other guards kept their personal pleasure slaves. Not that Etaw was of a mind to reveal such a secret to Jeete. The man was too loyal to Vakar, never bending a rule, never taking a risk.

“Answer me,” Jeete said, elbowing him.

Etaw whispered, “Huatt feared returning empty-handed. He didn’t want

to risk torture and execution.”

“The same as you?” Jeete frowned. “That man with her tonight—how do you know he’s one of the creatures and not fully human?”

Etaw recalled the evening before, the male’s transformation. “I watched him turn. His body shrank at remarkable speed. Fur sprouted on his back and limbs until I couldn’t see his skin any longer. His lips went black and his nose jutted out, becoming a snout. He fell to all fours, panting, as though he was in excruciating pain. His eyes, though...” Etaw paused, recoiling at the danger he’d seen in them. “They were filled with hate and became a strange silver

color that glowed with the faint outside light. Not once did he take his attention from Huatt. If not for the female acting first, the thing would have ripped Huatt apart.”

Jeete pushed to his feet.

Etaw grabbed the man’s forearm, terrified Jeete hadn’t believed what he’d said. Etaw had told him the truth. He had nothing else to offer, not even a convincing lie. “What are you doing?”

“We need to follow the creature and female, then attack when they don’t expect it. They can’t possibly escape both of us.”

“No.” With strength born of fear, he

pulled Jeete back to a crouching position and spoke quickly. “We have to stay here.”

“Why? To keep safe?” Jeete punched Etaw’s arm away from him. “If we don’t bring a woman back tonight, Vakar will send others to search for us as he sent me to find you. They’ll transport us back to E4. Nothing you say there—no matter how much you lie—will be able to save you from the pain and—”

Etaw interrupted, “The prize we want is inside the building. She’s exactly what Vakar prefers.” Small. Youthful. Initially resistant but eventually dominated. Vakar would spend hours grooming her for his use. He’d whip her when need

be, mount her as he pleased, then present her to the other rulers for their pleasure.

After which he'd hunt and dispose of her because she no longer amused him.

The tall woman and the werewolf reached the end of the street, the edges of their clothing and hair whipping in the steady breeze. They hesitated for a moment as if they didn't know which route to take, then turned to the left, disappearing from view.

"Now we make our move," Etaw said, reaching into his pocket.

"Wait." Jeete grabbed his arm, stopping him. "In the alley, you told me there were two werewolves on this

plane.” He focused on both sides of the deserted street, eventually glancing at the structures behind them. “Where did you see the other?”

“Inside the building with our prize.”

For the first time, Jeete regarded the house with caution, his previous decision to attack suddenly forgotten. “We should wait until he leaves as the other werewolf did.”

“This one won’t,” Etaw insisted. “I’ve seen how close he stays to the woman in order to protect her, never letting her out of his sight or allowing her to leave the house.”

“Then how can we possibly take her

from him?”

“We use surprise as you suggested earlier.” From his pocket, he pulled out the device that opened portals. Months before, he’d heard how some of the other guards had manipulated the instrument to bypass E4 in favor of going to E5. Etaw hadn’t dared do anything like that, too fearful of the consequences. However, he’d listened and learned how his companions had recalibrated the settings.

Not only had they discovered that changing them allowed one to go to another realm, the instrument was also able to take them anywhere within this dimension they desired...without anyone

or anything detecting them.

“What are you talking about?” Jeete asked.

“You’ll see.”

Stationed at the kitchen window, Staci regarded the backyard. Its heavy vegetation rustled in the whipping wind. Branches struck the house. The waning moon did little to eat away the ominous shadows. All that was missing was a wolf’s howl to make tonight a real-life horror movie.

“Tell me they’ll be okay,” she said.

Teeko came up from behind. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pressed his mouth to her neck.

Staci released her weight into him, sighing at what he was doing. His lips were soft and warm, his cheeks rough with his coming beard. A delicious combination that encouraged closeness.

What a pair they made. Her with so many brutal scars. Him a werewolf.

If she stopped to think about that, she might feel daunted.

No way. Staci didn't want to think. She wanted to feel, needing him near. His male allure was certainly part of the attraction. His determination to defend

her at all cost, his acceptance of everything she was—especially her flaws, which were far worse than any he had—meant more than all of the rest.

So many guys on this plane whined about not being able to understand women, wondering what it took to get a female's willing, unguarded response, her undivided loyalty. They should have tried sincerity and tenderness, the most powerful aphrodisiacs of all.

“They’ll be fine,” Teeko assured, his breath tickling her cheek.

She shivered in delight at him running his tongue over her ear. “You’re sure? I mean like totally?”

Teeko murmured, “No guard will ever bring Kuma down. He won’t let anything happen to Gwen. He loves her more than he did Zule.”

“He told you that?”

“He didn’t have to. I see what’s on his face whenever Gwen’s near. Surely, you’ve noticed it too.”

Staci had and envied Gwen for that, wanting the same from Teeko. If she hadn’t been such a coward, she would have asked him about his feelings for her, the ones beneath the surface that had nothing to do with sex. Instead, she turned and slipped her arms over his shoulders. “Hold me, please. As tight as

you can.”

He gentled his embrace even more. “I won’t leave you, I promise.”

Staci bit her lip to keep from thanking him, not wanting to sound too needy. Days ago, she hadn’t allowed herself to hope that a man would want her again just as she was.

Teeko didn’t seem to notice her scars at all, accepting them as a normal part of her, even after he’d seen the worst of them.

In her bedroom earlier, he’d turned on all of the lights, then directed her to go to all fours on the mattress, a position they’d never enjoyed before. Every time

they'd made love, Staci had made certain she was facing him so he couldn't see the full extent of her injuries. This time was no different. She hadn't budged.

“Go on,” Teeko had ordered.

Even a gun to her head wouldn't have persuaded her to do what he wanted. “I have an idea, you lie down.” She'd offered her most seductive smile. “I'll be on top this time. I'll do all the work.”

