



All's Fae in Love and Chocolate

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

By

Michelle L. Levigne

© copyright April 2006, Michelle L. Levigne
Cover art by Dan Skinner, © copyright April 2006
ISBN 1-58608-904-8
New Concepts Publishing
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

Chapter One

After six years of running, Alexi came to rest in Las Vegas. As a scion of one of the most prestigious, powerful and dignified Fae families, he had been raised to protect his image. Las Vegas, the city of neon, gambling, and scantily clad showgirls, was the last place anyone would look for a Fae of his social status. Which made it the perfect place to hide.

He expected to hate the town, teeming with greedy, dreaming Humans, but he discovered he liked it. For the first time since becoming a prime target for every husband-hunting Fae woman, he considered settling down somewhere.

After all, the family curse had caught up with him, after nearly three centuries of blissful ease in magic. His strength and skill in magic were fading. It wouldn't be so bad if they went downhill at a regular pace, but his magic faded and erupted, sputtered to a halt, gave him killer headaches from the pressure of magic inside his skin, then drained away with a frustrating lack of predictability.

Why not settle where magic and illusion were taken for granted, and strangeness was ignored? Why not settle in a place where no one would notice if he didn't know the first thing about getting along without magic?

Of course, settling down meant cutting off all access to his family wealth. He couldn't leave a trail that husband-hunting Fae women could follow. Alexi liked women, but he didn't feel like getting shackled to one for the rest of his life, just because he indulged in some bedroom calisthenics with her. Sleeping with a woman in Need guaranteed magical matrimony. Alexi had heard that a man caught by Need didn't mind, but that wasn't much compensation. Temporary liaisons, maybe a decade at the most in length, were all he could manage.

To avoid being trapped by Need-bound women, he could leave no trail. Which meant no access to his personal wealth in the home Enclave. Which meant--he had to get a job.

A Human job.

How in the world did someone manage that?

He couldn't access the Ether Lexicon. That was how the last hopeful bride tracked him. Alexi, however, enjoyed research as a hobby and knew how to use libraries and newspapers.

His answer came in the classifieds section of the *Las Vegas Review*.

A magician needed an assistant. Immediately. Two performances nightly, and matinees on Saturday and Sunday.

"The last place anyone would look for me," Alexi mused, with a snort of disgust.

A cheesy magic act in a Las Vegas casino was the perfect place for him to hide. Human magic tricks were an abomination to the Fae, who knew what true magic meant. Sort of a hide-in-plain-sight tactic, à la Edgar Allen Poe.

Most magicians were males, using scantily clad Playboy bunny wannabes as their assistants to distract the crowd. This ad, however, specifically stated male assistants in good physical shape. No one would ever expect him to work for a gay magician. It was just too preposterous. Alexi liked women too much. Which made this job the perfect disguise. All he had to do was plant a spell on the magician the moment he stepped into the room for the interview, to ensure he didn't make any unwanted demands on his assistant. Let the world think what they wanted. Alexi could live with it. He would be free forever.

He had to get the interview and plant his protective spell today, while his magic felt strong and reliable. Tomorrow had no guarantee where his fluctuating magic was concerned.

Alexi surprised himself by starting to whistle a jaunty tune as he strolled down the dusty Vegas sidewalk. Even though he had no assurance for his future, just having a plan, figuring out how to take care of himself without a lick of magic, made him feel as if he were on top of the world.

He turned his thoughts to the scenery he strolled past. This wasn't the main drag of Vegas. The second-run casinos and hotels and show palaces suited him fine. He rather liked the quiet of Vegas in the morning, when sunlight was still stronger than neon and most inhabitants were just starting their days. Crowds guaranteed safety, but the lesser numbers under the sun guaranteed him breathing room.

He reached the address specified in the paper--an upstairs office in a building that boasted a marriage chapel, notary public and pawnbroker. The intertwined trail of multiple perfumes assaulted his nose the moment he pulled the stairwell door open. The sound of angry female voices spilled down the stairs toward him. Alexi instinctively flattened himself against the wall at the first landing and spelled himself invisible. Fortunately, the angry, cursing young women who stampeded past him didn't brush against him or step on him. He held perfectly still, eyes closed, and waited for the door at the bottom of the stairs to slam before he made himself visible again.

Alexi gripped the banister and stared upward into the dimness. He had to have this job. After turning invisible, did he have enough strength left in his unreliable magic to enchant his new employer? He started climbing.

Only one door stood open at the top of the stairs. Alexi went up to it, moving softer than shadows, and leaned around the doorframe to scope out the situation before he went inside.

The poster covering the back wall of the cubbyhole office said "Marga the Magnificent."

And she was.

Tall, long-legged, she wore a form-fitting tailcoat and black leggings. Lace cascaded from the plunging V of her neckline, and blue-black sequins glittered on her top hat. Her heart-shaped face framed faintly slanted, leaf-green eyes that glittered with mischief. Only one corner of her mouth curved up, somehow implying a touch of danger amid all the fun. Alexi had never wanted to kiss a picture before.

So, the magician was female. That explained the search for a male assistant. He snorted at the idea of being someone's beefcake, but why the heck not? Turnabout was

fair play, and no Fae woman would ever dream of him becoming someone's toyboy.

Alexi glanced at the poster of Marga once more. No, he wouldn't mind at all.

"Can I help you?"

That low, slightly raspy voice sent prickles up and down his back, hinting at a touch of magic. Alexi turned, and before he could gather his waning magic to follow the hint to its source, Marga in the flesh distracted him.

She had her sable hair tied back in a ponytail, no makeup, wore baggy green sweats, and her nose was red with a wretched cold. She was still magnificent.

"Uh, hi, I was--" Alexi held up the newspaper ad. Ridiculous, to be tongue-tied in front of a Human woman. That was what the slow decay of his magic, the family curse, had brought him to. Right now, he didn't really mind.

* * * *

Megan forgot to sniff as she stared at the lean, elegant hunk of beefcake in front of her. After those five harpies accused her of sexism and illegal discrimination and stormed out, she went to the bathroom to wash her face and fill the coffee carafe. She seriously thought about closing the office for the rest of the day.

Her fingertips tingled, and it wasn't from the double dose of cold medicine she had taken against her better judgment. Come to think of it, she was here today against her better judgment.

But then, she wouldn't be staring at mister lean-and-wild, with his tangled white-blond hair and sharp cheekbones, those deep-set green eyes and the bowstring-tight stance that just screamed *untamed*.

The tingling in her fingertips screamed *undercover Fae*.

What was this beefcake doing away from the Enclaves? Men like him were usually hogtied and married before they gave off the heat levels she could almost see, so where was his wife? And if he wasn't married, what was wrong with him?

Megan wasn't afraid he was a Hunter, working for the Commission on Fae Invisibility, come to test her and make sure she hadn't developed any noticeable magic. She was a Halfling, and her Fae relatives didn't want her any more than they wanted her footloose father. The ability to sense and find Fae no matter where they hid, no matter how they damped their magic, didn't count as a magical talent. In the words of her cousin Pendergast, it made her a bloodhound and nothing more.

But the question remained, what was this guy doing here?

"Are you okay?" He smiled, reminiscent of a lost puppy. "If this is a bad time for you, I can come back later. Not that I want to. I really need this job."

"Hmm? Oh--advertisement--yeah." Megan focused on the ad in his hand.

"Unfortunately, Desi is even sicker than me."

"Desi?" The lines around his eyes did adorable things when he was confused.

"My roommate. We share office space, too. She advertised for the assistant. Desdemona."

"Ill-omened name," he muttered.

"You're telling me. Every assistant she ever had was either gay or wanted her to retire and set up housekeeping." Megan laughed, ending in a ragged cough.

Before she knew it, he put an arm around her shoulders and guided her into the

office, settled her in a chair, took the carafe and got the coffee going. A tiny blue spark leaped from his pinkie to the center of her forehead, immediately clearing her sinuses and melting down into her lungs to clear them.

Gotta love a guy who would do that for a stranger.

“So Desdemona needs the assistant. What about you?”

“Actually, Desi called the paper and cancelled her ad yesterday. She jumped her contract.”

“I’m lost.” His eyes sparkled with humor.

“She prefers doing freelance work, and she’s revamping her act. No need for an assistant. She’s lucky.”

“Do you have an assistant?”

“Not right now. And I’m seriously considering going solo.” She sighed as the wonderful aroma of coffee filled her nose. Two minutes ago, she couldn’t have smelled it.

“So that’s why those five were so pissed, going down the stairs.” He grinned, creating more interesting lines and crevices in his angular face.

This guy makes Legolas look like a pampered wimp. Megan fought down the brief, hungry urge to grab him and bite one of his pointed ears. He did have pointed ears under that tangled mop of shoulder-length hair, didn’t he? Really sharp, elegant points? *Down girl!*

“I’m considering taking a female assistant, just because the last guy who helped me wanted to help himself *to me*.” Megan sighed. Dennis believed employee benefits included mattress exercises and wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Then why were they so mad?” he asked, interrupting her train of thought.

“They started cussing me out as soon as I said they needed to see Desdemona and not me. Sorry, but what ever happened to being polite when you’re looking for a job? I don’t want those filthy mouths on my stage.” *Your mouth, however ...* Megan yanked her thoughts back to the matter at hand.

“Good afternoon, Miss Marga.” He stepped back and executed a formal, prim bow. “My name is Alexi Ambrosius, and I am very interested in learning the fine art of prestidigitation and illusion. I would be honored if you would take me as your apprentice and assistant.” One corner of his mouth curved up. “I will keep my personal life very separate from our collaboration onstage, I assure you, and keep my hands to myself.”

Was she absolutely crazy to consider taking a hunk-of-the-month as her assistant? Fae men were notoriously libidinous. That’s how there got to be so many Halflings in the world. Herself included.

Megan narrowed her eyes, physical and magical, and studied him. Along with the faint buzzing in her fingertips that let her sense Fae presence, she had the ability to see a visible corona, at will, that told her much about a Fae’s magical condition.

Alexi’s corona flickered like a strobe light, sliding between the blue of good health to a sickly yellowy-orange. He was in trouble. Maybe that was why he was out in the Human-run world, instead of letting himself get snagged by some female who was perpetually in heat and who would pamper him for the rest of her life.

“Why aren’t you married?” she murmured.

Alexi instantly winced, which told her a lot. “I’d like to stay away from that subject, if you don’t mind.”

“You’re not gay, are you?”

“If I lied and said I was, would you hire me?” He flashed her a puppy-pathetic smile.

Megan had to laugh, which finished clearing her sinuses. That, the second blue spark of healing magic Alexi gave her, and the coffee he brewed convinced her. She needed him around.

If he started getting pushy, trying to get into her bed, she would just reveal she was a Halfling with no magic whatsoever. That would scare him away. It always did.

* * * *

Alexi somehow wasn’t surprised when Megan took him to a second-rate casino called Knockers--complete with a flashing neon bust that made Dolly Parton look like an adolescent. They immediately went backstage, and she showed him to the closet-sized dressing room her assistant had used until two days ago. The man’s stage costume wasn’t quite as risqué as Alexi had feared, and left some things to the imagination. His respect for Megan grew. She had to be a good magician not to use his physique and various anatomical enhancements to distract the audience. He realized he should have gleaned that much from her promotional poster. She didn’t display buns and cleavage to distract the male audience.

He wondered if his instant attraction to and ease with her came from the fact that she wasn’t a Fae woman in Need, giving out audible emergency signals. Alexi stepped out into the hallway between their respective dressing rooms to show her how the abandoned costume fit him, and he laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Megan asked.

“Now I know what women go through. Token male. Would you have hired me if I was a few inches taller or shorter, or twenty pounds off?” He turned, making the sequined black satin vest gape open, revealing his bare stomach. His glossy satin pants were snug, but left him breathing room. From the slight twitch of Megan’s lips, her short nod, she appreciated the fact that he had kept in shape and worked on his tan whenever possible. Her good opinion suddenly meant a lot, and it didn’t have anything to do with the job.

“Let’s see how you do with some basic sleight of hand. Then we’ll know if you’re eye candy or a real assistant.” She led the way into her dressing room.

It was three times the size of his dressing room, meaning it had room for two chairs to pull up to the counter. She had a closet to hold her clothes and equipment, instead of three hooks on the wall underneath a wire shelf. She tugged a plastic bin out from under the makeup table and unsealed the lid. Five rainbow-striped foam balls appeared in her hand. A twitch of her fingers and four balls went between her fingers and the fifth sat on her palm. Another twitch, and all five vanished. She snapped her fingers and they appeared in her other hand.

Alexi whistled softly and shook his head. Humans weren’t such slouches at magic, after all.

“That’s basic?” He was delighted when Megan laughed at his rueful tone. “All

right, boss-lady, it's time to go to school."

"Just for a little while. We have to rehearse for tonight's show." Megan slouched and desultorily juggled the balls while she talked. "I'm honestly glad you showed up. I chopped my routine, figuring I wouldn't have anyone assisting me."

"I won't be able to do much of anything tonight."

"That's fine. We'll build you up gradually." She grinned. "Do you mind slapstick?"

"What is slapstick?" He knew instantly he'd made a mistake. "You mean like Vaudeville?" Alexi had some sodden memories of Vaudeville and Prohibition and having a wild decade or so running with the wrong crowd.

"Yeah, Vaudeville." She tossed the balls high in the air so they landed in the equipment bin again. "We could play up the fact you're the new kid, totally clueless about magic. Get some laughs. I could even give you a couple lessons onstage."

"And make the people laugh when I'm astonished and you pull things out of my ears." He nodded. This was definitely the perfect place for him. If he played the bumbler and people laughed at him, it would be one more layer of protection for his new life and identity. One more illusion.

Alexi was definitely going to like learning about Human magic. Especially with clever, pretty Megan as his teacher.

He waited until her head was turned and flicked one more spark of healing magic at her. He had to take care of his boss, after all. If she couldn't perform, then he didn't get paid. That was all it was. He was looking out for himself.

Alexi let his gaze rove over her and let his imagination fill in the details hidden by her baggy clothes. Being in voluntary exile was going to be more than interesting.

