

DREAM WARRIORS 3:

Kane

CYNDI FRIBERG

Loose Id

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Dream Warriors 2: Ryder

Enjoy this short, hot paranormal story. The fast paced plot will draw you in and the wonderful characters will keep you turning the pages until the very end.

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I recommend this book to anyone who enjoys paranormal tales with heroes that are sexier than sin. *Dream Warriors 2: Ryder* is a keeper!

-- Susan White, *Coffee Time Romance*

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-- Patricia Green, *Romance Reviews Today*

Action packed and with a good supporting cast, you'll enjoy the ride and be looking for more.

-- Holly, *Euro-Reviews*

The action doesn't let up, and the storyline is well-paced and interesting. This paranormal book was a nice surprise for me not having read any of Ms. Friberg's books before, but *Dream Warriors 2: Ryder* can stand alone.

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Dream Warriors 2: Ryder is now available from Loose Id.

DREAM WARRIORS 3: KANE

Cyndi Friberg

Loose Id.®

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content and graphic language.

Dream Warriors 3: Kane

Cyndi Friberg

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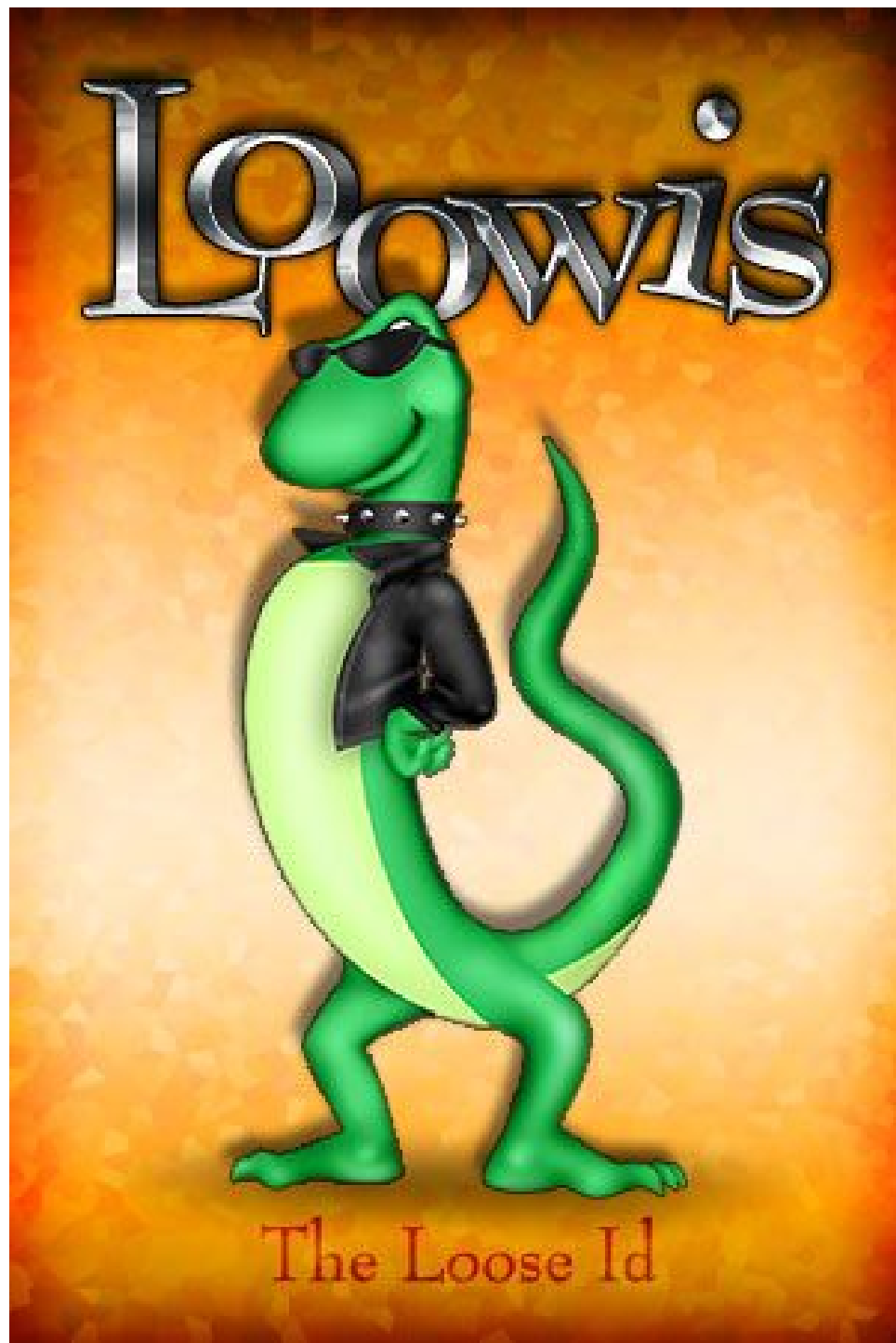
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Prologue

Kane caught one of Lyra's nipples between his teeth and closed his lips around the tender crest. Her soft gasp sent desire twisting through his body. Had Aphrodite ever fashioned a mortal woman more beautiful than his wife?

Lyra arched her back, encouraging his exploration. Her fingers moved through his hair, holding him close and urging him on. He suckled with long, firm pulls. She panted softly and parted her thighs.

She was always wild when he returned from war, and this campaign had been especially long. Easing his hand between her legs, he groaned at the wet heat awaiting him. He wanted to savor her luscious body, hear her cries of passion again and again, but he had been without her for too long.

He stroked her, aroused her to a fever pitch before settling between her thighs. She circled his waist with her legs and found his mouth with hers. Seeking, demanding, her tongue slid against his and curled around it as he pushed his shaft into her welcoming core.

They groaned together, their breaths mingling. "Oh, my love. How I've missed you." He whispered the words against her sweetly parted lips.

She tightened her inner muscles, dragging a moan from Kane's throat. He pulled back and thrust deep, filling her, joining with her. All the lonely nights on the cold, hard ground seemed a lifetime away.

He was home.

Clutching his back and matching his rhythm, Lyra cried out sharply. Her core rippled around his shaft, driving him over the edge. Kane dragged her hips off the fur pallets and drove deep, emptying himself against her womb.

Their harsh breathing filled the air. He lowered her bottom to the furs, her long legs still circling his waist. Supporting his weight on his knees, he smiled into her eyes. "We shall never be parted this long again. I will see to it."

She brushed her fingers against his cheek, tucking his damp hair behind his ear. "I was going to wait for just the right moment, but I'm too excited to wait." Her voice sounded breathless and laden with emotion. Moonlight gleamed in her wide, blue eyes.

"What could be more exciting than what we were just doing?" Kane separated their bodies and rolled to her side.

Lyra chuckled and splayed her fingers against his chest. "The two are connected." She paused for a smile. "I shall bear your child at summer's end."

His heart lurched, and his mouth dried up. Did she think him an imbecile? While he had battled their enemies, she had given herself to another man. His dreams turned to ashes and fury filled his heart. He shoved her hand away.

"Are you not pleased?" She stared at him with guileless eyes.

Kane couldn't breathe. He pushed to his feet, raking his hair with both hands, his back to his faithless wife. "I may be a warrior, Lyra, but I know how long a child remains in its mother's womb. If you give birth at summer's end, it is no child of mine."

Pausing to glare into her tormented eyes, he turned and stormed from the room.

Kane plunged into utter darkness. Swirling sensations pulled him this way and that. He struggled against the unseen force, flailing, writhing within the void. His feet found purchase, and a distant light dispelled the darkness.

He stood on the vast, empty plane of the Dream Realm, shaking with sorrow and rage. The years rolled away, decades, then centuries. His confusion mounted. This wasn't right. Lyra was part of his mortal life, long dead, all but forgotten.

Through discipline and determination, Kane had banished the pain of his past. He was a Dream Warrior now, accomplished and proficient. Kane constructed images so vivid mortals couldn't distinguish them from reality.

His breaths came in ragged gasps, and he braced his hands against his knees. He hadn't summoned Lyra's likeness, so how had she appeared?

Despite their command of this dimension, Dream Warriors didn't dream.

Chapter One

The Great Hall of Morpheus

Kane stared into the reflection pool, his hands clutched behind his back. It was his responsibility to report any anomaly to the Dream Master. Still, he was an intensely private person.

“You may as well speak. Your frustration has already disturbed me.”

Shifting his gaze, Kane saw Morpheus’s image on the surface of the pool. Surrounded by a solid black robe, Morpheus undulated in and out of focus. Kane turned and faced the Dream Master.

“I’m not sure the incident is worth reporting.”

“You wouldn’t be here if that were the case. What happened?”

“Images came unbidden to my mind.”

The golden nimbus surrounding Morpheus flared, revealing features that hadn’t been there a moment before. “Explain exactly what happened.”

“I had just completed my mission, and I was making my way across the Dream Realm when I was... sucked into...”

“The images were unpleasant?”

“Yes.” Kane suppressed the memory of Lyra’s tear-bright gaze. “Is the succubus confined? This has Delilah written all over it.”

“Delilah is in Tartarus. I checked on her yesterday.” Morpheus passed through Kane, sending a shudder down his spine. When Morpheus was distracted, he often lost track of his semi-corporeal body. “The stubborn bitch has no intention of telling me her name.”

“Until you know her name, we can’t be certain she isn’t communicating with others of her kind.”

“True.” Morpheus glanced into the reflection pool, his nimbus stabilizing. “I’ll put more pressure on her, for all the good it will do. Only her maker can disperse her energy, and I don’t know who made her. I can control her when I’m with her, but I’d rather not spend the rest of my existence babysitting that obnoxious --”

Boots slapping against marble interrupted his thought. Ryder strode into the hall, his movements mechanical and his expression tense.

“This is a surprise,” Morpheus muttered. “You’ve been rather scarce these past few weeks.”

Ryder fought back a guilty smile, but dimples appeared on either side of his mouth. “I’ve been busy.”

Kane laughed. “And we both know what you’ve been busy doing.”

Ryder was dressed in jeans and a tee shirt. The outfit seemed out of place in the opulent hall surrounding them. Constructed by the Dream Master himself, the hall served as a gateway between realms.

“What brings you to my hall?” Morpheus asked.

“A mystery.” All playfulness left Ryder’s tone. “Dora, Sheri’s cousin, is missing, and Sheri is worried sick.”