“No. I want to take you from behind.” He stepped out of his jeans and briefs. His cock was wonderfully rigid, his balls a carnal delight, so plump and tight they made Staci's mouth water. To say

she wanted him was the understatement of the century. Still...

“Don’t you trust me?” he asked.

“What? Of course.” She frowned. “How can you even ask such a thing?”

“How can you refuse to do what I want?”

No way was she going to talk about her imperfections with him. She wanted his passion, not his pity. “Turn out the lights first; then I’ll do whatever you say.”

“After it’s dark in here? I want to see you. Don’t you want to see me?” He looked down at himself, his expression

growing troubled. “Is there something wrong with me?”

Staci warned herself not to laugh. She mumbled, “A Calvin Klein model would sell his soul to look that good.”

Teeko frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“You’re perfect.” *I’m not.*

He regarded her, then padded to the bed. “Are you afraid I’ll turn into a wolf?”

“No.”

“Then tell me what’s wrong so I know.”

If only it were that easy.

“Please.” He bent down and kissed her with tenderness and respect.

When he pulled back, Staci sighed, defeated by his gentle manner, what appeared to be his genuine affection for her. “Get ready.”

“For what?”

What else? Gritting her teeth, she turned her back to him, picturing how the light accentuated her disfigurement—the skin red and shiny, puckered in some places, gouged out in others. A cratered landscape even she couldn’t look at for long.

She pressed her lips together to keep from whimpering. *Please don’t say*

anything bad. I couldn't stand it.

Without as much as a sigh, Teeko kissed her shoulders and murmured, "Lie down. On your belly."

Too embarrassed to speak, much less argue, Staci did as he asked.

He sat next to her, the mattress vibrating with his weight. Teeko kissed her spine, the small of her back, the worst of her injuries, easing her hurt more than any narcotic could.

Recalling that moment, she hugged him fiercely now, unable to get close enough.

He grunted in what sounded like

approval and brushed his lips over hers. Staci didn't refuse his invitation. What began as a gentle, tender kiss between them grew steamy, each of them trying to get as close as possible, their hands clutching, fingers exploring. They necked as though they'd been separated for years, as if they'd known each other forever, not only a few days.

His body was solid and heated, his hunger for her, his acceptance of all of her imperfections precisely what she craved. He deepened their kiss, pushing her tongue aside so he could fill her.

Staci snuggled closer, requiring his warmth. Her fingers were suddenly chilled. Why? Gwen had turned up the

heat shortly before she'd left with Kuma. And yet, there was a cold blast of air coming from somewhere.

Confused, Staci pulled her mouth from Teeko's and glanced up at the ceiling vent. Warm air poured down, brushing her face.

Her fingers were icy now, as were her feet and legs.

Not understanding, she lowered her face and froze. The wall behind Teeko was liquefying like some weird special effect in a sci-fi flick. Intense light poured from it. Two men emerged from the brightness, dressed in similar shirts, jackets, pants, their features identical.

What the fuck was happening? Who were those guys?

Oh shit, who else. Guards from E4.

Teeko turned, no doubt feeling the cold. The guard on the left lifted a weapon that looked like a small gun. Staci opened her mouth to scream. Before she could, there was a faint pop and then a dart hit Teeko's shoulder. Another dart struck his leg. Surprise followed by fear flickered across his face. His arms dropped away from her. He fell to his knees, unable to stand, to transform and protect either of them.

No, no, no, no, no.

The men smiled, that gesture as cold

and cruel as their expressions. The one on the right approached her. He spoke a language Staci didn't understand, his tone coaxing and menacing at the same time.

She wanted to holler for someone—anyone—to help her, but couldn't pull in enough breath to do so. At her feet, Teeko lost consciousness, his body slumping to the floor.

Fear and outrage pumped through her. She reached for him, then stopped as the guard nearest her edged closer. Fucking prick. Bastard. Acting on instinct, she backed away so he'd follow her, leaving Teeko alone.

He did just that, inching nearer.

Once more, she backed away. Her heart beat so hard Staci was certain it would explode. She flinched as her hip hit the counter.

The creep gave her another smile that said *you are so fucked, you are so trapped.*

Reaching behind herself, she searched for a weapon and found nothing. *God, no.* The knives were well to the left of her, too far away to reach.

The guard said something else, guttural words that repulsed her. The SOB with him continued to grin.

She stepped a bit to the right, hoping to keep their focus on her, ensuring that they forgot about Teeko. They watched her closely, each of them moving in the same direction she had, mimicking her movements. This time, she moved to the left, eager to get those pissing knives. When she kept going, sliding toward them, the closest guard strode forward.

Desperate, Staci grabbed the first thing she could, throwing the coffee pot at them both. The searing liquid flew in a wide arch and splashed the nearest one, hitting his eyes. He howled in agony.

The other muttered something beneath his breath and lifted his weapon.

In the split second before he fired, Staci fell to the floor, a learned reaction from the self-defense training Gwen had taught her. The guard stared, his frown saying he didn't quite comprehend what had happened. Not giving him a chance to figure it out, she rolled away and pushed to her feet, bolting into the hall.

There Staci stopped and turned. She had to go back to Teeko to keep him from further harm.

The guard came into the kitchen doorway, his body between Staci's and Teeko's. Once more, the guard lifted his weapon and took aim.

They'd just reached the next block over when Kuma grabbed Gwen's wrist to bring her to a halt.

Frowning, she whispered, "What are you doing?"

He lifted his face, smelling the wind. It was clean and cool, absent of threatening odors, and yet the animal part of him knew something was wrong. His belly clenched with the unknown threat, just as it always did on E4. The same as it had done the day Zule died. He'd known before he reached her that the unthinkable had happened.

Gwen leaned closer. "What is it?"

“We have to go back.”

“Are you kidding? Why?”

He didn't answer, turning away from the wind instead. There. He'd felt it again, the threat urging him to return to the house before it was too late. “Use the device,” he said.

“For what? Is this more BS to keep me from hunting the guards? I've already told you, no way are you going out alone tonight. I'm going to be there with—”

Kuma grabbed Gwen's arms, shaking her so she'd stop arguing and would listen for once. “Do what I say,” he growled. “Don't fight me. Staci and Teeko are in danger.”

