

THE DRAGON'S
Vamp

C. A. SALO

OTHER KIN BOOK II

**OTHER KIN BOOK 2:
THE DRAGON'S VAMP**

by

C.A. Salo

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

A SLAVE'S WAY OUT

“C.A. Salo has outdone herself and I trust this is only the beginning of a bookshelf overflowing with sexy sci-fi treats. I hope there will be a story showcasing Trea and Daniel since their characters made such a lasting impression and added to what was already an outstanding read which I definitely recommend to the masses.”

Indy

Joyfully Reviewed

“I’ve read a lot of books over the years, but *A Slave’s Way Out* is one of the hottest I’ve read in a long time. It isn’t just the chemistry between Catrin and Niko, which explodes off the pages, or the dynamics of the secondary characters. It’s that C A Salo shows a woman can be not only outstanding in her job that she fights for but also that she can be dominated by her lover and not look weak. When the reader first starts reading this book they are sucked into a different time and space right off the bat and aren’t let go of until the last word is read. They realize the voyage is over. I hope C A Salo writes more about these characters as the world she’s created is one you’ll want to visit over

and over again to see how each one is doing. This is definitely going on my keeper shelf and I am looking for more of her stories.”

Donna

FAR

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *THE DEVIL HIMSELF*

“I really enjoyed the author’s unique approach to a classic love story. This wasn’t an ordinary boy-meets-girl story as it featured a creature that some might find hard to love, yet the author was able to humanize the beast in the story and make me, the reader, fall for him as well despite what some might

consider imperfections. I found the author's use of an imperfect hero, at least when it comes to looks, refreshing and interesting.

“This was a very touching love story that I would definitely recommend to those looking for something a bit different.”

Lilac

Whipped Cream Review

Rating: 4.5 Cherries

**WHAT THEY ARE SAYING
ABOUT
*A WARRIOR'S LONGING***

“*A Warriors Longing* is definitely steamy. The chemistry between Lord

Gage and Meiken is strong enough to raise anyone's blood pressure. C.A. Salo did an excellent job blending the sci-fi, romance and erotica genres. Not everyone can do it so seamlessly.”

Victoria Cross

Night Owl Reviews

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A Slave's Way Out

The Devil Himself

A Lady's Challenge

A Warrior's Longing

The Mercenaries of Neris Series

*Other Kin Series Book 1: The
Werewolf's Mate*

Dedication

My Marlene, my sister, my best
friend.

Chapter 1

“God you’re such a jerk!” Mari snapped as she turned, coming up short when he appeared in front of her. “Stop that flash-step crap.”

“I’m a vampire, we quick-step. Lykens flash-step.”

“What the hell ever, just get out of my way, I’ve had it with you!” Turning,

she bumped into his chest when he did it again. She lifted her hand, slapping him hard. “Damn it, Rhys, just leave me alone.”

Rhys grabbed her hand, holding it to his chest. “You know what Drake said, what he scented. You’re a seer right? You tell me what you’ve seen.”

“I’m a witch, you hate witches.”

Rhys chuckled. “No you’re not; you even said so in the clearing when the Golem attacked Olivia Roven months ago. I’m the one who should be running, yet you’re the one backing away, and I want to know why.”

Mari sighed, turning. How to tell him what she was and why she was here was something she did not want to deal

with. Finding out she had a life mate here just made it worse—and her wanting to flee. But with the darkness still out there hovering at the edges of Alston somewhere, fleeing was not an option. “Why can’t you just let it go?” The warmth of his hand settled on her shoulder.

“Because you’re not the only seer around here. I want to hear the words from your own mouth.”

“Well you’re not going to and I’m not a seer.” Turning, she tossed his hand off. “Don’t get used to the idea. I’m out of here the minute the darkness is dealt with, and I’m heading some place warm and sunny. Key West sounds good.” Her eyes narrowed as laughter erupted from

his lips.

“I’m a high blood vamp remember? The sunlight doesn’t bother me woman.”

“Will you just—shut-up?” She turned and ran for the woods. Relief washed over her when he didn’t follow, but she could hear his words behind her warning that he wouldn’t drop it until she explained herself. Damn man, why couldn’t he be like others and run when she got pissy? No, he gave her attitude right back and laughed. Why did the powers-that-be have to do this? Why did they choose him to be her life mate, why here and why now? Why did they decide it was time for her to settle down again? She’d tried that once and she wasn’t doing it again. The pain still burned

heavily in her heart and soul...even after so long.

“It’s what must be.”

Mari whipped her head around to see one of the ancients. “Why now? Why him?”

“I don’t have all the answers, Mari. Like you I only know what is shown to me. He is your life mate and I have a feeling you know it and have sensed the bond with Rhys. Is it because he’s a vampire?”

“No,” she sighed. Sitting down on a rock she met Darina’s gaze. “I’m afraid.” Her whisper was barely heard.

Darina sat beside her, taking Mari’s hand within her own. “Mariwen Gawain, I know there are very few

instances that frighten you. We go through trials for a reason. Most times, we don't know why the powers set us on a path, especially if there is pain and sorrow, but there is a reason and sometimes it's just the time for them to happen. The balance must be kept."

"I know," Mari groaned. "But seriously, have you checked the attitude of that vamp? By the gods he's arrogant and self-assured."

Darina chuckled. "Several good qualities for a coven leader, wouldn't you say?"

"I suppose."

"How's your training with young Olivia going?"

"Good. She's a smart child when

she's not getting into trouble."

"Do you think she'll be ready when she's needed?"

Mari's forehead crinkled. "She's young and still has much to learn, but yes, when she needs to step up as guardian she'll be ready."

"Keeping her away from Tommy has given her focus. I realize she's hurting over not being able to see her friend, but make sure Drake and Kalana ensure their separation until this is over."

"I'll speak with them. May I tell Kalana why Livi's taking it so hard?"

"If you'd like. I think if Drake and Kalana know, it may help them understand why we're doing what we're

doing for her training.”

Mari lifted her gaze as Darina rose.
“So soon?”

“Sorry, sweet one, but I have responsibilities I must see to.”

“I know, but you come around less and less and you’re the only one I can really talk to who knows me.”

“I apologize, but there is one who you need to have faith in right now. I will always be here for you, Mari, never forget that.”

Mari rolled her eyes as she rose.
“Yes, Mother.” She snorted.

“I’m gonna slap you.”

“Oh that sounds real wise and ancient-like,” she chuckled.

Darina smiled as she started fading.

“On the back of the head when you least expect it, just so you know I’m watching.”

“Just not while I’m getting all hot and bothered with the vamp.” She grinned, chuckling. The mist sparked bright for a moment before disappearing entirely. “Ah, crap,” she exclaimed as she turned and headed back to the Roven’s manor. She’d stayed with Rhys for a while until he started getting all touchy feely and bugging her about what Drake Roven had scented about them on their first meeting at the edge of Alston. “Damn Lykens, always sticking their noses where they don’t belong.”

“Not true and you know it,” Darina’s disembodied voice replied.

Mari whipped around when she felt the slap to the back of the head. “Damn it, Mom, cut it out.” Turning back around, Mari took off at a run, heading for her secret place. She could have flown, but knowing her luck someone would see her, and then she’d be answering a bevy of questions about what she was and she wasn’t ready for that just yet. Climbing the rock face to stand on a ledge, she lifted her hand to the rock in front of her and walked through it. She’d erected a magical charm years ago to hide and cloak the entrance so no one would find it or bother her while she was here. Sighing loudly, Mari headed over to her wooden chest and withdrew four stones, placing

them at the four points of a circle to represent the directions and elements. She then sat down on the skin in the middle of the cave, crossed her legs, closed her eyes and rested her hands on her legs. Her chest rose with a deep breath. As she blew it out slowly, Mari connected with the land of her birth.

* * * *

“Where in the hell have you been?”

Rhys yelled.

Mari glanced behind her to see if there was someone there before turning and meeting his gaze. “Are you talking to me?”

“Who in the hell else am I talking to? You take off for three days without telling anyone and stroll back in here

like nothing's happened?"

Mari's eye twitched as Drake and Kalana Roven stood in the middle of the Roven Manor foyer with several others and one pissed off vamp. "The last time I checked I'm pretty sure I'm old enough to take off without a chaperone. And I did tell someone. I spoke with Olivia telepathically. I'm taking it she didn't let anyone know."

"No she didn't, but that's what happens when you tell a child what's going on! We didn't know if someone had gotten past our borders and taken you or worse. Forces have been out searching every inch of Alston for you!"

Mari's head tilted. He was worried for her and not just a causal fear. The

emotions she sensed coming off him were something she'd never felt before, even from her first husband. Calmly she replied, "I connected with Olivia because she's the only one I can connect with as she is the next guardian. I apologize for any inconvenience, but I needed some time alone."

"Where in the hell were you?"

"Within the boundaries of Alston."

"Bullshit! If you were here, we would have found you!"

Ok, now he was starting to piss her off. Breathing deeply, she kept Rhys' gaze as he stepped forward. "First off, vamp, I don't lie, so you'd better get that through your thick skull right now. Second, just because you *think* you

know all of these lands, I'm here to tell you, you don't. Third, if you don't stop yelling at me, so help me by the ancients, I'm going to give you something to yell about," she growled through her teeth. Mari clenched her fists tightly to keep the rising heat of rage at bay. Damn it, she didn't need this. She'd just spent three days getting herself in balance again and what's he do the minute she walks through the door? He jumps all over her. Well, she wasn't taking any of his shit. Worried or not, he needed to understand he couldn't treat her like she was one of his coven.

"Oh really," Rhys gripped her by the arms bringing her closer. "And just what the hell are you going to do?" he

snapped.

Mari's eyes narrowed, nostrils flaring as her body heated.

"Gods!" Rhys yelled as he jumped back looking at his hands.

"Don't you ever put your hands on me in anger again," she growled. She stamped her foot and watched everyone sway as the ground under them moved. "You just wasted the three days it took me to bring my balance back, you selfish, over-bearing vampire! Kalana, I'm going back to sanctuary!" Turning, she stormed out of the manor, hitting the field at a run. She waved her hand, casting an invisibility cloak. The minute the veil engaged, her wings came out and she took off at an incredible speed,

soaring over the land. As the scent of seawater became stronger, Mari angled up and landed on the ledge of her safe haven. Drawing her wings back, she stepped foot inside the warm cavern.

The tears trailed down her cheeks as she lay on the skin in the center of her sanctuary. Not up to meditating, Mari closed her eyes for some well-needed sleep.

* * * *

“He was worried.”

Mari opened her eyes to see her mother standing over her with the bright morning sunshine behind her form. “I know, I sensed his emotions, but he shouldn’t have gone off on me like that, especially grabbing me in anger.” Sitting

up, she moved her hair away from her face.

“True, but how would you have reacted if you’d been in his shoes?”

“Fine, Mom, point taken,” she whispered. “I haven’t been that mad in centuries and that worries me.”

“Because you like being in control.”

“Don’t we all?”

“Mariwen, there are times when we all lose control in one form or another. How we learn from our actions is what’s important. No one was harmed, although you did shock the crap out of them all and raised the eyebrows of the ancients with that little stomp of yours.”

“They felt that?” Mari’s eyes

widened as her mother nodded. “Ah, crap, sorry about that. Dad felt it too and contacted me while I was sleeping.”

“The ancients knew something must have upset you beyond normal to feel your anger, so they sent me to see how you are.”

“I’m fine, I just...” sighing heavily she looked out the entrance of the cave. “I don’t know how to deal with Rhys. He always has something to say when it comes to me and he thinks he knows it all. Rhys Beven frustrates the hell out of me, Mom, and I’m at a loss as to how I’m supposed to react.”

“Just be yourself.”

Mari snorted. “Oh, easy for you to say.” Meeting her mom’s gaze, she

barely caught the twinkle in her eye. “Are you telling me I can tell him who I am?”

“As I’ve said, Mari, he is to be your life mate. Now, how you tell him is up to you and I’m pretty sure he’ll want some sort of explanation when you reappear again. I can’t tell you how to deal with him or him with you; that is something you both have to figure out. I will say this, if you stop being so hard-headed on some issues, you may find speaking to him a lot easier.”

“Oh, so I’m the one being hard-headed?”

Darina smiled. “Just like your father. But to ease your mind, from what I’ve witnessed, Rhys is hard-headed as

well.”

* * * *

Mari sighed as she walked into the Beven manor house. She knew he'd scented her the moment she stepped onto Beven Coven lands as the house keeper opened the door for her before she'd even knocked. She informed her that Lord Rhys was in his study. Heading that way she lifted her hand to knock when the door opened and she met his bright blue gaze. “If you're going to yell at me I'll leave,” she said softly.

“No yelling, come on in,” he said, opening the door wider.

Mari stepped past him and waited until he shut the door before turning to face him. She gasped as his mouth

settled over hers roughly. Her hands lifted to lie on his chest as she kissed him back, breathing heavily when he lifted his head.

“Don’t you ever take off on me without telling me what’s going on.”

“Don’t you ever yell at me like that again or put your hands on me in anger.” Leaning back, she met his gaze. “Don’t let it go to your head, but yes, I should have told someone besides Livi what I planned on doing. But after we talked that day I was confused, no not confused, upset.”

“Why?”

“There’s so much you don’t know, Rhys. And when you wouldn’t stop dogging me it pissed me off and scared

me, and then my mother got on my case about you and well, I just...I needed some time alone.” Laying her forehead on his chest, Mari closed her eyes as his hands caressed her back. “Drake Roven is correct with what he scented about us. The ancients have...hinted...that we are to be life mates.” The last was whispered.

“And you’re not happy with their decision?”

Mari sighed as she moved away, her back to him. “It’s not that I’m not happy. I like you, and we seem to have a mutual attraction, although you are as hard-headed as I am. I wasn’t expecting it; the wave of emotions that hit me the moment we met. I’d decided a long time

ago I wouldn't get involved in a serious relationship again. The ancients knew how I felt, what I've gone through. I was mad at them for so long." Drawing in a deep breath she turned to meet his gaze. "I thought that because so much time had passed, and I'd started speaking to them again with no incidents, they'd accepted my wishes. Then you came out of the forest that night and I sensed what Drake Roven scented."

"I felt it too."

"And it pissed you off because you thought I was a witch," she said with a soft smile.

"Something like that."

"So, like me, you've had a bad experience, but with a witch."

“Yes, who was yours?”

“Human, but he didn’t do anything wrong toward me.” Her gaze lowered to the wooden floor. “He died because of who I am. The ancients saw fit to give him to me and take him away without blinking an eye. He would have died eventually with his life span, I knew that. He knew who I was, but the ancients brought the fight to our door and they didn’t protect him like they promised. Telling me ‘it’s as it has to be’.”

“What was his name?”

The corner of her mouth lifted slightly. “Saul. He was my husband.” Lifting her head, she met his gaze. “While I loved him and he’ll always hold a special place in my heart, I never

had my senses react to him the way they do with you.”

“And that scares the hell out of you.”

“Huh-yes, I never want to go through that again. I’m afraid that if I let you too close they’ll take you away.”

Rhys took her into his arms, his chin resting on top of her head. “Like everyone else, we have to live in the moment, Mari. Things will happen, but we can’t let it rule our lives. Like you, I’ve never had such an overwhelming sense of belonging to someone as I do to you. And, sweetheart, I’ve been around a lot of women.” He smiled when she thumped him on the back.