Chapter Two

“Marga, darling.” Carmen Toni, the casino’s owner slithered up to Megan’s doorway. He wore his trademark red plush velvet jacket and enough sequins to make Liberace jealous.

If her door had been closed, he would have opened it without knocking. She was content knowing he had missed another chance to walk in on her while she was half-dressed.

“Sweetheart, are you really up for tonight?” He looked her over, and she knew he imagined her in a garter belt and not much else. If she had been wearing a Panzer tank instead of her pseudo-tux, he would still see her in the altogether.

“Everything’s fine.” Megan clasped the amulet loaded with three doses of emergency magic her father had given her. Should she turn Carmen into a frog? It would be an improvement for him, of course, but she would lose a decent-paying gig.

“But you don’t have an assistant, sweetcakes.” He trailed the manicured tip of his finger up her arm. “How about you let old Carmy-baby help you out?”

“You want to get into show biz? I thought you were the wheeler-dealer, happy pulling strings behind scenes.” Megan stepped away and reached for her top hat.

“I’m talking about helping you in ... other ways.”

Despite Megan twisting sideways enough to dislocate her hips, Carmen managed to cup her bottom so she felt his slimy cold fingers through the material of her pants. She reacted with speed honed while dealing with prankster cousins who could fly, and backhanded him. He staggered back against the door and slid to the ground.

Carmen stared at her, bug-eyed, for the five seconds it took to regain his breath. He struggled upright and wiped at his face. The blood trickling from his nose didn’t show up on the red plush velvet. More’s the pity.

“You’re working alone, so I only pay for half an act tonight, baby,” he growled.

“She’s not working alone.” Alexi appeared in the doorway, glowering, his chest visibly wider and more muscular. Megan swore his teeth had points and his eyes had little red flames. Usually she wasn’t susceptible to Fae illusions. That meant either Alexi was really good or he was really angry.

A man angry on her behalf? It amazed her, so she didn’t feel the ache in her wrist from connecting with Carmen’s nose.

“Who are you?” Carmen sounded like he had a cold.

“Marga’s assistant.” Alexi tugged on the flaps of his vest and gave Carmen a look that clearly said *Duh!* He glanced at Megan, his question clear in his eyes. She shrugged, rolled her eyes and grinned. Funny how having him there made her feel a little giddy.

“Who are you and why are you in a lady’s dressing room uninvited?”

“She’s no--” Carmen swallowed hard when Alexi’s glare jumped twenty degrees in heat. “Ten minutes before your first show. Don’t be late. I got a dozen other acts that

want a chance. You ain't the only magicians in town."

Wincing again, he scrambled to his feet and stomped down the hall, to vanish into the doorway leading into the kitchen.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Alexi took Carmen's spot in the doorway and leaned against the door frame, arms crossed. He looked a lot better there than Carmen. Megan didn't mind him looming over her at all. "I saw him touch you, but you were too fast for me to do anything." He grinned, baring his teeth.

The growl in his voice made Megan shiver with feelings she thought she would never have. Especially toward a Fae male.

"How about from now on, you play watchdog?" she joked.

"Glad to."

"Alexi--"

"I know you were joking. But I wasn't. That scuzzbucket doesn't have the right to do that to you, even if he is paying you to perform. It's not that kind of performing." A wicked gleam wiped away the anger. "Anyway, I doubt he can perform."

Megan laughed. She tossed him a handful of trick cards. Alexi plucked them out of the air, shuffled them in mid-air and tucked them into the velvet sash of his black trousers.

"Pick a card, any card," he said, with a bow and a flourish.

Don't tempt me, she thought.

Alexi barked laughter, and she wondered if he had heard her thought. No, his magic field was weak and flickering. Besides, she would have felt the intrusion of him touching her thoughts. That was one magical power she kept as private as possible.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"I was just thinking that maybe we can get a better gig if I can find us a place run by randy old women. The ones who talk a good fight but never do anything about it, of course."

"Of course." Megan gestured down the hall, toward the stage entrance. "Well, assistant--we really need to get you a stage name--let's get to work." She tried to laugh away the primal growl that rose up inside her at the mental image of Alexi pandering to spoiled, fat old women to get them a better job.

Since when had she become so possessive?

"How about Alexi the Astounding?" he suggested.

"You have to earn it first, buster."

Megan stumbled as an image came to her of exactly how she'd like Alexi to prove he was astounding. *Down girl! Bad! You don't need a man complicating your life. Get your mind on track. Alexi is a friend, that's all. You should be grateful for that. Don't screw it up!*

* * * *

Over the next few weeks, Alexi's wavering magic impressed on him how imperative it was to learn to do without magic completely. He wondered if his increasing clumsiness had anything to do with the curse and the decline in his personal magic. Either that, or the more time he spent with Megan, the more little details about her distracted him. Maybe he unconsciously chose to make a mess of every magic routine, so he had an

excuse to touch her or have her touch him, guiding his hands through the movements again and again and again?

It was his only chance to get close to her, breathe in her clean, sweet, natural perfume and soak in the warmth of her. He kept his word, no matter how much he thirsted for a taste of her lips. He kept his hands and the rest of his anatomy to himself. He needed this job, and Megan's friendship, more than he needed a one-night stand.

Despite his return to the clumsy adolescent stage, he did learn a decent repertoire of tricks. He almost asked Megan why she wanted him to perform magic on his own, but an emergency call one Saturday morning answered his question before he asked it. Desdemona had a freelance entertainment business on the side, providing magicians, jugglers, musicians and comedians to entertain at parties. After Desdemona's commission, Alexi made fifty dollars doing an hour's worth of magic at a party for ten junior high girls who giggled and barely looked at him.

"Oh, yeah, it's a good setup," Megan said, when he arrived for the first show of the afternoon with only five minutes to change his clothes. "Every little bit of extra you can put away is a buffer against the lean times." Her smile thinned and turned wistful.

"Like when certain tomcats cut your pay because you won't play along?"

"And other times," she said, nodding.

"We have to get a better gig."

"We're lucky to be here."

"No, Carmen is lucky to have you. You deserve better."

"Nobody is beating down my door, begging me to come work at their casino. Fact of life." She headed for the stage door.

"Then I'll just have to make sure the right people know you're here," Alexi muttered, and watched her stroll down the dark hallway.

He couldn't depend on his magic, but decades of exploring the Human world had taught him a few things. He had taken to spending his free time wandering the neon strip that was Vegas, listening to the hustlers, hucksters and promoters. Their patter succeeded because they knew how to break through the *don't bother me* attitude of most of the people walking the streets.

Alexi suspected Megan wouldn't approve of him using his unreliable magic to coerce the movers and shakers in the casinos to hire them. So he would just have to use his charm. And a lot of luck.

After weeks of walking the streets, learning the patterns of the casino owners, performers and the street workers, he had a plan. It still depended on luck, however. One afternoon, he followed Albert Vitaglio, owner of the Aurora Borealis, to the Luxor, and cast about for an opportunity to catch the man's attention when he came out.

Alexi spotted a pickpocket. The tiny, translucent sparkle of magic at work caught his attention more than the boy's long fingers delicately lifting wallets and slipping inside purses, robbing oblivious tourists blind while they snapped pictures. Alexi watched the boy for a few minutes, trying to decide if he was Fae on a larcenous lark, or a Halfling who didn't know his heritage. Unfortunately, there were hundreds of Halflings in the Human world who had magic, didn't know it, and didn't know they used it to make their lives a little easier.

Alexi saw a handful of people stop and watch the boy work, then grin and walk on by. Obviously, some residents of Vegas had a low regard for tourists. *They deserve what they get* seemed to be the prevalent attitude.

That irritated him, which in turn surprised him. It wasn't too long ago that he would have been enjoying the show, too. He supposed that being a fugitive and having to actually worry about material possessions for the first time in his life had changed his attitude.

Megan had changed him. Just yesterday, she caught a customer stealing tips from a table. Signaling Joey, who manned the spotlight, she jumped down off the stage and caught hold of the hand holding the stolen bills. She went into an impromptu spiel about tripling the man's money with magic, so it would seem like he had stolen it, and squeezed his wrist until he let go of the money. The waitress whose table it was returned at that moment, scooped up her tip, flashed Megan a grin and stepped on the man's foot with her spike heel before she left.

Alexi had nearly broken into applause, right there.

No, Megan would not approve of what this boy was doing, and Alexi had the sneaking suspicion she would not approve if he just let the boy get away.

I'm no knight in shining armor, he growled at his conscience. *They died out centuries ago, and good riddance, always running around trying to break enchantments and kill friendly dragons and-- Well, what do we have here?*

He recognized four faces in the oncoming stream of men coming out of the Luxor. Four of the most influential casino owners on the strip. All heading directly toward the pickpocket. And more important, Albert was among them.

There was nothing wrong with cleaning up crime and profiting from it at the same time, was there?

Alexi snapped his fingers and skipped across the street in the blink of an eye, to reappear directly behind the pickpocket. The boy turned and tripped over Alexi, to sprawl across the sidewalk at the feet of the four casino owners. Another snap of his fingers made the boy's belt break, so his oversized pants slid down to his knees when he stood up again.

While he pulled the pickpocket to his feet and brushed him off, Alexi used the sleight-of-hand skills Megan drilled him in. He pulled wallets and jewelry, watches and cameras from the boy's pockets and his sweatshirt.

"Here," he said, loudly enough to get Albert's attention as all four men tried to skirt around them. "Here's your wallet. You must have dropped it. And this must be your wallet, too. And this must be your watch. And your other watch."

A crowd gathered around, so the boy couldn't have escaped, even if Alexi hadn't been standing on the cuff of his fallen pants. The four casino owners stopped and grinned. A woman let out a little shriek and snatched back the pink rhinestone-studded watch Alexi retrieved from the pickpocket's right sleeve.

"Who do you think you are, the Lone Ranger?" someone muttered.

Alexi didn't have time to respond, because the shouts from people who had discovered they had been robbed brought a police officer running. He wasn't above using a few flickers of magic to keep the attention of Albert and his three friends. He only

influenced them to stay and watch, knowing Megan wouldn't approve if he took away their free will.

What was wrong with him, that her opinion meant so much to him? Especially when she would never know, because he would never tell her?

That last flicker of magic made his head hurt. Now was *not* the time for his magic to go on the blink.

"Hey, Lone Ranger, got a minute?" a Southern-accented voice called, once Alexi finished making his statement to the officer.

Alexi turned to see Albert smiling at him, hands jammed in his pockets, the dusty afternoon breeze ruffling his expensive hairpiece. *Bingo!* Why a man that rich didn't get plugs or a hair weave, Alexi couldn't figure out.

"I have a few, but I need to get back to work. The show starts in an hour."

"Oh, you're in showbiz, huh?" He fell into step with Alexi. "Magician, right?"

"Assistant. Apprentice, I guess. Now, my boss, she's the real magician."

By the time they reached the casino, Alexi had let Albert pump him for information on every bit of magical talent Marga the Magnificent possessed. That earned him an invitation to come up to Albert's office and demonstrate their routine. That was the good news. The bad news was that Alexi's magic had slid from unreliable to AWOL. He couldn't have made the lights flicker if he gave himself an aneurysm by trying.

"Are you sure you don't want to watch Marga at work? The early show is the best, no drunks in the audience."

"Hey, we have a sort of code of ethics here on the strip." Albert chuckled raggedly and slapped Alexi on the back. "I couldn't sneak in and watch you two at work without old Carmen guessing what I'm up to. No, you come on over to my place, and we'll see how you do in a private performance, *comprende?*"

"Sounds good." Alexi pushed once more, begging his magic to work. All he got was a headache.

A horrifying thought made him stumble as Albert walked away. What if Albert and his pals wanted a private performance from Megan, with no magic involved?

That roar deep inside his psyche made him wish he could shift shape. Preferably into something big and fanged and fast. So he could shred anyone who tried to take advantage of Megan.

Alexi had to face the fact that he wanted Megan all to himself. He knew with his head that he had to keep his hands off her if he wanted to keep his job. He liked her, as a person, as a boss, as a friend. That was far more important than getting her horizontal for some mattress bouncing.

At least, he knew that with his brain. Convincing the rest of his body of that was taking more effort than he had ever imagined.

Chapter Three

“You okay?” Megan nearly dropped her new deck of cards when she glanced out in the hall and saw Alexi stumble up to his dressing room door. His magic field was almost completely gone. Just a few sickly yellowy-green sparks, fizzing like half-dead ginger ale.

“Fine. Just a headache.” He offered her a weak smile, nodded and winced, and closed the door.

Megan knew the kind of headache he had. Her father described them as the feeling his skull would explode into a thousand pieces, his brain stem was on fire, and dragons slid down his throat to ride skateboards in his stomach--wearing spiked helmets and elbow pads.

Megan’s secret magic allowed her to send healing to someone she knew well. Did she dare try to help Alexi? Had their weeks of friendship and working so closely together created enough of a bridge, a bond between them, to let her help? The condition his magic was in, he would never know that bit of healing magic requiring familiarity came from her. After working together for hours every day, and quite a few early morning hours drinking coffee and talking about anything and everything, if she didn’t know him well enough to share what little magic she had, she never would. They were as close as two people could get without sharing toothbrushes.

Besides the fact that he hadn’t told her he was Fae, and she hadn’t told him she was a Halfling, that is.

“For the sake of the show,” she muttered, when the dithering in her brain grew so loud, she thought she would scream in another moment.

Do it, she commanded the truncated magic at her disposal, and visualized what she wanted.

The air inside her dressing room tightened and tried to collapse in on her for a moment as Megan tapped the reservoir of power available to Humans alone. Most didn’t know it was there, and of those few who did, only a fraction of a percent knew how to tap that power. She was one of them. It was one of the reasons that she had been able to hide her own version of magic from her Fae relatives, and why her Human relatives had tried to have her committed to an asylum one hundred fifty years ago.

Two seconds later, a steaming cup of peppermint-scented, bilious green tea appeared in her hand. Over the years, she had been able to mask the noxious taste and scent, but Megan still hadn’t been able to conquer the color. She supposed that didn’t matter. Her father had always claimed that his magic-deprivation headaches made him blind and unable to taste or smell, so the same probably held for Alexi.