“Are you certain she’s missing? Females can be unpredictable.” Kane raised his brow as he looked at his friend.

“Dora wouldn’t take off without contacting anyone,” Ryder continued when the Dream Master said nothing. “None of Dora’s clothes are gone, and her car is still in the garage.”

“A missing mortal is a problem for the local authorities,” Morpheus pointed out. “Why have you brought this to me?”

Kane studied Ryder’s face. Dream Warriors used their influence to prevent calamities and steer mankind away from certain disaster. The disappearance of one mortal woman hardly warranted their attention.

“We’ve contacted the local authorities.” Ryder paused, raking his blond hair with the fingers of one hand. “Sheri filled out a report, and the officer assured her they’d do everything in their power to find Dora. That’s what concerns me. Mortals are powerless.”

Morpheus chuckled and turned to the reflection pool. “Show me Dora.” Ripples disturbed the surface of the water, but no image formed. “What’s her full name?”

“Theodora Gunther,” Ryder supplied.

“Show me Theodora Gunther.” The pool stirred again. Miniature waves overflowed the pool’s marble walls and splashed Morpheus’s robe. “Interesting. Your mate’s friend is no longer in the Realm of Mortals.”

“*What?*” Ryder moved closer to the Dream Master, gazing into the reflection pool.

Morpheus turned to Kane. “It appears I have an assignment for you.”

“I can search for Dora,” Ryder objected. “She’s Sheri’s cousin. I should --”

“Your telepathic link with your new mate will cloud your judgment and hinder your instincts. We need someone less involved in this mystery.”

“Am I only to locate her?”

“For now.” Morpheus motioned him closer. “If she is not in immediate danger, return and report her location.”

Tracking someone across the Dream Realm was no simple undertaking. Kane looked at Ryder, knowing Morpheus’s casual comments had to have upset him. “I’ll find her. When were you last in contact with this female? Did she ever touch you?”

“I saw her right before we captured the succubus and, yes, she shook my hand.”

“Good.” Kane extended his arm. “Shake mine.”

Ryder clasped his hand and transmitted a clear image of the missing human. Tall and lushly curved, the woman had combed her thick, blonde hair straight back from her face and bound it at the nape of her neck. Her image stared back at him with wide, suspicious eyes. Kane released Ryder’s hand with a soft gasp. Those bright blue eyes, that full-lipped mouth, even her tall, curvaceous figure were familiar to Kane.

“Did Chaos see this woman?” His tone snapped with sudden demand. Kane’s feud with the demigod was old, yet time had not decreased the intensity of Kane’s hatred for Hades’s son.

“I don’t think so.” Ryder’s gaze narrowed, and he crossed his arms over his chest. “Chaos was in the house when Dora stopped by, but Sheri insisted he go upstairs.”

“Why do you ask?” Morpheus wanted to know.

“I was just curious,” Kane lied. Finding her should be simple. He had a good idea where she was. “I’ll report back as soon as I’ve pinpointed her location. This shouldn’t take long.”

* * * * *

Dora tossed on the bed, fighting against the images. She didn’t want to relive these events, but the dream descended all the same. She was twelve again, gangly and introverted, standing outside the library waiting for her older sister Beth. Clutching a stack of books to

her chest, Dora looked up and down the empty street. Where was Beth? She'd promised to pick her up when the library closed. That had been an hour ago.

Footsteps echoed in the distance. Dora ducked into the shadow of the stairs ascending to the library's main entrance. Why was she such a coward? She had no reason to be afraid.

"Dora?" Her sister's voice reached her in the darkness, impatient and annoyed. "Where the hell are you?"

Dora released her pent-up breath and emerged into the moonlight. "What happened to your car?" She shifted the books to her hip.

"The piece of junk broke down three blocks from here." Beth made a bland gesture with her half-smoked cigarette. Moonlight silvered her features and gleamed in her world-weary eyes. "There was no answer at home. Do you want to wait around for Mom or hoof it?"

They both knew their mother's routine. Her shift ended at nine. If she wasn't home by now, she'd headed to one of her favorite "watering holes."

"There's no telling when she'll stagger home." A familiar combination of sadness and frustration made Dora sigh. Their mother had started drinking three years before when their father walked out of their lives.

"If we cut through City Park, we can make it in under an hour."

Dora's heart lurched at the suggestion. City Park wasn't safe after dark. It was barely safe in the light of day. "I'd rather walk around."

"Enjoy the trip." Beth headed off without her. "I have to be up for work in the morning, and now I have to take the frigging bus!"

Rushing to catch up, Dora licked her lips and matched her steps to Beth's hurried stride. City Park was long and narrow. If they walked all the way around, it would double the distance to their apartment complex.

A massive wrought iron arch marked the entrance to the park. Paths branched off into the darkness, winding through leafy trees and shadowed gardens. The fresh scent of grass, pine trees, and flowers drifted on the night wind.

Dora caught her bottom lip between her teeth and clutched the books before her like a shield. Her heartbeat raced, blood rushing through her ears. They were helpless. Why couldn't Beth sense the danger?

"Beth, I want to go back."

Her sister glared at her and stopped long enough to light another cigarette.

You don't have to watch this. A deep male voice penetrated her terror. Think of somewhere else, and I'll take you there.

"Did you hear that?" She covered her mouth with her hand, tears blurring her vision.

"Hear what?" Beth sounded more bored than annoyed.

"A voice. I heard a man's voice inside my head."

Beth laughed. "They have pills for that. Stop stalling"

This dream is about to become a nightmare, and your mind is resisting my guidance. Picture somewhere else.

The nightmare awaiting Dora was all too familiar. She pictured her dojo and the scene wavered, starting to morph. "Wait! The only reason I'm afraid is because I'm a little girl. Let me walk through the park as the woman I am today."

It won't make a difference. The past can't be changed.

"I have to try."

The image shifted, and Dora returned to her sister's side. Replacing the timid twelve-year-old was a strong, confident woman. A dragon decorated the sleeve of her sturdy white uniform. This was the gi Dora wore for competitions. The stylized dragon identified the dojo where Dora taught self-defense and Kodenkan Jujitsu. Markings on her black belt denoted her ranking as Godan, the fifth of ten "dans" a Jujitsu sensei could achieve.

Three young men crossed the grass on their right, silent signals passing between them as they approached.

"Hell of a way to spend Friday night," Beth muttered, flicking the ashes off the tip of her cigarette.

Dora watched the men through narrowed eyes, alert and prepared. Her mind was as much a weapon as her body. Long ago she'd realized "no" was seldom enough. Through long years of discipline, she'd learned to channel her fear and combat her desperation.

One of the men moved directly in front of Beth as a second crowded her from behind. "Hand over your money," the one in front of her sneered.

"You can't get blood from a turnip, sweetheart. Have a nice night." She shoved him off the gravel path, the tip of her cigarette touching his arm.

"You burned me, you bitch." He grabbed her and swung her around. "Watch where you put that thing."

"How about I shove it up your ass?"

The third man moved toward Dora, his eyes glassy and bloodshot. She waited until he neared and went for his legs with a quick, sweeping kick. Her leg passed right through.

"What the hell?" she whispered in disbelief.

He grabbed her by the hair. Her sharp jabs and vicious kicks had no effect on his actions. He turned her to face Beth, his hand clamped over her mouth. Beth struggled in one man's arms while the other taunted her with a knife.

The man holding Dora laughed. His fetid breath gagged her. She tugged against his hold on her hair. Stinging pain erupted across her scalp. Everything was the same!

I tried to warn you. This is more memory than dream. These images are indelibly imprinted on your mind. Give me something to work with. You don't need to watch her die.

Again, Dora finished for him. Beth's screams followed her as the image faded to black. Velvet tranquility surrounded her for a moment then she materialized on the large training mat in her dojo. She trembled, infuriated by her helplessness.

"Your mind wouldn't let me --"

She spun to face the intruder, kicking his legs out from under him. He landed with a grunt on his back, his head smacking against the mat. Dora straddled his chest. Her knees pinned his arms to the floor.

"Why can I see you now?" She positioned her fist above his throat.

Fierce dark eyes dominated his strong, masculine features. Long black hair spilled across the mat. Despite her focus, her pulse leapt. She recognized a kindred spirit. He was a warrior, a man ruled by discipline, calm and assured.

He didn't struggle. His gaze studied her, assessed her as she assessed him.

"I'm not a part of what happened in the park. Your mind wouldn't let me in." His casual tone provoked her. Why didn't he perceive her as a threat?

"Who are you?"

"Who I am is irrelevant. I need to know exactly where you are."

"This is my dojo." Why did she feel so -- strange? "I bought it when my sensei retired." Even knowing the fact was irrelevant didn't keep her from speaking the words. Warmth radiated from his body -- or was her body emanating the heat?

"Let me up. I find this position *distracting*."

His gaze focused on her crotch, and pleasure curled up through her body. This wasn't right! She didn't have erotic dreams. Her opinion of men had been shaped by her sister's murder. After years of counseling and three unsatisfying relationships, she'd come to the conclusion that sex was grossly overrated.

"Am I still dreaming?" She looked around, ignoring his directive. "This doesn't feel like a dream anymore."

He flexed his arms, effortlessly lifting her entire body. Cupping her butt, he flipped her backward onto the mat and came down on top of her. She gasped. His mouth curved in a triumphant smile. "I only ask once."

His aggression sent desire spiking through her body. She panted, inadvertently filling her nose with his evocative scent. Her body throbbed; her breasts ached. *What the hell was causing this?*

Driven by some unseen force, she curved her fingers around the back of his neck and pulled his head down toward hers. His lips parted, and she thrust her tongue into his mouth, stroking and tasting. She arched, grinding her pelvis against his. Why wasn't he returning her kiss?

He tore his mouth from hers and turned his face to the side. "You must stop."

Dora stroked his chest, his shoulders, his muscular arms, fascinated by the shape and the texture of his body. She needed more, she needed all of him. Nibbling at his neck, she rubbed her mound against his burgeoning erection.

"Touch me," she pleaded "I want you to."

"You don't know what you're doing." He dragged her hands away from his chest.

Hooking her legs over his thighs, she flipped him onto his back. She straddled his hips and frantically worked the knot securing her belt.

"Dora, stop this!"

She opened the front of her gi, pushed up her sports bra, and guided his hand to her breast. "I need this. I need you."