Her mouth sagged open. “Huh?”

“We need to go back,” he snapped. “We don’t have time to run. Use the device as Nikoli taught you.”

She’d insisted the man show her everything there was to know about it. How to get from one realm to the other...or from place to place in this dimension.

“Use it now,” he ordered.

Everything moved in slo-mo for Staci, allowing her to observe details.

Perspiration dotted the guard’s wide

face. Frustration darkened his already swarthy complexion. Fury burned in his light brown eyes.

The ends of his curly black hair wiggled slightly as he stepped forward in a way that said he didn't know what to expect from her. From the kitchen came the other guard's pained whimpers. Good. Staci hoped she'd burned the scumbag's eyes out so he couldn't harm Teeko.

Her pulse jumped in worry. She listened for sounds coming from him but heard only the rush of blood in her ears. Surely, the other guard couldn't see Teeko well enough to do anything to him.

She didn't want to consider what that anything might be. Losing him to death was unthinkable. No longer being able to see him because he'd been transported back to E4 was also more than she could bear.

What now? What now? What—

Her thoughts stopped as the guard directed his weapon's muzzle at her shoulder. Staci's hand flew to it in protection. She heard that same distinctive pop she had earlier, then a whoosh.

Again she dropped, her body hitting the floor. The dart whizzed past. It smacked into the wall and fell with a

tiny tap well past her feet.

The guard bellowed in outrage.

Definitely not the time for her to stick around. Scrambling to her feet, Staci dashed down the hall and wove from side to side to make certain she was a difficult target.

There was another pop and another. One dart flew past. Another hit the wall to her side.

She ran into her room, slamming and locking the door, then put her hands over her mouth to keep from making any sound.

Like that mattered. She'd just

slammed the door. *Idiot*. How could she have been so damn dumb? She should have been quieter. Not that it would have done any good. He'd seen her running into her—oh God.

The knob turned right, then left, just as it did in all the slasher films she'd seen. The guard's wheezing breath sounded too loud, definitely too close. When he couldn't open the door, he butted his body against it, making the wood shimmy and groan.

Staci backed up so fast, she ran into the nightstand. Her lamp crashed to the floor. She looked at the window, wondering if she'd have time to open it and scramble out.

To go where?

That maniac would follow her through the streets of Seattle, unless he returned to the kitchen so he and the other psycho could kill Teeko. Or take him back to E4 as an offering to the rulers who'd amuse themselves with his torture.

Uh-uh. Wasn't going to happen.

The guard slammed his body against the door again. Although it held, the sickening sound of wood splitting filled the air.

Staci ran from one corner of her room to the other, searching for something to use as a weapon. Her science book was huge, her lamp made of brass. With the

items in her hands, she turned.

Her door burst open, slamming into the wall.

The guard stumbled inside. His bulky shoulders pumped with his harsh breathing. He regarded the lamp and book she held, then made an angry sound like something from hell. Incomprehensible words poured from him, sounding enraged.

He stomped toward her, both hands tightened on his weapon.

Staci swung her lamp at him.

He halted, but only for a moment.

From the kitchen, the other guard

yelled something in his language, then screamed.

Why? Had Teeko regained consciousness and transformed? *Please. Please. Please.* Staci pictured him ripping the jerk apart, chewing him to shreds, tossing him into the portal on the way to E3, where he'd be for all of eternity.

On his next scream, the guard facing her looked over his shoulder, hearing what she had. Footfalls pounding in the hall. More than one set. How was that possible? Those agonized screams hadn't come from anyone who could still walk, much less run. Had more guards come through the portal?

Crap, not that. Please not—

Staci flinched as Gwen burst into her room, blonde wig askew, the instrument Nikoli had given her in her hand.

“Duck!” Staci hollered.

Just in time, Gwen did. The guard’s dart zipped past her face. It hit the hallway wall and fell to the floor.

Naked, Kuma stepped over it and entered the room.

The guard fired repeatedly, but no more darts came out of his weapon. He threw it at Kuma. With the grace of a wild animal, Kuma ducked, not bothering to watch the gun sail past him

into the hall. He reserved his full attention, all of his rage for the guard. The creep shouted something at Kuma. Kuma answered in a low, menacing growl.

“What are they saying?” Staci cried.

“I don’t know,” Gwen shouted. “I don’t understand—oh shit.”

The guard made a whimpering sound as Kuma’s body began to compress, his limbs growing shorter, his body hair darker, coarse and long.

“No!” Gwen shouted at him. She moved toward the guard.

Kuma stared at her. He pulled back

his lips, showing his teeth.

Gwen hollered, “You’re not hurting yourself by transforming again, and you sure as hell are not messing up my house with this piece of crap.” She pointed the device at the guard.

Behind the prick, a portal formed. He glanced over and immediately stepped away, trying to protect himself.

Think again. Staci swung her lamp, the base hitting his knee. His bone made a nauseating crack. He bellowed.

Gwen shoved her foot into his groin, cutting off the sound as she pushed him into the gateway. He stumbled backward, trying to right himself, unable

to do so. His mouth opened in a terrorized scream as the portal sucked him to E3.

Gasping, Gwen sealed the opening and shouted, “You okay?”

Staci nodded, then shook her head. “Teeko.” She ran into the hall.

Gwen called out from behind. “He’s okay. We already got rid of the other guard. We...”

Staci didn’t hear the rest. Her feet pounded the floor as she ran into the kitchen. Teeko was alone in the room, standing, the last of the tranquilizer wearing off. The syringe Gwen had used on him lay on the floor.

Staci threw herself into his arms.

Gwen sagged against the jamb and met Kuma's glare.

He hunched his shoulders for added emphasis.

Didn't impress or cow her. Here, they were equals. He'd better get used to her risking everything for him, even her life. However, a little sugar might go a long way to soothing his inner beast. "I've been a bad girl," she admitted, feigning contriteness.