“You always have to toss a smart-

ass comment in somewhere don't you?"

"Yeah," he chuckled.

"Tell me about what happened with the witch."

Rhys was silent for a few moments. "She showed up while I was visiting my parents in Spain. I thought I was in love for the first time, besides the puppy crush I had on my best friends' sister when we were growing up. She became an everyday visitor at my parents' house and they were as duped as I. No one had any idea that she'd been stalking my parents for months, waiting for the chance to get to them. Then I showed up, and like a love sick pup, I fell right into her hands."

Mari tightened her arms around his

waist.

“Apparently one of my fathers’ men had killed her father in a drunken brawl. I’ve never seen such hatred in anyone until that thing showed up at the borders of Alston the night you arrived. Anyway, during a party my parents were having she made her move and went for my father. I don’t know what made me look up at that moment but I did, and I jumped in front of her, taking her blade in my shoulder. It was a poisoned dagger, made from something she’d collected from my father. I actually pleaded with her to stop, declaring my love as she ripped the blade out of my flesh. It was then she told me how she’d used me to get to my father, that she had no intention

of being with me in any way. She told me she held her shudders in when I touched her. Her plan was to kill every vamp she could, starting with my father and me.”

“Oh gods,” Mari breathed, running her fingers over his lower back.

“Yeah,” he snorted. “Tell me about it. Well she tried going after my father again and I shoved her away as she hit me with the dagger again. I started feeling the effects of the poison and when she came at me again, I transformed to kill her...”

“Rhys...” Mari whispered lifting her head to meet his eyes.

“My father delivered the death blow. After the medics cleared the

poison from my system I asked him why he did it. He said I'd have a hard enough time getting over her betrayal, I didn't need to have her death on my hands as well."

"Instilling a hate for all witches."

"I know they're not all bad, it's just like Vampires, Lykens, and every Other Kin out there, there's good and bad in all species. We have a coven of witches living in Alston and I've always gotten along with them quite well."

"It's just the ones you don't know that you're leery about?"

"Yeah. Roven assumed you were a witch because Kalana was vague about who you were."

"He was wrong." She smiled.

“I know, but that didn’t stop the unease and mistrust of having an unknown witch at my door.”

“Which you directed so well.”

Rhys smiled. “You stood up to me instead of backing down. You stood toe to toe with me.”

“I don’t scare easily.”

“So I’ve noticed.” He grinned as he lowered his lips to hers gently.

Mari sighed as she lifted up on her toes, her arms wrapping around his mid-section as his went around her.

Rhys chuckled as he leaned back. “What are you doing?” he asked as she kept going back and forth on her toes.

“I’m short. It’s not easy to kiss you without being on my tippy toes. You’re

at least a foot taller than me.”

“Wrap your legs around me.” Lifting her up, Rhys held onto her ass as she wrapped her strong legs around his waist. “Better?”

“Yes,” she breathed, her body reacting to the press of his cock against her pussy, and the seam of her jeans rubbing her clit. Lowering her mouth to his, her fingers ran up into his short, dark blond hair, gripping it as best she could.

Rhys growled. “If you’re still afraid of us, you better stop now or I won’t be able to.”

“I don’t want to stop,” she whispered, shaking her head.

“Then we need to get to my bedroom. I am not taking you on the

floor our first time.” Heading to the door, he opened it, getting ready to quick-step until he saw his head of security running his way. “What’s going on?”

“We’ve had an encounter down by the sea,” Hoag explained.

Mari released her legs, sliding down Rhys’ lean form. “What kind of encounter?” Her eyes widened when he ignored her, not even looking at her in acknowledgement as he answered to Rhys.

“A Kelpie came ashore and attacked the guards.”

“Attacked? It didn’t try to lure or shape shift?” Rhys asked.

“No, sir, just straight out attacked.”

“That’s not right. Kelpies don’t just attack out of nowhere,” Mari stated, her nostrils flaring as Hoag continued to ignore her presence.

“My lord, the guards are holding it for you. We’ve also sent a message to Roven Manor’s security force.”

Rhys nodded, his arm slipping around Mari’s waist. “All right then, let’s go.”

“Sir, this is coven business.”

Mari’s eyes widened again as Hoag glanced her way. “Excuse me?” Moving in front of Rhys she stood in front of the young vamp and poked him with her finger, letting heat scorch through his clothing to his skin. “Let’s get one thing straight here, *junior*. Anything that

happens in Alston *is* my business as I'm guardian, so don't you think to cut me out or I'll take you to your knees so fast you won't know what hit you," she growled.

"Mari, he's seven hundred years old," Rhys stated as he laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Like I said, *junior*," she snarled before stomping away.

Rhys motioned for Hoag to follow. "She is my life mate, Hoag, it's been decreed by the ancients. Why don't you like Mari?"

"I can't put my finger on it, sir. It's like she's hiding something, something important, and I don't like that."

Rhys lifted his eyes to the petite woman in front of them. "Mari would

never do anything to hurt Alston or its people. If you trust my word on anything, trust me on this.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Mari listened to their conversation, her lips furled, until Rhys stood up for her. She smiled as she turned. “Are we going to flash-step or what?”

“Quick-step love, quick-step,” Rhys chuckled as he grabbed her around the waist and took off.

“Oh gods, whatever,” she groaned, grabbing her stomach as they stopped. Rhys’ hand caught her as she wobbled. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that,” she mumbled as Rhys helped her over to where Drake Roven was standing. Mari moved her gaze to the horse-like

creature held by Lyken and Vampire warriors off the beach area up by the grass and rocks.

“Any idea why it attacked?”

“No,” Drake replied as he turned to look at them and smiled. “You don’t look so good, Mari.”

“No kidding. Tell me something I don’t know,” Mari grumbled.

“Do you need Kalana?”

“No, I’ll be fine in a moment.” Straightening up, she glanced over as the Kelpie tried fighting. Rhys’ arm went around her waist. Her eyes narrowed when she noticed the closeness of her sanctuary. “Just where did it come ashore?”

“Over there by those rocks,” Drake

replied.

Mari followed his pointing finger and drew in a large breath when she noticed it was directly under her entrance, way above the rocky slope. Stepping forward she glanced out over the sea. “Was there anything else there? Did your scouts say they saw anything out of the norm?”

“No, nothing. All reports from both our teams indicate everything was as it should be: calm, serene and peaceful. They said it came up out of the sea as if it was crazed and it just went for them. Palidies on team one is a water nymph, he said he’d never seen anything like it. The Kelpie wouldn’t even acknowledge his presence or communicate. We have

no idea what the hell happened or why.”

Mari turned to face them. “I know someone who will. Damn I hate to do this, but I want solid answers on why they’re attacking my town.”

Rhys’ gaze narrowed, arms crossing over his chest. “Your town?”

“Damn right. Clear everyone another hundred yards back, I have a call to make.” Striding for the beach she listened as everyone fell back. Mari stood right on the edge of the crest, the water lapping the toes of her shoes, and closed her eyes. Breathing deeply, arms up, elbows by her side, palms up, Mari called forth the energies of the land. Her skin tingled, brain numbed as energies flowed freely through her system. Her

eyes fluttered as she took a step forward, right hand raised. She knelt and brought her hand down, slapping it on the surface of the water as she yelled, "Triton, I call for you!" The energy wave reverberated over the top of the water like a pulse, sending a sonic boom type of sound to the ears of everyone within hearing distance. Stepping back she stumbled a bit before arms went around her waist.

"That was something." Rhys smiled.

"Takes a lot of energy."

"I guess the hell so," Drake replied as he stepped up. "Did I hear things or did you just call a mythical creature?"

Mari chuckled. "Don't you know by now that all mythical beings are real,

Roven?”

“You’re telling me Triton, King of the seas and oceans, exists?”

“Of course Triton exists, and he’s a prince. His father, Poseidon, is king.”

“I thought Gods like them were myths,” Rhys stated.

Mari chuckled. “They are not Gods, they are Other Kin, very old Other Kin.”

“And they just come when you call?” Drake asked.

Mari’s lips lifted as her brow hiked up. “Only the ones I’ve played with.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Rhys asked as he turned her to face him.

“It means that I have some very old friends.”

“Just how old are you?”

Her smile grew as she kept his gaze. “Don’t you know you never ask a lady her age? Besides, that’s something for us to discuss later.” Turning her gaze to the Kelpie when it started fidgeting, her smile widened. “I’d say Triton’s coming.” Moving out of Rhys’ arms, she turned toward the sea as a water spiral shot straight up to the sky and a man emerged from within its center, smiling when he caught her gaze.

“Triton, is *here!*” he called out, arms tossed out to his sides.

Chapter 2

Mari laughed as Triton lowered the waterspout like a bridge and rode it to land. “You show off!” she chuckled as he picked her up and twirled her around. She noticed Drake and Rhys look at each other before Rhys glared her way. He folded his arms across his chest. “All right put me down you oaf.”

“Oaf, oaf, I’m the Prince of the

Seven Seas and Oceans and I get oaf?"

"Yes." She smiled, taking his hand within hers. "There's someone I want you to meet."

"It wouldn't happen to be that big vamp with a pissed off look would it?"

"Ha, yes it would," she laughed, leading him right up to Rhys and Drake. "Rhys, this is my friend Triton. Triton this is Rhys, my soon to be life mate, and our friend Drake."

"Life mate?" Triton boomed. "By the Gods, she's finally settling down." He whooped with laughter. "It's about time, Sissy, I now forgive you for not calling me for a century."

Mari slapped his huge bicep. "Stop it you trouble maker. Now back to

business, the other reason I called.” She motioned over to the Kelpie, noticing the smile leave his handsome face. “He came ashore and attacked with no warning. He injured a water nymph badly. Triton, he didn’t try to shape shift or lure. What have you heard about Alston?”

“We were figuring something like this was going to happen. All the signs toward a sea attack on Alston have been showing; the creatures of the water are anxious.” Looking down at her and then up to Rhys and Drake he said, “We need to talk in a more secure location. I’ll have my warriors come fetch him and get answers.”

Mari stood by as he lifted his hand

and four mermen emerged from the sea. Taking hold of Rhys' hand she leaned into him as Triton gave his orders. Once his men and the Kelpie disappeared into the sea, Triton turned with a smile.

“You're lucky I was close by.”

“Where?” Mari asked.

“Hawaii. Gods I love Pele, she's such a little hottie,” he whooped.

“Oh I'm sure,” she frowned. “Why were you so close?”

“Ah, I had a little visitor saying I should come this way.”

“Who?”

“Your mamma!” he grinned. “Boy she is still one fine looking woman. And no disrespect to your daddy, but if she wasn't with your daddy, I'd hop all over

that little ancient ass.”

Mari slapped him. “Ewe, gross. Now I have to go wash out my ears or something. She’s my mother you moron, don’t say stuff like that to me.”

Triton belted out a laugh. “Let’s go find some place to talk, we have a lot to catch up on, and I need to fill these boys in on what’s happening under sea.”

Rhys snarled when Triton took her hand, leading her away.

“Easy,” Drake said as they turned. “He’s not a threat.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Well for one, they’ve apparently known each other for quite a while and she chose you.” Drake smiled as he slapped his back. “Let’s go, they’re

heading toward your place.”

* * * *

Mari frowned at Triton as he started hitting on one of Rhys' house staff. What he'd just revealed was an attack from the sea was imminent. The darkness was raising his army to try and attack Alston from that angle now. Drake had left to talk to the Elder council about what they'd learned and Rhys stood by the window. "Triton, what does your father think?"

"He's calling his guards to arms. He's also been speaking with my aunts and uncles about what's happening on their ends. They don't want to get involved; they've fought the darkness once with your father and sustained a lot

of casualties.”

“Why wouldn’t they want to fight against the darkness?” Rhys asked. “Isn’t it as much a threat to them as us?”

“It is, and my father has made that point known. If we don’t destroy the darkness or find some way to seal it forever, it will come back with a vengeance like it is now.”

“But how do we seal it? None of us has that kind of power,” Mari said as she laid her arms across the table.

“Your father does.”

Mari met Triton’s gaze. “And my father is sleeping.”

“We may have to take the chance of waking him, Mari. Does he know what’s going on?”

“Yes, he’s aware.” Her eyes lowered to the table as she sensed Rhys’ gaze burning into her back as Triton’s eyes narrowed.

“You haven’t told him who your parents are? I thought you were joining as mates?”

“We are but I haven’t had a chance to explain certain—things—to Rhys.”

“Damn, I thought you would have explained everything to him before sleeping with him, because you know what happened before.”

Mari glanced over at Rhys and frowned, turning back to Triton when he busted out with laughter.

“By the Gods, this is great! You haven’t slept with him yet have you? The

Terror of Tahiti, The Sex Kitten of Shangri-la, The Arouser of Atlantis...”

“Shut-up, Triton,” Mari growled.

“Oh no,” Rhys grinned. “Continue.”

“No, it’s time for you to go play with Rhys’ servant,” Mari stated as she jumped up. “So I can talk to Rhys.”

“Or other things,” Triton grinned as he wiggled his eyebrows.

“You’re cruising for a bruising, water boy.”

Triton sighed dramatically, the smile still in place. “Water boy? No respect I’m telling you, no respect. So, Lord Beven, do you mind if I partake in some extra activities with your beautiful coven ladies? It’s been awhile since I’ve had the pleasure of loving a

Vampire.”

Mari rolled her eyes as Rhys grinned. “What, you can’t be happy with one, oh scourge of the seven seas?”

“They’re adults to do as they will,” Rhys answered as he stepped up behind Mari.

“Excellent,” Triton boomed as he rose. “Mariwen, make use of this night and bed your man,” he laughed as he wrapped an arm around a brown haired female. “And you, my love, can bite to your heart’s content, it won’t hurt me a bit. But just so you know, I may bite back.”

“You’re so overconfident, you horny toad!” Mari called out listening to his laughter.

“Mariwen,” Rhys smiled. “I like it.”

“Well I’m glad, seeing as how it’s my name.”

“So your mother is an ancient?”

Mari’s chest pressed tight against her shirt as she breathed deeply and turned to meet his gaze. “Yes.”

“And my soon to be father-in-law?”

Her eyes lowered. “My father is—my father is...”

“Are you embarrassed by him?”

“No!” Her eyes whipped up meeting his gaze. “I love my father. I’m just very protective over him is all.”

Rhys stepped forward drawing her into his arms. “That’s fine.” His chin rested on top of her head. “When you’re

ready you'll tell me. Now tell me about this Arouser of Atlantis."

Mari slapped his back, his chuckle echoing in her ear. "That was a long time ago."

"How long? You still haven't told me how old you are, Mari."

"Older than you can imagine," she whispered before lifting her head.

"You have to tell me some time."

"I will. I'm just really tired."

"You did expel a lot of energy calling Triton. Why don't we go up to my bedroom and I'll get you in a hot bath with a glass of wine."

