



DUET INCLUDES TWO **NEW** KINDRED TALES:
POSSESSED BY THE WULVEN
GUARDED BY THE GHOST

WICKED AND WILD

KINDRED TALES
KINDRED DUET

EVANGELINE ANDERSON
NYT AND USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

WICKED AND WILD

KINDRED TALES DUET: POSSESSED BY THE WULVEN
& GUARDED BY THE GHOST

EVANGELINE ANDERSON

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CONTENTS

Wicked and Wild

Book One: Possessed by the Wulven

1. [Samantha](#)
2. [R'orn](#)
3. [Sam](#)
4. [R'orn](#)
5. [R'orn](#)
6. [Sam](#)
7. [R'orn](#)
8. [Sam](#)
9. [R'orn](#)
10. [Sam](#)
11. [Sam](#)
12. [Sam](#)
13. [R'orn](#)
14. [Sam](#)
15. [R'orn](#)
16. [Sam](#)
17. [Sam](#)
18. [Sam](#)
19. [Sam](#)
20. [R'orn](#)
21. [Sam](#)

Book Two: Guarded by the Ghost

1. [Hanna](#)
2. [Hanna](#)
3. [Hanna](#)
4. [Hanna](#)
5. [Wraith](#)
6. [Hanna](#)
7. [Hanna](#)
8. [Wraith](#)
9. [Hanna](#)
10. [Hanna](#)
11. [Hanna](#)
12. [Wraith](#)
13. [Hanna](#)
14. [Hanna](#)

15. [Hanna](#)
 16. [Wraith](#)
 17. [Hanna](#)
 18. [Hanna](#)
 19. [Hanna](#)
 20. [Hanna](#)
 21. [Hanna](#)
 22. [Wraith](#)
 23. [Hanna](#)
 24. [Hanna](#)
 25. [Hanna](#)
- [Epilogue](#)

[The End?](#)

[Give a Hot Kindred Warrior to a Friend!](#)

[Sign up for my Newsletter!](#)

[Do you love Audiobooks?](#)

[Also by Evangeline Anderson](#)

[About the Author](#)

WICKED AND WILD

**Two sisters, both born with a Gift...
Samantha leads lost spirits home,
Hanna can see Beyond the Veil
But both are in terrible danger.**

**Can the Kindred Protectors assigned to them keep them safe?
You'll have to read this *Enemies to Lovers*, *Touch her and Die*, *Only one
Bed*, *Spicy Shifter and Ghost Romance*, *Wicked and Wild*, to find out!**

Are you ready for two Spicy and Spooky Kindred Tales in one book? Get ready for *Wicked and Wild*...

In "Possessed by the Wulven," Sam's ghost-hunting mission collides with skeptic R'orn, creating sparks of annoyance and attraction. She's stuck with the huge Kindred warrior in a haunted inn, one room, and a single bed—temptation rises. But when spirits take control, passions ignite...and enemies might just become lovers.

In "Guarded by the Ghost," Hanna's curse attracts a terrifying Dark Entity, leading her to a ghostly Kindred protector, Wraith. Together, they face a sinister force that hungers for her soul. Can enemies turned lovers survive the shadows that threaten their very existence?

Explore these tales of paranormal romance, where love, danger, and the supernatural intertwine in a haunting journey beyond the veil. Will Sam, Hanna, and their Kindred Protectors conquer the darkness that surrounds them?

Find out when you read this Enemies to Lovers Spicy romance—*Wicked and Wild!*

This book is dedicated to:

Teresa Scarpetta

for giving me the idea for

Possessed by the Wulven

and naming this book

Wicked and Wild

and

Brittany Wallschlaeger

for giving me the idea for G

uarded by the Ghost

also

Nikki Henry

for naming my ghost warrior “Wraith”

Thank you ladies for feeding my Muse!

Hugs, Evangeline

BOOK ONE: POSSESSED BY THE
WULVEN

SAMANTHA

“So you really do this for a *living*? And other humans like to watch you do it?”

R’orn, the big Kindred warrior who was assigned to be Sam’s Protector rolled his eyes—which happened to be golden and inhumanly gorgeous—not that it made him any less annoying.

“Yes and yes,” Sam said shortly and shot him an irritated glare. Honestly, *why* had she been saddled with this big jerk during one of the most important ghost hunts of her life? Oh right—because her Aunt Luna had a bad feeling about her safety and wanted her to be protected.

Aunt Luna was slightly eccentric. She read tarot cards for a living, dyed her hair blue and purple, and always wore flowing gowns that were exclusively either black or white. She had a pet Sphinx cat named Bertrand who had his own wardrobe of hand-knitted sweaters—a necessity since he was completely hairless. But she also happened to be married to a Kindred warrior who was a member of the High Council.

“Uncle Bruin” as Sam had been asked to call him, was a Beast Kindred and he believed in her Aunt Luna’s gift of discernment completely. So he was more than willing to ask that a Kindred warrior should be assigned to protect her niece.

Sam appreciated her aunt’s concern, but she was used to looking out for herself. While it was true that she’d had a few creepy encounters with fans lately—(one guy had followed her for several blocks shouting “Hey, Ghost Girl! Hey, c’mere—I’ll show you a ghost!”)—and she’d been getting some disturbing comments on her latest videos, that didn’t mean she was actually in *danger*. People were crazy sometimes, that was all. It was better just to

ignore them and move on—at least in Sam’s opinion.

But Aunt Luna had been so concerned.

“My dear, I see trouble for you in the near future,” she had insisted when Sam protested that she was fine and didn’t need a bodyguard. “Please—just accept the Protector your uncle is assigning to you for a little while.”

Sam loved her Aunt Luna—she had practically raised her and her sister, Hanna, after their parents died—so she had reluctantly agreed. But she never would have said yes if she’d known what a jerk her new Protector was going to be! She and R’orn had butted heads right from the start.

R’orn was a Wulven Kindred—which meant he had some kind of beast or animal inside him. At least, that was what Sam *thought* it meant. She would have been inclined to like him—she has a thing for scary animals as her current pet, a tarantula called Sir Pedro, could attest. She’d had a wolf-dog for a while and even a ball python named “Chompers.” But so far R’orn had never let her see his “other half” and he was such a jerk she’d never asked him to reveal it.

Sam sighed. She should have known this would be a problem—right from the start, they hadn’t gotten along. He’d shaken her hand politely enough and sworn to protect her with his life—that part had been kind of nice, actually. He’d gotten down on one knee almost like he was going to propose. Sam’s heart had started thumping when he took her hands in his and looked her in the eyes.

“Samantha, I swear to you my Oath—I shall stay by your side and brave any danger to keep you safe,” he had rumbled in that inhumanly deep voice of his. “My body will be your shield and my lips shall keep your secrets. Not a drop of your blood will be shed unless all of mine is first spilled out upon the ground. This I vow and may I die a thousand deaths if my words prove false.”

With his shaggy brown hair that shaded to gold at the ends and those golden eyes, not to mention the tattoos on his muscular arms—which were bare since he’d been wearing a vest with no shirt—he’d seemed to be just her type. Sam had been halfway in love with him—until she told him what she did for a living. And that was when things started going bad.

“A ghost hunter? What in the Seven Hells is a ghost hunter?” he’d growled, arching one thick eyebrow skeptically.

Sam had tried to explain that she went to haunted buildings and interacted with spirits...but unfortunately, things only got worse from there. R’orn, it

seemed, was a confirmed skeptic who didn't believe in any kind of life after death. He didn't even believe in the Goddess that all the Kindred worshipped! Which was pretty much unheard of, since most of the Kindred were so devout.

"What do you *mean* you don't believe in the Goddess?" Sam had asked him. "I thought all the Kindred worshipped her. Don't you call her 'The Mother of All Life?'"

"Some do." He'd shrugged, his broad shoulders rolling with the motion. "Not me. Never seen any proof that she exists."

"Lots of Kindred have, though," Sam pointed out. She'd read an article about that—many Kindred reported having some kind of contact with the Goddess they worshipped. Often she warned them of impending danger to them or a loved one or spoke to them in dreams or answered prayers. Such personal interaction with their deity made them much more likely to believe in the spiritual realm. It was one reason that her Aunt Luna's Kindred husband was so willing to believe in her gift and assign a Protector to her niece.

Just my luck that I get the one Kindred who's a non-believer, she thought sourly as she frowned at R'orn, who was watching her unpack her ghost hunting equipment from the back of her van. She'd driven all the way up from Florida—where she lived—to Massachusetts. He had offered to give her a ride in his shuttle, but she had declined—mostly to avoid conversations like the one they were having right now.

Her van was parked side-by-side with his sleek Kindred shuttle, both of them under a huge old maple tree with gold and red and orange foliage spreading overhead. There was a distant smell of smoke in the air, as though someone was burning leaves and the sky was a clear autumnal blue. The air was crisp and cold without being freezing and Sam could feel the tip of her nose tingling with the chilly weather.

It was, in short, absolutely *gorgeous*—she never got to experience Fall weather in Florida where the only two seasons were hot and hotter. She should have been enjoying herself—not only did she get to experience this beautiful time of year but she was about to explore one of the most haunted houses in the entire country—The Belgrave Mansion.

But it was all spoiled by the big idiot beside her.

"So this whole 'talking to the dead' thing you say you do," R'orn said. "Do humans really believe that shit?"

“By ‘that shit’ do you mean do they believe in ghosts?” Sam inquired, raising her eyebrow as she placed her spirit box carefully in her bag. “Because the answer is complicated—maybe *too* complicated for a guy with a brain that’s not big enough to comprehend the paranormal.”

He frowned.

“Hey—there’s no need to be insulting. I was just asking a question.”

Sam blew out a breath in frustration. Seriously, couldn’t Aunt Luna’s husband have found another, more agreeable Kindred warrior to watch out for her? Or at least one who didn’t sneer at the way she earned her living?

“All right,” she said, trying to hold onto her temper. “Well, the answer to your ‘question’ is, like I said, *complicated*. Statistically speaking, about a third of humans believe in ghosts and spirits. But that’s because only about a third of us have any kind of sensitivity to supernatural phenomena. Even fewer can actually communicate with the dead.”

“And I’m guessing you’re one of the few?” he asked raising one eyebrow skeptically.

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” Sam said frostily. “I have a small talent. My Gift is nowhere near as strong as my aunt’s or my sister’s, but I’m what you call a ‘Sensitive.’ And yes, I make my living from it—the same way you make your living by being a big, strong, scary-looking guy.”

“Hey, being big and strong is *not* how I make my living,” he protested, frowning. “I’m a Protector—I keep females safe.”

“Safe from danger or safe from your stupidity?” Sam muttered to herself.

His face darkened.

“I can hear you, you know, sweetheart. Kindred have much sharper senses than you humans—which is one reason I don’t believe in the bullshit you’re selling. I’ve never seen or heard or smelled *anything* in my life to prove paranormal or supernatural beings exist.”

“You—you exist!” Sam exclaimed in frustration, pointing at him. “You’re a Wulven Kindred—doesn’t that mean you can turn into a beast or a wolf or something like that?”

He frowned uncomfortably.

“It’s true I have a Beast inside me—but he never comes out. Believe me, sweetheart, you wouldn’t want him to.”

“Actually, I *would*—he might be better company than you are,” Sam said tartly. “Now look—I don’t care how skeptical you are, I’m going to be filming this and I need you to *not* blurt out your uninformed opinions while

I'm working. Okay?"

R'orn raised both hands in a "don't shoot" gesture.

"Hey—this is your world. I'm just here to protect you while you do... whatever it is you do." He frowned. "And speaking of that, are you aware that a human called 'Slasher69' has been leaving a lot of threatening comments on your social media? He has some seriously deranged ideas. *That's* the kind of thing you need to be worried about—not 'scary ghosts and ghouls'."

Sam was surprised.

"You've been watching my show?"

She went by the name "Ghost Girlie" on social media and had her own YouTube channel devoted to her ghost hunting exploits. It was a use of her talents that didn't involve dealing with individual clients for hours on end like her aunt did when she read the cards for people. It also beat the hell out of being a bank teller, which was what Sam had been doing before her channel took off.

"Yes, I've been watching your show," R'orn growled. "Parts of it, anyway. It mostly seems to consist of you walking around abandoned domiciles, jumping at shadows, and talking to dead humans who aren't there."

Sam shot him another glare.

"You think they aren't there because *you* can't see them. But I assure you—none of what I do is a trick or a gimmick. I can see the people I'm talking to, even if *you* can't."

"So you *really* think you're talking to spirits?" R'orn shook his head. "I thought humans had medication for disorders like that."

"All right—that's it." Sam stalked over to him, her feet crunching in the drifts of dead leaves on the ground, and poked him in his broad, muscular chest. "I've had just about *enough* of your sarcasm and rudeness!" she told him. "So you can just fly right back up to the Mother Ship now—I don't need you!"

R'orn crossed his arms over his broad chest, his biceps bulging with the move.

"I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart," he rumbled. "Because you *do* need me. Have you read any of those fucking remarks that Slasher69 asshole has been leaving for you under your little vids?"

"Those 'little vids' pay enough for me to travel the country doing what I

love!” Sam snapped. “Not many people can say that. I work hard and I’m *proud* of what I do!”

“I’m not talking about what you do—I’m talking about who’s watching you do it!” R’orn growled, glaring down at her. “Maybe if you weren’t so flamboyant you wouldn’t attract so much attention to yourself and crazy humans like Slasher69 wouldn’t be wanting to ‘cut you into little pieces’ with a special knife he’s been sharpening just for you!”

Sam sucked in a breath.

“He said *that*?” She’d really been trying to avoid reading the deranged comments this particular “fan” left under all her videos on social media, but they were getting harder to ignore. He wasn’t just on her YouTube channel, either. He followed her across all platforms, including Instagram, Tagalong, Piper, and FaceBook. To be honest, he seemed kind of obsessed with her—which *was* a little scary—but nothing to lose her shit over.

Or so Sam kept telling herself.

Now, however, R’orn was telling her that it was time to take Slasher69 seriously—not that she wanted to listen. But still...

“He really said he...he wanted to cut me into pieces?” she couldn’t help asking.

“That and a hell of a lot worse. I’m not going *anywhere* until this fucker is caught,” the big Kindred growled. “No matter how much you insult me—I gave you my oath and I’m *not* fucking breaking it.”

“Hey—you’re the one insulting *me* and *my* work!” Sam pointed out, getting angry all over again. “Just stop shitting on what I do for a living and we’ll get along a lot better—all right?”

“All right...all right...” He lifted both hands, palms up. “But don’t ask me to leave while this guy is stalking you. He’s fucking *crazy*.”

“A lot of people are.” Sam went back to putting equipment into her bag. “If you ignore them, they generally go away.”

“I don’t think that’s going to work with this guy—he seems completely obsessed with you,” R’orn said, echoing her own thoughts to an uncomfortable degree. “Look, maybe if you weren’t so fucking gorgeous, he’d lose interest. Have you thought about trying to look a little plainer in your vids?”

Sam shot him a surprised look. Gorgeous? Was he serious?

“Excuse me,” she said, putting a hand on her hip. “Did you just say I’m *pretty*?”

“Come on—you know you are,” R’orn growled. “I mean—just *look* at you.” He waved a hand to indicate her face and body. “You’re an Elite and you’ve got those luscious lips and those big, dark eyes...”

“An ‘Elite’? What’s that?” Sam asked.

“A female who the Goddess has blessed with extra-generous curves,” he growled. “And you’re always *flaunting* them—wearing those tight clothes and making your face up to emphasize your beauty...”

Sam shot a glance at herself in one of the side mirrors of her van. A heart-shaped face with straight black hair and big, very dark blue eyes stared back. She had on pale makeup and her full lips—which she had painted into a cupid’s bow with a ruby-black lipstick—seemed to pout sensuously.

Her clothing was all black from her form-fitting, long sleeved t-shirt and leather mini skirt to her black tights and Doc Martins. Yes, her clothes hugged her body but so what? She had realized back in high school after trying diet after diet that she was never going to be skinny. Now she owned her curves and showed them off with pride.

The Goth look was mostly for her viewers—it went with her image as one of the few who could “see beyond the veil and commune with the spirits.” But she wasn’t about to tone it down—it was part of her on-line persona. Just the fact that the big Kindred was asking her to change—to *not* be herself—made her feel attacked.

“Look, I dress how I want and I use whatever makeup I want,” she snapped at R’orn. “This is who I am. Anyone who doesn’t like it—including you—can go fuck themselves!”

R’orn made a noise of frustration.

“I’m not trying to *insult* you. All I’m saying is, maybe if you toned it down some, you wouldn’t attract so many crazies.”

Sam lifted her chin.

“I’m not toning anything down for anybody,” she declared. “And I don’t need *you* to tell me how to dress or what makeup to wear either. I’m *supposed* to be attracting attention—that’s the whole idea of social media—to get more viewers!”

“But some of them are fucking crazy!” he exclaimed, his eyes flashing.

Sam shrugged, trying to look stoic.

“That’s part of the job. Look, would I like to just go around the country exploring haunted houses as a hobby without having to film everything? Sure, that would be great. But that’s a *rich* person’s life—not mine. I was

barely getting by before I started my channel—and now I make enough to repair my van when it breaks down and save a little money for emergencies. I even get to treat myself to something nice like a spa day occasionally. So I'm going to keep doing what I'm doing for as long as I have to and I don't need *you* interfering."

"Fine—keep painting a target on your back," R'orn growled. "I'll keep my oath to protect you and keep you safe—you're just making my job a hell of a lot harder, that's all, sweetheart."

"You're making *my* job harder too—just by being here," Sam told him. "Now come on—I have to meet the owner of the mansion and do a little intro on the front porch and I do *not* need any of your input while I'm doing it."

He mimed a gesture of sealing his mouth shut.

"You won't hear a word."

"Good. That's the way I like it."

Sam turned her back on him and began crunching through the dry leaves to reach the huge mansion where she was going to stay the night and hopefully get the best footage of her life.

As long as the big Kindred didn't interfere, that was—the asshole!

R'ORN

R'orn watched the curvy little Elite stalk off, her ridiculously clunky boots crunching in the fallen foliage as she went and her full, rounded backside twitching becomingly. Damn it—if only she wasn't so fucking gorgeous! And if only she didn't flaunt her beauty so freely!

It wasn't just the fact that she was drawing the unwanted attention of deranged humans, either. It was the fact that she made the Beast within him—the dark, hungry part which almost always slept—stir restlessly. Several times it had almost awakened and R'orn had been forced to step away from her and calm it down as best he could.

This had never happened to him before. He was a Wulven Kindred but he had managed never to let that wild and ravenous part of himself out. In order to achieve this, he mostly kept away from planets that had a natural satellite. Because his Beast was tied to the cycles of the moon, that usually kept it quiescent. Living on the Mother Ship made things easy—though it orbited the Earth's moon, it was easy to find places in the huge ship where the moon's light didn't shine.

Of course, coming to Earth on assignment *did* complicate things somewhat. But R'orn had protected females on planets with moons once or twice before. He simply stayed inside on the night of the full moon or made certain his job was done before the moon reached its zenith.

And so, the Beast inside him slept on—until he was assigned to guard Samantha Wyatt. Never before had he encountered a female who interested him, though he had been a Protector for years. But the moment he had knelt before her and taken her hands in his to offer his Oath of Protection, the Beast had stirred to wakefulness and uttered the first word it had ever

spoken...

“*MINE.*”

R’orn had heard that single word tolling like a bell inside his head and it was all he could do to finish giving his Oath and retain his composure. He had excused himself afterwards to go calm the Beast.

The experience had shaken him to his core—but of course he couldn’t show it—especially not to the female he was protecting. He knew one thing though—he had to keep his Beast under wraps at all costs. So he kept his distance from the curvy little Elite and fed the antagonism between them on purpose. And so far, to his great relief, he had found that if he didn’t touch her, his Beast slept on and didn’t wake.

However, he was getting more and more worried about her safety. He would guard her with his life but there was only so much he could do if she refused to help. Despite her many admirers, there were several obnoxious or hurtful comments under almost all of her videos. Humans seemed to feel free to disparage each other as long as they had the anonymity of the Internet to hide behind. But none of them worried him as much as the comments from the user called “Slasher69.”

The comments had started as thinly veiled sexual come-ons—this user seemed to believe that a “fat chick” as he called Samantha—would welcome his advances. He wrote things like,

*“Why don’t we get together, baby? I’ll let you suck me like your favorite lollypop all night long—fat chicks **love** sucking dick.”*

And...

*“If you go down on your knees and beg for me to fuck you, I’ll pound you from behind, doggy-style. I’ll make you come so hard you **cry!**”*

And other more disgusting things as well—things a male should never say to a female he hadn’t even met and didn’t know intimately. It made R’orn angry just to read them—he wanted to reach through the screen and grab the disrespectful human by his throat and teach him a lesson!

But when Samantha didn’t reply to any of Slasher69’s posts, his tone had gotten progressively more threatening.

“You fat bitch! You’ll be begging me to fuck you but I’m going to fuck you up instead!” one of his recent remarks had read. *“I’m going to slice you into little pieces and fill a bathtub with your blood. That way I can jerk off all over you any time I want!”*

Naturally, most of the major social media platforms didn’t allow this kind

of threatening language, but Slasher69 got around that by inserting symbols and numbers instead of letters into some of the words. So “fat bitch” became “f@t b1tch.” The modified words were still readable and they got his point across without setting off the bots that were supposed to catch this kind of hate speech.

He was also proving impossible to track down. R’orn had been trying ever since he’d been assigned to Samantha and he wasn’t having much luck. He’d even gotten a tech on the Mother Ship whose specialty was the human Internet to try, but Slasher69 remained at large. Whoever he was, he was extremely good at covering his tracks.

R’orn wished the stalker hadn’t latched on to Samantha but he could see why he had. She was so pretty and vibrant—even in her videos, she came across as genuine and relatable. She seemed to honestly want to help the “spirits” she “communicated” with. In fact, if R’orn hadn’t been so sure she was just performing an act for the human social media ecosphere, he might almost have believed she was really speaking to dead humans and trying to help them.

Because that was what she did—at least according to her show—she went to “haunted houses” and helped the dead get what they wanted.

Often it was simply acknowledgement. Sometimes she would listen and talk as though holding a whole conversation with a person who wasn’t there—she really was an amazingly realistic actress, R’orn thought. She ought to be in some of the human’s shows or movies—she would certainly be a better female lead than the stick-thin females that they all seemed to think were so attractive here on Earth.

Sometimes she encountered an evil or vengeful spirit and pretended that she had to leave the house quickly. But mostly she made it seem as though the “ghosts” she contacted were willing to speak to her and tell her the story of their life and death, which she then relayed to her eagerly listening audience.

R’orn had to admit that even though he knew the whole thing was fake, her vids really were entertaining. He had watched hours and hours of them—though at first he’d promised himself he was only reading the comments to look for dangerous humans and keep her safe. But the little Elite had an innate charisma that translated well to the screen, and he found he couldn’t stop watching.

And now he was going to get to watch her make one of her vids up close

and personal—which was doubtless going to be interesting. Samantha insisted that she really could see and hear spirits—it would be fun to watch her film her show, though he wished she would just admit, at least to him, that it was all an act. However, she didn't seem willing to do that, so he would just have to keep his mouth closed and watch over her while she worked.

R'orn just hoped that Slasher69 wasn't anywhere around. Or if he was, he hoped he showed himself soon so R'orn could take him out. Next week was the full moon and he couldn't protect Samantha then—he would need to be somewhere hidden inside or else back at the Mother Ship—which would be safer and better.

Otherwise, she'd have more than a stalker after her—she'd have his Beast—and that was a much greater danger than any human could ever pose.

SAM

“Welcome to the beautiful and historic Belgrave Mansion—the oldest haunted house still functioning as an Inn in the country. I’m Ms. Primrose and I’ll be your Innkeeper.”

Ms. Primrose was a woman in her fifties wearing a Colonial period dress with a lace cap and a long white apron over her gingham gown. As she spoke, she smiled at Sam and spread her hands invitingly.

“It’s so nice to meet you,” Sam said, smiling back. “And the Belgrave is even more beautiful than I’d imagined!”

They were standing in the foyer of the magnificent old home, which was a huge three-story, white clapboard structure with a broad wrap-around porch filled with rocking chairs where you could sit and admire the fall foliage.

The Innkeeper nodded.

“It’s a lovely old Inn but its history is tragic. I’ve seen your show and I can’t *wait* to see what you find here!”

“Oh, thank you.” Sam smiled back. “I was so excited to get a room with you—you’re usually so full this time of year!”

“Yes, we are. Leaf Peepers and Ghost Lovers just converge on us in October!” The Innkeeper gave a girlish giggle. “We’re so excited to have you and your husband here with us tonight. It’s just a shame you couldn’t come on All Hallows Eve itself—the ghosts are so much more lively on that night! Still, you’re only a week off, so they’re already getting restless.”

“Oh—R’orn’s not my husband,” Sam said quickly. “He’s my, uh, assistant.”

She didn’t want to claim the big Kindred as her bodyguard—it might spook the Innkeeper if she thought Sam was bringing a stalker along with her

—(which she was *sure* she wasn't. People like that freak, Slasher69, were all talk and no action, as her grandma used to say.)

“Oh...but you only booked a single room,” the Innkeeper said, staring up at R'orn uncertainly. “And the room only has a single bed in it. I'm afraid your, uh, assistant won't fit on the couch either,” she added. Which was definitely true, since the big Kindred was at least seven feet tall and the size of a professional wrestler.

“Don't worry—he can stay outside in his ship. Er, his car,” Sam said quickly.

“But it gets really cold on these autumn nights,” the Innkeeper protested. “I know you're from Florida—you said so in several of your videos—but up here in New England, you really don't want to spend the night out in your car if you can help it!”

“Besides which, I'm not staying anywhere but with *you*, sweetheart,” R'orn rumbled, frowning down at her. “How can I properly *assist* you if I'm all the way outside while you're in here?”

Sam felt a wave of frustration. She wished he would stop calling her “sweetheart” in that sarcastic tone of voice—it was driving her crazy! She wanted to protest that he *had* to go sleep in the car—she'd heard that most Kindred ships had a living quarters in the back with a bed and everything. But if she did that, she would look like a mean-tempered bitch to the Innkeeper, who was obviously a fan.

“Well...we won't be doing much sleeping anyway,” she said at last. “We're going to be up most of the night speaking to the Belgrave spirits!”

“Oh—there are a *lot* of them too!” Ms. Primrose's eyes grew wide. “There have been so many tragedies here over the years. The Belgraves were truly a most unlucky family and I fear their bad luck rubbed off on the people who came to stay here when the family home was turned into an Inn.” She dropped her voice almost to a whisper. “Some people even say The Belgrave Mansion is *cursed*.”

“That's fascinating!” Sam leaned closer. “Would you be willing to say that again—and give us some history—while I record everything?” She pulled out her phone. There were better cameras to use of course, but she found that the shaky, found-footage effect she got from filming on her phone really appealed to her viewers.

“Oh—*me* be in one of your *videos*?” The Innkeeper's hands fluttered to her freshly starched apron. “How exciting!”

“Yes—my viewers will love you!” Sam said enthusiastically. “I want to hear all about the house and its history and the different ghosts. Take us through the whole thing.”

“I’d be delighted!” Ms. Primrose nodded eagerly. “Come right this way—we can start in the parlor where Earnest Belgrave hung himself back in 1745. Some say that was the start of the house’s bad luck...”

R'ORN

R'orn followed dutifully along as the Innkeeper and Samantha went through the huge old domicile talking excitedly and filming the different rooms as the Innkeeper related the tragic history of the various inhabitants and guests.

He had gone along with the idea that he was Samantha's assistant rather than her Protector because he sensed she didn't want the other woman to get spooked by the idea that she might bring danger with her. So he did his best to act as her assistant by carrying her bag of equipment and handing her whatever she asked for.

But as the tour went on, R'orn found he was interested despite himself and his certainty that everything was fake. There certainly had been a lot of tragedies here over the years! If he was a superstitious male who believed in the supernatural, he almost might have wondered if the old domicile really was cursed in some way.

"And this is the bedroom where Minerva Pennyfeather of the Boston Pennyfeathers was found with her head and her hands cut off," the Innkeeper said as they entered yet another bedchamber. "Her husband caught her with her lover, you know. He shot the lover, but he brought an axe just for her."

"How *awful!*" Samantha's lovely dark blue eyes—which were lined with black make up that made them look even bigger—widened dramatically.

"Yes. We've had guests who leave this room in the middle of the night. They often report they feel something cold—like an icy blade—pressing against their neck and they say they can't breathe." The Innkeeper nodded with grim satisfaction.

"Hang on—do you feel that?" Samantha put her arms around herself and

shivered. “Let me use the temperature gun. R’orn?”

She held out a hand and R’orn dug in the bag and handed her the equipment she asked for—he knew what it was from watching so many of her videos. He didn’t feel cold himself at all, but then, Kindred usually ran hotter on the temperature scale than humans.

Samantha used the temperature gun to check for “cold spots” and supposedly found a few.

“But I don’t see any spirits in here,” she added, looking around the room carefully—as though a ghost might pop out of a pillow if she stared at it hard enough, R’orn thought. “In fact, I haven’t seen any since we got here.”

“Just you wait until it gets dark—that’s when they get *really* active!” The Innkeeper widened her eyes.

“I’m sure I’ll be up all night then.” Samantha smiled politely.

They continued the tour and it seemed to R’orn that something awful had happened in nearly every room in the domicile—even the freshers and the food prep area, where a young man had been stabbed to death by the cook for daring to send back his morning porridge because it was too lumpy.

Finally, though, things seemed to be winding down.

“Now, I’ve saved the best for last,” the Innkeeper informed them, as she led them back up the stairs to the second floor. “The most haunted room in the whole Inn is where you’ll be staying tonight!” And she threw open the door of the room at the very end of the long hall with a flourish.

“Oh—I can’t wait to hear all about it!” Samantha’s eyes lit up as she used the camera on her phone to pan across the room.

It was larger than the other sleeping areas, R’orn saw—maybe he could sleep on the floor and leave the bed for Samantha. It wasn’t going to be a very comfortable sleeping arrangement though—the wooden floors looked hard and cold and there was only a single thin rug, between the fireplace and the large, four-poster bed.

There was a simple wooden washstand with a washbasin and a pitcher in one corner and a high-backed chair in another. Over the fireplace was a tarnished silver mirror that looked older than the Inn itself.

“This is what we call The Lover’s Suite,” the Innkeeper told Samantha proudly. “It was here that Caroline Abernathy and Beauregard Hartford spent their honeymoon...and here that they were both murdered in cold blood before they ever had a chance to consummate their love!”

“Oh, that’s *terrible!*” Samantha said in a voice that indicated the exact

opposite. “Please—tell us more!”

“Well, they came from rival families, you know—the Abernathys and the Hartfords always just *hated* each other. I think it started over a land dispute because the two families were neighbors,” the Innkeeper began. “They mostly kept strictly apart but then Caroline and Beau saw each other across the room at a ball being held in another county that both of them happened to be invited to. And wouldn’t you know it—it was love at first sight!”

“Love at first sight?” R’orn asked, frowning. It was the first time he had interrupted and Samantha shot him a frown. But he couldn’t help it—the story was interesting and he found himself wanting to understand the details.

“Yes—love at first sight,” the Innkeeper said.

“Forgive my assistant—he’s a Kindred and he doesn’t always, er, *get* human sayings,” Samantha said. She turned to R’orn. “Love at first sight is what some people say happens when you meet the person you’re meant to be with for life. It’s like this instant attraction—a kind of spark that jumps between the two of you. It draws you together and makes you want to be with the other person forever. Does that make sense?”

“Er...yes. I guess so.” R’orn nodded. He couldn’t help thinking of the way his Beast had roused itself and said, “*MINE*” the very first time he’d ever met Samantha. But surely that didn’t have anything to do with this human phenomenon they were talking about—did it?

“Anyway, the two of them fell in love and decided to elope,” the Innkeeper went on, continuing the story. “They were supposed to take a train to Boston, but their carriage broke down and they couldn’t get to the station. Our lovely Inn happened to be close by, so they decided to spend their honeymoon here with us instead.” She shook her head sorrowfully. “If only they had chosen someplace besides The Belgrave Mansion, their fate might have been different.”

“Why? What happened to them?” R’orn blurted out. He couldn’t help himself—he was *really* interested in this story for some reason.

Samantha shot him an annoyed glare.

“Yes—what *did* happen?” she asked the Innkeeper.

“Well, they were assigned this very room. Beau Hartford even carved their initials into the mantelpiece—see?”

She led them over to the mantelpiece over the fireplace and pointed out the “*CA+BH*” carved into the wood.

R’orn waited for Samantha to film the initials and then leaned down to

get a closer look at them himself. As he rose, he saw an image in the tarnished silver mirror hanging over the fireplace.

It was a human male—tall, at least by human standards—and dressed in very strange clothing. He had on an oddly formal looking jacket and trousers with a large white piece of lace at his throat. His eyes were dark brown and seemed to burn into R’orn’s own when their gazes met in the mirror.

For a long moment, R’orn found he couldn’t look away. Then the man leaned forward and put a hand on his shoulder and his paralysis broke.

“What in the Seven Hells? Get your fucking hands off me!” he growled, whirling around to confront the human.

But the male was gone—he had vanished as though he didn’t even exist. Even though he could still feel the heat of the other male’s hand on his shoulder, the space directly behind R’orn was empty—except for a frustrated looking Samantha.

“Look, can you *please* stop interrupting and making noises?” she hissed at him, waving her phone. “I’m *trying* to film this, you know. This is important footage!”

“But there was someone here just a minute ago—a human male. He was right behind me, leaning over my shoulder!” R’orn protested. “I saw him in the mirror, but then he was gone. Just...gone.”

He pointed at the tarnished silver surface, which now reflected only himself, Samantha, and the Innkeeper.

“Ahh, you may have seen something in our spirit mirror.” The Innkeeper glided over to him, a mysterious little smile on her face. “We keep it here because this is the most haunted room in our Inn—it allows the living to see images of the dead, you know.”

“A genuine spirit mirror? I didn’t know you had one of those here!” Samantha was instantly interested. She came over to examine the tarnished mirror but if she saw anything—or *anyone*—in it, she didn’t say.

R’orn rubbed his eyes. A trick of the light—that was what had happened. The room was already filled with shadows—it was lit only by a small lamp on the bedside table and the flickering flames of the fire. It was natural to think he saw something under such circumstances.

But then, why did he still feel the heat of the other male’s hand on his shoulder? And why did he get the feeling that the male had wanted something of him—wanted it desperately, with an urgency that seemed to burn along his nerve endings like fire?

Stop it! he told himself uneasily. *You're being fucking ridiculous. You're jumping at shadows—get hold of yourself!*

“Please go on with the story,” Samantha said to the Innkeeper as she started recording again. “What happened to Caroline and Beau?”

“Ah, well tragedy struck, as it so often does here at The Belgrave Mansion.” The Innkeeper sighed and shook her head sorrowfully. “You see, they didn’t know that Caroline’s father, Terrance Abernathy, had followed their trail. He had learned all about their elopement from Caroline’s maid, you see. And he had already promised his daughter’s hand in marriage to a good friend of his—a Mr. Alden Smythe of the New Hampshire Smythes, don’t you know?”

“So he was twice as angry, both because she was marrying against his will and because she had married a man who was from a rival family instead of the one he had picked for her.” Samantha’s lovely dark blue eyes had grown wide again. They looked like dark jewels in the firelight, R’orn thought. “Please, go on,” she said to the Innkeeper in a low, breathless voice.

“Well, so Caroline’s father found out where they were and he came creeping up the stairs that night,” the Innkeeper said. “He found them in bed, but when he questioned them, he was assured that they had not yet consummated their marriage.”

R’orn saw a flicker in the corner of his eye and glanced again at the mirror. For a moment, he almost seemed to see the same male he’d seen before. But this time instead of leaning over R’orn’s shoulder, he was in the large, four-poster bed. He had his arms wrapped protectively around a slim, blonde girl who had tears in her eyes. And standing over both of them was an older human male with gray hair and a face twisted with anger. In his hands he held a shotgun which he was aiming at the couple.

R’orn whirled around again but again there was nothing to see. The bed was empty except for dancing shadows and flickering firelight. Could it be his eyes playing tricks on him again? He frowned and scrubbed at them with the heels of his hands. What in the Seven Hells was going on around here?

Then he saw Samantha glancing at him with a look on her face that was half worried/half irritated.

“*Are you okay?*” she mouthed at him.

R’orn shrugged as though nothing was wrong—though to be honest, this fucking room was beginning to get to him!

“Anyway, Caroline’s father caught them in bed and he had a shotgun in

his hand,” the Innkeeper went on, continuing the story and obviously oblivious to the strange things R’orn had been seeing. “She begged him not to shoot—said they were in love! And then she promised him that she was still a virgin!”

“Oh—what did he say to that?” Samantha asked in a low voice.

“He said, ‘then you’ll die a virgin!’ And he shot them both. Right there in that bed—if you look, you can still see where the wood of the frame has been repaired. It was partially shattered by the shotgun blasts,” the Innkeeper added, pointing.

“How awful!” Samantha put a hand to her mouth.

“How do they know all this?” R’orn demanded. “I mean, if the, uh, lovers were both killed, how do they know what they said?”

“Why, because Caroline’s father, Terrance Abernathy, testified to the whole thing at his murder trial!” the Innkeeper exclaimed. “Folks said he wasn’t a *bit* sorry—they hanged him for the double murder but he went to his grave claiming that Caroline and Beau deserved to die for ‘dishonoring’ the Abernathy family name.”

“What an asshole!” Samantha said, frowning. “I mean, excuse me, but that’s exactly what he was!”

“Yes—he’s buried in the family plot at the old Abernathy estate, so we don’t have his ghost with us here at The Belgrave Mansion,” the Innkeeper said and heaved a regretful sigh. “But the spirits of Caroline and her husband, Beau linger on. It’s said that they’re still longing for each other, because they never got to consummate their marriage. You know they were married less than twenty-four hours before her father shot them both? So sad...” She shook her head, looking sad.

“I *do* feel a lingering sense of loss here.” Samantha spoke in hushed tones. “A sense of missed opportunity and longing for love...” She sighed and shook her head. “Such a tragic end.”

“Sadly, that’s the way it is with many of the stories here at The Belgrave Mansion,” the Innkeeper said. “At least with Caroline and Beau, they had a little time to love each other before they were discovered.”

R’orn wondered how it would be, knowing that the one you loved was forbidden to you but stealing her away anyway, even though you knew you might be killed for it. To brave such danger, a male would truly have to be in love—a state he had never personally experienced. And never hoped to, since he had no wish to subject any female to his Beast. But—

Suddenly he felt that warmth on his shoulder again—as though an invisible hand was gripping him. And then, with no warning, an acute sense of possessive protectiveness swept through him. He looked at Samantha and a growl rose in his throat at the thought of anyone hurting her or trying to take her from him. He wanted to keep her safe, to love her, to worship her body with his own—she was his, damn it! She belonged to *him!*

Stepping over to her in a single stride, he took her in his arms and leaned down to look into her face.

Samantha, who had been about to ask the Innkeeper another question, looked up at him with wide, surprised eyes. Her phone dropped from her hand and clattered in the hardwood floor but she seemed too shocked to notice—or to resist him.

R'orn wasn't taking any chances though—she was *his* and he was damn well going to show her that! Threading his fingers through her long, silky black hair he held her in place and bent her over his arm.

R'ORN

Samantha gasped as he pressed his mouth to the side of her throat. He found her pulse point and bit possessively, sucking hard...then kissed tenderly to ease the ache, bathing the mark he'd made with his tongue until he drew a long, shaky moan from her throat.

His only thought was to mark her as his own—to possess her and own her *forever*. He would protect her and provide for her and pleasure her until she cried his name in passion! He would—

“R’orn! What...what are you doing?”

Samantha’s words—which were moaned in a breathless voice, broke through the haze of lust and desire that had somehow taken over R’orn’s mind. He became aware that he was licking and kissing the vulnerable side of her throat and she was moaning steadily and—surprisingly—*not* trying to push him away.

Goddess, what the fuck was wrong with him? Samantha might be an incredibly sexy and attractive Elite, but he was her Protector, *not* her lover or her mate! Also, they didn’t even *like* each other! What had possessed him to act like this?

Hastily he straightened up and stood her back on her feet.

“I’m so fucking sorry,” he muttered, shaking his head. “I...I don’t know what came over me. Don’t know why I did that.”

“I...you...” Samantha still looked stunned. She put trembling fingers to her throat and R’orn saw that he had marked her badly—there was a dark red love spot on her neck surrounded by teeth marks—*his* teeth marks.

They looked at each other and neither one of them seemed to know what to say. In fact, the only one who *didn’t* look shocked was Ms. Primrose, the

Innkeeper.

“Oh, I think I know what possessed you to act like that—or should I say ‘who’ possessed you,” she said to R’orn, giving him a knowing smile.

“Wait...what?” Samantha picked up her dropped cell phone and immediately started filming again. “Please explain,” she said to the Innkeeper.

“Well, there’s a reason we call this ‘The Lover’s Suite’,” Ms. Primrose said, smiling mysteriously. “You see, the spirits of Beau and Caroline are still here and still longing for each other. From time to time they have been known to briefly *inhabit* the guests who stay here and use them to fulfill their longings.”

“You mean they *possess* the people who stay in this room?” Samantha’s eyes widened again.

“I wouldn’t exactly call it *possession*,” the Innkeeper protested. “It’s more like they *borrow* or *share* the bodies of the guests who stay here and use them to fulfill their unrequited love. You wouldn’t *believe* the stories I get from people who stay here overnight sometimes!” She put a hand to her mouth and giggled girlishly. “I’ve had married couples say it was the best sex of their life—even better than their honeymoon!”

“That’s...amazing.” Samantha sounded a little uncertain and also kind of shaky.

“That’s *bullshit*,” R’orn growled. “There’s no such thing as the spirit of a dead person possessing you and making you act out their fantasies and desires!”

“Oh, yeah?” Samantha rounded on him, her eyes flashing. “In that case, why did you just grab me and bite the side of my neck? If you weren’t being possessed by the spirit of Beaugard Hartford, then what excuse do you have for *this*?” She pointed to the side of her neck and glared up at him.

“I...I don’t know,” R’orn had to admit, frowning.

“I bet you left a mark, too.” Samantha strode over to the tarnished silver mirror and examined her neck. “Look at that—a bite mark *and* a hickey!” she exclaimed. “Do you see that?”

R’orn was staring at the mirror, all right, but not at the mark he’d made on her neck. Superimposed over her lovely face was another visage.

It was the small, blonde female he’d seen in bed with the male who had touched his shoulder, R’orn realized. She was looking up at him with hopeful eyes and somehow he could see both her and Samantha who seemed

oblivious to the fact that there was another, ghostly face, covering her own.

“Look—there.” He pointed at the mirror.

“I *am* looking!” Samantha’s voice was irritated, but it still had that breathless quality. “I mean, that’s going to take *weeks* to fade!”

“No—not the bite mark! You say you can see spirits—can’t you see that?”

R’orn strode over and pointed to the mirror at the ghostly face of the blonde girl.

“See what?” Samantha frowned.

“That...that human female! She has blonde hair and big blue eyes—a lighter blue than yours! She has her hair tied back in a pink ribbon!” R’orn stabbed his finger at the mirror. “And she’s there—right there over your own reflection!”

“Ah—I see that the spirits have chosen to reveal themselves to you and you alone.” The Innkeeper glided over, smiling at their images reflected in the mirror.

“What? Why would they reveal themselves to *R’orn*?” Samantha frowned. “I’m the one with Second Sight—he doesn’t even believe in ghosts!”

“They often do that here at The Belgrave Inn—they reveal themselves to the unbeliever,” Ms. Primrose said mysteriously. “I’ve had famous mediums and spiritualists stay here and see nothing. And then people who claim to disbelieve everything about the afterlife come downstairs shaken and white after a night in one of our rooms. It’s my belief that they don’t feel the need to speak to those who already believe in them—they want to make those who *don’t* believe take notice.”