He paced back and forth, fully human now, totally male. His stiffened cock

swung with each of his steps, his balls luscious enough to eat. Gwen considered falling to her knees and tending to his carnal appetite, but figured he might not be quite ready for that.

“Want to spank me?” she asked.

He halted.

“Because I’ve been so bad,” she added, tucking in her chin, trying to look remorseful and submissive. Anything to get him with the program. Right now, Gwen figured a little BDSM might be nice.

Kuma went to the left of her, the right, his manner deliberately intimidating.

Little did he know how much that excited her, though he'd soon find out. They both would. She unbuttoned her jeans and pulled down the fly. "I have a belt you can use to punish me...unless you prefer your hand."

Turning her back to Kuma, Gwen slid her jeans and panties over her buttocks, displaying them to him, making herself oh-so-accessible and deliciously vulnerable.

He stared at her naked skin, then moved faster than she believed possible, slamming the bedroom door shut, sweeping her into his arms. When he had Gwen on the mattress, he lay on top, his weight trapping her.

No way could she fight him. Nor would she be free of his hunger for hours. His rigid shaft pressed against her thigh. His beautiful eyes flared with ruthless desire.

“Do me hard,” she murmured. “Do me so fucking good I won’t be able to breathe.”

“Or defy me.”

She arched one brow.

“Or talk and talk and talk,” he growled.

“Wow, I’m really frustrating to be around, huh?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. If the

veins on his temple became any more prominent, they'd pop. He was more pissed than she'd ever seen him. Definitely not the time for more verbal foreplay. She whispered, "Try to see it my way, all right? I had to take care of the guard in here and the one in the kitchen. I can't lose you."

"What about me?" he raged. "You believe it's easier if I lose you?"

Perhaps with the passing of time, not that Gwen wanted to consider it. "You won't. I promise. I've no desire to die." She lifted her head to suckle his throat.

He eased back, not allowing her to reach him. Good God. The man was

killing her. She didn't want to argue or talk. Not now. Saving Staci and Teeko drove home the same truth Gwen had recognized in the alley after defeating the first guard. As long as the other dimensions existed, they'd always be in danger. She and Kuma had to take whatever pleasure they could before the next battle.

Don't let that be for a few days at least.

“Kiss me,” she begged. “Fill me. I want you...I adore you. You're everything I've always needed and didn't believe existed.”

Kuma stared at her, then swallowed

hard, his Adam's apple bobbing with it.

“Do you love me?” she whispered.

“More than life. Now be quiet.” He lowered his mouth to hers.

That's it, baby. Come to Mama.

In the kitchen, something metal fell to the floor, clanging loudly. Gwen flinched. Kuma glanced over at the door.

Oh, fuck. “Staci and Teeko are in trouble again.” Couldn't the shit have been over for just one night?

Kuma turned back to her. “You're not getting off this bed.”

Gwen kept trying. “We can't let anything happen to them. We have to—”

“They’re mating,” he interrupted.

“How could you possibly know—”

“Listen,” he ordered.

Once Gwen did, she heard Teeko’s moaning, Staci’s giggles. Apparently, they were as randy as she had been seconds ago. Nothing like escaping harm to make the old hormones rage.

“They don’t need our help with that,” Kuma added.

True. “So, we’re no longer in danger tonight? We’re safe?”

“You’re not from me,” he warned.

Gwen sighed. Did he think she’d want it any other way? “I meant, are we safe

from the guards.”

“For the rest of this evening,” he whispered.

“You don’t smell them?”

“Would I be answering you if I did?
Would I remain in human form if I did?
Would I—”

“Okay, fine, I got it.” She emptied her lungs in a noisy huff. “Still, they found this place. They must have followed us. You didn’t smell them doing so. They must have—”

“Quiet.”

“No, I’m worried. This could happen again.”

“It won’t.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“Because you’re not going out there again to hunt. You’re not leading the others back to this place.” He tightened his grip on her wrists as though to stress what he’d just said. “You’re not getting anywhere near them. I won’t have it. I’m going to keep you in this bed—beneath me—until you learn to obey.”

Sounded like a plan to Gwen. One she could live with until they needed to battle the guards once more. What no one else on this realm had the knowledge or ability to do, except for Nikoli and Regina. With the four of them

working together, they could keep getting rid of the guards. After that, there were the women who were trapped on E4 and E5. Someone had to rescue them, right? Someone had to—

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” Kuma asked.

She knew he wanted her safety and wished she could promise him that, but there was too much unfinished business. Not that Gwen was going to fight about it now. Time enough for that later. “Yes, I understand. And I’ll be good.” She smiled.

He gave her a look that said he knew she was lying, but claimed her mouth

anyway to take what was his, not allowing her to worry about what would come next.

Gwen surrendered completely, grateful for his passion, love and what remained of this night. Resolved and prepared for tomorrow.

Epilogue

Paige Ross was having a bad day and an even weirder nightmare, which didn't make sense.

A few minutes ago—at least, she thought it was only a few minutes—she'd been in Rozie's, a Seattle watering hole that catered to local professionals. It wasn't like her to go to singles bars or to have more than one glass of wine. Up until this morning, she hadn't found it necessary. She'd been engaged to be married. Had the twelve-thousand-dollar bridal gown, the three-carat engagement ring and had ordered the other expensive stuff required for a wedding. Now all

she was missing was her future husband.

Johnny decided he couldn't go through with it. Two months before the date when absolutely nothing could be returned or fixed, including her pride, he'd decided he did not want to spend the rest of his life with her.

“We can keep living together,” he suggested.

For five years, they'd done that. Paige was closing in on thirty. She wanted a baby and a home, maybe even more than she'd wanted him. She'd had enough of the power career, putting in eighty-hour weeks at the law firm where she worked. Finally, she realized that no

matter how many billable hours she had, she'd never make partner.

But a kid she could make.

At Rozie's, she'd finished the last of her martini and was checking out baby clothes on her smart phone when a crying jag hit—partly because of Johnny reneging on their wedding plans, partly because she wanted a child she could pour all of her love into. When her sobs got noisy, the guy at the next stool finally noticed her but didn't ask if she was all right. He moved to a table, safe from her tears. With an unsteady gait, she left the bar and went into the alley for a little privacy.