He moved his hands to her waist and held her away from him as he sat. She wrapped her legs around his waist, bringing his hand back to her breast. With a strangled groan, he pulled her bra back into place and framed her face with his hands.

"Listen to me." Determination ignited in his gaze, but she couldn't think beyond her desire. "You have to slow down."

“Kiss me. I want your tongue in my mouth.”

His lips covered hers briefly, the kiss gentle and patient “Aggression fuels the compulsion,” he whispered. “Try to relax.”

“I can’t.” She trembled, tangling her hands in his hair. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Release my hair, and I’ll show you.”

She didn’t want to turn him loose. She wanted to strip him naked and explore every inch of his body. God, he was gorgeous. He was also forceful and barbaric, everything she avoided in a man. So why did she burn for his touch? She unclenched her fingers and allowed his hair to slip from her grasp.

Unwrapping her legs from around his waist, he stood and helped her to her feet. Her gaze swept the length of his tall form. Dressed in an open vest and black leather pants, he intensified the ache between her thighs with every move he made. She needed him thrusting hard and fast, filling her... *No!*

“Zared, I command you to manifest.” The warrior spoke with absolute authority.

Nothing happened.

“Zared, come forth!”

“Who is Zared?” A faint shadow appeared between them as she spoke the name, then blinked out of sight. Dora took slow, deep breaths, determined to overcome the fire raging in her blood. She overlapped the front of her gi and retied her belt.

“Say it again.”

“Say what?”

“Zared. By speaking an incubus’s name he must obey you.”

“Zared, show us where you are.” She was more concerned with the desire coursing through her body than hunting a ghost, but this seemed important to the warrior. *Incubus*. He’d called it an incubus. Weren’t they the sexual predators of dreamland? “Zared, get your ass out here!”

The shadow appeared again, on the far side of the room. A shape struggled within the shadow, fluxing in and out of focus.

“Zared, solidify.” Dora strode across the mat as the incubus took shape, the warrior half a step behind her. The burning intensified as she drew near, confirming her suspicion that the entity was responsible for the compulsion.

Though Zared’s face remained distorted, his body obeyed her command. She grabbed his wrist and yanked him onto the mat. “You like playing mind games with women?”

“I will take care of this,” the warrior said. She ignored him.

Maintaining her hold on Zared’s wrist, she lodged her shoulder in his abdomen and flipped him over her body, slamming him against the mat. “You picked the wrong woman this time.”

The incubus hissed, and her body pulsed. She channeled the compulsion into her offensive. Her hand sank into his face with the first vicious jab, so she concentrated on his body. Flipping him onto his stomach, she bent both his arms behind his back.

“Zared, release me from this compulsion and never use your powers on me again.”

“You’re letting a woman fight your battles for you?” Amusement was clear in the unfamiliar voice.

Dora looked up and gaped. The newly arrived entity looked similar to the incubus. Undulating between shape and shadow, this creature glowed with golden light.

“No, sir,” the warrior grumbled. “She attacked before I could stop her.”

“Have you determined her exact location?”

“I was about to follow her into the Waking Realm when Zared activated a sexual compulsion.”

Flashing ebony eyes focused on the incubus. “You’re so predictable it’s boring.” His gaze shifted to Dora’s face. “Release him. All dream spirits obey me.”

“And why is that?” She glanced between the warrior and -- whatever the other one was. This was by far the most bizarre dream she’d ever experienced.

“I am Morpheus, Master of the Dream Realm. I will take Zared far from here.”

“Works for me.” She shoved him into the mat as she pushed to her feet.

“Come.” Morpheus motioned toward the incubus, and they disappeared in a flash of light.

“Well, that was fun.” Dora brushed off her knees. “I wonder what in the world I ate.”

The warrior walked toward her, his dark gaze illuminated from within. “Dora, wake up.”

Velvety darkness closed in, concealing his face, dampening sensation, and muddling her thoughts. She blinked and blinked again. The blackness remained. Drawing deep, calming breaths into her lungs, she fought back the panic ricocheting through her brain.

Focus.

Think.

Remember.

Where am I?

A strand of hair tickled her cheek. Was the warrior still here? He’d said he was about to follow her into the Waking Realm. Was she awake? She tried to brush the irritant away from her face. She couldn’t move! Struggling frantically against her bonds, she twisted and thrashed upon a flat, slightly giving surface. A bed? Where the hell was she? How had she gotten here?

Her wrists and ankles were encircled by some sort of cuff. The restraints spread her limbs wide. This position had only one purpose. A scream lodged in her throat. Did she really want to draw attention to herself?

A low, mournful creak cut through the darkness. Boots scraped against stone, and a man spoke a phrase she didn’t understand. Deeper, with a different inflection, this wasn’t the

warrior. Torches spontaneously flickered to life, illuminating the bedchamber. Red, gold, and black, the room spread out around her, an opulent cave in the sputtering firelight.

The man was huge -- tall, and heavily muscled. Long, black hair flowed to his broad shoulders. As he moved his hair turned red, then black, then red again. His back was to her as he crossed to the hearth.

She was chained to a bed like a virgin sacrifice, naked and helpless, awaiting his pleasure. Bile rose into her throat. She hadn't avoided the nightmare; she'd just postponed it. A strangled sound escaped her, and the man turned around.

Their gazes collided and Dora screamed.

Chapter Two

The man moved toward Dora, his stride long and powerful. His features looked almost human, except for those otherworldly eyes. Chills broke out on her skin as his gaze swept the length of her body. Her nipples tightened. *Shit!* What if he thought she was aroused? At least the sexual compulsion had left her. She had to think, to make sense of this madness.

“Gildonya frenti ephgal ru?”

“Drugs,” she muttered. “Someone slipped me a hallucinogenic.”

His dark brows drew together. “How did you get in here?” He spoke in faintly accented English.

“You’re not real. I’m going to close my eyes, take a deep breath, and wake up in my own bed.” She closed her eyes, but his soft chuckle kept her from cleansing her mind. Their gazes locked as soon as she opened her eyes. “You’re not real!”

He encircled her clenched fingers with his and squeezed her hand. “I am real. I’m just not human. I’m guessing from your reaction you didn’t allow yourself to be chained?”

She dragged a shaky breath into her lungs. His gaze descended to her breasts, then returned to her face. He hadn’t climbed on top of her -- yet. “Where am I? If you’re not human, what are you?”

For a long silent moment, he searched her features. He released her hand and cupped her chin, angling her face toward him.

“Lyra?” The one word held a wealth of emotions, but Dora couldn’t decipher them. The man waved his hand, and a blanket covered her naked body. “What’s the last thing you remember before waking up here?”

She raised her brow in disbelief. “Am I supposed to believe I’m awake?” Her laugh sounded sharp and mirthless. The scene in her dojo had felt just as real.

The man turned toward the door. “No harm will come to you. Relax. I’ll return shortly.”

“Wait! Don’t you dare leave me chained like this. If you --” He was gone before she could finish the sentence.

Relax? She jerked against the cuffs, thrashing for all she was worth. If he thought she was going to lie here, patiently waiting for his return, he was deluded!

His gaze lingered in her memory, ink-black one minute and flame-red the next. His hair had the same morphing quality. What the hell was he? Her mind filled with a confusing mixture of images. City Park, wrestling with the warrior, fighting the incubus, and wherever this was, all blended into a surreal collage.

She focused on her surroundings. The scent of burning wood drifted from the elaborate hearth. Her wrists and ankles ached, proof that her efforts were futile. The blanket abraded her nipples and teased her skin.

How could this be a dream?

Resuming her struggle, she twisted as far as she could to each side, searching for some form of weapon, or a tool to loosen the cuffs.

Another face appeared, eclipsing the image of her captor. Strong, masculine features and fierce dark eyes, the warrior said he’d follow her into the Waking Realm. Uncertainty compounded her determination to escape. She could still feel his muscles rippling beneath

her palms and his hair sliding between her fingers. Muted echoes of desire pulsed through her body. How could sensations so distinct be part of a dream?

The door inched open and Dora held her breath. Had the warrior heard her thoughts? Her pulse accelerated.

A young woman slipped into the room and closed the door behind her. Firelight accented the red tones in her auburn hair as her wide blue gaze took in the room with thorough assessment. She crossed to the bed, her simple garment flowing around her slender body as she moved.

Releasing her breath with a soft whoosh, Dora licked her dry lips. "Who are you?"

"My name is unimportant. We have no time to lose." She reached for the cuff securing Dora's wrist and deftly worked the buckle.

"Where am I? Who -- *what* was --"

"His name is Chaos. This is his father's domain. Most call it the Underworld. We don't have time for long explanations."

The woman released Dora's other wrist, and she sprang up, unfastening one ankle while the redhead freed the other. Dora gathered the blanket around her body as she crawled off the bed. The characters in her dream could call it whatever they wanted. All Dora wanted was to wake up.

The redhead rummaged through an old-fashioned wardrobe and found a short-sleeved shirt. Dora tugged it on over her head, her thoughts in a jumble. Judging from the size, the garment belonged to Chaos. She shivered. The name suited him.

"Hurry. We must be gone before he returns."

"Why are you helping me?" The shirt fell almost to her knees.

"My reasons are my own. Come with me or stay. The choice is yours."

Dora hesitated. She was free now, and clothed. Chaos had seemed as surprised by her presence as she'd been to awaken in his bed. Perhaps she should wait -- no. Dream or not, that didn't seem wise.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To someone who can protect you." She gestured toward the door.

"I can protect myself," Dora objected automatically.

Condescension tinged the redhead's smile. "I'm sure your training came in handy in the Realm of Mortals, but human rules no longer apply. Stay or go. It makes no difference to me, but Chaos can't find me here."

Dora wanted to scream. Go with a stranger into an unknown situation or stay and wait for a non-human mountain of a man. Neither option held much appeal. The redhead crossed the chamber without a backward glance. Dora fell in behind.

Human rules no longer applied? The casual statement sent dread spiraling through her.

"How do you know about my training?" Dora glanced up and down the long, narrow corridor before following the redhead. "Who are you?"

"Be quiet and move quickly. If the sentinels sound the alarm, we're screwed."

They rounded a corner and entered a wider passageway. There were no windows or lights, yet illumination filled the corridor. Each step she took made it harder to believe this was a dream. Her feet moved over smooth, warm stones. The scent of smoke and roasting meat drifted on the air. Tangible, distinct, her senses confirmed the reality of her surroundings.