“That’s fascinating—but also really frustrating,” Samantha said. She looked up at R’orn. “Didn’t you say you saw a man earlier? You said he was standing right behind you.”

“I don’t know what I saw—nothing probably.” R’orn folded his arms over his chest. “A trick of the light—there are so many shadows in here.”

“But—” Samantha began.

Just then they all heard the clear, tinkling sound of the bell being rung down at the small reception desk in the foyer.

“Ah—my next guests have arrived so I must go,” Ms. Primrose told them. “You’ll have to be sure to tell me what else you see or *don’t* see tomorrow morning.”

And with a knowing wink, she left them alone in the room which might or might not be haunted—at this point, R'orn really didn't know.

SAM

“That was quite a tour she gave us, wouldn’t you say?” Sam looked up at the big Kindred speculatively. Her neck was still throbbing from where he’d bitten and sucked her so savagely.

And be honest, Sam, whispered a little voice in her head. *That’s not the only part of you that’s throbbing!*”

She’d been so irritated with the big Kindred for being a jerk about what she did for a living, that she hadn’t allowed herself to realize how attractive he was—but she was *definitely* noticing now. Yes, he was a jerk, but there was no denying that her heart had been pounding when he’d grabbed her and bent her over his muscular arm to kiss and lick and suck the vulnerable side of her throat.

Her neck had always been an erogenous zone for Sam—it was almost as sensitive as her nipples and she melted when a man kissed or bit her there. How in the world had R’orn known that? And why had he acted the way that he had? Could it be that the spirit of Beau Hartford had *actually* possessed him for a minute or two? And might it happen again? Could—

“We need to go,” R’orn growled, breaking her train of thought.

“What?” Sam asked. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about how there’s something wrong with this fucking room,” he growled, his golden eyes flashing. “And we need to leave—*now*.”

“Oh, I see how it is.” Sam went over and sat on the side of the bed and looked up at him. “You scoff at the supernatural but the minute you see or experience anything at all that shakes your disbelief, you want to turn tail and run away as fast as you can.”

“What?” R’orn had been in the act of heading for the door, but now he

turned and glared down at her. “*What* did you just say? Did you call me a *coward*?”

Sam arched an eyebrow at him.

“Well, if the size twenty-two boot fits...”

“Fuck that—I am *not* fucking afraid.” R’orn crossed his arms over his massive chest.

“So you’re not worried that the spirits of Beau and Caroline might take us over and use us for their own ends—the way the spirit of Beau did to you just now?” Sam demanded.

“That was...I don’t know *what* that was, but it *wasn’t* a spirit using my body,” he growled, looking perplexed. “None of that shit the Innkeeper said is true—spirits aren’t real!”

“Then prove it by staying here with me tonight,” Sam challenged him. “If you’re not afraid of being possessed by a spirit and doing his will—or of seeing something that’s ‘not real’—you’ll stay right here with me.”

“Stay here all night?” He sounded apprehensive.

“Not only that—if you really don’t believe the spirits will use us, then you’ll sleep beside me in this bed all night. And of course, *nothing* will happen because none of what I do for a living is *real*—right?”

She didn’t know why she was taunting the big Kindred—or specifying that he had to sleep in the bed with her to prove he wasn’t afraid. Previously she’d been thinking of making him sleep on the floor. But after that scorching neck kiss, she felt a little *different* towards her Protector. Though she wasn’t sure she wanted to admit that, even to herself. But there was no denying her physical reaction to him—her nipples were tight and her pussy was wet and aching.

Also, she couldn’t pass up the chance to make him admit the supernatural world was real. Since she’d met him, R’orn had been denigrating her work and acting annoyingly superior—as though she was some crazy person he had to baby-sit while she went out hunting “ghosts.” Sam really wanted to rub his nose in the fact that what she was doing was real and valid and this seemed like a perfect way to do it.

As for why the spirits had chosen to show themselves to R’orn instead of to her, well—that was all right. She could still feel their presence in the room, even if they weren’t talking to her.

“Well?” she asked, raising an eyebrow again. “Are you going...or staying?”

“Fine. I’ll stay.” R’orn came and sat beside her on the bed—which creaked alarmingly under his muscular weight.

Sam felt a ticklish sensation, almost as though someone was blowing in her ear. A shiver of something that could only be described as pure lust rushed through her, but she managed to keep her face straight when she answered.

“Good. Because I’m going to set my equipment to record everything that happens all night. We’ll see if the spirits of Caroline and Beau make themselves known...and exactly *how* they do it.”

“Yes,” whispered a voice in her ear. “*Yes, please—stay. Stay and let us use you.*”

Sam felt another shiver of lust run down her spine. Was that the spirit of Caroline Abernathy murmuring in her ear?

If so, it seemed like they might be in for a wild night...

R'ORN

R'orn couldn't believe he'd agreed to do this. After the crazy fucking incident where he'd somehow lost control of himself and bitten Samantha on the neck, he would have expected her to kick him out and demand a different Protector. Instead, she had challenged him to stay with her—to sleep in the same bed, even—to see if the spirits would use them!

Which was complete bullshit, of course—no spirit was going to use him because there was no such thing as spirits and ghosts, R'orn told himself firmly.

If that's true, then who are the people you've been seeing in that damn spirit mirror? a little voice whispered in his head. And why did you suddenly feel so possessive of Samantha—why did you mark her neck?

He tried to push the question away. Maybe it was his Beast that had caused him to act like that. But though it had stirred when he bit her, the creature that lived inside him hadn't wakened. So that seemed unlikely. Still, he needed to be careful because if he went too far with Samantha, then his Beast surely *would* wake and become extremely demanding and possessive. He—

“All right—I'm ready for bed. Now I just have to set up my equipment.”

R'orn looked up and had to bite back a curse.

Samantha was wearing a long, silky white gown with a lace top that was stretched tight over her full breasts. He swore he could even see the pink points of her nipples poking through the lace! She also had on a white silk and lace robe that matched the gown, but it was open, clearly showing her full, curvy body.

R'orn tried not to stare but he couldn't quite help it. The gown clung to

her wide, curvy hips and thick thighs in a way that made his mouth water. Goddess, why did she have to be such a tempting little Elite?

“Like what you see?” Samantha asked dryly and he realized he was looking at her the way a canine might look at a juicy bone.

“Er...are you going to be warm enough in that?” He cleared his throat. “You heard what the Innkeeper said—it gets cold here at night.”

“Well, between the fire and you in bed beside me, I think I’ll be all right.” Samantha winked at him. “The bathroom is free now—you can go get changed into your night clothes,” she added carelessly.

“Oh, I...” R’orn thought about claiming that he had no night clothes and that he intended to sleep in his regular clothing all night. But she had clearly seen him bring his carry-all cube with him, so she would know this was a lie. Or she might just tell him to go get his clothes out of his shuttle, and then he would have to leave her alone and unprotected.

Reluctantly, he decided he had no choice but to change. Rising from the bed, he grabbed the small, square carry-all cube and took it into the fresher. He took off his uniform trousers and boots and the black, sleeveless vest he usually wore instead of a uniform shirt. He was a free agent who happened to work as a Protector, so he didn’t have to be in uniform all the time, as other Kindred warriors were.

He usually slept in just a pair of long black sleep trousers, but he was reluctant to go out with a bare chest and back. That was because the tribal markings of his Wolven Clan would show, and Samantha might have questions about them—questions he would rather not answer. But after searching for a few moments, he realized he hadn’t brought a sleep shirt. So there was nothing for it but to go back to the “haunted” bedroom with nothing but his long black trousers on.

Samantha was busy setting up various pieces of equipment around the bed—including her phone, which was mounted on a motion-activated swivel stand which would twist and turn to catch any movement. But when she looked up at R’orn, she sucked in a breath and her hands dropped to her sides.

“Oh, uh...” she began and then seemed to forget what she was going to say.

“I’m ready for bed if you are,” R’orn growled, frowning fiercely at her—daring her to say anything about the dark, swirling tattoos that covered his chest and back.

She studied them for a long moment but only said,
“I didn’t know you had ink.”

“They’re my Clan markings,” R’orn said shortly. “They tell what kind of Wulven I am.”

“And what kind are you?” She finished setting up the phone and came to stand in front of him. They were between the fire and the bed and the firelight shone through her flimsy white gown, making it nearly see-through. R’orn tried not to look but he found it was almost impossible.

“I’m a Cursed Wulven,” he said at last, his mouth dry.

“Cursed? Cursed how?” she asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

“Cursed because my kind of Wulven Kindred has a Beast that is more...I guess you could say more *bestly*,” R’orn tried to explain. “With other Wulven Kindred, their Beast looks like the male who carries it—maybe just a little harrier and with glowing eyes. But my Beast, well...it looks more like an animal. Like what you humans call a ‘wolfman’ with fur all over and a wolf’s face and tail. Or I assume it would—I’ve never let him out before. Ever.”

Why was he telling her this? He didn’t know—it almost felt like some outside force had taken control of his mouth and was causing him to spill all his secrets—to reveal all the things that kept him from ever taking a mate. For no female would want to deal with the creature he kept inside him—she wouldn’t be able to tame it unless she allowed the Beast to take her—unless she submitted to his animalistic lust.

And no female in the world—in the galaxy or the universe—wanted to submit to the frightening creature that lived inside him. R’orn was certain of that.

“Is your Beast scary? Is that why you can’t let him out?”

Samantha took a step closer to him and reached up to trace the curving black ink on his bare chest. Her light touch seemed to set a fire inside him.

“Don’t.” R’orn caught her hand with his own to stop her, but then he didn’t want to let her go. They were standing so close he could look down into her deep blue eyes and see the firelight shining in them. She had taken off the pale makeup she usually wore and he thought she looked even more lovely without it.

“Why not? Are you afraid I’ll wake up your Beast? Make him come out?” She was taunting him now, looking up at him with a slight smile on her luscious lips—lips he suddenly wanted badly to kiss.

“He can’t come out unless it’s a full moon,” R’orn said hoarsely. “But if you wake him, he’ll become very...demanding.”

“Oh? And what might he demand?” she asked, still smiling.

From the corner of his eye, R’orn saw a flicker in the silver mirror. Was there someone else there with them? Someone making him want to do things he knew he shouldn’t? He tried to push the thought away. But at the same time, he felt it again—those ghostly fingers on his shoulder, urging him on.

“He might demand that I suck your ripe nipples,” he growled softly, letting go of her hand and cupping one full breast instead.

Samantha gave a little gasp but didn’t pull away as he gently thumbed her nipple, which had gone tight.

“He...he might?” Her breath came out low and breathless and her pupils had dilated, making her eyes drowning deep.

“Fuck yes, he might, sweetheart,” R’orn growled. He released her breast but immediately tugged at the sleeves of her robe, which slithered off her shoulders and fell in a heap at her feet. He watched as his hands reached up again and plucked at the thin straps holding her white silk and lace nightgown in place. It was like watching someone else as they pulled the straps down, causing the top of the gown to slip until her full breasts were revealed in the firelight.

“What...what are you doing?” Samantha half moaned, but she didn’t try to stop him when he cupped her bare breasts again and began tugging lightly at her nipples.

“What my Beast demands,” R’orn said, but again it was as though someone else was speaking through him.

She was too short and he was too tall for him to reach her comfortably with his mouth. R’orn lifted her by the waist and set her on the end of the bed, making her gasp. Then he knelt before her and pressed his face between her breasts. Gods, her skin was so soft and she smelled so *good*—a warm, feminine scent that made his cock ache when he inhaled it.

“*Ohhhh*,” Samantha moaned as he sucked one tight nipple into his mouth and began teasing it with his tongue. “Oh, R’orn—we probably shouldn’t... shouldn’t do this!”

He let her nipple slip from his mouth for a moment.

“Fuck, yes we should, sweetheart,” he growled. “Now be a good girl and give me your other nipple to suck—I want to make your pussy wet.”

Moaning, she thrust her breasts out, offering them to him as he had

demanded. R'orn cupped them in his hands and sucked the other nipple, drawing it deep into his mouth to suck hard and long until she gasped and tugged at his hair.

“Oh God...Oh, R'orn!” he heard her crying softly. His cock surged again—he loved the sound of his name on her lips! And he loved the feeling of her soft little fingers carding through his hair as he sucked and nipped lightly at her tight peak. She was getting wet—he was sure she must be. He could smell the sweet scent of her desire drifting up from between her thighs like an exotic perfume.

Her scent...her soft moans...the feeling of her fingers in his hair...they all called to the Beast deep inside him. R'orn could feel it stirring, could feel the possessive feelings of hunger and lust beginning to surface. This was dangerous, he realized through the fog of desire that had clouded his brain. What he was doing could very easily wake his Beast and then—

Suddenly Samantha's phone rang. The sound was shrill and insistent—a high, tinny melody that grated on R'orn's nerves and seemed to break the strange trance he'd fallen into.

It seemed to do the same to Samantha. She gave a little cry and pushed him away, pulling up the top of her nightgown at the same time.

Jumping off the bed, she pushed past him and went to grab the phone... but it went dead in her hand the minute she took it off its stand.

“What in the world?” R'orn heard her muttering to herself. “I thought I left it on silent!”

He rose as she continued to do something to the phone and heard her mutter, “Well, I certainly can't use *that* footage.”

Looking over her shoulder wasn't difficult because she was so short. On the screen of her phone, R'orn saw himself kneeling before her and sucking her tight nipples as she cried softly and gave him her full breasts freely. Inside, he could feel his Beast stirring again, growling with desire as he watched the erotic scene.

Samantha seemed to realize he was behind her because she whirled around and looked up at him.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“I don't know,” R'orn said honestly, shaking his head. “I...I didn't mean to do that.” He pointed at her phone. “I don't know why I did. It was like... someone else was controlling me.”

She frowned and put a hand on her full hip.

“Oh, so now you’re saying the *ghost* made you do it? And you never would have otherwise because I’m not your type?”

“You’re *exactly* my type—you’re an Elite and you’re fucking gorgeous,” R’orn growled. “And I don’t know if anything or anyone *made* me suck your nipples—I only know I didn’t mean to do it. And I *can’t* do it again.”

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“Can’t or won’t?”

“*Can’t*,” R’orn said emphatically. “You don’t understand, sweetheart—this is *really* getting my Beast riled up. It’s making him...hungry.”

Her eyes went wide.

“Hungry? He’s not a...not a cannibal or anything, is he?”

“Not that kind of hungry.” R’orn raked a hand through his hair. “Never mind. Look—I really think we should leave this room.”

“You *promised* to stay with me!” Samantha crossed her arms over her breasts and got a stubborn look on her pretty face.

“Yeah, but—”

“You *said* there was nothing in here—you said you weren’t afraid to stay.”

“I’m *not* afraid for myself!” R’orn growled impatiently. “I’m afraid for you, sweetheart! It’s not good to get my Beast riled up like this!”

“Then let’s just go to bed. Look, I’m starting my phone again. I need to be here in case something paranormal happens in the middle of the night.” Samantha was putting the phone back on its motion-activated stand as she spoke.

“Go to bed? *That’s* your fucking solution?” R’orn demanded, raising his eyebrows in disbelief. “*Seriously?*”

“Yes, seriously. We can just go to sleep. And we’ll pretend that this...” she waved a hand vaguely, “never happened. Unless my big, strong Protector is going to leave me all alone in a haunted room by myself?” she added, raising an eyebrow tauntingly.

R’orn felt a frustrated growl rise to his lips. She didn’t know how close his Beast was coming to the surface! If it got too close, it was going to demand that he do things to her—things she hadn’t agreed to and might regret!

But maybe if he kept his back to her and closed his eyes and breathed deeply, he could calm the creature inside him. He didn’t like leaving her alone—not considering the threats she’d been getting.

“Fine,” he said at last, glaring down at her. “But we’re sleeping back-to-back.”

“Fine with me.” Samantha shrugged, which caused her full breasts to shift under the thin nightdress. Her tight nipples were little points under the silky material and R’orn could still taste her—salty and sweet—on his lips. Gods, he wished he could taste her pussy too! *That* was what the Beast inside him hungered for—the feeling of her thick thighs wrapped around his head and the taste of her honey as she came just for him...

Samantah turned away, completely oblivious to his lustful thoughts. and went to get into the bed. As she slid between the sheets, R’orn felt the Beast in him growling with need. It was almost fully awake now and it wanted him to take her—to Claim her and knot her and Bond her to him to make her his forever.

“No!” he thought at it. “*We can’t—I can’t. She doesn’t even like me and she sure as the Seven Hells couldn’t deal with you! Shut up and go back to sleep!*”

But the Beast didn’t show any signs of doing that. As R’orn slid into bed beside the curvy little Elite and deliberately turned his back to her, he thought that it was likely to be a very, very long night.

SAM

Sam settled down on her side with her back to her Protector, but she wasn't a bit sleepy. Her whole body was humming with desire. She could still feel R'orn's hot mouth on her nipples—which were tingling and swollen because he'd sucked them so hard.

Shouldn't be doing this! she lectured herself sternly. *I don't even like him—he's a big jerk!*

But the truth was, she didn't dislike the big Kindred *quite* as much as she had. He had seemed almost vulnerable when he had explained about his Beast—Sam wanted to hear more about it, but she didn't know if he would talk to her or not.

You'd better leave him alone, she told herself. *Didn't he say his Beast was dangerous? That it was **hungry**?*

Yes, but that only made her *more* intrigued. Still, she knew she ought to settle down. Sometimes spirits waited until everything was quiet to manifest themselves. So she sighed and tried to get comfortable on the rather lumpy mattress.

But that was easier said than done because the next moment, an icy wind swirled around her, making her shiver and curl in on herself. Unfortunately, the gown she had on wasn't very warm—because she lived in Florida, she had almost no cold weather clothes. The thin, silky material didn't do a thing to keep her cozy.

Sam burrowed under the covers but it did no good—the wind somehow came with her, swirling around her body until she felt like she was *freezing* to death. Was it the manifestation of a spirit...or was the big old inn just extremely drafty? Either way, she was in real danger of turning into an ice

cube!

But there *was* a source of heat—she could feel R’orn’s big body radiating warmth like a furnace just behind her. Feeling desperate, she turned over on her other side and pressed herself against him.

The big Kindred stiffened immediately.

“Hey—what are you doing?” he demanded, his voice coming out in a hoarse growl.

“I’m freezing!” Sam complained. “I’m not trying to molest you or anything—I just need to warm up.”

She pressed her face against his broad back and tucked her knees against the backs of his legs.

“Is that your nose? Goddess, it’s like a fucking ice cube!” he complained, but didn’t try to move away from her.

“Just give me a minute to get warm,” Sam murmured. “Then I’ll go back to my side of the bed—I promise.”

R’orn sighed deeply.

“Well...all right. But only for a minute.”

“Uh-huh...” Sam slipped an arm around his narrow waist and pressed more firmly against him. She was surprised at how good he smelled and how soft his skin was, despite all the rock-hard muscle she could feel just underneath it. He had a warm, spicy, somehow indefinably masculine scent that made her think of fur and smoke and the forest at night and some dark spice she couldn’t name but which drew her to him like a magnet.

“Are you warm yet?” he asked, after a moment and Sam could feel the tension in his big body.

“Not nearly.” She snuggled even closer. Mmm—hugging the big Kindred was like hugging a warm, muscular teddy bear, she decided. This was nice—comforting and sensual at the same time. She rubbed her cheek against his broad back and inhaled deeply, breathing in his spicy, masculine scent. Someone ought to bottle the way he smelled and sell it—they would make a million dollars overnight, she thought.

“Samantha, what the fuck are you doing back there?” R’orn growled.

“Cuddling you. Warming up.” She pressed even closer. “Mmm...I like the way you feel. Like the way you *smell* even more.”

R’orn twisted his head to the side, trying to get a look at her.

“What the fuck, sweetheart?” he demanded. “Didn’t I tell you it was dangerous for us to be too close because of my Beast?”

“Tell me about your Beast, then,” Sam challenged him. “You said he was ‘hungry.’ Hungry for *what*, exactly?”

“What do you think?” He sounded irritated but he still made no move to get away from her.

“Mmm...I don’t know *what* to think unless you tell me.” Sam rubbed her breasts against his back—his warmth felt good against her tight nipples.

“Gods, sweetheart—I can feel you rubbing against me!” His voice came out as half growl/half groan.

“Just tell me about your Beast—what is he hungry for?” Sam prompted again. What was it about his scent that made her feel so hot and bothered? She didn’t know but she found that she liked it a lot.

R’orn sighed deeply, but at last he answered her question.

“There’s something not a lot of people know about Wulvens. We *need* to taste our females—even more than regular Kindred do,” he said in a low voice. “That’s because of the Beast inside us—it feeds on our female’s pleasure.”

“Wait—are you telling me that you *need* to go down on a woman in order to keep your Beast happy?” Sam wasn’t sure she’d heard him right.

“We do—we fucking *hunger* for it. Just as the Beast inside does,” he growled. Abruptly, he turned over and cupped her cheek. Sam could see his golden eyes were glowing softly in the dim room. “I’m hungry for you right now, Samantha. You’re driving me fucking *crazy!*”

“What just...just by cuddling you a little?” she asked, looking up at him.

“It’s not just the feel of you pressed against me—though that’s a fucking big part of it,” R’orn told her. “It’s your scent. I can smell how hot you’re getting and it’s waking my Beast.”

“I don’t...don’t know what you’re talking about,” she protested breathlessly.

“This...I’m talking about *this*.” And one big hand slipped between her thighs to cup her pussy through the thin material of her gown.

“Oh!” Sam wanted to move away...but somehow she couldn’t. His hand felt too good and she didn’t want him to stop touching her.

“This is the scent I smell—your hot little pussy,” R’orn growled, his golden eyes burning into hers. “Tell me, Samantha—are you getting wet? And do you have panties on under this silky little nothing of a gown you’re wearing?”

As he spoke, his thick fingers rubbed expertly between her thighs.

“*Ohhh*,” Sam moaned. She knew she ought to close her legs and push his hand away. So how was it that she found herself spreading her thighs for him instead?

“Mmm...doesn’t feel to me like you’re wearing anything under this at all,” R’orn murmured and she felt his fingertips parting her outer pussy lips and somehow unerringly finding her aching clit on the first try.

She moaned again and rolled onto her back, spreading her thighs wider. Part of her knew she shouldn’t be doing this—why was she letting him touch her like this? But part of her just wanted to give in completely and let the big Kindred do anything he wanted. The way he was touching her felt so *good*.

Her last boyfriend had never been able to find her clit somehow. He’d spent all his time rubbing the wrong spots—even when Sam tried to direct him, he refused to learn. It was so irritating!

It was nice to be with a man who didn’t have to be taught. R’orn was touching her in *just* the right way—sliding the silk of her gown against her aching clit and wet, throbbing pussy—without having to be directed at all.

“Damn! How do you know just how...how to touch me?” she gasped, bucking her hips as he circled the tender button of her clit.

“It’s one of the things we Kindred are good at,” he growled softly. “Because we’re 95% male, we’ve never had enough females to go around, so the competition for them has always been fierce. A male who knows how to pleasure his female is more likely to keep her.”

“Mmmm...all...all right,” Sam panted. She was having trouble thinking straight because what he was doing felt so good.

“Do you like it when I stroke your pussy, sweetheart?” R’orn murmured, looking down into her eyes. “Does it feel good when I pet your little clit? Are you getting nice and wet for me?”

“I...I don’t know,” Sam gasped and bucked her hips again.

“Well maybe I should find out.” Lifting the bottom of her gown, he bared her completely and leaned down to look between her legs. “Gods, look at that sweet little pussy...” His voice was a soft, lustful growl. “Look how wet you’re getting for me, baby...”

“I...I am?” Sam asked, her voice shaky and breathless even in her own ears. She could see herself dimly in the flickering firelight—her pussy lips did seem to be shiny with her juices, she thought.

“Fuck yes, you are, sweetheart! Just watch...” And he parted her outer lips and began sliding one blunt fingertip around and around her aching clit

once more.

Without the silk of her gown between them, the sensation was almost more than Sam could bear.

“Oh...*oh!*” she gasped and twisted her hips, unable to help herself. “Oh, R’orn, *please!*”

“Please what, sweetheart? You want more? You want *this?*”

And two long, thick fingers suddenly found her entrance and slid deep inside her.

Sam cried out breathlessly as he finger-fucked her and R’orn leaned down to catch her cries in his mouth.

His lips were hot and he tasted like salt and heat with a hint of cinnamon. Sam kissed him back eagerly, spreading wider and thrusting up to meet him as he fingered her ruthlessly towards orgasm. Somehow his thumb was rubbing over her clit, even as he fucked into her with his long fingers and she was getting close...so damn close...

But before she could quite reach the peak, R’orn pulled away from her and rolled over to sit up on the side of the bed.

“R’orn? What...why...?” She lay there, panting and stunned for a minute—throbbing and unfulfilled—before sitting up herself. “Why did you stop?” she demanded, looking up at him.

“Because if I don’t stop now, I won’t be *able* to stop.” He looked at her and she saw that his golden eyes were glowing brighter than ever. There seemed to be something moving in those molten gold depths—another being—a creature that hungered for her.

His Beast, she realized.

“Is...is he awake? Your Beast, I mean. Does he want me?” she asked in a low voice. She felt shaken but also intrigued—she’d always loved monster movies and she’d been fiercely disappointed as a little girl when she watched *Beauty and the Beast* and the Beast turned back into a human at the end.

“Yes he’s awake and yes he fucking wants you. He wants to taste you,” R’orn snarled. “Or at least, he wants to taste you through me, since he can’t come out right now.”

“Do you want to taste me?” Sam asked.

“Fuck, yes!” His voice was a hungry growl as he glared fiercely at her. “I’ve never wanted anything so much in my fucking life! But I can’t—I’m afraid I’ll go too far. Don’t want to hurt you, sweetheart.”

Sam’s heart was pounding. She could see the naked hunger in the big

Kindred's eyes. To be desired like that—to be *hungered* for... It was something she'd never experienced with a human male. Most of the men who were willing to go down, didn't do so very enthusiastically—generally it was just a prelude to the main event or as an exchange for a blow job. But the way R'orn was staring at her made her think this *was* the main event for him.

She just couldn't resist that hungry look.

"I'm not afraid of you, R'orn," she murmured. "Not afraid of your Beast either. You won't hurt me."

Without breaking eye-contact, she reached between her thighs and slipped two fingers into her pussy. God, she was so hot and wet! She didn't know if the spirits in the room were driving her or if she was finally giving in to the attraction she'd had to the big Kindred since the beginning—though she hadn't wanted to admit it—but whatever the case, she couldn't remember ever being so aroused.

Lifting her fingers, she traced them lightly over R'orn's sensual lips, coating his mouth with her juices.

"There," she said softly. "See? I'm not afraid."

Slowly, the tip of his tongue came out, licking his lips, tasting what she'd given him and a long, low groan came from deep in his throat.

"You asked for it, sweetheart," he growled. "Now you've given my Beast a taste, he needs *more!*"

Without warning, he pushed her flat on her back and pinned her wrists above her head.

Sam gasped with surprise but before she could say anything, he was already kneeling on the floor between her legs, splitting her thighs wide with his broad shoulders. He was so big and his reach was so much longer than hers that he was able to keep her hands pinned even as he raised her nightgown with his other hand.

She moaned and tried to shift her hips as the cool breeze swirled around her bare pussy—but it was soon replaced by the big Kindred's hot breath.

"Hold still, sweetheart," he growled, his eyes flashing as he looked up at her. "Going to taste you as long as I want to—going to make that sweet little pussy gush all your honey for me."

Sam couldn't answer because he had already fastened his hot mouth over her pussy. He was so much bigger that she felt completely enveloped by him—his mouth covered all of her...and then he began to lick, delving deep to taste her juices.

“Oh!” she cried and bucked up against him. She couldn’t have wiggled free if she’d wanted to, though—he had her wrists pinned and her legs split wide. One long arm was wound around her right thigh, holding her in place as he plundered her pussy with his tongue.

“Oh! Oh, please!” Sam gasped as she felt him part her outer lips and explore her inner folds thoroughly. He lapped her long and hard and then swirled his tongue over her sensitive clit, pushing her closer and closer to the edge as she moaned—helpless to stop him. Then he delved lower, sliding his tongue deep inside to taste her juices before coming up to suck her clit into his mouth and tease it mercilessly.

Sam had never felt so helpless or so hot. She’d never been treated like this before—never been held down and tasted so thoroughly, pushed to the edge by a man who wanted nothing more than her pleasure.

“R’orn!” she gasped, writhing under his hot mouth. “Oh God, I’m getting so close—please...*please!*”

He looked up for a moment, his eyes burning with an animalistic desire and his mouth wet and shiny with her juices.

“In a minute you’re going to come for me, Samantha,” he told her in a low, growling voice that was inhumanly deep. Was it his Beast speaking through him? “You’re going to come nice and hard—all over my tongue. And when I lap up all your honey, we’re going to start again...and then again and *again* until my Beast is satisfied.”

“Oh, but I...” Sam began.

But he was already back between her legs. He let go of her wrists and two thick fingers were sliding inside her again, spreading the walls of her inner pussy and fucking deep inside her as he went back to licking and sucking her sensitive, swollen clit.

Sam was moaning steadily now and she found that her hands had found their way down to his head. Her fingers were twined in his thick hair and her whole body was trembling as he pushed her closer and closer to the edge.

Going to come! she thought deliriously. *Going to come so **hard!***

And then her orgasm hit her like a tidal wave, knocking her flat and drenching her in pleasure. Her hips began twisting uncontrollably as sparks of sensation raced through her body—Sam thought she had never felt so out of control! She might have fallen off the bed if R’orn didn’t still have one muscular arm wrapped around her thigh, holding her in place.

“*Ohhhh!*” she moaned, her back arching and her toes curling. “Oh,

R'orn...yes...yes!"

He rode out her orgasm, lapping steadily until she began to shy away from his tongue from sheer sensory overload. At last, he looked up and licked his lips, his eyes still burning.

"That was good," he growled as Sam panted and looked down at him, feeling dazed. "You came nice and hard for me, Samantha. But my Beast needs *more*."

"Oh, but...but I'm too sensitive!" she tried to protest. "I can't—"

"You *can* and you *will* come again for me—as many times as I need you to tonight," he growled, his eyes flashing. "You woke my Beast—now you're going to have to satiate him!"

"I...I didn't know!" Sam protested. "I didn't think..."

"You didn't think he'd want to taste you until he has his fill?" His eyes flashed. "Think again, sweetheart. You're going to be flat on your back until my Beast has as much of your honey as he wants."

He must have seen the apprehension in her eyes, however, because his voice softened somewhat and he stroked her inner thigh soothingly.

"Don't worry, baby...we can go slow. I know your sweet little clit is sensitive, so I'll just spend some time lapping your honey right from the source until you're ready to come again for me."

Holding her gaze with his, he placed a gentle kiss on her inner thigh and then moved lower, kissing his way down closer and closer to her pussy. When he got there, however, he avoided her over-sensitive clit. Instead, he placed his big, warm hands on her inner thighs and parted her pussy with his thumbs. Leaning down, he began to kiss the entrance of her pussy as tenderly as though he was kissing her mouth.

Sam moaned as she felt his tongue slip inside her, exploring deep in her quivering walls. He was tasting her in a more leisurely way now—a way that seemed to say he was going to be at this for a long, *long* time.

She began to relax, catching her breath as her tense muscles slowly melted into the mattress. God, she'd never had a man demand to taste her like this or get so much pleasure out of it! It must be true that his Beast fed on the pleasure of the woman he was tasting.

Idly, she ran her fingers through his hair, wondering what was wrong with her, letting her Protector go down on her like this. It was bound to be bad for their professional relationship. But then again, maybe their relationship was going to be *more* than professional from now on, especially

if R'orn was ready to admit that what she did for a living wasn't just a waste of time...

She wasn't sure how long she lay there, just letting him thrust his tongue inside her and gather her juices. Soon, however, he began kissing her again—hot, open-mouthed kisses as he made his way slowly up her pussy until he was tenderly kissing her throbbing clit, surrounding her with the warmth of his mouth...teasing her by never *quite* touching the sensitive little button directly, though occasionally she felt his tongue brush against her.

Before she knew it, Sam was moaning again. Her hips seemed to move on their own, begging for more.

“R'orn,” she gasped. “Oh, please...”

And then the big Kindred started all over again, pushing her slowly but steadily to the edge...

R'ORN

R'orn knew it wasn't right, but he let himself get lost in her. Her scent... her taste...he let her fill his senses and overwhelm him completely.

He came every time she did, even though he never touched himself—feeling her pleasure through his Beast as it fed on her orgasms brought him to the brink again and again. But despite coming over and over as he brought her to the peak, his shaft never got soft. Male Kindred were multiorgasmic and R'orn was no exception to that rule.

Inside him, his Beast roared approval. Samantha was the one, he assured R'orn—their Fated Mate—the one they had been waiting for. And on the next full moon he would come out and Claim her.

That was what finally brought him to his senses. He couldn't let Samantha meet his Beast! She was too small...too fragile. And his Beast was cursed—little better than an animal, even though it had sentience and intelligence. He couldn't trust it to be gentle with her if it ever did get out.

R'orn's heart sank as he realized he was going to have to give her up. And with that realization came another—he fucking loved her! Samantha was everything he wanted in a woman—she was quirky and independent and self-confident and beautiful—not to mention curvy in all the right places. If he'd been given a choice of any female in the universe, he would have picked her.

Unfortunately, his Beast felt the same way. And if it was given a chance, it would savage her.

Tonight is the only night I'll have with her, he thought and the idea filled him with loss and longing. *Tomorrow I'll have to say goodbye.*

There was no way around it—he would have to leave Samantha and request that another Protector be sent down to her.

After tonight, he could never see her again.

SAM

Sam woke feeling incredibly well rested, despite getting little sleep the night before. R'orn had feasted on her for *hours*. Her clit still felt swollen and incredibly sensitive from the way he'd gone down on her for so long, but she wasn't complaining.

The big Kindred wasn't in bed with her but that was all right—he'd left a short note on the Belgrave Inn stationary saying he had gone down to breakfast. Sam supposed he must have worked up quite an appetite—then blushed at the idea.

But as she got up and got dressed, she couldn't stop replaying the events of the night before over and over in her head. She'd *never* had a man show such passion for her—such *hunger*. It was flattering—R'orn's intense desire for her had been almost frightening in its intensity—but in a good way. *Definitely* in a good way.

She wondered if the ghosts that inhabited this room had anything to do with his behavior and if so, whether he would admit it. If he could just stop it with the "I'm such a skeptic" act, maybe they could have something together. After all, she could get used to being devoured like that. R'orn had been giving her multiple orgasms there at the end, and she hadn't even known she was capable of having those!

She hummed as she got dressed and packed up her equipment. As she passed the spirit mirror for the last time, she thought she saw something there. Turning her head, she saw the face of a pale, blonde girl with light blue eyes looking back at her.

"Oh—hello!" Sam smiled at her. She was used to seeing spirits, so seeing a disembodied head floating in the mirror beside her own didn't bother her at

all. “You must be Caroline Abernathy,” she said to the spirit.

The blonde girl nodded and smiled shyly.

“We, uh, certainly had fun in your room last night,” Sam told her, grinning. “Did you and Beau have anything to do with that?”

The girl winked and gave her a naughty little grin.

Sam laughed at the cheeky smile.

“Well, I have to thank you, then. I couldn’t stand the guy I was with last night until you two got involved. Now, I think I might be halfway in love with him!”

Just saying the words out loud made her realize they were true. Damn it—she tried not to be one of those women who couldn’t give her body without also giving her heart, but it was hard. Especially when R’orn had just given her what was hands-down the best sexual experience of her life—and they hadn’t even had actual sex!

That made her wonder what sex would be like with her big Protector. She couldn’t help imagining being pinned under that big body...or maybe sitting on his lap and sinking down onto the thick cock she’d seen outlined under the material of his sleep trousers the night before. How would it feel to take all that inside her? She had some pretty big toys but none that compared to what R’orn appeared to be packing...

Sam felt her cheeks getting hot and her pussy getting wet all over again. Damn—anyone would think she would be all worn out after last night, but apparently she was ready to go again! Maybe she could get R’orn to give her a tour of his ship and she could see if there really was a living area with a bed in the back of it.

“Well, I’d better get going,” she told the girl in the mirror. “Thank you for a wonderful night.”

Caroline Abernathy smiled at her and then faded from sight. She was the kind of spirit Sam liked best—a friendly, helpful one who just wanted to interact with the living world without hurting anyone. Not all spirits were so nice.

Humming happily to herself, Sam gathered her things and left the room. She practically skipped downstairs, keeping an eye out for her Kindred Protector. Would he be in the main dining area, having breakfast with the other guests? Sam hoped not—she wanted to speak to him privately. She was sure if they started talking about last night, she would blush so hard even her pale Goth makeup wouldn’t be able to hide it!

She found him at last, sitting on the front porch at a small table. The early morning light was shining through the colorful leaves and the air was crisp and fresh—it was a gorgeous Fall morning. There was a plump blueberry scone and a cup of steaming coffee in front of R’orn. But despite the beautiful day and the yummy breakfast, the look on his face was *not* happy.

Uh-oh... Some of Sam’s good mood leaked away, but she took the chair across from him anyway. He was probably upset, thinking he’d been used by the spirits last night. But the thing was, except in cases of complete possession, a spirit couldn’t *make* you do things you didn’t already *want* to do.

What had happened between them in the room with the spirits of Charlotte and Beau wasn’t on the Amityville Horror level—it was more like two friendly ghosts giving them a little nudge to do what they *wanted* to do in the first place. She just hoped she could explain that to him.

“Good morning,” she said, trying to keep things casual. “How did you sleep?”

“I didn’t,” R’orn growled. He had been staring into his coffee but now he looked up at her. “I can no longer be your Protector, Samantha.”

“What?” Sam looked at him, taken completely by surprise. “Is this because of last night? I mean, did we break the rules? You’re not allowed to uh, sleep with a woman you’re protecting?” she asked. “I mean, not that we actually slept together but...”

He shook his head.

“There is no such rule. Protectors and their charges often end up together.”

Sam felt bewildered.

“Well then, why? Did you not, uh, enjoy yourself last night? Because you certainly *seemed* to,” she added pointedly.

R’orn gave her a searing look from his molten gold eyes.

“Of *course* I enjoyed it. Last night was the best fucking night of my life! Which is why I have to leave and I can never see you again.”

“What?” Sam shook her head. “Now I’m *really* confused. None of what you just said makes sense. If you enjoyed what we did, why are you leaving?”

“Because I’m not the *only* one who enjoyed it,” R’orn growled. “My Beast did too. In fact, he’s marked you as our Fated Mate—the one female in all the universe the Goddess has set aside just for us.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in the Goddess!” Sam exclaimed.

“I don’t,” he said shortly. “But there’s no denying a Fated Mate.”

“Well, if I’m supposed to be your ‘Fated Mate’—” Sam began.

“Did you not hear what I said? My Beast has *marked* you!” R’orn’s voice was a low, frustrated growl. “He wants to Claim you—if I’m being honest, he’s wanted you from the first minute I met you.”

His words sounded like an admission—almost a confession, Sam thought.

“He has?” she asked, still not sure what to think.

“Yes, he fucking has!” R’orn raked a hand through his thick, brown hair. “The very first time I met you—when I took your hands to offer you my Oath of Protection—he woke inside me and said the first word he’d ever spoken to me. He said ‘*MINE.*’”

Sam felt a shiver run through her. To think that the wild and ravenous creature that lived inside R’orn wanted her—and had been wanting her all this time! It was strangely intriguing.

“So...he wanted me right from the start?” she asked.

R’orn nodded.

“Why do you think I’ve been acting like such an asshole? Trying to push you away? I knew it would mean trouble if we got too close.”

Sam glared at him.

“Wait...what? So you *do* believe in spirits after all? And you were just trying to wind me up?”

“After last night, I don’t know *what* I believe,” R’orn said sincerely. “But I *do* know that we went too far. My Beast wants you now—and he’ll do anything to have you. So I have to stay away from you for your own safety, Samantha. I’m fucking sorry.”

Sam was beginning to get angry now.

“Well, if that isn’t the most convenient after-sex brush off I’ve ever heard.” She deepened her voice, mocking his low tones. “Sorry, sweetheart—I’d love to be with you, but the huge, hairy monster that lives inside me will be after you if I don’t go, so I can never see you again.”

“Stop it!” R’orn’s eyes were glowing so brightly that she could see their light, even though they were sitting out on the porch in broad daylight. “It’s *not* a fucking excuse!” he growled. “It’s the truth! And my beast *is* huge—imagine a monster, almost three meters tall, covered with hair and with the face of an animal—a wolf!”

“What—*nine* feet tall?” Sam demanded. R’orn was already so much

bigger than her, she had to crane her neck to look up at him. She couldn't imagine him being even taller!

"That's my best guess—he might be even taller," R'orn said grimly. "Now imagine that creature running you to ground and savaging you. Pinning you down and knotting you! Forcing you to submit while he fucks you for hours. Is *that* what you want?"

Sam felt herself go breathless. The picture he painted was a vivid one—both frightening and intriguing at the same time. She squeezed her thighs together tightly and felt a little spark of sensation from her oversensitive clit.

"Look," she said at last. "I'm a ghost hunter—I'm not easily frightened."

"You *should* be," R'orn snapped. "I know *I'm* fucking frightened—frightened of my Beast hurting you. Raping you—possibly even killing you, if you refused to submit to him. He's a fucking *animal*, Samantha. All he knows is lust and hunger—breeding and knotting."

"Knotting?" Sam whispered. She was still trying to take all this in. "What —"

"My kind of Kindred has a Breeding Knot at the base of our shafts," he explained shortly. "It swells inside a female's pussy to hold her in place for a long, thorough breeding. Sometimes it takes *hours* to complete."

"Oh!" Sam squeezed her thighs together even more tightly and felt another little spark of pleasurable sensation from her clit. "But surely your Beast can't be *that* bad," she protested. "I mean, if he can talk, then I should be able to reason with him—right?"

"His thoughts and his words are very primitive. And no, you can't reason with him. All you could do if you had the misfortune to meet him would be to run. And if he caught you, your only chance of survival would be to submit—to let him breed you and knot you," R'orn said harshly. He leaned across the table and took Sam's hands in his own. "But I don't *want* that for you, baby," he said earnestly. "I don't want you to be hurt and I'd rather *die* than know that I was the one who hurt you! That's why I *have* to go."

"But...but..." Sam's eyes were suddenly stinging. He was serious, she realized—he really was going to leave her and not even look back. "But I'm just getting to know you—the *real* you," she got out at last. "And I like you a lot more than I thought I did!"

"I like you too, sweetheart." R'orn's golden eyes were suspiciously bright. "Hell—I think I'm falling in *love* with you." He withdrew his hands. "But I can't let that happen—to either one of us. I have to go now, before it's

too late.”

He rose from the table, leaving the untouched coffee and scone.

“Wait!” Sam rose too, reaching out to him. “Don’t do this, R’orn! I’m sure we can find a way around your Beast! Can’t we just avoid each other on Full Moon nights or something?”

He shook his head.

“Not now that he’s awake and he’s tasted your pleasure. He’ll always be wanting more—wanting to come out and Claim you. And now that he’s active, he’ll be able to come out even if it *isn’t* during the full moon. He’d be coming out right now if he wasn’t so sated from how many times you came last night while I tasted you.”

Sam felt her cheeks getting red as she realized they weren’t alone on the porch anymore. Another couple had come out to view the gorgeous foliage and drink in the crisp Autumn air and they were shooting her and R’orn curious looks. Still, she couldn’t just let the big Kindred walk away—could she?

“Please!” she begged shamelessly. “I don’t care about your Beast—I’m not afraid of him! I...I’ve had lots of scary pets in the past,” she offered lamely.