She knew Alexi would drink the tea just because she told him to. She had been sharing all her latest herbal teas and fruit concoctions with him, and he had gamely tried each experiment, which she thought utterly sweet and so unlike the average male, let

alone the average Fae male.

“Hey, you sure you’re okay?” She tapped on the open door and held out the cup before Alexi could get enough energy to lie to her. “This should help a little.” Just to distract him further from the magic in the cup, she handed him two aspirin with the supposed tea.

“You’re an angel.” Alexi’s voice sounded like those dragons had been doing chin-ups on his vocal chords. He managed a pitiful smile, popped the aspirin in his mouth, and tossed back the tea to wash them down without hesitating. While he was distracted, she touched his shoulder and willed some of her magic strength into him. His magic field strengthened, going from yellow to grass green in a couple of spots.

“The mint should help you relax, which will loosen up the pressure in the blood vessels in your head, which should ease part of the headache, which should help you relax more. At least, that’s the theory.”

“Hey.” Alexi’s eyes widened. Already, most of the red had left them. “You’re right.” He sniffed at the quarter inch of liquid left in the cup. When Megan braced to face a few uncomfortable questions, he tipped the cup to drain the last few drops into his mouth. “You are a life saver.”

“Nah.” Her face warmed and her heart skipped a few beats. She knew better than to think too hard on the reasons for that. “I’m just your anxious boss who doesn’t want to do the show alone today, that’s all.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right.” Alexi leaped to his feet and stripped off his shirt. He tossed it onto the chair in the corner and had his pants unbuttoned before he turned and gave her a shaky grin. “Um--”

“Sorry.” Megan retreated, pulling the door closed behind her. She gladly escaped into her dressing room and sat before her wobbly knees collapsed. What was wrong with her? It wasn’t like there was any deep, meaningful bond between them, right? Just friendship, right? She saw Alexi’s abs on a daily basis. Why did he affect her so intensely now?

Maybe because if he hadn’t caught himself, she would have stood there, dazed and goggle-eyed, while he stripped down to his briefs? Not that she was a voyeur. Her sense of decency was absolutely prissy. But there was something about Alexi that made her want to throw caution to the winds and change her entire viewpoint on life.

“I am not in Need,” she muttered. “Halflings don’t suffer Need. Besides, I am way too young for that kind of thing, anyway, even if I was a full-blood. Which I’m not. So I don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Yo, babe.” Carman rapped hard on the door. “Curtain in five minutes. Whoever you got in there, he better be dressed and out before then, if you know what I mean.” He snickered, and Megan heard him stomp down the tile hallway.

If only there was someone in the dressing room with her. Megan suspected that was the problem. Alexi certainly hadn’t shown any interest in her, so why ruin things by making a move of him? If he rejected her, everything would be ruined. She didn’t want to risk losing him.

* * * *

“You know what your problem is?” Megan bit her lip to hold back the scorching

flow of words as she and Alexi walked through the doors of the Aurora Borealis. There were too many security guards present, too many witnesses if she had a hissy-fit and decked her assistant. Despite working for second-raters like Carmen, she did have a reputation in this town, and she wanted it to stay a good one.

“Ambition?” Alexi gave her an innocent grin, then for good measure, fluttered his eyelashes at her.

Why did guys always have such gorgeous eyelashes?

“Arrogance,” she spat, to keep from bursting out laughing. Megan wanted to enjoy her snit for a few more minutes. It would help fight off the raging nerves doing battle in her stomach, and help her face Albert with a semblance of calm.

“Nah, ambition is better. And what’s wrong with talking with the owner of another casino, anyway? It’s not like you have an exclusive contract with Carmen.” He nodded to the man guarding the elevator and flashed the card Albert had given him.

Megan was impressed, despite herself. She had enjoyed Alexi’s tale of collaring the pickpocket, but finding out she had an interview with Carmen’s biggest object of envy and loathing ruined the fun of the story.

“You didn’t bother asking if we did,” she spat as they stepped into the elevator. The doors hissed closed in counterpoint. Then she sighed. “You’re right, it’s not exclusive. And it’s up for review in two weeks.”

“Perfect timing.”

“Perfect for Carmen, if he wants to can us for even stepping foot in this place. What if we don’t get the job with your good buddy Albert?”

“We will.” Alexi closed his eyes and leaned back against the elevator wall, as if he had all the time in the world.

“What are you going to do? Put a whammy on him to make sure we get it?” The moment those words slipped past her lips, Megan wished she had Great-Aunt Silvestrina’s time-skip ability, so she could re-do the last ten seconds.

She didn’t really fear Alexi figuring out she was a Halfling. Megan wanted to avoid talk of magic because she didn’t want to hurt him. His magic field was in bad shape today. It fizzed and shifted from Brownie-toned umber to a yellow no self-respecting lemon would accept. He would be embarrassed if he knew she could see the condition of his magic.

His friendship meant more to her than their partnership and his growing adeptness at sleight-of-hand.

“No whammy,” he said, eyes still closed. “The truth is an amazing thing.”

The elevator doors slid open before she could respond. Megan mulled over all the possible meanings of those simple words while Alexi handled the receptionist and four levels of underlings they had to face before standing before Albert.

The truth: she was good, and she deserved better than Carmen’s grungy dive and the half-sloshed audiences he spilled into the cracker box-sized auditorium. The truth: she had earned her big break. Alexi was looking out for her when he decided to schmooze and snag her a new gig.

The truth: she liked having someone looking out for her, for a change. Especially when it occurred to her, just before Albert walked into his office, that she was especially

glad it was Alexi doing the looking.

“Marga....” Albert stood slowly, looking her over from head to foot.

Megan didn’t have that sensation that something slimy had climbed into her shirt. Albert was simply looking her over, not mentally undressing her. That was a point in his favor.

“I’ve heard good things about you. Except for you letting that shyster Carmen work you to death for half the pay you deserve.” Albert winked and held out his hand to shake hers.

His hand was big, warm, dry and callused. A man who still did his own work. Another point in his favor. No slime, no sensation that he had died long ago and didn’t have the good grace to lie down. Another point in his favor.

Come to think of it, the fact that Alexi trusted him enough to finagle an interview had to say something for the man. Megan had come to rely on Alexi’s sense of people. He had a knack for handling troublesome members of the audience before they actually became a problem for her, without magic.

“I’m trying to remedy that. My first step was hiring Alexi to look out for me.” She let Albert guide her into a seat in the beige leather U-shaped sofa in the middle of his office.

Albert had a nice laugh. “I sent a few of my people to check on you the last few days. They liked what they saw. I like what I’ve heard about you.” His gaze didn’t flicker, meaning his thorough search of her reputation and background hadn’t revealed that she had bought a new identity twenty years ago.

There were some disadvantages to being a Halfling and almost two centuries old, after all.

Megan consciously relaxed and settled back into the sofa. She had a good feeling about this.

All because of Alexi.

What was she going to do when he got bored and decided to move on?

She almost leaped out of the sofa, jolted by the panic that came with that thought.

No, Alexi couldn’t leave. Never. She needed him. As a friend and bodyguard and sounding board and PR man and ... Well, he was pretty good decoration, too. Maybe he wouldn’t mind a little harmless necking once in a while? Snuggling on the couch after a long, hard day and night on stage, watching an old movie, falling asleep in each other’s arms? Would that be so bad? She didn’t have to tell him she was a Halfling after all.

Did she?

* * * *

That night, Megan dreamed that Alexi dragged her into the vanishing act cabinet with him and kissed her until smoke came out of her ears. When she woke, she was dripping sweat, her skin was scorching hot, and she hovered nearly a foot above her sheets. She hadn’t lost control like that in her dreams since she had a killer crush on Jack London.

“Please, no,” she whispered, and concentrated until she lowered back down to her cold, damp sheets. There was no way in the world she was going to go through another decade of puberty. Not even if Alexi was the target.

* * * *

Alexi rode on a wave of euphoria for the next three days, slowly growing aware that the emotions came from Megan. Who really cared if his powers were fading and flickering, with power surges and sudden drops into magical black holes? He had Megan, and her friendship was more potent than any drug the Human and Fae worlds could ever devise.

That realization came to him just before showtime on the third day and dropped him back to the basement level of reality with an almost physically painful jolt. How in the world had he become so attuned to her, to know how excited she felt about their upcoming new gig? More important, why did it mean so much to him to know he had contributed to her giddy delight? When had she become so important to him? All right, so he needed her for job security, and he liked having her for a friend, but when had their relationship changed so he felt utterly deprived if he went for six hours without seeing her? Why did her happiness mean so much to him all of a sudden? Why did he suddenly know that she liked coffee ice cream with dark chocolate crackles and hot fudge, when he had never seen her eat it? Why did he know that she preferred cold pizza with feta cheese and tomatoes for breakfast? Why did he know she used diet cherry cola to calm her nerves and give her energy on days when she hadn't slept well the night before?

What really frightened him that afternoon was that he had stopped to buy a six-pack of cherry cola on his way to work, sensing that Megan would need it. When he approached her dressing room and heard her talking on the phone, he suddenly knew she was talking to Desdemona. Then he knew, as if he had read the transcript, that Megan had been up from three a.m. until nine, talking Desdemona out of a fit of depression. Alexi stood there in the hall, listening to her get reassurances from her roommate that she wouldn't do anything stupid and dramatic that evening. He shivered, wanting to help Megan, unsure how, but knowing he needed to do something to raise her spirits.

When her conversation ended, he tapped on the door and held out the six-pack. Megan nearly fell on his shoulder and wept.

Then Alexi realized what he had done, and it made him feel as if the floor had fallen out from underneath him. He retreated to his dressing room, shaken, and closed the door.

In the Enclaves, giving a woman an entire six-pack of diet cherry cola was tantamount to either a declaration of love or an attempt to get her sloshed and seduce her, depending on whether she was in Need or not.

"Can't be either," Alexi muttered, and stared at his stricken expression in the mirror.

Maybe the menopause-like fluctuations in his magic brought on dementia? After all, what intelligent, mature Fae male gave up an entire six-pack?

One who cares a lot about his boss who was also his friend and teacher.

Or one who has become Fixated, a quiet little voice at the back of his mind answered. And chuckled evilly.

"No," he muttered, and snatched his costume down off its peg, hoping activity would occupy his mind. "It's impossible. Fixation isn't real."

Of course, he knew he couldn't prove that. If the Ether Lexicon mentioned

Fixation, then it was real, or at least had been real at some time in history. And Alexi knew the Lexicon did mention it. Despite how good he felt lately, he knew better than to try to summon it.

And that just added to his confusion. The last few days, he hadn't felt any discomfort. All his attention had focused on the sensations he had been receiving from Megan. No headaches, no symptoms of something big, scaled, and clawed having temper tantrums in his stomach and inside his skull.

"Fixation only happens between Fae, not Fae and Humans," he said, trying to convince himself.

The entry on Fixation was prefaced by an entry written by one of his cynical relatives perhaps eight centuries ago. *Fixation is a phenomenon that does not exist. It is a fable created by the Fae Emotional-Mental Health Authority to calm the terrors of males being pursued by females in the throes of Need. FEMHA has a history of fabricating fictions to temporarily soothe problems without consideration for the long-term effect.*

Quite a few Fae authorities through the centuries had tried to stamp out the belief in Fixation. Alexi suspected they were all people who had hoped for Fixation and had to settle for courtship and getting to know their intended mate the old-fashioned way. He closed his eyes, and the actual entry in the Lexicon came into his mind's eye.

Fixation occurs when a man and woman bond at several levels, none of them physical. Depending on the strength of their individual magical quotient, the bonding can be one-way, the stronger accessing the thoughts, emotions and physical sensations of the weaker magical individual. Or it can be two-way, if they are equals or one partner is blessed/cursed with Eclipse-level talent. As the two partners work to combine their lives on the spiritual, emotional, mental, and finally physical level, their powers will combine and emerge stronger and more disciplined than the sum of their powers individually.*

Alexi frowned, remembering the footnote, that he had needed to search almost an hour to find. **Eclipse-level talent is nearly as rare as Fixation, and considered by some to be even more mythical. Unless carefully disciplined and constrained, Eclipse-level talent can destroy its possessor and every Fae and Human within the reach of his or her mental voice. It is commonly believed that only Fixation can reliably tame a Fae with Eclipse-level talent.*

"Yeah, and you thought you had problems, buddy?" Alexi muttered.

He shook his head, opened his eyes, and got to work changing into his costume. He had a show to do in fifteen minutes. Megan needed him. He refused to let her down. Her disappointment, he suspected, would hurt worse than if she shot him and then poured salt into the wound.

Whatever was happening between him and Megan, it wasn't Fixation. That could only happen between two Fae, not Fae and Human. Alexi sighed at that stupid little qualifying rule. Fixation with Megan would be wonderful, but it came with a price. She would be happy to be bound to him--Fixation guaranteed that--but he would want to die when she grew old and feeble and died in another fifty or sixty years.

The scent of roses interrupted his fuming and overpowered Alexi to the point of gagging. He felt a little dizzy when he realized he caught the scent through his own nose and the link with Megan. He tugged his vest into place and leaped to the door. His knees

nearly buckled at the sudden flash of surprise and then disgust that shot through the link between them.

“What do you want?” Megan snapped.

Alexi yanked the door open and leaped out into the hall. He ran into a wall of roses cradled in tanned, buff arms. He couldn't see the face right away, with white and red and pink roses filling his eyes.

“My job, sweetheart,” a husky tenor voice crooned.

Get out of here, Alexi commanded and snapped his fingers. To his disgust, the roses only drooped and petals fell like rain instead of vanishing. Now, however, he could see the intruder. He recognized him from a few publicity photos in Megan's scrapbooks.

“Hey, Menace,” he said, baring his teeth in what he prayed was a threatening grin.

“The name's Dennis,” the black-haired, blue-eyes Adonis snarled. Then his gaze traveled down Alexi and those eyes widened. “What's he doing in my costume? Sheesh, I go away for a few days and you give away all my stuff!”

“My costume, my job to give away, and I fired you more than a month ago!”