Archways led to other hallways, and iron-banded doors broke the monotony of the stone walls. Tension mounted within Dora. If this wasn't a dream, was she -- dead?

Piercing screeches rent the air, and a flurry of large, black birds swooped toward the women. Dora gasped and ducked. One sharp talon narrowly missed her face before the creatures continued their flight down the passageway.

“Shit!” The redhead grabbed her arm and pulled her into a rounded alcove. “They are never in this corridor. They must have sensed something was afoot.”

“Were those sentinels?” Dora pressed her hand over her pounding heart.

“Yes.” Her gaze grew distant, her head tilted as she listened to something Dora couldn’t hear. “Kane is just around the corner. Stay here! He will find you.” Before Dora could respond to the command, the redhead blinked out of sight.

Dora leaned against the wall, inhaling through her nose and exhaling through her mouth. The warrior ran past the alcove, silver sword in his right hand. Dora gasped. His head turned at the last moment and he reversed direction.

His dark gaze swept the length of her body, then settled into a scowl. “Did he hurt you?”

“Are *you* Kane?” Here was proof she was still dreaming. He couldn’t be in her dreams and reality. She relaxed a little, pushing her hair out of her eyes.

“Yes, I’m Kane. Did Chaos touch you?” Anxiety made his tone rough, his expression fierce.

Tingles erupted along her forearms and skittered down her spine. Was she still under the sexual compulsion? *You have no use for aggressive men.* And this one personified the breed. “I’m fine. Your friend freed me --”

“What friend?”

“Didn’t you send the red-haired woman?”

“Despite what happened in your dojo, I would never send a woman ahead of me.”

Dora crossed her arms over her chest. “That *woman* freed me while you were still tromping around in the corridors.”

“We don’t have time for this.” He grabbed her upper arm. She jerked it free. “We must hurry.”

“I understand that. Keep your paws off me.”

With an exasperated sound, he headed down the hallway. Dora followed close behind. She could see little more than Kane's broad back. The scene in her dojo replayed in her mind. Most arrogant jerks would have accepted her brazen offer without a second thought. He could have screwed her brains out, and she would have loved every minute of it. A heated tingle skittered down her spine. It had been years since she was tempted to --

He stopped short, and she collided with him, muttering a curse under her breath.

"You're a long way from home," a deep, rumbling voice said. "What brings you to the Underworld?"

Dora leaned around Kane to see who had spoken. Her eyes rounded, and her breath lodged in her throat. Easily topping seven feet, the speaker made Chaos look small. Standing side by side the resemblance was unmistakable.

"Hello, Hades." Kane squared his shoulders and raised his chin. "I've come for the girl."

Chapter Three

“Excuse me?” Dora put her hands on her hips and faced Kane. Not even her dreams got away with that tone.

“She doesn’t seem comforted by your presence.” Chaos ambled forward. Hades yanked him back.

Dora eyed -- was Hades a god? Tension mounted within her, making her heart race. “How did I end up in the Underworld?” Hearing her own question eased the tension gripping her chest. This was preposterous. “I’m not even Greek.”

He smiled, and his face transformed. His menacing gaze sparkled, and deep brackets framed his mouth. Struck by another resemblance, she looked at Kane. Were they somehow related?

“Let’s retire to my office and see if we can sort this out.” He motioned behind him with a sweeping gesture.

Despite his apparent civility, she hesitated. Her dream had already swung from intriguing to terrifying and back. Kicking Zared’s ass had felt wonderful, then suddenly she’d been chained to a bed. “What happened to the red-haired woman?”

“What red-haired woman?” Hades asked.

“A woman with long, auburn hair freed me from your son’s chamber.”

“Now I see why the sentinels are riled. You were smuggled in without my permission, a Dream Warrior has crossed over from the Dream Realm, and I may have another uninvited guest. Cerberus is getting old. I shall have to rethink my security.”

Dora rubbed her eyes, wishing she’d wake up. Her amusement was wearing thin. In a surreal daze, she followed Hades to his office. Chaos remained at his father’s side, while Kane sheathed his word and fell into step behind her.

She’d always been slow to believe anything she couldn’t experience with her five senses. Her senses told her this was real, yet her mind refused to accept the conclusion. There had to be another explanation. She couldn’t be in the Underworld.

Hades motioned her toward a carved ebony chair situated before his large desk.

“She was a gift from Delilah,” Chaos explained as Hades seated himself behind the desk. Chaos stood on her right, Kane on her left. Dora had never felt so tiny. “Zared bribed two guards to sneak her past Cerberus. One of my spies gave me their names.”

“Zared meant for you to find her after he activated the sexual compulsion.” Kane shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“Oh my god, if I hadn’t commanded that thing to release me, I would have... Chaos would have found me like I was in my dojo?” Dora shuddered. “Where did Morpheus take Zared? I’m not finished with him!”

Kane chuckled, but Chaos met her gaze, confusion knitting his brow. “You fought the incubus?”

Hades didn’t let her answer. “If Morpheus thought a cage would contain Delilah, he’s learned little of the succubus.” He folded his arms over his chest, his gaze settled on Dora. “She looks enough like Lyra to be her twin.”

“Which is doubtless why she’s here,” Kane said.

“Is Morpheus any closer to learning Delilah’s real name?”

Kane shook his head. "He underestimated her resolve. She knows she can't die, and she has nothing to gain by surrendering what little control she has left."

Hades stroked his chin, looking from Chaos to Kane and back. "Before I had Athena wipe all memory of the succubus from my mind, I scattered a set of clues across the Realm of Mortals. Whoever follows the clues can learn Delilah's real name and curtail her power once and for all."

"You're explaining this now?" Kane scoffed.

"If Athena wiped out your memory, how do you know about the clues?" Dora crossed her legs and relaxed against the chair. If her subconscious was determined to play with myths, why not enjoy the show?

"Obviously, she left that knowledge intact in case I had need of it."

"Obviously."

Hades glowered.

"Don't provoke him," Chaos said. "He can be quite unpleasant when provoked."

"The voice of experience?"

Resting his forearms on the desktop, Hades narrowed his gaze. "The resentment of brothers gave birth to Delilah; it is only fitting that you undertake this quest together."

"What?" Kane and Chaos said together.

"They are both your sons?" Dora motioned to the men on either side of her.

"Yes." Hades smiled. "A youthful indiscretion and a momentary lapse of reason."

"The succubus is a dream spirit," Kane said. "I will undertake the quest."

"My folly set her free." Chaos sounded just as vehement. "The quest should be mine."

Hades met Dora's gaze, his smile dissipating. "What about you? Are you ready to undertake this quest?"

"Hell, no! I want to wake up."

“I wish you were dreaming, little one. Your presence here is more upsetting than you know.”

He’s part of my dream. There’s no freaking way I’m in the Underworld!

“Knowing the real name of the succubus is a temptation too great for any male. A woman must accompany them on this quest.”

She just stared at him silently, unwilling to indulge her subconscious any further.

“Dora, you’re not dreaming.” Hades gazed at her, expectation clear in his eyes. “We don’t have time for your denials.”

“This is bullshit.” Pushing to her feet, she rushed for the door. It slammed shut in her face.

“I cannot restore you to life, but because you were not yet meant to die, I can allow you to choose how you spend --”

“I am not dead!” She balled her hands into fists, staring at the closed door, willing it to open, demanding that her subconscious release her from the dream.

Kane touched her shoulder. She twisted away, glaring at him.

“You were in my dream,” she cried “I must be dreaming still.”

“I’m a Dream Warrior,” Kane told her, his gaze bright with concern and compassion. “I interact with mortals through dreams. Because Hades is my father, I can also manifest in the Underworld. I followed you here from the Dream Realm, thinking Chaos had captured you.”

“I do not ravish defenseless women,” Chaos shouted.

“No, you seduce them in the dark of night!”

“Enough!” Hades’s roar shook the office. Dora turned around and leaned back against the door as he continued his rant. “This is not about Lyra. The succubus must be stopped, and you three are going to stop her.”

Chaos started toward her. “I will take Dora and --”

“You’re not going anywhere with her!” Kane shielded her with his body. His protectiveness surprised and intrigued her. No one had ever defended her before.

Easing past Kane, she approached Hades. “Are you sure a woman can command the succubus even with her real name?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Kane tried to command Zared and the incubus ignored him. It was only when I used his name that he obeyed.”

Hades looked at Kane. “Is this true?”

“Yes. I was surprised, but it makes sense. An incubus can only access the dreams of women.”

“And Delilah only interacts with men.” Hades shook his head. “I left myself specific instructions, and one of them indicated that a woman would be sent to undertake this quest.”

“I was sent to entertain your son by the very creature you’re trying to destroy.” Dora tried not to laugh, but the situation grew more fantastical with each passing moment.

Ignoring her amusement, Hades tapped his thumb against the desktop and stared at her. “You’re the one. I can sense it.”

“You’re full of shit” She gulped as he shot to his feet, black gaze glowing. “I’m sorry.” If the ruler of the Underworld squashed her like a bug would she die in reality?

“She meant no insult, Father.” Chaos drew Hades’s angry gaze away from Dora. “It’s obvious she has yet to accept the reality of her circumstance.”

She licked her lips and tried again, her tone far more respectful. “I got the impression you planted these clues a long time ago.”

His only answer was a stiff nod.

“Then how could you have known I would end up here?”

"I can't explain the situation, but you are the one." That apparently settled the matter for him. "If you return with the true name of the succubus, I will reward you handsomely. If you fail, I will put you in a cage beside Delilah until she tells you her name."

Dora gasped. "Chaos set the succubus free and Kane is a Dream Warrior. How did I get dragged into this?"

"You were in the wrong place at the wrong time, wearing the wrong face." Hades folded his hands, his gaze boring into hers. "This is too important. I can't afford to be nice."

"How will I access the Realm of Mortals?" Kane asked. "For that matter, won't Chaos draw too much attention to us?"

"This is All Hallows Eve. The realms overlap and dimensions blend. I can insert all three of you into the Waking Realm until dawn."

"It can't be Halloween." A shiver raced down her spine. "This morning it was mid-September."

"Time passes differently here. The sooner you accept it, the easier it will be for you to adjust." Something akin to compassion lit Hades's gaze. "You belong to the Underworld now."

"She may have been thrust into the afterlife, but she doesn't belong to the Underworld," Kane insisted. He moved closer to Dora. Hades could have let her discover the truth in her own time. She couldn't ignore her senses indefinitely.