Mari's lips parted as Rhys lifted her effortlessly into his arms. She draped hers around his neck as he

brushed her lips gently with his, sending tingles coursing through her body. She'd only been to his room once when she'd woken up there after the incident in the clearing with Olivia Roven and the Golem. She'd insisted on her own room after that and he'd put her right across the hall from his own. She also knew that Rhys wanted to question her about everything from her parents to her past. She had to hand it to him though; he wasn't demanding answers like he would have done when she'd first met him months ago. Glancing up she watched him as he headed down the hall to his rooms. She admired his strong jaw and good looks. Any female would be honored to have him for a life mate, but

she, she was just scared.

“Why are you frowning?”

“Wha...I, um, I was just thinking.”

“Of?” Rhys asked as he stepped into his master bath.

“Why I’m so scared.”

“Of us?” He frowned as he set her on a padded chair. “I thought we went through this earlier.”

“We only grazed it, Rhys. Just because I spilled my guts to you doesn’t mean I’m not afraid.”

Rhys knelt down in front of her, taking her hands within his own as their eyes met. “Answer me this. Did your first husband know about your gifts and who you were or did you hide it from him?”

“He knew.”

“And he chose to stay by your side correct?”

“Yes.”

“He made his choice, Mari, as we all do, as I do. Are you afraid that I’ll die?”

“Yes,” she whispered breathlessly.

“We all have to die sometime. When it’s our time, it’s our time, and there’s nothing we can do. What we have to do is fight to survive and live our life to the fullest every day because we don’t know what’s right around the corner. Do you think I had any idea this darkness would emerge and come after us? No, I was living my life between doing my daily responsibilities for the

coven, securing Alston and partaking in pleasurable bed sport.” He smiled when her eyes narrowed. “I’ve never claimed to be a saint, Mari, but all that was before I met you and we started fighting to save this town. Since the night we met and I sensed the bond between us, I haven’t been with another woman. I think my body damn well knew you were it and that was that. Frustrating as hell let me tell you.” He grinned as he rubbed the backs of her hands with his thumbs. “I’m one thousand eight hundred and eighty years old and I’ve never felt what I feel with you. If that’s not a sign that we’re not only life mates but soul mates, you tell me what is.”

Mari’s mind was whirling. “What

if once you find out what I am you don't want me anymore?"

"Your mother's an ancient right?"

"Yes."

"If your father was good enough for your mother, and the ancients and Gods saw fit to allow a child to be born, then who am I to say otherwise? Would you turn your back to me if you found out I was half human or Triton's brother?"

Mari squeezed his hand. "No."

"I'm not by the way, human or Triton's brother," he chuckled.

"Oh that I know." She smiled bringing her hands to his shoulders. "Rhys, if you think about it, we really don't know each other very well, and I'm feeling a bit rushed and that's

spiking my anxiety as well. I know what I feel between us. I know our bodies are telling us we're supposed to be together, as well as my mother pointing that out." Her breath shuddered as they stared at each other, her fingers playing with the short strands of his soft hair. "I never expected to be part of someone again; I've lived so long on my own."

Rhys gripped the sides of her thighs. "Just because we're to be mates doesn't mean we have to jump into the ceremony straight up. There's no law that says, 'up, that's it, you're together, now marry'." The side of his mouth went up as her eyes widened. "Is that what you thought, that I'd make you jump right into the binding ceremony?"

“A part of me I guess.”

Leaning forward he kissed her softly. “Baby, this is going to be new to me as well. Like I said, I wasn’t exactly a saint. You are, however, the first woman to ever grace my bedroom with her presence. Well, outside of my mother, sister, and housekeeper. No female I’ve slept with has ever been here. I need a little time myself to acclimate to us.” Leaning back, he met her gaze. “You don’t snore do you?”

Mari chuckled as she smacked a kiss on his lips. “No. Well, only when I’m really tired. But I don’t drool and I like the right side.”

“Perfect, I’m a lefty. Now let’s get you in the tub.”

Mari stood and let him help her take her clothing off. “Um, just because we’re not...you know, going through the bonding ceremony right away, doesn’t mean you want to wait, to well, you know.”

Rhys’ brow lifted. “The Sex Kitten of Shangri-la can’t say sex?” he chuckled.

Mari slapped his arm as she lifted her shirt. “Remind me to smack Triton for his big mouth.” Once the shirt was off, she noticed where his gaze was and turned to look in the huge mirror. Her eyes went to the black ink dragon tattoo starting on her right shoulder and going down across her back with its tail ending right above her belly button.

“Does it bother you?”

“Hell no.” Cupping her shoulder his fingers trailed down, following the art.

“You’re hard aren’t you?”

“Hell ya.”

Mari smiled as she backed up, rubbing her bottom against his groin, his hands going to her hips to stop her as he groaned.

“No, not tonight. I promised you a hot bath and a glass of wine, and you’re tired. I can see how pale you are right now and when I take you as mine,” he lowered his mouth to her ear, meeting her eyes in the mirror, “I want you fully charged.”

Take her as his—damn, now her

panties were wet. “Don’t talk like that unless you want to do something about it. It’s been a long time since I’ve been intimate with anyone.”

Rhys smiled as he backed up. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mari took her pants off as he started the water, her eyes widening when he turned to her. His blue eyes were glowing translucent as his fangs descended.

“I can smell your arousal. I need to go, sweet, before I attack you.”

“Don’t forget my wine,” she called out as he quick-stepped out of the room.

* * * *

Mari groaned as she rolled over in the warm comfortable bed. Stretching

her arms out above her as she stretched her body, a soft smile played on her lips as an arm went around her waist. “Morning.”

“Don’t you mean afternoon?”

“What?” Rolling over she noticed that he was fully dressed. “What time is it?”

“Twelve-thirty.”

“Oh crap,” she exclaimed, tossing the comforter aside. “I’m late. I promised Livi I’d train her today.”

Rhys grabbed her, bringing her back down to the bed. “She’s here. She came with Drake and the Elders to talk with Triton.”

“There was a meeting and no one woke me up?”

Rhys moved to lay over her and smiled. “You needed the rest, sweet. You didn’t even budge when Triton came up here booming about how you still had panties on and didn’t take his advice to get laid last night.”

Mari scoffed at his grin. “Uh, that idiot.”

“Don’t worry,” he said as he lowered his mouth to kiss her neck. “I made him feel guilty, telling him if you hadn’t expelled so much energy calling him I would have gotten a piece last night.”

Mari chuckled then moaned when he nibbled on a sensitive area of her neck. “Oh I like that.”

“Mmmm.” Mari’s hips came up and

her breathing deepened when he bit her a little harder. “Am I allowed to bite you?” he breathed as his eyes changed.

Her lips parted on a silent moan as the smoothness of his descending fangs caressed her skin. “No, not right away. Not until I...” her breathing hitched when his hand cupped her pussy. “Oh damn, Rhys.”

“You smell so good,” he groaned. “Like an exotic spice and bright warm sunlight mixed together.”

Her hands moved to the front of his pants, his moan filling her ear as she lightly caressed his hard cock. Her knuckles slid down it as she lowered his zipper, and her back arched as he rubbed her clit. They both froze with a knock on

the door.

“What?” Rhys yelled.

“My lord, young Olivia is inquiring as to Ms. Mari’s wakefulness, and Prince Triton is—egging her on if I shall say, sir.”

Rhys groaned as he lifted his head from the corner of her neck. “Thank you, William, we’ll be down in a few moments.”

“Remind me again to smack Triton when I see his watery ass,” Mari grumbled as she sat up on her elbows.

“I’ll hold him for you.” He smiled as he jumped up.

* * * *

Mari smiled as Olivia concentrated. “That’s it, Livi, now put

your hand out and concentrate on making the energy into a ball on your palm.”

“It’s hard.”

“I know, but I also know you can do it. Think of a ball or sphere.” Mari grinned when a small orb the size of a golf ball appeared. “Open your eyes, Livi.”

“Oh wow, I did that?”

“Yes. Now the more you practice the easier it will be to call the energies forth, and the bigger you can make them. When needed they can become a weapon.”

“Mari?”

“I feel it.” Turning, her eyes narrowed as she scouted the area around the river where they sat. “Livi, get away

from the water for me.” Backing up, she kept Livi behind her. “Call for your father, Livi, call now!” Backing up she pushed Livi further back as a creature sprinted out of the river. “What the hell? It’s a Kappa.”

“A what?”

Mari kept her eyes on it as she bowed deep. “I am guardian of this land, why are you here?” Mari gasped when it ignored her and charged at them. Bringing her hands together she conformed the energies around her, just as she’d shown Livi a few moments ago, and let a sphere the size of a baseball go, hitting the reptilian-like creature right between the eyes. Hers widened as it shook off the hit and came at them

again. “Run, Livi!”

“Daddy’s coming. I won’t leave you, Mari!”

“Livi, run!” Mari yelled as the Kappa flew right over her head, pouncing on Livi and knocking her to the ground. The child screamed and transformed into her wolf self and ran away from the Kappa as it tried dragging her to the water. Mari’s powers were kicking up. Streaks of lightning coursed through her as she tackled the Kappa from the side, oomphing as they went flying. The damn thing was so stocky she couldn’t get it to tip onto its side as its webbed feet slid across the ground. Mari grunted when the Kappa renewed its efforts to get to Livi after she’d sent

up a howl. “You stay away from her!” Mari shouted as she lifted her hand, gripping its beak-like mouth. If she could tilt the beast’s head to the side, the water from the lily-pad-like bowl on top of its head would spill and render it immobile. Mari growled as the Kappa flung her back, knocking the breath out of her as she landed hard. Her head swam as she felt it crawling up over her. She screamed when the beast swung, ripping the front of her jeans to shreds in an attempt to rape her. “No you don’t!” Mari yelled as her blood heated. She lifted her hands to its chest as Livi yelled for her in the background. Her hands had just started burning through the Kappa’s scaly skin when it

disappeared. Gasping, she moved her head to see Rhys tilting the Kappa's head, emptying the water.

"Mari, are you alright?" Drake asked as he knelt down next to her side.

"Yes. Livi?"

"Fine. She's getting dressed." He smiled before walking over to Rhys.

"What happened?" Triton asked.

"It came up out of the water and charged us. I tried bowing and it ignored me, going after Livi first. It tried dragging her to the water and then she wolfed up and got away as I tackled it. The damn thing was too strong for me to overpower physically and it tried to..."

"Rape you," Triton said as he laid his shirt over her stomach and private

area. “Why didn’t you transform or power up?”

“I was. He has burns on his chest from my hands.”

“You know what I mean, Mariwen Gawain!”

“I haven’t transformed in centuries,” she whispered, noticing Rhys and Drake staring her way.

“You haven’t...Gods woman, you’re not out fighting a human to survive! You’re smack in the middle of an Other Kin war! What the hell would you have done if we hadn’t arrived in time?”

“I was handling it!” she growled, sitting up. She kept his gaze.

“Yeah, you handled it really well!

I'm ordering you to tell Rhys who you are, maybe then you won't hold back when you need your powers!"

"You are not my Prince! I don't take orders from you, Triton!" Jumping to her feet, she held the shirt up as a cover. She growled at him, the beast within her wanting to fight.

"You feel her wanting to come out; your eyes are glowing and your skin is heating."

"I can't transform!"

"Not unless you get what you need, and I'm sure your vamp will be all too glad to help you with that!"

Mari's chest rose with a deep breath, slowly letting it out through her nose, sighing tiredly. "You don't

understand. It's not like I can hide my other self easily, Triton. I can't just delve into the sea and disappear. Well I can, but that's not the point I'm trying to make. If someone saw me, if someone—do you know what they'd do to me, Other Kin or human alike? They'd cut me up so fast...”

“You forget, Sissy, how powerful you really are. No Other Kin or human invention can contain you if you don't want it to. You need to remember that. You may need to shift to fight the darkness.”

“I know, I just—” she whispered, glancing over at Rhys. She knew she was more powerful when she was shifted to her other self, and that power

may need to come out.

“Mari, has it hit your mind that if your father has the power to kill or seal the darkness away, then you may too? You are his blood and he is here if you really need him to arise.”

“It’s dangerous to wake him before his time.”

“Don’t you think if he knows you’re in life or death danger he’d wake on his own?”

“That’s impossible,” she mumbled, meeting his gaze.

“Not as impossible as you think. My uncle Zeus said he’s seen it before when a...” Glancing over at Rhys and Drake, he turned her so their backs were facing them, “...a you know who’s child

is in danger, it woke up on its own to protect and take down the threat. Now that's why Pompeii happened, but the... you know what...was sleeping beneath the volcano.”

“Oh wonderful, so are you telling me that if my father wakes up to protect me he could literally destroy Alston?”

“Not knowing where he's sleeping, I can't say.”

“Trust me when I say, the whole of Alston could be wiped out if he woke suddenly.”

“That's impossible. Alston is huge, at least ten thousand square miles,” Rhys stated as he joined them.

Mari frowned as Triton's brows went up and he scooted away, saying

he'd let them talk while he took care of the Kappa. "Rhys, my father is—very powerful."

"Apparently so are you from what Triton said, and he's right. You should have shifted. The Kappa could have very easily overpowered you and then what?"

His voice rose with his last words. She just stared as he ran a hand through his hair. "Well if you were listening, Mr. Big Ears, then you would have heard me tell him I couldn't if I wanted to," she sniped.

"And what is it you need from me to help you shift?" he snarled right back.

Mari's insides twisted as they stared each other down, all quiet around them.

“Your blood,” Olivia whispered.

Mari lowered her eyes as they closed with a sigh.

“I’m sorry, Mari, but I agree with Triton and Rhys. It almost got the both of us. Any blood will do, not just a Vampire’s, but she needs it in order to shift fully.”

Mari lifted her gaze, meeting Rhys’.

“It’s not secure here!” Triton bellowed. “Go now, back to Beven Manor. Now, Mari, go!”

Mari caught one last glimpse of Rhys before she took off running. She glanced to her left and saw him quick-stepping to keep up. She stopped short of the door to his home, waiting for him to appear. Her chest rose with the deep

breath she inhaled, letting it out slowly through her nose as Rhys appeared with Triton.

“Since when can you run like that?” Rhys asked.

“That was nothing, just a walk in the park,” Mari replied as she stepped into the manor and went to Rhys’ study. When Triton closed the door, leaving just them inside, she knew it was time. “Rhys...”

“Are you embarrassed that you’re a blood drinker?”

“What? No! It’s just that when I shift...when I shift, I need a lot of space and most people run in horror.”

“You’re not a Medusa are you?”

Mari chuckled. “No, and she’d take

offense to that. She's actually a very nice woman. Just because men turn to stone when she looks at them isn't her fault. Rhys, I'm—I'm a fire dragon. My father is a full-blooded fire dragon. Alston is his sleeping ground, the entire Eastern United States are his territory."

His eyes widened. "That's crazy, Mari. Full dragons have been extinct for thousands of years, before my birth even."

"Not extinct, sleeping. A dragon can sleep for eight to ten thousand years and to them it's like eight to ten hours of sleep."

Rhys shook his head. "If what you're saying is true, then you are the rarest of Other Kin alive."

“I know,” she whispered. “That’s why I haven’t shifted for centuries. I’m not the only one. Every dragon has a child or guardian to help watch over them and their territories while they sleep. We just choose to keep our shifts on the low down.”

“Just how old are you?”