Megan finally appeared in her dressing room door, buttoning her tuxedo shirt.

Alexi had a vision of Megan half-naked when Dennis walked through the door with his armful of roses. Something primal and fanged growled deep inside him. Yet strangely, laughter bubbled up inside him.

No, the laughter wasn't coming from inside. He met Megan's gaze, and she grinned at him, sharing some delightful joke he hadn't quite heard yet. All that mattered was that she *didn't* grin at Dennis.

“I'm not hiring you back, so don't even ask,” she continued, turning back to the intruder. Her lips curved up even more as she surveyed the wilted roses.

“I didn't come for a job. We're going to be partners.” Dennis turned his back on Alexi and took a step forward to crowd Megan back into her dressing room.

Lava bubbled up inside Alexi's gut. Red clouded his vision.

What a clown. He can't even walk across a room without tripping over the cracks in the tile. The scorn in Megan's thoughts cooled that heat before he reached out with hands and magic to throttle the muscle-bound baboon.

Want him to? Alexi asked.

A tiny giggle burst from Megan's lips, instantly muffled. He was sure she was only laughing at her own thoughts, and hadn't heard him. Still, that gave him an idea

An image of Dennis' fancy Italian shoes tying themselves together flicked from her mind to Alexi's. He felt a jolt of well-being through his magic field as he leaped to make her vision reality. His magic was instantly so strong, he didn't even need to snap his fingers. Snickering, he stepped back and leaned against the door frame of his dressing room.

Dennis cursed and tossed aside the roses, which now exuded a decidedly rotten smell. He tried to catch himself against the wall, but he missed and slammed his forehead against the door frame. Alexi gave a good yank with his magic, making Dennis twist around and land on his tush in the hallway instead of in Megan's dressing room.

“Denny, baby!” Carmen yelped, appearing suddenly in the badly lit hallway.

“What happened, partner?”

“Partner?” Megan squeaked. She gave Dennis a look full of loathing that Alexi normally reserved for particularly foul, slimy, dripping, wart-encrusted creatures from the Nightmare Dimensions. “How the heck did he get to be your partner?”

“Bought his way in,” Carmen grunted as he helped Dennis get back to his feet.

“Won big over at the Luxor,” Dennis said. He cursed and bent to untie his shoelaces. “How’d that happen?” He glared at Alexi, then shook his head. “There’s no way ...”

“He’s a very good magician,” Megan said with a chortle. “Ten times better than you ever were on a good day.”

“Hey, baby, watch how you talk to your new boss,” Carmen snapped. “He asks, you’re out of here, contract or no contract.” An evil gleam entered his eyes. “And considering you only have a week left on the contract and we need to re-negotiate ... Well, just don’t push your luck.”

“Don’t push yours,” she retorted. “Alexi, you ready? We have to be on stage in like two minutes.”

“Always ready.” Alexi bowed and offered her his bent arm. She beamed at him, took two high steps over the mounds of blackened, rotting roses, and hooked her arm through his. A purely pleasurable jolt went through him at the muted contact. The euphoria of only an hour ago returned, rushing through him, soothing away the ache that usually came nowadays with the performance of any sizable magic.

Come to think of it, he hadn’t felt that ache even threaten to return. How did that happen?

“My hero,” she whispered as they hurried down the hall to the stage entrance.

“Me? Nah, he just tripped over his own feet.” Alexi prayed the stage lights and shadows hid the blush heating his face.

“Hmm, maybe.” She winked at him as they separated so she could go through the door first. “Keep it up, and we’ll have to add a big red ‘S’ to your costume.”

Chapter Four

Megan was flying high when she and Alexi came off stage after the midnight show, thanks to that diet cherry cola and watching Alexi knock Dennis flat without laying a hand on him. There were some advantages to having Fae magic, after all. She only flinched once, when it seemed Alexi had the same idea she did about tying Dennis' shoelaces together. It was a juvenile trick, but she wasn't about to complain when it worked so well.

Who really cared, after all, that Dennis and Carmen were partners? She had a job waiting for her with Albert, the Aurora Borealis and his cruise ships. Between Florida, Hawaii and Vegas, she would be set for work and out of those two crumbs' reach and revenge for a good long time.

And as an added bonus, Alexi was part of the bargain. He had emphasized to Albert that they were a package deal. Megan didn't know if Alexi did it to protect her from unwanted advances or to ensure his future, and she didn't care. Anything to keep Alexi in her life. If he was in it for the money and fame, she wouldn't complain.

She would just have to work on making sure he stayed with her to be with *her*. After all, with so many lechers making moves on her, something about her attracted a man on a purely carnal level. And that included someone as wonderful and hot as Alexi. She could make him very happy.

Megan stumbled over air as she walked into her dressing room. She almost forgot to shut the door as she sank, stunned, into the closest folding chair.

Had she actually been thinking about seducing Alexi?

An image of Alexi sweeping her up in his arms and covering her face with kisses flashed through her mind. Megan closed her eyes and sighed and melted a little. Why hadn't that happened already? That's what she wanted to know. Was something wrong with her that Alexi hadn't made a move on her yet?

She had enjoyed those hot dreams about her and Alexi and either a big vat of chocolate or a hot tub or satin sheets. One of her semi-useless magic gifts meant she knew when she dreamed, and usually she had some control over what happened in those dreams. So if Alexi swept her off her feet into eternal bliss, that meant she definitely wanted it to happen.

So how could she get it to happen in reality, while she and Alexi were both awake?

"Yo, babe." Carmen rapped once on the door and flung it open. He spread his legs so he filled the doorway and crossed his arms. His impersonation of a confident man of business would have been more convincing if he didn't have flecks of pink foam sticking to his moustache. "We gotta talk about this afternoon. If Alexi is getting in the way of you and Dennis getting it on, well, the guy's gotta go."

"Dennis has to go, not Alexi." She stood and mirrored his stance, arms crossed,

ready for an argument. Carmen's intrusion had interrupted a really great daydream.

"Dennis is my partner!" Carmen shook his head, as if dizzy. "Now come on, babe. I understand you playing hard to get with me, to make him jealous, but the game's over. Your main squeeze is back." He gestured around her dressing room. "He wants your dressing room in his office. More convenient for relaxing between shows." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"The answer is no. As in no way, not never, no how, nuh uh. Got it?"

"What is your problem?"

"You are." Alexi appeared in the doorway behind Carmen. His magic field flared bright blue. His eyes blazed gold. "What part of *no* don't you understand?"

"Bottom line." Carmen's voice quavered and sweat beaded on his forehead. "This guy goes, or you both go. Got it?"

"Got it." Megan nudged her two bins of props. "You want to take the empty one and clear our gear off the stage? I can get the other one out. I'll meet you outside in ten, okay?"

"Sounds good." Alexi snagged the bin and headed down the hall toward the stage.

"What the hey?" Carmen stumbled back two steps to sag against the opposite wall in the hall.

"Good-bye." Megan swept the contents of the dressing table into the bin and tossed her street clothes on top of everything.

"But ... but ... what about your contract? We were going to talk about the new conditions tonight." He watched her cross the hall, clear Alexi's few possessions out of the broom closet dressing room and toss them into the bin, too.

"The new conditions where I play nice with your new partner, share a dressing room with him and put up with him groping me--and probably your slimy friends ogling me, too, right? Oh, by the way, Carmen, I know about the video cameras in the chorus line's dressing room. If you don't want to sing soprano, I'd suggest taking them out, permanently." Megan fluttered her eyelashes at him as he sank closer to the ground. "Tell me the truth." She flinched when she heard whispers and realized she had an audience.

This was good. If she could just get Carmen to tell the truth, something she could use in court if necessary.

She lost her breath for a moment as flickers of blue magic circled Carmen's head. She couldn't work a truth spell to save her life. That meant Alexi's magic was stronger than she thought tonight, and he was protecting her. She definitely had to keep that man.

"When I refused the new conditions in my contract, what would you have done?"

"Tossed you out on your tight little tush and changed the locks so you couldn't get your gear," he babbled, as if the words were yanked out through his vocal chords.

"It's okay for you to toss me, but it's not okay for me to walk?" She waggled her finger in his face and made tsking noises. "For shame, Carmy baby."

"I got connections in this town!" he squealed.

"So does Albert Vitaglio," Alexi said, coming from the darkness with the full bin of magic equipment. "He thinks Megan is a real lady and deserves to be treated like one. Understand?"

His tangled mane of white-blond hair took on a bluish cast for half a heartbeat.

Blue sparks shot out to circle Carmen and pepper him in rapid-fire succession. Megan saw the man actually flinch a dozen times. It was all she could do not to cheer and count as each spark bit into him.

"I understand," he whispered, and finished sliding to the floor.

"Want to catch the late floor show over at the MGM?" Alexi asked. "My treat."

"Only if you let me buy the champagne." She slapped the lid on the storage bin.

"Your wish is my command." Alexi bowed, gesturing for her to go ahead of him.

How he managed to look elegant with his arms full of plastic storage bin, she had no idea. Feeling breathless with shock at the speed, and so elated she had to check to see her feet were still touching the floor, Megan swept down the hall to the back door. She laughed, nearly crowing, when they reached the parking lot and her car.

"You were great!" Alexi burst out with a hearty roar of laughter that sent sparks through the parking lot. Five of the eight dead parking lot lights came back to life.

Megan dropped the storage bin and leaped to hug him. They dipped and swirled, waltzing around the parking lot. Touching Alexi, she could actually hear the Ether Orchestra, and for once the music matched her mood, heavy on violins and flutes.

Alexi didn't kiss her, but Megan felt so good, she didn't mind at all.

He came to her in her dreams that night and kissed her on her mouth, the curve of her ears, down her neck. His mouth tasted of moonlight and bittersweet dark chocolate, drowning her until her blood fizzed in her veins. They danced, floating under the moon on a platform of air.

* * * *

Alexi woke with a jolt, drowning in sweat and hovering eight inches off his bed. Frustration made sparks whiz and zing all around his room. Why did those exhilarating dreams about Megan always have to end just when things were about to explode?

To work out his frustration, he went back to Knockers and used his extra-high levels of magic energy to jimmy those cameras Megan had mentioned. He honestly thought she didn't know about them, but he and several of the backstage men had been working in teams to foul the cameras so Carmen got absolutely nothing, no matter how much he spent on repairs and new equipment. Tomorrow, those cameras would fall at the most inopportune moment, when all the chorus girls were in their dressing room. Too bad he wouldn't have a camera there to catch the mob scene and whatever happened to Carmen. With luck, Dennis the Menace would get caught in the stampede.

* * * *

"Oh, hon, did you get laid last night?" Desdemona crooned, when she walked into Megan's bedroom.

"Nope." Megan giggled, feeling as if she had finished off a six-pack of diet cherry cola. "Better."

"Nothing's better than getting laid, if it's done right." Her roommate settled down on the end of the bed. "So, what happened? Alexi is triplets and they all showed up and gave a private little Chippendales show for you?"

"No, better--" Megan stopped short, choking as the image filled her mind. "Well, almost better." She giggled.

Desdemona giggled with her, by the time she got to the end of the story. She had

loathed Dennis just as much as Megan, and her disdain for Carmen had only been muted by her need to get a paying gig on a regular basis.

“Honey, it’s nice that Albert is on your side and you only had a week on the contract, but jumping ship isn’t going to look good, no matter how you slice it. No matter what a lecher Carmen was, the other bosses on the strip are going to only see the fact that you pulled out with a week left on your contract.”

“How many of them wait until there’s only a week left, and assume that their employees don’t have anywhere else to go?”

“Oh.” Desdemona nodded.

“And he admitted in front of witnesses that I was out if I didn’t accept his new contract. That’s sexual harassment and throwing me out. I was just taking him up on his word.”

“If you don’t say anything, but those witnesses do ... there’s nothing Carmen can do to you. Girl, you rock!” She high-fived Megan, but her smile faded as she settled back on the end of the bed. “So, what are you doing until the new job starts?”

“What do you think? I have to go shopping and get some new clothes. I’m going on a cruise, after all.”

“Some people are so lucky. If I hadn’t decided to go for the comedy relief, I could have had Alexi.” Desdemona pouted, but humor sparkled in her eyes.

Not on your life. Megan laughed, taking her roommate’s words as a joke, but that throb of panic startled her. Someone else taking Alexi as assistant, friend, partner and White Knight? Never!

* * * *

Cruises, Alexi decided halfway through the first trip, were not romantic. He didn’t like all that water around him when he couldn’t depend on his magic to keep him dry. And what was so romantic about rebellious fifteen-year-olds and randy old women dripping with fur and makeup following him everywhere he went? Just when he thought he had them classified--the teens giggled and drooled and the old women pinched his butt--they switched attack modes and confused him. He would have complained to Megan, but she was having her own problems fending off the bored fathers of the teenage girls, or the husbands of the old women.

“I’ve had enough,” he finally told her, when the ship returned to port and they stood on a high deck overlooking the gangway, watching their tormenters leave. “Either we use disguises offstage or we hide in our cabins and play poker.”

Megan snorted and looked away. Alexi caught a glimpse of her expression. She grinned and bit her lip. Frowning, he concentrated on her, hoping his magic was strong enough to catch her surface thoughts.

If only I was Fixated, everything would be great.

Strip poker leaped the gap between them, as strongly as if she had shouted it.

Megan was interested in him? Alexi thought he could fly, even if all his magic had deserted him for good.

So what if her interest was purely physical, carnal, totally focused on her gratification? He could win her over. He could woo her. They were friends already, weren’t they? Lovers could become committed, couldn’t they?

Committed? Alexi nearly gasped in horror.

He needed to be committed, as in a mental asylum, if he seriously considered binding his life to a woman.

Yeah, that quiet voice at the back of his mind responded, but this is Megan. She's different. She's not hunting. She's not wonky from hormones. She doesn't know you're Fae. If she's considering jumping your bones, it's because she thinks you're hot, and not because she's got an itch that's going to last for the next thirty years. So what if you won't need to hide in a closet with her on a regular basis? It could be more fun if it's voluntary, right?

Voluntary meant he'd have to work on winning her interest and keeping it.