"It's a disservice to Dora if we allow her to be blinded by false hope. I will investigate her options while you complete the quest, but she can't go back."

"I'm -- dead?" Her voice shook and tears shimmered in her eyes. Kane wrapped his arm around her shoulders, ignoring her token struggle until she settled against his side. She blinked repeatedly, refusing to let the tears fall. *Stubborn chit.*

“Why waste all this time?” Chaos grumbled. “Tell us where the last clue is, and we’ll return with the name.”

“I can’t. Each guardian only has one piece of the puzzle. I have concealed the details, even from myself.”

“We only have until dawn?” Hoarse and unsteady, her tone sent protectiveness surging through Kane.

“I will empower you with everything you need to succeed, but you must focus entirely on the quest.”

Dora’s expression filled with speculation and cunning. The little vixen was plotting something. Pretending to yawn, he hid his smile and studied her lovely face. Her physical resemblance to Lyra was staggering, but their personalities differed vastly. Lyra would have been hysterical with her first glimpse of Hades, while Dora spoke her mind and stood her ground.

She rubbed her arms and glanced down at her borrowed shirt. “I can’t go traipsing around in this, even on Halloween.”

Hades nodded, his lips curving with the hint of a smile. His dark gaze swept her tall form and the shirt transformed. Diaphanous material gathered over one shoulder, barely covering her full breasts. A wide golden belt accented her narrow waist before the short, fluttery skirt flared out over her hips.

“Is this supposed to be funny?” she snapped.

“It’s Halloween,” Hades reminded her. “You’re a nymph.”

“Well, this nymph isn’t going anywhere until she’s fully clothed.”

Kane paused for a moment to appreciate her curvaceous body showcased in the filmy dress before he sent an image to Hades. “Try this.”

“That’s no garment for a woman.”

“We don’t have all night,” Kane reinforced before Dora could verbalize the indignation in her eyes.

Hades waved his hand and the dress lengthened and split, transforming into the white uniform she’d worn in the Dream Realm. The garment triggered memories of her mouth moving over his and her soft skin beneath his palms.

His body had demanded he take full advantage of the sexual compulsion. He wanted to touch her, and taste her, and thrust into her wet heat until she screamed with release. Each time he looked into her eyes awareness flared, keeping his desire simmering.

“Where does this quest begin?” Chaos asked with obvious impatience.

“Go to the Navy Pier in Chicago. Alexa will find you there.”

Chapter Four

Dora clung to Kane's arm as they manifested in a secluded corner of a park. Maybe Dream Warriors and demigods were used to instantaneously zapping from one location to another, but her legs trembled and vertigo made her stomach heave. Cool night air wafted against her cheeks as she waited for the world to stabilize. Her eyes focused in the twilight, nausea receding with each deep breath.

"Are you all right?" Kane asked, his voice warm and caressing.

"I will be." He wrapped his arm around her waist as she took a wobbly step.

She swept the park with an assessing glance. Beyond the trees concealing them, she caught a glimpse of manicured gardens and a tiered fountain. On her right a massive Ferris wheel rose into the sky, illuminated with colorful lights.

"The pier is sure to be crowded. I thought it best to arrive here."

Accepting Chaos's explanation with a nod, she eased away from Kane. "Before we begin this adventure, I need to find a phone."

"Who do you wish to call?" Chaos asked. "It's unwise to --"

"She should talk to Sheri. It will alleviate her doubts once and for all."

Dora put her fists on her hips and faced Kane. "How do you know Sheri?"

“She’s been spending a great deal of time with one of my friends.”

“Ryder is a friend of yours?”

“Ryder is a Dream Warrior,” Chaos said, absently kicking at the fallen leaves.

She shook her head, searching her memory. “He can’t be. Not only did I see him while I was awake, I shook his hand.”

“Most dream spirits aren’t able to solidify in the Waking Realm, but Ryder is the oldest and most powerful of the Dream Warriors.” Kane motioned toward the colorful attractions waiting in the distance. “Let’s get going. We only have a few hours to complete this quest.”

“Why is learning the real name of the succubus so important?” Dora stayed close to Kane as they crossed the park. Years of training and discipline taught her self-reliance. Still, having a warrior covering her back held undeniable appeal.

“Delilah is not just a succubus,” Chaos told her. “She’s the original succubus. She’s the source from which all others descend.”

Dora looked at Chaos as confusion knitted her brow. “How does a spirit reproduce?”

“She doesn’t actually create other dream spirits. It’s more like she trains them.” She’d directed the question to Chaos, but Kane replied. “For the longest time only Morpheus and his brothers were able to manipulate the Dream Realm. Then Morpheus recruited Ryder.”

“Does Sheri know what Ryder is?” They continued across the park, myriad questions spinning through her mind.

“Of course. Your cousin and Ryder have become quite close.”

Needing the distraction, Dora focused on her unanswered questions. “When did Delilah first appear?”

“Shortly after humans spread across the face of the earth, the Dream Realm became too vast for one being to manage. Morpheus and his brothers separated the responsibilities into three divisions, designating roles according to each brother’s expertise.”

“Morpheus has two brothers?” Dora dragged the elastic band off her half-loosened hair, gathered the thick mass at the nape of her neck and refastened the band.

“He has three brothers,” Kane corrected.

“But you said they separated the Dream Realm into three divisions.”

“Morpheus oversees the entire realm. His brothers have specific roles, but they more or less answer to Morpheus.”

She paused on the sidewalk and looked at Kane. “Hades said the resentment of brothers unleashed the succubus. Who created Delilah?”

“Morpheus isn’t sure.”

“Or he won’t say,” Chaos countered.

“Why would he withhold the information if he knew?” Kane asked.

Dora shook her head and started walking again. This could be a very long night if these two continued to snarl at each other. “You said the realm became too big to manage. How did dividing it help?”

“Each brother was empowered to create helpers, within the scope of their responsibilities.”

“Whose responsibilities required a succubus?”

“The succubus is evil.” The passion in Chaos’s tone drew Dora’s attention to him. “Whoever created that creature did it with malicious intent.”

Laughter drifted on the air as a family rushed past. Adorned in simple discount store costumes, three children scrambled toward the entrance of the amusement center. The youngest paused and stared at Chaos until his mother dragged him away by the sleeve.

Dora’s chest tightened. It *was* Halloween. Six weeks had vanished in an instant.

What did her students think had happened to her? Her throat burned, and tears gathered behind her lashes. She stubbornly blinked them away. Crying was a pointless waste

of time. She forced the pain back and focused on the present. Step one, find a phone and call Sheri. Step two, complete the quest.

“This place is crawling with kids.” Dora swallowed past the lump in her throat. “You can’t go walking around with a sword.”

Kane nodded and his sword disappeared. Her eyes widened. Had Hades given her super powers too?

Long and narrow, the pier teemed with excited children, rushing from place to place. Parents hurried along in their wake. Music and the call of vendors completed the festive atmosphere. Towering one hundred fifty feet into the sky, the Ferris wheel served as a centerpiece for the historic Navy Pier.

“I’ll get the clue from Alexa,” Chaos offered over the din.

“We should stay together,” Kane responded.

“How are you going to find anyone in this crowd?” Dora moved closer to Kane.

“We’re business partners.” His eyes flashed like rubies, hinting at a relationship far more intimate. “She’ll find me.”

Kane’s hand pressed against the small of her back and heat curled deep into her belly. If the sexual compulsion was lifted, why did she still ache for him? She’d never encountered a man who set her senses ablaze with the brush of his fingertips.

“How are you holding up?” His gaze caressed her face and her lips tingled.

“As well as can be expected under the circumstances.”

“Do you understand the circumstances, or do you still think you’re dreaming?”

Laughter surrounded them, the smell of popcorn made her mouth water, and her body responded to his merest touch. Dora had never been one to lie to herself, but how could she accept the alternative?

“I don’t know what to believe.”

Kane held out his hand. A cell phone rested across his palm.

“Where did you get that?”

“I’ll return it to its owner if I happen to see her again.” He flashed a rakish smile.

They found a relatively quiet spot next to a stuffed animal stand, and Dora entered Sheri’s number into the phone “Is that you, Sheri? I can hardly hear you.”

“God, woman, you scared me to death! Are you okay? I’ve been so worried. Ryder said Kane went after you, but they were afraid you were trapped in the Underworld.”

Dora slumped against the vendor stall. Dread wrapped around her chest, making each breath painful.

“Dora? Can you hear me? Where are you?” Sheri’s worried voice cut through her shock.

“We’re in Chicago.”

“Who is we?”

“Me, Kane, and Chaos.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me? Trouble follows Chaos like a shadow.”

Dora rubbed her forehead, her mouth gone completely dry. She couldn’t be dead. She had struggled for years to find a purpose for her life. Only in recent years had she achieved one. Why would this happen now? “You know Chaos?”

“We met briefly. Why did it take so long for you to contact me? If it hadn’t been for Ryder, I’d be locked up by now.”

“I’m fine, sort of. We’re on a quest. What can you tell me about Delilah?”

“Delilah is in Tartarus. I was under the impression Morpheus had her under control.”

Dora looked at the phone, too stunned to speak. Sheri was systematically confirming everything Dora had been told since waking up in the Underworld. Kane took the phone from her numb fingers.

“Hi, Sheri. This is Kane. We don’t have a lot of time. I thought it might be helpful if Dora heard some of this from you. Can you please explain what you know of Delilah’s abilities, and why it’s important that she be rendered powerless?” He handed the phone back to Dora.

“You’ve actually interacted with Delilah?” Dora asked before Sheri could speak.

“Delilah’s a succubus, so she can only torment men. She trapped Chaos in the Dream Realm and nearly killed him. Ryder and I worked together to capture her and save Chaos. Actually, this goes back farther than that. Do you remember my friend Meagan?”

“Yes. You introduced us last summer.”

“She was attacked by an incubus. The succubus came into the picture later. Kane said you were in a hurry, so I’ll cut to the chase. Ryder trusts Kane, and I trust Ryder. If Kane says this is a crisis, it’s a crisis.”

Dora held her hand over the phone as she asked Kane, “Will I be able to contact her again?”

“I’ll see to it.”

“We really do have to run,” she said into the phone. “I’ll be in touch as soon as this is over.”

“Be careful.”

* * * * *

“Were you in the Underworld earlier tonight?” Chaos asked, doing his best to sound casual.