The next thing she knew, she had a freaking headache and was now dreaming about a place that was downright bizarre.

What appeared to be velvet covered the walls. Some of the panels were red, the others a deep scarlet. Black silk sheets draped the bed. Black candles, not lamps, lit the space. She smelled jasmine and cinnamon and—

Whoa, hold it. Since when did nightmares have fragrances?

Good God, she wasn't sleeping. She was fucking awake and lying on the freaking silk-covered bed.

Paige opened her mouth to scream, but

it caught in her throat. *Don't make any noise*, she warned herself. *If you do, someone might come inside.*

She stared at the door, suddenly realizing this room had one. Rolling off the bed, Paige swayed on her feet, then gaped at the floor. It appeared to be made of stone, possibly granite. However, it was warm, as though there was a heat source beneath it.

Frowning, she noticed her feet were bare. No high heels or stockings. A quick search told Paige the items weren't in here, nor was her purse. Beneath the velvet hangings, the stone walls were icy, as though this room lay inside a refrigerated meat locker.

Snatching back her hand, she regarded her clothing, relieved she still wore her power suit, blouse and underwear. *Thank God, thank God, thank God.* The thought of someone touching her or undressing—

She shuddered, forcing herself not to think about that. Right now, she was alone. If she got hysterical and started to scream, someone might come in here to find out why or to shut her up.

Pulling in a ragged breath, she rubbed her neck, then stopped at a sore spot on the side. Felt like a bee sting, the skin puffy and tender. When had that happened? Who'd brought her here? What was going to happen to—

Don't go there, dammit.

She stared at the door, then screwed up enough courage to try it. Locked. She searched the room for a weapon and settled on one of the candleholders. Made of metal, the fixture felt nicely heavy in her hand. With one well-placed whack, she could knock out the psycho who'd brought her here. Then she'd run like hell before he could—

Paige's thoughts paused. She forgot to breathe at the sound of footfalls, the steady *tap-tap-tap* of someone approaching the door.

Skittering away from it, she bumped into the mattress, then thought better of

being anywhere near the bed. She gripped the candleholder as hard she could and went to the side of the door, prepared to hide behind it until her captor came inside and she could clobber him.

The footfalls stopped.

Paige lifted the holder above her head.

Nothing happened. Had he changed his mind? Was he going to—

The knob turned. She focused on it as she'd never done with anything else before. To the right it went, to the left, as though the psycho was testing it. Didn't he know the damn thing was locked?

Had he lost the key?

Oh shit. Then she'd never get out of here.

She pressed her lips together to keep from whimpering. Her heart slammed against her chest. Her arms started to ache from the weight of the candleholder. Her head pounded with her migraine.

She squeezed her eyes, hoping it would relieve some of the hurt.

A key turned, and the door swung inward.

The sound galvanized her. Blindly, she brought down the holder and hit the

knob rather than the man. The metal *ting* drowned out her gasp.

She'd expected a troll. Even through her panic, Paige could see this guy was possibly in his early thirties, tall, with olive skin and black hair combed away from his forehead. Dressed in what seemed to be camouflage gear, he was surprisingly good-looking and seemed sane, though troubled.

Why? Was he a member of a SWAT team sent to save her? Did the operation go wrong and now he was a prisoner too? If so, how in the hell had he escaped his room to come into hers?

Wait a sec. This wasn't her room. She

wanted out of here.

Before she could flee, he took the candleholder from her all too easily, closed the door and put his forefinger to his lips, indicating she needed to be quiet.

The whimpering she'd repressed earlier poured from her now.

"Don't make any noise," he whispered, "or the others will come."

Others? There was more than one maniac to worry about? What about him? His thick accent sounded Greek or Middle-Eastern. Even if he did look really good, Paige didn't know him.

“Who are—”

“Who I am doesn’t matter.”

The hell it didn’t. “Why are you here?”

“Do you want to go home?” he asked.

“Are you kidding? Of course, I do.”

“Then you’ll have to trust me.” He offered her his hand.

For the first few seconds, she couldn’t move. And then she realized she could either go with him or stay here and wait for the unknown maniac. They couldn’t be one in the same.

Paige forced herself to take his hand. His palm felt dry, nicely warm. Gently,

he curled his fingers around hers. Hardly the touch of a lunatic.

“I’ll do all I can to bring you back to E1,” he said.

“What? Where?”

He didn’t answer. Pulling open the door, he led her into a candlelit hall.

About the Author

Tina Donahue is an award-winning, bestselling novelist in erotic, paranormal, contemporary and historical romance for Samhain Publishing, Ellora's Cave and Kensington. *Booklist*, *Publisher's Weekly*, *Romantic Times* and numerous online sites have praised her work. Three of her erotic romances were named finalists in the 2011 EPIC competition. The French review site, Blue Moon Reviews, chose one of her erotic romances as their Book of the Year 2010 (erotic category). The Golden Nib Award at Miz Love Loves Books was created specifically for one of her erotic romances. Two of her titles

received an Award of Merit in the RWA Holt Medallion competition (2011 and 2012). Tina is featured in the 2012 Novel & Short Story Writer's Market. She was the editor of an award-winning Midwestern newspaper and worked in Story Direction for a Hollywood production company.

Email: tina@tinadonahue.com

Website/blog: www.tinadonahue.com

Twitter:

www.twitter.com/tinadonahue

Facebook:

www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100000458023097

Pinterest:

www.pinterest.com/authortina/my-books

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author

page:

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Look for these titles by Tina
Donahue

Now Available:

The Yearning

Outlawed Realm

Unending Desire

Illicit Desire

The Prophecy

Come Fill Me

*His hunger for one woman will make
him a traitor to his world.*

Unending Desire

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Outlawed Realm, Book 1

From a portal in his lab on E2, one of the five dimension of Earth, quantum physicist Nikoli Zorr gazes on everything forbidden to him. Passion. Desire. The exquisite pleasure of running his hands over the lush curves of a young woman he should have stopped watching weeks ago.