“None that wanted to fuck you, I’ll bet,” R’orn said darkly. “No, I’m sorry, Samantha—I have to go. I’ll ask your uncle, Commander Bruin, to find another Protector for you. Right now I’m more of a danger to you than your stalker is.”

“But...but...” Sam tried to protest, but the big Kindred had already left the porch and was heading to where his ship and her van were parked side-by-side.

Sam watched him go with tears in her eyes. She hadn’t known how much she cared for R’orn until he walked away.

And now she would never see him again.

SAM

“So you sent away the other Protector that Aunt Luna sent you?” Sam’s little sister, Hanna, looked up at her with big eyes.

The two of them were only three years apart in age, but they couldn’t have been more different in temperament and appearance. Despite being younger, Hanna was the taller of the two and she had golden brown hair and hazel eyes that looked green in the light and almost silver in the shadows.

The sisters *did* have a few things in common, however—they were both curvy girls and both had “The Gift” as their Aunt Luna called it. The difference was, Sam was able to use hers to make a living. For Hanna, the situation was quite different.

Hanna’s gift was *too* strong—even stronger than their Aunt Luna’s. It was definitely more of a curse than a blessing. She spent her time avoiding the same places that Sam sought out to make her ghost hunting show.

“Yes, I sent him away,” Sam said, flopping down on her sister’s couch with a sigh. “I just couldn’t stand to be near another Kindred warrior. Not after what happened with R’orn.”

“What exactly *did* happen?” Hanna asked, sitting down beside her and offering her an open package of Oreos. “I know you thought he was a jerk—did you have a huge fight or something?”

“Not exactly,” Sam said dryly. “In fact, kind of the opposite. See, we were staying in a room where these two newlyweds were murdered on their honeymoon—”

“Oh, how horrible!” Hanna put a hand to her cheek and her face went pale.

“Sorry, but it’s true.” Sam winced at the look on her little sister’s face.

Poor Hanna—her Gift was so strong that she didn't just *see* and *speak* to the dead—they could actually interact with her physically. Sometimes she felt their pain and sorrow as her own. And sometimes she saw worse things than the spirits of the dead—supernatural beings that most people would call “demons” or “devils”—dark entities that wanted to cause harm and pain. They seemed drawn to Hanna—maybe because she had a pure soul that shone so brightly and they wanted to snuff out her light.

“No, it's okay.” Hanna shook her head. “I'm fine. I was just thinking of how awful that must have been for you! And for them—poor things!”

“Well, they *were* brutally murdered, but that's not the energy of the room at all,” Sam told her. “They were also deeply in love and they like to *encourage* the couples who stay in their room to also be, er, in love—if you know what I mean.”

“But you and R'orn aren't a couple, are you?” Hanna asked blankly.

“Well, we weren't before we stayed in that room.” Sam sighed. “Who am I kidding? We're still not. Despite what went on that night.”

“What went on? What are you talking about? What happened?” Hanna demanded. “Did the two of you have sex or what?”

“Well, not *exactly*.” Sam could feel herself blushing. She usually told her little sister everything—they were extremely close. But she didn't know how to explain the night of passion with the big Kindred and how R'orn had gone down on her for hours.

“Come on—what happened?” Hanna begged. “You know I don't have any love life of my own, so I have to live vicariously through you!”

Sam laughed ruefully.

“Well, you're not having much of a life then, are you? Okay—we didn't have sex but he did, er...want to go downtown, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh my God—really? He *wanted* to?” Hanna asked.

“I know, right? It's not very common,” Sam said dryly. “But he didn't just want to—it was like he was *hungry* for me. Like he was starving and I was a five course banquet, if that makes any sense.”

“Oh my *God*,” Hanna said again, but this time her tone was dreamy and envious.

Sam knew her little sister was lonely—she'd only had a few relationships in the past and every guy she ever dated dropped her because they thought she was crazy. It wasn't Hanna's fault—it was just her Gift popping up in extremely inconvenient places. No man wanted to be with a woman who

might gasp or squeak or scream at any moment because a ghost had suddenly appeared to scare her or a malignant spirit had pinched or poked her.

Sam knew that her sister tried her best to control her responses to these paranormal encounters but she couldn't always keep herself from reacting—especially if a cruel spirit was tormenting her.

“Well, it was nice—*more* than nice—*amazing*. But it's over now,” she told Hanna. “He says the Beast inside him wants me too much and it's not safe for him to be around me now.”

“Wait—he has a beast in him? Like what kind of beast?” Hanna wanted to know.

Sam shrugged.

“As far as I can tell, he turns into a kind of werewolf creature during the full moon. Or he would if he'd let himself. He's been suppressing it for ages and now he's afraid that it wants me and if he gets too near me, it will get out and, er, hunt me down.”

“Oh my God!” Hanna exclaimed for the third time and looked really alarmed. “Maybe he was right to leave, Sam—that sounds really dangerous!”

“I don't know—I kind of like big, scary animals.” Sam sighed. “Anyway, it's a moot point now. He went back up to the Mother Ship and he's not coming down again.”

“But that leaves you without a Protector, since you sent his replacement away,” Hanna pointed out. “What are you going to do about that stalker guy who keeps making those awful remarks on your Social Media?”

“Ignore him,” Sam said firmly. “He's like all the rest of the freaks out there—all talk and no action.”

“What about what Aunt Luna said, though?” Hanna protested. “You know she felt like you were going to be in danger.”

“Maybe she was having feelings about R'orn's Beast,” Sam said, shrugging. “I don't know. But I *do* know I've had enough of being followed around and treated like a porcelain doll. I'll be fine—I got myself some pepper spray—the really heavy duty kind. Look.”

Opening her purse, she pulled out a small black canister with a skull and crossbones and a notation that said, *Two Million Scoville Units!* on the side.

“This will stop anyone in their tracks,” she told her sister firmly. “And I'm keeping it with me at all times. I'll be fine.”

Hanna sighed deeply.

“I sure wish they made some kind of *psychic* pepper spray. I could really

use some right now.”

Sam frowned, already on the alert.

“Why? Is there a spirit bothering you? Tell me where he is—I’ll give him a piece of my mind!”

Hanna shook her head, her long, golden brown hair swishing over her shoulders.

“It’s not a spirit you could see or communicate with, I’m afraid,” she said in a low voice. “It’s not a ghost. I think...I think it’s something else. A *Dark Entity*, as Aunt Luna calls them.”

Her voice had sunk almost to a whisper and her eyes darted around the room in a hunted way, as though she was afraid that the thing that was terrorizing her might hear her talking about it and come to hurt her.

“Oh, Hanna!” Sam scooted closer and put an arm around her little sister. Even though Hanna was taller than she was by half a foot, she still felt protective of her. Back when they were in school together, she’d gotten into so many fights protecting her sister when people called her a “freak” for jumping at the spirits she always saw. Only Sam could see them too and she was quick to defend her sister when anyone threatened her.

But this was a threat she couldn’t help Hanna with. She could see ghosts, but only Hanna could see the darker spirits that sometimes stalked her. And she seemed to have a hard time defending herself against them, though their Aunt Luna had taught her some tricks.

“He mainly comes at night.” Hanna’s eyes looked haunted and for the first time, Sam noticed she had dark circles which she’d tried to cover with concealer.

“Did you try smudging your room?” she asked. “Drawing a circle in salt around your bed?”

“Yes and yes—none of that seems to bother him.” Hanna made a shooing gesture with one hand. “It’s not that big of a deal—he just likes to scare me and give me bad dreams. That’s all.”

“Is he touching you? *Hurting* you?” Sam demanded.

Her sister shook her head, but not very convincingly.

“He’s trying but...but I’m okay,” she said at last.

“You ought to go up and stay with Aunt Luna for a while,” Sam told her. “You know she says the spirits of the departed Kindred aboard the Mother Ship are almost all happy and content. And maybe that *thing* couldn’t follow you up there.”

“Maybe...” Hanna said doubtfully. “Look, let’s change the subject. I don’t like talking about him—I think he can *hear* me when I do.”

“All right. But let me know if things get worse—or go up to Aunt Luna. You know she’ll get Uncle Bruin to send a ship for you. He’ll do *anything* for her,” Sam said.

“I know.” Hanna got that dreamy look in her hazel eyes again. “I wish I could find a man who would treat me the way he treats Aunt Luna.”

“Well, maybe you can. If you go up to the Mother Ship you might meet a Kindred. Preferably one who *doesn’t* have a huge Beast inside him,” Sam said dryly.

But Hanna shook her head.

“No—they’d just think I was a freak, like human men do. And how can I blame them? It’s hard to explain that you can see things nobody else can without sounding weird and crazy. Even Mom and Dad didn’t believe me. You know they talked about putting me in an institution?”

“They did? No—I’m sure they didn’t!” Sam protested. She had only good memories of their parents, who had died in a traffic accident during one of their monthly “date nights” back when she and Hanna were teenagers.

“Yes, they did—I heard them talking about it,” Hanna said sadly. “They were going to do it for my own good—they thought I was having hallucinations—that I was schizophrenic.”

“That’s awful! What stopped them?” Sam asked.

“Aunt Luna. That’s why she moved back to Tampa, you know. She had a successful business being a Medium in California but she came back to Florida to be close to me and keep mom and dad from putting me away.” Hanna sighed. “Things *did* get better after she came and taught me how to ward off spirits with evil intentions. But even her tricks and tips can’t help with...with *Dark Entities*,” she finished in a whisper.

“Oh, Hanna...” Sam squeezed her sister again. “I’ll stay with you tonight if you think it will help. And every night for that matter—except for Halloween. I have to be out at a ghost site to do a live-stream special then.”

“Do you *have* to?” Hanna frowned. “I don’t like it that everyone who’s watching you will know where you are. What if some creep tries to track you down?”

“I won’t give them the exact location. Anyway, I *have* to do it or I won’t have anything to show on Halloween,” Sam said. “None of the footage I took in the Belgrave Mansion was, uh, useable at all.”

She cleared her throat and tried not to blush as she remembered exactly *why* the footage was unusable. Mainly because 95% of it was R'orn going down on her. It might make good spank-bank material if she ever got over him abandoning her the way he had, but it certainly *wasn't* something she could post on her Social Media channels.

“Will you be safe?” Hanna asked, looking worried. “I wish you hadn't sent that other Kindred Protector away!”

“I'll be fine. I have my pepper spray—remember?” Sam tapped the black cylinder. “So don't worry about me.”

Hanna gave her a weak smile.

“I won't worry about you as long as you don't worry about me—okay?”

“It's a deal.” Sam smiled back.

But inside, she couldn't help being concerned about Hanna. She'd never seen her little sister looking so tired and worn before. Whatever this Dark Entity was that was stalking her, fighting it off must really be taking a toll on Hanna.

Well, after the Halloween special, she was going to *make* her sister go up to the Mother Ship and spend some time with their aunt, she decided. Aunt Luna was the only one who had ever really understood Hanna when they were kids—and the only adult who had believed her when she talked about the dark and horrible things she saw.

But for now, Sam had to get ready to do her live show on Halloween night. Thank goodness she'd been able to find a new location to film at—one almost as haunted as the Belgrave Mansion.

Her viewers were going to love it and she wasn't going to spend one minute even *thinking* about R'orn, she decided. As far as she was concerned, the big Kindred was out of her life. And Halloween night was going to be her best show ever!

She had no idea what danger she was walking into. Death was stalking her and she couldn't even hear its stealthy footsteps creeping up behind her...

SAM

Sam looked around the abandoned mental hospital apprehensively. A lot of bad things had happened here—she could *feel* the negative energy sweating out of the stained and peeling walls like some kind of psychic ooze. It was at times like this that she wished she wasn't a one-woman-operation. But she'd only recently started making enough money to quit her job and ghost-hunt full time. She wasn't at the point where she could pay any employees yet.

I must be standing in the reception area, she thought, trying to shake off the chills that ran up and down her spine. There was a rusty old wheelchair against one wall and a wooden desk that had been chopped in two—possibly by an axe. Its splintered edges stuck up, making shadows on the wall in the brilliant moonlight pouring in through one of the broken windows.

Well, it was a spooky location, but that was what she had been looking for, Sam reminded herself. She normally got permission before entering an old, abandoned building but in this case, she hadn't been able to find anyone who the old mental hospital belonged to. It wasn't on private property—in fact, nobody seemed to claim the land it was on. It had been abandoned for over fifty years and the odors of mold and dirt and rot were strong in her nose.

Sam fingered the can of pepper spray which was shoved down the front pocket of her black pleated mini skirt. It hadn't been easy to find a skirt like this with pockets, but she'd managed after rummaging through her closet for ages. She felt like it was important to keep her only weapon close to hand.

She was also wearing her Doc Martins and a classic Lost Boys t-shirt. There was no need for a jacket. She'd left the frosty weather behind in New

England. Here in Tampa, even at the end of October, it was still hitting the high eighties during the day and barely dipping into the seventies at night. The air was muggy with humidity and Sam was already feeling sticky and hot.

She glanced at her phone and saw that it was edging past eleven—she needed to get started! Raising her phone, she began her live-stream.

“Hi goulfriends, this is Ghost Girlie, coming to you live from an abandoned mental hospital,” she said to the camera. “Not going to tell you where I am exactly, but let’s just say it’s a *very* haunted location.”

She began wandering through the empty halls, the soles of her Docs crunching on shards of broken glass, panning her phone around as she went.

“I don’t see any spirits yet, but I *sense* them,” she told her audience. “So many bad things happened here. They—”

Suddenly she heard what sounded like footsteps behind her. Whirling around, she confronted...an empty hallway filled with shadows. Damn, this was getting creepy even for her!

You must have imagined it. Stop jumping at shadows—keep going! You need to find at least one spirit to talk to!

Sam would have thought that the halls would be crowded with them—more than one person had died here, she was sure. Yet she didn’t see anyone until she pushed her way into a room at the end of the hall.

“This must have been some kind of treatment room,” she said, talking to her audience as she panned the phone around. “There’s some kind of table here—it’s fixed in place so there’s no moving it.” She pointed the phone at the empty table. “And I see equipment—looks like electrical wires. I wonder—could this have been an electro-shock room?”

The evidence seemed to support it. And then she saw it...a lone spirit in the corner of the room.

“I see someone,” Sam said softly, speaking into the phone. “You guys won’t be able to see her, but I can—it’s a girl and she’s crouching in the corner as if she’s afraid.”

Slowly, she approached the spirit. It looked like a girl of about eleven or twelve, Sam thought. She was huddled in on herself in the corner, wearing an old-fashioned hospital robe—the kind that tied in the back but always kept flapping open.

Sam frowned, feeling sorry for the poor girl. What a terrible outfit to be stuck in for all eternity! To feel so vulnerable and helpless and half undressed

always—what a *nightmare*.

“She must have been a patient here,” Sam murmured into her phone, keeping her voice low so as not to scare away the spirit. “She’s dressed in a hospital gown. She only looks to be eleven—twelve at the most.”

She edged closer, walking slowly—she didn’t want to seem threatening.

“Hi there,” she said softly, leaning down to get closer to the girl. “My name is Sam—can we talk?”

R'ORN

“Warrior, arise at once!”

R'orn was woken from an uneasy sleep by the loud, feminine voice speaking in his ear.

“Huh...what?” He sat up and looked around the darkened sleeping chamber uncertainly. He was back aboard the Mother Ship in his own suite, trying *not* to think about Samantha. He—

“Did you not hear me, Warrior? I said get up! The female I sent you is in grave danger!”

“What?” R'orn stumbled out of bed, still looking for the source of the voice. “Who’s there? Who’s speaking?” he asked, because the room looked completely empty.

“It is I—the Mother of All Life!” the voice proclaimed. As it spoke, the room filled with an overwhelming presence. It was undeniably feminine and as heavy as a boulder. R'orn felt himself being bowed down as its weight pressed down on him.

“What? You mean...the Goddess?” he gasped, falling to his knees as he looked around him wildly. “I...I don’t believe in the Goddess!”

“And yet I did you a favor and sent a female to you anyway!” the feminine voice thundered in his ears. **“But what did you do with my gift? You threw it away! You left the human female, Samantha, at the mercy of the predator that stalks her!”**

“No, I didn’t!” R'orn protested. His Atheism had fled and he was rapidly becoming a believer. “Please, Goddess,” he begged. “I told them to send her another Protector—she should be safe!”

“She is NOT safe!” The Goddess sounded seriously displeased. **“This**

very moment she is alone and unaware that her death is near. Warrior, you must go to her at once!

“But it’s nighttime on her part of the Earth right now!” R’orn protested. “I should send someone else!”

“Warrior, do you proclaim yourself a coward?” the Goddess demanded.

R’orn straightened up—as much as the massive weight of the divine presence pressing down on him would allow.

“No, Goddess—I’m no coward! But the moon will be out. And my Beast —”

“Your Beast knows better than you do that the girl is meant to be your Fated Mate!” the Goddess told him. ***“Now go and save her at once! She is in an abandoned building that was once a medical facility. You must find her before the one who stalks her does.”***

“Slasher69!” R’orn breathed and his heart started pounding even harder than it already was as he remembered the terrible threats Samantha had received. “How will I know where the building is?” he demanded.

“The coordinates are already in the Nav-com of your ship,” the Goddess told him. ***“Fly to her as fast as you can, Warrior—you must hurry. It is almost too late!”***

And then the overwhelming presence was gone, along with the almost unbearable weight.

R’orn didn’t waste any time thinking about how he’d suddenly been turned from an atheist to a true believer. Luckily, he’d fallen asleep with his clothes and boots on. He left his suite at a dead run, rushing down the long silver corridor that led to the Docking Bay where his ship was parked.

He just hoped he could get to Samantha before it was too late!

SAM

“**W**hat’s your name?” Sam asked the girl, who had finally turned to face her. She had long, straight hair parted in the middle—a very 70s style, Sam thought. Her eyes were big and shadowy and the look on her face was sad.

“I...I *think* I’m Michelle,” the girl said, speaking at last. Her voice was nothing but the shadow of a whisper but because of her Gift, Sam was able to hear it.

“Michelle, what are you doing here?” she asked gently.

“I...I don’t know.” The girl shook her head.

Sam wasn’t surprised. Sometimes the dead knew exactly what had happened to them and sometimes they were confused about the time and events leading up to their demise. Death, especially a sudden, violent one, could be bewildering for the lost soul it left behind.

Of course, not everyone who died ended up as a ghost. Most of them went on to the afterlife. But some got lost and stuck here on Earth—most often those were the victims of some tragic murder or accident. They just didn’t seem to know how to get free of the mortal realm and move on.

Sometimes, Sam was able to help them. She hoped that this might be one of those times.

“Were you a patient here at the hospital?” she probed gently. “Maybe your parents sent you here?”

“Yes...yes, they did!” The girl’s eyes brightened but then, just as quickly, she was sad again. “Papa said I was crazy. Mama begged him not to send me but he said it was the only way to make me well again.”

Sam felt as though her heart would break. Poor little thing! It reminded

her that Hanna had barely escaped a similar fate.

“I’m so sorry,” she said gently. “That must have made you very sad.”

In many ways she was like a therapist to the spirits she communicated with—she tried to name and validate their feelings, which sometimes helped them resolve their issues.

“Yes.” Michelle nodded. “Yes, I was so sad. I missed Mama and Papa so much! At first they came to see me every day. But then Mama got sick and died and then *nobody* came.”

She began to cry—her ghostly sobs barely as loud as the scurrying of the mice behind the walls.

“I’m so sorry, Michelle!” Sam wished she could give her a hug, but unlike her sister, she couldn’t usually interact physically with the spirits she communicated with. But maybe she could still help. “You say that your Mother went on before you?” she asked gently. “She died before you did?”

“Yes.” The ghost girl nodded and swiped at her eyes. “She went to Heaven and I can’t follow her.”

“Why not?” Sam asked her. “I’m sure she’s waiting for you.”

“I don’t know the way!” Michelle nearly wailed. “I’ve searched and searched, but I can’t get out of this room! The room where they k-k-killed me!” And she dissolved into sobs again.

Now Sam saw the problem. This wasn’t unusual at all—tortured spirits who died violent deaths often got trapped in the place where they had been killed.

“What if I helped you find the way out?” she asked. “Would that be all right?”

“C-could you?” Michelle looked up and swiped at her eyes again. “Oh please—if you could show me how to get to Mama, I’d be so happy!”

“I think I can,” Sam told her. “But you have to come with me. I’ll lead you out of this room. Do you want to come?” She held out her hand.

Tentatively, Michelle reached out and put her ghostly hand in Sam’s. Of course, Sam could only feel it as a swirl of chilly air, but she could tell that the ghost girl had placed her trust in her.

“Good,” she said encouragingly. “Now come with me, we’re going to leave this room and try to find the way to your mother.”

She started walking towards the open doorway and Michelle followed along. But she stopped when they came to the table in the center of the room.

“That’s where they did it,” she whispered. “That’s where they killed me.”

They kept turning the dials, giving me more and more shocks. I could tell it was too much but the doctor kept saying, ‘More—more!’ And I had that nasty-tasting rubber bite piece in my mouth, so I couldn’t say anything.”

Sam waited patiently until she finished speaking, but she knew it was important not to let the girl get fixated on her point of death. If she did, she would never get out of the room where she had died.

“That’s very sad and the doctor was wrong to do that,” she told Michelle. “But it’s time to go now. We have to find your Mom—remember?”

“Oh yes—we’re going to find Mama!” Michelle tore her gaze from the rusted metal table and started walking again, following Sam out of the room.

“Good, that’s good! Come on—let’s go,” Sam coaxed her. Finally they made it past the threshold of the room and out into the darkened hallway.

“Where are we?” Michelle looked around. “This place is so dark and scary! What are we doing here? Where’s my room? I want my room!”

“No, no!” Sam moved hastily to block the open doorway. Of course the ghost could pass right through her if she was really determined to go back, but Sam hoped she wouldn’t. She was afraid if Michelle went back to her death room, she’d never leave it again.

“But my room!” the ghost girl begged.

“I know it’s dark and scary here, Michelle,” Sam said patiently. “But it’s brighter outside. There’s a full moon overhead tonight!”

Sometimes a troubled spirit found their way to the afterlife as soon as they left the immediate vicinity of their death, but sometimes they had to be brought out and away from the place where they had died. Sam was betting this was one of the latter cases. She knew that she had to get Michelle out of the abandoned hospital and into the grounds outside. That was the only way to help her into the afterlife.

“Come with me,” she said to the ghost girl. “Come on—I know the way out. You can trust me, just keep your hand in mine and follow me.”

She knew that her audience watching at home couldn’t see the spirit she was helping, but they could see her actions and watch as she led Michelle out of the dark and awful building where she had been killed.

“Keep going,” she urged, making sure she could still feel the cool, ghostly fingers in hers as she walked down the hallways, her Docs crunching on the glass and debris. “Keep going—almost there.”

At last they reached the side door of the hospital, which Sam had found unlocked and used to get in. Just outside it was a barren, overgrown parking

lot filled with weeds and beyond that, a bunch of trees nearly covered by the tangle of underbrush and vines that grew around them. Central Florida's subtropical climate ensured that any piece of property that went neglected eventually turned into a mini jungle.

But it wasn't the parking lot or the overgrown forest Michelle was looking at. When Sam turned to look at her ghostly companion, she saw that the ghost girl was staring up into the sky. It seemed like she was looking at the full moon, floating overhead, but Sam didn't think that was what drew her attention.

"Oh, look," she said in her pale whisper of a voice. "Look up there—I see a light shining. It's shining in a kind of tunnel and it's all golden and warm."

"That's your path," Sam told her, though she couldn't see the path herself. No one but a soul on the edge of death could. "That's the way to your Mom. Go on, Michelle—you can do it—move towards the light."

"That's the way?" Michelle asked, half turning to her. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Sam said firmly. She squeezed the ghostly fingers, even though she couldn't feel anything but coldness. "Go on now—I'm sure she's waiting for you."

"Oh, she is! She is!" Michelle's voice got a little stronger. "I can see her now—she's waving to me!"

"Go to her then!" Sam urged her. "Go on—be free!"

"I will!" Michelle turned to her once more. "Thank you...thank you so much!"

"You're welcome." Sam smiled. It always made her feel so good when she was able to help a spirit who was stuck move on to the next plane of existence!

She felt the cold fingers leave her hand and watched as Michelle's spirit drifted upwards, over the parking lot with its crumbling asphalt and weeds and up into the moonlit sky.

"There she goes," she said quietly into her phone. "She's finally going home at last. Who knows how long she was stuck in that awful place? Maybe fifty years or more! But now she's going to be with her mom in the afterlife."

As she spoke, a strange thing happened. Though she had never seen it before, suddenly a tunnel appeared in the sky above her. It was filled with a warm, golden light and Sam could see a woman's figure standing there, waving for Michelle to hurry and come to her.

Sam frowned. But she wasn't *supposed* to be able to see the entrance to

the afterlife! None of the living could see it—not unless they were right on the brink of death...

And then a hard, cold hand snaked around her throat and squeezed.

“All right, Ghost Girlie,” rasped a low, angry voice in her ear. “You’re coming with me—we’ve got a date!”

R'ORN

R'orn landed his ship right beside the abandoned building and hurried to get out. But he froze for a moment in the doorway, plotting his way into the human structure.

This was going to be tricky. He needed to stay in the shadows and out of the moonlight as much as possible in order to keep his Beast at bay. Already he could feel it demanding to be let out, like a prisoner rattling the bars of his cage. But for Samantha's sake, he *had* to keep it locked up inside. It wasn't safe for her if the Beast came out. If it—

And then he heard a strangled scream and all his thoughts went right out the window as he plunged into the night.

SAM

“It’s me, Ghost Girlie—Slasher69!” the male voice rasped in her ear. “How come you ignored me, huh? All I wanted was a date, but you wouldn’t even answer any of my comments! You even tried to report me!”

“Because every single comment you left me was sick and disgusting!” Sam gasped. His fingers wrapped around her throat made it hard to breathe—let alone talk. She couldn’t see his face—not just because it was dark, though. He was wearing a Halloween mask—a demonic one with elongated features and a twisted grin. It reminded her of one of those awful home invasion torture porn movies where the guy with a mask breaks in and subjects the helpless family to terrible abuse.

She had the canister of pepper spray in her hand, but the mask was going to make things difficult. Maybe if she could spray the stuff right in his eyes, she could buy herself enough time to escape. But what if the mask blocked it and he didn’t let her go?

Oh why hadn’t she gotten herself a different weapon? Like a stun gun. Or a real gun? She could have gotten one easily enough—Florida’s ridiculous new gun laws meant that practically anyone could go buy a gun at any time and carry it around with them wherever they went with absolutely no consequences.

“You should have answered my comments. You should have met me for a date,” Slasher69 rasped. “But you didn’t—you rejected me and now you have to pay the consequences!”

He lifted his other hand and Sam saw the gleam of metal in the moonlight.

A butcher knife! Oh my God, he’s going to stab me to death!

She thought about trying to rip the mask off but there was no time.

“Let go of me, you asshole!” she shouted. And lifting the canister of pepper spray, she blasted a stream of the toxic stuff at the eyeholes of the demon mask.

Slasher69 jerked his head up and gasped but didn’t let go of her throat. In fact, his grip only tightened, cutting off more of Sam’s air and making her feel like she might pass out.

“You little cunt!” he snarled, shaking his head and Sam saw that she must have missed. Though the acrid scent of the pepper spray hung in the air, the mask had protected her attacker from the worst of it. In fact, she was worse off than him. The fumes burned her eyes and the insides of her nostrils, making her choke and cough.

“Leave...me...alone!” she managed to croak out.

“Never! You’re going to pay for ignoring me, Ghost Girlie! Pay with your life!” he snarled.

The silver blade rose again, flashing in the moonlight. Sam tried to brace for the impact. Would it hurt very much, being sliced to ribbons? She was very much afraid that it would.

Should have listened to Aunt Luna! Shouldn’t have sent my Protector away! she thought dimly. *Oh please...*

But though she waited, the knife never came down. Instead, she heard a choked cry of pain from the man holding her.

Looking up through streaming eyes, she saw that a huge hand was locked around Slasher69’s wrist.

“Let go of her, you fucker!” a deep, familiar voice growled. “How dare you hurt my female?”

“R’orn?” she gasped, because the huge Kindred was suddenly looming over both her and her attacker.

R’orn didn’t answer her. Instead he squeezed until Sam heard a low cracking sound. Slasher69’s hand suddenly went limp. He howled in pain and dropped the knife to the floor with a clatter. He let go of Sam’s throat too and she was able to back away. But R’orn wasn’t done yet.

“You fucker! I’ll fucking kill you!”

The big Kindred’s voice was thick with rage. When she looked up at his face, Sam saw that his normally golden eyes were blazing blood red in the darkness. God—she’d never seen anyone look so scary!

“R’orn...” she began, still backing away, but he still wasn’t paying her

any attention. Taking her attacker's head in his hands, he twisted forcefully to one side.

It looked like a move from an action movie, where the hero breaks the bad guy's neck. But R'orn didn't just break Slasher69's neck—he ripped his head completely off!

There was a horrible wet, fleshy tearing and the crunch of broken bones. Then blood was fountaining out of the bloody stump as Slasher69's headless body sank to its knees...and then slumped to the floor.

“Oh my God!” The words came out in a breathless scream before Sam could stop them. She clamped her hand over her mouth and looked up at R'orn. Something was happening to him...he was *changing* somehow. Getting bigger...and fur was sprouting on his arms and chest.

“Samantha...” His voice came out in an inhumanly low growl. Suddenly, Sam realized he was standing in a puddle of moonlight spilling from a broken window nearby.

“Oh my God—your Beast! Is he...is he coming out?” she gasped, looking up at him.

R'orn nodded.

“Can't...hold him back...much longer,” he grated out. “Samantha, *run!*”

As he spoke the last word, she saw his face begin to change too. It was elongating in the moonlight, becoming the head of an enormous wolf-like creature.

Then her paralysis broke. She turned and ran, almost stumbling over her own feet as she headed desperately for the side door exit.

Ominous noises were coming from behind her. A low, rumbling growling that sounded like words, though she couldn't make any of them out. And then she was out the door and running through the cracked and pitted parking lot, trying not to stumble over her own feet as she raced for her life.

She risked a glance behind her and saw, to her horror, that the huge wolf thing that R'orn had become was after her! It was running on its hind legs but other than that, it looked much more like an animal than a human. He hadn't been kidding when he'd said his Beast was cursed—it looked just like a werewolf from a horror movie to Sam!

The trees—maybe I can hide in the trees! she thought wildly. She had to do *something*—the Beast was gaining on her with incredible speed!

She made it out of the parking lot and hit the mini jungle running, but the thick underbrush slowed her down considerably. She found herself fighting

through the foliage, pushing and shoving desperately to get through the matted tangle of vines and creepers and branches.

There were crashing sounds behind her and she knew the Beast was on her trail. Still, desperation kept her going. She had to get away! Maybe if she could make it through the forest, she could lose the Beast and circle back around to her car. Maybe...

And then she felt something hook into the back of her shirt.

She thought it was just another branch but when Sam turned her head, she saw glowing golden eyes behind her. The thing that was hooked into the back of her shirt and holding her back were the Beast's claws! He had already caught up to her somehow, though it should have been impossible. He was too big to squeeze through the underbrush and branches as she had done!

Sam gave a desperate tug, throwing all of her body weight forward. She heard a low ripping sound as the claws snagged in the cotton fabric ripped open the back of her classic Lost Boys t-shirt. With another convulsive movement, she wiggled her way free and found herself falling...right into the center of a small clearing in the middle of the tangled forest.

"Oh...oh my God!" she gasped as the Beast came crashing through the underbrush, breaking branches and pushing them aside as he came. So *that* was how he'd managed to get through—by sheer brute force.

He stood over her and Sam saw that any clothing that R'orn had been wearing before he changed was gone now—ripped away from the huge, furry form that loomed over her in the moonlight.

The Beast had come for her and there was no getting away, she realized. She was trapped.

SAM

“R’orn? Are...are you in there?” Sam was still flat on her back, looking up at the enormous hairy form looming over her. The Beast stood on his hind legs and he really did look nine feet tall—as though the top of his head might touch the round white moon above him.

He was covered in dark brown fur tipped in gold, though it was hard to see in the moonlight. Just like the color of R’orn’s hair, she thought faintly. His pointed ears swiveled towards her and his muzzle wrinkled in a soft, silent growl as he looked down at her.

Sam had never been so frightened in her life! She thought of how she had foolishly told R’orn she wasn’t afraid of his Beast because she’d had “lots of scary pets.” What a dumb thing to say! No animal on Earth could compare with the enormous, powerful being looming over her now.

*Why did I say that? Why did I tell him I wasn’t afraid because I had “scary pets?” So **stupid**, she thought numbly. And now his Beast is going to rip me apart!*

Maybe not, whispered a little voice in her head. Think, Sam—what did he say when you told him about your pets?

R’orn’s voice came back to her, echoing in her memory.

He’d said, “None that want to fuck you, I bet!”

That’s what the Beast wants—that’s what he craves! Sam thought, as she remembered what the big Kindred had told her. More of R’orn’s words came back to her.

“All you could do if you had the misfortune to meet him would be to run. And if he caught you, your only chance of survival would be to submit—to let him breed you and knot you!”

That was what he'd said. Oh God, was she really going to have to do that? Was she going to have to let R'orn's Beast breed her?"

Sam's eyes dropped from the Beast's golden gaze to the enormous furry pouch between his thighs. She couldn't see anything yet, but maybe that was because the Beast was still preoccupied with its bloodlust, from killing Slasher69. What she had to do if she wanted to survive this situation, she told herself, was to turn that bloodlust into sexual lust—into desire. She had to make sure the Beast would rather fuck her than tear her throat out.

It was the only way.

Not knowing what else to do, Sam slowly began pulling the tattered remains of her Lost Boys t-shirt off. Luckily, she had no bra on underneath it so her heavy breasts were bare in the moonlight as soon as she got it off.

"Hey!" she said softly, thrusting out her chest, to get the Beast to look at her ripe nipples—which were tight with fear. "Look here—look at this. Is this what you want?"

The Beast looked at her breasts and she could almost see its primitive thoughts shifting gear. The low, rumbling growl turned into a more positive, interested sound. The furry pouch between its thighs twitched and then a shaft began to appear.

Sam could see it clearly in the bright moonlight. The broad head was narrowed to a soft point at one end and the shaft itself was long and thick and dark red—almost black. Precum was already beading on the pointed crown and still the shaft continued to emerge.

Oh my God, how big is he anyway? Sam thought, awed at the sight. Even her biggest sex toy was nowhere near this size. How could she possibly take all that inside her?

Yet, somehow she had to—the only way out of this was to let R'orn's Beast Claim her and breed her.

But what about the knot? whispered a little voice in her head, as the thick bulge at the base of his shaft finally emerged. *There's no way you can take that thing and you know it!*

But she had to try. It was either that or be torn to bloody pieces right here in the middle of the forest!

Sam had a sudden, hopeful thought.

Maybe if I jerk him off, he won't want to breed me.

She didn't know if it would work or not, but it was worth a try! Anything was worth a try at this point.

Knee-walking forward in the high grass, she approached the enormous Beast. She was encouraged when he just stood there and didn't make any moves towards her.

"Hey, big guy," she said and was surprised at how steady her voice sounded. "I know R'orn is in there somewhere. R'orn, can you hear me?"

The Beast grunted, but made no other noise. It seemed clear to Sam that her Kindred Protector wasn't coming back anytime soon. At least, not while the full moon was up. So there was no choice but to go ahead with her plan.

"Why...why don't we have a little fun?" she said to the Beast. Carefully, she reached for the enormous shaft and was disconcerted to see that she couldn't wrap her fingers all the way around it—it was simply too thick! However, using both hands, she was able to start making up and down motions, sliding her fingers over the hard, hot cock that bobbed in front of her.

The Beast growled softly and seemed to be enjoying what she was doing. The wide crown, which tapered to a point, was right in front of her face and Sam could see a bead of precum shining on its tip. On impulse, she leaned forward and lapped the bead away. It was rich and salty with a wild spice she'd never tasted before. Actually, not too bad, she decided.

The Beast growled again and thrust his hips at her. Meaning, she guessed, that he wanted more.

"All right," Sam said, looking up at him. "But there's no way I can get all this in my mouth. Maybe just the head..."

And leaning forward, she swirled her tongue around the crown, starting at the base and working her way up to the pointed tip.

She was relieved to find that the point was indeed soft and it had a small slit at the tip that leaked more precum as she lapped it. What could it be for? Maybe the pointed tip was supposed to fit into the mouth of a female's womb when the Beast bred her?

The thought sent a shiver through her entire body and Sam realized it wasn't purely a shiver of fear. Was this turning her on? Licking and sucking the Beast's enormous cock? Surely not. And yet, she couldn't deny that her nipples were stiff and it wasn't just because she was cold from being topless. Also, between her legs, she was beginning to feel extremely hot and swollen. Could it be that she *wanted* this?

No, surely not. Sam tried her best to push the strange thought away and concentrate on the task at hand—which was jerking the Beast off so he

wouldn't want to breed her.

She sucked the broad head into her mouth and continued to swirl her tongue around and around it as she pumped the huge cock with both hands. Soon, she was sure—the Beast had to come *soon*...

But just as she was certain he was about to shoot his load, she felt a huge, hairy hand on her shoulder. Looking up, she realized the Beast was pushing her gently but firmly away.

“What...what is it?” She wiped at her lips and swallowed the spicy precum he'd leaked in her mouth. “What do you want now?”

The Beast looked down at her and she could see how his golden eyes were gleaming in the moonlight. He opened his jaws—which shouldn't have been able to utter a single intelligible word—and spoke.

“Mine...” he growled in that deep, rumbling voice. “Breed now...Claim.”

“Uh...breed?” It was exactly what Sam had been afraid of...and yet was she also longing for it? Surely not! But she couldn't help flashing back to fantasies she used to have when she was younger. Fantasies about what might have happened in Beauty and the Beast if the Beast had never regained his human form...

“Breed...*now!*” the Beast demanded and his eyes flashed.

“Okay, okay!” Sam held up a hand to him. “But please...go slow. R'orn, if you can hear me, make him be gentle!” she begged. “He's so big—I don't know how he's going to fit!”

Well, she'd better find a way to *make* him fit if she wanted to survive this! Slowly, she reached under her pleated skirt and pulled her panties down—noticing as she did so that they were extremely damp. Was her pussy really getting that wet? She supposed she was about to find out—or the Beast was going to find out for her.

It took a minute to get the tangled panties over her Doc Martins, but at last she managed. Then, feeling more frightened and excited than she ever had in her life, Sam turned around and got on her hands and knees.

“All right,” she said and spread her legs. “I...I'm ready.”

SAM

For a long moment, nothing happened. Sam could feel the tall grass she was kneeling in tickling her bare breasts and tight nipples and brushing the insides of her thighs, which were wet with her juices. She couldn't believe this was turning her on, but she had to admit that it was.

She waited for the Beast to mount her, but when he finally crouched behind her it wasn't the pointed tip of his cock she felt—it was his long, hot tongue.

“Oh!” she gasped as he bathed her pussy with a long, leisurely lick. And he wasn't done yet. She could feel the Beast's broad, hot tongue exploring her, parting her pussy lips to slide deep into her inner folds. When it rubbed over her swollen clit, she couldn't help moaning and backing to meet it...just a little. God, that felt good!

It reminded her of how R'orn had devoured her for hours. He'd said that his Beast wanted to taste her too. A new thought entered her head.

Maybe this is all he wants—just to taste me. Maybe if I hold still and open my pussy for him, he'll be content just to lap my pussy the way R'orn did!

“All right, big guy,” she said, turning her head to look back at the huge, furry form crouched behind her. “I know what you like...and you can have as much of it as you want.”

The Beast was still nosing under her skirt, but Sam flipped it up for him, baring herself completely. Spreading her thighs wider, she arched her back and pushed her ass up and out, giving the Beast unrestricted access to her wet, open pussy.

He gave a low, interested growl and then she felt the tip of his hot, wet tongue find the mouth of her pussy and slip inside. Sam gave a little gasp of

surprise as it slid inward—God, it was almost as big as a cock! No, it was *bigger* than a cock—at least bigger than any guy she'd ever been with! She could feel it stretching her inner walls as the tip of it slid even deeper, to the end of her channel.

It was a strange but extremely pleasurable sensation. Sam moaned and widened her stance even more.

“Yes, Beast!” she gasped breathlessly. “That’s right—tonguefuck me! Fill me up with your tongue!”

She was getting close...she could feel it. The long, hot tongue seemed to be everywhere. How could the Beast fill her with it and still be able to lap her throbbing clit at the same time? Sam didn't know, but somehow he was managing it.

With a low moan, she felt herself slip over the edge and start to come.

“Oh...oh, Beast! Oh, R'orn!” she gasped as her inner walls spasmed around the long, hot tongue. “Oh God, you're making me come! That feels so good!”

The Beast seemed to enjoy her orgasm. She could feel him licking and thrusting inside her even as she came, tasting her juices eagerly as they gushed out of her. She'd always had an extremely wet pussy—some of her old boyfriends had said she was *too* wet and it put them off. But the Beast seemed to love it. He tonguefucked her until at last, the orgasm was over.

“*Ohhhh,*” Sam moaned softly. Looking behind her, she saw that the Beast was withdrawing at last.

She couldn't help feeling a little disappointed. Was he done already? R'orn had gone down on her for *hours*. It was really surprising that his Beast was so easily satisfied.

But then the Beast rose from his crouch and she saw that he had one massive fist wrapped around his long, red shaft.

Oh my God! she thought, feeling suddenly panicked. *Tasting me didn't satisfy him after all! Now he's really going to breed me!*

Blind panic took over and she started to scramble away on her hands and knees. But she didn't get far.

Two huge hands caught her by the waist and pulled her back.

“Beast?” she gasped, twisting her head to the side to look up at him. “Beast, please—you're so big and I'm so small!”

For the second time R'orn's Beast's spoke.

“You...will...stretch,” he growled in his inhumanly deep voice.

“Licked...you...open.”

“You...you what? Are...are you saying that the way you licked me will...will help me open for you?” Sam demanded, trying to understand him.

Slowly, the Beast nodded.

“Hold...still. Breed now,” he commanded her.

Sam couldn't have moved if she'd wanted to—his hands around her waist were gentle but as strong as iron. For a moment, she almost seemed to see herself as though she was outside her body. Here she was, mostly naked in the tall grass, on her hands and knees about to be fucked by R'orn's Beast. How had this happened to her?

Sam didn't know but she *did* understand there was no way out of this. Biting her lip, her heart banging against her ribs, she slowly tilted her hips back again, offering the Beast her open pussy.

“All right,” she said in a voice that only trembled a little. “You...you can breed me, Beast. Just please—be gentle, all right?”

The Beast made a noise that seemed to be a sound of ascent—at least she hoped it was. And then she felt the pointed tip of his cock find the mouth of her pussy and begin to slide inward.

SAM

Sam tried not to moan as the broad crown breached her entrance. God, he was so big and this was only the head! She certainly hoped the Beast was right when he'd said that the way he had licked her would help her open for him. There was no other way she was going to be able to take his massive cock!

But there was no moving or getting away. All she could do was try to relax and let him take her—try to be open enough to let the Beast's huge cock in.

She panted a little as she felt the thick shaft following the head and sliding inside her. Had she thought the Beast's tongue was stretching her inner walls? Now she knew the true meaning of being opened. Her pussy was being stretched to the limit and still the Beast continued to feed his thick shaft into her channel.

“Oh...oh, Beast! Oh, R'orn!” she moaned as more and more of it entered her. Was it possible that the way the Beast had licked her was enabling her to stretch in every direction? Because it now felt like his cock was filling her more deeply than she had ever been filled, and yet he still hadn't bottomed out inside her!

Then, finally, she felt the broad, pointed head find the end of her channel. And just as she had suspected, the soft point at the end seemed to find its way even deeper inside her, possibly right into the mouth of her womb! A sudden thought occurred to her—could the Beast get her pregnant? She wasn't on any kind of birth control and he certainly wasn't wearing a condom. If the point of his cock was spurting directly into the mouth of her womb when he came in her...