Alexa leaned against the railing, moonlight silvering her delicate features. Simple and sophisticated, her ivory silk blouse and charcoal skirt offset her smooth skin and sapphire blue eyes. Her long tresses shone like rich mahogany, but Chaos knew her hair changed color in different light. Had Alexa set Dora free?

"I despise the Underworld. You know that." She met his gaze directly, her expression giving nothing away.

"There are few people that can get in and out without my father sensing their presence. You are one of the few."

She didn't argue. "You're not attempting this quest alone, are you?"

"No." He studied her face, remembering all they'd shared, longing for what should have been. "I have two others with me."

"Who?" She looked out over the water, the breeze catching a strand of her hair.

He tucked the tendril behind her ear, his fingers lingering against her skin. "A Dream Warrior and the woman you freed."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Retrieving a crystal disk from the seam pocket of her skirt, she watched it sparkle in the moonlight. "What is the purpose of the quest? Hades told me very little."

"That's as he intended. Did you activate the clue?"

She chuckled and handed it to him. "Not for lack of trying. I'm obviously not meant to know what it says."

"That's for your protection."

She said nothing more. Awareness arced between them, compounded by tension and memories. "I'll be back when this is over."

Pain flashed through her gaze before she looked away. Chaos closed his fingers around the disk, his heart aching. He'd spoken the words so many times before. This time he meant them.

Chapter Five

“Did you intentionally surround me with children before you let me find out I was *dead*?” Shaking with the effort it took to repress her emotions, Dora glared at Kane. She needed to scream, to rail against the injustice, and weep.

“Hades tried to tell you.”

“You knew I didn’t believe him!” She snapped the phone shut and thrust it at Kane. “I try not to cuss around children. What I really want is to *hit* something.” A smile curved his mouth, and she balled her hands into fists. If he laughed she’d slug him, children watching or not. “This isn’t funny.”

“I know it’s not.” Compassion softened his expression, and he cupped the side of her face, tracing the crest of her cheekbone with his thumb. “You deserve a period of adjustment. I understand how traumatic the transition can be. Unfortunately, we need --”

“Did you experience this transition?” She pushed his hand away. “I thought you were the son of a god.” Fury and grief buffeted her composure by alternating turns.

“It was only after my mortal life ended that I learned who had fathered me. I understand what you’re feeling.”

He reached for her again, but she held up her hand, warding him off. She was precariously close to losing control. There would be time for grieving after they completed the quest; until then, she would focus on her anger.

“Who killed me?”

“I don’t know who actually ended your mortal life, but I have no doubt who arranged the deed.”

She closed her eyes, resting her head back against the wall. “Delilah.”

His strong arms wrapped around her, and Dora surrendered to her grief. She clutched his vest as tears trailed down her cheeks. “I’ll never have children. I’ll never own a minivan. God, this is so unfair!”

He stroked her damp cheeks with his thumbs, his hands framing her face. Their gazes locked, communicating on a level deeper than words. She parted her lips, needing to feel anything other than pain. He tilted her head and covered her mouth with his. Wrapping her arms around him, she pressed into his warmth. He took the kiss deeper, easing past her parted lips to stroke his tongue against hers.

With a throaty moan, Dora returned the kiss. She curved her tongue around his and slipped her hands under his vest. He was warm, solid, real. She couldn’t get close enough to him. His heat chased away the cold stealing over her entire body.

“Get a room!” a passerby called.

Kane eased away, his hands resting on her hips. “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m dead.” She scrubbed her hands over her face. “What has Delilah got against me, anyway?”

“I can only guess at what she ultimately hoped to accomplish.”

“She suggested I use Dora to lure you to the Underworld.” Kane pivoted to the side as Chaos spoke. “After I had enjoyed her charms, of course.”

Dora shook her head. "I don't understand. Why would you need me to lure Kane to the Underworld?" She looked at the Dream Warrior. "Can't you go there whenever you want?"

"I had not set foot in the Underworld in nearly two millennia."

"Not since our father refused to let you kill me."

With one lightning fast strike, Kane grabbed Chaos by the throat. "You deserved to die!"

Dora grabbed his forearm. "*Children* are watching."

Kane shoved Chaos away and moved closer to her.

She pushed him back to his original position. "I've had enough of this shit! Who was Lyra, and why were you ready to kill your brother over her?"

Kane just glared at Chaos.

"We really don't have time for this." Chaos returned Kane's glare with equal intensity.

"Have fun on the rest of the quest. I'll be on the Ferris wheel."

Whirling toward her, Kane trapped her against the vendor stall, his hands on either side of her shoulders. His gaze narrowed, and his nostrils flared. Her heart fluttered within her chest. As he stared into her eyes, his expression evolved from anger, to regret, and back to anger.

"While I fought to defend our land against invaders, Chaos seduced my wife. He left his bastard in her belly and my image in her mind." Harsh and rife with emotion, his voice was barely discernable above the noise surrounding them. "Lyra claimed the child was mine, but I knew that was impossible. After calling her a faithless whore, I returned to my men. I died at the hands of our enemies without ever seeing her again."

"What happened to Lyra and the baby?"

"This was eons ago," Chaos protested. "It has no bearing on the quest."

Dora looked past Kane, shocked by Chaos's reaction "You don't deny it?"

“He can’t. Every word is true.” Kane pushed off the stall and turned to Chaos. “Did you get the clue?”

Kane’s stiff posture warned her that the subject was closed, but they hadn’t answered her question. What had become of Lyra and her child? Chaos held out a faceted crystal disk. Kane snatched it from his hand. Distracted by the unanswered questions, Dora waited for Kane to reveal the clue.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Neither did I,” Chaos said. “That’s why I was handing it to Dora.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Kane passed her the disk. Prickly sensations zinged through her hand as she settled the disk in the middle of her palm. Light flickered, forming a distinct rectangle. Words scrolled across the disk, the characters embedded deep in the crystal.

“Smith Museum of Stained Glass Windows.” She read the words as they scrolled, mesmerized by the disk. She hadn’t expected anything quite so magical.

“Does it say what city?” Kane asked.

“Or what country?” Chaos countered.

Dora shook her head. “You two really should get out more. One of the largest stained glass exhibitions in the world is right here on the Navy Pier. It was featured on the news right after it opened. A better question, how did Hades know to write the clue in English?”

“Because he knew you would activate the disk.”

She ignored the challenge in Chaos’s tone, her mind grappling with the implication. Heat emanated from the disk and another image formed. “Hold on. It’s not finished.”

A window appeared within the crystal, a large, arched pane topping four long, narrow sections. The image scrolled, like an Internet virtual tour, showing the windows on either side and giving Dora a frame of reference.

“I think we’re supposed to find this window.” Both men stared at her with confounded expressions. “You can’t see the image in the disk?” They shook their heads. Dora smiled. “I guess you better not piss me off. Come on. There’s a directory over there.”

Kane ran his finger down the index until he found the museum’s listing. “It’s in the Festival Hall.”

“What if they charge admission?” Dora used the corresponding diagram to figure out which direction to head. “Can either of you conjure money?”

“I’ll teleport us inside if necessary,” Chaos told her.

After the ease with which Chaos had transported them from the Underworld, Dora didn’t question his abilities. The museum was one of the stops on the Trick or Treating Treasure Map, so they followed a group of chattering children to the entrance.

“Admission is free.” Dora sighed. Despite the noisy revelers, the museum was nearly deserted. The display extended along the lower terraces of the Festival Hall.

“What are we looking for?” Kane asked as they moved from one gallery to the next.

“The window has five separate sections. Four are oblong and the one on top arches over the others.”

“Does the window depict an image?” Chaos pointed to a striking portrayal of the Virgin Mary. “Or is it a geometric design?”

“The disk didn’t offer a lot of detail” Dora moved from room to room, taking in the exhibition with hurried glances. They weren’t here to appreciate the stunning combination of color and light. The succubus must be stopped once and for all. “The upper pane looked like a landscape and the long, narrow pieces were people.”

“Like that?” Kane motioned toward a split pane window, a woman on one side, a man on the other.

“Sort of, but this window has four lower sections and one above.”

They rushed along, searching for the elusive window. Dora tried to remain focused on the quest, but her conversation with Sheri echoed through her mind. Delilah had trapped Chaos in the Dream Realm. The succubus had nearly killed the son of Hades. How could that be possible?

“There it is.” Kane took her by the hand and led her to a large multi-paned window.

“You’re right, but why were you so certain this is the one I saw in the disk?”

“Doesn’t this person look familiar?” He pointed to the long, narrow section on the far right. The stained glass depicted a figure cloaked in a black robe. Features lost in shadow, his robe had been outlined in gold.

“Morpheus.” She whispered the name. “Who are the others?”

“The one on top is a common symbol representing Hypnos. These are his four sons, Phantasos, Phobetor, Icelus, and Morpheus.”

“But what does it mean?” Chaos moved closer to the window. “We already know Morpheus’s genealogy.”

“Does the disk have any more information?” Kane asked.

Dora looked at the crystal and found Phantasos’s image enlarged within the disk. “It’s showing me that one.”

“When the Dream Realm was divided, Phantasos was charged with constructing surreal dreams -- fantasies.”

“That’s still not much of a clue.” Dora glanced at the disk again. The image undulated, and a hand passed through the glass. A knot formed in her belly. This night just got better and better. “It’s not a window, it’s a doorway.”

“A doorway to where?” Kane asked.

“Only one way to find out.” Chaos reached for Phantasos’s windowpane. Just like the image in the disk, his hand passed through the glass. He leaned forward. His arm disappeared and then his shoulder.

“Wait! We should go together.” Dora’s protest came too late; Chaos vanished through the portal.

* * * * *

Chaos sprawled on his back. Silk sheets caressed his skin, while firelight played across his naked body. He hadn’t meant to activate the portal. Had he? He felt muddled, almost intoxicated. They were supposed to... find something. Where had the others gone? Why was he naked?

A dark-haired woman knelt between his thighs, her lissome figure gilded by the fire’s glow. She arched her back and sifted her long hair through her fingers. Her breasts thrust forward, her legs parted, displaying the delights awaiting him.

“Say my name,” she whispered, cupping her breasts, a silent invitation

“Beautiful.” He propped himself up on his elbows and smiled into her eyes.

“My name is not Beautiful. Say my name.”

Her face was familiar. He knew every silken hollow of her body, but her name eluded him.