Alexi kind of liked that. Challenges made life interesting. Just how did he let Megan know he wanted to be lovers without getting thrown into the same category as Dennis?

"What's wrong?" Megan asked, when she looked back at him. "Your ... "--she gestured, as if she could see his fluctuating magical field--"you look like something is bothering you."

"I never learned to play poker," Alexi said, deciding to take the plunge.

"Then why did you bring it up?"

"Just something we can do when we're hiding in our cabins. Bad idea, huh?" He grinned, wondering just what strip poker entailed.

"Oh, I'd be happy to teach you." She actually blushed, and he found that endearing.

"Something tells me there's a lot you can teach me," he muttered, and that darkened her blush.

Chapter Five

Megan curled up on the tiny sofa in her hotel room and looked out through the balcony doors, overlooking a long stretch of beach. So what if the angle was wrong to see the water? It was still a first class suite. Albert had gone all out arranging their between-cruise accommodations. Unfortunately, Alexi was in another wing of the hotel.

On the other hand, with the daydreams she had about Alexi, maybe it was a good thing he was far out of reach. Megan sighed as she slid into another romantic interlude in her mind.

The radio played Rachmaninoff. Alexi bowed to her, his long hair tangled by the breeze. Shadows filled the room. The two of them stood in a pool of moonlight that turned all their features silver. Alexi's hand was cool when he took hold of her hand and drew her up close to him. He rested his hand lightly on her hip and twined the fingers of his other hand through hers, so their palms pressed together. His hand warmed. She felt his pulse in his wrist, pressed against hers.

They danced, slowly circling within the confines of the puddle of moonlight. Their bodies never touched, except where their hands joined and where his hand rested on her hip. Alexi didn't speak, but his eyes, filled with liquid fire, held her gaze prisoner. Any moment now, he would lean forward and brush his lips against hers, softer than rose petals, hot enough to scorch. She would feel it down to her soul. It would turn her to lava inside.

Megan leaped from the sofa and picked up the novel she had bought at the dock that afternoon. Tormenting herself with daydreams of Alexi wasn't going to get her a good night's sleep. She had a long day ahead of her tomorrow, when the next cruise started.

* * * *

"Why was tonight harder than the whole last cruise?" Megan muttered, as she and Alexi settled into the cubbyhole dressing room behind stage. Applause penetrated the walls.

"Maybe because it's getting old?" He leaned against the wall, stretching his arms to the ceiling. Megan watched, despite scolding herself about temptation. Some men were so graceful, it just wasn't fair. Alexi burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" She bent over to slide her shoes off.

"Nope, stop. We have one more gig for the night." He held out a hand to her.

"What gig?"

"Private performance."

"Alexi, you know I truly appreciate you being a go-getter, promoting our act, but...." She sighed. There was nothing she wanted more than to hold his hand, but she knew that would only lead to disappointment.

"Trust me. Am I your best pal, or what?"

“Of course you are.” She forced a smile, when she wanted to blurt that she wanted to be more than just pals.

She let him take her hand and pull her to her feet. “Close your eyes,” he ordered, heading for the door.

“What?”

“After we get out on the deck, at least.” He grinned, a teasing light in his eyes.

Megan seriously considered backing away. Then a shiver of anticipation raced up her spine and cut through the weariness from doing three shows in a row with tough audiences. She gripped his hand harder. And closed her eyes when he said to.

She regretted her cooperation when Alexi led her up the first set of stairs. And the second. And when some people they passed going across the deck laughed. At least, she thought they crossed the deck. Her sense of direction deserted her about two minutes into their little adventure.

Then again, did she really care? She liked the feel of Alexi’s hand gripping hers. Despite the scolding she gave herself the other night, she let her imagination take over. How would Alexi’s warm, strong, gentle hands feel all over her body?

Massage, she firmly told herself. *I could use a really good, deep massage.* Her imagination added flavored massage oil, and she hurried to add, *Just my shoulders and back.*

“You are really tense,” Alexi murmured. “Maybe I should make you an appointment for a massage, instead of this.”

“No!” Megan almost stopped short, jolted by the panic that shot through her. Whatever Alexi had planned, her gut instinct told her it would be more fun than having one of those fake Swedish girls pummel her body until it gave in and relaxed.

Another flight of stairs. The sound of voices and music faded. The breeze off the water grew stronger, meaning fewer walls and obstructions. Where was he taking her?

Carmen’s threat of having ‘connections’ flicked through her mind. Was this some weird, delayed punishment for walking out on her contract a few days early?

Stupid. She nearly laughed. *Alexi isn’t a hit man.* That nasty little voice answered, *Yeah, he still hasn’t hit on me.*

“Here we are.” Alexi tugged his hand free and stopped her with both his hands on her shoulders. “You can look, now.”

“Oh....” Megan turned slowly, looking all around.

They were at the highest point on the ship that anyone could go without breaking a few rules. The deck was small, the railing a simple metal grid, too high to climb easily. She didn’t care as she looked up at the moon, and looked down at all that silver spread across the water in every direction.

Alexi watched her as he stepped backwards and reached for the CD player sitting on a small table set with champagne, chocolates and strawberries. The strains of Rachmaninoff’s *Rhapsody* whispered in the night. Alexi bowed and held out a hand. Megan curtsied and didn’t feel at all silly in her pseudo-tux. Her feet stopped hurting and her headache evaporated like mist. She shivered when Alexi put his hand on her hip and twined the fingers of his other hand through her fingers.

They didn’t say a thing to each other. She forgot about the moonlight and even the

music as she stared into his eyes. They danced even when the music paused between tracks. When the last song finished, they drifted over to the railing and sipped champagne as they looked out over the moonlit ocean. Megan dipped her strawberries into the champagne. She could hardly taste either, lost in wondering how Alexi's lips would taste.

Too soon, a waiter came to clear the table. He winked at Megan and grinned wide at something Alexi murmured to him, but said nothing as he cleaned up and hurried away.

"That ... was one of the nicest ... no, nice isn't the right word." Megan yawned delicately and let Alexi link his arm through hers, and they started down the stairs. "That was like a dream come true." She sighed.

"I hope so," he murmured, so softly she wondered if she only imagined his voice.

"You are better than the best pal, Alexi. Better than my best friend." She bit her lip against complaining that he hadn't kissed her, but *she* had ended that dream before he kissed her, hadn't she? If she wouldn't allow it in her fantasies, how could she expect it in real life?

"I think the champagne is getting to you." He took extra care guiding her around the corner into the next stairwell. They had a long hike to the quarters assigned to performers, deep in the bowels of the ship.

Megan barely restrained an unladylike snort. The two pieces of dark chocolate she had nibbled had a more intoxicating effect than if she had guzzled the entire bottle of champagne. As it was, she only had the one flute. Now was not the time to tell him that Fae blood made her immune to most Human intoxicants.

"I'm not ever letting you leave me, you know," she continued.

"How, boss-lady, are you going to ensure that? Slavery is illegal. Unless you plan on keeping me tied up in your closet between performances?"

Megan stumbled at the image of Alexi completely helpless, subject to her every whim. *No, I'm not that kind of girl!*

She could have sworn he sighed.

"How about being partners, then, since I'm fresh out of handcuffs and whips?" she retorted.

"Partners?" Alexi stopped and turned her to face him. His eyes glowed. One of these days, she would have to tell him she could detect magic, and warn him about keeping his Fae reactions hidden. "You're serious?"

"The way we fit together, the way we work together, like we were made for each other--that's rare. I don't want to lose it. And not just in our act, either," Megan added softly.

"I'd like that." His eyes actually got misty. "A lot. You have no idea how much your ... friendship means to me, Megan." He gently stroked his hands up and down her arms.

She shivered, delighted at the certain feeling that when he said 'friendship,' Alexi meant a whole lot more.

* * * *

The next two months were the hardest Megan had ever endured. Glorious, yet painful. She had Alexi all to herself, when they weren't on stage. He protected her from

the lechers and she protected him from starry-eyed girls and horny grannies. They explored the towns all along the cruise ship's route and made friends in the tourist shops and restaurants. That was the glorious part.

The painful part came every night when she said good-night and went to bed, alone. She staged the revelation in her head a thousand times, where she revealed her Halfling status and instead of getting angry, Alexi scooped her up in his arms and kissed her. That wasn't so bad--except that her daydreams always turned into nightmares. Alexi fled her in disgust. Alexi realized that she wanted to jump his bones, and he ran away. Alexi laughed at her when she told him she was falling in love with him. Or else Alexi took her to bed, was thoroughly bored, and ran home to the Enclaves.

So she didn't tell him. That was only part of the pain.

The other part came from the dreams that tormented her. Hot dreams. Steamy dreams. Alexi declaring his undying love. Or just his scorching lust. Megan would have settled for setting the sheets on fire. She didn't want to scare Alexi away by declaring her aching hunger for his touch, his kisses, the taste of his mouth and the heat of his arms tight around her. So she didn't tell him.

Half a loaf was better than starving for the rest of her life, right?

* * * *

Two months of cruises was more than enough, yet Alexi grumbled as he packed to leave the boat that last day. He liked having Megan all to himself. True, he had to share her with three audiences each night, a kiddie matinee every other afternoon, and the crew of the ship, who had welcomed them like family. It was the time they had together, alone, just them and the moonlight and the ocean, that he gruded losing.

He enjoyed the challenge of turning Megan's dreams into reality. Roses on her bed. Dancing in the moonlight. Visiting the same waterfall every time the ship stopped at that particular port. Diet cherry cola and dark chocolate in her dressing room before every show. Any image that came to him through their link, he tried to fulfill. If it wasn't Fixation, it was the next best thing, and he enjoyed it. The best part was, Megan knew he was the one fulfilling her dreams. She hugged him, she walked the deck with her arm linked with his, and she refused whenever an appreciative passenger asked her to dance. What more could a Fae on the run want?

Besides long months of isolation with Megan, and nothing to do but fulfill the hints of dreams that she kept hidden even from herself?

Alexi had spent his life warding off relationships. So now that he finally wanted one, he hadn't the slightest idea what to do. Keep going the way they were? Hope Megan made the first move? Tell her what he was and hope she didn't call for the mental health cops?

The last thing he wanted to do was anger her by revealing how much he wanted to sweep her off her feet and fly her to the moon--literally. There was a nice little spot just on the border between day and night where they had a glorious view of Earthrise and no neighbors for thousands of miles. Isolation, plenty of Megan's favorite things to eat, music, satin sheets and time to bring every one of Megan's dreams past that irritating stopping point--what more could he want?

That irritating stopping point did more than irritate him. It left him aching. It left

him ready to scream some nights when he woke up from one of their shared dreams. Why did Megan always stop her dream just before that long, delicious, steamy slide into ecstasy?

Last night, however, something had changed between them.

The memory came back, and Alexi's hands trembled as he zipped up his suitcase. His mouth trembled as he grinned in anticipation. Last night, Megan's dream had them lost in a moonlit glade, the grass thick and lush and cool, the air tingling with magic, filled with falling rose petals and tiny, popping champagne bubbles. Stars spun around them. Music whispered.

They danced to a music that filled their blood with humming magic more potent than diet cherry cola and dark chocolate mixed. Megan went up on her toes and kissed him. Soft and sweet and lingering. Alexi had felt his feet leave the ground, then hers. They floated in mid-air, slowly rotating around each other, touching only with their lips and their fingertips that clung to each other's shoulders. The glade vanished around them, so they hung suspended in star-shot space.

"You're killing me," Megan whimpered, then wrapped her legs and arms tight around him.

Alexi had taken over the dream then, and as far as he knew, that wasn't possible. All he knew was that *he had magicked away their clothes and they continued to tumble through the air, tangling limbs and mouths, learning every particle of each other's body, stroking the flames higher until--*

The dream shattered, moments from completion. Alexi had rolled over onto his back, aching, hardly able to breathe. It could have been chalked up to the most incredible experience of his life, but it left him feeling empty.

Dreams weren't enough. It was time to let Megan know how he felt about her. To take their partnership to another level. Why couldn't best pals be lovers, too? He had to stop being a coward and take the risk. Either that, or drive himself insane.

Megan was well worth the pain of loving and losing. He would make every day with her as glorious as a century together. He would treasure her and care for her and work for her happiness, even as he watched her age and fade and grow frail.

"If it isn't Fixation," he muttered, "it's the next best thing, and our souls will be together, even when she's gone."

A year ago, if anyone had told him he would feel that way about any woman, let alone a Human, he would have laughed. And then waited for the lunatic in a dark alley so he could beat the stupidity out of him.

The time had come to take Megan's dreams and make them reality for both her and him.

The only problem was, he ran the risk of getting fired and shoved out of her life forever.

* * * *

"That's impossible." Megan glared at the psychedelic globe of color where her father's disembodied head floated and rotated. Currently, he hung upside down, his face green and his eyes pink. She hoped he hadn't taken up body-tinting again. While it was only an annoyance and slight embarrassment in the Enclaves, he was living among

Humans now. Some of his neighbors might take exception and call the police. Or the nice young men in their white coats.

“Sorry, sweetheart.” Morigard shrugged, which took talent, since he had no visible shoulders. “It’s the Need.”

“I’m a Halfling. I don’t get the Need.” She plopped down on her bed.

For the first time in eighty years, Megan had to fight the urge to give in to a massive, earth-shaking temper tantrum. What she needed right now was Desdemona’s teasing comfort and a trough-sized triple chocolate sundae. However, her roommate was asleep, courtesy of Morigard’s protective spell that kept outsiders from overhearing or walking in on their communication.

“If Alexi ever figures out that all my dreams about the two of us ... and the fact that he’s been able to hear my dreams ... and I’ve been able to broadcast my dreams to him ... it’s all fueled by Need” Megan groaned and hid her face in her hands. “How could this happen?”

“Well” The communication globe popped and Morigard stepped through. Fortunately, he was normal coloring: silver-haired, silver-eyed, dressed in an icy blue jogging suit. He sat down on the edge of the bed and put his arm around her shoulders. “I think this time, it’s your mother’s fault.”

“What?” Megan sat up straight. But not so much that she left the comfort of his arm around her.