His duty is to close the portals that keep the monsters out of E2—and never interfere with the inevitable fate of those on the other side. Yet he can't bring himself to abandon the woman who has captured his soul.

Psychologist Regina Page is trying to keep her mind on her client, and off the mysterious, unbearable sexual cravings that consume her when she's alone in her bedroom. The next moment she's attacked by vampires, then swept into another realm by a stranger whose touch awakens that same raw desire. Whose eyes are already filled with farewell.

Yet beneath their undeniable carnal lust, something else stirs. The beginnings

of illicit love. The unexpected need to protect *him*. Even if it means risking body, blood and soul to defeat the merciless horde...for a future that was never meant to be.

Warning: Contains a repressed scientist who likes to look, and the woman who delights in unleashing his inner caveman. And sex hot enough burn a hole in all three dimensions... and maybe create a whole new one.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Unending Desire:

Nikoli glanced at Regina's hand, chiding himself for having followed her

here, for wanting to be near her before Sazaar arrived. A foolhardy act that wouldn't change anything. It wasn't as though he could tell Regina what to expect. A horror she wouldn't believe until it unfolded before her.

Fearful of behaving inappropriately, of running her off and losing his only chance to be this close, Nikoli lifted his hand. After weeks of fantasizing about touching her, he cautioned himself to temper his reaction.

The warning did little good.

Longing he'd never experienced stole his breath as he clasped her exquisitely soft fingers, his thumb stroking hers.

Lids sliding down, Regina parted her lips on a quiet sigh. Color rose to her cheeks, the same as it had this morning in her bath when he'd watched her, hungering to touch and taste every inch of her flesh. To smell it. A pleasure unknown in his dimension.

On E2, sterile air replaced all fragrances, a matter deemed necessary to keep the populace disease-free. Here, the scent of food, drink and muggy rain bombarded Nikoli. Even so, it wasn't enough to keep him from catching Regina's fragrance. Light and faintly sweet, it reminded him of what her people called vanilla and peaches.

Blood rushed to his groin, pooling in

his cock. Another word from her realm. A language Nikoli had learned over the years as he'd monitored the spontaneously occurring portals, never realizing he'd someday cross through one he had created into a dimension more electrifying than he could have ever imagined.

Time passed more swiftly here than it did on his plane. As people moved about, their bodies seemed to blur. The vibrant colors dazzled when compared to his realm's somber hues, making Nikoli slightly dizzy, the same as touching her.

“Regina,” he repeated, enjoying the sound of her name. He glanced at her

fiery red hair, gold earrings—the color of stars on his side—soft gray sweater and black pants.

Gently, she squeezed his hand, her expression soft with arousal. “And you are?”

There was no need to lie. Tonight would be their only time together. Tomorrow, Regina would be safe, and he would surely be dead. Even if he escaped harm from Sazaar, Andris and the others, death awaited him on his return to E2. Fear or sorrow should have overwhelmed Nikoli. Instead, gratitude for this small slice of time, this moment of unrestricted joy, quickened his answer. “Nikoli Zorr.”

Regina moved her lips as though testing his name. Her resultant smile said she liked it. “Nikoli.” Her iris’s green tint was darker now, lushly verdant in the room’s scant light. She studied his features. “It sounds Russian. Were you born there?”

Prepared for her questions, he continued to lie. “My parents emigrated from a small isolated village in Romania. They brought me over when I was twelve. I’m afraid our accent is quite unique.”

“It fits you,” she said. “Do you work here?” She glimpsed at his shoulders. “Are you on your way home?”

“Sir?”

Nikoli glanced over at the young woman who had waited on him. She regarded Regina's hand in his, then flashed him a hungry smile.

Unmoved by her seduction, growing cautious, he said, “Yes?”

“You forgot your change.” She rested a series of bills and circular coins near his cup, then regarded him, her expression expectant.

Nikoli wasn't certain how to respond. Of the currency he'd stolen, he hadn't known how much to offer for the drink. Overwhelmed at seeing Regina, at being close enough to hear her speak, he'd

watched her hand over a bill for her order but hadn't noticed if she'd received anything back.

“Thank you,” he said.

Brows drawn together, the girl glanced at the bills.

Nikoli sensed she wanted them back. Why, he didn't know. Taking a chance, he slid the one on top toward her to see what would happen.

“Thank *you*,” she said, pocketing it. Ponytail swinging, she hurried back to her station.

“Wow. You're a good tipper,” Regina said, arching one brow.

Nikoli wasn't certain what she meant. His only answer was the truth. "I wanted her to leave." He smiled. "It was the only way I knew to get rid of her."

Regina laughed.

The carefree, tinkling sound stroked Nikoli's soul. With great care, he squeezed her fingers.

Regina's expression grew distracted, her smile fading as she glanced at their hands, her fingers hugging his. Not caring if he acted recklessly, Nikoli held on to her for a few seconds more.

After he released her, Regina wrapped her fingers around her cup. She asked again, "Do you work in this

building?”

“On the third floor,” he offered, lying easily, giving her the name of one of the companies he’d passed on the way down here.

Nodding, Regina captured a bit of the drink’s whipped cream on her fingertip, then brought it to her mouth, licking it off.

The back of his neck tingled.

“Do you own the company?” she asked.

His attention remained on her mouth, the promise of its wet heat beyond her plump bottom lip. He imagined his

tongue stroking her lips, parting them, seeking entrance. Once claimed, he pictured Regina offering even more of herself. On her knees, she'd take his cock into her velvety palms, lifting it to her mouth, drawing it inside, providing shelter, elation, completion. Sounding distracted, he said, "Yes."

"What business are you in, Nikoli?"

The shameless images in his mind evaporated with her question. Stalling for an answer, his knowledge of this realm, he peeled off the white circular cover on the top of his cup and placed it to the side. A word popped in his mind, one he'd seen quite a few times on this plane. "Consulting."

“On what?”

His pulse pounded. He thought back to things he'd seen here. “Computer software designs.”