Mari smiled. “I feel like I’m robbing the cradle with you. I was born around thirty-five hundred B.C., right here on what you now know as Alston.” His gaze faltered from hers and that spiked her nervousness. “But so help me, Rhys Beven, if you call me an old lady, I’ll kick your ass.”

Rhys snorted. “Yeah, bring it on, sweetheart.” Quick-stepping to her, he

took her in his arms, lowering his mouth to hers passionately.

Mari moaned, her arms going up around his neck as he lifted her off the floor, groaning when a knock sounded.

“Hey love birds, the Elder Council want to see us.” Triton grinned.

“You have the worst timing *evvvveerrrrr*,” Mari growled.

Chapter 3

“Mari, we’ve come across some rather interesting news,” Druid Elder Morgan Suibhiue stated as Mari and Rhys stepped in. “Rhys, we’re going to ask you to remain on that side of the table for now.”

“Meaning what?” Rhys stated as he stepped forward. “I am a member of this

council.”

“And from what we hear, Mari’s life mate,” Noela Carme, Elf Elder said softly and with a smile.

“It’s nothing bad so tame the fangs,” Gavril Beven grinned.

Mari glanced up to see Rhys’ fangs disappearing back into his mouth. “What’s this about?”

“You, Mari,” Gwill Roven of the Lyken clan replied as he laid a large leather book on the council table. “The Roven historians found something very interesting in our history.” Flipping to the page he’d marked, he motioned them forward.

Mari frowned as Triton burst out in laughter. There in front of her was a

picture of herself staring back. Obviously one of the original Roven Clan had thought it a good idea to put to paper who had led them to Alston. “Damn Lykens,” she muttered.

“Hey now,” Evan Roven chuckled.

“What the—you’re the one who led our ancestors here?” Rhys asked as he met her gaze.

“I am,” she whispered as she stepped back. “I did it for entirely selfish reasons at the time. My father had just fallen asleep after his battle with the darkness and I needed someone here to—watch him—although no one knew he was here. I knew of a group of Other Kin who wanted to be free to live their lives without having to fight for clan wars and

territories all the time. They wanted peace. The farther I traveled the more Other Kin I found wanting the same. I asked them if they could put their differences aside and live in peace with Other Kin who wanted the same. I told them that I knew of a place where they could settle. However, they had to protect their lands and its people if danger came. They all agreed and as you know, they settled here.”

“You say your father fell asleep after the battle with the darkness, our records show that it appeared only once and our ancestors fought it,” Elder Eva of the Woodland Fairies said.

“Yes, my father fell asleep not too long after the first battle. From what I’m

told it was one of the bloodiest wars ever known to Other Kin. Triton and his family were there.”

“The darkness attacked the first time right after Mari was born,” Triton said.

“I was able to make it back in time to help your ancestors fight it off for the second battle with the help of some very good friends again.” Smiling up at Triton, she watched as he beamed like a peacock. “The darkness wasn’t as strong as when my father and the others fought it in the first battle. It hadn’t regained its full strength before it attacked. But thinking my father was asleep,” she shrugged, “it went for the chance I guess.”

“Who is your father?” Gavril Beven asked.

“Uncle!” Rhys growled as he stepped forward.

Mari caught his arm, holding him still. “My father is a fire dragon and this is his territory.”

“That’s impossible!” Elder Morgan of the Druids stated. “Dragons haven’t been seen for thousands of years.”

Her lips parted to speak when a blinding light entered the council chamber.

“Dare you suggest my daughter speaks of non-truths?” Darina asked as she emerged. “Or that my husband does not exist?”

The corner of Mari’s mouth tilted

up with her mother's dramatic entrance. She listened as Triton chuckled when they all bowed their heads respectively. "This is my mother, Ancient Darina."

"Blessed one, we meant no disrespect," Morgan stated.

"Of course you didn't," Darina replied. "I know it must be difficult to think of dragons still being around as no one has seen them in such a long time. But this is Alston, and this information stays within Alston's boundaries forever."

"Mother, I'm pretty sure I could have explained everything. Why are you here?" Mari asked.

"To warn you all that the coming battle will be soon. The ancients sense a

great unrest looming close.” Turning to Mari, she met her gaze. “You must be able to shift completely. If you do not, then all is lost. Do you understand this?”

“There’s no way I can take down the darkness even shifted. I am not as powerful as father.”

“Mariwen, the darkness is coming for you. It has been learned that the reason it keeps attacking Alston is that it knows you will come. It has no idea where your father rests or even if it’s on this side of his territory.”

“Me? Why?”

“Because you are Alston, you are this land. You hold the key to its safety. And no, Olivia Roven cannot be brought into battle this time. She is not ready and

she would not survive.”

Fear ran through her body like water thawing from the ice caps. “Then I’ll leave.”

“If you leave, it will kill all here. Is that what you want?”

“No,” she whispered, turning her gaze when a hand touched her lower back, heating her chilled flesh.

“You won’t be alone,” Rhys stated as he drew her closer. “We will help you.”

“As will I,” Triton stated.

“Mari,” Darina said as she lifted her daughter’s hands within her own. “You are never alone and you have more power than you know.”

Mari closed her eyes as her mother

kissed her cheek. The electricity spiked as her mother disappeared.

“Don’t forget you come from my bloodline as well,” Darina’s disembodied voice whispered.

“What did she mean by that?” Rhys asked.

“I, I don’t know. I’ve never shown any signs of having mother’s powers. Triton?” she asked as she met the Sea Prince’s gaze.

“No idea kiddo, that’s something beyond me,” Triton said.

“Mari, if you’re the guardian of Alston, then may I ask why Olivia was chosen to be a guardian?” Gwil Roven asked.

“Livi was chosen simply because

she was born of Alston lands, and since I have no child of my own, yet. A new guardian needed to be chosen in case something happens to me.”

“So, no matter that she’s a guardian; you’ll still be *the* guardian?”

Mari smiled. “Yes, unless I die, then all my gifts and powers will go to Olivia; unless I have a child, then they will automatically find any child of my blood and infuse with them.”

“In other words,” Triton said, “No matter what, a dragon guardian will always protect Alston and its people.”

Mari frowned as she glanced back to the council members. “Call to arms, prepare for a battle as mother said. They won’t wait to attack.”

Mari sighed as she sat on Rhys' bed staring out the huge picture window. She'd left the room dark on purpose so she could see the stars. A soft smile lined her lips when Rhys slipped in behind her, his warmth heating her back.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes. Rhys, the reason I asked you to wait to bite me is because sometimes my blood is...hot. My body heats up with my passion and I've never let a vampire bite me in the middle of sex, so I'm not sure if you'd feel my fire or not.”

“Will I hurt you if I bite and feed from you?”

“No, like Triton, I'm old and powerful enough that you could bite all

you like and I'll be fine, unless we do it for days with no sleep and food."

"Days huh?" he grinned.

Mari smiled, turning as he drew her close. "I just didn't want you to run once you tasted me."

"I'm not running anywhere and I plan on tasting every inch of you."

Her head tilted as his lips ran down her neck. She parted her lips with a soundless gasp as Rhys' hands traveled up to her breasts, his fingers finding her nipples. "Rhys," she whispered breathlessly.

"Do you wish to feed on me?" he asked as he removed her shirt.

"No, that would be too many sensations at once and I don't know how

I'll act."

"Because you haven't fed in a while?"

"Yes."

Rhys smiled as he removed her bra. "Don't worry, love, that's something I know how to deal with." Lowering his head, he gently drew her turgid peak into his mouth, her moan and movement had him lowering his hands to her waist to hold her still.

"Rhys, do not make me wait," Mari groaned as she ran her fingers through his hair grabbing on, trying to force his head closer.

"Slow down."

"I haven't been with a man in a hundred years," she growled.

Lifting his head, he met her gaze. “Exactly. That’s why you will slow down. I will not hurt you, Mari, no matter how fast and hard you want to mate.”

Her heart sped at his words and the glow of his eyes. “Alpha.”

Rhys grinned. His fingers worked into her hair near her scalp and held her as he attacked her mouth. He knew she was a powerful being, and if she didn’t accept his dominance during their first mating, she never would, and that he wouldn’t accept. Two alphas in a relationship was hard; if one didn’t yield they’d have a hard time being together as a couple, and from her body language, she accepted his dominance. “You will

not orgasm without my permission, do you understand?"

"Yes." She breathed as heavily as he did.

"I know it's been a while and you're primed, but you will wait and enjoy the pleasures I give you."

"But, you'll hurry right?"

"When it pleases me. Now get naked, woman."

"Woman?"

Rhys chuckled as she undressed quickly. "Yes, my woman." Moving away, he stripped swiftly, smiling when her eyes lowered to his thick erection. Her pink tongue wetting her lips had his cock jumping. "Suck him for me." His voice husky, Rhys groaned when her

warm mouth moved over his wide head. Lowering his hand, he gently placed it on top of her head. He really shouldn't have her do this; he was ready to explode and groaned when her tongue tickled the skin on the underside of his cock. Her fingers lightly grazed his balls. He groaned as her warm mouth settled over his head, taking him in slowly. His buttocks clenched as she moved further down his shaft, engulfing his cock down her throat. "Baby, don't hurt yourself," he mumbled.

Moving her mouth back up, she let her lips barely touch his wide head as she glanced up, her gaze moving over his body. Her pussy clenched with wanting. Rhys' body was firm with enough

muscle to show his strength. Not like those wimpy vamps portrayed in movies now where they were skinny and pale. Gods if they only knew the real thing lived right next door. Rhys was the perfect picture of how a vampire should be portrayed.

“Baby, are you day dreaming?”

“Only about you.” Sucking him quickly, Mari smiled at his gasping moan and tightening fingers in her hair.

Rhys growled as he lifted her up his body, his tongue stroking deeply into her mouth, hers initiating a sensuous duel. His fingers delved into her hair, clutching against her scalp, his lips demanding and hungry as he pressed his erection against her damp pussy.

Turning, he lowered her. Kneeling on the floor, his nostrils flared with her intoxicating scent.

Mari moaned as his large hands moved her thighs apart, exposing her swollen folds to his gaze. Her hips arched at the brush of his knuckles over her and then he buried his mouth against her pussy. Mari cried out as she squirmed against him, his hands holding her thighs apart as he devoured her. “Oh my god!” She was trying to hold on. She could do it. Then the rush of the endorphins hit her. “Rhys, please! Oh my god I’m going to come!” she screamed, her eyes tearing up with the battle to hold her orgasm back—and then his mouth was gone. Gasping, her body

trembled uncontrollably as he moved over her, her legs stretching, going over his thighs as he knelt in front of her. She cried with pleasure as his fat cock filled her slowly, his thickness stretching her swollen insides. “Come on, Rhys. Please!”

“Please what, my love?”

“Faster,” she growled.

The side of Rhys’ mouth tilted up as he fully encased himself in her warmth. “You are so tight, honey. I don’t want to hurt you.” Grabbing her hips when she went to thrust against him, he held her in place.

Mari’s head moved to the side as her pussy clenched around his hard cock.

“You’re making this hard,” he said

between clenched teeth. Moving slowly out of her, the sweat beaded on his forehead as he entered her slowly again.

“Damn, Rhys, move!”

“When I say so wench!” Smacking her inner thigh he met her gaze as she turned her head his way. Slowly he pumped her once, twice. He held her hips tight, and when her muscles clenched around him again he started thrusting with vigor.

“Not yet, Mari, not yet,” Rhys said through clenched teeth. The desire to give this woman the ultimate pleasure stirred him to hold onto his own passions. His eyes shifted with the heating of her body. The sheen of sweat on her delicate skin had his fangs

descending as his thumb lowered to her engorged clit.

Mari's body heated to a level she'd never felt before. Her lips parted on a silent gasp as images and emotions of Rhys floated through her brain, letting her know that the mind-marking was taking place, and she truly was with her soul mate. The deafening sound of silence pinged through her head all of a sudden; the only coherent thought was Rhys' voice.

"Now, Mari. You may come for me now!"

"Rhys!" she cried as she was tossed over the edge with the most intense orgasm she'd ever had. It ripped through her like an inferno.

Rhys growled as he tensed. Tingles traveled from his spine to his dick and he roared with his release as he thrust into her fully. Breathing heavily he collapsed half on her and half on the bed. Her body twitched with aftershocks, his hot breath coming back at him as it hit the side of her neck. His nostrils flared with the rapid pulse of her blood surging through her neck.

“Wh-what in the hell did you do to me?” Mari breathed heavily.

Rhys chuckled as he kissed her temple. “I loved my woman right.”

“Why didn’t you bite me?” Mari asked as she rolled to her side, facing him. She liked the way his arm wrapped around her waist.

“We had so many sensations whipping through us I thought it best to wait for another time to bring us more pleasure.”

* * * *

Mari smiled as she slowly walked by his office. Catching Rhys’ gaze through the open door, she winked before heading outside.

“Tease,” Rhys said as he came up behind her, lifting her off her feet.

Mari laughed as he turned her in his arms. “How so?” she asked wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Walking by my office like that while I’m conducting business.”

“Like what? All I did was smile and wink at you.” Tilting her head when

his lips found the sensitive spot on her neck, she wrapped her legs around him as his hands held onto her ass.

“Exactly.” Nipping her gently, he was cautious not to let his now descended fangs puncture her soft skin.

Her lips parted on a gasp. “Taste me,” she whispered.

“Are you sure?”

Mari met his gaze when he lifted his head. “Yes, before my blood becomes too hot and increases the risk of hurting you.”

Rhys turned and ran up to his chambers with her; he wasn’t taking the chance of making her sick from quick-stepping. Once in their rooms, he sat her down on the bed.

Mari grinned as they disrobed. She knew once her blood flowed into his mouth the blood lust would kick up within him, encouraging him to mate. Lowering her hand, she spread her trimmed pussy lips with her fingers and found her clit. Meeting his gaze as his hand went to his engorged cock they watched each other for several moments before he knelt in front of her and moved her hand out of the way. "Oh gods, Rhys," she breathed, her head tilting back as his mouth landed on her clit, sucking and pulling, nipping with his teeth. Mari knew he was making sure she was wet enough for him, because once the blood lust hit he'd take her quickly. "D-don't get me too worked up," she

breathed, her hand lowering to his head. “I-I don’t want to burn you.”

Rhys stood, lifted her, and sat on the bed. He brought Mari down to straddle his lap, her warm, wet folds caressing his hardness. Moving the hair off her neck, he leaned in closer, his nostrils flaring as he scented the right spot. He parted his lips, kissing her there, licking her so his salvia would numb the area for his fangs.

Mari sighed. She knew he was preparing her instead of just digging in, and that made her love him even more. Love, where the hell...gasping, her eyes flew open with the prick of his fangs. A moan escaped her as they lowered further into her neck. His hand clasped

her breast, his fingers tugging her nipple as euphoria shot straight to her pussy. Her eyes shifted to her vertical dragon eyes, her blood heating as it flowed into his mouth leaving her pussy clenching. “Rhys.”

His hands grasped her hips, lifting her slightly. He thrust upward, impaling her on his cock.

“Oh gods!” Mari twisted her fingers in his short hair, bringing his fangs deeper into her neck as he pumped into her faster and faster. Then he lowered a hand between them, his thumb rubbing against her throbbing clit. A ragged sound left her lips before screaming his name with the pulsing pleasure of her release.