“My best guess is, your mother had some Fae blood. Could explain how she accepted my magic when it got out of control a couple times during....” He glanced sideways at her and blushed nicely. “Your mother was one in a million, sweetheart.”

“That’s about how many women you’ve seduced,” she grumbled. She let him draw her head down to rest on his shoulder.

Morigard had the amorous energy of a dozen tomcats, but at least he stuck to one Human woman at a time. And he had a charming tendency to be uncomfortable talking about his romantic activities with his daughter.

“The thing is, honey, your mother was the only one who ever got pregnant. My guess is, she had enough Fae blood to counteract all my anti-fertilization magic. She sure wanted you badly enough.” He sighed. “I sure miss her.”

“Not enough Fae blood to give her long life.” Megan sighed, feeling again that flood of regret and longing that always came when she thought of her mother. Then she gasped. “If you’re right, I’m not really a Halfling, am I?”

Morigard gave her a little shake. “Look at it this way, honey. The guy doesn’t suspect yet, and it looks like he really, really likes you.”

“Really likes me and feeling horny are totally different from loving me enough to want to be stuck with me.” She hid her face in her hands. “Daddy, what am I going to do?”

“I don’t know. The truth might just send him running for the hills. On the other hand, if the two of you ... you know ... he’s bonded with you and he won’t mind when he finds out the truth.” He stood up and recreated the psychedelic globe, large enough to step through. “I’m curious why he’s so intent on living like a Human, though.”

“His magic energy fields are totally wonky. Sometimes they’re so low, he has less

magic than a turnip. I think he left the Enclaves so he could figure out how to live like a Human before he's totally without magic."

"Most Fae would do the opposite. Settle in and make sure they have lots of friends to work magic for them. Or pester every Fae medic available to figure out what's wrong." Morrigard shook his head. "I'm going to look into things, start asking around."

"Daddy--" Megan gave up. Warning her father and even ordering him point blank to butt out never did any good.

"Hey, I have to make sure he's good enough for my baby girl." He winked and stepped into the globe. It swirled, scrambling the image like his favorite lava lamp, and then popped with a chiming sound that put her teeth on edge.

Megan dropped backwards on the bed and groaned. She was no better off than before she called her father for some advice. True desperation was the only thing that made her admit she needed help.

All right, so the Need explained all those hot, sweaty, illogical, totally frustrating dreams about Alexi. But that didn't explain why Alexi had been acting out nearly every dream, as far as she had allowed them to go.

If she let a dream go to the shatter point and beyond, would Alexi dare go that far?

All right, she admitted it, she wanted a wild man. She wanted Alexi transporting her to the moon without a speck of Fae magic. She wanted hot, sweaty, naked and Alexi. Nobody but Alexi. How could she tell him so without ruining their friendship?

No, it was more than friendship. More than best pals. More than partnership. It was almost as if they had skipped the hormonal overload stage and had jumped ahead to a few decades down the road when they could spend time together in private without ripping each other's clothes off. The mental and emotional and--yes, strange as it seemed with a male, especially a Fae male--the intellectual unity were all wonderful. Megan knew she couldn't live without that oneness with Alexi.

If only she didn't feel as if she had been horribly cheated by not going through the hot, sweaty decades of really fantastic, soul-searing, Earth-shaking, fly-me-to-the-moon sex.

Chapter Six

“Partners.” Albert raised a glass of champagne, gesturing for Megan and Alexi to go through the double doors into the main auditorium of the Aurora Borealis. “Here’s to a great partnership, for a lot of years to come. I think you’ll like this, kids.”

Megan nearly snorted, and muffled it in her sip of champagne. If Albert only knew that the ‘kids’ he had taken under his wing were more than triple his age.

Then she got a good look at the stage, lit with pin spots and colored gels and a variation on the tacky old standby disco ball. Snowflakes and sparks floated around the stage, lit in silver and blue. Screens went transparent and turned opaque as lights behind and in front of them faded in and out, giving the illusion of clouds. The platform and the pillars supporting it were transparent, spotted with glitter, so the stage seemed to float on nothingness and turned solid depending on the angle of the light.

It reminded her of that last highly disturbing, hungry dream of her and Alexi and clouds and ... she felt hot and kind of melty inside just remembering a fraction of that dream.

“The stuff dreams are made of,” Alexi murmured, and ran his fingertips down her back, just a brush, barely felt through her jacket before he walked past her toward the stage.

Yeah, I wish my dreams were this real, she thought.

Alexi stumbled and glanced back at her, one eyebrow quirked, and Megan caught her breath. Had he heard her thought? Maybe her dreams coming to life the last few weeks weren’t all coincidence? Maybe Need provided extra voltage to her magic, so her dreams had reached him, and he acted them out without realizing it?

Could it mean Alexi wanted her just as painfully much as she wanted him?

“Okay, kids, what do you think?” Albert raised his arms, taking in the stage, redesigned to showcase them. He grinned like a proud father whose wife had just delivered triplets.

“I think we’re going to be very happy together,” Megan said. She faced Albert, but her gaze focused solely on Alexi, who stood beyond him, down the aisle. “For a long, long time to come. Forever, if that’s possible.”

Albert laughed, the satisfied roar of a lion who knew he was king of the jungle. Megan didn’t hear any threat in it. As far as Albert was concerned, they were his newest pride and joy, and he was going to take good care of them.

At least, she hoped her people sense hadn’t been turned upside down and inside out by Need.

Because that same instinct told her that gleam in Alexi’s eyes held nothing but heat and promises.

* * * *

Rehearsal went perfectly. Megan started to worry when she realized that Alexi

used tiny spurts of magic to help their two new illusions when they ran into rough spots. Then it hit her with a pleasant jolt that Alexi's magic had grown steady during the cruise. His magic field no longer flickered and fizzed at inopportune times ... since he began reacting to her steamy dreams. It stayed steady when they worked together.

If that wasn't a *carte blanche* to up the ante between them, Megan didn't know what was. Alexi needed her. It wasn't like she was trapping him. She was like life support for his magic, right? He wasn't in any pain when he played out her dreams, was he? She couldn't possibly be coercing him. She was a Halfling, and he was a pureblood from one of the oldest and strongest Fae family lines, that supposedly held the fabled Eclipse-level talent. So how could a Halfling of dubious magical endowment have any power over someone like Alexi?

Hormones were the key, Megan decided. Not Need hormones, that could trap him into mental and emotional partnership for the rest of their lives. No, just plain old hormones of the full moon, pheromones, let-me-drown-in-your-eyes variety.

And that was pretty good for a girl's ego, no matter how old she got.

"If we did anything, he wouldn't get trapped, would he?" she asked her father in a quick consultation just minutes before going on stage.

"What do you mean by *anything*, baby?" Morigard scowled, looking more fatherly and protective than he had in--well, more fatherly and protective than he ever had.

"If we had sex, if I really am in Need, he wouldn't get trapped, would he? I mean, I'm only a Halfling--"

"There's no such thing as *only* a Halfling." He sighed and leaned back, floating in the iridescent communication bubble. He was currently in Bermuda, trying to contact some friends inside the Triangle Enclave. Communications were always iffy with the Triangle Fae.

"I want him, Daddy. For however long he'll stay." Megan shuddered a little as she vocalized what she had been dancing around for weeks. "I don't want him to be stuck with me if he doesn't want to stay."

"Baby." Morigard shook his head. "If he really gets Need-bonded with you, he'll want to stay. Believe me."

"But will it be real?" she whispered.

"You're a magician. You tell me what's real." He winked and snapped his fingers. The bubble popped, vanishing in a rainbow of sparks.

Alexi tapped on the door before Megan could do more than inhale to let out a stream of curses in ten different languages. She choked, grabbed at the bowl of dark chocolate breakup some considerate soul left in her dressing room, and shoveled a handful into her mouth.

Thanks to the chocolate--high quality, shooting straight to her nerves and her libido in five seconds flat--Megan had herself under control. The show must go on, after all.

And after the show ... Well, there was a time for magic, and a time for nature to take its course.

* * * *

“I have an idea for a new illusion,” Megan said, as she came to rest in the doorway of Alexi’s dressing room.

“What do you plan on doing?” He bent to pick up the shirt he had dropped when she startled him.

Alexi hadn’t expected her because he had been busy speculating on what sort of hot, steamy dream would invade his mind and torment his body tonight. If it wasn’t such agony, keeping his hands off her, Alexi might have enjoyed the excursions. Megan’s innocent sensuality constantly fascinated and enchanted him. He had just imagined her wearing nothing but a bubble bath. Hearing her voice over his shoulder startled him.

“Me? I’m going to take a nap. This one is all up to you.” She grinned, winked, and beckoned for him to follow her.

Alexi sighed, bit his tongue to keep from begging her to leave work for tomorrow, and followed her down the hall. He would rather bite her earlobe. He forgot his silent grumbles when they stepped out onto the deserted stage. Sparkling, swirling stars and clouds surrounded the transparent surface. It looked just like the dream the other night when he had managed to take over, just for a moment.

Did Megan remember it?

His pulse picked up and his mouth went dry at the thought that maybe, just maybe, she had decided to make dream reality.

Alexi nearly laughed at the deafening thuds of his heart. When had he become skittish at the thought of wooing a woman, taking her into his arms and kissing her until they both melted? He hadn’t been celibate that long, had he?

No. He grinned in answer to Megan’s questioning little smile. It wasn’t the enforced and strangely pleasant celibate life. It was Megan. She wasn’t just a woman, just a bundle of warm, sleek limbs and sweet scent. She was Megan, and everything inside her beautiful package.

Unwrapping the package ... Well, if he was lucky, if she was agreeable, his dream might just come true tonight.

“Nap?” he said, when she just stood there, her head tilted to one side, and studied him.

“Oh. Right.” She rolled her eyes and shrugged, and he had the feeling her thoughts had been somewhere far away.

Then Megan looked him over, head to toe, that measuring look she had given him when they first met. Nothing new about that. She often did that when assessing how they would choreograph a new illusion. But she licked her lips, slowly, just the tip of her tongue. Alexi’s pulse tripled.

“We’re doing a version of the Princess in the Castle,” she continued, and looked away.

Megan? Nervous? The idea intrigued him. Alexi stepped closer.

“I’ll be in a series of transparent boxes, surrounded by fog. You have to work through each box, removing different supports, until you finally get through to me. By then, I’ll be floating on nothing.”

“I’ll do the usual rings and ropes and other tricks to show you really are floating on nothing.” He nodded, liking the idea of the sweet torment he would go through, so

close to Megan, touching her, with an audience blocking him from following through on his hungry dreams.

“Maybe with the afternoon matinees, with kids in the audience, you can bring them up onto the stage to help you. Then, you bring me down to the ground, set me upright--” A nervous little chuckle escaped her. “But you can’t. I keep going horizontal and floating, until you wake me up.” She met his eyes. Started to shy away. Straightened her shoulders and swallowed hard. “With a kiss.”

“A kiss.” Alexi knew he wasn’t imagining those sparks, those hints of flames in her eyes. “That won’t work.”

“Why not?” Her voice squeaked.

“I don’t think I can stop with one kiss.”

Megan froze. For two agonizing heartbeats, he knew he had made a mistake. It wasn’t nervous eagerness he saw in her eyes, it was distaste and fear. She had probably tried to figure something else to break the ‘enchantment’ and end the illusion.

Then Megan smiled, that pallor vanished under a rosy blush, and sparkles filled her eyes, more dizzying than the swirling stars all around them.

“You know,” he continued, “that’s an important part of the illusion. I might need to practice. To get it right.”

“Oh, definitely,” she whispered.

“And I think we should agree right here, if I can’t stop, it’s not my fault. This was all your idea.” He had restrained himself all this time because the only thing more painful than not kissing Megan was the thought of never seeing her again, because he had crossed the boundary line.

“You’re worried about your job?” Megan stepped close, so her warmth crossed the tiny gap of air between them. “Think about it this way: if you don’t kiss me soon, you’re fired.”

“You’re the boss,” Alexi murmured.

At least, he meant to just murmur, but it ended on a growl as he wrapped his arms around her and yanked her up close against him, chest to knees. He paused just for two heartbeats, long enough to say he had given her a chance to change her mind. Megan laughed and levered her arms up between them. Alexi took a deep breath, aching with a sharp pain he had never felt before, and tried to brace himself to let go of her. Then she slid her arms up around his neck.

Alexi felt specks of magic dance around them, arching out of his body, through his body, wrapping threads of magic around him and Megan. All right, so his magic was malfunctioning once again. He didn’t care. All that mattered was absorbing every bit of the experience of kissing Megan.

It occurred to him, as he drowned in the apple-wine taste of her, that his old tutor was right. Some things were better for having worked and waited for them. Instant gratification wasn’t everything it was cracked up to be.

Megan, warm and soft in all the right places, sleek and strong, smelling of rosemary, tasting of apples and chocolate and cherry cola, took all his attention.

He kissed a long, slow, warm line down her throat, startling laughter out of her. It hummed against his lips, raising the temperature in his belly a good twenty degrees.

“Is this whole working together thing,”--she sighed when he licked the hollow of her collarbone--“is this going to be a problem?”

“Problem?” He raised his head to meet her eyes again. Sometimes he couldn’t read Megan, and that intrigued him more than any artifice she could have used to snag his attention.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” She shrugged, as much as she was able, firmly pressed against him. “I won’t backtrack. And I don’t want to lose you as my assistant and partner and best friend.”

“Best friend, huh?” Something primal, deep inside, roared triumph. “What’s the next step up from best friend?”

“Let’s save that for the morning, okay?” She tangled her fingers in his hair and drew his head back down so their lips met with hungry force.

“My place or yours?” He swept her up in his arms.

Megan laughed and the sound buzzed between their mouths. She didn’t answer. They didn’t get any further than her dressing room, which conveniently had a daybed disguised as a couch.

Alexi could have sworn something grabbed his legs to tug him off balance and something else shoved him down on the bed. He let out a shout of surprise that died in a groan of purely hedonistic pleasure. Megan, soft and warm and vibrating with laughter, pressed into the mattress under him, was a sensation worth dying for. She fit against him as if they had been carved to match in all the right places. Soft and sleek, elegant and strong. She laughed when he struggled to straighten them out so they lay down the length of the bed instead of their heads hitting the wall and their legs hanging off the side.