But the thought was pushed out of her head as the Beast pulled almost all the way out...and then slammed back into her, fucking her hard and deep.

“Oh! *Oh!*” Sam moaned as the Beast rammed himself inside her. It seemed he had used up all his gentleness when he was slowly penetrating her for the first time. Now that he knew she could take him, he was fucking her mercilessly, holding her in place with his huge hands as he skewered her on his massive cock.

“Oh...oh Beast, please!” Sam gasped. She felt like a ragdoll. Her bare breasts were swaying and jiggling with each deep thrust and a pleasure so intense it was almost pain went through her each time the broad head slammed into the end of her pussy channel.

It felt as though her belly was bulging with each hard thrust but again, Sam couldn't stop it. She couldn't do anything but spread her pussy wider for the Beast and pray it would soon be over.

But the pleasure inside her was growing. Part of that was because the Beast's heavy balls were swinging up to slap against her clit every time he rammed himself inside her. The steady rhythm both teased and tormented her. Slowly, Sam realized she was about to come again—come while she was skewered on the Beast's enormous cock as he plowed into her.

“Oh...oh please!” she moaned again. She didn't know if she could stand to orgasm while she was so filled. She was afraid that spasms of pleasure might be painful as her inner pussy tried to grip the huge invader.

But she could no more hold back her orgasm than she could hold back the Beast or stop him from fucking her—*breeding* her. She was going to come and come *hard*.

“Beast, please!” she heard herself panting. “Please, you're going to make me...make me come if...if you keep it up! And I don't...don't know if I can take it! Your cock is so...so *huge!*”

But her words only seemed to make the Beast want to fuck her even more deeply.

At least he isn't putting the knot in me, Sam thought deliriously, remembering the massive swelling at the base of his shaft. *I'm sure I couldn't take that!*

But she had barely finished the thought before she felt the Beast push even deeper into her and something huge breached the mouth of her pussy.

“Oh, no!” she moaned, wiggling feebly, though she was pinned in place by the enormous cock inside her. “Oh, no—please! Not that—not the knot!”

But it was too late. With a final roar, the Beast thrust his cock all the way inside her. Sam moaned as she felt her pussy mouth and inner walls stretch to take the enormous knot. At the same time, she felt the pointed end of his crown slip deep into the mouth of her womb.

The sensation was too much. Somehow it set off her orgasm and, just as she had feared, Sam's inner walls began to spasm around the huge invader as sparks of pleasure rushed through her body.

"Coming!" she moaned as her pussy did its best to grip the Beast's cock even harder. "Coming so...so hard! Oh, Beast!" She could feel herself milking him, almost begging him to come inside her and fill her with his seed.

I can't! she thought deliriously. *What if he gets me pregnant? He's bare inside me! What if—*

And then the Beast began to come.

"Oh...ohhh!" Sam cried as spurt after spurt of hot cream filled her pussy. She'd never been able to feel a man coming inside her before, but of course the Beast wasn't a man—he was a Beast. And she could certainly feel him filling her up.

The massive shaft flexed inside her, pulsing as he spurted inside her. Sam swore she could feel her belly growing with the volume of seed he was pumping into her. God, how could she hold it all? And yet *still* he kept going.

It seemed like forever she was there on her knees in the moonlight, her pussy stuffed to the limit with the Beast's massive cock as he filled her with his cream. And Sam's own orgasm was somehow still happening, her pussy milking him diligently as though she was begging for more and more—which the Beast was more than willing to give her.

At last, however, the steady stream of hot seed slowed and then stopped completely. But the Beast didn't withdraw from her.

Instead, he turned them both on their sides and lay there, still connected to Sam in the most intimate way.

"Oh, Beast!" she moaned softly as she felt his big, furry body curl around her own. His cock was still lodged firmly inside her, his knot keeping her plugged so that not a single bit of his seed leaked out.

When Sam looked down, she swore that her lower belly was bulging from all the cream he'd pumped into her.

The Beast seemed to like this effect because one big, warm hand came down to cup and caress her lower belly.

It was almost like he was saying that he hoped he had gotten her pregnant, Sam thought dimly. Like he was caressing the place where his child might grow.

“Beast,” she moaned softly. “Did...did you get me pregnant? Do you know? Can...can you tell?”

But this was apparently a question that was too complex for the Beast’s primitive mind. His only answer was a low, rumbling,

“MINE.”

And then he pulled Sam even closer to him and put one muscular, furry arm around her.

Sam sighed. The thought of trying to wiggle away from him crossed her mind...and was immediately rejected. There was no way she was going anywhere with his massive knot still swelled inside her and plugging her pussy. Besides, she had no energy left to try and get away. She couldn’t ever remember being so exhausted in her life.

Closing her eyes, she let herself relax in the Beast’s warm embrace. And after a while, though she would have thought it would be impossible, she drifted off to sleep with his cock still lodged firmly in her pussy.

R'ORN

R'orn woke in the early morning, stark naked but with his still-erect cock bathed in a deliciously tight, warm wetness. The scent of growing things was all around him and someone small and feminine was in his arms.

Mmm, must be having a dream, was his first thought. But then he opened his eyes and saw that he was lying outside and curled around a small, plump female. Not just any female, though—Samantha! She was half naked, topless and wearing only a black skirt and the thick black boots she favored. Her shirt lay shredded on the ground beside them.

Memories rushed back to him—killing her attacker and then the Beast taking over and running her down and then...

Gods! What he did to her—what we did to her!

R'orn felt sick. He had *not* been gentle with her the night before. And even though it had been his Beast in the driver's seat, he couldn't place all the blame on the creature that lived inside him. He felt the same desires his Beast did—he was just as responsible for what had happened. He had run her down, taken her hard, and even now he was still buried inside her.

Just as he was thinking this, Samantha began stirring.

“Who...what...?” She opened her eyes and looked around, clearly disorientated. “Why am I sleeping on the ground? And why am I so *sore*?” she murmured.

“That’s because of me,” R'orn said hoarsely. “Goddess, baby, I’m so fucking sorry!”

“What?” She looked up at him, frowning. “Oh, it’s you! I thought your Beast was still here.”

“He’s gone back inside,” R'orn said grimly. “Now that the damage is

done and he's had his pleasure."

"He appears to be still having it. Or, er, *you* are, anyway." She looked down between her legs where R'orn was still filling her.

"Fuck! I'm sorry!" R'orn apologized again. He started to pull out, but she stopped him with a hand on his leg.

"Wait! *Slowly*," she begged. "Do it slowly, R'orn. I'm *really* sore—your Beast is a lot to take."

"You should never have had to take him," R'orn said grimly as he slowly and carefully withdrew from her. "I should have kept better control of him."

"You warned me what would happen," Samantha pointed out. "You—*ohhh!*"

Her words ended in a gasp as his shaft at last came free from her pussy and with it, a gush of white cream.

"Goddess!" R'orn groaned. He couldn't believe how much he'd filled her with!

"Thought...you didn't believe in the Goddess." Samantha winced as she slowly sat up.

"After last night, I'm a believer," R'orn told her. "She sent me to come help you—told me you were being attacked."

"Ugh—by Slasher69. That freak!" She shivered and then looked up at him. "I can't believe you killed him!"

His eyes flashed.

"He fucking got what he deserved! We'll report his body to the authorities later."

"Really?" Sam asked. "You're not afraid to tell them you killed a human?"

"Why should I be?" He shrugged. "The World Court has ruled that a Kindred warrior is justified in killing any male who tries to harm his female. That bastard signed his own death warrant the moment he typed the first threat he sent you."

"I'm glad I don't have to worry about him anymore," Sam admitted with another shiver. "I don't know who he was but he was *crazy*."

"He's gone now," R'orn said comfortingly. "You're safe from him, baby."

"Thank you." Sam looked up at him. "But tell me about the Goddess. What did she look like? I've spoken to lots of spirits and ghosts but no deities."

“I didn’t see her so much as felt and heard her,” R’orn admitted. “Her presence was like a heavy weight on me—she was seriously displeased that I’d left you alone and in danger.” He shook his head. “I just don’t understand why she would send me to you on the night of the full moon. She must have known what would happen—known that my Beast already hungered for you.”

“Maybe she sent you so that we could finally get together—because she knew there was no other way we could when you were being so stubborn.”

R’orn had been staring morosely at the grass but now his head jerked up in astonishment. He hadn’t heard Samantha’s voice with his ears—he’d heard it *inside his head*.

“What...how...?” he began.

“Did you hear that?” Samantha asked, looking at him anxiously. “I, er, ‘sent’ it as loud as I could.”

“Of course I heard it!” R’orn exclaimed.

“Good. Then...does that mean what I think it means?” She looked at him shyly. “My Aunt Luna told me when you have, uh, Bonding Sex with a Kindred warrior, you’re able to exchange thought messages. Like, talk telepathically. So...*does that mean we’re Bonded?*” she finished, sending the last question through their new link rather than saying it out loud.

“I...I suppose it does,” R’orn sent back tentatively. *“Though I don’t feel like I deserve to be Bonded to you, sweetheart. Not after the way my Beast and I treated you last night.”*

Samantha frowned.

“Look, is your Beast a lot to handle? Yes. *God, yes.*” she said, switching back to speaking aloud. “And was I scared at first, also yes. But by the end I think we had, er, reached an understanding.”

“An understanding?” R’orn exclaimed. “What was there to understand? He—we—held you down and took you! You had no choice, no say, no—” He shook his head, feeling sick. “I’m so fucking sorry, sweetheart—what I did to you last night is unforgivable.”

“No, it’s not!” Samantha protested. “Because I participated too—it was an act of passion.”

“It was an act of *violence*,” R’orn argued. “I don’t deserve you—don’t deserve to be Bonded to you. I...I should go and leave you alone.”

“Is that what you *really* want?” Samantha demanded. “To leave me?”

“No, damn it! Because I *love* you!” R’orn burst out, feeling pushed to the

edge.

“Good, because I love you too!” Sam shot back. “I know it’s crazy—I know we haven’t known each other for long. But it just feels like...”

“We belong together,” R’orn finished for her.

She nodded.

“Exactly. So can you please stop beating yourself up about what happened between me and your Beast last night? I’m not upset about it—I promise.” She switched to her mental voice. “*After all, it brought us together.*”

“*I suppose it did,*” R’orn acknowledged grudgingly. “*But I still feel bad about how hard I used you, baby.*”

“*I’ll be fine—nothing a long hot shower and a little ibuprofen won’t fix.*” She started to stand up and winced. “*Well, maybe a **lot** of ibuprofen.*”

“Let me take care of you,” R’orn said. He stood up and then bent to swing her into his arms.

“What? Oh!” she gasped as he lifted her and cradled her against his chest. “Where are you taking me?”

“You’re my mate now,” R’orn reminded her. “I’m taking you back to my ship so I can take care of you.”

“Oh, well...”

She shifted in his arms and at first he thought she would protest. But he sent a wave of love and devotion through their new link—also the need and desire he felt to care for her and heal the wounds he’d made. At last, he felt her relax.

“All right,” she said simply. “I usually take care of myself but I guess if you really want to...”

“I do,” R’orn assured her through their link. “I want to take care of you for the rest of our lives, sweetheart.”

Then he held her close and carried her back towards his ship.

SAM

The rumors were true, Sam found—the Kindred shuttles really *did* have a living area in the back of them. There was also a nice shower, big enough for two, and a king-sized bed.

R’orn got her into the shower first—he came in with her, actually. He washed her gently but thoroughly and when Sam tried to protest that she was capable of cleaning herself, he only shook his head and told her he wanted to care for her.

“I’m your mate, sweetheart—mates take care of each other. Please, just let me do this,” he murmured through their link.

It wasn’t easy for Sam—she was kind of a control freak and used to taking care of herself. But she could feel how much the big Kindred wanted to do this for her. So in the end, she held still and let him wash her everywhere—even between her thighs, where she was the most tender.

R’orn was especially careful when he knelt before her and washed her there, using just his fingers and taking things very gently as he rinsed away the seed his Beast had pumped into her the night before.

Afterwards, he dried her thoroughly and then laid her in the center of the big bed.

“What...what are you doing?” Sam asked, as he got between her thighs and put her legs over his shoulders.

“Healing you.” R’orn looked up. “My kind of Kindred is able to make healing compounds for his mate—much like the Blood Kindred do.”

“But...well...I mean—” Sam began to protest.

“This *isn’t* sexual,” R’orn interrupted her sternly. “And it’s not going to lead to anything else. This is just me trying to make up for what I did to you

last night, baby—trying to fix the damage my Beast caused.”

“Well...all right,” Sam agreed. She knew how much he loved to taste her, but she hadn’t had any idea that he could heal her this way.

“Good. Now just relax and hold still,” R’orn commanded, his golden eyes flashing. “Be a good girl for me, Samantha—I just want to heal you.”

There was something about his dominant tone that did funny things to Sam’s insides but she tried to do as he said and just relax, as the big Kindred ducked his head and began to bathe her pussy with long, slow licks of his tongue.

He started with her outer lips, which Sam had to admit felt wonderful. But after awhile, he looked up at her.

“Are you ready for me to heal you inside now, baby?” he murmured. “Ready to let me spread you open and heal your inner pussy?”

Sam’s heart skipped a beat and there were suddenly butterflies in her stomach.

“I...I guess so,” she whispered. “If...if you’re careful.”

“I swear to always be careful with you from now on,” he promised. “Just relax sweetheart, and let me heal you inside.”

Then he carefully spread her outer pussy lips with his thumbs and ducked down again to begin lapping her inner folds with long, slow strokes of his tongue.

It stung just a little at first, especially when he circled the mouth of her pussy and dipped inside with his tongue, healing the area where the huge knot had spread her so wide the night before. Sam whimpered and shifted her hips but R’orn looked up with a stern expression.

“No, Samantha,” he said firmly. “You have to be a good girl and *lie still*.”

“I...I’m trying,” she whispered. Again, his dominant tone seemed to send butterflies through her, but she did her best not to move.

R’orn finished healing the inner walls of her pussy and then went back to lapping her tender folds, dragging his tongue up and over her clit over and over slowly and gently.

Sam bit her lip. It felt as though her new mate’s touch was starting a gentle fire in her belly—a fire that was spreading through her entire body. Her nipples were tight with desire and her clit was throbbing. It was getting harder and harder to be still!

She knew that R’orn’s only intention was to heal her, but she was getting

closer and closer to orgasm and she didn't know if he would be upset with her if she came. After all, she wasn't one to just lie there when the pleasure hit her—she always had to *move*. Also, he had said specifically that this wasn't sexual—would he be upset with her for taking it that way?

At last she was nearly panting from the slow, gentle pleasure he was building inside her with his long, leisurely licks. Her hands were fisted in the bedspread on either side of her and her core felt as tight as a wire.

“What is it, sweetheart?” R'orn looked up, speaking through their link though he never stopped licking her. *“I can feel how tense you're getting. What's wrong—don't you feel better?”*

“I...I feel more than better,” Sam panted out loud. *“R'orn, I know you said this isn't sexual and I'm not supposed to move, but I can't help myself—I think I'm going to...going to come if you keep this up!”*

*“Hmm, so you're going to be a **naughty** girl?”* he murmured, raising an eyebrow at her as he continued to lap her pussy.

“I...I can't help it!” Sam panted. *“I can't hold it back and I can't hold still anymore!”*

“No, Samantha—you have to be a good girl and hold still—no coming until I'm sure you're all healed,” he growled sternly through their link.

“But...but it feels so good!” Sam moaned. God, what was it about the stern way he was talking to her inside her head that was making her even hotter? She felt like a naughty girl who might get a punishment if she was caught doing something bad...but at the same time, she felt completely unable to not do that bad thing. After all, how could she help coming when he was torturing her so sweetly with his tongue?

“You just have to lay still and be good,” R'orn told her. *“And no coming unless I say so. I'm not done healing you yet. Here—how does this feel?”*

And he slipped two long, thick fingers deep in her pussy as he continued to lick slowly over her throbbing clit.

“It...it feels all right,” Sam panted. *“I...I mean, it doesn't hurt or...or anything.”*

“And this?” He curled his fingers upwards and began to rub—and somehow he found an internal spot that Sam hadn't even known she had.

As he massaged it, waves of pleasure deeper than anything she'd ever felt washed over her. Oh God, was that her G-spot? She'd thought it was a myth! But somehow R'orn had found it as easily as he'd found her clit—which was not something any of the other men she'd ever been with had been able to do.

“Oh!” she gasped. “Oh, that feels so...*Oh!* Please, R’orn—I *need* to come!”

At last she felt him consent.

“*All right then, sweetheart—come hard for me—come while I lap your sweet little clit and fingerfuck your pussy!*” he growled through their link.

Once he gave his permission, Sam stopped trying to hold back. She cried out, her back arching as waves of pleasure rushed through her. Her nipples were so tight they hurt and her hips were thrashing uncontrollably.

Somehow R’orn managed to stay with her and keep licking and pumping deep inside her pussy until, at last, the pleasure ebbed.

“*Ohhhh,*” Sam moaned, going limp against the mattress.

“Was it good, sweetheart?” R’orn withdrew his fingers and licked them clean. Then he placed a soft kiss on her pussy and then scooted up the bed to take her in his arms.

“Was it *good?*” Sam laughed weakly as she snuggled against his broad chest. “You know, every time you go down on me, I think it’s the best time ever and then you go and top it!”

“I hope you enjoy letting me taste you,” R’orn said seriously, looking down at her. “Because I’m going to need to do it a hell of a lot, baby.”

“You are?” Sam looked up at him.

“Mmm-hmm.” He nodded and pushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. “Remember I told you that my kind of Kindred needs to taste their female even more than other kinds of Kindred warriors do?”

“Oh...because of your Beast, right?” Sam asked.

“Exactly.” He looked at her seriously. “Now that he’s awake and he’s come out, he’ll be harder to control. If I can feed him pleasure—*your* pleasure—on a regular basis, that will keep him from wanting to come out again.”

Sam shivered.

“Well, I might not mind another encounter with him sometimes in the future, but not right away.”

“You never have to let him breed you again, if you don’t want to,” R’orn promised. “As long as you don’t mind helping me control him by spreading your legs for my tongue on a regular basis,” he added, his golden eyes going half-lidded with lust.

Sam looked at him in surprise as she felt his desire through their link.

“You *really* like, uh, going down, don’t you?”

“I fucking *love* it,” R’orn growled. “I hope you do too—it would be difficult for my kind of Kindred to be mated to a female who *didn’t* like getting her pussy licked.”

“I never much liked it before *you* did it to me,” Sam admitted. “But, well—you’re *really* damn good at it.”

“It helps that you’ve got the sweetest little pussy I’ve ever tasted,” R’orn growled softly. “Gods, just tasting you makes me so damn hard!”

“Well, maybe we ought to do something about that, then.” Sam gave him an arch smile. “Like Bonding Sex? I know I got to do it with your Beast, but I’d really like to do it with you, too.”

“Really?” He looked at her uncertainly. “You think you’re healed enough to take my knot? It’s not going to be as big as my Beast’s equipment but still...”

“It’s all right,” Sam assured him. “You did a *really* good job of healing me. *I especially liked it when you were being so stern and telling me not to come until you let me,*” she added shyly, through their link.

“*Mmm, you like it when I’m stern with you, sweetheart?*” he growled softly. His mental voice was as deep and growly as his regular one, she thought—and it was even sexier hearing it inside her head.

“*I kind of do like it.*” Sam wiggled against him, loving the feeling of his big, muscular body against her own. “*It makes me feel really naughty when you’re strict like that.*”

“*Well then, I think it’s time for you to take a ride on my cock, baby. But **no coming** until I tell you to.*”

R’orn sat up against the headboard and put her into position, straddling his hips. His long, hard shaft was between them and Sam could feel the broad head brushing the lips of her pussy.

“*Now be a good girl and come down on my cock,*” R’orn instructed as he guided the head of his shaft to the mouth of her pussy. “*Take me nice and deep—all the way into your tight little pussy.*”

With a moan, Sam did as he ordered, sinking down so that his entire, thick length slowly penetrated her to the core.

“Oh, R’orn!” she moaned as she felt the wide head bottom out inside her. “*You’re in me so deep!*”

“*As deep as I can go, baby,*” he growled, gripping her hips and beginning to thrust slowly in and out of her. “*Until you take my knot, that is. That’s when I’ll breed you and Bond you to me all over again. Now be a good girl*

and ride me—I want to feel your sweet, tight pussy squeezing my cock until I fill you with my cum.”

Sam moaned as she caught his rhythm and rode her new mate’s shaft. He stretched her wide—though not as wide as his Beast—and it felt incredible to give herself so fully to the man she loved.

Deep inside R’orn, through their link, she could feel his Beast also enjoying her pleasure. He growled in approval when he felt her pussy sliding against R’orn’s thick cock and taking him so deep inside herself.

As strange as it seemed, Sam *liked* the idea of being mated to both of them. Even if the wild, animalistic part of her new mate was a little bit scary, it was also sexy as hell—as was R’orn himself.

She didn’t know how long they stayed like that—R’orn thrusting up inside her as she rode him—but before she knew it, she was getting close. Probably because he wasn’t just filling her—he had also reached between them and was circling her aching clit with his thumb.

It was nice to be with a man who knew most women needed more than just penetration to come, she thought distractedly. And then the pleasure got so great it was hard to think at all.

“R’orn!” she gasped, riding him harder. “R’orn, I think...think I’m getting close!”

“Me too, baby. Are you ready to take my knot?”

“I...I think so!” Sam moaned. “Do it, R’orn—knot me! Fill me up completely.”

“Gods, sweetheart—can’t help myself, I fucking *need* to knot you,” he growled. Holding her hips firmly, he pulled her down hard.

Sam gasped as she felt the thick swelling find and fill her pussy mouth. It wasn’t as big as his Beast’s, but she was still glad he’d taken the time to lick her so thoroughly and help her open up for the extra girth.

As she gave herself completely and took his knot deep in her pussy so he could breed her again, it seemed hard to believe that only a week ago she’d thought the big Kindred was a jerk. Now she knew the *real* R’orn—the sweet, hot, protective warrior who would do anything for her—who would kill or die to protect her. It was *him* that she’d fallen in love with.

“*Love you too! Come for me now, baby,*” he growled in her mind as he circled her clit with his thumb and let his knot swell inside her. “*Come hard on my cock—come for me and my Beast while we fill your pussy with our cream!*”

“Oh! Oh, R’orn...oh, Beast!” Sam moaned as her orgasm overtook her.

Her inner walls spasmed around the thick cock inside her, milking it, urging her new mate to fill her with his cum. As R’orn spurted deep inside her, she felt both him and his Beast taking pleasure in her release...and in breeding her so deeply and Bonding her all over again.

“That’s right, sweetheart—come for us! Come for us both!” R’orn urged her and Sam couldn’t help but comply.

Afterwards, she collapsed against his broad chest, her head on his shoulder as she tried to catch her breath. He was still buried inside her and that was how Sam liked it. She snuggled against him, enjoying the feeling of being opened and owned by her new man.

“Easy, baby. Easy,” he murmured in her ear and stroked her back lovingly. “Such a good girl to come so hard on my cock! My Beast liked it too.”

“I know.” Sam looked up at him. “I...I could feel you both enjoying it when I came.”

“Your pleasure is *our* pleasure,” R’orn assured her, smiling. “So tell me—now that we’re together, where are we going next?”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Sam frowned in confusion.

“I mean, where is your next ghost hunt?” he asked patiently. “Because after last night and that fucking Slasher69, I’m never letting you go out hunting alone again!”

“But...I thought you didn’t believe in what I do!” Sam protested.

“I do now. What I saw that night in the Belgrave Mansion pretty much convinced me,” R’orn admitted. “And then talking to the Goddess...well, it made me realize the supernatural is real. Yes, baby—I believe in you *and* your Gift. I’m sorry I was an asshole about it before,” he added penitently.

“I forgive you,” Sam lifted her head to kiss him lightly on the mouth. “I know you were only trying to push me away because of your Beast.”

“Never going to push you away again,” R’orn promised. Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her closer and returned her kiss. “*Mmm*, you feel so right in my arms! I was a fucking *idiot* to try and push you away!”

“Like I said, I forgive you.” Sam sighed contentedly and cuddled against him. It felt as though the big Kindred was a piece of her soul that she hadn’t known she was missing.

A thought suddenly occurred to her, though, which made her frown wistfully.

R'orn was instantly attuned to her mood.

"What is it, baby?" he murmured through their link. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong with **us**," Sam assured him. "I never knew I could be this happy. It's just...well, I wish my little sister could have this kind of happiness, too."

"Bring her up to the Mother Ship," R'orn suggested. "I'll introduce her to some of my friends. They're **not** Wulven Kindred," he hastened to add, probably knowing that Sam would worry if she thought her sister had to go through the same experience she had the night before with his Beast.

Sam shook her head.

"I told her she should try dating a Kindred guy but I don't think she's really in the right place right now. She's...having troubles of her own. Until she gets them settled, I don't think she'll be ready to find the love of her life."

"You don't always feel ready when the love of your life comes along," R'orn pointed out dryly. "I sure as hell wasn't ready for you, baby." He gave Sam a squeeze and another long, lingering kiss on the mouth. "But now that I have you, I'm never letting you go!"

Sam sighed happily and kissed him back. She never had to be alone again, she realized. In R'orn, she would have a protector, a lover, and a companion by her side for the rest of her life. She only wished that Hanna could have what she had—that she could overcome the curse her Gift had become to find happiness and love as well.

But there was nothing she could do for her sister at the moment. And in the meantime, she could feel that R'orn was still hard inside her. Even though they had just finished making love, it made her want to Bond with her new mate all over again.

She never would have believed that having a Kindred Protector would change her life so completely for the better, Sam thought as she began to move on R'orn's shaft again, drawing a low growl of pleasure from his throat. Or that she could be so happy and content with a man she'd only known a week. But through their new Soul Bond, she understood that R'orn was indeed her Fated Mate—the one she was meant to be with. And that made all the difference.

But none of it could have happened if she hadn't been able to put aside her fear and allowed herself to be...*Possessed by the Wulven.*

BOOK TWO: GUARDED BY THE GHOST

HANNA

“That’s it—you’re fired!” Mr. Harvey, the graveyard shift manager of the Denny’s that Hanna was working at, pointed one pudgy finger at the door. “I mean it, Hanna! I’ve had enough of your bullshit. Get out *now!*”

“But it was an accident!” Hanna pleaded. “I would *never* pour hot coffee on someone on *purpose*—you must know that!”

“All I know is that I’ve had enough of your excuses and the way you’re always jumping at shadows and staring at things nobody else can see, like a goddamned cat!” the manager—a middle-aged, balding man with a paunch—snapped at her.

He had never liked Hanna, from the minute she’d first taken the waitressing gig three months ago. And to be fair, Hanna had never liked him either.

Part of the reason was his nasty attitude and the fact that he stole tips from the servers—he would take them right off the table if no one was looking! Several times after a kind customer had left Hanna a five or a ten-dollar bill, she had looked away for a moment only to look back and find it had disappeared. Then she would see Mr. Harvey walking away, whistling casually as he stuffed something into his pocket.

He also demanded that the servers share their tips with him at the end of the night, even though he was a salaried employee with benefits and the waiters and waitresses were only making \$2.15 an hour and had no health care of any kind. So basically, he was stealing from them *twice*.

People had tried to complain but nobody seemed to care what happened to the overnight shift. Mr. Harvey was the only manager willing to take it, and the owner of that particular Denny’s franchise seemed to think he was

entitled to whatever he could get as a kind of bonus.

Anyone would hate a manager like Mr. Harvey, Hanna thought, but she had another reason to dislike him—she could actually *see* his mean and stingy spirit while the other people working at the rundown Denny's with him only felt the effects of it.

It was an angry little Imp with a shriveled face and a swollen belly—a Greed Imp, Hanna thought. It clung to Mr. Harvey and sat on his shoulder, its tail wrapped around his throat like a wrinkled rope. It whispered in his ear—a constant litany of, *“never enough...need more...get more...you're entitled...the rest of them are all lazy...that should be yours...take it!”*

And the manager listened to it and always did the Imp's bidding. By now it was so firmly entrenched that it was practically becoming part of him—its wrinkled red flesh merging with his own pasty white skin. Hanna couldn't look at the ugly thing without a shiver going through her and though she tried to hide it, she was certain the distaste she felt must sometimes show on her face.

Of course, Mr. Harvey wasn't the only one with an Imp. Lots of people had them—there were Lust Imps, Envy Imps, Pride Imps, Anger Imps—name an unattractive human quality and there was an Imp for it. Some people had more than one—Hanna couldn't bear to watch a session of Congress on C-span—the lawmakers were crawling with the ugly, evil things. And forget corporate CEOs—they were so taken over by Greed, Pride, and Theft Imps they could barely be seen at all.

Of course, the Imps didn't *cause* a person to act the way they acted but they were always out and about, encouraging the lowest and vilest human behavior. And people who kept indulging in those behaviors often attracted their own personal Imp, which clung to them and fed on them like a parasite, encouraging their disgusting actions.

A person with an Imp had what was called a “fatal flaw” in the literature classes Hanna used to attend. Once she had dreamed of becoming an English professor and teaching the literature she loved so much, but her dreams had been crushed by her “Gift”—though to Hanna, it was more of a curse. Having her particular gift was kind of like having a type of Paranormal ADHD—it was impossible to concentrate when the spirit world was constantly interfering in her life.

Seeing the Imps or “Dark Entities” as her Aunt Luna called them, was only part of it. Hanna was also able to see and communicate with the spirits

of the dead. Her older sister, Samantha, had this Gift as well—she had a popular ghost hunting show on YouTube where she helped lost and frightened spirits move on to the afterlife. Their Aunt Luna had a smattering of it, as well as the Gift of Divination, which she used to read Tarot cards for people and advise them about the future.

So the Gift ran in their family. But while Hanna's sister and Aunt were able to use their Gifts to make a living, Hanna's Gift only hindered her and held her back—that was because her Gift was more extreme than either Samantha's or Aunt Luna's.

She wasn't just able to see and talk to dead people—she could also interact with them on the physical plane. And the same went for the Dark Entities she saw, which Samantha and Aunt Luna and pretty much everyone else on the planet, it seemed, were blind to.

Basically, this meant that Hanna could *touch* the invisible spirits and entities all around her. And by the same token, she could also be touched by them—they were aware of her and drawn to her—which was how the accident with the hot pot of coffee had happened.

Her shift had started out badly with a big bunch of rowdy college students from the nearby university. They sat in Hanna's station and ordered multiple appetizers, then bickered over the bill which she'd had to split nine ways. Almost none of them left a tip, so she wound up with five dollars and fifty cents for about two hours of work, because they stayed so long.

It was a disappointing start to a long shift and it didn't get any better from there. Her next few customers were either no or low tippers, which made Hanna wonder if she was going to be able to make her rent that month. It had doubled recently, causing her to pick up as many extra shifts as she could, in order to afford the crappy little studio apartment on the bad side of Tampa, not far from Busch Gardens.

She would have asked if she could stay with her big sister, Samantha, for a while, but Sam was currently living out of her van so she could travel to various haunted locations for her ghost hunting show. Also, she'd just gotten into what seemed like a pretty serious relationship with a Wulven Kindred Warrior who had been assigned to be her Protector. So now they were traveling together and Hanna couldn't stand being a third wheel.

She could always go up to the Mother Ship and stay with her Aunt Luna and the Kindred Warrior she was married to, of course. But whenever she saw the two of them together, they seemed so totally in love that Hanna was

sure she would just be in the way. Her new uncle was a Beast Kindred named Bruin and he seemed completely devoted to her aunt in every way.

Hanna wished *she* could find a Kindred Warrior who would fall in love with her. The big aliens who had come from beyond the stars to protect Earth years ago were 95% male due to a genetic anomaly. As a result, they valued females highly and treated them like queens.

But she was sure that any Kindred she met would just think she was crazy—like all the human guys she'd tried to date before she'd given up dating for good. And like Mr. Harvey, her manager—now her *ex*-manager, she supposed—and like the male customer she'd accidentally poured coffee on.

She hadn't meant to do it—honestly, she hadn't—even though he *had* been provoking her. Previous to the coffee incident, she'd just finished with a horrible customer—a woman who had eaten all but two bites of her Denver omelet meal with a side of hash browns, bacon, and blueberry pancakes with extra whipped cream—and then declared that it was all “disgusting” and she wasn't going to pay for any of it.

Hanna had been forced to get Mr. Harvey involved in the matter—which he absolutely hated, since he preferred to sit in the back room and look at porn on his phone all night. He had ended up comping the woman's meal and while she left with a triumphant smile on her face—and a Liar Imp clinging to her shoulder like a pet bat—he'd turned to Hanna and growled,

“You'd better not fucking bother me for the rest of the night! And the price of that woman's order is coming out of *your* tips!”

“But...but how is that fair?” Hanna had protested. “It's not my fault she didn't want to pay!”

“You should have given her better service,” Mr. Harvey snapped. “Then maybe she wouldn't have complained!”

Then he had stormed away, presumably going to resume his porn scrolling in the back room.

At that point, Hanna had been wishing she could just go home. She felt like crying—almost all the money she'd made so far that night was going to go to pay for the nasty customer's meal! What was even the point of her being there?

She felt tears stinging her eyelids and she didn't want to break down in the middle of the dining area. Turning quickly, she went to the bathroom to blow her nose and put some cold water on her face.

Her hand hovered over the knob of the employee's only restroom...and

then she passed it by and went to the ladies room for customers instead. She'd learned the hard way her first day on the job not to go into the employee bathroom. It looked like an empty room with just a sink, toilet, and hand dryer to anyone else. Only Hanna could see the dead man sitting on its single toilet, staring vacantly at the wall.

She thought he might have been one of the short order cooks at one time and he'd died of a heart attack in there, but she didn't know for sure because he never talked. He just sat there, gray and silent, with his pants around his ankles as he stared at nothing.

Hanna was used to dealing with dead people—she'd been seeing them all her life—but some were definitely creepier than others. So she went to the ladies room where no one had died.

After splashing water on her face and blotting her eyes, she walked out again to find that the hostess had seated two older men at one of her booths. Putting on her best professional smile, she brought them some menus and said,

“Hi, I'm Hanna and I'll be taking care of you tonight. What can I get for you?”

“Well, you can *start* by bringing that fine ass over here, honey,” one of the men—a biker-looking guy in a black leather jacket said, eyeing her.

Hanna felt her smile freeze on her face as she saw a Lust Imp poke its pointed snout out of the collar of the man's jacket and give her a lascivious grin.

“*Sexy bitch,*” it whispered in the man's ear. “*Look at those nice big tits! Bet she shaves her pussy—wouldn't you like to get a good look between her legs? Bet she can suck cock too—look at that mouth! Oh yeah—love to have those sweet pink lips wrapped around your cock-meat!*”

Hanna felt sick but she tried not to show it. She could tell that the customer had been drinking—the harsh scent of whiskey drifted off him whenever he opened his mouth—which only made him more susceptible to the Imp's suggestions.

His companion, thankfully, was more drunk than he was and *didn't* seem to have a Lust Imp attached to him, though Hanna wouldn't have been surprised to see a Gluttony Imp—which was the kind that urged every kind of overindulgence and excess from gambling to smoking to overeating and drinking to excess.

“How about some coffee?” she suggested, hoping to sober the two of

them up. “That’s always a good starter.”

“Suuure...coffee’s nicsh,” the really drunk man slurred.

“I like my coffee like I like my women—hot and in pretty white cups!” the other customer declared, leering at the neckline of Hanna’s waitressing uniform, where a tiny bit of her white lace bra was visible.

Hanna was quick to tug her uniform top up to cover the lace as she turned and went for the pot of coffee and two cups. She was already sure that she wasn’t going to be getting a good tip from these two unless she was willing to flirt with them—which she definitely was *not*. Still, she had to at least do her best to get them served in a timely fashion—she would just have to be professional and ignore the crude come-ons from the customer with the Lust Imp clinging to him.

When she came back with the coffee pot in one hand and two white china mugs in the other, the really drunk man was asleep with his head on the table.

“Seems like your friend must be really tired,” Hanna said politely, putting down the mugs. “Should I pour him a cup anyway, in case he wakes up?”

“Forget the coffee, sweetheart—how about you and me get out of here?” the man with the Lust Imp asked. As he spoke, he reached under Hanna’s skirt and began running his hand up her thigh.

“Hey!” Hanna snapped. “You can’t—”

And that was when she saw the eyes, staring at her through the window of the Denny’s.

They were glowing red and filled with malevolence. A sudden chill swept over her, as though the temperature in the room had dropped twenty degrees all at once. Hanna could *feel* the thing’s evil intent—its sinister desire to possess her.

It was the Dark Entity that had been stalking her for the past few weeks but it had never come this close before...and never appeared anywhere but when she was alone at night. This was the main reason she’d started taking graveyard shifts—to avoid being alone during the darkness when she felt most vulnerable. But now it was proving that it was willing to seek her out—to find her no matter where she went to hide from it.

Hanna had seen a lot of terrible things because of her Gift, but this hungry creature—this Dark Entity—was by far the worst. Maybe because she sensed his power—he was stronger than the Imps could ever be. His shadowy essence seemed to fill any room he entered and his hunger for her was palpable—like an icy, unwanted hand stroking over her breasts and between

her legs.

She had let out a short, piercing shriek and jerked away from the window with the burning red eyes. But the sudden motion caused the glass coffee pot to jump in her hand and a wave of boiling hot coffee landed right in the lustful customer's crotch.

"Hey—ouch! Fuck, you fucking bitch!" the man shouted, jumping up in a hurry. "What the fuck did you do that for?"

"I didn't...didn't mean to!" Hanna exclaimed, backing away. Her eyes were still glued to the window. A smile had appeared to go with the burning eyes—a smile filled with long, sharp bloody fangs. The Dark Entity was grinning at her like a hungry Jack-o'-lantern. And then she heard his voice—a horrible, inhuman snarl she knew only she could hear.

"Soon, my beautiful Hanna...I'm coming for you and soon you'll be mine..."

"Hey, you fucking cunt—look at me when I'm talking to you!" the man she'd spilled coffee on shouted in her face, waking her from the dazed trance she'd fallen into.

Great—he had a Rage Imp too. Hanna could see it sticking up on the other side of his jacket, its red face filled with anger as it poured a stream of furious invective into his ear.

*"Fucking bitch—she did that on purpose! Just because you touched her! She ought to be **grateful** you'd touch her at all—fat bitch like that, bet she can't get a date to save her life. Nothing but a life support system for a cunt—that's what she is! Useless bitch!"*

Some of the other customers were looking up and another one of the servers ran to the back to get Mr. Harvey. Before she knew it, Hanna was caught between the two angry men—her customer shouting that she had poured hot coffee on his crotch on purpose, and her manager apologizing profusely and chewing her out right there in front of everyone.

"He was touching me!" Hanna exclaimed desperately. She knew she couldn't explain that the Dark Entity—which had mercifully disappeared from the window by then—had scared her. It would only make both of them think she was crazy—not that she cared very much what anyone thought at that point. She just wanted to go home. But at the same time, she barely dared to leave—what if the Dark Entity was waiting for her, just outside? What if —?

"I don't care *what* he was doing, that *isn't* the way we handle that kind of

thing around here!” Mr. Harvey was shouting in her face, his breath heavy with stale coffee fumes.

*Right, Hanna thought, beginning to get mad. Because we **don't** handle things like that at all around here—at least not when **you're** the manager. You don't give a good goddamn how your servers are treated as long as you get to help yourself to their tips at the end of the night!*

She only wished she had the nerve to say it out loud. Wouldn't anyone say anything in her defense? But looking around the dining area, she saw that while all of the customers and servers were watching—some were even filming it on their phones—no one came forward to defend her. She was all alone in this and no white knight was going to come riding in to save her.

“I didn't pour the coffee on him on purpose,” she tried to protest. “I was startled by something...something in the window and my hand jerked.”

Mr. Harvey raised his bushy eyebrows almost to his thinning hairline.

“Which is it, Hanna? Did you pour it on him on purpose because he was ‘touching’ you? Or was it an accident because you saw a ghost or something in the window?”

“Like I'd touch your fat ass, you cunt!” The customer snarled at Hanna before she could answer. “Fucking disgusting pig like you—you'd be lucky to get any man to come within twenty feet of you!”

Hanna felt a rush of shame and anger. Her weight had always been a sore spot with her.

“That *wasn't* what you were saying when your hand was crawling up my leg!” She spat, finally losing her temper. “How dare you talk to me like that? *You're* the disgusting pig! Do you think *any* woman will ever be interested in your tired old lines and your nasty, grabby hands? No! No woman with a pulse would even give you the time of day unless she was trying to earn a tip from your sorry ass!”

“Hanna! We do not talk that way to customers!” Mr. Harvey blustered.

Hanna turned to him.

“Oh, so it's all right for him to call me a ‘cunt’ and a ‘disgusting pig’ but I can't return the favor? He was harassing me from the minute I came up to their table!”

Mr. Harvey folded his arms over his chest.

“It's your word against his, Hanna and now your job is on the line. I think you'd better apologize, don't you?”

He and the customer both looked at her expectantly. But even though she

needed the job and her rent was due, Hanna couldn't make herself apologize.

"No," she said, folding her own arms over her chest. "No, I shouldn't *have* to apologize. The coffee spill was an accident but everything I said was true—he was touching me and harassing me and I *shouldn't* have to put up with that."

"This is bullshit!" The customer raged, before Mr. Harvey could say anything. "She poured boiling hot coffee on my dick and then she has the nerve to insult me?" He stabbed a finger at Hanna. "I want her fired *now* or I'm going to sue this fucking restaurant for everything its worth!"

Mr. Harvey went pale—he didn't like lawsuits.

"I'm so sorry, Sir," he said to the customer. "You are absolutely right." And that was when he turned to Hanna and said the fateful words. "That's it—you're fired! Get out!" And he had pointed to the door of the Denny's, indicating that she should leave at once.

Hanna had tried arguing, but it was a lost cause. Mr. Harvey had been looking for an excuse to get rid of her from day one and now he had one. Even now, no one spoke up for her, though it felt like every eye in the place was on her as she marched to the swinging double glass doors at the front of the Denny's.

But when she got to the doors, she hesitated. The night outside was dark and impenetrable. The few streetlights in the parking lot were the old Arc sodium kind that barely put out a dim, flickering orange glow. Anything might be waiting out there for her—anything at all.

He might be waiting.

But as she hesitated, Mr. Harvey came stomping up and swung one of the doors wide, letting in a blast of hot, muggy air. Tampa never really cooled down, except for a few months in the early part of the year, and it was only just past Halloween.

"Get...out," he said through gritted teeth. "*Now!*"

And then, of course, Hanna had no choice but to leave—stepping out into the night and hoping that the thing that had been glaring at her through the window *wasn't* waiting in the shadows to devour her.

HANNA

Thankfully nothing jumped out at her as she made her way quickly to her beat up Honda Civic, parked in the corner of the cracked parking lot.

The car was over ten years old and it broke down with alarming frequency, but it was all Hanna could afford. It was either the Civic or the bus—and a surprising number of people died on busses each year.

Hanna didn't like riding with the shades of the dead—it was especially creepy when the bus was full and she could see living customers sitting in the same seats already occupied by ghosts. They always looked uncomfortable and often shivered and rubbed their arms as though they were cold. Even those without a Gift could often sense the presence of the dead, though they usually just thought it was getting chilly or the sun had gone behind a cloud.

Tonight the old Civic started right up, much to her relief. But once she had it started, she was at a loss for where to go. She didn't want to go back to her empty apartment, not when she knew the Dark Entity was stalking her. He might come find her again, and she couldn't face him right now—not on top of losing yet *another* job.

Hanna had never been able to hold down employment for long. The supernatural world interfered with her too much and other people sensed there was something different about her—something other, something *wrong*. It made them want to avoid or get rid of her. So she moved from one menial occupation to another, never holding any one job for longer than six months.