Rhys' arm moved around her waist holding her tight against him as he thrust faster and harder. His blood rushed through his veins as her powerful blood hit his system. His body jerked with the lightning-like energy from her blood jolting down his spine to his cock. He lifted his mouth from her, roaring as his dick exploded with a stream of cum. Breathing heavily, Rhys groaned as he kissed her shoulder. An aftershock had him trembling against her as he wearily stuck his tongue out to lick and close the two puncture holes on her neck. "Are you alright?" he asked smiling. He lifted his head to see her eyes still in shift mode.

"Yes, what about you, any ill

effects of my blood?”

“No, except I noticed it started heating as your passion rose. It was lukewarm when I started and by the time we finished it was almost to the scalding point.”

“I didn’t hurt you did I?” Mari’s eyes widened.

“No, love, I’m fine.” Kissing the tip of her nose, he nipped her softly. “Don’t you think if it was giving me pain, I would have stopped?”

“I suppose.”

“I will say this though; I can still feel your blood flowing through me like the damn Energizer Bunny,” he chuckled.

Mari grinned. “Little hyped up are you?”

“Hell yeah!” Rhys chuckled as he swung her up, turned, and laid her under him on the bed. “Ready for round two?”

Mari giggled as he wiggled his eyebrows. Cupping the sides of his face, she met his lips as he thrust up into her wetness.

* * * *

“That’s it, Livi, concentrate,” Mari whispered as her young charge worked on her chakra balls.

“It’s hard.”

“I know, but you’re doing great. Just hold it for one more moment.” Glancing at Livi she smiled as the child pushed herself to finish her task. “Okay, Livi. Open your eyes and look.”

“Wow.”

“See what you can do when you practice?”

“It’s huge.”

“And you held it for two minutes; a new record for you, little girl.” Mari chuckled as she sat back. “Now think about dispelling the energies evenly.”

Livi looked over at her with a grin. “Can’t I just toss it at Triton and knock him into the lake?”

“Mischievous child,” Mari said then laughed. “Yes, when I call to him and he turns, knock him with it, alright?”

“I’m with ya.”

Mari stood. “Hey, water boy!” she yelled. “Want to help her train?” she asked when he turned.

“Sure,” Triton called back.

Mari stepped aside, grinning as his eyes widened when he realized the energy ball was coming at him. “Ooooo,” she groaned. Her head went back; left eye squinting with the pain Triton must have felt. The hit knocked him back, driving him to the middle of the lake and into the water. “Damn that looked like it hurt,” she mumbled and then busted out with laughter when Livi giggled. Mari stopped laughing when he didn’t come back up right away.

“Do you think he’s alright?” Livi asked.

“Yeah, he’s Prince of the Oceans, he can take a little lake water, which means—look out!” she yelled as a barrage of water balls came at them.

Livi screamed as she ran behind Mari. “Don’t hide now kid, this is his version of a snow ball fight!”

* * * *

“How in the hell can you three be so...” Rhys growled as he turned to look at Mari, Livi, and Triton who were all soaking wet. “Damn. I’m so pissed I don’t even know what I want to say!”

“Irresponsible would be a good start,” Drake Roven supplied.

“Irresponsible!” Rhys yelled. “We’re in the middle of an Other Kin war and you three are having a...a damn *water fight* with no care to your surroundings! Who knows what kind of creature could have sprung up on you from the depths of that lake?”

“There were no threats,” Triton said nonchalantly as he rolled his eyes.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me damn it! You had my woman and Roven’s daughter out there with no security back up to watch your asses! When word came over of an attack on the three of you we just about shit ourselves trying to get to you because we knew there were no teams in that area!”

“Ah, I think you better settle down a bit,” Drake whispered. “Mari’s dry which means you’re pissing her off.”

Rhys’ gaze flew to Mari. She was indeed dry, her hair blowing with the breeze. “You cannot be mad at me for your actions!”

“You better stop yelling at me,”

Mari said softly.

“Do you know how damn worried we were? All we saw were water balls and the glows of energy balls being dispensed. We had no idea what the hell was happening out there.”

Mari sighed as her gaze lowered. “Rhys, you know with Triton and I nothing can get by us. We’d never let anything hurt Olivia.”

“No, Mari, I don’t know that,” he stated as she lifted her eyes to his again. “Because you have yet to show your full powers or capabilities in human form, never mind shifted.” His chest ached as she lowered her gaze again. He wished like hell she’d trust him, especially with her powers.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you, Rhys. You don’t understand what a shift for me involves. As I haven’t shifted in centuries, I’ll be hungry. It won’t matter that I’m sated in human form. Once I hit dragon mode, the beast will be going for the first meal it can find and Alston’s dairy population will go down considerably. I suggest if you want me to shift, you put me in the middle of the field, where I can eat and leave.”

Rhys’ gaze narrowed.

“No you won’t be in danger, I just...”

“She doesn’t want you to see her feeding frenzy,” Triton said then shivered. “Seen it once, and that was enough for me.”

Mari frowned. "Oh thanks for that."

"Hey, sweetie, he may not mind being another blood drinker, but I am of the Sea, all that blood is a little much for me."

"Baby. You who eats fish raw. And you call yourself an ancient Other Kin. One would think at your age you'd be able to handle anything."

Rhys' brow lifted as they kept arguing back and forth. "Are you two missing the picture on why we're upset with you?"

"No!" Mari said as she met his gaze. "We know why you're both mad and it's asinine. There's nothing wrong with a little play in training. As you stated we are in a war and if we don't

take some R&R every now and then, we'll lose it. Don't you narrow those eyes at me, Rhys Beven. I've been in more wars and battles than you have in your life time, so I think I'm the expert here."

"I don't give a damn what you think you're the expert at! All you had to do was let us know what was going on."

"Oh yeah like that makes sense! *Oh hold on Livi, let me tell Rhys we're going to toss an energy ball at Triton and watch his ass go flying into the lake.* Will you give me a break!"

Rhys' eyes changed with his anger. "Don't you give me that sarcastic damn attitude, Mariwen!"

"Then stop treating me like a damn

fledgling!”

Rhys noted Drake motioning to Livi to step over to him as Triton stepped the other way. Mari may not have realized it but she was burning. She literally had flames surrounding her body, almost phoenix-like. Sighing deeply Rhys met her gaze. “I don’t mean to treat you like a baby, but some common courtesy would have been nice, Mari. What would you have done if our roles were reversed? You would have come to us hell bent looking for a fight and pissed when you realized we’re alright, just funning around. Shit you probably would have been shooting fire balls at my head by now and you know it.” Rhys released his breath slowly when she started

calming down. Her flames disappeared, and her fists unclenched. He smiled as his arms crossed over his chest, loving his little firecracker.

“What are you smiling at?” Mari grumbled.

“You, my little hot head.”

“Shut-up,” she mumbled. “Fine, you’re right, okay. I can see how it would have looked from a distance. But that’s all I’m saying on the matter.”

Rhys’ smile exploded into a grin. “Good enough for me, what about you?” he asked as he turned to look at Drake.

“I’m good,” Drake chuckled.

“Triton, I think Amaress is waiting for you at the manor.”

“Excellent.” Triton grinned as he

took off.

Rhys kept Mari's gaze as the Rovens left, as well as the security forces who'd shown up. Damn she was beautiful. His cock swelled as the wind gently blew her chestnut brown hair around. "What am I going to do with you, Mariwen Gawain?"

"Fuck me."

Rhys chuckled as he unfolded his arms, stepping toward her. "With pleasure."

Chapter 4

Mari breathed deeply. “Alright, are they gone?”

“All except Triton, he’s in the wood line by the lake if we need him. Kalana and Drake are standing by the north end of the forest,” Rhys said.

Mari met his gaze as he stepped in front of her shaking naked body. “I’m not sure if it’s anticipation of the shift, for I

love being in dragon form and want you to see me as such, or from fear of you being witness to my feeding frenzy.” His hands felt warm as they settled on her shoulders bringing her closer to his body heat.

“You’ll be fine, Mari. I’m not worried about the frenzy, and we talked about this last night. I can’t wait to see you in dragon form.”

Mari closed her eyes as his lips lightly touched her forehead. Going down to her knees, she smiled as he followed. “Ready?”

“Always.”

Her nostrils widened as she moved her mouth to his neck, his jugular pulsing as blood sped through his veins with his

excitement. Striking the area with her tongue, she made sure her saliva coated him well so when she pierced him, he wouldn't feel as much pain. When she lowered her fangs into his neck he groaned, the mind-marking letting her know it was pleasure and not pain. The salty warm taste of his blood escalated her senses as he thrust into her wet pussy. Oh lord, it felt good. Her body came down on him hard as his life's blood flowed through her system, opening her veins. Gasping, she removed her mouth; his large hands grasped her ass, bringing her down hard on him, once, twice, three times. Her lips parted as euphoria spread through her. Her fingers clenched his shoulders

as she met his thrusts.

“That’s it baby, fuck me,” Rhys rasped as he moved his hand between them to her swollen clit and let her keep up their frenzied pace as he rubbed.

Amazing sensations swarmed her as her climax started. Tingles shot from her spine to her brain and back to her pussy. “Oh gods, Rhys, don’t stop!” The fire burst through her body and she cried out his name as her muscles contracted around his cock.

Rhys groaned. His balls tightened, his cock hardened even more, spurting his climax into her warmth with a moan. His eyes whipped open when her body tensed.

Mari’s lips parted, her eyes flew

open as the change started, the beast of her dragon self clawing to get out. Jumping off him, Mari flung herself away, holding her hand up to stop him when Rhys stepped forward. Gasps of agony escaped her parted lips as muscles tore from bone and reattached. Mari cried out as her blood pumped faster. Her senses heightened becoming more honed and agile. Mari roared with her transformation and with the freedom and power of it; she let go completely. Shaking her giant head, her nostrils flared releasing a plume of steam as her name was called. Turning her head slightly so she could see by her feet, her heart pounded with the pleasure the man beneath her had given her such a short

time ago. *Rhys*. She mind spoke.

“Yes, love, I hear you.”

“I’m, hungry.”

“I know, beautiful, go and eat.”

With one flap of her thirty-foot wing span she was up and hovering. Pointing her head toward the sun, she hovered horizontally. Taking a deep breath she released a roar that hadn’t been heard in centuries alerting the land, its inhabitants, her father and all threats that the guardian was back. She tilted her head to look at him one more time before one downward swoop of her wings had her soaring over the trees, going to the feeding field they had set up for her private use. Glancing down she saw Triton sitting on a waterspout in the

middle of the lake waving at her, and the Roven clan running in wolf form along the perimeters of the woodlands. Damn it felt good to be back. Closing her eyes as the wind blew over her, she enjoyed a truly magnificent feeling that she hadn't felt in so long. Sighing inwardly she tilted her head, opened her eyes, and spied several cows. Damn she hated this part. If she'd shifted more often she wouldn't need to feed in dragon form, but being her stubborn self, well now she was hungry. With a rumbling roar, she swooped down, grabbing the closest cow with her clawed feet. Its frightened bellow made her hesitate for a second before the dragon within took over. Turning her foot, she broke its neck in

one smooth movement before tossing it into the air and catching the carcass between her mighty jaws. She'd refused to eat live food from the moment she could control herself, and humanely killed them before eating. After eating two more, she spotted Rhys just inside the woods and descended, landing on her feet before laying down, her head on her front limb as her wings folded back behind her. She met his gaze as he walked to her and snorted tiredly.

“Are you well, my sweet?”

“Yes, tired.”

Rhys stood by her head, his hand on her as he met her eye. “You are beautiful.”

Mari smiled as her forked tongue

slipped out and between his legs, liking the desire in his eye as its roughness ran from his ass, under his balls to his hanging cock which was hardening again.

“Troublesome woman,” he said, smiling. “Behave before I make you shift back so I can boink you all night.”

“As much as I would love that, at this moment I can’t. I need to digest before I can shift back.” Her eyelids fluttered heavily before letting a tired sigh escape as she drifted to sleep with his hand rubbing the side of her head.

* * * *

Mari smiled as she stretched under the warm covers. Rhys had obviously stayed with her until she shifted during

sleep and brought her back to their bed.

“I need to ask a question,” Rhys said as he sat down on the mattress.

“Mmmm?”

“When you first arrived here, the night we first met at the border to Alston, you seemed almost afraid when we first saw the darkness coming toward us. Were you really afraid or was it an act so we wouldn’t figure out who you were?”

“Both,” she mumbled, rolling to her side meeting his gaze. “I was planning on playing the innocent until I had a better idea who I’d be dealing with here in Alston as I hadn’t been back to socialize in so long. Whenever I did come back, no one saw me because I’d

come in over the ocean and go straight to my sanctuary. Yet the night we met, it did scare me, as I hadn't realized the darkness had grown so much or absorbed so many souls, making it stronger. Granted I've grown in power and strength as well, but the amount of souls I sensed that night inside the darkness was astounding."

Rhys nodded. "I knew you were hiding something, but I couldn't put my finger on it and then when I sensed our bonding..."

Mari chuckled as she reached up, dragging him over her body. "Ha, you knew you were in trouble."

"Trouble wasn't the word I'd use," he laughed as she smacked loud kisses

over his face. “Woman, behave before I smack your ass.”

“Ha! Now that’s something I’d like to see.” Triton chuckled.

“I don’t think so, fish man,” Mari said as she spotted him leaning against the door jamb.

“No respect, I simply get no respect anymore.”

“Oh, my poor Triton!” Moving her hand, she lifted him off the floor with her powers, bringing him to the side of the bed, she reached up and yanked him down. “I love you, you know that.” Spreading kisses all over his face, Mari chuckled as he tried fighting her off.

“Dragon spit, dragon spit, ewwww gross!” Triton complained as he backed

up, grinning at Rhys as he sat back on the pillows. “I’ll leave her and her dragon saliva to you my friend.”

Mari stopped laughing. “Why what’s up, where are you off to, what happened?”

“Dad summoned me this morning, there’s a meeting with the aunts and uncles about the darkness. They want an update on what’s happening and then will decide if they’ll come to help or not.”

“Triton.”

“I know, Mari. If I can’t convince them it’s time to fight, we may be going at this alone.”

Mari knelt, clutching the covers around her body. “Well screw them

then! If they don't want to fight with me this time, they can go to Hades when they want my help. *I* won't come running when the darkness goes after them." Huffing she met his gaze. "Well, you know...if I'm still alive."

"Of course you'll be alive," Rhys growled as he yanked her onto his lap. "Don't you ever think otherwise, do you hear me?"

Mari smiled softly as she cupped his cheek with her hand, "Yes, love, I hear you. Now tell me, my color hasn't faded with my age has it?"

"Color?"

Triton chuckled as he sat on the corner of the bed. "No you're still as vibrant red and beautiful as ever."

“And my tail?” Mari smiled.

“It still shades wonderfully from red to blue, although, it looked like the very tips are now a royal blue color instead of a midnight blue, but still gorgeous darling. Oh and a nice roar that says, ‘hey I’m back and I’m going to kick some ass’.”

Mari shrugged. “What can I say, I’m territorial, and someone is trying to invade on my territory.” Snuggling up to Rhys, she smiled when his arms went around her waist.