“Not so fast, buster,” she growled, and tangled her legs with his. Her hips rose up hard and sharp, the collision of their anatomies yanking the breath from his lungs.

Then suddenly Megan was on top, her legs wrapped around his hips as she straddled him. Every drop of blood in his body wanted to be there, trapped under her. She froze, eyes widening, as if she shared the tidal wave of sensation tearing through his body.

“Uh, Alexi – “

“Hurry,” he growled. If they both weren’t naked in the next two minutes, he wouldn’t be responsible for the consequences.

Magic wasn’t fast enough. He yanked on her shirt, popping the buttons. She gasped, the sound ending in a groan as his hands cupped her breasts. Somehow, Alexi never imagined Megan as a girl who would go out without a bra. Magnificent breasts like hers needed protection.

He dug his fingers into her hips to hold her still and sat up. Megan was in the perfect position to allow him full access to the treasures hidden under her shirt. He held her still, pressed against him with one arm while his free hand worked on removing the obstacle of her clothes and his mouth feasted on those perfect, soft, sweetly scented breasts. Megan squeaked and wriggled and tore at his clothes, which only added to the rapidly rising pressure that threatened to turn his brain to pudding.

But what a way to go.

Somehow, he wasn’t quite sure how, they were both naked when the volcano

erupted and tore away every coherent thought. He only knew that Megan was there, in his arms, hungry for him, holding on so tightly he knew he would have bruises like trophies of honor when morning came.

Mine, the beast deep inside him howled in triumph. *All mine. Forever!*

* * * *

Somewhere around four a.m., Megan realized two things. First, she liked being on top, which none of her previous lovers--three, including a short-lived husband in WWII--had ever allowed her to experience. But most shocking, she realized she had been a snob, thinking that lovemaking with a Human was much more elemental, pure, an art form.

Alexi used magic purely to increase her pleasure. He focused his incredibly deft lips and tongue and teeth on sensitizing every inch of her bare skin. Then his hands took up where his mouth left off. When she rose above the maelstrom of sensations through the night, she saw his magic field burned bright, almost blinding blue, tending toward the white of the purest, highest power available. Alexi, concentrating solely on her, had full control of his magic.

Magic kept them on the daybed, when all their rolling and somersaulting and wriggling should have had them on the floor several dozen times. His magic kept housekeeping and other early morning denizens of the casino from knocking on the door, asking about the racket. Or worse, just barging in and getting an eyeful.

Maybe, she thought in those drowsy moments of purely luxurious, semi-aching exhaustion, Alexi had problems with his magic because he tried too hard. Maybe his whole aristocratic background was the problem. When he let go and just enjoyed himself
....

She purred and snuggled closer. Alexi let out a richly satisfied little rumble of laughter and tightened his arms around her. She didn't mind that he had revealed a caveman side. Megan was delighted that he was possessive of her, because quite frankly, when Alexi let go and just enjoyed himself, he was everything a woman could want.

She intended to keep him.

How to do that without terrifying him?

Go to the extreme, perhaps?

"You realize," she murmured, when Alexi's hands drifted down her back again, lightly tracing her curves under the cape they used as a blanket, "you're never getting away from me?"

"Getting away?" Again that totally chauvinistic rumble of satisfied laughter. "Who said I wanted to?"

"Good, because the alternative is to keep you handcuffed inside my dressing room, except when we're on stage. I don't want to spend money on bruise cream to keep you from running away, but I will if I have to."

"Hmm, I guess that means boss-lady is satisfied?" Alexi rolled her over so she was underneath him and they were nose-to-nose. "So, I didn't just destroy my career?"

"I don't want to be your boss, in anything," Megan whispered. "I mean it. Completely partners."

She held her breath, and closed her mind tightly against the image of a pair of gold rings and a high-class Vegas wedding chapel, complete with doves, silver bells, and

miles of white lace and roses. She didn't want to scare Alexi away. Teasing about keeping him prisoner was one thing. Actually shackling him to her was another. The way to keep a man prisoner, according to Desdemona, was to make him think it was all his idea.

"Partners." Alexi's smile made his eyes glow silvery blue. "How about"

"What?"

Alexi shrugged and tangled his fingers in her hair, holding her head still as he slowly brushed his mouth across hers in soft kisses that stole her breath. Through her closed eyelids, she saw his magic flare even brighter as he fit his hips against hers. She felt the pulsing of his magic in the synchronized beating of their hearts, felt the sizzling of magic in his skin against hers.

Had he figured out that he needed her to keep his magic steady? Was that why he ...? No. Megan shoved that thought away and threw all her passion into the kiss. She refused to believe that he wanted her for anything more than hot, explosive sex.

An hour later, when they had worked through passion into exhaustion and a short, blissful nap, Alexi woke her with more kisses and whispered, "Roommates."

"Hmm?" Megan knew the last few hours had definitely fried a couple hundred brain cells.

"Roommates. Partners in everything." He lifted his head enough they could see each other.

"Uh, Alexi--"

"Were you joking, when you said you wouldn't let me get away?"

For ten long, agonizing seconds, Megan stared into his eyes, shadowed with drowsiness, the bruises on his mouth that came from hours of kisses, his silky, tousled white hair. He was fully serious.

"No, I wasn't joking," she whispered.

"Neither am I. Besides." He sat up and slid off the narrow bed and reached for his scattered clothes.

"Besides what?"

"I don't really like the idea of Desi walking in on us. I like her, but not enough to see her every morning. Especially before she's had her first cup of coffee."

That earned a sputter of laughter from Megan. The sound died as she watched Alexi's sleek, elegant backside while he searched for his clothes and started to get dressed.

"My place is little better than a closet. Much as I like this place...." He paused to slide his socks on, then gestured around the dressing room. "I don't want to live here. I do want to live with you, however. So, let's go. We only have about"--he checked the clock over the door--"about six hours before we have to be back here to get ready for the next show."

"Go where?"

"Hunting for a place to live." He yanked the cape off her. And froze.

"Alexi?" Megan shivered.

"Um...." He licked his lips and turned his back to her. "Maybe I should get out of here while you get dressed. Or we'll be late for our first show."

Megan laughed. It was so ridiculous to contemplate Alexi being that distracted by her body. Even if she really was caught in the middle of Need

She gasped as that thought came crashing down on her. If she was in the middle of Need, Alexi had just trapped himself with her for the rest of their lives.

Did he know it? Did he mind?

Strike that question. She was going to make sure Alexi was glad he had been trapped. And that meant scrambling to get dressed and go house-hunting with him.

They found an apartment that suited them both, far enough from the high-traffic part of the city to give them a sense of privacy, with lots of room, and a mall close by to take care of all their provisioning needs. It was Alexi's idea to get basic furniture on their way back to the casino. She laughed at the image of Alexi turned so utterly domestic, so quickly.

Megan stopped laughing when she realized Alexi's idea of basic furniture stopped at a huge brass bed with four pillows for each of them and three sets of satin sheets.

Despite arriving at the casino an hour before their first show, they nearly missed it. Even Alexi's unconscious magic couldn't keep an irate stage manager from banging on the door and interrupting their celebration.

Chapter Seven

Alexi considered taking a psychology course. He needed help to figure out what had happened to him. He had never been happier in all the centuries of his life, and his magic hadn't been steadier for the last three decades. He knew it was all because of Megan. She made him feel complete, happy, eager for every new day. The problem was that he couldn't quite figure out how it happened.

He couldn't risk contacting a counselor in the Enclaves to get his answers. What if the wrong people found out where he was? He needed to find out exactly how he landed where he was, happy and fulfilled and steady, so he could make sure he stayed that way. So he could protect this perfection he had found with Megan. Because the bottom line was that even if he married Megan--and that showed just how far gone he was, that the thought of marriage didn't give him hives--he feared it wouldn't do him any good if some woman caught in the throes of Need caught up with him. He wanted to stay with Megan. Forever, if possible.

Three weeks after they moved into their new apartment, they had a luxuriously furnished bedroom and fully stocked kitchen and not much else. They loved to eat, to cook for each other, and spent all their time at home either in the kitchen or the bedroom. What else did they need? Megan laughed when he suggested they might want to expand their horizons and visit a store that didn't deal with gourmet cooking supplies or linens. Then she signed up for a Victoria's Secret account.

That suited him. It wasn't wise to go too fast, expanding their horizons.

Life was perfect. Even when they were late getting to work, which was nearly every day, life was perfect.

If he used his amazingly steady magic to get them through traffic without having to stop once, and to have their costumes ready for them to slide into, did it really matter? No one noticed. He was glad to be a Fae for probably the first time in his life, because his magic was useful for something. As long as Megan smiled at him and got that smoky, hungry look in her eyes whenever he touched her, life was perfect.

Then his Aunt Mynirva showed up in the front row of their midnight show, on their three-month anniversary. Alexi saw Mynirva and nearly didn't recognize her, until the two miniature Birds-of-Paradise in her hat winked at him and one lifted a wing in greeting.

Alexi stuttered through his patter and nearly dropped the oversized deck of playing cards when he saw Mynirva's best friend, Gwendolina, sitting next to her. Gwendolina's Valkyrie-shaped daughter, Gormendina, sat next to her. All three women had pink hair, wore glitter and Spandex, and looked good, considering that the youngest of the trio was over three hundred years old. They fit right into the audience, and that worried Alexi. Either his relatives had started doing research before they left the Enclaves or these women were on the hunt, and he was the prey.

* * * *

Megan didn't spot the Fae women in the audience through the glittery lighting effects and colored gels. She didn't sense their vibrating magic fields until the applause died down after Alexi's levitation trick, which required some real, Fae magic to work properly. She found it adorable that he worked so hard to hide his magic from her. Then she realized that the three women in the front row, the four women directly behind them, and ten other women scattered through the audience, weren't at all impressed. It was kindergarten-level magic for Fae, after all.

Megan used her magic, which had grown enormously since she and Alexi became lovers, to filter out the special effects. She nearly fumbled her foam balls when she looked at the women and saw their fluctuating magic fields.

Poison green stripes, intertwined with grayish lavender blotches and yellow spots. Clear signs of women caught in Need. At least three were in the last, painful stages of Need. If they didn't get some release soon, Las Vegas could go up like an atomic bomb had hit it.

Something growled and bared its fangs, deep inside her. It didn't take a genius to realize those women stared at Alexi like ... well, like the last Fae male within three hundred miles.

He's mine! Megan amputated her routine, to get to the flying knives ten minutes ahead of schedule. She leaped across the stage and snatched up the knives from the display rack. Alexi stepped back, eyes wide, his mouth crooked with a grin he could barely repress. Megan spun and flung the knives into the board with a conspicuous man-shaped outline drawn on it, without missing a beat.

The knives landed exactly on the outline, with perfect accuracy. Megan trembled deep inside where it didn't show and bared her teeth. *There! Let those wimpy Enclave twitches try that, even with their magic to help!*

"Do we have any volunteers?" Alexi said, after only the slightest hesitation. Megan knew better than to look over her shoulder and see whether he was upset, amused or just thrown off balance by her shortcut in the routine. "I trust Marga the Magnificent-- how about the rest of you?"

Murmurs rose up from the audience. Megan knew he had stepped over to the target board and moved inside the outline formed by the line and knives.

The glitzy, pink-haired woman in the front row raised both her hands. Megan shuddered at the sudden mental image of that Need-scorched woman grabbing at Alexi. What did it take, anyway, to snag a male Fae during Need?

Her father's words, assuring her she was in Need, came back to slam into Megan's mind. What if he was wrong? What if it was an unreasonable facsimile of Need, making her hot and itchy, but not really a permanent bond?

Alexi is mine, you stupid twitch! Megan mentally screamed.

The Fae woman didn't even flinch. She batted her extra-long eyelashes at the stagehand who helped her climb up onto the stage and sashayed toward Alexi. Her intent was clear to Megan. The stupid twitch thought she could throw her arms around Alexi, tackle him to the ground, and he would be hers.

A mental-psyche scream reverberated through the auditorium. Megan flinched.

So did half the Fae women in the audience. Green and red sparks of magical distress shot through the air, bounced off the ceiling, and rained down again.

“Right this way,” Megan called, and reached for the woman’s hand, intercepting her before she got within five feet of Alexi.

A low, primordial growl reverberated through the mental atmosphere. Megan nearly laughed aloud to realize it came from her, first, and then all the Need-scorched women in the audience echoed it.

Halfling! The shriek of dismay modulated into scorn. *You can’t have him.*

Yeah? Who says so? Megan retorted, and yanked hard on the woman’s wrist, to drag her toward the target outline.

Every Fae woman here will fight you.

Every Fae woman here will shred the one next to her, to get Alexi. Did you ever think he might have some say in this?

The concept that a male might resist a female in Need so stunned the woman, Megan got her backed up against the target and the belt in place before she could resist.

“Let me go!” she wailed, and wriggled against the restraints.

The belt held tight, when it was made to tear away if Alexi needed to duck out of the way of a miss-thrown knife.

Megan stepped over to the stand holding the remainder of the throwing knives. They were plastic painted silver, with a magnetic core to make them stand up straight on the magnetic line underneath the target. The worst damage anyone could get was a bruise, no matter how hard the knives were thrown.

Megan knew that. Alexi knew that. The Fae twitch and the audience didn’t know that.

Fighting an evil grin, Megan held the knife by the blunt side of the blade, poised between two fingers. She held her breath and flung it.

As the knife slipped from her grasp, she felt a ripple of magic. The plastic turned to metal. Sharp metal, that shattered the light on the razor-fine edge. Megan stared, stunned for half a crucial second, as red and yellow-streaked magic yanked the knife off course, heading straight for the twitch’s heart.

Alexi! She threw every bit of her magic into the call. Then she reached with all her strength and pulled on that warped, angry magic field.

Alexi somersaulted across the stage, into the path of the knife. He snatched it out of mid-air, less than a foot from the twitch’s heart.