Her dark eyes narrowed, and she disappeared.

Groaning, Chaos collapsed across the bed. This was supposed to be a place of fantasy. He had passed through Phantasos’s image, but *why* was he here?

Warm fingers encircled both his ankles, and Chaos gasped. His heart lurched within his chest and he reared up, looking toward the foot of the bed. The Macedonian twins stood there, passion burning in their dark eyes. By the gods, he would never forget this lusty pair. Seldonia and Cerclin, or was it Cerclin and Seltar? *Shit!* He’d always been better with faces than names.

As one, the twins climbed onto the bed, pushing his legs apart and bending his knees. Their clever fingers brushed against his thighs. Heat erupted in his groin and fire coursed

through his veins. He hadn't touched a woman since the succubus used desire to torture him. *He needed this!* Pleasure would soothe the pain, ease the aching void Delilah had left behind.

The twins reached the apex of his thighs. He held his breath. Delilah had taken him to the brink of climax again and again, always stopping just before he found release. He trembled. Just the memory of those horrific days made his gut clench.

"Relax," one of the twins murmured. "Let us pleasure you."

He closed his eyes, concentrating on the caress of their hands and the teasing slide of their hair. One twin cupped his balls, while the other circled his shaft with her fingers. *Oh yes!* Warm, wet lips closed around the head of his cock, and Chaos opened his eyes. He loved to watch his shaft sink into the willing mouth of -- the twins were gone!

A blonde knelt between his thighs, her large breasts swaying as she bobbed her head, sliding him into and out of her mouth. Did he even know this one? Her tongue swirled, and her lips tightened.

Chaos moaned. He may not know her, but she sure as Hades knew how to use her mouth!

Releasing him suddenly, she crawled on top of him, straddling his hips. "You're certainly greedy tonight."

He watched the jiggle of her massive breasts, scrambling for a fragment of memory. If he had bedded her before, why did she seem completely unfamiliar to him?

"What is wrong with you?" Her brow creased as she stared into his face. She guided his hands to her breasts. "You couldn't keep your eyes off these as I danced for your father."

Recognition jolted him. The only reason he'd bedded this woman was to enrage his father. But Hades had offered her to Chaos indefinitely when he found out where she'd passed her first night in the Underworld.

He moved his hands to her waist and lifted her off him. "Go. I'm not in the mood."

She gasped. “What sort of game is this? You demanded my favors. Do you think I wanted to pleasure you --”

“Go!”

She disappeared.

Chaos climbed off the bed, gazing about the chamber for his clothing. This wasn’t real. None of it was real. He needed to return to the gallery and continue with the quest.

A surge of scalding desire inundated his body. His knees buckled and he cried out, grabbing his head between his hands. Images and sensation, memories of faces and bodies twisted through his mind.

He suddenly knelt in a grassy field, a young woman pinned beneath him. “I don’t think I want to, Chaos. My father will be furious.”

Alexa! He had few regrets in his life, but Alexa was one. Innocent and trusting, she’d surrendered her virginity along with her heart, and he hadn’t appreciated either.

“I love you, Alexa. I need this. Don’t you love me, too?”

Shame stabbed into his heart as he heard his own words. What a manipulative bastard!

Her blue gaze locked with his, tenderness melting her uncertainty. “You know I love you. I’ll always love you.”

She unclenched her thighs and framed his face with her hands, drawing his mouth down to hers. He thrust into her virgin passage, capturing her sharp cry with a demanding kiss. She shuddered as he pulled back and whimpered when he drove back in.

Her core squeezed him so tightly Chaos moaned. Regret struck anew with each forceful thrust, but his body didn’t care. She opened to him, accepting him, surrendered without reservation. He took what she offered and more, reveling in carnal pleasure.

Panting harshly, he tore his mouth from hers and propped himself on his forearms. He glimpsed the hurt in Alexa’s gaze before she closed her eyes and turned her face away. He’d stayed with her longer than most, teaching her the pleasures of the flesh as penance for his

carelessness. By the time he'd lost interest and moved on, she'd been as lusty as he, abandoned and uninhibited.

He hooked his arms under her knees and drove to the hilt. In the blink of an eye Alexa vanished and a brunette woman appeared. The next thrust brought a different face, a more lushly curved body.

"No! Phantasos, stop this."

Chaos tossed his head, trying desperately to withdraw, but some unseen force drove him on. Each deep thrust brought a new woman, another reminder of his selfishness. He screamed, battling the compulsion; still, the transformations went on and on. Shocked and sickened, Chaos watched the obscene review of his shallow life.

Chapter Six

“Should we go in after him?”

Kane stared at the image of Phantasos and spread his hands in a bland gesture. “This is all new to me. What exactly did you see in the disk?”

“I saw a hand pass through the window, just like Chaos’s hand passed through.”

“What do you see now?” None of this was playing out the way Kane expected. He’d thought one clue would lead to the next, but the crystal disk seemed to be the only clue. The quest had yet to reveal anything they didn’t already know.

“It’s focused on the next brother now. What was his name again?”

“Phobetor,” Kane grumbled. “If we’re supposed to go play with Phobetor, then Chaos got off easy. Phobetor creates nightmares. He’ll determine what frightens you most and create images to --”

“That’s where the word phobia comes from.”

“Exactly.”

She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear and looked into his eyes. “What are you afraid of?”

“It doesn’t matter. Phobetor has no power over me. I’m a part of the Dream Realm.” If it hadn’t been for his unwanted trip into the past, he would have believed his own assurance. Dream Warriors didn’t dream, but something or someone had triggered his memory. He moved closer, needing to touch her, needing to shelter her from more unhappiness. “I think we both know what frightens you.”

She glanced at the clock on the wall and heaved an audible sigh. “It’s already nine-forty and we’ve hardly begun. Chaos better come back with the clue.”

“I can go in first and see if I can locate the clue without you having to enter Phobetor’s domain.”

“I’ve had nightmares for years. This is nothing new.”

She reached for Phobetor’s likeness, but Kane caught her wrist. “Let me go first. I’ve been a Dream Warrior for the better part of two millennia.” He manifested his sword, then intertwined their fingers and led her through the portal.

Having expected to emerge in City Park, he staggered to a stop, and swept the scene with a startled glance. Oil lamps illuminated the opulent common room of his villa in Byzantium. A balmy breeze caressed his skin, rich with the familiar scents of sandalwood and jasmine.

“Where are we?” Dora’s voice sounded hushed with confusion.

He shook his head, unable to accept what he saw. “This was my home when I was mortal. I don’t understand why we’re here.”

“It’s all right if we relive my past, but not yours?”

The challenge in her tone was warranted, so Kane didn’t reply. His chest tightened, making each breath an effort as dread washed over him. He really didn’t want to see this again.

“Who were you in life? What year is this?”

"I died before Constantine became sole emperor of Rome." She stared back at him with a blank expression, so he clarified. "It's almost thirty years into the fourth century."

"You're Roman?"

"I was a Roman citizen, but I was born in Greece. This is Byzantium, soon to be renamed Constantinople."

She looked around, her eyes wide with wonder, her cheeks flushed. "This place is gorgeous."

"It's actually rather modest by Byzantine standards." He shook away the ghosts. "Does the disk offer any suggestions on where to begin our search?"

Opening her hand, she gazed into the disk, repositioned it twice, then shook her head. "It's clouded over. I think we're on our own."

"Let's get this over with."

He strode across the room and down a corridor. Dora followed in his wake, her steps more hesitant. He'd pictured Lyra with Chaos ever since he learned of his half-brother's treachery. Apparently, Phobctor was determined that he experience the incident firsthand.

Expecting the harsh breathing and moans of coupling, he slowed his pace as sobs reached his ears.

"I don't understand!" Lyra's heartbroken tone stabbed through him. "Why would he accuse me of so foul a deed?" He peeked into their bedchamber and saw his wife weeping in the arms of her handmaiden.

"Damn. She really does look like me." He glanced at Dora, and she offered a tentative smile. "The past can't be changed, so we should learn from our mistakes and move on."

"The clue is in there with them." He raked his fingers through his hair. His stomach knotted at the prospect of looking into Lyra's tormented eyes. "Phobctor expects me to face my deepest fear."

“You told me you found out about Hades after you died. Did you know Chaos existed when you found out Lyra was pregnant?”

He shook his head, unable to speak past the lump in his throat.

“All you knew was your wife had conceived while you were nowhere around. You came to the only conclusion available to a rational man.”

The bedchamber was filled with memories of events he couldn’t change. He leaned down and brushed his lips across Dora’s mouth. “Thank you.”

She slipped her hand into his and squeezed his fingers. They stepped through the threshold together.

* * * * *

The scene twisted out of focus and reset in a new location. Dora yelped, holding tight to Kane’s hand. Trees sprang up around them. A gravel path rolled out beneath their feet and the dramatically arched ceiling became a starry sky. Crickets chirped and barren tree branches scraped against each other.

She’d been prepared for this when they stepped through the portal. Why had she relaxed her guard? *Because that’s exactly what Phobetor intended.* Tension gripped her stomach. She consciously relaxed her abdominal muscles. Kane was at her side. That alone made this different than all her other nightmares.

“Guess you don’t have to ask where we are.” She tried to sound casual, though dread rolled through her in sickening waves. This was the spot her sister had died, yet she was alone with Kane.

“Phobetor is fond of head games.”

“I gathered that.”

As if to reinforce Kane's opinion an inhuman moan disturbed the night. Dora turned in a slow assessing circle. There was no one else around. A fist punched through the grass and grabbed her ankle. Dora screamed.

Kane drew his sword and swung at the creature, detaching its hand from its arm. The hand went limp and fell to the grass, while the creature crawled out of the ground. She kicked it in the face. It kept coming. Kane stabbed it in the chest. A piercing shriek escaped its mouth, but the creature advanced.

"Duck!"

Dora dropped to a crouch as Kane swung his sword in a wide arc. The creature took two wobbly steps before its head toppled to the grass.

"This is sure as hell different." Dora panted. "What was that thing?"

"Zombie, ghost, ghoul, take your pick." Kane rotated the head toward her with the toe of his boot. "Don't you recognize that face?"

Her heart gave a mighty lurch. "Oh, my god. That's the one who held me."

"You're part of the afterlife and so are they. This could be interesting." He nodded toward the two semi-decomposed bodies lumbering toward them. "Don't be fooled by their appearance. They're probably more agile than they look."