“It makes my heart burst with joy to see you happy, Mariwen.”

Mari smiled softly as Triton’s fingers caressed her cheek before he leaned in to kiss her other one.

“You know I will be here for you, my sister, whenever you need it. I must go now, but I will be back. Take care of her well, Rhys Beven.”

“Be safe my brother,” Mari whispered as he rose and headed for the door.

“I didn’t think you two were family,” Rhys asked.

“Not by blood,” Mari replied as she tilted her head to meet his gaze, smiling as his lips lowered to hers gently. “I need to go to my sanctuary today to gather a few items; would you like to go with me?”

“I’d love to.”

* * * *

“How in the hell am I supposed to

get up there?" Rhys asked as he turned to Mari.

Mari chuckled as she wrapped her arms around his waist. "Hold on to me, I'm casting a cloak over us so no one can see what we're doing. Are you ready?" When he nodded, Mari breathed deeply, smiling when his eyes widened as she shifted enough to change her eyes and expand her wings.

"You can fly."

"I can fly." She smiled as her wings swooped once, lifting them up. With her enhanced strength she could easily keep a hold of him and flew up the rocky face to the ledge that looked like nothing more than a small crevice, and landed. Once Mari had them firmly on the

ground, she kept a hold of his hand when he went to step back. “Don’t let go until we’re inside. I have a cloak surrounding my sanctuary at all times.”

“Didn’t the Kelpie come ashore near here?”

“Yes, that’s why I called Triton in that day,” she said as they walked through the barrier into her cave. “I knew it wasn’t a coincidence.”

“Holy shit!” Rhys exclaimed as he looked around at the opulence.

Mari chuckled as she released his hand. “What? Did you think I’d leave it a dank, dark, wet cave?”

“Well, no, but I never thought—and you’ve hidden this for how long?”

“Quite a few centuries.” Mari

grinned as she walked over to an old wooden chest. Opening the heavy lid, she withdrew her battle gear. "I haven't had to wear these since the last time I fought the darkness."

"I thought you said you'd been in many battles."

"I have, but these were made special for me by my father. They're made from his scales and skin. Very few Other Kin can break through the protection castings he's placed, never mind the items themselves."

"Is the darkness one of them?" he asked softly.

"Yes." Turning, she set her hauberk down as she took his hand, leading him over to the bed to sit on its edge. "Rhys,

the darkness is or was an Other Kin soul. His name was Olipisies, and he turned to the dark arts because my mother turned down his advances—way before she met my father or thought of having me, before she became an ancient. Olipisies wouldn't stop his pursuit of her even when two ancients made it clear to him that he needed to stop. Olipisies killed them..."

"He killed two ancients," Rhys burst out. "I thought that was impossible."

"No, you only need to have the knowledge. Ancients, like anyone else, are susceptible to death. Olipisies went into hiding after that and emerged again years later. He'd been gathering dark

powers and tried taking my mother as she was out patrolling her quadrant.” Smiling, she recalled the story as it was told. “She was fighting him and had fallen to the ground after a hit. Olipsisies started yelling at how she betrayed him and his love, and that he was going to kill her. Mother was hurt badly and the other ancients were making a rush to get to her, but they couldn’t, not in time. As she watched the death blow coming, she lifted her hand to try and stop it with the little power she had left, when a monstrous roar filled the air—her words not mine,” she said grinning. “And then the ground shook as a full grown dragon landed in front of her, stopping the hit meant for her. She said he struck back,

sending Olipisies flying and then went after him. His flames scorched the grounds, setting Olipisies blazing. Mother said Olipisies tried fighting father even while his skin was burning off him to the ground, but father was too powerful and they watched as he disappeared.” Meeting Rhys’ gaze, Mari smiled as she leaned forward, her lips gently brushing his before nipping his bottom one. “So now you know how my parents met and how the darkness was born.”

“So, in other words, Olipisies started this shit because he was jilted?”

“Yep. I couldn’t say anything earlier or in the council chambers because I didn’t trust the protection

charms and no one needs to know our life history...well, except you, because you're to be my mate," she said smiling.

* * * *

Mari chuckled as she lifted the goblet of wine to her lips. They'd decided to stay at her sanctuary and have a night to themselves away from everyone. She'd made Livi go find Drake and tell him where they were so no one would worry.

Rhys lifted his hand, caressing her arm from shoulder to fingers before he lifted her to his lap.

Mari lowered her glass, sighing as his lips met hers. Slowly, sensuously, his hands caressed her back, side, arms, and thighs as he took his time savoring

her lips. “Rhys,” she breathed heavily.

Rhys smiled. “Oh no, love, we go slow this night, for I plan on making love to you, not fucking you. I want you exhausted from multiple orgasms by the time I’m finished with you.”

Mari trembled at his words. “Oh, yeah?” No man had ever made her body tremble from his words or from his sex—no man other than Rhys. “So, I’m good to orgasm at will tonight?”

“Most definitely.” Lifting her with him, Rhys rose and strode to the bed. Setting her on her feet, he averted her hands when she went to take her clothes off. “No, Mari, let me.”

Mari shuddered, lips parting on a gasp as he barely kissed her neck, his

hands sliding under her t-shirt, fingers gently caressing her naked skin. Mari moaned when his mouth joined his hands, kissing his way up past her breasts. She groaned with want. “My nipples, play with my nipples,” she gasped.

“In good time,” Rhys muttered, taking her hands in his and bringing them behind her back. “Slowly, Mari. I will not let you rush me tonight. I want to love you right.”

“You do love me right, Rhys.” Mari met his gaze. “I love how my body reacts to you, it’s never done that with anyone before. You’re the only one who’s ever been able to make me burn, literally. You are my soul mate, my other

half. Never doubt yourself when it comes to you pleasuring me.”

Rhys smiled as he kissed her softly. “I don’t, but we always seem to love each other hard and fast, which is fine, but I like slow sometimes. It helps me show you how much you mean to me, how much I love you.” He whispered the last, letting go of her hands.

“You...”

“Yes, does that frighten you, Mari, to know that I’ve fallen in love with you?”

Mari wrapped her arms around his neck. “No,” she whispered as she gently kissed him. “I’ve fallen for you as well. I was so scared at first, but then I got to know you, to feel your real self. I love

you, Rhys.”

“Will you bind yourself to me this night, Mari? Will you let me claim you as mine forever?”

“Yes.” She smiled.

Rhys drew her flush against him and captured her mouth. Her tongue lifted to tangle with his and he kept it slow and sensuous, loving how her body trembled for him as he slowly kissed every inch of her. Removing her clothes, he lowered her to the bed. He began a journey with his mouth from her lips to her inner thighs.

When his hot breath passed over her clit Mari gasped, her hips lifting closer to his mouth. “Don’t tease, Rhys.” His tongue darted out, striking the

engorged little nub several times. Her body tensed, a moan escaped, and Mari groaned when finally his lips settled around her clit. Her body trembled as he drew her into his mouth, sucking, nibbling; his ministrations slow as she fought the rising climax. A tremor shook her core as he continued his slow, steady pace. Shards of light scattered behind her closed lids.

Rhys knew she was moments away from an orgasm. “Yes, my love, at your will.” Lowering his mouth to her clit, he sucked, his hands lifting to keep her thighs from crushing his skull as she writhed on the bed; her fingers clutching the covers as she arched up; her body jerking as she cried out with her orgasm.

Rhys suckled and licked her as she came down from her pleasure, his movements in rhythm with hers. He finally lifted her head when she lay breathing heavily. His lips pressed to her inner thigh as he worked his way back up, taking a pebbled nipple into his mouth.

Mari's body twitched as he revived her need for him. Her hands roamed his body, her fingers digging into his back before moving a hand to his erection.

Rhys grasped her hand moving it to the bed. "Not yet," he breathed. His lips covered her nipple again, as his thumb and forefinger tweaked her other one. Mari groaned and arched her back, lifting her breasts up closer to his caresses. When she went to grab his

cock again, he held her hand to the bed as her body arched against him with her desire. Leaving her breast he traveled down, kissing and nipping lightly. Her stomach muscles twitched as his fangs pressed against her slightly, enough to prick, but not pierce her skin. Her moans were louder, her body was heating, and he knew she was close to another release. “I can’t get enough of you, Mari,” he rumbled, his nostrils flaring at her musky scent as he slowly ran his tongue over her pussy and clit. Her pussy was so wet from her earlier orgasm and his continued strokes, that his dick hardened even more—if that was possible.

“Rhys, please, I can’t wait

anymore, I want your fat cock in me,” Mari growled.

“Is the beast coming out, love?”

Mari growled as he rolled her onto her stomach, lifting her ass in the air, the cool air hitting her hot pussy. “Rhys!”

Rhys groaned when she arched her back, lifting her pussy higher, offering its sweet heat to him. Lowering, he slowly ran his tongue from her clit backwards, spearing it into her heat as he would his cock. Her taste was sweet and musky, absolutely the best thing he’d ever tasted in his life. Thrusting his tongue in and out of her until she screamed his name, he lifted himself, lowering his hand to her clit as he nipped her ass cheek before licking her puckered anal star.

“Oh my god, Rhys, fuck me, please!”

“I will be, but I want you to come for me, Mari.”

“No, I want you in me!”

Rhys leaned over her shoulder, his harsh breath near her ear as he continued to rub her swollen jewel. “I want you to come for me or I’m going to stick my fat cock up your ass, now come for me damn it, come now!”

Mari exploded, her body arched as thousands of tiny lights flew behind her closed lids. Crying out his name, she vaguely felt his warm body covering her.

Rhys touched, caressed and kissed her body gently, not letting Mari come down off her high from her orgasms.

When her body started responding to his caresses again, Rhys grinned as he rose, slowly turning her onto her back. “Spread your thighs for me, Mari.” She did so and his cock jumped. Lowering his hand, he started rubbing on her clit and she started squirming.

“Rhys, I want you in me damn it!”

“Hold it.” Vamping his eyes, he watched as her body turned red with her inner heat.

“I thought I could go at will?” she breathed heavily.

“I want you to hold this one, Mari, only this one, my sweet, alright?”

“Ohhhhh gods yes, but—please hurry, I’m so close again. By the gods you’re going to kill me.” Her eyes

squeezed shut, her body hummed, brain tingled, and feet burned as she held her orgasm. She almost sighed when he removed his fingers from her clit. She arched with a deep moan as the head of his thick cock entered her slowly, stretching her, filling her in more ways than just physical. Mari's eyes opened, meeting his gaze; her arms went around him as he settled to the hilt inside her warmth. A slight sheen of sweat covered her as Rhys slowly thrust in and out, the sensations almost more than she could take.

Rhys smiled when her eyes glowed orange with a mixture of red, the mind-marking telling him she was heating up more than usual during their lovemaking.

“You’re so beautiful, Mari,” he whispered, lowering his mouth to hers softly as he quickened his thrusts.

Mari started to tremble, her orgasm on the edge of euphoria.

“Will you be mine forever, Mariwen? Will you let me claim you?”

“Yes, yes, and I claim you!”

“I’m going to come, Mari, are you ready?” he asked through clenched teeth.

“Yes!”

“Come for me, love, now!” he roared, his body tightening as hers arched with her cries of pleasure. Her insides clenched around him, his cock expelling his seed as he thrust into her with vigor. Rhys vaguely noticed the flames surrounding them on the bed, but

they weren't burning him so he gave one last thrust and collapsed on her heaving chest. His hot breath hit the side of her neck. He could feel the flames dying down as her orgasm receded. Rolling to his side, he kept his dick buried within her warmth. "It's a good thing we were here. I think you might have burned down the manor otherwise. Were you hot for me baby?" he said smiling.

"Smart ass," Mari grumbled as she cuddled up to his chest.

"Why didn't the flames bother me?"

"Because you're mine," Mari grinned. Lifting her head she kissed him smack on the mouth. "I let you claim me and I claimed you. My fire, my blood, my flames will never harm you now,

Rhys.”

“So, I could stand and let you bear down on me with dragons’ fire and I’d walk away unharmed?”

“Yes.”

“Well that’s good to know in case you ever get pissed at me.”

Mari nodded happily. Moving her leg under his, she flipped him so she was straddling his waist. She moved her hips, smiling when his dick twitched inside her. “Round four?” Wiggling her eyebrows, she laughed when he yanked her down to him as he thrust his now hard cock into her warm wetness.

Chapter 5

“Mari, Mari wake up.”

Mari rolled over in her sleep as her father’s image came to her. “What?”

“Call to arms, Mari, call to arms!”

Mari jolted up, breathing heavily, as she slapped Rhys’ arm. “Rhys, wake up,” she said. Jumping out of bed she headed to the cave entrance. They’d

spent the last two nights here away from everyone, talking, making love, and just plain fucking.

“Why?” Rhys asked as he rolled.

“My father woke me up.” Standing out on the ledge, she looked over the quiet ocean and the full moon hanging low.

“Why?” he yawned as he stepped up to her side.

“Call to arms.”

“I don’t see anything.”

“Shhh,” Mari whispered.

Transforming her eyes to dragon eyes enhanced her vision tremendously. “There.” She pointed as fish jumped like crazy out of the water.

“I don’t see anything,” Rhys said as

he squinted.

“Trust me, something’s there.” Turning, she went to her battle gear and started dressing. Sliding the leather pants up, she met his gaze. “Call to arms, Rhys.”

“Let’s go.”

Mari lifted her amour over her head and started strapping it at her waist. “I need to hold them back from the shore. I can’t let them get on land. You need to go alone.”

Rhys grabbed her arm hauling her to him as she lifted her gaze. “I am not leaving you.”

“I’ll be fine. I haven’t sensed the darkness yet, and I fed two days ago. I can hold them off with no problem until

you get back.” Mari could see the fear in his eyes. “If I didn’t think I could handle it I’d let you know. Now, I have to call Triton and head out. Please, trust me.”

His hands tightened for a brief moment before he let her go. “I do trust you.” Leaning down he kissed her hungrily. “I love you, so you better not get hurt damn it.”

Mari smiled as she grabbed her twin swords, swinging them up onto her back into their sheaths. “I promise if I get hurt, I’ll let you spank me.” Heading toward the cave entrance, she turned as he stepped beside her. Smiling, she stepped off, landing with one knee down on the beach sand. Glancing up when he landed next to her, she stood and met his

kiss hungrily. "I'll see you when you get back." When he quick-stepped away, Mari walked into the ocean ankle deep, lifted her hand and slapped it to the ocean's surface. "Triton, I call for you!" Having been in dragon mode and fed recently, she was strong enough to make the call and protect Alston from its invaders.

When the reverberation wave went out, her eyes narrowed as the approaching invaders stopped. Breathing deeply she held her breath hoping they'd turn back. *Damn asses.* She growled as they kept coming, and unfurled her wings; giving one mighty swoop, she was up. The salt water sprayed her face as she charged toward them. She could

transform to dragon and go undersea, but it would be harder for her to fight them, and she didn't like being at a disadvantage. Stopping half a mile from their approach, she lifted her arms and pushed down, creating a barrier of rushing water from the sea surface to its floor and back up. "If you come with the intent to do Alston and its people harm I order you to leave now!" Mari's gaze narrowed when an Isonade came to the surface. They were a dangerous creature. They used their barbed tail as a weapon to strike sailors off ships or even people off the beach—just to kill.