It was an exhausting way to live and that was *before* the Dark Entity had started stalking her. Now she felt close to the edge of some kind of mental and emotional breakdown. Not that she could *afford* to have a breakdown, Hanna thought dryly. Who would pay her rent if she did? She'd wind up

homeless, on the street. No—she *had* to keep going, she told herself. Screw Denny’s—she’d find somewhere else to work. Right now she just needed to kill some time until daylight.

She drove to an all-night Wal-Mart and went inside to browse. She couldn’t really afford to buy much—all she had was the less than ten dollars she’d earned in tips that night and her bank account was nearly dry. But roaming the brightly lit aisles was better than going home to her dark, lonely apartment.

At last, however, Hanna was nearly dead on her feet. She’d been up almost twenty-four hours by that point and dawn was only an hour or two away. She decided to go home and risk getting some rest. She bought a large box of Kosher salt to renew her wards and finally left the store.

Driving home in the night, she kept thinking she saw the burning red eyes staring at her from the back seat. But every time she turned her head to look, it was only her imagination. She began to hope that maybe the Dark Entity had decided he’d done enough for tonight—maybe he would leave her alone for awhile.

God, if only he would! She was so tired and so alone. If only she had someone to go home to—someone to protect her and care for her. But Hanna knew that was never going to happen for her. Men sensed that she was strange and shied away from her because of it.

Of course, it didn’t help that she was extra curvy as well. She had a pretty face and long, golden brown hair and hazel eyes, but apparently none of that counted when your dress size was in the double digits.

Hanna kept a wary eye on the streets as she drove through her neighborhood—unofficially named “Suitcase City” because so many people moved in and out of the area so quickly. The Civic’s wheels rumbled over cracked pavement as she drove past abandoned cars up on blocks, littered yards filled with trash, and the occasional sex worker, strolling through the shadows cast by the streetlamps.

At last she got to The Carlton Arms—her apartment complex. Despite its grand name, it was little more than slum housing. The building where Hanna lived was grimy and dark, filled with cramped apartments that had bad plumbing and walls so thin the neighbors’ fights could be heard at all hours of the day and night.

It wasn’t a safe area for a woman alone to live and Hanna knew it, but it was all she could afford now that rents had gone sky-high. She was lucky to

find anything she could get on her limited budget without trying to find a roommate, which never worked out for her.

Keeping a sharp eye on the dingy surroundings, she hurried from her car to the front door. Once inside, she took the elevator up to the third floor, trying not to notice the dead man in the corner with his brains blown out and sliding in slimy gray and red chunks down the rear wall. It had been a drug deal gone wrong, Hanna thought. Once or twice the ghost had tried to talk to her, but she didn't have her sister Sam's gift of leading lost spirits into the afterlife, so she did her best to ignore him.

Thankfully, this time he didn't speak and Hanna was able to get from the elevator to the door of her apartment with minimal difficulty.

There was another dead man in the hallway that she carefully avoided. This one had been an abusive husband, killed by his wife after she'd taken so much abuse she finally had to fight back. She'd slit his throat while he was sleeping.

The long wound bisecting his neck gaped like a lipless smile when he looked at Hanna, who was careful *not* to look back. This spirit was still filled with rage and he hated women—it was better not to antagonize him. Mostly he left her alone as long as she didn't get too close.

She let herself into her apartment and closed the door with a relieved sigh. Alone at last...well, *mostly*.

There was only one spirit inhabiting the cruddy little studio, but it was a benign one—the ghost of a little Spanish grandmother who had lived there nearly fifty years ago, back when The Carlton Arms was actually a nice place to live.

Hanna saw her shade, pattering around the little corner of the apartment she thought of as the “kitchen nook”—just a single countertop with a two-burner stove, a microwave, and a tiny oven. Sometimes she could smell the ghost of spicy *enchiladas* or the sweet, creamy scent of *dulce de leche*. *Abuelita*, as Hanna thought of her, was almost always cooking or baking something.

She didn't mind sharing her living space with a ghost like *Abuelita*. She'd lived a happy life and the echoes of her contentment still lingered here. Though they never talked to one another, sometimes the little old woman would nod at her, before going back to her endless baking.

Unfortunately, she was no help at all when it came to the Dark Entity. Hanna had to deal with him herself—which she did as well as she could. As

tired as she was, she knew her wards had to be renewed before she could dare to sleep on the lumpy, fold-out couch bed in the center of the room.

She started by washing the few windows she had with water she'd collected during the last full moon night. Water that had been blessed by the light of the full moon had special warding and cleansing properties. Then she swept up the salt from her last ward and threw it away. It was time for something new—something more powerful to keep the Dark Entity out.

Taking a stick of Sage incense that her Aunt Luna had given her, Hanna lit it and began walking around the interior perimeter of her cramped apartment. As she walked, she waved the burning incense around and murmured over and over,

“By the power of fire, I ward thee. Cleanse this space from all unclean spirits and ward it from those who wish me harm. By the power of fire I ward thee...”

It didn't take long to walk the whole apartment.—it was barely five hundred square feet. By the time she was finished, the incense stick was only half gone. Hanna set it in a holder where it could continue to smolder and opened the new box of Kosher salt. Crouching low, she poured a thick line of salt all around her fold-out couch bed, murmuring as she did,

“By the cleansing salt I ward thee. Let this be a barrier to any who would wish me ill.”

Her Aunt Luna had taught her these wards when she began seeing Imps and other dark spirits as a teen. Up until then, she'd mostly just seen dead people and the spirits of the lost.

Many people can see spirits when they're young children—it's one reason you hear so many stories of three and four year olds talking about how their dead grandparents came to visit them and watch over them. However, after the age of four—five at the latest—most people lose the Gift. Those who are able to see Beyond the Veil past that age are often labeled crazy or insane.

That had nearly happened to Hanna. Her parents had seriously thought about institutionalizing her because they thought she was schizophrenic. It had been her Aunt Luna who saved her, giving up a lucrative practice as a Medium in California to move back to Tampa and be close to her troubled and Gifted niece.

Hanna would forever be grateful to her aunt—who was rather eccentric but also sweet and caring. She had become Hanna and her sister Samantha's

guardian after their parents were killed in a car accident when Hanna was thirteen and Sam was sixteen. And her wards had always worked to keep Hanna safe...until the Dark Entity, that was.

Pushing that thought aside, Hanna finished the salt circle and decided she could *finally* take a shower and go to bed. She scrubbed her body with the harsh bar soap which was all she could afford and washed her long hair with cheap shampoo she'd gotten at the Dollar Store. Then she dried herself and dragged on a raggedy old sleep shirt—holey but clean and comfortable—and went back to the main room of her studio apartment.

Dawn was only half an hour away when she finally collapsed, exhausted, onto the lumpy fold-out couch mattress. She thought about trying to stay up until the light started peeking in the windows—the Dark Entity had only ever come to her at night and she was more vulnerable when she was sleeping because her guard was down. But she felt like she just *couldn't* hold her eyelids open one more second.

With a little moan of pure weariness, she crawled under the scratchy bargain sheets she'd found on clearance and laid her head on the lumpy pillow. In the kitchen nook, *Abuelita* was humming faintly to herself and making something that smelled like vanilla caramel flan. The soothing scents mixed with the sage incense lulled Hanna into a state of calm.

With a sigh, she let her eyes drift closed and fell into a dreamless sleep... only to be woken a few minutes later by a cold voice speaking in her ear.

HANNA

“Why hello, Hanna...how are you tonight? Are you hungry for my touch?”

Hanna’s eyes flew open and she saw what she had been dreading—the burning red eyes were staring at her from just outside her window.

“No!” Her voice was a low croak filled with fear. “You can’t come in! I warded the apartment against you! I washed the windows with full moon water and used sage incense in my warding! You *can’t* come in!”

“Oh, can’t I?”

The burning red eyes floated through the glass as though there was nothing in the way at all. They seemed to leer at her from the foot of the bed and she could feel the hungry lust of the Dark Entity as he stared at her.

Hanna’s heart was pounding but she still had the unbroken line of salt around her bed. That had kept the Dark Entity out so far. Mostly he came to hover just outside the salt ring and leer at her.

“I...I’m not afraid of you,” she told him, trying to believe it was true. “You can’t cross my warded circle! Just leave me alone!”

“Is that what you truly think?” Suddenly the burning red eyes were floating towards her. Then they were hovering right over her—right over the bed!

Hanna’s skin broke out in goose-bumps as the temperature plummeted. When a terrified gasp escaped her, she could see a plume of her own breath in the frigid air.

“N-n-no!” Her teeth were chattering, though she couldn’t tell if it was with fear or cold. “N-no—leave me al-lone!”

“Now why would I do that, my sweet little Hanna? I want you for my

own.”

“W-why would you w-want m-me?” she asked. “P-please—just leave me alone!”

“Never. Your power called to me and so I came. You will be mine—mine entirely. I will take you to the Demon Realm and you will suck my cock and drink my burning cum for all eternity!”

Horrible images suddenly invaded Hanna’s head. She saw her pale, lifeless body lying rigid on the bed, her hazel eyes wide open and staring at nothing. Then she saw her spirit—her ghost—being dragged down and down into the darkness...into a pit of endless night filled with suffering souls that screamed and begged to die even though they were already dead, that prayed for the light that never came...

“No!” she screamed breathlessly but it came out as a whisper. She tried to sit up, to get away, but a cold weight had settled on her chest, making it difficult to breathe and impossible to move.

“You will be mine,” the Dark Entity told her again. *“As soon as you surrender to me and give me your body, I will be able to take your soul.”*

“Never!” Hanna whispered. She understood now what he was saying—that the moment she willingly gave him her body, he would be able to take control of her spirit as well. “Never!” she vowed again. “You disgust me! You...you might rape me but I’ll *never* give in willingly!”

“That is what you think, my lovely little Hanna...”

Out of the darkness, a pale hand appeared. It had long fingers that seemed to have too many joints and each was tipped with a razor-sharp, pointed black nail.

As she lay there, unable to move, the index finger hovered over her face and then dipped down and began to write something on her forehead.

Hanna screamed and writhed helplessly. It felt like the Dark Entity was etching her skin with acid! But though she struggled as hard as she could, the cold weight on her chest wouldn’t let her move until he was done.

Finally the hand disappeared again and the blazing red eyes looked down into hers.

“The next time I come to you, you will welcome me—even beg me to take you,” the low, demonic voice snarled in her ears. *“Once I shove my cock in your tight little pussy and fill you with my burning seed, you will be mine. And then I’ll take you with me...soon you will be my wife!”*

“Never!” Hanna gasped again and then the weight on top of her seemed

to squeeze all the air out of her at once. With a breathless gasp, the world around her faded and everything went black.

HANNA

Hanna woke with a start in the middle of her bed. By the relentless Florida sunshine streaming through her windows she thought it must be almost noon. Her body was drenched in cold sweat and she felt sick to her stomach.

At first she couldn't understand why she felt so bad, but then she remembered the Dark Entity's visit the night before. The cold weight on her chest, squeezing the breath out of her...the vision she'd had of the pit of damned souls screaming and begging to die so the agony would end...and most of all, the Demon's assertion that she would give in to him and that he would take her once she did.

He wants to fuck me! And once he takes my body, he'll have full access to my soul, she thought.

The idea of the demonic entity entering her body caused her stomach to rebel. She stumbled off the rickety pull-out bed and barely made it to the bathroom before the contents of her stomach came up in a hot, loose rush. There wasn't much—she hadn't had time for dinner the night before, though she'd eaten the rest of an appetizer one of her customers didn't want. It had been Jalapeno poppers and now Hanna regretted every spicy bite.

She leaned over the toilet bowl, tears stinging her eyes as the bile stung her throat.

Maybe it was just a bad dream, whispered a small, hopeful voice in her head. *Just a really bad, terrible, awful nightmare. After all, he's never been able to cross the wards before, right? So maybe you just dreamed the whole thing.*

Hanna wiped her mouth on a swatch of toilet paper and flushed the toilet. Maybe it *was* just a bad dream. Maybe she was finally going crazy—just like

her parents thought she was all those years ago.

Rising on unsteady legs, she rinsed out her mouth in the tiny, stained sink. Then she splashed water on her face and looked at herself in the rusty mirror.

“Just a bad dream,” she told her reflection, willing it to be true. “Just a nightmare. Just...”

The words died on her lips as she felt a burning sensation on her forehead. Her eyes were drawn upward and in the mirror she saw a line of fiery script appearing slowly, an inch above her eyebrows.

Hanna couldn't read the language it was written in, but the letters burned as they appeared, refuting her pathetic hope that last night had been nothing but a nightmare. The Dark Entity—the Demon—had marked her somehow. He had put his sign on her and now she would *never* be free of him!

“No! No, no, no, no—*NO!*”

Hanna didn't realize she'd shouted aloud until someone in the next apartment hammered on the thin wall and shouted,

“What the fuck?” in an angry, sleepy voice.

Pushing away from the mirror, she ran back to the main room of her apartment and grabbed for her purse. She scrambled madly in it until she found what she was looking for—a thin, golden wire that was meant to fit over the temples.

It was a Think-me—an ingenious Kindred device that made telepathic communication possible. Hanna's Aunt Luna had given it to her, instructing her to use it in case of emergencies. Well *this* was an emergency, all right—possibly the worst one she'd ever had!

Hanna closed her eyes and concentrated, picturing her aunt as she always saw her. Aunt Luna had platinum blonde hair which she dyed blue and purple and she only wore clothes that were black or white or a combination of the two. Now Hanna reached out to her aunt, sending out a plea for help.

After what felt like an eternity, she finally heard Aunt Luna's soft, calm voice in her mind.

“*Hanna, is that you?*”

“*Oh, Aunt Luna! Please, you have to help me!*” Luna sent to her. “*Please, I'm in so much trouble—I can't stay here on Earth one more night! I need to come see you—I need to get away. Please!*”

“*My darling girl, what ever is the matter? No—don't try to tell me now,*” Aunt Luna sent back. “*You just come right to the Human/Kindred Relations*

building in downtown Tampa. You know where it is, right?"

"Yes—Sam and I saw you and Uncle Bruin off there for your honeymoon, remember?"

"Oh, that's right. So can you get there?"

"Yes, I think I have enough gas," Hanna sent, thinking of her nearly empty fuel gage. But she didn't care if it used up the last of her gas to get to the HKR building—she would do anything she had to in order to escape the fate the Dark Entity had planned for her.

"Good—you get there as fast as you can. Uncle Bruin and I are going to come and get you and take you back to the Mother Ship with us. You can tell me all about it there, once you're safe."

"All right," Hanna agreed. Earlier she'd been worried about disturbing her aunt's domestic bliss, but now she was concerned with the fate of her immortal soul! She hated to barge in on them, but she knew her aunt loved her and would do anything to help her. And right now, she needed that more than anything—someone to care for her and keep her safe and protect her.

Someone to drive away the Dark Entity who stalked her. Oh God, she hoped that Aunt Luna could help her. Otherwise, what would she do?

WRAITH

Wraith drifted around the Docking Bay, looking for something to do. Well, not something to *do*, really, since he couldn't actually interact with anything in the physical world. But something or someone new to *see* would be nice.

Anything new would be welcome. In the century since he'd been killed and left to wander the Kindred Mother Ship alone, sometimes he felt like he'd seen everything there was to see. And none of it mattered because he couldn't change any of it. Everything was the same for him, no matter what.

Of course his people, the Kindred, had grown and changed in the time since his demise. He'd seen so many warriors come and go, always searching for their brides. And then, about ten or twelve years ago, something new had happened—the Mother Ship had come to protect a small, blue and white planet called Earth.

Wraith wished he could go explore the Earth—its inhabitants were certainly interesting. But he was stuck aboard the Mother Ship. Every time he tried to seat himself on a shuttle that was about to take off, he found himself sucked through the walls and drifting just above the floor of the Docking Bay, back aboard the place where he had died, as usual.

Eventually he had stopped trying, but he still liked to go and see the new people who arrived on a daily basis. Usually the new arrivals were brides from Earth, coming to do their Claiming Period with the Kindred warrior who had called them. The Earth females were beautiful in Wraith's opinion—they came in so many lovely shades and shapes and a lot of them were Elites, which he loved.

Sometimes he saw uncertainty on their faces when they came to meet

their new mates, but mostly it was joy and excitement. It was nice to watch the way the new brides and their warriors reacted to each other, even though Wraith knew he would never have a bride himself.

No one saw him watching, of course. They looked right through him. Sometimes they *walked* right through him if he didn't get out of the way fast enough. That resulted in a cold shiver for them and an uneasy feeling of drifting apart for him, so Wraith tried to avoid it.

He wasn't expecting anything different today, but he knew a shuttle full of new brides was expected in about an hour and he liked to see them as they first stepped off the ship. So he was surprised when an unexpected shuttle came through the Atmosphere Barrier and landed in the Docking Bay. This couldn't be the brides—it was too early. So who was in the shuttle?

Wraith drifted closer to look. He wished sometimes that he could just walk—he would have paid a million credits to feel his boots make solid contact with the metal floor of the Mother Ship again. But that was impossible—he couldn't make contact with anything or anyone. In death, he was doomed to be nothing but an observer.

As he watched, the door of the shuttle opened and the steps unfolded. First out was Commander Bruin, a middle-aged Beast Kindred who was a member of the High Council. Wraith approved of him—he often sat in on High Council meetings, just to have something to do, and he thought the male had solid judgment.

Next out of the shuttle was Bruin's mate, a middle-aged Earth female who went by the name of Luna, Wraith believed. She was a lovely, if somewhat enigmatic woman and it was clear that Bruin was devoted to her. She was wearing a black and white outfit as always, since those were the only colors she ever dressed in. She—

But his stream of thought was cut off when he saw the third and final passenger coming out of the shuttle.

"Gods!" he muttered hoarsely—though no one could hear his voice but him. Still, he couldn't help the exclamation.

The final passenger was a human female who looked to be a little younger than Luna. She was an Elite—a female the Goddess had blessed with extra full curves—and she was *beautiful*.

Long, golden brown hair flowed in waves down her back and her large, lovely eyes looked silvery-green—though that might have been just because they were filled with tears.

“There, there, Hanna,” Luna said as she put an arm around the other female’s shoulders. “Don’t cry! You’re safe here and you can tell me all about it.”

“Am I? Am I *really* safe?” The girl’s lovely eyes darted around the Docking Bay nervously and happened to fall on Wraith.

And that was when something strange happened.

Usually when people looked at Wraith, they looked right *through* him, because they couldn’t actually *see* him. But when the girl called Hanna’s gaze landed on him, her eyes actually met his for a long, lingering moment. Then she stiffened and swiped at her tears, as though she was embarrassed that he’d seen her crying. Wraith even saw her cheeks go red as she swiftly looked away.

He stared at her, too amazed to do the polite thing and look away himself. She had *seen* him—he was sure of it! For the first time in over a hundred solar years, someone had *seen him!*

“Come on now, let’s get back to our suite and we can talk,” Luna said to the other female.

“I hate to be a burden,” Hanna replied. “I know you and, er, Uncle Bruin are really happy together. I hate that I’m barging in on you two.”

“Oh, you won’t be barging in,” Bruin said, smiling down at her. “Any kin of my mate is welcome here. But to avoid any, er, *embarrassing* situations, I got you a guest suite right beside ours. That way you can have your privacy and still reach us quickly if you have a problem.”

“And by ‘embarrassing situations,’ Bruin means that he still can’t keep his hands off me.” Luna looked up at her mate and smiled and he returned the smile with a knowing one of his own.

“Aunt Luna! You shouldn’t say that so loud!” Hanna’s eyes darted to Wraith again and her cheeks went pink.

“Why not?” Luna asked. “We’re the only ones here.”

“No, we’re not. What about that man?” Hanna’s eyes darted to him again and then away. She dropped her voice but Wraith could still hear her. “I mean, he seems to be listening!”

“What man?” Luna and Bruin both looked in Wraith’s direction but neither of them seemed to see him. Which wasn’t unusual at all. Even people who supposedly had the gift of seeing spirits, like Luna claimed to, couldn’t see Wraith. He thought it must have something to do with the curse he was under, but he wasn’t sure. However, Hanna was clearly seeing him—how

was that possible?

“Never mind,” she said to Luna. “I’m just surprised. So...I’m not staying with you two?”

“No, is that a problem?” Luna asked, frowning.

“I don’t know.” Hanna looked desperately unhappy. “I’ll tell you what happened and then you tell me what you think. But first, let’s get to your suite.” Her eyes darted to Wraith one more time and this time he nodded at her.

Hesitantly, Hanna nodded back. Then she turned and hooked her arm through Luna’s.

“Come on—let’s go.”

They left the Docking Bay and for a long moment Wraith just stood there, his boots hovering a quarter inch above the metal floor as always. How could she see him? What did it mean? And why was she so upset? Was she in some kind of trouble?

He didn’t know but he *had* to find out. However, since Hanna could see him, that was going to make things tricky. He couldn’t just follow them down the corridor and drift through the walls of Luna and Bruin’s suite to observe. He would have to be more careful than that.

But he *would* find a way, Wraith swore to himself. Hanna was the first person who could see him in over a hundred solar years.

He was definitely going to find out all about her.

HANNA

As they made their way back to her Aunt Luna and Uncle Bruin's suite, Hanna couldn't help thinking of the strange, silent warrior who had just been standing there looking at them in the Docking Bay. Who was he and why did he stare at them so rudely? It was almost like he didn't expect them to see him watching!

The thing that made it extra embarrassing was that he was so *handsome*. Well, except for the jagged scar that ran down one side of his face, but somehow that only seemed to emphasize the perfect symmetry of his chiseled features. He also had long, thick black hair that came down past his broad shoulders and he was extremely tall and muscular, like all the Kindred were.

Men that good looking usually looked right through Hanna. She wasn't skinny enough to be worth their interest or to attract their attention. But this man—this warrior—had been staring at her like he couldn't take his eyes off her!

And speaking of his eyes, they were the only thing about him that wasn't symmetrical. Because his left eye was a brilliant blue but his right eye was pure, melted gold. It was a striking combination and Hanna had had to force herself not to stare.

The other odd thing about the strange warrior—besides the fact that Aunt Luna and Uncle Bruin had acted like he wasn't there—was the fact that he was wearing some kind of strange, old-fashioned looking uniform.

Most of the other Kindred warriors dressed in tight black trousers, tall black boots, and long-sleeved uniform shirts that were different colors, depending on what branch of the Kindred tree they came from. Beast Kindred wore scarlet, Blood Kindred wore pale blue, Twin Kindred wore emerald

green and so on.

But the strange warrior who had been staring at her had on a kind of armor that put Hanna in mind of feudal Japan. He had a chain-link sleeveless shirt which showed his muscular arms and a chain-link kilt kind of thing that came down to just above his knees.

Come to think of it, maybe the armor was more like something from the Roman Empire? Or not—she wasn't an armor expert, after all. But what really made her think of Japan was the long, curving blade she'd seen strapped to his back. All of the other Kindred carried blasters—why did the strange warrior have a sword instead?

But she didn't have long to ponder the strange anomalies in the warrior's outfit or wonder why he had been staring at her—before she knew it, the three of them were stepping into Aunt Luna's and Uncle Bruin's suite and her aunt was telling her to make herself comfortable on the couch.

"I'll just go get you some hot tea to drink—that will steady your nerves. Then we can talk," Aunt Luna said.

"Luna, darling, why don't I make the tea?" Uncle Bruin rumbled, raising his bushy black eyebrows. "Hanna's waited long enough to tell you what's troubling her and that will give the two of you some privacy."

"Oh yes—that's a good idea. You're so sweet to me, Bruin." Aunt Luna stood on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to her husband's cheek.

He turned his face at the last minute and the kiss landed on his lips instead.

"That's because you're beautiful and perfect and I have to take care of you," he said, when the kiss broke at last. "And that means taking care of the ones you love as well." He nodded gravely at Hanna who gave him a weak smile. She truly was grateful that he was giving her privacy to talk to her aunt—she hadn't felt comfortable confiding in Luna until the two of them were alone.

As soon as Bruin went into the kitchen—or the food prep area, as the Kindred called it—Aunt Luna sat down beside her on the couch and took Hanna's hands in her own.

"All right now, tell me everything and don't leave anything out," she commanded.

Hanna took a deep breath and began talking.

"...so when I woke up this morning, I was hoping it was all a dream—a nightmare," she finished, some time later. "But then I looked in the mirror

and, well...*look.*”

She lifted the hair off her forehead—she’d left it down to be sure it covered the strange, glowing script. But when she pointed, Aunt Luna only shook her head and frowned.

“I see nothing.”

“What? But it’s right there!” Hanna jumped up. “Do you have a mirror? I’ll point it out to you.”

They went into the bathroom together and Hanna looked anxiously into the 3-D viewer, which was the Kindred version of a mirror, only it showed you from all sides. She would have been ashamed of her ratty jeans and t-shirt—(she’d thrown on the closest thing at hand and hauled ass to the HKR building without even packing anything)—if she hadn’t been so fixated on the glowing red letters that still burned on her forehead.

“See—there!” she said, pointing again.

But again, Aunt Luna shook her head.

“I’m sorry, Hanna—I just don’t see it. But that doesn’t mean there’s nothing there—we both know your Gift involves being able to see Dark Entities and their works while mine does not.”

“Wait—I have an idea. Do you have anything to write on?” Hanna asked her.

Luna brought her a pen and paper and she carefully copied down what she saw on her forehead and then handed it to her Aunt.

“Hmm...” Aunt Luna frowned. “I would have no idea in the world what this said if I hadn’t had a dose of Translation Bacteria. But luckily, I have—Bruin made sure I got some so we could travel to other planets together. But even with the bacteria, this is tough. I *think* it’s some form of Ancient Assyrian but I could be wrong...”

“Maybe I wrote it backwards because I was looking in the mirror?” Hanna suggested.

“Ah—of course. Let me just hold it up to the viewer...”

Aunt Luna did this as she spoke, but what she saw must have been bad, because her lovely face grew grave.

“What? What is it? Did he put some kind of spell on me?” Hanna demanded.

Luna shook her head.

“Worse, I’m afraid. It’s a kind of curse—a *lust* curse, I believe,” she said frowning. “It reads—‘she who is under this brand shall be insatiable.’”

“What?” Hanna demanded. “You’re kidding!”

“I wish I was.” Her aunt looked at her sympathetically. “Oh, Hanna—I’ve been worried something bad was going to happen. The cards have been foretelling trouble for you for *ages*.”

“What? But then why didn’t you *warn* me?” Hanna demanded.

“Because, my dear...” Luna patted her cheek. “The cards *always* foretell trouble for you. And they always have. Your Gift is too extreme for you to live a normal life, I’m afraid.”

“I won’t live any life at all if this...this demon thing gets me!” Hanna put a hand to her throat. “He said that the next time he came to me I would beg him to...to take me.” She shivered with disgust. “You don’t think...is this lust curse he put on me really going to work?”

“I don’t know.” Her aunt looked at her carefully. “Are you feeling extra, er, *amorous* right now?”

“I don’t *think* so,” Hanna said, frowning. “But I’ve been so upset from the minute I woke up. Is there any way to remove it?”

“My dear, I can’t even *see* it,” Aunt Luna reminded her. “But I’ll look in my Wiccan books and see if I can find any kind of spell or ritual that will remove ill-intended magic. Of course, most of those spells are meant to remove magic cast by another human—*not* a demonic being.”

“I’m so afraid he’s going to get me, Aunt Luna.” Hanna clutched her aunt’s hand. “What if he comes for me tonight?”

“I don’t see how he can—we’re above the Earthly realm here,” her aunt said calmly. “I’m sorry he marked you, Hanna, but I think that coming up here to the Mother Ship was the best thing you could possibly have done. You should be removed from his influence here which means you’re *safe*.” She squeezed Hanna’s hand for emphasis.

“Do...do you really think so?” Hanna asked hopefully.

“I really do.” Her aunt gave her a hug. “I can’t tell you how much I’ve longed for you to come up here where I can keep an eye on you! I wish your sister would come too, but I know she has her own life. And now, at least, she’s mated to a Kindred, so I know she has a protector who will always shield her from harm.”

“But what about my life down on Earth?” Hanna asked. “Am I just supposed to abandon it?”

“My dear...I don’t want to be rude or belittle you in any way but *what* life?” Aunt Luna said gently. “I know you once hoped to teach at a

university, but you haven't been able to finish your degree and now all you seem to do is go from job to job, each one worse than the last."

Hanna wanted to protest, but she knew her aunt was right. She thought of the miserable waitressing gig at Denny's with her horrible manager and the rude customers and awful hours. Maybe Aunt Luna was right—maybe she *did* belong aboard the Kindred Mother Ship.

"I really think you're going to like it here," Aunt Luna told her. "There are very few shades and spirits here—most of the Kindred go immediately to the afterlife to be with their Goddess as soon as they die. And those that do remain are peaceful and content. So there will hopefully be far fewer distractions here—you might even be able to resume your studies."

"I guess so..." Hanna still had a few doubts. "But...won't it be weird, me being the only single woman on board? I mean, aren't all the other Earth women up here mated to Kindred warriors?"

"That's true, they are," Aunt Luna admitted. "But you never can tell... you *might* meet a Kindred warrior of your own." She winked at Hanna knowingly and put an arm around her shoulders to give her a little squeeze.

"*Maybe*," Hanna said doubtfully. "But I can't help thinking they'll all just think I'm crazy—the way human men do."

"My dear, that is simply *not true*," her aunt said firmly. "I promise you, the Kindred are *much* more open to the idea of the supernatural than human men are. Your Uncle Bruin has never doubted my Gift once!"

"Of course, it helped that she read my cards and told me completely accurate things about my life and my past that only *I* knew the first time we met," Bruin rumbled, coming into the room with a tray filled with tea things in his large hands. He sat the tray on the decorative table in front of the couch. "I hope I'm not interrupting? I would have knocked but I had my hands full."

"No, I think we're about finished with the hard stuff." Aunt Luna raised her eyebrows at Hanna. "Aren't we, my dear?"

"I...guess so." Hanna's hand went to her forehead involuntarily. "I don't suppose there's any way to tell if this, uh, thing is going to suddenly start, um, affecting me?"

"Only time will tell. As I said, I'll try to find a spell to remove it. In the meantime, have some tea—it will make you feel better," Aunt Luna urged, as she poured Hanna a cup of the steaming, fragrant liquid.

"You always think tea makes everything better," Hanna said, smiling

despite herself. Her aunt was a firm believer that almost nothing couldn't be solved with a hot cup of tea.

"That's because it *does*," Luna said firmly. "Now drink up. And later on, maybe we can introduce you to some of the eligible warriors aboard the ship." She looked up at her husband. "I've been telling Hanna that I'd feel so much better if she had a Kindred mate to protect her."

"Not yet, please," Hanna said quickly. "I don't feel ready for anything like that right now."

"No, of course not. Forgive me for rushing you," Aunt Luna said. "I just want you to have a Protector, my dear. Someone who will keep you safe and make you feel loved and cared for. Someone who will *cherish* you."

For some reason the image of the handsome warrior with the mismatched eyes crossed Hanna's mind, but she pushed the thought firmly away. Men like that didn't date women like her, she told herself. They dated leggy supermodels and Instagram influencers. There was no way Mr. Tall, Dark and Hot was going to have an interest in plus-sized her. In fact, she would probably never even see him again.

She had no idea how wrong she was.

HANNA

Hanna took her time getting ready for bed that night. She was putting off going to sleep, but she was also enjoying her new surroundings. The guest suite which was located right beside Aunt Luna and Uncle Bruin's suite was a complete one eighty from her old apartment.

For instance, instead of a single, rusty shower stall and a stained sink and toilet, she had a huge bathroom with top-of-the-line fixtures and a bathing pool that was practically big enough to swim in. Hanna did do some swimming—and some soaking—though she was still a bit too tense to totally relax.

The rest of the suite was amazing too. The bedroom had a huge bed with a thick, luxurious mattress, silky, cool sheets, and big puffy pillows. After sleeping on the lumpy fold-out couch for so long, Hanna was sure it was going to be a treat to drift off in such luxury. *If* she could relax enough to go to sleep, that was.

The food prep area was well stocked—though admittedly most of the food was Kindred cuisine she wasn't used to. But her aunt had promised to make a grocery order and have some "Earth food" delivered. They were going to have to go shopping for clothes, too. Hanna hadn't packed a thing other than what was in her purse. Not that anything she'd left behind was worth much, but it was a little inconvenient to have to borrow Aunt Luna's clothes until she could get some of her own.

For now she had a lovely white silky nightdress to wear to bed. She was taller than her aunt, so it would be a little short on her, but she didn't really mind.

Already she was beginning to see that Aunt Luna was right—the Mother

Ship was a wonderful place to live. There was free healthcare and free education for anyone who wanted to take classes. Also, unlimited maternity leave and free childcare if and when she ever wanted to have children. Yeah right—she'd have to find a guy who didn't think she was crazy first, Hanna told herself dryly.

But the best thing so far about the Mother Ship was the blessed lack of Imps or Dark Entities of any kind. Either the Kindred were much more honorable, kind, and truthful than human men or else they simply lacked the nasty little demonic creatures because they were aliens from another planet and the Imps were tied to the Earthly Realm.

Hanna suspected it might be a combination of the two, but for whatever reason, it was nice not to be constantly distracted by the evil little spirits. They didn't just leer at her when she was on Earth—they often pinched or poked her or jumped out at her at unexpected times, just to see her scream. She hadn't had a supernatural creature jump-scare her since she'd come aboard the Mother Ship and it was *wonderful*.

It was amazing, she reflected, how much calmer she felt when she didn't have the constant threat of some ugly little spirit scaring or pinching or poking her at any moment. It made her wonder if she might be able to pick up her studies again. Several of the major Earth universities had branches at the Mother Ship now—maybe a degree in English Lit *was* back on the table.

She also hadn't seen any dead people since she arrived. As Aunt Luna had promised, spirits and shades seemed to be few and far between up here. It was nice not to have to worry that she might turn the corner and confront an angry ghost at any moment.

Of course, she had been on board less than twenty-four hours, so it was too early to say for sure yet, if things were going to work out here. But so far, Hanna was cautiously optimistic.

She couldn't be *completely* calm and optimistic though—not until she'd had her first night aboard and made sure that the Dark Entity which was stalking her really was unable to reach her here.

Aunt Luna seemed to think she was perfectly safe—though she *had* come into the guest suite and taken the precaution of placing some wards herself. She had also made sure that Hanna had an extra Think-me on her bedside table in case of emergencies.

“The minute you have a problem or even *think* you have a problem, just put on the Think-me and bespeak me and Bruin,” she told Hanna. “We'll be

over there in a hot minute, I promise.”

Taking all these precautions had gone a long way to soothing Hanna’s anxiety, but she could still feel some worry simmering in the back of her mind, like a pot on the stove that might boil over at any minute. She wasn’t going to feel completely safe, she thought, until she spent an entire night without the intrusion of the Dark Entity and got the damn lust curse off her forehead.

There was no luck on that front so far—Aunt Luna had tried several spells and counter spells but Hanna could still see the fiery letters glowing on her forehead whenever she looked in the mirror. However, she still hadn’t felt any effects of it, meaning she *wasn’t* particularly horny. Even in the luxurious bathing pool, she had no urge to “help herself out,” as her aunt had delicately put it when she and Samantha were growing up and they came to her with questions.

Hanna had a feeling that her sex drive might return if she could feel safe and protected, but for now, it was still missing in action.

When she finally put on the white silk gown and slid between the cool, crisp sheets, she hoped she would be able to get to sleep. Aunt Luna had offered her some sleep medication—supposedly all natural and completely hangover-free—but Hanna had refused it. She wanted to be instantly alert if the demon thing came back. The memory of being frozen in place as the Dark Entity sat on her chest and leered down at her, was still vivid in her mind. If she saw even a *hint* of the glowing red eyes anywhere in her room, she was grabbing for the Think-me at once to call for help!

It took some time for her to settle down. As lovely and luxurious as her new bedroom was, it was still completely unfamiliar. The mattress felt almost *too* comfortable and the pillows were too puffy. Hanna was used to sleeping on the lumpy, thin fold-out couch mattress with a pillow so flat she had to double it over to get any neck support at all.

At last, however, she found a comfortable position and her eyes began to drift closed. She had left the light in the bathroom on and the bathroom door cracked but otherwise the room was in darkness. There were no windows the Dark Entity could get through and the bed was triple warded. And most importantly, she saw no glowing red eyes in the shadows.

Maybe Aunt Luna is right—maybe the Dark Entity is confined to the Earthly Realm—like the Imps, she thought hopefully as she yawned. Maybe I can finally get a good night’s sleep for the first time in months...

And so thinking, she finally drifted off, completely unaware that she was being watched.

WRAITH

When Hanna's breathing became even and regular, Wraith finally felt comfortable stepping out from his hiding place inside the wall.

He didn't like hiding in solid objects—he could do it, but his vision was somewhat obstructed and he could feel the molecules of whatever he was in vibrating hard, wanting to get rid of him. Still, he had spent most of his afternoon and evening doing exactly that, since it was the only way he could find out what was happening with the intriguing little Elite.

As far as he could tell, she seemed to be in fear because some kind of demonic force was pursuing her. Wraith knew a thing or two about Dark Forces—he had tangled with them before, greatly to his detriment. So he could understand her fear.

He could also see the fiery runes the Dark Entity had placed on her forehead—they burned and glowed and were extremely obvious when she had her hair pulled out of the way. But he hadn't gotten a chance to get a really good look at them and he wanted to—he felt like maybe there was more to the curse than even her Aunt Luna knew.

Wraith had decided to wait until she went to sleep to see if he could get a better look at them. He didn't watch her while she was naked or bathing—he was an honorable male and it would have been wrong to spy on her when she was in such a vulnerable position. But he did hang around her suite—hidden in this wall or that—and watched as she explored it. He liked to hear her little murmurs of surprise or pleasure, such as when she sat on the mattress and exclaimed to herself,

“Oh! So soft!” as though she wasn't used to such luxury.

He had also watched her trying some of the Kindred food. She had put a

meal cube into the rehydrator and made herself a serving of *k'achik-ston*—a meat dish with a fiery hot sauce most frequently served on the Beast Kindred home world of Rageron.

Wraith had watched her taste it and then make a face and run to the cold unit to get something to drink to ease the burning in her mouth. He wished he could come out and explain that she needed to pour the pale yellow *ping-sha* sauce over the meal to neutralize some of the heat. But he was afraid that she would get upset if he suddenly appeared in her food prep unit and started instructing her on how to eat Kindred cuisine, so he remained hidden.

She had put the rest of the meal back into the cold unit—clearly she didn't like to waste food but she didn't feel up to eating any more of it. Wraith wished again that he could talk to her—that he could recommend a meal cube that she might enjoy. She needed to eat, after all, or she would lose her luscious curves and she wouldn't be an Elite anymore, which would be a damn shame.

But again, he couldn't say anything or let himself be seen, so he just watched her.

This wasn't the first time he'd watched a beautiful woman—when he had first died, he had been obsessed with watching the female that he loved—Mara, the one he had hoped to Bond with. He had wanted so badly to comfort her as she grieved for him, but she had been unable to see or hear him. Eventually she had moved away from the Mother Ship, going back to the Blood Kindred home world, Tranq Prime, where he had first met her.

Wraith had picked up from various conversations that she had Joined with another male and had several children. At first he had felt angry and betrayed, but after a time reason prevailed. After all, he wanted her to be happy and since he was unable to provide for her and protect her, he was glad that she'd found another male who could.

He had missed Mara terribly at first, but now over fifty solar cycles had passed since he had heard anyone mention her and he assumed she was dead. She must have passed into the afterlife, however, since he had never seen her. Or else, if she had gotten stuck like he was, she might be still on Tranq Prime, which was presumably the place of her death.

After Mara had moved out of his life—or death, he supposed—Wraith had never taken much interest in any other female. With very few exceptions, Kindred are monogamous—once a warrior gives his heart to a partner, no one else catches his eye or holds his attention.

But Wraith found himself intrigued by Hanna—*more* than intrigued actually. He couldn't seem to stop watching her. So as soon as she finally fell asleep, he came out from the extremely uncomfortable wall he'd been hiding in and drifted over to her bedside.

She was lying on her side with her knees pulled up and her arms folded, her hands tucked under her chin. It was a strangely vulnerable, childlike posture and he couldn't help thinking how beautiful she was and wishing that he could protect her from whatever it was that she feared.

There was a slight frown on her lush lips and a little wrinkle between her eyebrows, as though she was having a bad dream. After a moment, she began murmuring in her sleep.

“No...no, please! Don't touch me...don't take me there!”

Wraith frowned sympathetically. Poor little female—she really was having a bad time. He wished he could wake her, but he was powerless to do anything but watch.

He wanted to see the glowing runes on her forehead, but she had moved so her hair was covering her face. However, after a few moments of muttering to herself, she turned on her back and he was able to see the burning red runes.

Wraith's frown deepened as he studied them. It wasn't just what the runes said—it was the evil intent he could feel coming from them. He put out a hand, letting it hover over her forehead to absorb some of the energy. A feeling of malevolence so strong it nearly burned him came from the curse! It was mixed with an oily feeling of greedy lust—a gluttonous hunger to devour the cursed one and digest her for eternity while she writhed in unspeakable pain in the darkness of the Pit.

Wraith drew back his hand, rubbing it against his armor as though he'd touched something unclean—impure. This was no ordinary curse! And the creature who had marked Hanna was no ordinary demon. There was power in the burning letters scratched into her forehead—a stamp of ownership it would be hard to refute if the Dark Entity came for her.

Wraith shook his head—he wondered if her aunt had any idea how deadly the curse Hanna carried was. If so, she ought to be more concerned for her kin. Hanna's life and indeed her immortal soul were in dire danger and it seemed like no one had realized that fact.

He wished *desperately* that he could warn her. He didn't want to see such a lovely Elite dragged to the underworld and tormented for all eternity! She

seemed so sweet and innocent—she didn't deserve such a terrible fate.

At this point her dream seemed to get worse because she began thrashing in the bed and crying out in a louder voice.

“No...*No, please! Don't touch me! Leave me alone!*”

Instinctively, Wraith leaned down to shake her awake and end her torment. He forgot he couldn't touch her—or anything else for that matter—as he placed his hand on her shoulder and called her name.

“Hanna? Hanna, wake up! It's a dream—only a dream.”

At that point, several things happened simultaneously.

First, Wraith realized that he could actually *feel* her under his hand. Her flesh was solid and so was his when he touched her—yes, he was actually *touching her!* He could feel the warmth of her body and the softness of her skin. It was like a miracle!

Second, Hanna's eyes flew open and she stared up at him with stark terror on her lovely face.

“Who...what...what are you doing in my room?” she gasped, finally getting the words out. “And who are you? How did you get in here?”

“I'm sorry!” Wraith held up both hands in a gesture of peace. “I didn't mean to startle you, Hanna. You were having a bad dream.”

“How do you know my name?” she demanded. “How dare you come in here?” Not waiting for an answer, she reached for the thin golden wire circlet on her bedside table with shaking fingers. “Get out of here—get out *now* or I'm calling my uncle—he's on the High Council!”

Wraith could see that he'd made a grave mistake—in trying to ease her anxiety by waking her from the nightmare, he'd made it ten times worse. She was frightened of him now and who could blame her? Of course she was scared—being woken from a sound sleep to find a strange warrior she didn't know standing over her would certainly be frightening.

“I'm sorry—please forgive me for scaring you,” he said shortly. “I'll go now—maybe we can talk later.”

And before she could say anything else, he drifted quickly through the wall of her bed chamber and away from her.

As he went, he couldn't help thinking what a mess he'd made of things! For the first time in over a hundred solar cycles a woman could actually see him and what did he do? He frightened her nearly to death!

“Stupid, Wraith,” he muttered to himself. “Really fucking stupid!”

But though he was angry with himself, another part of him was still in

shock. Not only could she see him—she could *feel* him too—and *he* could feel *her*. For a brief moment he had almost been corporeal again.