The audience roared approval, clapping hard enough to deafen. Alexi bowed with a flourish, his sweat-darkened hair flopping in his face. He looked around the audience and his expression darkened when his gaze landed on the Fae women in the front row, and the ones behind them, and the others scattered through the room. Megan’s heart sank, even in her relief that he was aware of who had worked that little bit of nasty magic.

At least Alexi didn’t blame her.

But knowing those women were there, hunting him, meant Alexi was going to vanish. As in, run away.

Their partnership was over. The act was destroyed. Even worse, no more snuggling until two in the afternoon, leisurely breakfasts in bed, laughing over the

Sunday comics page, experimenting with off-beat recipes in the kitchen. No more sparks. No more trail of clothes from the door to the bedroom. No more bouncing off the ceiling and the world vanishing around her. No more kissing Alexi.

While those thoughts flashed through her mind, Alexi made a speech to the audience that had them laughing. Even the twitch, still trapped against the target board. Megan saw the hot red and orange sparks of magic from the twitch's Need, dancing around Alexi, trying to pierce his skin and rev his hormones to make him susceptible. He shrugged the magic aside like raindrops.

No!

The sound erupted from the minds of half the Fae women in the audience. The loudest shriek of dismay came from the twitch. Her magic shifted to furious black sparks. Her eyes glowed red. Her head nearly spun on her neck.

"You!" she shrieked, and flung handfuls of furious black, purple and silver magic in a killing blast straight at Megan.

"Stop!" Alexi bellowed.

He flung his hands up in the air. Everything non-Fae froze, including the light coming down from the spotlights in the ceiling and along the catwalk. He leaped, crossing the five feet of space between him and Megan, and the furious magic hit him in the chest. It bounced off like confetti and faded with a sizzling sound.

"What do you think you're-- No, I know what you *think* you're doing. If you're able to think at all," he growled. He snapped his fingers and every Fae woman in the audience was yanked from her seat and tossed up onto the stage with all the care of a hotel maid doing laundry. A dome of crackling blue and silver magic formed around them.

For the space of ten heartbeats, the two sides glared at each other. Alexi took long, deep, loud breaths, visibly fighting for control. The women cowered together, their former rivalry forgotten in their fear of him. It was all Megan could do not to do a victory dance on the stage. Whatever had been wrong with Alexi's magic had definitely healed itself. Maybe she had been right, and he had been trying too hard. When he didn't think, just reacted, his magic flowed as naturally as breathing.

He was one of the strongest, most potent Fae ever born. He was destined for great things. His magic was so strong, so penetrating, she could feel it sizzling in her fingertips.

Megan felt the floor try to vanish from under her when she realized she knew what he had been about to do, half a second before he did it. How had that happened?

"You're in violation of a dozen laws for the protection of the non-magical," Alexi said, having finally regained enough control to speak with only a touch of growl in his voice.

"What does that have to do with her?" the twitch with the lavender-glittery hair snarled. She flicked her fingers at Megan. Three sickly yellow sparks of magic leaped off her fingernails, but bounced off the dome and bit her.

Alexi's mouth dropped open when he turned to glance at Megan and saw she wasn't frozen. "Megan?"

"She's a Halfling," the older Fae woman from the front row said. A hint of a chuckle in her voice startled Megan. Alexi stared at her, shaking his head. "Honestly,

Alexi, the family curse has evidently lost its grip on you, so how could you be so oblivious you didn't realize you were working with a Halfling?"

"Excuse me." Megan stepped a little closer to Alexi. She had the feeling that when the explosion came, the safest place would be right next to him. The calmest point was in the eye of the storm, so to speak. "Alexi's magic was really bad when we first met. And I'm really good at hiding what I am. Okay? So don't go ragging on the guy."

Alexi laughed.

"Oh, do stop braying like the proverbial donkey and let me out of here," the woman said. She flinched when Alexi snapped his fingers and she popped out of the dome. A chair appeared from nowhere, nearly knocking her off her feet as it scooted up underneath her. She settled into it and nodded satisfaction. "Very good, dear. I don't know what happened to you--"

"Megan happened to me." Alexi wrapped his arm around Megan's waist, which earned hisses and shrieks of dismay from the Fae women still trapped inside the dome. "Aunt Mynirva, Megan is my lover, and I plan on marrying her."

Words failed Megan. She couldn't even summon up a smirk for the twitches in their prison. Mynirva just chuckled.

Alexi turned Megan just enough to face him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"That I was a Halfling who couldn't stand her relatives, or that your magic field was healing?" Megan said. It was easier than going through all the ideas and problems that had tangled in her mind over the last few months. "I figured, you were on the run just as much as I was and ... well, once you figured out what I was, you wouldn't want anything to do with me."

"Not want anything? Megan, I think I'm Fixated on you."

The screams that rose from the trapped women made Megan jump. Mynirva snapped her fingers and an opaque green shield formed over the dome. The sound instantly stopped.

"I thought it was impossible, when I thought you were a Human, but I didn't really mind. I kind of liked knowing we were linked," Alexi added, his voice softening. "And lately, it's like we're growing these roots into each other and getting tighter and..." He shook his head. That goofy, intoxicated grin Megan loved covered his face. "I'll use up my last drop of magic to keep them from coming between us." He hooked his thumb toward the dome.

"Your last drop of magic?" Mynirva sniffed delicately. "My dear nephew, I am on the Magical Standards and Controls Commission, and in eight hundred years of service, I have never seen such depth and purity of magic. You could hold those idiots in their prison for fifty years and not feel the drain."

"That's impossible." Alexi snorted. "My magic helps with our act, but that's about all I can manage. And I don't care. I mean, Megan lives just fine without magic. If we have enough between us to survive out here in the Human world, and if we can have the next three or four centuries together, that's enough for me."

"Ummm..." Megan gently slid free of his arm around her. "Alexi, your aunt is right. Your magic field is blue, really pure, so it's white in spots. When you first got here, it was fizzing like a can of soda going flat, but now..." She had to shake her head in

admiration. "I honestly don't know what happened. I mean, it's so strong, it soaks into everything. I can feel your magic. I knew what you were going to do with them." She gestured at the dome and turned her back on it. "I knew what you were going to do before you did it. That's pretty strong magic."

"I felt no such thing," Mynirva said. She turned her penetrating gaze on Megan. Slowly, her frown melted into a smile. A smug, satisfied, mischievous smile.

"Aunt Nervy, what are you thinking?" Alexi snagged Megan close against him again. "You're not making me go back, and you're not doing anything to Megan, hear me?"

"It's not what I did, dear, but what she did." Mynirva snorted. "Actually, what the two of you have done together. Honestly, Alexi, you're over three hundred years old, and you come from a long, distinguished line of--well, that could be part of the problem. Be that as it may, I swear the two of you are mere babes in the woods. Especially when you don't realize what you have. Tell me, Megan, when did you hit Need?"

Megan flinched. She couldn't help it. She froze, refusing to look at Alexi. His arm tightened around her, but at least he didn't jerk away like she had turned into a hot potato.

She sighed, knowing it was no use to lie to this powerful old woman. "I didn't think it was real, or that it would be fully potent. And when Alexi kissed me, I didn't want to let him go. He's my best friend, not just my partner. My father said it was Need, that maybe I had some Fae blood from my mother's side to push it over the safety margin. I thought I'd never go into Need. Honestly, Alexi, I swear, I didn't mean to trap you!"

"When did you go into Need?" he asked so quietly, she almost wouldn't have heard him, except that he still held her pressed close against his side.

Megan took some comfort from that. If Alexi didn't shriek, push away, and run for antiseptic, then maybe he wasn't totally disgusted at having been caught in her Need.

"Umm, some time during our last two cruises. Those dreams I was having--"

"I was sharing your dreams since before our *first* cruise," he said, stopping her by pressing two fingers against her lips. "I figured I was Fixated on you, but I couldn't explain how. But I didn't mind."

"You didn't?" she managed to say, muffled by his fingers.

"I liked it, okay?" He leaned close enough their foreheads touched. "For all we know, my Fixation triggered your Need. Which sounds kind of fair, if you think about it."

Megan snorted laughter.

"So," he continued, finally sliding his fingers off her lips, "technically, I trapped you before you trapped me."

"Fixated." She let out a long, loud breath. "I don't understand. Fixation is about as mythical to the Fae as the Fae are to most Humans."

"Summon the Ether Lexicon," Aunt Mynirva commanded.

Both of them flinched.

"I forgot about our audience," Alexi grumbled.

Megan yelped, twisted free of Alexi's hold on her, and turned on her heel, pivoting to see the entire audience. Fortunately, all the Humans were still frozen in place.

"Time bubble, or is the spell just affecting this room?" she asked.

“You’ll have to ask him,” Mynirva said, flicking her wrist at Alexi. “Once he consults the Lexicon, we’ll know what exactly is going on with him.”

“I can’t,” Alexi said. That gleam faded from his eyes, making Megan want to cry. His shoulders slumped, and he looked like that tired, lost figure she had first seen in her office so many months ago.

“Oh, but I think you can. Your magic field is, as Megan said, much stronger. Purer. Yes, blue shading into white in spots.” She narrowed her eyes and considered Megan for a moment. “My dear girl, your relatives are fools, to have dismissed you so cavalierly. Yes, I know who you are. Your father courted me for a time. Just before the Boston Tea Party.” She winked at Megan. “You have far more talents than ... well, you have the strength to hide your talents. Clever girl. I’m starting to think ... but no. Alexi, summon the Lexicon. That will confirm my theories.” She waved her hand in an imperious gesture.

Sighing like a little boy being forced to practice the piano instead of play hockey, Alexi spread his hands, closed his eyes and muttered the summoning spell.

An enormous volume reeking of dusty pages and sour ink, glittering purple, blue and silver, appeared in his hands. He nearly dropped it before his magic field could support it. Alexi stepped back, eyes wide in shock.

Megan was impressed. She had heard about the ultimate source of answers and instructions for the Fae, nearly four feet wide, three feet high and two feet thick when it was closed. And that was just the interface point, where the gathered knowledge of the Fae intruded into physical space.

“Well, interesting.” Mynirva stood up and sauntered over from her chair. Alexi stepped back and let her step up to the pages. “You know, my dear, the most I have ever seen anyone summon of the Lexicon has been about the size of a Human phone book. For you to summon so much ... I hope you and dear Megan here are planning on a dozen children, at the very least. The Fae need the power the two of you create, working together. That’s all I can say.”

“Power ... working together?” Alexi’s frown cleared and he nodded slowly. “Of course. That makes sense.”

“What?” Megan demanded. She really hated being left out of a conversation that was going on right in front of her.

“Ah, here it is.” Mynirva nodded, pleased, when the pages stopped riffling. “Alexi, our family line does have a curse, but not to harm us. The label of Eclipse-level talent was created for the men of our bloodline. They have a vast quantity of power at their disposal and, I’m ashamed to admit, a predilection for infantile behavior and absolutely no self-control. It was necessary to put a geas on the men, to tone down their power as they grew older, so they wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

“My power has been diminishing as I got older,” Alexi explained, nodding to Megan.

She bit her lip to keep from saying *Duh!* and reminding him that she had been able to see his magical field as it sputtered and turned sickly colors. After all, she hadn’t exactly been forthcoming with him, either.

“However, there was an out clause,” Mynirva continued. “Fixation was created

specifically to help men in your uncomfortable situation. Total unity with a woman, giving her control over your magic, sharing and learning her discipline. Together, the two of you are stronger than if your full magical potential was unrestrained. But Fixation requires an emotional and mental link before it can take root," she added, a cat-in-the-cream smile brightening her face.

"Meaning?" Megan prompted.

"Meaning...." Alexi sighed, and that same smile grew on his face. "Meaning I didn't get Fixated on you until I started to fall in love with you. Maybe...." He hesitated and stepped up to the Lexicon, trying to read over Mynirva's shoulder.

"Go on, dear." She slapped the Lexicon shut. "You don't need the Lexicon to confirm what you already know in your gut."

"Maybe I was getting frustrated with waiting. You kept pulling out of your dreams before anything happened, so I sort of, well, I nudged you into Need," he said, his voice dropping nearly to a mumble.

Alexi, Megan realized, was ashamed. Maybe worried? Afraid she'd be angry?

"Do you love me?" she asked, keeping her voice soft, because the alternative was to shriek. She had never felt so terrified of the wrong answer before in her life. And that was quite a long time, from a Human standpoint.

Maybe her problem was that she had been thinking from the Human standpoint for too long.

"Oh, yeah." Alexi met her gaze after a long, visible struggle. His eyes glowed, despite his fear of her response.

"That's good, considering you said somewhere a while back that we're getting married."

Alexi let out a triumphant yelp.

Mynirva nodded and winked at Megan. "You'll do very well, dear. Welcome to the family." She hooked her thumb at the dome, where the Fae interlopers were still held prisoner. "Send them home, would you?"

Alexi nodded and barely glanced at the dome. There was a loud pop, like an enormous balloon bursting, and the dome vanished.

"This is where I take my leave. Do invite me to the wedding, dears." Mynirva snapped her fingers and vanished in a shower of hot pink sparks.

Megan laughed when Alexi leaped and wrapped his arms around her.

"I should have married you the day we went apartment hunting."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Alexi bowed his head to kiss her. He groaned when she pressed two fingers against his lips. "What now?"

"Two things. First, we have a show to finish." Megan giggled when he groaned louder and looked around at their audience. "And second, I should tell you that I refuse to marry someone unless I love him." She took a deep breath. From that gleam in Alexi's eyes, she suspected that the prediction talent worked both ways. "And I love you with everything that I have, everything I am, everything I--" Her words muffled in a squeak as Alexi captured her mouth in kisses.

Thanks to the time bubble, they didn't have to hurry to release their audience.

* * * *

Less than a week later, they were married. Albert insisted on hosting the party, since he considered himself their guardian angel. Desdemona, as maid of honor, dressed as Glinda the Good Witch. Albert, as best man, dressed as Gandalf. And the Justice of the Peace dressed as Elvis in his rhinestone bedecked best.

Megan and Alexi lived happily every after, with two shows every night and matinees on Saturday and Sunday.