"We are here for Alston. Step aside unless you want to be destroyed."

Mari smiled with no mirth, her

arms crossing over her chest. “Just *who* do you think you’re speaking to, fish?”

“Fish, fish—you insolent woman...”

“Silence!” Mari thundered letting her dragon self show for a moment. “I am guardian here. This is my land, my territory, and you seek to invade what belongs to me?” Her gaze narrowed when a male Selkie came to the surface speaking softly. Turning her ear, she listened and smiled. “Turn back now if you want to live. Fight for your dark master and you will die.” She interrupted them, meeting the Isonade’s gaze as he turned back.

“You are the guardian?”

Mari grinned. “Surprise, asshole.”

Rhys quick-stepped as fast as he could with his security legion behind him, rushing to the seashore. He could see the residual light of energy discharges and heard the booms that followed. He'd sounded the alarm the moment he'd reached his manor, and Alston's first wave of fighters was heading toward Mari. Skidding to a halt, sand flew as his gaze spotted Mari. She had her swords drawn as she fended off a harpy and a fairy, her hand lifting to shove a passel of water Other Kin back with a swell of water. "Air support, you're needed!" he yelled as a dozen flying Other Kin soared over his head to assist Mari.

“She’s too far out, we can’t get to her,” Drake Roven said as he stopped by Rhys.

“I can,” Kalana said. “And I’ll make sure she hasn’t been injured.”

Rhys breathed easier when Kalana flew into the fray right to Mari’s side, as the others battled the Other Kin who had been attacking her when he’d arrived.

Rhys stood by Drake and their land warriors as all water and winged Other Kin went to the line Mari had drawn. When Rhys heard her giving orders of setting a perimeter, his gaze went to the warriors as they followed her word. His stare didn’t waiver from her as she came toward them. He breathed easier when she stopped in front of him, her wings

going back. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah a few minor scrapes. They started retreating, probably because you guys showed up and their numbers are low. They’re tiring out. I set up a perimeter both undersea and above with normal shift changes. Surprisingly, it’s an Isonade leading them and he had no idea who I was.”

“But you showed him real fast didn’t you, baby.” Rhys grinned as he drew her into his arms. “Let’s get you fed and put to bed.”

* * * *

Rhys smiled as he brushed a strand of her hair off her shoulder, its red highlights shining with the firelight of her sanctuary. She refused to go inland,

saying she wanted to stay close to the battlefield. She flew them back up here to rest. His cock twitched as the satiny curl wound around his finger. He leaned over kissing her lips lightly.

“You know, you’ll be useless unless you get some sleep. I, on the other hand, can stay up for days.”

“I know, I just...”

“You want to protect me. I know, Rhys, and I understand. Now cuddle up to me, please, and wrap those strong arms around me.”

Laying down he did as she requested, spooning her. He kissed the side of her neck. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Mari yawned before inching back just a bit to sit

snuggly against his strength.

* * * *

Rhys jolted awake listening for what woke him. He turned as Mari twitched against him slightly. “Mari, you’re having a nightmare.” Lowering his hand to wake her he looked up sharply when someone grabbed it.

“Don’t wake her yet,” Darina said. “Her father’s telling her how to defeat the darkness. Give her this for me.”

Rhys glanced down after she disappeared to see a black rock the size of a baseball with markings etched around it, in his hand.

* * * *

Mari’s gaze narrowed as she stared at the battle taking place over the ocean.

“What’s on your brain?” Rhys asked as he stepped up.

“Something’s not right. Why hasn’t he appeared yet? He sent his minions in to fight, yet leaves them unprotected against us. There’s not one Other Kin out there fighting for him that I couldn’t destroy in a heartbeat if I chose to, and yet he’s absent.”

“Think he’s testing us to see how strong we are?”

“No, he knows how strong Alston’s forces are from the first battle. He wouldn’t risk it again...”

“Then it’s a decoy,” Drake Roven interrupted.

Mari glanced his way. “Yes, but for what?”

“Is he after something or someone besides you, Mari?” Kalana asked.

“The only one he wants to kill is me—well, beside my mother and father—because we’re the only one’s standing in his way to take this land.”

“No, you’re not, not anymore, Mari.”

Mari met her wide eyes. “It’s pointless. If he goes after Livi then he still has to deal with me and he knows the chance at waking my father. No,” she said shaking her head. “I don’t think he’d risk going after her, it wouldn’t make any sense.”

“But it would. If he takes Livi out, and you, then he’s reached his goal by killing the two things that mean the most

to your parents and Alston. Without either of you, and with your father sleeping, Alston is defenseless against him and his attacks.”

“Livi’s tucked up safe inside Roven Manor, which is far into Alston lands. I haven’t even sensed him near, never mind breaching our protection shields.”

“Like you said, Mari, something isn’t right, and I don’t trust him not to go after my daughter.”

“If you want to leave the front lines, I understand, but I’m tuned in with Livi, I’ll know if something happens. Just like if and when he comes close to Alston.”

Kalana shook her head. “No, I’ll stay where I’m needed. Besides, our Alpha, Evan, and his mate Sofia are with

her at all times.”

Mari leaned over hugging her friend. “You let me know if you want to leave. You know I’d never let anything happen to Livi, but if your head’s not in the battle then I’d rather see you with her than the possibility of injury to you because you’re worried about her.”

“If it becomes an issue then I’ll pull myself out.”

Mari nodded, glancing over at Rhys before she headed to the ocean, her wings expanding as she joined in the fight. Calling her lines back, Mari shifted halfway. Opening her mouth she let out a roar, the strength of it shoving the air attackers back and rolling through the sky. Lifting her hands she created a

huge wave then released it, ridding the waters of the attackers down there. Turning, she headed back to land. This was really starting to piss her off; they were just attacking to attack, not caring if they succeeded or not.

“What was that about?” Rhys asked as she landed in front of the tent that had been erected for ops.

“They’re pissing me off with these little skirmishes.”

Rhys grinned as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “The second wave is arriving. How about we head back to the manor, get something to eat, get into a hot bath, let me love you until we both can barely move so that way we’re up to snuff should anything come

about?”

“Barely huh?” Mari smiled.

“Sounds good to me vamp boy.”

“Boy? Damn, honey, I thought by now you would’ve noticed I’m a man.”

Mari chuckled as she wrapped her arm around his waist. “Oh I have, baby, I have.”

* * * *

Mari couldn’t shake the niggling feeling at the back of her mind that said something was close to happening. She’d always trusted her instincts in everything, that’s why she’d lived so long with barely any issues. Glancing down, a soft smile lined her lips as she watched Rhys sleep. She knew they weren’t due back at the ops tent until

later on this afternoon, but she couldn't shake that she needed to be up there now. Silently sliding out from under the covers, Mari tossed her leather pants and t-shirt on before quietly grabbing her armor and weapons and scooting out the door without a twitch from her mate.

Buckling her chest armor as she headed for the front door, she hadn't seen him until he spoke.

"Where are you headed before the sun's even broke through?" Hoag asked.

Mari glanced over as he stepped out of the shadows. "To check on the front lines. My gut is uneasy."

"Where's Lord Rhys?"

"Asleep."

"Don't you think you should tell

him before taking off?”

“He needs his rest,” Mari narrowed her eyes. “Why do you hate me so much?”

“I don’t hate you; I just don’t trust you, *my lady*.”

Mari smiled. “Well in that case, piss off then and stay on alert. Something’s coming, I can feel it.”

“Then shouldn’t we sound the alarm?”

“No, nothing’s made itself known yet. I’m not calling out the security forces until I know when and where the threat is.” Slapping her belly armor, she met his gaze. “Just keep those vamp senses tuned in and alert.” Stepping toward the door she stopped, turning to

meet his gaze. “Hoag, stay by Rhys, don’t let him out of your sight. Will you do that for me?” she asked softly.

“Of course, my lady,” he answered, bowing from his waist.

Mari nodded before opening the door and took off at a run toward the ocean and the ops tent. Frowning, she wondered where in the hell Triton was. She’d called him three damn days ago and still no sign of the Sea God or his people. “I do not like this,” she muttered as she stepped up to the commander in charge of this wave’s fighters. “What’s happening?”

“Lady Mari.” Galen Moilanin of the Lyken Roven clan smiled as he turned her way. “I didn’t think you were

due back until this afternoon.”

“Yeah, my gut’s twisting,” she said noticing the smile slide off his face.

“I’m not the only one then. They’ve been pulling back their forces slightly all night, but steadily. There are barely any attackers out there by sea or air. I don’t like it. It’s like the calm before the hurricane.”

Mari nodded as she walked toward the ocean’s edge. “Yeah I know what you mean.”

* * * *

Mari paced for about an hour before she sat down, grimacing as she held her stomach.

“Lady, are you alright?” Galen asked as he knelt down by her side.

“No,” she groaned, doubling over. “Call to arms, Galen.” Stumbling she made her way out of the ops tent to see hundreds of Other Kin flying in from the sea, and the sea’s surface turbulent with Other Kin coming in from below.

“Holy shit!” Galen exclaimed.

Mari listened to Galen place the call to arms over their portable radio before spreading her wings.

“It could be a trap, don’t go. Wait for back up!” Galen called as she took to air.

Mari ignored him as she charged into battle. The Alston line of defense was badly outnumbered by this new tactic and she wasn’t leaving them to fight this alone. Shifting partially, she

called back her line and took a huge breath. She let it out, igniting it into a fireball the size of a bus. The screams of the Other Kin attackers died as she did it again, moving her head across the entire front line of their defense. The ones behind them stopped. Smoke streamed from her nostrils. "I am not playing with you mother fucker's anymore! You want to attack then you will die!" Roaring, she lifted her hands, bringing any Other Kin attackers up from the sea, smashing them against the cliff rocks. She knew at that moment her roar had woken Rhys and he was on his way.

Turning when tingles flew down from her head to her spine, her eyes widened as goose bumps appeared all

over her body. Her body thumped as if a large heartbeat had taken place. Mari motioned to the Alston fighters to stay at the line of defense, and flew quickly to the ops tent to see Rhys and Drake Roven standing there. “The darkness is here! Call all fighters out! He’s broken the protection shield on the other side of town, he’s going after Livi!” Mari yelled as she flew by them. Her wings pushed down, surging her forward at exceptional speeds, and casted an invisibility cloak around her. Mind-linking with Livi, she warned her to get to safety now, but Livi was screaming; her words and thoughts jumbled from her fright.

Growling, Mari surged forward as

Livi screamed for Sofia, her female Alpha and aunt. Mari's dragon eyes pinpointed Livi inside the large foyer of Roven Manor, the darkness standing over a body as Livi discharged energy balls, her body wracked with sobs. *I'm coming, Livi!* She said through mind-link as Alpha Evan Roven ran into the foyer, attacking the darkness. Mari winced as he was tossed back, hitting the wall. He got up and was tossed back again. With blood covering his chest, he slumped by the wall this time.

Mari roared crashing through the open front door as the darkness went for Livi. "Get away from her!" Tackling him, she dragged him through the walls and out the other side of the manor

tossing him to the ground. Landing on her feet her chest heaved as he rose, the black mists swirling around him as he transformed into a man.

“We meet again, Mariwen.” His voice was crackly and deep as though he’d smoked one too many cigarettes.

“I thought we’d taken care of this a long time ago, Olipisies.”

“Ah well that was before your father decided to make Olivia Roven the next guardian and you took a mate. I was going to sit back and wait for him to awaken, but well, I changed my mind. Good job by the way, hiding her from me for all these years.”

“I do my best,” she replied sarcastically. “Now why don’t you just

scurry back to the hole you crawled out of?”

His chuckle sounded like fingernails scraping along a chalkboard. “Why don’t you step down and let me kill the little brat? She’s nothing to you.”

“And then what, sit still as you slice my throat? I think you know that’s not going to happen.”

“You’ve always been a black sheep, not listening to the ancients and doing what you want. Why not now? Kill your vamp and come with me, I’ll make you my Queen.”

Mari laughed. “Queen of what, a dank dark cave that you like to hide in, because every time you come to the surface you get your ass kicked? No

thanks, I'll keep my sexy vamp and make plenty of babies to take over kicking your ass for me when I'm gone."

"Bitch. Just like your whore of a mother," he snarled.

Mari's laughter stopped on a dime as she narrowed her eyes. "How quickly you change your tone when you don't get what you want, Olipsisies. You can say whatever you want about me, but you will *not* disrespect my mother, because you're a frigging psychopath," she growled.

Mari jumped, twirling in the air when he came at her, unsheathing one of her swords. She swung it down nicking his shoulder, his cry of pain loud as she landed on her feet. "It's a flesh wound

you baby!” she taunted as he came at her again, missing his hit as she somersaulted backwards.

“I know what you’re doing you miserable bitch,” he seethed. “You’re getting me away from the house.”

Mari glanced at everyone who had gathered behind Roven Manor, Rhys included. “It doesn’t matter because you won’t be going back there.” She’d already linked with Livi and knew security forces had moved her out of the vicinity and the elder council was on their way to assist her in the battle.

“You’re a cocky bitch.”

“Yeah, kinda take after my daddy that way.” She grinned, stepping back. Her hands flew up and called forth her

shield as he sent lightning-like discharges at her. Mari groaned, her feet sliding back from the force of the hit. Shoving her shoulder into the shield she held it strong and secure. He knew he couldn't beat her physically, so he changed tactics and was coming at her with his powers now. She knew he would resort to his powers but had hoped to wear him down a bit more beforehand. Unfurling her wings she brought them down, the pressure keeping her where she wanted to be. Glancing up she noticed Rhys taking off and then she heard her mother's voice. *"I sent him to the front lines to assist Galen and get him away from Olipisies, you don't need that extra worry."*

“Thanks, mom,” she grunted, shoving her shield aside. Mari brought her hands together, held them up and opened them palm out as she pointed them toward Olipisies. The wind rose in a tunnel formation straight at him. The force of her wind had Olipisies stepping back. Breaking it off, she quickly took the advantage and punched, knocking him in the head with her fist. He sailed through the air toward the trees and into the forest. Turning, she met Drake Roven’s gaze. “Do not follow. It will be too dangerous for you.”

“What about you, Mari? You need back up,” Drake argued.

“You’re not strong enough. Go to your daughter, she needs you!” Stepping

off, she flew along the ground quickly and met Olipisies as he landed and rolled along the forest floor, his body changing into black mist. Her chest heaved as she glanced around. He had the knowledge of changing his form to any elemental item he wanted. His black arts, practices, and stolen powers from those he'd killed would be used this day.

Relaxing her breathing, her lashes fluttered as she called in the land's energies. Listening as a twig snapped, her eyes opened in the shape of her dragon eyes and saw him coming at her in wind form. He was a black cloud with the faces of those he'd killed screaming to get out. Her chest expanded as she breathed deeply, letting it out as fire.

She kept up their deadly dance by following him when he tried to get away and stopping when he dissipated into nothingness.

Mari knew he'd try anything to win, even backhanded dirty tricks from the last time they'd fought. She was glad her mother had the foresight to send Rhys from this area, for Olipisies would, in no uncertain terms, use Rhys and his safety against her to get what he wanted.