His hand still tingled with the warmth and softness of her skin and he had no idea what to do next—he only knew he *had* to find another way to talk to her and get to know her—to touch her again.

Not only that, he *had* to have her—Hanna was the first person in over a hundred years that he could touch and already he hungered for her.

HANNA

Hanna sat up in bed, staring at the wall the mysterious warrior with the mismatched eyes had disappeared through. Was he a ghost? A spirit of some kind?

It was the only explanation she could think of for the way he seemed able to move through solid objects. But the strange thing was, he didn't *look* like a ghost.

Almost all of the shades and spirits she'd ever seen had a kind of faded, gray, almost see-through appearance. And most of them seemed to be stuck in the moment of their death—or else repeating an endless cycle of some kind. Like *Abuelita* back at her apartment, endlessly cooking and baking, which was something she must have loved to do during her life.

That was a nice cycle, at least—much better than the ghost of the nasty, abusive husband who paced outside his old apartment and cursed his wife in an angry, hoarse voice only Hanna could hear. But neither one of them could carry on a conversation with her, even if she tried.

Anytime she'd ever attempted to talk with a ghost, Hanna had never been able to get sense out of them. Her older sister, Sam, was a kind of Ghost Whisperer—she was good and leading lost spirits into the afterlife. But all the ones that Hanna had spoken to just mumbled and murmured to themselves. None of them had ever called her by name or talked directly to her in a way that made any sense.

And there was another thing—the strange warrior had *touched* her. Not to pinch or poke like the cruel Imps did, though—his touch had been kind and firm and strangest of all *warm*. Every other ghost she'd ever touched had felt as cold as ice—but not the strange warrior. Heat seemed to radiate from his

hand to her skin. Also, he *smelled* good. He had a warm, spicy, masculine scent that lingered in the air long after he was gone. Hanna had never smelled any ghost before—for which she was profoundly grateful, considering the circumstances of some of their deaths.

She frowned to herself as she considered the situation. Could it be he *wasn't* a ghost? Maybe he was new kind of Kindred she'd never heard of? Like an elemental Kindred or something? But if that was true, why had she been the only one who could see him in the Docking Bay?

No, he *must* be a ghost, Hanna decided. The question was, what should she do about his nocturnal visit?

Her heart had stopped pounding by now and she felt considerably calmer. She looked down at the golden wire circlet of the Think-me uncertainly and then slowly put it back down on the bedside table. There was no point in waking up Aunt Luna for a ghost that only Hanna could see. He must not have any evil intent towards her, or he couldn't have gotten through the wards. And he had even apologized for frightening her. So he was a polite ghost—that was *something*.

At last, she decided the only thing she could do was try to get back to sleep. Hopefully the warrior with the mismatched eyes would leave her alone for the rest of the night. If he wanted to talk, Hanna wouldn't mind if he approached her during the daytime, when she was awake. She would certainly tell him, though, not to bother her in the middle of the night again!

She got up to use the bathroom and take a drink of water and then settled in the unfamiliar bed once more. Another person might have lain there, freaking out for hours. But Hanna had been seeing spirits and shades all her life and she'd had *much* worse encounters with ghosts before. So in a relatively small amount of time, she was able to drift off again...

Only to wake an hour later with a cold weight pressing her down into the mattress and a malevolent voice hissing in her ear.

HANNA

“**S**o here you are, my sweet little Hanna,” the voice of the Dark Entity hissed in her ear. “*It took me some time to find you, but here you are at last.*”

Hanna stiffened and tried to reach for the Think-me on the nightstand beside her. But she found that her entire body was paralyzed and she was completely unable to move her hand and arm.

“*I took the liberty of immobilizing you.*” Burning red eyes blazed down into hers. “*Now that I have placed my mark on you, your body is mine to do with as I please...*”

As he spoke, Hanna felt a cold, claw-tipped hand stroke her breast through the white silk of her nightdress. Her nipple hardened at once, but not in lust—she could only feel fear and loathing of the monstrous creature that was covering her body with its own.

The Dark Entity seemed to read her mind.

“*Don’t worry, my darling little Hanna,*” he snarled. “*It’s been long enough since I marked you with my curse—soon your body will come to life as it never has before. And when it does, you’ll **beg** for me to quench your thirst and ease your lust. And the moment you invite me in, you’re MINE!*”

“No!” Hanna gasped. “No, I’ll never do that!”

“*Oh, yes you will—you’ll be my wanton little slut before the night is out!*”

The claws of the cold hand covering her breast curved inward—at first Hanna feared that the Dark Entity meant to cut or maim her. But instead, the claws caught in the material of the nightgown and gripped hard. With a low, ripping sound, the demon on top of her tore open the top of her nightgown.

A rush of freezing air stung her bare breasts and Hanna gasped again in fear and horror. Her heart was pounding desperately against her ribs but she couldn't get up or get away—couldn't move at all to fight. She was helpless because the Dark Entity had paralyzed her entire body!

"It was very foolish of you, trying to run away from me," he continued, still leering down at her. *"You know I can only come to you in darkness, so what did you do? You **surrounded** yourself with darkness—with endless night! That wasn't very smart, my sweet little slut."*

Hanna's heart sank. How could she be so stupid as to think she could get away from the demon? She'd thought he was stuck on Earth but she had been wrong. And there was no real daylight here on the Mother Ship, since it was in space, orbiting the Moon. She had trapped herself in an even worse situation than she'd been in back home!

"Running away didn't work and your wards can't keep me out," the Dark Entity snarled in her ear. *"Why don't you give in to the curse and beg me to take you?"*

The weight on her body shifted and Hanna was horrified to feel something as heavy as lead and cold as a corpse settle between her legs.

"You want it—you know you do!" Something that felt like a long, thick icicle began grinding against her pussy through the silky material of the gown. Everywhere it touched her Hanna felt a burning pain, yet she was unable to move to get away.

"No!" she gasped. *"No—get off me! You're hurting me!"*

"That's the idea, my little whore," the thing on top of her snarled. *"I'm going to take my time with you—fucking you and devouring you. Can't wait to shove my cock inside your hot, wet little cunt while I gnaw on your nipples. They look so juicy and pink...I might just bite them right off!"*

A wide, bloody grin filled with fangs suddenly appeared in the darkness above her. The lipless mouth parted and a long, forked tongue unrolled to lick her cheek, covering it in cold slime.

Hanna felt like she was going to explode from the sheer volume of terror building up inside her. Not being able to move while the demon raped her at his leisure *and* bit pieces of her off at the same time—it was *unthinkable*. She was afraid that her mind might give way the moment he started!

"No!" she shrieked at the top of her lungs. *"No, leave me alone! Get off me!"*

"Scream all you want, little Hanna," the Dark Entity hissed, its forked

tongue lolling from its jagged grin. *“No one can hear you. No one is coming to save you. No one—”*

“You son of a bitch—get the Seven Hells away from her!” an unfamiliar voice shouted.

HANNA

Hanna gasped and her head would have jerked in the direction of the voice if she'd been able to move. But she saw what was going on soon enough.

The huge warrior with the mismatched eyes was in her room again. He was looming over the Dark Entity and he had his curving blade drawn. It was glowing with a brilliant white light and when he sliced it through the horrible pool of darkness covering Hanna's body, there was a sound like steel slicing through flesh.

The burning red eyes above her narrowed and the demon howled in fury and pain.

"*You dare!*" it hissed and turned to face the warrior, who held his ground.

"Get away from her—get *off* her you bastard!" he growled. He stabbed with the sword again but this time it seemed the Dark Entity was too quick. It moved with a jerk that Hanna could feel and suddenly—oh thank God!—the icy weight on top of her was gone and she could move her limbs again.

"*She is MINE! I claim her—my mark is on her flesh!*" the Dark Entity gnashed its fangs, trying to bite the warrior, who jumped back nimbly.

"She's not yours, demon! Go and never return—leave her alone in the name of the Goddess!" As he spoke, the warrior sliced with his sword again and he seemed to score another hit.

There was an angry howl and suddenly the burning red eyes were all the way across the room, glaring at the warrior.

"*This isn't over!*" it hissed. "*I have claimed the girl as my own—her body belongs to me! Her **soul** belongs to me!*"

"You have no claim on her, you fucker!" the warrior growled. "Back to the Pit where you belong! This female is innocent—you cannot have her!"

He stabbed forward again and there was an unearthly howl from the Dark Entity. Then the burning red eyes rushed through the wall of Hanna's bedroom as it finally ran away.

The warrior seemed about to go after it, but Hanna held out a hand to him.

"Please!" she gasped, her words choked with tears. "Please, I...I don't know who you are, but don't leave me!"

The warrior looked indecisive.

"The demon is wounded," he pointed out. "If I can catch it before it leaves the Mother Ship, I might be able to finish it off."

But all Hanna could think about was being alone in the room—alone and vulnerable and helpless.

"What if it comes back for me?" she cried. "Please—don't leave!" Then she dissolved into sobs of terror and couldn't say any more.

The warrior sheathed his sword and came back to her at once. Sitting down on the bed beside her, he put a warm, comforting arm around Hanna's shaking shoulders.

She leaned against him, unable to do anything for a long time but sob and shake as she struggled to hold onto her sanity.

The Dark Entity was gone...but for how long? And what would she do the next time it came for her?

There were no answers—only tears.

WRAITH

Wraith's heart fisted in his chest as he cradled the little Elite against his side. She felt so fragile, curled against him. It had been well over a century since he'd held a female and he had forgotten how small and breakable they were. He wanted to comfort her but he wanted to be careful with her as well, so he simply held her while she cried and didn't say anything.

At last, she looked up at him with wet eyes. Her long lashes were matted with tears and her eyes were huge and filled with emotion.

"It...it would have killed me," she somehow managed to get out. "It said it would...would rape me and...and eat me at the...at the *same time!*"

Wraith felt sick with anger for her. The poor little female! He wanted to comfort her, but he wasn't sure how to do that, so he said the only thing he could think of.

"The demon won't touch you again," he told her. "I *swear* it, Hanna—I give you my Oath as a Kindred warrior—I won't let him near you again!"

"Who...who are you?" She managed to get out. "Are you watching over me for some reason?"

"I guess in a way," Wraith said hesitantly. "I noticed you in the Docking Bay and I saw *you* noticing *me*. I mean—you were able to *see* me. That hasn't happened in a long time."

"You're a ghost, right?" she asked, looking up at him. "A spirit who got left behind?"

Wraith nodded.

"That's right and you're the only one who's ever been able to see me." He shook his head. "This is the first conversation I've had in over a century."

Her eyes widened.

“I’m sorry you’ve been trapped for so long. My sister—she has a Gift like mine, but hers is more practical. She’s really good at guiding lost spirits to the afterlife. Maybe she could help you find the way home.”

“I’m not going anywhere as long as you’re in danger,” Wraith said firmly. “Didn’t I just give you my Oath to protect you?”

“But...you don’t even know me,” she pointed out.

“No, but I’d like to.” She was still leaning against him with his arm around her shoulder, so Wraith gave her a gentle squeeze. “Who are you?” he asked. “And how long have you been able to see people like me?”

“You already seem to know my name—Hanna,” she pointed out. “Were you eavesdropping on me?”

“If you mean was I watching you—yes I was,” Wraith admitted. “I wanted to know more about you. As I said, you’re the first person who’s been able to see me in over a century. That made me curious about you.”

She nibbled her lush lower lip.

“I guess I can see that,” she said at last, nodding.

“I’m Wraith, by the way,” Wraith said. “It only seems fair that you know my name since I know yours.”

“Nice to meet you, Wraith.” She let out a shaky laugh that was more than a half sob. “Not that this is exactly a typical introduction—you saving me from a demon.”

“I’m glad I was close enough to hear your cries,” he said seriously.

“I am too. *Really* glad.”

She shifted in his arms and looked down at herself. There was a large rip in the front of her nightdress which showed the creamy inner curves of her breasts. Wraith had noticed it of course, but he’d been concentrating on comforting her—he couldn’t feel much desire when she was so distraught.

“Oh!” she exclaimed and pulled the ragged parts of the dress together. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to, uh, flash you.”

“I’m not offended,” Wraith assured her. “I also want to make something clear—when I accidentally woke you earlier tonight, I wasn’t, er, trying to take advantage of you. I was *trying* to get a better look at the runes on your forehead.”

“Runes?” Her fingertips went to the burning lines that still glowed just above her eyebrows. “My Aunt Luna said they might be ancient Assyrian.”

“They’re runic symbols and they have the energy of evil,” Wraith said

grimly. “The demon that is after you has marked you most powerfully.”

“I wish I could get them off!” She rubbed at her forehead fiercely, but the glowing symbols remained. “He—the Dark Entity—seems to think they’ll make me *lust* after him.” Her face screwed up in an expression of disgust. “He said they’ll make me *beg* him to...to take me. And once he does, then he can drag me down to Hell with him—or wherever it is he came from.”

“The Demonic Realms, I imagine,” Wraith said. “It’s one of the Seven Hells.”

“Do you really think the curse he put on me will work, though? I mean it *can’t*—can it?” She looked up at him pleadingly.

“I don’t know,” Wraith said honestly. “Do you feel any different?”

She made a face.

“I don’t exactly feel, er, ‘amorous’ as my aunt puts it, if that’s what you’re asking. Probably because I was scared to death, but also because that thing is *disgusting*.”

“Let me look at them again.” Wraith swept her hair aside with one hand and leaned in, getting a good look once more at the glowing symbols. After a moment, he shook his head. “The runes he carved in your flesh are strong ones—they speak of ownership and possession—of lust and hunger and greed to devour.”

Hanna shivered and pressed closer to his side.

“You seem to know a lot about them. Do you know of any way to get rid of them?”

“The demon that put them there must be killed or driven back to the Pit,” Wraith told her. He frowned. “Since they still glow so brightly, I’m afraid it’s clear the creature still lives. I only wounded him.”

“I should have let you go after him,” Hanna said, bowing her head. “I was just so *terrified* it might come back for me the minute you left.”

“Hey...of course you were frightened. It’s not your fault.” Wraith lifted her chin gently, marveling at how soft her skin was as he did. When Hanna met his eyes he cupped her cheek and swiped at the tear tracks on her face with his thumb. “*None* of this is your fault.”

“It *must* be.” She looked away. “Why else would he be after me?”

“You clearly have an extremely powerful gift,” Wraith told her. “Your kin—your Aunt Luna has one as well and you tell me your sister does too. But Hanna, each of them have a single candle—you have a star that’s gone nova inside you! Now that I’m close to you, I can feel it. It’s like a tingling

current of energy running through you.”

“Oh, am I, er, shocking you?” She started to move away but Wraith pulled her back gently.

“Even if you were, I wouldn’t want you to leave,” he told her. “But you’re not—it’s just something I can feel. Maybe because I’m a ghost.”

“Well, you’re the most solid looking ghost I’ve ever seen,” Hanna told him. “I’ve never seen a ghost that looked so, well, so *alive*.”

“I didn’t feel alive until I met you,” Wraith told her. “Do you know how long it’s been since I touched someone? Since I held a beautiful woman in my arms?”

“Oh, er...thank you.” Her cheeks went pink.

“I didn’t mean to embarrass you,” Wraith said. “But you are, you know—beautiful. I hope it doesn’t make you uncomfortable for me to say that but I noticed your beauty when you first came from that shuttle in the Docking Bay.”

“I, uh, noticed you too,” she admitted, looking down at her hands. She glanced up at him for a moment. “Especially your eyes. What kind of Kindred are you?”

“A Hybrid—half Blood Kindred and half Beast.” He grinned briefly, showing the short, sharp fangs that proclaimed the Blood Kindred part of his heritage. “That’s why I have one blue eye and one gold,” he added.

“Oh—I wondered.” She nodded and then yawned.

The yawn seemed to catch her by surprise because she clapped a hand over her mouth and her eyes went wide.

“Oh, I’m so sorry—that was rude! I’m not bored or anything, I’m just suddenly so...so...” She yawned again, hiding it with her hand. “So *tired*.”

“Of course you are—it’s the middle of the night,” Wraith said reasonably. “You need to sleep.”

“I’m afraid to.” Her lovely eyes went wide. “What...what if he comes back?”

“I don’t think the demon will return tonight,” Wraith assured her. “I wounded him pretty badly. But if it will make you feel better, I’ll stand at the end of your bed with my sword drawn all night, guarding your sleep.”

“You’d really do that for me? But...you just met me.”

“And I gave you my Oath of Protection,” Wraith reminded her.

“But...don’t you need to sleep too?” she protested.

“I never sleep. I’m a ghost,” he reminded her.

“Oh—that’s right.” Her cheeks went pink with embarrassment. “How could I forget? It’s just...you’re not like any ghost I’ve ever met before. And believe me, I’ve been seeing ghosts since I was a baby.”

“That must have been hard for you,” Wraith remarked. “Carrying such a powerful Gift—such a heavy burden at such a young age.”

She shrugged uncomfortably.

“It didn’t start getting *really bad* until I was a teenager—that’s when I started seeing the, uh, darker spirits, not just ghosts.”

Wraith’s heart went out to her. He couldn’t imagine having to deal with such frightening sights when she was so young and vulnerable.

“Well you don’t have to worry about that particular dark spirit tonight,” he promised her. “I’ll guard your sleep, Hanna. And I won’t leave your side for a moment.”

She nibbled her lower lip.

“Will...will you wake me up again if I start having a nightmare? I’m worried the, uh, Dark Entity might try to get to me that way. Through...through my dreams.”

“I’ve never heard of a dark spirit that can do that, but yes, I’ll wake you if you start to thrash or cry out,” Wraith promised her.

“And...you’ll really stay with me?” She looked at him appealingly. “All night long?”

“All night long.” Impulsively, he squeezed her shoulders and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “Go to sleep now, Hanna. Do you want me to tuck you in?”

“I, er, think I can manage.” She gave him a tentative smile. “Wraith, why do I feel like I’ve known you all my life?”

“Maybe the Goddess sent me to you—or you to me,” Wraith said seriously. Despite his long confinement to the Mother Ship, he still believed in the Mother of all Life. “After all, you’re the only one who can see me, and I seem to be the only one who can see the demon that’s after you and the markings he left on you.”

She went pale and her fingertips traveled to her forehead again for a moment.

“That’s true. I wish they would fade—then we’d know he was dead.”

Wraith didn’t like to tell her that killing a demon was no easy proposition, so he simply nodded.

“If it’s any consolation, I do think they’re a *little* less bright than they

were,” he told her. “He may yet die of his wounds.”

Hanna looked troubled.

“I wish he would. I was afraid I might go...go crazy for a minute there when he was...was on top of me, pinning me down...”

Her breath was beginning to hitch in her chest and Wraith was afraid she was going to start crying again. Not that he minded comforting her, but what she needed right now was sleep, not more tears.

“Try not to think about it, little one,” he murmured, stroking her cheek. “He won’t get a chance to get near you again.”

“All...all right.” Hanna looked up at him, gratitude shining in her lovely silver-green eyes. “If the Goddess did send you to me, I owe her a big ‘thank-you.’ I’d be dead right now and my soul would be in the Demonic Realms if it wasn’t for you.”

“Don’t think about that,” Wraith said again. “Never dwell on things that might have been—that never leads to happiness.”

“I guess you’re right.” She sighed and shifted so she was lying down in the bed again. “I changed my mind—you can tuck me in if you want to.”

Wraith’s heart squeezed in his chest. She seemed so vulnerable...so innocent. He wanted with all his heart to guard her and keep her safe from the terrible danger that stalked her.

“I’ll try,” he told her. “Though I usually can’t touch anything physical—my hand just passes right through.”

“You’re touching me,” she pointed out, since Wraith still had one hand on her arm. “Try pulling the covers up and see what happens.”

He took his hand off her arm to do as she said...but found that his fingers simply passed through the rumbled bedclothes when he reached for them.

Hanna saw the problem at once.

“Now try pulling the covers up with one hand while...” She yawned. “While you touch me with the other,” she finished.

Wraith put his hand back on her arm and reached for the covers again. This time he had no trouble grasping them and pulling them up for her. It occurred to him that he had been actually sitting on the bed when he was holding her—sitting, *not* hovering. Touching Hanna seemed to make him solid and corporeal again in a way he hadn’t been for a century.

“Thank you,” he said to her, meaning it from the bottom of his heart. “Thank you so much.”

“For what?” Her eyelids were already closing.

“For letting me touch again—for letting me *feel*. The warmth of the covers...the softness of your skin...” He shook his head. “I haven’t felt anything at all in so long.”

“Thank *you* for saving my life,” she responded and yawned again. “I’m sorry—I’m so sleepy now! I didn’t...didn’t even ask you how you...how you died. Unless that’s a rude question?”

“Not rude at all,” Wraith assured her. “But it’s a question for another day. “For now, rest and I’ll guard your sleep.”

She blinked at him sleepily.

“I hope you’re not a dream.”

“I’m not,” Wraith assured her. Taking her hand, he pressed a gentle kiss into her palm. “Does that feel like a dream?”

“No.” She gave him a soft, dreamy smile. “Not at all.”

Then her eyes closed and she slept the sleep of the utterly exhausted.

Wraith watched over her, guarding her as he had promised. He almost hoped the demon would come back so he could kill it once and for all and free her of the curse. But it had clearly gone somewhere to lick its wounds and recover. Until it was dead, Hanna was at risk, he thought grimly.

He would have to stay by her side night and day from now on until he could get another chance to kill it.

Not that he minded. Tenderly, he stroked her cheek and she responded with a little moan as she pressed against his hand like a kitten asking to be petted. There was something about the little Elite that tugged at his heart—maybe they *were* meant by the Goddess to be together—at least until the demon was dead.

Until that time, Wraith promised himself he would keep her safe and never leave her side.

HANNA

“So you have a Kindred Protector now but he’s a ghost?” Aunt Luna asked, looking at Hanna uncertainly.

“Yes—he’s sitting right beside me at the table, actually.” Hanna nodded at Wraith, who was seated beside her at the round breakfast table in her aunt’s suite. Uncle Bruin had already gone off to a meeting of some kind, so it was just the three of them. Though to a casual observer, it would look like only two.

Hanna had been hoping that holding the big Kindred’s hand would help him appear to other people the same way it made him solid enough to touch and interact with physical objects. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem to be working that way. Aunt Luna still couldn’t see him, even though he and Hanna were sitting side by side with their hands clasped and fingers entwined.

She liked holding hands with him, Hanna admitted to herself. Liked it a lot. In fact, she felt increasingly drawn to her new Kindred Protector and it seemed like he was drawn to her as well.

All her life she’d heard of “love at first sight” but she’d never expected to experience it herself—mainly because most guys thought she was weird because she could see ghosts. But Wraith *was* a ghost and he could see everything she could—it was wonderful to be with a man who didn’t think she had a screw loose just because she could see things he couldn’t!

“Sitting right beside you, hmm?” Aunt Luna looked at Hanna’s hand, which to her must appear to be cocked at a strange angle with her fingers splayed—but that was because they were entwined with Wraith’s.

“Yes—he’s right here. He saved me last night.” She explained about the

Dark Entity and how it had attacked her and Aunt Luna's face went rigid.

"That's terrible, Hanna! You should have called me!"

"How could I? I was paralyzed," Hanna told her. She shivered. "It was *horrible*. But that was when Wraith appeared and chased it off." She squeezed his hand gratefully. "And he says he's going to stay with me and protect me."

"Absolutely," Wraith rumbled. He had a low, melodious voice that she really liked.

"Then we owe you a debt of gratitude, Wraith." Aunt Luna nodded to him, though she couldn't see him. "Thank you for saving my niece and for protecting her. Hanna is like a daughter to me." Reaching out, she squeezed Hanna's arm. "I'm so glad you found a Kindred Protector, my dear!"

"I'm glad too." Hanna gave Wraith a shy smile and he squeezed her hand.

"It's my very great pleasure to be at your side, little one," he murmured, which made Hanna feel like she was melting.

In fact, she'd been feeling frisky, so to speak, from the moment she'd woken up that morning. But she had put it down to the fact that Wraith was pacing around her room, looking ridiculously hot in his armor as he guarded her. It was kind of nice to have a bodyguard—especially such a big, muscular one.

"So how did your new Protector come to find you?" Aunt Luna asked, breaking into Hanna's thoughts.

"Oh, er, he saw me in the Docking Bay yesterday," she explained. "And then he noticed that *I* can see *him*—which hasn't happened in over a hundred years, apparently." She looked at Wraith for confirmation and he nodded. "So that made him curious and he came to find me."

"It's a very good thing he was there at the right time to protect you," Aunt Luna remarked. "Have some more pancakes, my dear—you always loved my blueberry pancakes before," she added, pushing the plate that was stacked high with the delicious brown pancakes towards Hanna.

"Oh, no—I shouldn't." Hanna shook her head—she was always shy about eating in front of men, due to her weight. Especially men she liked, and she was beginning to like Wraith very much.

"Why shouldn't you?" Wraith asked, frowning a little. "You *must* be hungry. I remember feeling ravenous when I woke up most mornings, back when I was alive."

"Yes, but pancakes are so *fattening*," Hanna protested. "I really

shouldn't."

"Yes, you should." He looked at her seriously. "You need to eat to feed your curves. It would be a pity if you lost them. Don't you want to remain an Elite?"

"What is he saying?" Aunt Luna asked eagerly.

"Oh, he said I should, uh, 'eat to feed my curves' so I can 'remain an Elite,'" Hanna said, looking at her aunt. "What's an Elite?"

"An Elite is an extra curvy woman—like *all* the women in our family," Aunt Luna put a hand on one full hip. "The Kindred *love* Elites."

"Your aunt is right," Wraith confirmed, his mismatched eyes going half-lidded as he looked at Hanna. "A female with a full figure is beautiful and *extremely* desirable."

"Oh!" Hanna could feel her cheeks getting hot with a blush but somehow she couldn't look away from the big Kindred.

"Here—have some more." This time Aunt Luna didn't wait for an answer, she just added two more pancakes to Hanna's plate.

Hanna took a few more bites, but she found she couldn't eat much—the butterflies in her stomach wouldn't allow it.

This was ridiculous, she told herself. She hadn't felt this way since college...and then the guy she'd had feelings for had turned out to be a self-absorbed, narcissistic jerk who only wanted to sleep with her because, as he put it—he wanted to "dip his dick in crazy" because he'd heard that "crazy chicks were wild in bed."

Hanna had disappointed him—she'd never been very good at letting go in bed unless she felt really safe and cared for and he hadn't given her that feeling at all. He had called her a number of names—"fat bitch," "cold fish," "crazy cunt"—before storming off and telling all their mutual acquaintances that she was bad in bed.

It had taken Hanna a long time to recover from that kind of betrayal and she still hadn't fully recovered her self-esteem, even though it had been years ago. It was after that encounter that she had sworn off dating for good.

But Wraith seemed the opposite of self-absorbed and narcissistic—on the contrary, he was completely focused on her, which only made the butterflies in her stomach more active and fluttery.

It still seemed hard to believe that he was into curvy girls—a man who looked like him down on Earth would have had a string-bean influencer hanging off his arm. But the way he was looking at her made Hanna a

believer. Their eyes kept meeting and his gaze was so direct—so *intense*. It made her heart pound and she had to squeeze her thighs together tightly to control the tingling she was feeling in her clit.

“You never told me how you ended up here—stuck on the Mother Ship,” she said, looking away from his gorgeous, mismatched eyes shyly.

“Oh, you mean I never told you the story of my death.” He nodded. “It’s a simple one, actually—simple and stupid.”

“Stupid? What do you mean?” Hanna asked, frowning. “How could your death be ‘stupid?’”

“Because I brought it on myself.” Wraith sighed heavily. “I am, as I told you, a Hybrid—both my mother and my father were Kindred, but from different branches of the Kindred family tree. As it turns out, Hybrids have a lot of trouble Bonding a female to them—the same way many Hybrid animals are sterile.”

“Really? I didn’t know that,” Hanna remarked.

He nodded.

“It’s true, unfortunately. Anyway, I had a female I loved very much and she loved me—Mara was her name.” He sighed. “Though I tried to Bond her to me, I was never able to. And a Failed Bonding is *painful*.”

“Go on.” Hanna was fascinated. She was learning so much and he hadn’t even gotten to the main story yet. “So what happened?”

“I heard that there was a certain wise woman on G’rala Three that could help Hybrids to Bond with their chosen female,” Wraith explained. “So I went to see her.” He shook his head. “I should have known there was something wrong the moment I stepped into her hut.”

“Why? How could you have known?” Hanna asked.

“I sensed the presence of evil—I was always sensitive to the supernatural when I was alive. I didn’t have a Gift like yours, but I could feel the presence of the other world that surrounds the world of the living,” Wraith explained. “And I sensed it strongly in the wise woman’s hut. But I wanted so badly to Bond with Mara, I ignored my instincts.”

Hanna was hanging on his every word now. Her Aunt Luna had gotten up and was quietly clearing the table, probably knowing that Hanna would fill her in later, since she couldn’t see or hear Wraith.

“I explained my problem to her and she gave me a potion,” Wraith told her. “She said it would enable me to Bond with my female but cautioned me not to take it until I returned to the Mother Ship. I believe her exact words

were,

‘Take the brew
And Bond ye well.
But who thou Bonds
Time will tell.
Shalt never see the afterlife
Until thou Bonds
With love, a wife.’”

Wraith shook his head as he finished reciting the short verse.

“I know now that those words were a curse. I should have known not to take that potion—my beloved, Mara, *begged* me not to. She said we could stay together, even without Bonding. But I was stubborn—I wanted what every other Kindred warrior has—a Soul Bond with his mate. And so I drank the potion.”

“And...it killed you?” Hanna almost whispered.

He nodded.

“In very short order. I was already dead by the time they rushed me to the Med Station. I could see my body as they tried to revive it but I couldn’t get back into it. I remember how Mara wept and wept. I *hated* myself for hurting her, for insisting on taking that damn potion...”

He looked so upset that Hanna squeezed his hand, wanting to comfort him.

“I’m so sorry, Wraith. That must have been unspeakably awful,” she said softly.

Wraith sighed.

“It was a long time ago now. I’ve just...never spoken of it before to anyone. Since I wasn’t able to speak to anyone until you arrived, little one.” He gave her a half smile that made Hanna’s stomach flutter.

She liked it when he called her “little one”—especially since she’d never thought of herself as little before. She was taller than anyone else in her family and she’d always been plus-sized, but compared to Wraith, who was nearly seven feet tall and extremely muscular, she did indeed feel small and delicate. It was a new feeling for Hanna, and one she found she liked immensely.

“Well, are you two ready to go shopping?” Aunt Luna’s voice cut into her

thoughts and Hanna looked up.

“Oh, yes—but are you sure, Aunt Luna? I, er, won’t be able to pay you back for a while,” she added, apologetically.

“Don’t you worry about that, my dear,” her aunt said, smiling. “Nobody lacks for anything here on the Mother Ship and there are so many cute little shops down by the parklands in the middle of the ship. Besides, I *want* to treat you—it’s been a long time since you and I had a girl’s day together.” She paused. “Well—it won’t really be a *girl’s* day since your new Protector is coming with us, but you know what I mean.”

“Yes, of course.” Hanna turned to Wraith. “Er...do you mind coming with us today?” she asked uncertainly. “I know most guys don’t really like shopping,” she added apologetically.

“Whatever makes you happy makes *me* happy,” Wraith assured her. “Besides, how can I pass up the chance to see such a beautiful Elite trying on lovely new clothes?” he added, his mismatched eyes going half-lidded.

Hanna felt herself blushing again and couldn’t help laughing.

“You’re bad!” she exclaimed. “Come on, let’s go!”

HANNA

Later that evening, Hanna reflected that the shopping trip with Aunt Luna and Wraith was the most fun she'd had in a long time. Her aunt seemed determined to get her every pretty outfit she tried on, but what was even more fun was watching the way Wraith's eyes lit up when she put on something particularly form fitting.

"That one hugs your curves—you should get it," he said, his voice going just a bit hoarse when she was trying on a long, shimmering emerald green gown with a low-cut neckline and a long slit up one thigh.

"Thank you, but...I don't know when I'd ever wear it," Hanna said, looking down at herself.

"You'd wear it to the Christmas Party we're going to be going to at the end of the year!" Aunt Luna exclaimed. "The High Council always throws one. I want to introduce you to Commander Sylvan—that's the head of the Council—and his wife, Sophia—she's a sweetheart."

"I wish I could escort you to that party." There was a wistful note in Wraith's deep voice. "I would be so proud to step into the ballroom with such a beautiful Elite on my arm."

"I wish you could too," Hanna said softly and then had to explain to Aunt Luna what they were talking about.

"Get it," her aunt said decisively. "You never can tell what might happen, my dear and it looks *lovely* on you."

"But, Aunt Luna—it's so expensive!" Hanna protested.

"Price is no object today," her aunt declared.

And so the gorgeous, shimmering gown was purchased.

After lunch, which they had at a *chic* little café in the center of the Mother

Ship that served Twin Moons cuisine, her aunt explained that she had a few errands to run.

“But I don’t want you to stop shopping, my dear,” she told Hanna. “You still haven’t bought any underthings or night clothes yet. Here.” And she dug her cred-chip card out of her purse and handed it to Hanna. “Get yourself what you need and I’ll see you later on for supper. Or ‘Last Meal’ as the Kindred call it.”

Hanna tried to protest, but her aunt wouldn’t hear of it. She said she wanted Hanna to get everything she needed.

“The two of you have fun,” she added, nodding at the spot beside Hanna where Wraith was standing. “Just be sure you stick to my niece like glue,” she added, pointing a finger at him. “Don’t leave her alone for one second.”

“You have my word that I will stay by her side and protect her,” Wraith rumbled and Hanna repeated his promise for her aunt’s benefit.

“Good. Now the two of you have fun.” And with a wink, Aunt Luna left them and went to do her errands—whatever they might be. Hanna half suspected that she had nothing to do at all and just wanted to give her and her new Protector some time alone.

Not that she minded. Though going shopping for underwear and lingerie with the big Kindred in tow *might* get a little embarrassing, she thought, blushing.

Actually, it was *very* embarrassing—but in a pleasurable way. Wraith stayed just outside the dressing room door as she tried on progressively smaller and skimpier outfits. She opened the door to show him each one and she couldn’t help feeling warm all over when she saw the way his eyes went half-lidded as he watched her turn so he could see her from every angle.

“You’re so fucking *gorgeous*, little one—do you know that?” he growled hoarsely when Hanna came out wearing a tiny black teddy which tied with a satin ribbon between her breasts. It was made of material so sheer her nipples were clearly visible and the tiny black panties that matched barely covered her pussy mound.

“Oh...thank you.” Hanna couldn’t help the blush of pleasure that rose to her cheeks. “I think I’ll get it,” she added. “The, uh, material is really soft.”

“Is it?” Wraith raised his eyebrows. “It’s been a long time since I touched anything soft,” he murmured, his eyes running over Hanna’s mostly exposed body.

She felt a tingle go through her and suddenly she wanted his hands on her

more than anything.

“You can feel it if you want to,” she said, rather breathlessly. “Here...”

And lifting one of his big hands, she placed it over her breast. “See? It’s...*very* soft.”

Wraith’s eyes widened and then went lazy with lust as he cupped her breast.

“So I see,” he murmured, thumbing her nipple lightly through the thin fabric. “Most of it, anyway,” he added because her peak had gone tight with desire.

“Ohhh...” Hanna half moaned, pressing her breast further into his hand. Part of her couldn’t understand why she was doing this—she hadn’t even known him a whole twenty-four hours yet and it wasn’t like her to be so forward. But suddenly she wanted his hands on her desperately—she felt almost *hungry* for his touch—like a starving woman desperate for something to eat.

Wraith seemed to feel her desire and return it.

“Do you know what else it’s been a long time since I’ve done?” he murmured, stepping closer to Hanna, which put both of them inside the small, cramped dressing room.

“W-what?” she stammered, looking up at him. He was so close she could feel the heat of his big body radiating against hers and the way he was gently teasing her nipple was driving her *crazy*.

“This,” he murmured, and leaned down to take her mouth in a kiss.

Hanna moaned and reached up to put her arms around his neck. She had to stand on her tiptoes to do it, but Wraith bent down to her, cupping her cheek as he kissed her.

His lips were soft and warm and his spicy, masculine scent seemed to invade her senses, making Hanna feel weak in the knees with desire. His tongue licked delicately at the seam of her lips and she opened for him immediately, welcoming him in.

His mouth tasted sweet and spicy at the same time and Hanna couldn’t get enough of him. She sucked eagerly at his tongue and moaned softly as he explored her.

She had never felt so hot before in her life, she thought—so ready to go! Usually it took a lot to get her warmed up for sex. She always felt so nervous and unsure of herself. But with Wraith she felt confident that he liked her—that he *desired* her. And knowing that made all the difference.

Taking the hand that was on her breast, she pushed it down between her legs. She was feeling so hot all of a sudden—so *needy*.

“Mmm, little one, you’re so *eager*,” Wraith murmured, breaking the kiss for a moment as he cupped her pussy. One long finger pressed against her clit, rubbing her in *just* the right way.

“I...I can’t seem to help it,” Hanna admitted. “All of a sudden I just feel so...so *hot*. I don’t know what’s wrong with me—I don’t usually act this way.”

“You don’t? Hang on...” Frowning, he brushed the hair away from her forehead and uttered a low curse.

“What? What is it?” Hanna turned her head so she could look in the viewing panel behind her. To her concern, the runes on her forehead were glowing more brightly than ever.

“It’s the runes—the lust curse.” Wraith pulled his hand from between her thighs and straightened up. “I’m sorry, but I don’t want to take advantage of you when you’re under the influence of the curse,” he said apologetically when Hanna made a little moan of disappointment.

“Oh...okay, I guess.” She squeezed her thighs together tightly, missing the feeling of his big, warm hand cupping her pussy. Maybe it was time to try and find some alone time to take care of herself, she thought.

She got dressed and bought the see-through black teddy set, hoping she could use it at another time. Then she began to think it was time to go home—she was getting *extremely* hot and bothered and she really needed a sexual release.

She let Wraith know she was ready to go and they set out together, headed for the tram system that ran through the Mother Ship, taking people to different parts of the huge structure.

Hanna settled herself on a seat in the back of one of the tram cars and Wraith sat beside her. Or rather, he hovered about a quarter inch off the seat because he wasn’t solid enough to sit unless she touched him. But now Hanna felt self-conscious about touching the big warrior. She wished she could take his hand and put it on her knee, but she was afraid he might think she was being affected by the lust curse and trying to come onto him.

*Well, you **are** being affected by the curse—aren’t you?* whispered a little voice in her head. *Look at the way you were throwing yourself at him in the dressing room of all places! That’s not like you at all, Hanna. What must he think?*

The little voice was right, she reflected—also, the way she was *feeling* wasn't like her either. She was getting hotter and hotter, crossing and re-crossing her legs and squeezing her thighs together to try and relieve some of the ache she between her legs. Her nipples were hard, her pussy was wet, and her clit felt positively *swollen* with need. God, what was *wrong* with her?

“Hanna, hold my hand,” Wraith reached for her and she was glad he had made the first move. It made things so much easier and also allowed him to become more substantial and really sit beside her instead of hovering.

Of course, no one else in the car could see him, so to everyone else on the tram, it doubtless looked like she was just sitting there with her hand cocked at an odd angle over the empty seat beside her. Not that Hanna cared.

“This is nice but aren't you afraid that you'll make the curse worse by touching me?” she murmured to him, trying to make a joke out of the situation.

Wraith gave her a serious look.

“No, little one. But I can tell you're suffering.”

“What? How?” Hanna exclaimed, a little too loudly. Several of the other people on the tram—most of them older Kindred warriors and their wives—shot her questioning looks and she looked away quickly. “How?” she murmured again, more softly. “How can you tell I'm, er, having a hard time?”

“Your scent,” he said simply. “I can smell how wet and hot you're getting.”

“You *can*?” Hanna hissed, looking up at him in horror. “But...but I took a bath last night and a shower this morning—you know that!”

“Who said it was a bad smell?” Wraith gave her a half-lidded look. “It's warm and feminine and utterly *delicious*. It makes my mouth water to taste you, if you want to know the truth.”

“You...I...*what*?” Hanna murmured, her eyes going wide as she looked up at him. Because of her Gift being such a liability to her social life, she had very limited sexual experience and she'd never been with a guy who had offered to “taste” her. Though the few she *had* been with had definitely expected her to go the other way and give them blow jobs.

“Have you never had a male taste your pussy before?” Wraith asked, sounding surprised. “A beautiful Elite like you?”

“No.” Hanna shook her head. “Never. Uh...is that something Kindred like to do a lot?”

“Kindred males *need* to taste their females,” Wraith explained. “It feeds a hunger deep in our soul. And it’s one of the greatest pleasures a male can give to his female...and take for himself.”

“You, uh, really *like* it then? I mean, you’d want to...to do that to me?” Hanna’s heart was pounding again and somehow, she found her eyes were locked with his gold and blue mismatched gaze. The eye contact felt incredibly intimate, especially when they were talking about such a sexual subject, but somehow, she couldn’t look away.

“Little one, I would fucking *love* to taste you,” he growled hoarsely, holding her eyes with his. “But since it would be your first time, I’d want to take my time with you—kissing your inner thighs...stroking your panties... until you finally surrendered to me. Until you let me take off your panties and spread your legs wide.”

“*Ohhhh...*” Hanna breathed. She wanted to ask him to go on, to say more—but she was too embarrassed to do so.

Luckily, Wraith wasn’t done yet.

“Then, once I had you all the way open for me, I’d kiss you,” he murmured.

“Just...just kiss me?” Hanna asked.

“I’d want to be gentle with you, since it’s your first time,” he told her. As he spoke, she could feel his thumb rubbing against the back of her hand and his warm, masculine musk seemed to fill her senses, making her even hotter.

“Go...go on,” she whispered.

Wraith seemed more than willing to do so.

“I’d kiss the outside of your pussy gently at first, just getting you used to having my mouth on you, between your legs. And then, when I could tell you were ready, I’d spread open your sweet pussy lips and spend some time kissing your Goddess pearl.”

“My...my what?” Hanna still couldn’t look away from his eyes and her heart was pounding so hard and fast she felt lightheaded.

“Your ‘clit’ is what you humans call it, I believe,” Wraith murmured. “I’d kiss you slowly at first, until you were moaning for more—maybe pulling my hair or scratching my shoulders.”

“But...wouldn’t that hurt you?” Hanna protested breathlessly.

His eyes flashed.

“Bringing you pleasure would be worth the pain.”

“Oh,” she whispered. “And...and then what would you do?”

“Lick you,” Wraith growled softly. “All over—inside and out. I’d want to taste your sweet honey right from the source and then kiss your clit some more and tease it with my tongue until you finally came for me—came all over my mouth.”

Hanna didn’t know what to say to that. He was still talking in that deep, sexy voice and looking her in the eyes as he described exactly what he wanted to do for her. He hadn’t touched anything but her hand, but she thought she’d never been more turned on in her life! Between her thighs, her pussy was throbbing for release and she could feel her panties getting wet with her juices.

Just as she was about to ask him what might happen next, the tram came to a halt at their stop.

“I think this is us,” Wraith remarked, rising from his seat and pulling her up with him.

“Yes, I...I guess so.” Hanna was faintly aware that the other people on the tram were staring at her. Doubtless it looked to them like she was crazy—talking to an invisible friend. But she honestly didn’t care—she was so wound up and hot and bothered that she couldn’t think of anything except the things that Wraith had been describing to her just a moment ago.

“Do you want to go straight to your aunt’s suite or should we drop your packages off at your own suite first?” Wraith asked, looking down at her.

“Uh...my suite, I think,” Hanna managed to get out.

It wasn’t the packages and shopping bags she was worried about though—right now what she needed was some time alone to help herself.

She had never needed to come so badly in her life!