Regina's quick nod told Nikoli he hadn't said anything strange.

She smiled. “My system could certainly use some expert help. Carly's always complaining about how we need to move my accounting and other files into the twenty-first century. Sad to say, I've let her whine without really doing anything to fix the problem. I figured she could just live with it since she's my only employee, kind of a combination bookkeeper-receptionist-secretary. But

hey, if you know software, maybe you can give me a couple of tips on what I need to do.”

Sweat trickled down Nikoli’s back. He had no idea what to suggest. The systems on this side were centuries behind the advancements on his. “Of course, but I generally work with large firms with hundreds of employees.” To take the focus off himself, he asked, “What business are you in, Regina?”

“I’m a psychologist.” She ran her fingertip over the food she’d been eating. Small, delicate flakes fell from it onto the countertop. “I deal with anxiety disorders.”

He offered a nod of encouragement. “I admire anyone who helps others with their problems. Your work must be very rewarding.”

Appreciation for his comment radiated from her. “I certainly try to help all that I can. Unfortunately, I’m not always successful.”

He thought of Sazaar and was careful to keep himself from sounding worried. “It’s understandable that some can’t be helped.”

Regina offered a rueful smile. “I’ll have to remember that when I’m feeling badly about a failure. Now that I know you work here, perhaps I can ask you for

a pep talk from time to time.”

He spoke without thinking. “A pep talk?”

“A word of support,” she amended.

“Of course.” With his full attention on her, he spoke from the heart, offering a future they didn’t have. “Always.”

A soft heat emanated from her, the kind a woman on this side showed when she wanted a man. “Are you on your way home, Nikoli?”

Surprised at her question, not knowing why she asked, he shook his head.

She glanced at his coat, confusion sparking in her expression as though

she'd expected him to leave.

“There’s a matter I have to attend to,” he said, being deliberately vague, “but I still have work to do and planned to return shortly.”

Naked pleasure shone on her face.

It pleased him as nothing else ever had. “Are you going home?” he asked.

“I have one last patient in a few minutes.” She nibbled on the edge of her food, then returned it to the white square it had rested on—what her people called a napkin. Brushing crumbs from the side of her mouth, she said, “The appointment will be over in an hour. If you don’t have to work past seven fifteen or so,

would you care to have dinner with me?" She lowered her hand to the table, waiting for his answer.

His mouth had already gone dry. Her words rang in his mind.

I have one last patient.

Sazaar. For weeks, he'd watched his mate arrive at Regina's office, then struggle to disclose her abominable secrets. Thus far, Sazaar hadn't revealed anything about Andris and the others. Tonight, she would. Nikoli sensed it. Feared it.

Once Regina learned what no human was meant to know, Sazaar would destroy her. She'd have no other choice.

*It's easy to fall in love. Destiny
requires tooth and claw.*

Waterfall

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Dragon's Fate, Book 1

Curses are designed to be cruel, but the one afflicting Jordan and his brothers is almost beyond bearing. A dragon born by blood magic, he is an immortal trapped in human form, with only one hope of finding his eternal mate. He must bite her—and pray she lives.

One dark night, he senses the

wounded heartbeat of a woman in the shadows, begging him to end her life. Ever the gentleman, he chivalrously obliges her wish. Only to discover three days later that she lives. And has married another.

Celeste always dreamed of marrying for love, but the nightmare of living in her father's home drives her to wed the Duke of Hudson. Yet on her wedding eve, she is compelled to follow a mysterious man who professes to know her secret. A man with curious blue scales on his muscular arms—whose shadowed eyes reflect a dangerous mix of destiny and desire...

Warning: Explicit sex, sex in water,

four super-hot dragon brothers, and a curse born from magical power that has left them wondering who they are all their lives.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Waterfall:

Jordan's vision hazed and warped in a colorful wave, heightening details at the center of his focus. He shook his head and looked down to the highly polished wood floor. His sight returned to normal.

What just happened? His vision never colored except after he had bitten. He locked his jaw, and his chest labored.

He slowly raised his gaze back up at the duke and the woman who stood the same height beside him. A rainbow of colors radiated out from her.

He choked.

The woman... He closed his eyes, and the image from the beach came back to him...

Golden hair lit up with the sun. The pearls of her aristocratic dress played against the tips of his fingers as he gently laid her on the grass for dead.

His throat tightened. He had bitten her three days past, and she...*lived*.

Oh, bloody hell.

His body shook.

She was his mate.

Heat coursed through his flesh and burned through his cock, which swelled and pressed painfully against his trousers. His mate. He shifted his stance and placed his hand at an angle to disguise his engorged erection. Damn. He glanced about the room. This couldn't be possible. His attention snapped back to her.

“Lords and ladies, I present to you my new wife, Her Grace, the Duchess of Hudson!” His Grace raised her fingers to his lips and kissed her gloved knuckles.

It was her. It really was the same woman. Jordan had touched that wrist. Had taken her bracelet. His treasure of her death. His fingers fisted, and he stumbled forward, seeing nothing but her golden hair, slender nose, full, angelic lips and noble cheekbones. All held the color of life. Not death.

She had wed Hudson.

He bumped into the gentleman who stood before him.

“Mind your step.”

How could she? He continued forward without pause. After five hundred years of frustration and loneliness, he had found his lifemate,

and Cupid had poisoned the arrow.

She had married another, and tonight would bed her husband.

Not him.

His feet moved as if he glided, pulled by a rope to her. This was wretched! His vision streaked, danced and swirled in blue and gold ripples, making his stomach flip.

Yet he'd found her!

The room hummed and dropped away. He stepped in front of her, shaking. He stared down at eyes so green they reminded him of a serene, moss-covered pond. A shiver raced from the tip of his

toes to the white streak in his hair.

“You survived.” His deep and raspy words barely left his mouth.

Her eyes widened, and her skin paled, accentuating the freckles across her nose. “Pardon? Do I know you, sir?”

She had freckles... His lips turned up into a genuine smile. Freckles. He wanted to know every tiny detail about her.