Mari's head tilted, her ears tuned into the woods around them, her gaze scanning the areas within sight. She caught a blue flash from her right peripheral vision and turned. Using her wings to create a wall of wind as the lightning bolt came at her, she took a

deep breath and released her dragon's fire as he ran and dived into a nearby lake. She sucked her fire back as it skidded along the water's surface. Turing quickly, Mari jumped to a tree as Olipisies came up from the ground beneath. "Well that's new. Who'd you steal that from?" Jumping, she somersaulted through the air landing on another branch as he came up after her. Jumping again, she turned heading toward the ground. Mari turned mid-air, sending fire balls up at him, smiling when he grunted in pain. Flapping her wings she shoved toward him and came up in a one-eighty. Thrusting her foot out, she kicked him, sending him flying into a cluster of trees, breaking several

before he finally stopped, hunched against one.

Mari roared as she charged Olipisies. Her knuckles met with his jaw and sent him straight up through the branches. Mari smiled as she glanced behind her, reaching for the obsidian sphere her mother had given her—and that's all it took. Glancing back up, Mari gasped as he shot toward her. Her lips parted as the hit knocked the wind from her lungs; then her wrist was being grabbed and he swung her downward.

Mari groaned as she came up out of the hole her plummet to the earth had caused, the warmth of blood dripping down the side of her face. “Yeah, I guess we’re even now, huh asshole?” She

never should have thought it would be that easy to take him down. The minute she took her eyes off him, he went for the attack. Well, she wouldn't make that mistake again.

“Always the smart mouthed little bitch,” Olipsisies growled.

Mari chuckled. “Well what other kind is there?”

“You will die this day, Mariwen Gawain, and then I'll get the little brat and lastly your vamp, just for the laughs.”

Swiping the blood from her lip, she smeared it on her thigh. “Yeah and what makes you think my father won't wake up just to kick your ass to Mars?”

“He's sleeping, it won't happen.

And when I find his lair, I will take him out as well.”

“You have awfully big goals for such a small—well what are you, are you even a man anymore?”

Mari smiled when she saw the forest start attacking him. Tree limbs came down swatting him; animals came out of everywhere and descended on Olipisies. “The land doesn’t want you here,” she said as he thrust limbs away and took to the air. “You’ve never had good luck on Alston, have you Olipisies?” Taking to the air she charged him, kicking and punching. Unfortunately, he blocked every move and came at her with a lightning attack. Growling, she created a vortex that

devoured the lightning, and cast it back at him. Her eyes narrowed when he held up his hand dissipating the wind and lightning. Unsheathing her sword, she lifted it, deflecting his menacing looking one as it came down at her head. Turning, Mari went in for the killing blow and gasped, her sword lowering, tingles spreading throughout her entire body. "Saul," she whispered as tears turned to cries of agony. She glanced down to see her stomach ripped open from a long slash. Her hands got bathed in blood as she tried holding in her organs. She collapsed, falling, the wind hard on her back as she plummeted toward the ground. Mari's eyes closed as Saul's face turned into Olipisies, her

groan hardly heard from the impact tremor of her landing.

“You blamed the ancients all this time when it was me you should have been gunning for, Mariwen. He had a good soul for a human, but don’t worry, love,” he growled as he gripped her hair, lifting her head, “He doesn’t blame you anymore for failing to protect him. Well, not since I told him it was I who initiated everything.”

Her breathing was raspy as she dragged breath into her cooling body. Mari knew the life force was leaving her as Olipsis slammed her head to the ground, laughing about taking out Rhys next. “N-nooo...” her words garbled as blood gurgled from her mouth.

Chapter 6

Mari vaguely heard her mother's voice as her upper body was lifted and the ground trembled.

“You may not realize it now, but everyone you've touched within your life has been for a reason—even Saul. You were with Saul to show you your humanity, to teach you that humans are worth living and fighting for no matter

what. Do not let his death be in vain. Do not let your love for Rhys be wasted. You must fight for what you want to keep. Everything you have had to bear until this time has been to strengthen you and make you the person you are, Mari. You can beat the darkness. You can do what's needed to save this land, to save yourself and your father," Darina said as she hugged her daughter. "You need to feed, Mari, please feed from me, please don't die yet, it's not your time. Mariwen!"

Mari parted her cold lips as flesh pressed against them. The warm coppery taste of blood dripped onto her tongue as Kalana's healing energies worked on her wound. Groaning, she suckled softly,

weakened by her condition, and twitched as the blood, her mother's blood, flowed through her, healing and bringing her life back.

* * * *

Mari roared as she jumped up from her mother's arms. Glancing down she noticed her wound had disappeared.

"Mari?"

"I'm fine, thanks, mom."

"He's heading toward the sea, he's going after Rhys."

"Then that will be his last mistake."

She turned her head when Darina grabbed her arm.

"Do not lose focus."

"No fears there. I'm through playing." Stepping to the open field,

Mari tossed her arms out letting the change take hold. She roared with anger as she flapped her mighty wings and soared toward her mate.

* * * *

Rhys doubled over, groaning as he landed on his knees. “Mari,” he whispered, glancing toward the area where Roven Manor would be. The gut wrenching pain told him she was in trouble, bad trouble.

“My lord?”

“Mari, I have to get to her.” Rhys made a motion to leave, but a hand held him down. He glanced up and met Hoag’s gaze.

“No, Ancient Darina ordered me not to let you go near the fight.”

“She’s in trouble, Hoag, she’s hurt.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let you.”

Rhys rose, staring his security chief down. He glanced over to see Galen and Roven Manor’s security force behind Hoag. “I can’t let her die!”

“Mari can take care of herself,” Galen said.

“You don’t understand! She’s dying!” Rhys yelled, his anger initiating his change to full vampire shift. He growled, ready to strike down his fellow fighters, when he felt his body thump as if a large heartbeat sped through him. He turned, staring at the horizon. “Something’s coming.” Stepping forward, his eyes widened as he turned

his head. "Full battlement, now! The darkness is coming!"

"You need to come with me now," Hoag said as he grabbed Rhys' arm.

Rhys yanked his arm from Hoag's grip. "I will not run."

"If what you say is true and Lady Mari is down, then how do you expect to fight the evil one? You need to get out of his path and take cover!"

"He will find me wherever I go if I'm the one he's after. I will not run!" Rhys growled. Unsheathing his weapons he strode to the front line beside Galen. "Ready arms!" When the black cloud appeared on the field heading toward them, Rhys breathed deeply. "I love you, Mari," he whispered. Rhys turned his

attention back to his fellow fighters. “Keep the line, do not back down. We can all give him a good fight. I have faith in all of you!” Roaring with anger, Rhys stepped forward in an all-out run, listening as the security legion behind followed him into battle.

Rhys was the first one to connect swords with the creature of a man the darkness had turned into.

“So this face does nothing for you?” Olipisies asked. “Too bad for poor Mariwen, she took one glance and let her guard down.”

Rhys slashed his sword. It didn't matter what combination he used, the creature blocked him effortlessly. “Where is she?” he yelled.

Olipisies laughed. “Dead. Right where you’re going to be.”

His heartbeat stopped, dread ran through his veins like ice water. His face contorted as he snarled, anger leading him into an attack.

“I guess she didn’t tell you—this was her first husband and true love, Saul.”

“Do not think to play head games with me, creature!” Rhys said as he deflected several blows. He knew Mari loved him, he knew she had loved Saul. He also knew their souls were mated and her love he would never doubt. Rhys flew back from a wind-style attack, grunting as he slid across the ground.

“My lord, we need to get you out of

here now,” Hoag said as he ran up.

“I’m not running!”

“He’s only after you. After disarming the others he didn’t kill them. He wants to kill you, you need to leave now!”

“No!” Rhys turned to Hoag. “He killed Mari, he will not live do you hear me? I’ll kill him!” Without another thought Rhys turned. Quick-stepping, he came in fast, his fist landing a punch on Olipisies’ chin, sending him flying. Rhys drew back to dish out another hit. Rhys gasped for breath. His eyes widened as Olipisies’ hand wrapped around his throat, lifting him three feet off the ground.

“You think you’re something don’t

you? The mate of a dragon. Let me tell you something little boy, you're nothing more than an ant for me to crush with my boot."

Rhys gasped for breath as he struggled to get free. The darkness held him tight as he blasted the Alston forces back with one hand. Blackness was encroaching on his senses. What the hell was he waiting for, why didn't the creature kill him straight out? Lifting his foot, Rhys kicked out, hitting his target with minimal effect. Damn he was going to die like this. His eyes fluttered. "Mari, love..."

Rhys' eyes flew open when the roar reverberated over the land—she was alive and she was pissed. When

Olipsisies' hand loosened on his throat, Rhys took the chance and came up with his own hands, knocking the creature's arms off him. Rhys swung up and out with his clawed nails, making several two inch cuts across Olipsisies' abdomen.

Olipsisies came up with a hit that sent Rhys flying across the ground.

Rhys snarled as he jumped to his feet, running for Olipsisies with his sword drawn. Rhys' security forces were behind him as they spread out, taking down any attacker that was lucky enough to break through the lines. "My woman lives and she's coming for you!" Rhys yelled as he swung, hitting Olipsisies on the right arm.

“She may be, but you’ll never see her again!”

Rhys’ attack stopped short when he was completely lifted off the ground. He cried out as his body squeezed in on itself. His hands forced down, he couldn’t lift a leg, never mind a foot, as he was being crushed. Then as he was falling, a monstrous roar filled the air. Once his knees hit the ground he glanced up and saw a blood red dragon before him with blue spikes going from her head to her tail, and to the tips of her wings. “Mari.” Rhys backed up as she swung her tail at Olipisies, knocking him toward the sea. Mari came to stand between them. Rhys’ head tilted as she stood up on both hind legs and let out the

loudest roar he'd ever heard. Glancing over, he watched Galen and the others cover their ears as Olipisies flew backwards by the sheer force.

“You crazy bitch!” Olipisies screamed. “I’ll kill you!”

Rhys rushed forward out of instinct to protect his mate and found himself forced to his knees in front of Mari, his throat being squeezed again. Glancing over he met her eye. “*Do it,*” he said with his mind. Her head tilted and he shut his eyes hoping what she’d told him was true as she released her dragon’s breath on the both of them. Rhys opened his eyes at Olipisies’ screams to see the creature burning as he backed away, releasing his hold. Rhys stood within her

flames, his sword drawn. He lunged forward, driving it into Olipisies' chest and down to his hips. Yanking it out, the creature dropped before him. Rhys stepped over to him, aiming for Olipisies' heart, and thrust down again, striking home before withdrawing his sword as Mari's flames died down. Glancing up, he noticed Triton with twelve others—ancient Greeks looking like Other Kin—surrounding them. His chest heaved as he stepped back. They lifted their hands and cast some kind of light barrier around the burned creature crawling on the ground.

“Step back, my love, we’re almost finished,” Mari said.

Rhys followed behind her as she

withdrew the black orb her mother had given her. Once she took her place in the circle she held it up and spoke in a language he didn't understand. His eyes widened when Olipsisies screamed as he turned to his black mist and was sucked into the orb.

“How’s that for a crazy bitch, you psycho?”

When the lights went down and Mari stepped back, Rhys grabbed her arm and turned her to him, lowering his mouth hungrily. “Don’t you ever almost die on me again, Mariwen Gawain Beven,” he breathed heavily.

“Don’t worry, I don’t plan on it.”

Rhys chuckled as he lowered his mouth to hers quickly before glancing up

at Triton with narrowed eyes. “Where in the hell were you, fish breath?”

“By the Gods I still get no respect.” Triton grinned as he stepped forward, hugging them both. “Talk to the ’rents, aunts and uncles. It wasn’t easy convincing them.”

When one of the others stated he wanted the orb, Rhys tried to grab Mari as she broke free. She stood there facing down what he assumed were twelve of the Greek gods.

“Oh you think so, huh ass hole!” Mari snarled. “This is going where my parents say. What are you going to do, Zeus, when you need my help the next time? I’ll tell you what I’m going to do, I’m going to sit there and laugh my ass

off at the lot of you!”

“You couldn’t have contained him without us,” Zeus replied.

Rhys stepped back as Mari laughed. “Not liking the sound of that,” he whispered out the side of his mouth at Triton.

“You stupid imbecile, I’m half ancient. I didn’t need your help or didn’t you notice that white light that came out and encompassed all of yours, pushing you out? Yeah that was me! I can’t believe none of you came to help me when I needed it! I’ve been there for you every single time, every time! I’m done! I’m holding a grudge and I don’t know for how long!”

Rhys smiled as she turned her back

to them and stormed over to Triton and himself, the others leaving quickly. “Well I guess you told them,” he chuckled.

“I sure as hell did,” she said smiling.

“Well, at least we took care of all the water attackers on our way in,” Triton said.

“Yes you did,” Rhys chuckled. “Is that Pele of Hawaii?”

“Yeah, we’ll be taking a short vacation here. You know she’s always wanted to see Alston.” Triton grinned.

* * * *

Rhys snuggled, bringing Mari’s back closer to his front. “So it’s over for good?”

“Yes, unless he finds a way to break free of the orb, but that’s pretty much impossible. And then there’s the safeguards put into place where the orb is secured.”

“I thought you were dead. I had a horrible gut wrenching feeling tear through me.”

“I almost was. I’ve never been that close to death before. All I could think about was you and losing you.”

Rhys met her gaze as she rolled over. Lowering his mouth softly to hers, he breathed in her sweet essence, his lips gently caressing her soft skin. “I don’t ever want to go through that again, Mari. I thought I was going to die when I thought I’d lost you. I didn’t care who I

was fighting, I was going to make him pay for what he'd done; for taking you away from me."

"I don't even want to think about what Evan Roven's going through."

"I've talked with Drake. They don't blame you. They know you arrived as fast as you could and they were all fighting the darkness trying to keep him away from Livi."

"But Sofia was pregnant with his child and now they've both been taken from him forever."

Rhys wrapped his arm around Mari as she leaned into his side. "I know, baby."

"Livi's going to blame me and herself. I've felt her anger toward me,

and she won't answer any of my calls.”

Rhys sighed softly, kissing the top of her head. “Drake and Kalana are aware of Olivia’s state of mind and are taking care of everything. She’ll come around when she realizes no one could have stopped Sofia’s death.”

“Kalana told me Evan’s thinking of stepping down as Alpha and giving the position to Drake, that’s how heartbroken he is over the loss of his mate.”

Rhys held her to him, pressing kisses along her temple as she cried softly. “We cannot change what has happened, love. We can only live through it the best we can and strive for a better future.”

“I know.”

“I love you, Mari.”

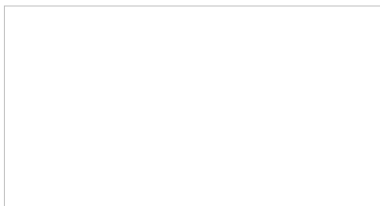
“I love you, Rhys.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erotic Romance Author, C. A. Salo, loves to write Science Fiction and Paranormal.

When not writing, C. A. enjoys home schooling her son, traveling, movie night with the family, and digging with her hands in the soil to grow flowers, organic vegetables, and herbs for her family. She also enjoys watching the antics of the ‘Princess’ of the house—AKA The Cat, and snuggling with her longhaired red dachshund

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