HANNA

But the moment she locked herself away in the bathroom with Wraith just on the other side of the door in case the Dark Entity came back, she found that she *couldn't* help herself. Because no matter how she rubbed her pussy—and she tried *several* techniques, trying to achieve satisfaction—nothing she did could bring her relief.

It was incredibly frustrating but nothing seemed to help. Hanna had never been much good at sex with other people, but she knew how to please herself. However this time, she just *couldn't* make herself come. She even tried the tiny lipstick vibrator that she kept in her purse—it had been a joke gift from Sam last Christmas but it actually worked quite well.

But this time not even the vibrator could get her off. It only seemed to make her hotter and hotter without offering any relief.

At last, Hanna gave up in disgust. All she was doing was making herself so horny she couldn't see straight and since she was unable to come, the need inside her was only getting worse. In other words, the more she tried to scratch her itch, the itchier she got!

“Hanna? Are you all right in there?” she heard Wraith ask through the door.

“Um, just fine!” she called back in a voice that sounded a little too high and bright. “Just coming out.”

Quickly she pulled up her jeans and underwear and washed her hands. She didn't want her new Kindred Protector to suspect what she'd been doing. She stepped out of the bathroom stall where the toilet was and back into the main bathing chamber where the bathing pool and the shower stall were. She gave Wraith a nervous smile.

“Sorry I took so long.”

“I don’t mind how long you take—I just wanted to be sure you were all right,” he told her. Ducking down, he looked at her more closely. “Are you *sure* you’re all right?”

“Of course! Why—don’t I look all right?” Hanna smiled harder, trying not to show the sexual frustration that was tormenting her.

“You seem...on edge,” Wraith told her.

“Just worried we’ll be late for dinner.” She glanced at the watch on her wrist. It had been her mother’s and she wore it for sentimental reasons, but it still kept good time. “Oh no—we really *are* going to be late if we don’t hurry! Let’s get going.”

“I’m ready when you are,” Wraith told her. He spread his hands. “Always ready.”

“Good, then let’s hurry.” Hanna took one of his big hands in hers and he immediately entwined their fingers. His boots, which had been hovering a quarter inch off the bathroom tiles were suddenly planted firmly on the floor.

“Are you going to wear your armor to dinner?” Hanna asked him, as they walked quickly from her suite to Aunt Luna’s next door. “I mean, I know I’m the only one who can see you, but are you able to change? I’m just curious,” she added. “If you can’t—”

“I can.” His big body shimmered for a moment and then, in place of the chain link armor he was wearing a kind of furry kilt and fur boots. He also had on a tight, dark blue vest that made his eyes look amazing.

“Ohhh,” Hanna breathed. “I *really* like that! Is that how you dressed when you were alive?”

“It was a ceremonial outfit I wore when I was courting Mara on Twin Moons,” he explained. “Believe it or not, this...” He pointed at the fur kilt, “Is alive. Or it was when I originally wore it. It’s called a *tharp* and it can change to any configuration you want.”

“I think it looks good like that—*really* good,” Hanna breathed, eyeing the expanse of muscular thigh the fur kilt revealed. “I—”

“Oh, there you are!” The door slid open and Aunt Luna was standing there. “Come on my dear—and Wraith too, I assume?”

“Yes, and he even dressed for dinner.” Hanna described the outfit her ghost warrior was wearing to her aunt and also Uncle Bruin, who had come in with a tray of drinks.

“Ah yes—traditional Blood Kindred ceremonial garb.” Uncle Bruin

nodded as he offered her a drink.

Hanna took a drink, wishing she could offer one to Wraith. Aunt Luna apparently had the same idea.

“I asked Bruin to make four of these yummy Fireflower cocktails,” she said to Hanna. “Would you like to try giving one to your Protector?”

Hanna looked up at Wraith, but he shook his head regretfully.

“I might be solid enough to drink while you touch me, but what happens when we have to break contact?” he said. “The liquid in my solid body will suddenly be suspended in midair when I become incorporeal again. It would probably wind up on your aunt’s carpet, which I’m sure she wouldn’t like.”

Hanna had to admit that this was probably true. She explained what he had said to Aunt Luna, who nodded thoughtfully.

“Yes, he’s probably right. It’s very considerate of him to think about that.”

Hanna thought she saw disappointment in the big warrior’s eyes.

“We can’t try it now, but we will later,” she murmured. “We can do it in the kitchen where there’s no carpet and it’s easy to clean up if there’s a mess.”

Wraith smiled down at her.

“You’re very sweet, little one. I would like that very much. I haven’t tasted food or drink in a very long time.”

The four of them made small talk with Hanna translating. She was glad to see that Uncle Bruin didn’t even bat an eye about including a ghost that he could neither see nor hear in the conversation. He obviously trusted Luna’s word that there was someone there and even went out of his way to make conversation with Wraith, which Hanna translated.

“I’ve done some research, you know, into your ghost warrior,” he said to Hanna, once they were all four seated at the table. “He was the leader of a battalion when he was alive and known for his ferocity in battle.”

“Oh, really?” Hanna looked up at Wraith, who shrugged modestly.

“He was killed by a very unusual poison—we might be able to simulate an antidote for it now, but back then it was untreatable,” Uncle Bruin went on. He looked at the spot where Wraith was sitting. “Oh, and in case you’re wondering—Mara, the female that you loved, moved back to Tranq Prime and Joined with a Blood Kindred warrior. They had three children together—all sons—and their descendants still live on Tranq Prime today. She died at the age of ninety-six of natural causes,” he added.

Wraith was still for a moment on hearing this news, but then he nodded gravely at Bruin.

“Thank you. I have wondered many years what happened to Mara and how she fared,” he rumbled softly. “I am glad to know she had a happy life with another, since I left her too soon.”

“He’s glad for the information and thanks you for looking up the facts about his ex,” Hanna translated. She squeezed Wraith’s hand. It was obvious that he’d loved Mara very much but she had been dead a long time and hadn’t shown up here in the Mother Ship. Which meant that she was probably in the Kindred afterlife with the Goddess and beyond reach.

She wondered if it was wrong that she felt just a *little* bit relieved about that. It would have been really hard competing for Wraith’s affection with another woman—especially one he had known and loved and who was also a ghost.

The conversation moved on to other topics as they ate the delicious *brexom* stew Uncle Bruin had made. He apparently loved to cook and he was good at it too.

The Kindred didn’t have any kind of gendered duties or ideas about “women’s work” when it came to cooking and keeping the house neat. In fact, because of the intense competition to find brides, most of them were excellent in the kitchen and more than willing to clean. It was important to offer a prospective mate an equitable and agreeable domestic situation, as Uncle Bruin explained, when Hanna remarked on it.

“We believed the same thing in my time,” Wraith confirmed, when she asked him. “A warrior’s mate is his equal—why should he not share equally in the home duties? It’s only fair.” He frowned. “I fear I won’t be able to help you as I should though, unless you’re willing to touch me the whole time so I’m solid enough.”

Hanna couldn’t quite smother a smile when she thought of the huge ghost warrior doing housework while she trailed behind him, keeping a hand on his arm or back so he was solid enough to handle the vacuum cleaner or wash the dishes.

“Thank you, Wraith, but you don’t make any messes and I don’t mind cleaning up after myself,” she told him.

Dinner was lovely and it helped take her mind off the lust curse, which was still working on her. But after the last bite of sweet strawberry pretzel salad—Aunt Luna’s specialty—was eaten, she began to feel fidgety again.

“I should be getting back to my suite,” she told her aunt after they cleared the table together. “Thank you again for today—I had a wonderful time and got everything I needed. I kept a total and I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

“Don’t worry about that.” Aunt Luna smiled and patted her on the cheek. “I just want you to be happy.” She gave Hanna a slightly worried look. “And you’re *sure* you’ll be all right tonight? I can renew the wards, or you can sleep in our guest room here if you like.”

“Thank you, Aunt Luna, but I’ll be fine,” Hanna said firmly. “Wraith will be with me all night. Right, Wraith?” she asked looking up at him.

“I will not leave your side,” he rumbled. “And if the demon comes back, I’ll finish him off this time!” The look in his eyes was so fierce that Hanna shivered.

“He’s going to stay right beside me,” she told Aunt Luna. “But I promise I’ll call you if there’s trouble.”

“Well...all right.” Aunt Luna looked up to the spot where Wraith was standing, though she couldn’t see him. “I’m trusting you, Wraith.”

“And I will not betray your faith in me,” he promised gravely. “Though I have not known her long, Hanna is precious to me. I will do everything in my power to protect her.”

Hanna repeated this, feeling her cheeks get hot as she did. Did Wraith really already have feelings for her? Because she was *certainly* having feelings for him.

In fact, the feelings she was having were getting pretty intense, but they weren’t all just because of her huge ghost warrior. It was the lust runes working on her again, she thought, pressing her thighs together. Earlier she’d asked Aunt Luna if she had found any other spells or counter spells that might help remove them, but her aunt had shaken her head.

“No, but even if I did, I don’t think they would work, my dear,” she had told Luna. “I think that your ghost warrior is right—the only thing that will remove the curse is for the Dark Entity to be wounded or driven back to the Pit, where it belongs.”

So Hanna was stuck living with the lust curse for now. And at the moment, she *really* needed to get back to her own suite and see if she could do something to scratch her itch. Earlier she hadn’t been able to help herself, but she had to try again or she was going to go *crazy*.

So they said goodbye and she promised her aunt she would come over for lunch the next day. Then, trying to walk normally despite the way she felt so

swollen and hot between her legs, she left and went back to her own suite with Wraith beside her.

WRAITH

Wraith could tell something was bothering his little Elite. Towards the end of Last Meal she had gotten quieter and more withdrawn and now she was walking almost as though she was in pain. He wanted to ask her what was wrong, but he got the impression that she wanted to keep whatever was bothering her private, so he said nothing and only followed her into her suite.

Once they got inside, she went straight to the bathing chamber again. Wraith paced outside the door for what felt like a long time, waiting for her and wondering what was going on. Was she all right in there? It made him nervous to have her out of his sight—what if the demon came back and grabbed her while he was trying to give her privacy? Part of him wanted to float through the door and check on her but he didn't want to lose her trust. He didn't want to—

A little cry from the other side of the door erased all doubts from his mind and he came charging through the door, drawing his sword as he did.

What he found, though, wasn't what he'd expected. He'd been sure he would see the demonic entity trying to steal Hanna away. Instead he found her with her panties down and one hand between her legs. There was an agonized look on her face and tears in her eyes.

“Hanna? What's wrong, little one?” Wraith frowned, his sword in one hand. “I heard a cry—it sounded like you were in pain.”

“Oh my God!” Her cheeks went red and she began scrambling to pull up her panties.

Wraith stopped her by coming to put a hand on her arm. The minute he touched her, the physical world became more real for him and he understood what was going on.

The scent of a female in need reached his nose—a hot, almost desperate fragrance that made his cock go immediately hard. But the embarrassed, pained look on Hanna’s face was enough to stop him from getting too excited.

“Little one?” he murmured, ducking down to look into her eyes. “What’s wrong? Please tell me.”

“It...it’s so *embarrassing*,” she whispered, looking down at her hands.

“There’s no need to be embarrassed with me,” Wraith assured her gently. “Whatever it is, you can tell me and I won’t judge you—I swear it.”

“It...it’s this damn lust curse!” she burst out at last. “It’s making me *crazy*! I’ve never been so hot in my life but I can’t *do* anything about it!”

Wraith had thought it might be something like that, but he’d assumed she could deal with the effects of the curse on her own with self-pleasure. However, that didn’t appear to be the case.

“Tell me more,” he said gently. “Why can’t you help yourself?”

“Because no matter how much I touch myself, I *can’t come!*” Hanna exclaimed. “Believe me, I’ve tried *everything*. And it just keeps getting worse. It’s making me so sensitive that I can’t even stand to *try* anymore—not that it was doing me any good,” she added bitterly.

“Let me see,” Wraith said, kneeling in front of her.

“What? No!” She kept one hand firmly over her mound, her eyes going wide.

Wraith looked up at her.

“I can’t help you if you don’t let me see the problem. Would you rather go to the Med Center?”

Hanna went pale.

“No! No, I don’t want that!”

“Then let me see,” Wraith repeated patiently. “Maybe I can help you with the curse. I know a thing or two about them, since I’m under one myself,” he added dryly.

This seemed to finally convince Hanna because she reluctantly moved her hand. What she revealed made him shake his head in sympathy.

Her soft little pussy lips were dark pink and swollen with need and when Wraith framed her mound with his hands and gently parted the outer lips, he saw that inside she was looking just as needy. Her little clit stood out like a pink pearl—obviously desperate for attention. But it was very clear by the way she was wincing away even from his gentle touch that the attention she

needed couldn't be given manually.

Luckily, he thought he had a solution.

He looked up at her.

“So you've been trying to achieve a release all this time?”

She nodded miserably.

“I think if I could just come, I'd feel better! But I *can't*—nothing I'm doing is working, even though I've tried and tried.”

“I don't want you to try anymore,” Wraith told her. “I think I know what can help you, but you'll have to trust me. Do you?”

Hanna nibbled her lower lip.

“We haven't known each other very long but yes—I trust you,” she said at last.

Wraith felt his heart swell.

“Thank you,” he said simply. “You honor me with your trust.”

“So...what are you going to do?” she asked. “Do you know of some kind of medicine that can help?”

“In a way.” He nodded. “How much do you know about Blood Kindred?”

“I know they have fangs,” she said hesitantly. “But they don't drink blood—right?”

“Exactly, most Blood Kindred don't drink blood. They use their fangs to inject their Essence, which is a special liquid their body makes just for their mate. Essence can heal wounds and it also brings pleasure and helps in the Bonding process,” Wraith explained. “I'm half Blood Kindred and my fangs also produce Essence.”

He bared his teeth briefly, letting her see the short, sharp points of his fangs and the beads of blue liquid Essence collecting at their tips.

Hanna went pale.

“You want to *bite* me?” she asked, her eyes going wide. “But I'm already so sensitive down there! I don't think—”

“No, no!” Wraith hastily assured her. “I don't want to bite you, little one. I want to spread my Essence on the places where you're hurt. That's all.”

“So...you want to lick me? Lick my...lick me there?” she asked, nodding down at herself.

“I do,” Wraith said gently. “Not for my own gratification, though—to heal and soothe you. You're very swollen and I can tell you're hurting. Will you let me help you?”

She nibbled her lower lip again and he could tell she was nervous about

the idea. It reminded him that she'd never had a male's mouth between her legs before.

"I'll be gentle," he promised. "I'll only use my lips and tongue—I swear I won't hurt you."

"Can...can I take a bath first? I mean, a dip in the bathing pool?" she asked at last. "I just want to feel clean if you're going to, uh, lick me there. Okay?"

Wraith wanted to tell her that she was already perfect—he loved her hot scent and he was sure he would love her flavor as well. But he could see that she felt uncertain and self-conscious, so he nodded.

"Of course—whatever makes you comfortable."

"Thank you." She nodded shyly. "Er...I'll need to get undressed."

"Oh, right." Wraith turned around, giving her his back though he would have loved to see her disrobe. But again, he understood that she was shy. He waited until he heard a soft splash before turning around again.

Hanna was submerged neck deep in the warm waters but she didn't look happy about it. In fact, she appeared to be in pain.

"Hanna? What's wrong?" Wraith phased out of his clothes and joined her in the bathing pool at once—though he didn't really feel the water grow warm and wet around him until he touched her bare shoulder lightly.

"This water's really *hot*," she admitted in a low voice. "It's really stinging me."

"Then don't stay in. Here—let's get you out right away." Wraith lifted her in his arms, but she protested.

"Wait! I wasn't finished washing yet!"

"You don't *need* to wash," he told her firmly. "Your soft little pussy is perfect just the way it is. Now come on, I'm taking you out of here."

And he carried her out of the pool, despite her weak protests.

Once out of the bathing pool, he got them both wrapped in drying sheets which immediately sucked up any moisture that touched them. Then he picked up Hanna again and took her into the bedchamber where he laid her on the bed.

She looked at him uncertainly.

"Um...now what?" she asked in a small voice.

"Now you're going to let me heal you," Wraith said firmly. He didn't want to push her into anything she didn't want, but she *needed* to be healed and there was only one way to achieve that.

“By...by licking me?” she asked.

“Exactly.” Wraith knelt on the floor, keeping the fingers of one hand loosely circled around her ankle to keep himself corporeal. He looked up at Hanna expectantly. “All right, little one—you’ll have to open for me or this won’t work.”

“I know. I just...I’m sorry. I feel *shy*,” she whispered—as though she was afraid he’d be mad at her.

Wraith’s heart squeezed like a fist. Of course she was nervous! This was her first time trusting a male to taste her. And he would bet, by the way she was acting, that her past lovers hadn’t treated her with nearly the patience and caring she deserved. Well, it was time to break that cycle right now.

“We can take our time, if you like,” he murmured and dropped a gentle kiss on the smooth skin of her calf. “We can go very...*very* slowly if that will make you feel better.”

“Really?” Her silvery-green eyes widened.

Wraith nodded and kissed her calf again—just a little higher this time.

“Of course,” he assured her. “We have all the time in the universe—there’s no need to rush things. Just try to relax and let me heal you.”

“I...I’ll try,” she promised and already her breath was hitching in her throat.

“Good,” Wraith murmured, kissing her again...just a little higher. “That’s good, Hanna—that’s all I ask, just that you try.”

A little noise that was half moan/half sigh was his answer and he thought he felt just a tiny bit of the tension leaving her body as he kissed her again—this time almost at the crease of her knee. Then he turned his head and licked gently at the underside of her knee—it was a delicate, sensitive area and it made her moan even louder, though she didn’t try to pull away. Good—he was on the right track.

Little by little, Hanna relaxed as he kissed her open. Wraith did it slowly, savoring the feel of her warm, smooth, soft skin and her delicious feminine scent. It had been so long since he’d tasted or touched a woman intimately—so long since he’d smelled that secret scent of feminine desire. He wanted to savor this experience, to save it in his memory for always.

At last he had her legs apart and was kissing her inner thighs—slowly drawing aimless patterns on her soft flesh with his tongue but never *quite* touching her pussy yet. He was getting closer and closer but he was determined not to taste her until she asked him to.

“Oh...oh, Wraith!” she moaned softly at last.

“Yes, little one?” He lapped gently at the crease where her thigh met her body, making certain that his tongue didn’t brush her more sensitive areas.

“Your mouth feels *really* good,” Hanna confessed. “I think maybe, if...if you want to...I might be ready to let you heal me. As long as you go slowly.”

“Why would I want to rush such a perfect experience?” Wraith murmured. Rubbing his cheek against the soft curls of her mound, he inhaled deeply. “Mmm, you smell so good, little one,” he groaned. “I could almost come just from your scent alone!”

“You...you really like it *that* much?” Hanna’s eyes were wide when he looked up at her.

“I more than like it—I fucking *love* it,” Wraith assured her, his voice a low, hungry growl. And then he ducked his head and bathed her outer pussy lips with a long, hot stroke of his tongue.

“*Ohhh!*” Hanna gasped and shivered under his tongue but didn’t try to get away. She was already hot and wet and he could taste her juices—salty/sweet—on his tongue. It was his favorite flavor in the whole fucking universe—the taste of an aroused woman who was willing to open for him.

Wraith’s cock was already aching—he had to remind himself he was only healing her. But he couldn’t help licking a little deeper the next time, dragging his tongue up her soft little slit to gather more of her honey and sliding just the tip over the sensitive bud of her clit.

“*Ohhh!*” she moaned again and shifted her hips restlessly. “Oh, Wraith, that feels better already.”

“It’s going to feel even better in a moment,” he promised her, hearing the growl in his own voice. Gods, he needed to keep control here and not scare her by diving in too fast!

But he’d forgotten how sweet the juices of a female you cared for could be—how addictive it was to hear her moaning your name as you lapped her sweet pussy. He was so hard he felt like he could fuck a hole in the plasti-steel wall and he hadn’t even spread her open yet!

“Going to open you now, little one,” he murmured, trying to keep the growl out of his voice as he looked up at her. “Going to spread your sweet pussy wide and give you a tongue-bath to spread my Essence. Are you ready for that?”

Hanna shifted her hips again and moaned softly.

“I...I think so,” she whispered. Her drying sheet had come completely

open, showing her full, gorgeous breasts and Wraith couldn't help noticing that her nipples were tight with desire. Her lovely silver-green eyes were dilated and her breathing was coming faster.

But most important, her pussy was getting even wetter. He couldn't wait any longer to taste more of her juices.

Spreading her outer lips gently with his thumbs, Wraith ducked his head and found the entrance to her pussy. Starting there, he licked upwards, laving her sensitive, swollen folds with his Essence and doing his best to heal her.

"Oh...oh, Wraith!" Hanna gasped and then he felt her soft little fingers carding through his hair. The sensation sent shivers of pleasure down his spine—he fucking *loved* it when the female he was tasting showed how much she was enjoying herself!

He licked her again, savoring her juices which were running freely now as her pussy gushed just for him. Hanna's fingers tightened in his hair and he heard her moan once more. When he reached her clit, she bucked her hips impatiently, which made him think that soon he would have to concentrate on that very sensitive spot to help her come. But first, he wanted to taste her some more.

Starting at her pussy mouth again, he lapped upwards, bathing her inner folds with his Essence. This time when he reached her clit, he felt her fingers tighten in his hair. When he looked up for a moment, Hanna's face was a sight to behold. Her eyes were half-lidded and almost glazed with lust, her cheeks were flushed, and her nipples were tight, pink little points. She looked like a woman who was on the edge of orgasm, but couldn't quite get there.

"Hanna," he murmured, catching her eyes with his own. "I think you're almost healed now. Do you want me to stop?"

Her answer was immediate.

"No!" She bucked her hips. "No, I...I think I'm getting close to coming. Please, Wraith—don't stop!"

"I won't, little one," he promised her. "But you have to show me where you want me. Guide me and put my mouth just where you need it to be."

Just as he had hoped, she took him up on his offer. Her little fingers tightened in his hair—pulling until it hurt, but it was a *good* pain. Wraith felt his cock go even harder as she tugged him into position with her mouth directly over her hot little clit.

Mmm, so she's ready to come then, he thought. Let's see what brings her the fastest.

He started out licking circles around and around her clit and soon found that every time he lapped the right side, her fingers tightened in his hair and her breath came in short, panting gasps.

“Wraith!” she gasped, which made him even harder—he fucking loved it when a woman he was tasting called his name! “Wraith, oh God—I...I’m so *close!*”

Wraith was close himself. He hadn’t been able to come in over a hundred years—it was a pleasure he’d had to leave behind when he died. But now that Hanna was touching him and making him corporeal again, he could feel the pressure building in his balls.

He knew well enough not to change anything—he’d found exactly what she needed so he kept it up, lapping the right side of her clit over and over, loving the feeling of her tugging his hair and panting his name. Gods, she tasted so good! He could eat her sweet little pussy forever—right at that moment, it was all he wanted to do for the rest of his existence.

“Wraith! Oh, *Wraith!*” she cried and then she was gushing again—her pussy making honey just for him that he longed to lick up. But first he had to ride out her orgasm—and it was a fucking hot one.

Hanna acted like she hadn’t had a sexual release in a long, *long* time. Her hips bucked up hard and he had to wrap his arms around her thighs to try and hold her in place. Her breasts were bouncing and her fingers had tightened in his hair until it hurt—but *Gods*, did it feel good! Then, oh Goddess—he couldn’t hold back any longer!

As he felt her trembling under his tongue, Wraith came himself for the first time in over a century, spurting hot and hard as he tasted her juices. His mouth and chin and cheeks were wet with her honey and *still* he couldn’t get enough. He wanted to *bathe* in her—to never stop tasting her hot little cunt!

Wraith kept lapping until she started shying away—her clit clearly over stimulated. When he felt her fingers loosen their grip, he looked up.

“Feeling better, little one?” he murmured, placing a kiss on her inner thigh.

“I...I think so.” Her cheeks were still adorably flushed and her eyes were bright. She had that glow of satisfaction that only a well-loved woman gets.

Wraith felt a surge of pride and tenderness at the same time. He’d been almost afraid that he’d forgotten his technique, but he clearly still had it. And Hanna looked adorably ruffled, with her hair messed up and her cheeks pink from coming so hard.

He gave her a mocking frown.

“You only *think* so? Then I guess I haven’t done my job right.”

“No, no!” she hastened to assure him. “You did an *amazing* job. I...I’ve never had a guy make me come before—you know?” she added softly. “I didn’t even know it was possible—I thought *I* was the only one who could make me come.”

Wraith grinned at her.

“Well, I’m glad to prove you wrong, little one. You tasted *delicious*. In fact...I think I made a mess of your sweet little pussy. I’d better clean you up.”

And lowering his head, he began to bathe her pussy gently with his tongue, lapping up her spilled juices and avoiding her clit while it was still so sensitive.

“Oh, but...but you don’t have to do that!” Hanna protested weakly, but he noticed she wasn’t trying to close her legs. And when he caught a glance of her forehead, he saw that the runes were only glowing a little less brightly.

It made him think that she might be up for another round—*he* certainly was. Kindred males are multi-orgasmic and he couldn’t get enough of her sweet honey or hearing her call his name.

“I *want* to,” Wraith assured her, his voice dipping down to a soft growl. “And then I’m going to make you come again. Are you going to be a good girl and let me?”

Her eyes widened and she nodded slowly.

“Yes...I can...can be good,” she whispered.

“Good.” Wraith gave her throbbing little clit a soft, open-mouthed kiss and looked up again. “But this time, scratch my shoulders—be *rough* with me. I want to feel your pleasure marking me,” he told her.

Her eyes widened, but she nodded.

“I...I was trying not to pull your hair too hard,” she confessed. “But I’m afraid near the end, I did.”

“Yes, you did and I fucking *loved* it,” Wraith growled. He had always enjoyed some pain with his pleasure. He didn’t want to hurt Hanna, but he loved to be hurt himself—to feel the sharp sensation of her showing him that he was making her come hard and long.

He bent his head again and began licking her once more. He wasn’t nearly finished giving her pleasure or taking pleasure and pain from her himself...

HANNA

Hanna lost count of how many times Wraith made her come that night. He seemed tireless and wholly intent on her pleasure. He also seemed to like it when she scratched him and pulled his hair. He wasn't rough with her at all, but he seemed to want *her* to be rough with *him*.

She wondered if he had always liked pain or if it was possibly a by-product of being dead for so long and unable to feel much of anything. But when he touched her, he was as real and solid as any living man between her legs and she could tell he relished the sensation.

Hanna loved it too. She'd never had a man be so intent on her pleasure before. The other guys she'd been with—there hadn't been many—were much more interested in getting their rocks off and leaving. With one guy—the one in college who had only fucked her because he wanted to try “fucking a crazy chick” the sex had barely lasted ten minutes.

With Wraith, it lasted hours. He couldn't seem to get enough of her—he went back to the well over and over again like a man trying desperately to quench his thirst.

Even when Hanna was finally satiated herself and told him she was ready to stop, she thought he looked disappointed. But he simply nodded and said, “Very well, little one. Then I'll dress myself and guard you.”

Rising from his knees, he shimmered for a moment and then he was wearing his armor again, with his sword in one hand.

Hanna felt disappointed.

“Wraith,” she protested. “I know you're here to guard me but, well, couldn't you guard me just as well if you were a little closer?”

His forehead wrinkled uncertainly.

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, well...” Hanna bit her lip, feeling shy again. “Couldn’t you, well...hold me tonight? I mean, couldn’t you guard me just as well that way?”

“I *suppose* I could.” He nodded. “Do you want me to hold you?”

“Yes, please!” Hanna said at once. Even though he had just spent hours pleasuring her, she still couldn’t seem to get enough of the big ghost warrior. “It’s been so long since I’ve been close to anybody,” she added shyly. “I thought maybe you might feel the same way.”

“I do,” Wraith said softly. “Very much so, little one. Here...”

He shimmered again and this time when he reappeared, he was wearing nothing but a pair of long black pajama bottoms.

“Mmm, those look nice on you but you don’t really have to wear them, I mean, not if you don’t want to,” Hanna murmured, eyeing the place where a trail of dark, curly hair ran down into the waistband of his sleep trousers.

But Wraith surprised her.

“Yes, I do,” he said seriously. “I don’t know if I could trust myself not to take you if both of us were bare.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Hanna assured him. In fact, despite the marathon tasting session, she was feeling kind of empty inside—she wanted to be *filled*.

But Wraith shook his head.

“I’m afraid that wouldn’t be safe, little one. You see, if I take you—if I Claim you and try to Bond you to me—it might drag your soul out of the mortal realm and into the realm of the dead, with me.”

Hanna looked at him, shocked.

“You *really* think that could happen?”

“I think it’s a distinct possibility,” Wraith said seriously. “A Soul Bond between a Kindred warrior and his mate is one of the strongest forces in the universe. Often when one of a Bonded couple dies, they drag the other down into death with them. I don’t want to do that to you, Hanna...” Leaning over the bed, he cupped her cheek and looked into her eyes. “You’re so vibrant and beautiful—you’re not done living yet and I won’t steal your life from you.”

“Well...all right, I guess.” Hanna nodded, feeling shaken. “But I still want you to hold me, though,” she added. “Will you? Please?”

Wraith’s mismatched eyes went soft.

“It would be my very great pleasure, little one,” he rumbled. “Scoot over and let me get into bed with you.”

Hanna scooted over—but not too much—she wanted him close. Wraith seemed to feel the same way because the minute he got in beside her, he pulled her into his arms and nestled her close to his side.

“*Mmm...you’re so warm,*” Hanna sighed in contentment as she pressed her cheek to his broad chest. “I’ve never met any ghost who was warm before—usually they’re all so gray and chilly.”

“I’m only warm and solid with you,” Wraith reminded her. “You make me feel alive again.”

Hanna wanted to tell him that he did the same for her. She’d never been with any man who honestly cared about her pleasure and comfort like Wraith did. They might be rushing things a little, but honestly it *felt* like they belonged together. Like he was a missing piece of her life she’d been looking for without even knowing it.

But she didn’t quite know how to express all that—or if it was too soon to say it. Besides, the many, many orgasms he’d given her had tired her out completely. She could feel her eyelids closing, though she tried to keep them open.

Wraith seemed to see her problem because he dropped a gentle kiss on the top of her head and said,

“Sleep now, beloved. I’ll guard your dreams. Nothing will get near you while you’re in my arms.”

Hanna remembered that he didn’t sleep and she knew he was right. The Dark Entity didn’t stand a chance of getting anywhere near her as long as her ghost warrior was holding her.

For the first time in months—ever since the Dark Entity had started stalking her—she found that she was able to close her eyes without any fear or anxiety. And instead of tossing and turning for hours, she fell asleep almost at once, held safe and secure against Wraith’s broad chest.

HANNA

The next month was the happiest of Hanna's entire life. She felt calm and peaceful and she was no longer afraid of the Dark Entity. Since Wraith had wounded it, the demonic creature hadn't dared to come anywhere near her. It was as though her ghost warrior's bravery had banished it completely.

And since she no longer had to deal with Imps and unhappy ghosts appearing around every corner, she was much less nervous and jumpy. With Aunt Luna's encouragement, she enrolled in one of the universities that had branches aboard the Mother Ship and began her literature degree again.

Wraith never left her side. He even attended classes with her—Hanna sat in the back of the room with an empty seat beside her so he could touch her and listen in. She even picked up an extra course in Blood Kindred literature and began to think of double majoring in Kindred and Earth Lit.

She had never felt more happy and healthy—both mentally and physically—in her life. And every day she fell more deeply in love with her ghost warrior.

It amazed her sometimes—you would think that after being with someone literally all the time, 24/7, you would get tired of them. But she never felt that way about Wraith and he never seemed to feel that way about her, either.

They tried different experiments to see how solid he could be, starting with letting him drink. Hanna held his hand and watched anxiously as he took a sip of Fireflower juice—a favorite Kindred liquor.

Just as Wraith had thought, if she let go of his hand right away, he became insubstantial again and the liquid fell to the floor with a *splat*. But if she held his hand for at least five minutes after he took a drink, the liquid seemed to incorporate itself into his ghostly body and remained in place

when she released his hand.

But though he could drink liquids and eat food again—as long as he was holding Hanna’s hand—there seemed to be a limit when it came to digestion. Which was to say, he never had to use the restroom, like a living person did. Instead, the food or drink he took in seemed to eventually just melt away.

Not being able to complete the digestive process didn’t seem to bother Wraith much. He was simply happy to be able to taste things again.

But the thing he liked best to taste was Hanna herself. All day long, the lust runes worked on her, causing her increasing sexual need. By the time evening came, she usually felt like she was so horny she was going to go *crazy* if she didn’t get some help.

Thankfully, Wraith was more than willing to offer that help. He was always willing and eager to taste her and make her come again and again with his tongue and fingers.

Sometimes he even came with her to the ship’s library to study and—once she got seated at a table in the back of the library behind rows of digitally recorded books and reference materials—he would duck down between her legs and treat her to a leisurely tongue bath while she tried to hold back her moans. Needless to say, she didn’t get a lot of studying done during these occasions but Hanna felt deliciously daring letting her ghost warrior go down on her in public, knowing that no one could see him but her.

Her life would have been completely perfect, she often thought, if only Wraith would consent to make love to her. But though he used his fingers and tongue on her nightly and even made use of the large, Kindred-sized toy that Hanna had bought from a novelty shop to fuck her long and hard, he refused to try and Bond her to him.

“I’m afraid I’d drag you into the realm of the dead with me,” he said, when Hanna—who had lost her fear of becoming a ghost—begged him to just try.

“I don’t care!” she told him. “Please, Wraith—I just want to be with you. What does it matter if we’re both dead as long as we’re together?”

“But he shook his head, looking grave.

“No, little one. You would miss your mortal life. It’s terribly difficult not to be able to touch anything, not to be heard or seen by anyone. I won’t take that from you. Please don’t ask me to.”

So Hanna had to be content with doing everything *but* Bonding with her ghost warrior. They spent hours every night enjoying and exploring each

other's bodies and it wasn't just Wraith who enjoyed using his mouth. Hanna loved to suck his thick shaft and stroke the Bonding Knot at its base until he groaned and came for her—shooting his seed down her throat.

Hanna never had trouble swallowing. His seed melted away like cotton candy in her mouth, leaving nothing but a faint, spicy taste behind that reminded her, oddly enough, of a pumpkin spice latte.

November had come to an end and December was halfway through when Wraith and Hanna walked into Aunt Luna's suite and found her crying. Uncle Bruin was sitting by her side with an arm around her shaking shoulders.

"Oh no—what's wrong?" Hanna exclaimed. Immediately her mind went to the worst case scenario. "Is it Sam? Did something happen to her?" She hadn't seen her older sister in months—not since right before Halloween—and she'd been trying not to bother her too often since Samantha was basically on her honeymoon with the Wulven Kindred warrior she had Bonded with. The two sisters had talked over the Think-me several times, but they hadn't communicated in a while.

Because you've been too happy with Wraith to remember to talk to your sister, whispered a guilty little voice in her head. If something happened to Sam, it's your fault, Hanna! You should have been talking to her more often, but no—you've been lost in your own little world...

But Aunt Luna shook her head.

"No. It...it's not, Samantha," she said in a voice choked with sobs. "It's an old client of mine from Earth—a dear friend. Something terrible has happened and I just don't know how to help."

"What is it? What happened?" Hanna asked—immediately sympathetic. (Not to mention immensely relieved that whatever the trouble was, it didn't involve her sister.)

"Oh, this client—Summer is her name—she came to me asking if she would ever be able to get pregnant," Aunt Luna explained. "This was some time ago—about five years, I guess—right before I met your Uncle." She gave Bruin a little smile through her tears and he squeezed her gently. "She'd been to so many doctors you know—she and her husband had gone through all the tests and none of them showed anything wrong. They were about to start IVF but it's so expensive and their insurance didn't cover it—it was practically going to bankrupt them!"

"That's terrible," Hanna said. "Did something happen to her? I mean, did she ever get pregnant?"

“I read her cards and told her to try again on the next full moon,” Aunt Luna said. “And I gave her a little fertility charm—nothing big, just a sachet of herbs blessed by the Goddess to bathe in under the moonlight before making love. Anyway, it worked like...well, like a *charm*. She got pregnant right away and they had a beautiful baby girl.”

“Well that’s wonderful,” Hanna said and Wraith nodded his agreement. “So then...why are you crying?”

“Summer just called me on the Think-me,” Aunt Luna explained. “Something terrible has happened to her daughter—she named her after me. Did I mention that? It was a lovely gesture. Anyway, Little Luna, as they call her, is about four now and she somehow got into the neighbor’s backyard where they have a pool...”

“Oh, *no!*” Hanna said with real horror. That was definitely one of the dangers of living in Florida—there were pools, ponds, and lakes everywhere—not to mention the ocean on three sides. Her parents had made sure that she and Sam got swimming lessons almost as soon as they could walk, to avoid this kind of tragedy.

“Is she dead?” Wraith asked quietly and Hanna repeated the question.

“That’s the thing—she’s not. She’s on life support but she’s hanging on—*barely*,” Aunt Luna said. “I think her spirit may be hovering around her body, unable to find its way back in. But if the little girl’s spirit hovers too long without finding its way...”

“She’ll make her way to the afterlife,” Hanna finished for her.

“In all probability, yes.” Aunt Luna nodded. “I’m going to go down to Earth to see if there’s any way I can help, but I’m afraid I won’t be able to. I have only a tiny sliver of the Gift you and Sam have, of seeing and speaking to Lost Spirits. I’m afraid I won’t be able to find the little girl and help her back into her body.”

“What about calling Sam?” Hanna asked at once. Her sister was so good at helping Lost Spirits get where they needed to be, she had a whole YouTube channel devoted to it.

But Luna shook her head sadly.

“I thought of that, of course. But she and her Kindred are on another planet right now—he wanted to take her to Ogi’o Prime because they have an extensive culture devoted to life after death. It’s in a closed system and you need special permission to go there. She’s going to be unreachable for at least another week. And by then I’m afraid it will be too late!”

“I’ll go then,” Hanna said, though she could feel her stomach fisting into something that felt like a chunk of ice as she spoke the words. “I can speak to spirits too—I just generally try not to, because most of them are so unpleasant. But I can do it when I have to—maybe I can find the little girl and bring her back.”

“Hanna, no!” Aunt Luna exclaimed. “I don’t want you going back down to Earth—you’re *happy* here. And safe. The Dark Entity hasn’t bothered you since that first night when Wraith drove it away!”

“Your aunt is right, little one,” Wraith said quietly. “You won’t be safe on Earth and I can’t go with you. I am bound to the Mother Ship and I cannot leave it, no matter how hard I try.”

Hanna felt even more frightened, but then she pictured the young mother standing beside her daughter, seeing the tubes and hoses and the almost lifeless little body in the hospital bed and she *knew* she had to go.

“I’ll be fine,” she said, lifting her chin. “The Dark Entity has only ever bothered me at night—he can’t stand the daylight. So we’ll go during the day—I’m sure that’s when the hospital has visiting hours, anyway—right? And then we’ll be sure to come back up to the Mother Ship before it gets dark.”

Aunt Luna blotted her eyes on a tissue.

“Are you certain you want to try this, Hanna? It’s no light thing to intervene between death and his prey.”

“I’m sure,” Hanna said firmly, even though her insides now felt like a solid block of ice. She turned to Wraith. “Please—try to understand.”

“I do.” Putting an arm around her, he dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “I understand that you have the heart of a warrior, little one. I know that you have to try and help if you can.”

“Thank you.” Hanna felt a rush of gratitude. She’d been afraid he would be upset with her for wanting to put herself at risk. But he understood her—he *always* understood. It was one of the best things about him.

Aunt Luna blotted her eyes again and blew her nose.

“If we’re going to go, we need to leave at once,” she said. “Bruin can fly us down right away and we should make it during daylight hours.”

“All right.” Hanna nodded. She’d been sitting on the couch but now she stood on shaking legs. “Let’s go.”

“Wait—before you do...” Wraith stood as well and took her in his arms. He kissed her deeply and looked into her eyes. “Just be sure you’re back before darkness falls, little one,” he murmured. “I couldn’t bear to lose you.”

“I...I don’t want to lose you either,” Hanna whispered. “Don’t worry—I’ll come back before dark. I’ll be aboard the Mother Ship, back in your arms before you know it.”

She had no idea how wrong she was.

HANNA

The hospital had a sterile, chilly smell—the smell of disinfectant and death, Hanna thought. She usually avoided it as much as possible—in fact, she hadn't been to a hospital since the death of her parents, many years ago when she was only thirteen.

Unfortunately, both her mom and dad had been killed instantly in the wreck that took their lives and their spirits must have gone directly to the afterlife. So she and Sam had only been able to see their bodies—a terrible sight that Hanna would never forget. But she had looked anyway—hoping against hope that the policeman who had come to their door was wrong and that the people under the bloody sheets in the morgue weren't her parents.

It had been her parents after all though, and while she and Sam hadn't seen their spirits, they had seen plenty of others during that visit.

The hospital was *crawling* with dead people.

Hanna winced and looked away as a gray man with a huge, open wound in his abdomen walked past her. He was naked and the look in his eyes was dull and confused. There were still a few surgical instruments sticking out of the open cavity.

To her right a teenager with a gunshot wound that had taken off half his head was muttering to himself. Hanna couldn't hear what he was saying and she didn't *want* to hear—she just wanted to get past him.

She saw the ghosts of a few children too, but none seemed to be hovering near any particular room, trying to get back into their body. They were mostly playing quietly to themselves, but always alone—for some reason, the dead didn't often congregate together. Maybe because most of the spirits who were stuck in the Earthly Realm were confused—too confused to find the

afterlife. Often, they were even too confused to know that they were dead.

Case in point, Hanna saw a gray, translucent man who looked to be in his sixties striding importantly down the hall, holding a ghostly chart in one hand. He was wearing a long white coat and it was clear he'd been a doctor during his lifetime and he thought he was still seeing patients, even now, years after his own death.

Hanna hadn't missed seeing ghosts one bit. But one thing she'd missed even less was the Imps and they seemed to be *everywhere*. She saw a few Lust Imps clinging to the nursing staff and most of the doctors had Pride Imps riding on their shoulders, assuring them in hissing whispers of their own importance.

One of the Imps—a red, wrinkled one with long teeth and glowing green eyes—jumped out and made a face at Hanna as they rounded the corner and she had to fight not to gasp out loud. No, she *certainly* hadn't missed these little bastards one bit!

At last they made their way to the Pediatric ICU where the little girl was. When Aunt Luna said they were visitors, the nurse in charge was reluctant to let them in. However, when she explained that they were there for the grieving mother, the nurse reluctantly allowed them to enter.

“But if anything happens, you'll have to get out right away and give us room to work,” she told them sternly.

They promised not to interfere and to leave at once if they were told to, and finally they were allowed to go back to the little girl's room.

Just inside the door Hanna saw a heartbreaking sight. A woman with short brown hair was standing at the foot of the hospital bed with tears rolling silently down her cheeks. Lying in the center of the bed was a still, small form hooked up to tubes and wires and machines which were all that was keeping her alive.

“Oh, Luna—you came!” the woman who must be Summer cried as Aunt Luna entered the room. She threw her arms around Hanna's aunt and sobbed as if her heart would break. “I turned my head for just a minute—less than a minute—and little Luna was gone!” she wailed, her words coming out muffled and heartbroken. “Tom and I searched *everywhere* but we never thought she could get over that fence to the neighbor's yard. By the time we thought to look, she was already...already floating...face...face down...”

At that point her words dissolved into sobs and she clearly couldn't say any more. Aunt Luna was crying too—her heart clearly breaking for her

friend's tragedy. She looked over Summer's head at Hanna, her eyes filled with tears and Hanna knew what she was asking. But when she looked around the room, she didn't see the little girl's spirit hovering nearby. In fact, she didn't see anything at all that would indicate she was still near.