A weighty force pressed upon his shoulders, buckling his knees.

Hell.

He knelt before her, bent low, and stared up at her like a peasant in awe

before a goddess.

The image of her as he had dragged her from the water—blood and seawater trailing over him and staining his clothes—slid through him.

Now this distortion stained his soul.

He had left her...

Left his mate for dead.

How could he not have known? He licked his lips with a tongue that held no moisture. The scent of orange blossoms and cherries filled his flaring nostrils. Her scent. The scent of her blood.

She'd had no wedding ring on her finger that night. He opened his mouth

and grasped her hand. She needed to know she was his mate, a love for all time...

Thick-gloved fingers wrapped about his forearm, and his scales prickled in familiar warning. Ilmir.

“Please excuse him, Your Grace. He is truly in his cups.” Ilmir’s calm, deep voice slashed through his beautiful rainbow fog.

The censure of the room came crashing back to Jordan’s senses.

Ilmir’s breath pressed to his ear. “You are making a dangerous spectacle.”

Jordan turned his head toward Ilmir and narrowed his eyes. How dare he? The man had done everything against all mores his entire life.

“Jordan.” Ilmir glanced at the woman before them. “Is this...” His gray eyebrows rose over his pale, ice-blue eyes in question.

Jordan remained silent and continued to glare at his brother. Beyond his grayish-white hair, his well-tailored evening attire made him appear the perfect, elegant young gentleman. *Appear...* Jordan frowned and ground his teeth together. How dare he act noble? Here. Now. He wanted to grab Ilmir by the ear and drag him outside,

but nothing was as it should be tonight, and this act too had strings.

Hudson stepped before them, blocking his new duchess from view. A deep frown scarred his face. "I suggest you listen to your brother. Your family is in enough of a public tumble, which I will help you out of, but this..." His brow arched, and dreaminess glazed his eyes. An odd smile flashed across his lips, then disappeared.

Ilmir wrapped his arm under Jordan's and pulled him to his feet. His breath warmed Jordan's ear. "Don't fret. If she is yours, no one can deny the fact. Not even her." Ilmir slowly turned him from his beauty.

Jordan wobbled and swayed, his shaking legs unable to support him. He floated as if he was a bloody cork in water...water so unfamiliar and deadly. Deadly? He mentally jarred himself. He was water. Water could never kill him. He'd found her, and he would not leave her here for Hudson's use.

“Act inebriated.” Ilmir gripped him hard and almost dragged him through the crowd.

Like the devil he would! Jordan glanced back. Her eyes, huge emerald pools that spoke of a deep soul, watched him as she talked to an older woman at her side. He pulled against Ilmir's grasp. “Release me.”

Ilmir's fingers tightened. "No, brother. This is not how we untangle this."

"This is not yours to untangle." He could not leave without saying more to her.

She needed to know. Know what had happened.

She needed to know she was his mate.

Not Hudson's.

"Release your fingers," he ground out, and the sacs in his mouth swelled. He jerked his head back—that was not supposed to happen unless he prepared to bite—and clenched his teeth, holding

his lips closed on the poisons that swelled in his glands.

He glanced around the room. Bloody hell! His body changed against his will, and he did not know what those changes encompassed. The room watched them. What was happening to him? He firmly planted the soles of his shoes on the marble floor.

“No!” Ilmir’s fingers dug into his flesh. “Not until I have you in a carriage. She will not disappear, Jordan. I assure you.” He laughed a mocking chuckle and yanked him through an open door. “She is a duchess.” He kicked the door closed with the heel of his boot.

“To hell, Ilmir.” His angry words smoked out of his mouth and singed the fabric on Ilmir’s coat. Damn smoke. He’d just breathed smoke. He stared at the lightly glowing spot on Ilmir’s sleeve, and his eyes widened. He had never done that before.

“Quite so. Hell has had me and enjoys my flavor.” The sleeve of Ilmir’s coat puffed, smoldering. “Now listen and listen well, brother. That there”—Ilmir pointed back into the ballroom—“is the Duke of Hudson. This is his home. If we slight him, we have no remaining allies in London. Do you understand?” Ilmir brushed at the singed fabric and continued to stare at him as if nothing out

of the ordinary had occurred.

Of course Jordan knew where they were. But— Bloody hell! She was his! His! “Ilmir.”

“Control yourself. You cannot do this badly.”

Jordan’s fists shook in anger. “As if you should give that guidance. You have never thought of anyone but yourself!”

Ilmir nodded. “Correctly stated. And you have seen the consequences. Be the good whelp you always are. Or go your own path and we all fall.”

“Fall? We can’t fall.” But Ilmir was correct about one thing. Confronting her

here in front of a room full of people when he was uncertain of his body's changes was a poor plan. He sighed and rolled his shoulders. He needed her alone. And now.

Shameless Desire

Tina Donahue

*Passion without limit. Carnal hunger
that knows no bounds.*

Outlawed Realm, Book 3

Within Earth's five dimensions, nothing is as it seems...and desire is never far away.

In E4's jungle, Kuma was the Alpha werewolf, bent on revenge against the hated guards. Swept with them into the E1 dimension, now he prowls Seattle at night, stopping the thugs from abducting women for use as sex slaves in E4's Pleasure Palace.

On her way home from her nursing job, Gwen senses danger in the night's shadows—an instant before a stranger attacks. Clinging to consciousness, she watches the impossible, a wolf fighting him off...protecting her. She wakes in her own bed, convinced it must have

been a dream until she sees Kuma in human form. Virile, intense. A man like no other.

Within his powerful embrace, Gwen experiences rapture she didn't believe existed. His unrestrained lust and burning need end her loneliness, though not the menace they face. The guards are a constant threat in their hunt for women and their determination to see Kuma dead. Together, he and Gwen must fight—for his life, her freedom, their future.

Warning: Out-of-this-world sex and a romance to die for. Features a hunk whose inner beast won't be tamed, and

the woman who craves his most
shameless desire.

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11821 Mason Montgomery Road Suite 4B

Cincinnati OH 45249

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