But that doesn't mean she's completely gone, she thought and felt a stab of fear. *You know what you have to do, Hanna—you have to look for her. If there's any chance she's anywhere near, you have to find her and bring her back.*

It was a terribly risky thing to do...but it was also the *only* thing to do. She hadn't come here just to stand around and cry—she had come to help and Hanna knew she was the only one who could.

Taking a deep breath, she opened herself to the world Beyond the Veil—the place she'd been shying away from since she'd seen her first ghost, (a horrible old man who'd had a heart attack in the room that served as her nursery)—when she was only one or two. The Shadow Lands—that was how she thought of the gray world between life and death—and she did her best to keep the door that led there closed.

But now, for the first time, instead of trying to hide from her Gift, Hanna used it. She swung the door wide and stepped through.

HANNA

In the outside world of the hospital, Hanna's body quietly collapsed. Luckily, Bruin was standing beside her and he was able to catch her as she fell. He called frantically for Luna, but she shook her head.

"Hanna has gone hunting," she told him, as he lifted her niece's limp body in his arms. "Hold her for a moment—we have to give her time to search."

Hanna heard them talking only dimly. Her spirit was in the Shadow Lands, the place Beyond the Veil, and she was searching in the gray dimness for any sign of the young life that had been torn too soon from its body.

"Luna?" she called softly, as she went. "Little Luna? Are you here? Can you hear me?"

But there was no answer, so Hanna went on.

It felt like she wandered forever, calling for the child in the half-light. Nothing grew in the Shadow Lands and no animals made their homes there—it was a sterile, lifeless, colorless place where nothing ever died and nothing was ever born.

In the distance she could see the dark shapes of mountains wreathed in shadows, but they never seemed to get any closer no matter how far she walked. Her feet were on a path made of flat, gray paving stones surrounded by a vast, sandy desert. The path wound ahead of her endlessly and seemed to have no beginning point and, by the same token, no end.

If she turned her head, Hanna could see the open door that led back to the hospital room where the little girl's body lay. But it was getting further and further off and the light of the door was growing dimmer.

She understood instinctively that if she got too far from that door, she

wouldn't be able to find her way back again. If she lost sight of the Living Lands, she would exile herself in this cold, sterile, gray place forever. But the memory of that small body looking so shrunken in the too-large bed and the sobbing mother kept her going.

Just a little further, she told herself. Just a little bit further...

And then she heard it—a high, sweet voice singing softly, like a child singing to herself while she plays alone.

“Miss Mary Mac...Mac...Mac...

All dressed in black...black...black...

With silver buttons...buttons...buttons...

All down her back...back...back...”

Hanna's heart skipped a beat—she knew at once it *must* be the girl she was looking for!

“Luna!” she called again. “Little Luna, is that you?”

The singing stopped at once and Hanna was afraid that she must have scared the little spirit away. But then, after a few more steps, she saw her.

Little Luna was crouched on the stone path just ahead of her. She was playing aimlessly with the sand that swept out from the path like a great, gray ocean. Her clothes were wet, clinging to her small body despite the arid environment around her, and her long blonde hair dripped water endlessly on the paving stones of the path—water which instantly evaporated as though it had never been.

“Little Luna?” Hanna asked, approaching her carefully, the same way she might approach a stray cat that was skittish and scared of people. “Little Luna, is that you?”

The girl looked up and Hanna was glad to see that her eyes hadn't gone sunken and dull like the eyes of the dead. Her face was filled with curiosity.

“Who are you?” she asked in a clear, piping voice. “Why are you here in the gray place?”

“Your mommy sent me to come look for you,” Hanna said, kneeling down beside her. “Do you remember your mommy? She misses you so much.”

The little girl looked puzzled.

“But then...why didn't she come looking for me herself? I've been here, waiting and waiting, but she and Daddy never came for me.”

“They *can't* come for you, sweetheart,” Hanna told her. “Not everybody can come to the gray place.” She nodded around at the Shadow Lands. “I'm

one of the only people in the world who can, so your mommy asked me to come and bring you back to her.”

Luna looked at her mistrustfully.

“Mommy says I’m not supposed to go with strangers. Are you a stranger, lady?”

Hanna bit her lip. She had to be careful how she answered—she was at the furthest limit she could go without getting lost forever. The door back into the hospital and the Land of the Living was barely a bright spark on the horizon. If the girl ran from her, she didn’t dare to follow or both of them would be eternally damned to wander the gray half-life forever.

“I tell you what,” she said, having an idea. “My name is Hanna. What’s your name?”

“You already said it—my name is Luna. But Mommy calls me ‘Little Luna,’” the little girl replied.

“Little Luna, it’s very nice to meet you.” Hanna put out her hand. The child looked at it for a long time, but finally she took it.

Hanna shook hands with her cheerfully and smiled.

“Look at that—we just got introduced to each other!” she said, laughing a little. “That means we’re not strangers anymore.”

“We’re not?” The little girl’s brow furrowed and then cleared. “Okay—I guess we’re not.” She smiled at Hanna. “So what should we do now? Do you want to be my friend and play in the sand with me? It’s almost like the beach...except there isn’t any ocean,” she added, sadly.

“We can play in a minute but first, can we go on a walk?” Hanna stood and held out a hand to her. “I think if we hurry, we can find the way back to your Mommy. Wouldn’t you like to see her again?”

“Oh—Mommy! Yes, I miss Mommy and Daddy so much!” Luna jumped up and gave Hanna her rather damp little hand.

“Then let’s go see her.” Hanna smiled down at the little girl. “Let’s go see your Mommy.”

And the two of them began the long walk back.

HANNA

Time moves differently in the Shadow Lands. Hanna felt as though she had been trudging for hours, keeping Little Luna firmly by the hand. At first she had been afraid that she'd gone too far—that there was no getting back to the Land of the Living. But little by little, the tiny bright spark that was the door that led to the hospital room began to grow bigger.

Luna walked by her side, uncomplaining. In the living world she might have said that she was hungry or thirsty or that she needed to go to the bathroom. But in the Shadow Lands there is neither hunger nor thirst—neither intake nor elimination. That which is, *is* and it never changes.

Going back was like walking through quicksand, Hanna thought. Or maybe just really thick mud. The Shadow Lands seemed to suck at her and the girl beside her—Luna especially had been there long enough that the gray half-life considered her its own and wanted to keep her.

But they persevered and after what felt like hours and hours, the door was at last right in front of them. Luna had been keeping her head down as they walked—the effort to keep moving was clearly taking all her energy. But then the sounds of the Living Lands drifted out to them and she heard her mother's voice.

“Mommy!” she exclaimed, looking up eagerly. She saw her mother standing beside the hospital bed and frowned and looked up at Hanna. “There's my Mommy...but who is that little girl in the bed?” she asked. “She looks like *me*.”

“That's because she *is* you,” Hanna told her.

“She is? But how can she be me when *I'm* me?” The little girl looked confused.

“I should have said she’s *part* of you,” Hanna corrected herself. “She’s the part that can run and play in the sun—she doesn’t have to stay in the gray place.”

“I don’t want to be in the gray place, either! I want my Mommy!” Luna started to run through the door but Hanna gripped her hand, stopping her.

“Wait!” She crouched down beside the little girl, putting herself on her level. “Listen to me, Luna,” she said firmly. “I know what you want to do—you want to run in there and hug your Mommy right away—right?”

“Yes! Yes, I do!” The little girl was beginning to cry now—a good sign, Hanna thought, that she could produce tears in this vast, arid desert.

“But first you have to jump *into* the little girl in the bed,” Hanna told her. “She’s part of you, remember? Until the two of you join up again, your Mommy won’t be able to hear you or see you. Do you understand?”

“I *think* so...” Luna said slowly. “Jump in the girl on the bed and *then* my Mommy can see me?”

“And hear you and hug you,” Hanna told her, nodding. “Can you promise to do that for me?”

“Yes, yes—I promise!” Luna was tugging at her hand. Her eyes were fixed on the scene in the hospital room. Hanna’s were too. The girl in the bed, her grieving mother—Aunt Luna and Uncle Bruin, who was holding Hanna’s own limp body carefully and giving her worried looks.

Hanna wanted to jump into her own body as well, but she knew she had to wait and be sure that Luna got into hers first. If she somehow missed and wound up back in the Shadow Lands, Hanna had to be there to catch her and redirect her.

“Okay,” she said to the little girl. “On the count of three, you’re going to run into the room and jump into that little girl. Are you ready? One...two... *three!*”

“*Three!*” Luna shouted at the same time. She let go of Hanna’s hand and jumped through the open doorway, directly onto the hospital bed.

Hanna watched anxiously as she settled into the limp, pale body. She hoped the spirit hadn’t been gone too long for it to join with the physical body again.

But just as she was getting worried, Little Luna’s eyes flew open and she began to wave her arms.

“Mommy! Mommy!” she cried.

“Oh my goodness! Look—*look!*”

The mother's voice was almost a shriek. Immediately she had her daughter in her arms and tears of happiness were filling her eyes.

"You came back!" Hanna heard her sobbing. "Oh my sweet girl, my baby—you came back to me!"

Feeling a warm glow of satisfaction, Hanna walked through the door herself. With a little hop, she found herself back in her own body, which was still being held gently by Uncle Bruin.

As she blinked her eyes and looked up at him, she saw relief spread over his bearded face.

"Thank the Goddess!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "I feared the worst!"

"I knew that Hanna could do it—I knew she could find her!" Aunt Luna was suddenly at her side, hugging her even before Uncle Bruin could put her down. "Oh sweetheart—I'm so proud of you! For the first time, you used your Gift instead of *it* using *you*. You've truly come into your own today." She looked over her shoulder and frowned. "But...I feel a cool draft. You didn't leave the door open—did you?"

"The...the door?" Blearily, Hanna tried to focus on the place where she had opened the door to the Shadow Lands. To her concern, she saw that she had indeed forgotten to shut it. It still stood open, showing the gray and featureless twilight of what Little Luna had called "the gray place."

"I don't think—" she began and then she saw them...

Two glowing red eyes were staring at her from just inside the doorway. As Hanna watched in horror, an evil mouth filled with long, jagged fangs slowly widened into a grin. And then a long arm that seemed to be made of the substance of shadows reached out for her.

"Hanna, my sweet little slut," a voice hissed in her ears. "At last we meet again..."

WRAITH

“*W*arrior, arise—a choice lies before you!”

Wraith knew at once who the voice belonged to—it was the voice he had been waiting to hear from the moment of his death, when he had so foolishly drunk the poison potion.

“Goddess!” He rose from the chair he had been hovering over in Hanna’s suite and bowed low before her.

The Mother of All Life has a beauty so terrible it is difficult for mortals to perceive. But Wraith was no longer strictly mortal and he saw her for a moment when he dared to lift his eyes. The sight was one of such shining beauty as to strike a warrior blind and dumb and for a moment, he could say nothing else.

“*You must make a choice,*” the Goddess repeated. **“*The human female that you love is in dire peril. Even as we speak, her soul is being ripped from her body.*”**

“I’ll go to her at once!” Wraith exclaimed, finding his voice at last. “I gave her my Oath—I’ll save her! But, Goddess—she’s on Earth and I can’t leave the Mother Ship!”

“*Therein lies your choice, Warrior,*” the Goddess told him. **“*I can transport you to the Earthly Realm so that you may fight the demon who seeks to claim her soul. But I cannot promise you will be able to return. Even if you are able to save your love, you may be trapped there forever, wandering in darkness.*”**

Wraith didn’t hesitate.

“I love her, Goddess,” he told his deity. “I will go to her and fight for her, no matter what the cost. Please—send me quickly! I have to save her!”

The Goddess nodded her shining head.

“I chose well when I marked you as her Protector. Very well, Warrior—brace yourself. The trip will be swift and terrible and you must be ready to fight the moment you arrive.”

Wraith drew his sword, the steel ringing as it left the scabbard.

“I am ready,” he said grimly. “Send me, Goddess. And if I never return, so be it.”

“Your courage is beyond praise,” he heard her murmur.

And then there was the sound of a mighty wind rushing in his ears and everything was blackness.

HANNA

“**N**o! No, leave me alone!” Hanna shrieked, but her voice came out as nothing but a whisper as the hand made of shadows clawed her spirit from her body.

With horror, she saw her physical form slump forward as Aunt Luna and Uncle Bruin grabbed for her.

“Oh no!” she heard Aunt Luna exclaim. “The Dark Entity—somehow it found her!”

And then she was being dragged through the open doorway to the gray Shadow Lands again and leaving the brightness of the Living Lands behind her for the second time.

*For the **final** time if you can't get away. Run, Hanna—fight!* whispered a panicked little voice in her head.

But though she struggled and kicked, the Dark Entity had its claws sunk deep in her flesh. Hanna felt the burning, piercing pain as she fought and failed to tear herself away. He seemed to be all around her—his body somehow made of solid shadows so cold they burned her.

“*My foolish little slut!*” the demon hissed as it dragged her further into the dim gray land. “*I can't believe how **stupid** you are. You were safe—I couldn't touch your physical body as long as that hulking warrior guarded you. So what do you do? You leave your physical body and open a doorway just for me—a path for me to come and take you. You must **want** me to own you—there's simply no other explanation.*”

“No!” Hanna gasped, twisting her head to see the open door—it was still so *close*. If she could just get free of the Dark Entity's grip, she could jump back through the door and slam it closed!

“Oh yes, my little slut! You’re mine now.”

“No—leave me alone! I don’t want anything to do with you!” She thought of something suddenly. “And you can’t take me unless I let you—unless I willingly give myself to you sexually. That’s why you put the lust curse on my head! But I’ll never give in—you might as well let me go!”

Horrible, hissing laughter filled her ears.

“Stupid little slut—that rule only applied while your spirit and body were joined! I couldn’t own your physical body until you offered it to me freely. But now you’re nothing but a spirit and no barrier stands in the way! I can drag you to Hell and fuck on you and feast on you at the same time!”

Hanna opened her mouth to protest but a new voice pierced the gray shadows.

“Take your hands on my female, Demon!” it growled. And then the bright, shining point of a silver sword blade suddenly punched through the Dark Entity’s roiling, shadowy body.

The Dark Entity let out an angry shriek and whirled to face the attacker while still keeping one clawed hand wrapped firmly around Hanna’s upper arm.

“You dare to wound me!” it snarled. *“I’ll make you watch while I fuck your female and feast on her soul!”*

“Let her go now or suffer the consequences—this is my final warning,” the deep voice growled.

And then a tall warrior with long black hair and mismatched eyes stepped out of the shadows.

“Wraith!” Hanna was nearly crying with relief. Her Protector was here now—everything would be all right. She was certain it would!

But then the Dark Entity drew a sword of its own—a blade that seemed to be made of pure, pitch-black midnight. The dull half-light of the Shadow Lands skated the length of its wickedly sharp edge, making it gleam dangerously.

The demon lashed out with its sword and Wraith jumped backwards, nimbly avoiding the blow. He drove forward with his own blade once more, but this time the demon dodged.

Wraith slashed again, but it was clear he was trying to be careful not to hurt Hanna while he fought the Dark Entity. His movements were constricted because he couldn’t risk harming her.

The Dark Entity saw this at once, and used it to his advantage. He

dragged Hanna in front of his shadowy body and flashed his jagged white grin at the big Kindred.

“Fight me, Warrior! Go on—do it! Or are you afraid you might hurt the little female? Is that it?”

“Let...her...GO!” Wraith roared, his mismatched eyes flashing with anger. They had begun to glow almost as red as the demon’s now—he might be going into Rage—the berserker state of fury that all Kindred enter when their female is threatened, Hanna thought dimly.

But unfortunately, the Dark Entity had found a weapon it could use and it wasn’t about to stop. Dragging Hanna close to its shadow body—which was so cold it burned her—it put the sleek obsidian blade to her throat.

“Not another step closer, Warrior,” it hissed at Wraith. *“I’ll slit her throat. You know if the spirit is mortally wounded in the Shadow Land it cannot go back to the Land of the Living!”*

“No!” There was horror in Wraith’s voice and the red faded from his eyes to be replaced by fear. “No, don’t hurt her!”

*“But I will...I’ll do **more** than hurt her. I will damn her to an eternity of suffering in the Pit with me!”* the Dark Entity threatened. *“She’ll be mine forever to feast on and to fuck! Mine...Mine...MINE!”*

“Take me!” Wraith threw down his sword and spread his hands wide.

“What?” The Dark Entity sounded confused.

“I said, take me instead,” Wraith repeated. “I’m much larger than Hanna—I’ll make a much better meal for you.”

“Hmmm...” The Dark Entity sounded thoughtful, as though it was really considering the big Kindred’s offer.

Hanna was so horrified that at first she couldn’t speak.

“Wraith, no!” she gasped, finally finding her voice. “No, you can’t trade yourself for me—you *can’t*.”

“I can and I will.” Wraith kept his gaze fixed on the glowing red eyes of the Dark Entity. “Take me and let her go, Demon,” he challenged. “I’m nearly twice her size.”

“But will you be as much fun to fuck, I wonder?” the Dark Entity mused.

Wraith glared at it.

“Don’t you like a challenge? You can *try* to fuck me, but nobody says you’ll succeed. Or is it only helpless females you like? Are you too much of a coward to take on a warrior?”

This taunt seemed to decide the Dark Entity.

“*You swear to come with me to the Pit without a struggle?*” it demanded.

“I give my word as a Kindred warrior. My sword stays here.” Wraith kicked his bright silver blade away. “As for the fucking, there’s going to be some fighting first, but you can try.”

“*I think I like that idea. Very well...*”

The clawed fingers suddenly unwrapped themselves from around Hanna’s arm and the shadow body moved towards the big Kindred.

“No!” she cried again, reaching out for Wraith. “No, Wraith—you can’t do this! You can’t sacrifice yourself for me! I won’t let you!”

“Hanna, get back to the Land of the Living and *stay there.*” Wraith’s voice was hard and his eyes never left the Dark Entity’s. “Go now, while you have the chance!”

“I won’t! I won’t leave you!” she cried.

“You *have* to.” Wraith pointed at the open doorway. Even now it was just a few feet away. “Go—don’t let the demon take us both! You must go while you can!”

“No!” Hanna was sobbing by now. “No, Wraith! I can’t let you do this—I can’t let you give yourself for me! Stop this and come with me now!”

“I can’t, little one. I’ve given my word.” He looked at her earnestly and she could see that his heart was breaking. “I love you, Hanna,” he said in a low voice. “And I’ll never forget you or the time we spent together. Now please—*go.*”

Then the Dark Entity wrapped its shadowy substance around the big warrior and suddenly both of them were gone, leaving Hanna alone and weeping in the Shadow Lands.

HANNA

Somehow Hanna staggered back through the doorway to the Land of the Living. She hardly knew how she managed though—her eyes were almost too blinded with tears to see anything.

When she woke up the second time in Uncle Bruin’s arms, she found that he and Aunt Luna had taken her out of the little girl’s hospital room—which was now crawling with medical staff—and they were all in a hallway of the hospital.

“Oh thank the Goddess!” Aunt Luna exclaimed, when Hanna opened her eyes. “I was so afraid we’d lost you forever! But here you are, back in the Land of the Living and you’re all right!”

“No, I’m not!” Hanna said, and began to sob.

The next few weeks were as dark and horrible as the previous weeks had been bright and wonderful.

Hanna spent every minute of every day thinking of Wraith—imagining the horrors that were being done to him, the torment he was enduring. And all because she had stupidly left the door to the Shadow Lands open instead of closing it after she’d found Little Luna!

My fault—everything that’s happening to him is my fault! He’s being tortured right now—maybe even raped and devoured alive—all because of me! she thought over and over again. It became an obsessive thought—an endless litany of guilt in her head and the worst thing about it was her imagination insisted on conjuring horrible images to go along with the terrible words.

Hanna barely slept anymore because when she did, her thoughts turned into the most vivid and horrible nightmares she’d ever had. But she refused to

let Aunt Luna give her calming potion because she felt she deserved every bit of the torment.

“My dear, you know Wraith wouldn’t want you to punish yourself this way!” Her aunt said desperately, when Hanna had refused any kind of help yet again several weeks after she had lost her ghost warrior. “He sacrificed himself because he *loved* you!”

“I loved him too,” Hanna said dully, pushing away the calming sleep draught Aunt Luna had concocted just for her. “He’s the only man I’ve ever loved and now he’s gone. But he’s not just dead—he’s being *tortured for all eternity*, Aunt Luna! And it’s *all my fault!*”

“It’s *not* your fault!” her aunt tried to argue. “Please, sweetheart—don’t keep blaming yourself!”

“Who else should I blame?” Hanna demanded. “I’m the one who left the door wide open! I’m the one who let him take my place in the Pit. I deserve every single sleepless night...every single nightmare. No matter how bad they get, I can’t ever be in as much pain and agony as he’s suffering right now.”

And she turned and left her aunt’s suite to go back to her own, where she could be miserable in peace.

Throwing herself on the bed where she and Wraith had loved each other for such a short time, she began crying. She’d wept so much already that her lids were red and sore—the tears felt like acid etching their way down her cheeks, and yet she welcomed the pain. It was surely not even a tiny fraction of what Wraith was enduring on her behalf...

And then she felt a hand on her head, stroking her hair gently.

“Little one, don’t cry,” murmured a deep voice. “Please don’t cry for me.”

Hanna jerked her head up, staring wildly around. There, sitting on the side of the bed, was Wraith!

“Wraith! Oh my God—Wraith!” she gasped and pounced on him.

HANNA

Wraith caught her and held her tight in his arms, stroking her hair and murmuring that he loved her.

Hanna wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist and sobbed for joy.

“You’re back! You came back! You’re all right!”

Wraith let her cry but when her sobs trailed off to sniffles, he pulled her gently away and looked into her eyes.

“It’s true, little one—I’m back. But only for a little while—only to say goodbye.”

“What?” Hanna shook her head. “But that can’t be right, can it?”

“I’m afraid it is,” Wraith rumbled. “I can’t stay long.”

“But...but what happened? How did you come back at all and why can’t you stay?” she demanded, still keeping her legs wrapped firmly around his waist because she wasn’t about to let him go. “Tell me *everything*.”

Wraith sighed.

“I struggled against the Demon for a long, *long* time—we fell into the Pit together, fighting. He wrapped himself around me and tried to take me but he couldn’t. I fought to free myself, but I wasn’t able.”

“So you were fighting for two *weeks*?” Hanna asked, her eyes wide.

“Was that how long it was here in the Land of the Living? Time has no meaning in the Pit,” Wraith said.

“It was the longest two weeks of my life,” Hanna assured him. “But how did you get out and come back?”

Wraith frowned.

“I had help. I was *determined* to never give in, but I could feel myself

weakening as the demon tried to take me...then I saw a brilliant beam of light from above. The light became a rope—a glowing rope that reached down into the depths of the Pit.”

“A rope? What was it?” Hanna asked shaking her head.

“It was the Goddess—the Mother of All Life—she threw me a lifeline,” Wraith said gravely. “And then I heard her calling me—calling me by name.” He got a faraway look in his eyes. “Just hearing her voice seemed to give me new strength. I fought my way free at last and grasped the rope. Hand over hand, I pulled myself up and out of the Pit. As long as I held the Goddess’s rope in my hands, the demon couldn’t lay hold of me again.”

“So the Kindred Goddess helped you out of the Pit?” Hanna asked, her eyes wide.

Wraith nodded.

“And when I finally reached the lip and pulled myself over the edge, I found her standing there in all her shining glory. ‘**Warrior,**’ she said to me. ‘**By your courage and honor you have earned your final rest.**’ Then she pointed and I saw a vast golden tunnel filled with light. And standing in it was everyone I had ever loved when I was alive. I saw my parents...my brothers...even Mara, my lost love, waving at me. All of them were beckoning and calling my name.”

“Oh...” Hanna whispered, feeling deflated. “So...you have to go join them now?”

“Not immediately, but soon,” Wraith told her. “I begged the Goddess for an hour to say goodbye to you and to let you know that I am not writhing in torment. I will be going to stay in the afterlife instead—I thought that knowing that would help give you peace.”

“I can’t even tell you how *horrible* I’ve been feeling,” Hanna said, searching his eyes with her own. “I’m so glad you’re all right and so grateful that you came to tell me so!”

“Good. Then I must leave.” And Wraith began to grow insubstantial—so much so that Hanna could see her own hands through his body as he began to fade.

“Wait!” she exclaimed desperately. “Wait—don’t go so soon! Kiss me first—kiss me one more time, Wraith. Please!”

He grew solid again, his mismatched eyes filled with love for her.

“Of course I will, little one. How could I refuse the sweetness of your kisses one last time?”

Hanna took his face in her hands and kissed him—there was hunger and desperation in her kiss. His lips were soft and when he parted them, he still tasted like cinnamon. She pressed herself against him as she deepened the kiss...slipping her tongue into his mouth to explore as if she owned him.

Wraith groaned at her eagerness and kissed her back with more passion. His big hands were roving over her body now, up and down her sides and back and then stroking her breasts and teasing her nipples which were suddenly tight with desire.

His desire seemed to spur Hanna's own. She no longer had the lust runes on her forehead—they had faded after the Dark Entity had gone back to the Pit. But she felt just as hot and ready as she ever had when they were still etched into her flesh. Pulling back from him, she began tugging off her top.

Wraith frowned.

“Little one, what are you doing?”

“You know what I'm doing,” Hanna purred, giving him a naughty look. Throwing her blouse to one side, she reached for the fastenings of her bra. She was wearing one that clipped in the front so she was able to peel it open, exposing her naked breasts for him.

Wraith sucked in a breath. He had always loved her breasts.

“We shouldn't do this,” he rumbled, but he couldn't seem to take his eyes off her full breasts and tight nipples.

“Why not?” Hanna demanded. “Don't we have a little bit of time before you have to go? Why not spend it loving each other?”

“But I'm afraid this will make it too hard to leave you,” Wraith protested. But even as he spoke, he cupped one of her breasts and began to tug lightly at her nipple.

Hanna moaned softly as showers of pleasure sparks shot through her body. She certainly *hoped* what she was doing would make it hard for him to leave her because she wanted the big Kindred to stay!

“Stay with me for just a little while!” she begged, leaning forward and pressing her other nipple to his mouth. “Touch me...*taste* me. I've missed you so much, Wraith!”

“Gods, I shouldn't...” he groaned, but he was already sucking her tight pink bud between his lips and circling it with his tongue.

Hanna moaned again and ran her fingers through his long black hair, pulling it just the way she knew he liked.

The little bit of pain seemed to fire Wraith up. His eyes flashed and he

slowly let her nipple slip from between his lips.

“All right, little one,” he growled. “I’ll taste you one last time before I go. What better way to enter the afterlife than with your juices on my tongue?” He gave her a half-lidded look. “But this time, I want to try something different—I want you to ride my face.”

Hanna felt a shiver of pure lust go through her. Previously, she’d been too shy to try this particular position. But tonight she would do anything—*anything*—to keep her ghost warrior with her just a little while longer. Rising for a moment from his lap, she began to strip off her jeans and panties.

“Let’s do it,” she told him. “Come on—show me how you want me.”

Wraith’s mismatched eyes blazed with lust and he shimmered for a moment, changing from his armor to the long black sleep trousers he’d always worn when they slept together. He lay back on the bed with a pillow under his head and beckoned to her with both hands.

“Come here, little one—straddle my face,” he commanded.

Hanna did as he asked at once. Crawling over to him, she was about to straddle him but Wraith, it seemed, couldn’t wait. Reaching for her, he put his big hands around her waist and lifted her easily, placing her in position with her knees on either side of his head.

“Oh!” Hanna gasped. She always forgot how strong he was until he lifted her like she weighed no more than a feather pillow or a doll. Looking down between her legs, she saw an eager look in his gold and blue eyes.

“Come down,” Wraith growled. His hands were still on her waist, urging her to do as he said. “Come all the way down, little one—I want to feel your sweet little pussy pressed against my mouth.”

Hanna did as he asked, though she was trying to be careful and not crush him. She had always been large in her hips and thighs—she didn’t want to smother the big warrior.

But Wraith clearly wasn’t worried about that.

“I said come *down*,” he growled and pulled her firmly down until her pussy met his mouth.

Hanna gasped in pleasure as she felt his hot, wet mouth close over her sensitive outer lips. And then his hot, wet tongue was tracing her slit, sliding deep into her inner folds and finding the throbbing button of her clit.

She cried out and reached down to grip his hair. Knowing how much he loved it, she pulled *hard* and heard a muffled growl of desire and pleasure in response.

Suddenly two big hands were gripping her ass, kneading her hard as he pulled her down and opened her even wider at the same time. All the while, his tongue was licking her hungrily as though he was desperate to taste her juices. And then he found her clit again and sucked it into his mouth, teasing the right side of it with the tip of his tongue in the exact way that he knew drove her *crazy*.

As her orgasm began to build, Hanna forgot to feel shy or ashamed of herself or vulnerable in this position. She gripped the big warrior's hair even harder and ground herself against him, riding his face exactly as he'd asked her to, giving herself up to him completely.

"Wraith!" she moaned as she rode him, grinding shamelessly against his tongue. "Oh God, yes! I'm getting so *close*..."

And then she felt it—the sharp pinch of his fangs in her flesh. She would have cried out, but almost as soon as it came, the sharp little pain was eclipsed by the huge wave of intense pleasure that washed over her.

"*Ohhh!*" she moaned and felt herself trembling all over as her inner walls spasmed and the orgasm overtook her. "Oh Wraith! Oh my God, what did you *do*?"

He didn't answer at first and the orgasm seemed to go on and on. But finally, when Hanna thought she couldn't take anymore, he lifted her briefly and looked up.

"I bit you," he growled. "Injected my Essence. But I shouldn't have."

"W-why not?" Hanna panted. "It felt...felt amazing!"

"Because it only makes it that much harder to leave you," Wraith admitted. "Now that I've bitten you, my body wants to take you."

"Do it!" Hanna exclaimed. She scooted nimbly down his big body until she was straddling his hips instead of his face. Grasping his thick cock (his sleep trousers had somehow melted away)—she aimed the broad head at her pussy.

"I shouldn't..." Wraith protested. But when she pushed the wide crown of his cock into her wet pussy, he didn't try to stop her. In fact, he took her by the hips and pulled her down onto him.

Hanna threw her head back and moaned as she felt her inner walls stretching to take his huge shaft. She was glad now that she'd bought the Kindred sized dildo and let him use it on her often. It wasn't *quite* as big as Wraith's equipment, but it had definitely gotten her ready for him.

After a long, slow thrust she finally felt him bottom out inside her—the

head of his cock pressing deliciously hard against the mouth of her womb. Only his Bonding Knot remained outside her pussy, though Hanna felt that she could take it with a little maneuvering.

But then, after filling her, Wraith stopped.

“What’s wrong? Why aren’t you moving?” Hanna demanded.

“Little one...” he frowned. “We shouldn’t do this—it’s too easy to go too far.”

“As far as I’m concerned, this isn’t far *enough*,” she told him. “Make love to me, Wraith—*fuck* me! I need you to!”

“If I’m not careful I might try to Bond you to me,” he warned.

“Meaning you’d put your Bonding Knot inside me and bite me to inject your Essence again at the same time?” As she spoke, Hanna had begun to move. She shifted her hips back and forth, allowing just a few inches of his thick cock to slide out of her tightly stretched pussy...and then to slide back in again.

Wraith’s gold and blue eyes flashed.

“*Exactly*,” he growled. “And don’t think I don’t notice what you’re doing, little one. You’re riding my cock and being a very *bad* girl.”

“I can’t help it!” Hanna moaned as she sped up the pace. She could feel the Bonding Knot beginning to slip inside her. It seemed to her that somehow her pussy was opening even more to accommodate the big Kindred, opening to welcome him in. “I can’t help it—it feels so *good* to finally have you inside me! Please, Wraith—let me just ride you for a little while.”

“Well...” He seemed to hesitate but Hanna reached down and gripped his broad shoulders. She dug her nails in, scratching hard enough to mark him—giving him the pain she knew he craved.

Once again, the pain mixed with his pleasure seemed to tip Wraith over the edge.

“Gods, little one!” he groaned. “How can I say no to you when your hot little cunt feels so good wrapped around my cock? Very well, you can ride me for a little while. Ride my cock with your sweet, wet pussy.”

“Thank you, Wraith,” Hanna moaned. She began to work her hips even harder and faster, her bare breasts swaying with each stroke. His knot was going in and out of her now—she could feel her pussy mouth stretching to take it. In just a minute she would have it all the way inside her...

And then it happened, she felt the whole thick knot slip all the way into her pussy and begin to swell inside her. She sat down hard at once, making

sure that it couldn't slip out again—letting it fill her and tie the two of them together.

“Hanna?” His eyes widened. “What did you do?”

“I've got your Bonding Knot inside me,” Hanna informed him. “Oh God, it's so *big*,” she moaned as her inner walls stretched even wider to take the swelling thickness. “But it feels so *good*!”

Wraith shook his head.

“We have to stop—I have to take it out of you! If I try to Bond you, I might drag you to the afterlife with me!”

“Do it then!” Hanna demanded. She leaned back defiantly, taking his knot as deep as she could, and glared at him. “Do it—Bond me to you. And if it kills me, it kills me. *I don't care!*”

“But you're too young to die,” Wraith protested. “What about your aunt and your sister? Do you really want to leave them so soon?”

“They'll understand,” Hanna told him. “They'll miss me but they would want me to be happy. And Wraith, *you're* what makes me happy. I *need* you in my life—or in my death—I don't care which one it is, as long as we're together.”

“Oh, little one,” he groaned. “I shouldn't do this...”

“Do it!” she insisted again. “Bite me and Bond me to you—take me with you, Wraith.” She looked down at him desperately. “Don't go where I can't follow!”

At last her pleading seemed to convince him. With a low growl, he flipped them over so that he was on top and Hanna was pinned beneath his big body with his thick shaft lodged firmly in her pussy.

“All right then—you asked for it,” he rumbled. “Bare your neck for my fangs!”

Hanna did as he asked, turning her head to one side and pushing her hair out of the way. In that moment she felt no fear at all—only the desire to be with her ghost warrior forever—even if it meant she became a ghost herself.

As the sharp points of Wraith's fangs pierced her neck, she felt his Essence flooding her system with pleasure and began to come again. Once more her inner walls gripped the thick invader and this time it was almost as though she was massaging him—begging him to shoot his cream deep in her womb and Bond her to him forever.

Wraith didn't disappoint her. With a low groan that she felt more than heard, he began to spurt inside her, hot and hard, over and over filling her

completely with his seed.

Hanna had never been able to *feel* a man coming inside her before, but she felt this. And strangely enough, his cream didn't seem to melt away like it had when she'd sucked him. Instead, she felt her pussy overflowing with his hot seed. But it didn't matter because Wraith kept on coming, filling her with more and more even as some leaked out.

She had never felt more alive or more in love, she thought. Here she was, intimately joined to the man she wanted to be with forever with his cock lodged firmly in her pussy, pulsing inside her as he did his best to Bond them together and she never wanted it to stop!

Forever, she thought as she wrapped her arms and legs around him and held his big body close to her own. *Oh Wraith, I want to be with you forever!*

"I want to be with you too, little one," a deep voice rumbled in her head. *"Love you so much! I never want to let you go."*

Hanna felt a burst of joy. She knew what it meant that she could hear her ghost warrior's voice inside her head. How often had she seen her Aunt Luna communicate mentally with Uncle Bruin? A Soul Bond with a Kindred warrior meant that the two of you had formed a link so deep you could speak without even opening your mouth. That was what she had now with Wraith—she could feel him filling her mind the same way she still felt him filling her body.

"Oh Wraith—I love you so much!" she sent to him through their newly forged link. *"Never leave me again."*

"I won't—but I don't know where we're going," he sent back. *"I don't know—"*

"Then I will tell you, Warrior."

Suddenly Hanna's bedroom filled with a warm, feminine presence. She knew at once who it must be.

"Goddess?" she said aloud, looking around for the source of the voice. But she couldn't see anyone—she could only feel the warm, peaceful presence.

"Yes, it is I, daughter," the Goddess informed her. ***"I came to see why the Warrior was taking so long to say goodbye to you."***

Hanna felt a sudden stab of fear and she wrapped her arms and legs even tighter around Wraith's big body.

"Please, Goddess—don't take him away from me!" she exclaimed. "Or if you do, let me go with him. Just please, don't separate us again. We're

Bonded now and I love him so much!”

“And I love Hanna,” Wraith rumbled, looking up. “Forgive me for my disobedience, Goddess. “I couldn’t help myself—I long to be with her.”

“And so the two of you shall be together—forever,” the Goddess told them. **“Hanna, you showed great courage, going into the Shadow Land to find the little girl’s spirit and bring it back to her grieving mother. And Wraith, you sacrificed yourself for the female you love. Such bravery and selflessness will not go unrewarded.”**

“It...it won’t?” Hanna asked tentatively. “So...you’re not mad at us?”

“How can I be angry when I meant the two of you to be together all along?” the Goddess asked. **“Wraith, the potion you took which killed you carried not a curse, but a blessing. You were born too soon and so I had to put you in a state of stasis until Hanna could also be born and come to know you. You were the only one who could protect her from the demonic entity that stalked her—just as she was the only one who could retrieve that little girl’s soul.”**

“So...all of this was planned?” Wraith asked, sounding bewildered.

“From the very beginning,” the Goddess assured him. **“I always have a plan for my children, Warrior.”**

“So...what happens now?” Hanna asked uncertainly. “I mean, do I go with Wraith to the afterlife?”

“Not yet, my daughter,” the Goddess told her. **“For I am giving your Warrior a second chance at life. He will be solid and mortal once more so that the two of you can truly live and love together. You will bear him sons and the two of you will raise a family and grow old together. You will die on the same day after a long and fruitful life and only then, side by side and hand-in-hand, will you enter the gates of the afterlife together. This is my gift to both of you for your courage and self-sacrifice.”**

“Oh, thank you Goddess—thank you!” Hanna found that she was weeping—tears of joy were rolling down the sides of her face. Inside, she could feel Wraith’s wonder and joy and gratitude as well.

“Thank you, Goddess,” he said. “Truly, all my long years of exile as a ghost were worth it to hold my beloved in my arms and know she will never be parted from me.”

“Live well, Warrior,” the Goddess murmured. **“And I will see the two of you later—much later.”**

And then the warm, feminine presence was gone from the room, leaving

the two of them holding each other tightly as they tried to process the amazing experience.

It took a little time for Hanna to speak. For a long time she clung to her ghost warrior, knowing that he was no longer a ghost. At last she said, rather shakily,

“Did...did that really just happen?”

“It did,” Wraith rumbled. Rolling them over again, he put Hanna on top and she realized she was still straddling him with his shaft buried deep in her pussy. He looked up at her, his mismatched eyes shining with happiness. “It *did* happen—the Goddess has granted me another chance at life—a life I get to spend with you, little one.”

“I’ve never spoken to a deity before,” Hanna admitted. “Her presence is...overwhelming.”

“She is truly the Mother of All Life and worthy of praise,” he agreed. “And she is most generous to give us this chance—the promise that we will be together always.”

Hanna felt as though her heart might burst with happiness.

“I’ll never lose you again!” she whispered, reaching down to cup his face.

“We’ll never lose *each other*,” Wraith corrected her, smiling. “And that’s not all the Goddess promised—she said we would have a family.”

“That’s right!” Hanna was reminded all over again of this shaft deep inside her. She wiggled her hips, making Wraith groan. “She said I would bear you many sons. So shouldn’t you get started getting me pregnant?”

His gold and blue eyes went half-lidded with desire as he looked up at her.

“With pleasure little one. I want to Bond you to me again, all night long.”

So he did. And all during the long, pleasurable night Hanna felt incredibly blessed that the big warrior had come into her life. Her future happiness was assured forever now, all because she had been...*Guarded by the Ghost.*

EPILOGUE

“You look beautiful in that gown!” Sam stared at Hanna admiringly as she twirled in the emerald green dress that Aunt Luna had bought her when she first moved to the Mother Ship. “And you look so *happy* too,” she added. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you looking so content and so *calm*.”

“That’s because there are no Imps up here and hardly any ghosts,” Hanna told her, smiling.

“Well, there’s certainly one less now,” Sam pointed out. “Since your own ghost warrior is back in the Land of the Living.”

“Yes, isn’t he amazing?” Hanna sighed happily. “And the Goddess promised we’d be together *forever*.”

Sam laughed.

“Yes—he’s almost as amazing as *my* Kindred,” she said, her eyes dancing. “And now that the two of them are friends, maybe we can go on a double date sometime.”

“I’d love that,” Hanna said seriously. “But only if it’s here on the Mother Ship. I never want to go back down to Earth again if I can help it. I’m going to stay up here with Wraith and Aunt Luna and Uncle Bruin and finish my degree and then teach.”

“Just like you always wanted to.” Sam’s eyes were suddenly shining with tears. Reaching up, she pulled her little sister in for a hug. “I’m so happy you’re finally in a good place,” she whispered in Hanna’s ear. “I’ve been worried about you for so long!”

“Well, you don’t have to worry anymore,” Hanna assured her, hugging her back. “I’m settled now and happier than I’ve ever been.”

Just then the door to Hanna’s bedroom opened and Aunt Luna put her

head in.

“Girls, are you almost ready to go? The men are all dressed and waiting—we don’t want to be late for the Christmas party!”

“Coming.” Sam stepped back and fluffed her hair. She was wearing a color other than black for once—a gorgeous ruby red dress that hugged her curves and made her eyes sparkle like sapphires. Linking her arm through Hanna’s, she smiled up at her. “Ready, little Sis?”

“I’m ready,” Hanna assured her. Arm in arm she and her sister walked out to meet their mates.

Standing in the living area were three handsome Kindred warriors, all dressed in tuxes for the formal occasion—their Uncle Bruin, Sam’s mate, R’orn, and Wraith. When Wraith caught sight of Hanna, his eyes went wide with appreciation.

“Little one,” he sent through their link. *“You look breathtaking!”*

“Thank you,” Hanna sent back. *“You’re looking pretty sharp yourself!”*

She walked over and put her arm through his, gazing up at him adoringly. She liked him in his traditional ceremonial garb of the furry kilt and fur boots, but there was just something about a man in a tux that melted her.

“You melt me too, little one,” Wraith told her. *“Do you remember when you bought that dress, how I said I wished I could escort you to a party while you were wearing it?”*

“Yes—you did!” Hanna exclaimed, remembering. *“Back when you were a ghost and I was the only one who could see you. But **everyone** can see you now,”* she added. She loved the fact that he was visible to the other people in the room, not just her.

“Yes, thanks to the Goddess. I was so lonely before you came into my life.” Wraith put his arms around her and bent down to hug her close to his big body.

“I was lonely too,” Hanna whispered in his ear. “But now neither of us will ever be lonely again. I love you, Wraith!”

“Love you too, little one,” he rumbled. “So damn much!”

And then Aunt Luna began hurrying them out the door so they wouldn’t be late for the party. As Hanna took her warrior’s hand in hers and intertwined their fingers, she felt a rush of excitement and joy. Her life was complete now in every way and her Gift was no longer a curse. She couldn’t have been happier and it was all thanks to the Goddess, who always had a plan for her children.

THE END?

OF COURSE NOT!

There are always more Kindred stories coming. I'll be working on a Christmas book next and after that I had plans for the 5th book in my Forbidden Omegaverse series. As always, I love to hear from readers so if you want to drop in and say "Hi" you can find me on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [TikTok](#), or [X](#) (formerly Twitter.) Come find me and hang out for a while. I try to foster a community of caring and fun (with some naughty Spice throw in) on all my pages.

Hugs and Happy Reading to you all!

Evangeline

October 2023

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Evangeline Anderson is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the *Brides of the Kindred*, *Alien Mate Index*, *Cougarville* and *Born to Darkness* series. She is forty-something and lives in Florida with a husband, a son, and two cats. She had been writing erotic fiction for her own gratification for a number of years before it occurred to her to try and get paid for it. To her delight, she found that it was actually possible to get money for having a dirty mind and she has been writing paranormal and sci-fi erotica steadily ever since.

You can find her online at her website www.evangelineanderson.com

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