Dora forced herself to watch them, taking comfort in the fact that she could interact with them now. Flesh hung from their bones in grotesque ribbons, their features eroded by decay.

Focus, be calm; rely on your skills, not your emotions.

Kane advanced on one, forcing them to separate. Dora turned her attention to the remaining creature.

"I hope you can still feel pain." She jumped into the air, launching her foot into the creature's throat. It grunted and staggered back a step. It shook its head and rubbed its throat. She kicked the middle of its chest. With preternatural speed, the creature grabbed her leg

and flipped her onto the ground. She rolled. Getting her legs beneath her, she leapt to her feet.

She smashed her forearm against its jaw and slammed the heel of her other hand under its chin. Its head snapped back as its hand closed around her wrist.

“The head has to come off, or it won’t stop.”

Acknowledging Kane’s warning with a definitive nod, she kept her gaze fixed on her opponent. She twisted her wrist within the creature’s bony grip, aligning her arm with the seam of its fingers. With one sudden jerk, she freed her arm and sent it staggering backward with a vicious kick.

Kane swung his sword and jumped aside as the creature fell to the grass. The bodies disintegrated, leaving Dora alone with Kane.

She wiped her sleeve across her brow, her heart pounding. “That would have been a lot more fun if they weren’t already dead.” Panting softly, she let her focus expand. “Are they really dead, or is this just a dream?”

“We’re in the Dream Realm.” He looked around as he sheathed his sword. “The past can’t be changed, so this must be the future.”

“You can travel through time in the Dream Realm?”

“The only temporal restriction that applies to the Dream Realm is the inability to change past events.”

She chuckled. “Was that a yes?”

“I’m able to access the dreams of anyone, regardless of the era.”

“Have you ever tried to let Lyra know what really happened?”

He turned his face away and rubbed the back of his neck. “That would violate the temporal restriction.”

“Dora?” Her heart leapt at the sound of Beth’s voice. She was afraid to turn around, terrified she’d find another decomposing ghoul.

Kane looked beyond her and smiled. "It's all right."

She slowly turned to face her sister. Her pulse raced so fast her vision blurred and her chest ached. Transparent and shimmering, Beth's image was barely discernable in the moonlight. Dora covered her mouth with her hand, wishing she could wrap her arms around Beth and hold her close.

"I can't stay long. I really shouldn't be here, but you know me. Rules were never my strong suit." Beth smiled and Dora sobbed, no longer able to restrain her tears. "I just wanted you to know how proud you've made me."

Kane wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her back against his chest.

"I love you more than you can imagine. That's why I fought my way here." Beth's image intensified, revealing her stubborn expression. "The key to this whole crazy puzzle is right under your nose. Whenever a soul is forced into the afterlife, they're allowed one final request. The request isn't always granted, but the procedure is the clue you're looking for."

Her image wavered, the light dimmed. "Wait!" Dora forced the word past her dry throat. "I love you, Beth. Do you know how much I loved you?"

"I know." She smiled again. "I've always known." Her face raised, her gaze focusing on Kane. "You better make her happy, or I'll find you."

Chapter Seven

Dora looked at the clock on the wall of the exhibition and shook her head. "It's still nine-forty. Only a few seconds passed."

"Time has no meaning in the Dream Realm."

"I didn't really understand, until now." She was still shaky from her emotional reunion with Beth. "What do you think she meant? Should I use my request to find out Delilah's real name?"

"Who would you ask? Hades doesn't know her name."

"And Hades is the one who will grant my request?" Dora shuddered. She didn't want to belong to the Underworld. Being dead was bad enough.

"I honestly don't know. Hades said he would research your options."

Dora rubbed her thumb across the disk and waited for the clouds to clear. "It's showing the first brother again. Either Chaos is still in there, or he didn't find the clue."

Kane hesitated. His gaze searched her face. "You were amazing during Phobetor's test. Are you sure you're up to this?"

"If I was so amazing, why are you asking?"

“An awful lot has been piled on you all in one night.” He brushed the back of his fingers against her damp cheek. “I just want to make sure --”

“Is this because I cried?”

He shook his head. “Phobator isn’t half as twisted as Phantasos. I suspect as soon as we cross that portal... I’m afraid he will use my attraction to you to manipulate us.”

“First of all, you know the attraction is mutual; and second, I’m pretty sure I can control myself.”

“Like you did in the dojo?”

She gaped at him.

“I don’t mean to be insulting, but Phantasos can create compulsions much stronger than any incubus.”

Dora crossed her arms over her chest, trying not to smile. “Time stands still while we’re in there, right?”

He nodded.

“If you can’t resist me,” she shrugged, “we’ll just work out some of our frustration and then go find the clue. I’m not opposed to the idea of continuing what we started in the dojo.”

His gaze focused on her mouth. “Are you sure?”

She took his hand and turned toward the windowpane. Pressure compressed her body, then released with a subtle pop. Using the portal was far less disorienting than being teleported. They emerged in her dojo, and Dora chuckled.

“Did he hear our conversation or is this a coincidence?”

“As close as we were standing to the portal, I doubt it’s a coincidence.”

Kane strode across the mat and tried the door. “We’re locked in.”

The door leading to her small office and the alley beyond was missing, confirming his conclusion. "I don't feel an uncontrollable urge to jump your bones. Should we look around for the clue?"

He grinned. "I'm pretty sure that would be a waste of time. Think about what happened with Phobetor."

"He made you feel like shit, then let me kick the stuffing out of the bastards who murdered Beth."

"Only after we completed the tasks did Beth appear with the clue."

"So we have to accomplish some sort of task before he'll allow us to find the clue?" She looked into the disk and gasped. Kane lay across the mat as she rode him with great enthusiasm.

"I guess I don't have to ask what you saw." His smile turned downright wolfish. "You said you weren't opposed to this."

"I'm not. It's just... Is he watching us?" Dora licked her lips. Her nipples gathered against the sturdy fabric of her gi. She'd been wearing a sports bra a second ago. If she continued stalling would Phantasos dissolve her clothes?

"All the sons of Hypnos are non-corporeal." He chuckled at her startled expression. "They have no bodies, so their only way to experience pleasure is vicariously through others. He can keep us here indefinitely, and he can make us unable to resist each other. I'd rather make love to you while we're in control." He unbuckled his sword belt and lowered the weapon to the mat. His boots followed before he shrugged out of his vest.

"Doesn't it bother you that we're *expected* to perform?" She crossed her arms over her chest, stubbornness warring with desire. Kane appealed to her more than any man ever had, but the situation held her back. "I hate being manipulated."

"Haven't you ever had an erotic fantasy?"

She hadn't until he appeared in her dream. Most men left her indifferent. Only Kane had been strong enough to reach beyond her emotional defenses. "He's demanding a whole lot more than a fantasy."

"Actually, he's not. If you were sitting at a stoplight in your car, entertaining naughty thoughts about me, it would be exactly the same. We're the ones who changed the parameters by physically entering his domain."

"Can we just think about having sex?"

He laughed and held out his hand. "Give me the disk."

"Why?"

"Because I want to feel your fingers digging into my back while I --"

"I get the point." She passed him the disk and turned away as he shed his pants. The floor to ceiling mirror mocked her impulse. Every sculpted inch of his magnificent body was displayed on the reflective surface. He crouched, setting the disk on his piled clothes. His butt flexed and the muscles in his back rippled. Her mouth went completely dry.

Turning to face her, he met her gaze in the mirror. "You weren't nearly this shy before."

"Who do you see when you look at me?"

"A strong, independent woman who happens to look a lot like a girl I used to know."

"That girl was your wife."

"Nearly two thousand years ago. This isn't about Lyra. You appeal to me on a level she never reached."

Soothed by his assurance, she dared a glance at the rest of him. Fully erect, his shaft arched nearly to his navel. Her gaze flew back to his, her heart pounding in her chest. "Is Phantasos having fun at my expense?"

His gaze narrowed and he moved in close, resting his hands on her shoulders. "Are you a virgin?"

“No.” Her tone sounded a bit too insistent even in her own ears.

“How many times have you made love?”

“Never.” He dragged the elastic band off her hair. “I’ve had sex a few times, but it was...”

He moved the hair away from the nape of her neck and breathed against her skin. “It was what?”

“Awkward and uncomfortable.”

“I’m pretty sure we can do better than that.” His mouth moved against her skin, sending tingles down her spine. *Pretend we’re alone in your dojo.* His voice sounded softly inside her mind. *This is for us, only us.*

Us. We. The words soothed Dora, tempted her with longings she’d ignored for years. She wanted Kane, needed the comfort of his embrace, the intimacy of his caress. Unknotting her belt, she parted the front of her gi and guided his hands to her breasts. Their gazes met in the mirror, his shining with desire and tenderness. He cupped both breasts, rubbing his thumbs across her nipples.

“Kiss me.” He whispered the words above her ear.

Without turning around, she craned her neck, offering him her mouth. His hands remained on her breasts while his lips slid over and against hers. She traced the seam of his lips and murmured as he sucked her tongue into his mouth. *Yes!* She needed this. She needed him.

His fingers rolled her nipples, working them into hard little peaks. He turned her suddenly and pressed her back against the mirror. The kiss grew feverish. Their tongues dueled. Their lips clung. She breathed in his breath, savored his scent, relished his taste. Her hands stroked his back and squeezed his shoulders. Strong and capable, he was a warrior like herself.

He growled into her open mouth and tugged her pants down. They caught on her hips and she wiggled, then kicked them aside. His mouth never left hers as he stroked her torso and belly. He pulled her forward and explored the silky contours of her bottom. His fingers traced the crease between her cheeks, teasing her damp folds from behind.

She was just as bold, exploring every bulge and ripple of his muscular body. Her hand closed around his shaft and she trembled. Hot, hard, and incredibly thick, he felt even more impressive than he looked. Her core heated, melted, anticipating his entry.

Keeping her pressed against the mirror, he sank to his knees. His mouth closed around one of her nipples and drew it deeply into his mouth. Pleasure darted from her breast and lodged between her thighs, making her acutely aware of her emptiness. She wanted him there, stretching her, filling her.

He lifted her leg to his shoulder, and Dora buried her fingers in his hair. His warm breath wafted over her damp curls. Her inner muscles clenched, dragging a cry from her throat. She needed his touch, his kiss. Why was he teasing her? His chest expanded and she groaned. He was scenting her! The act was so savage, so elemental, it made her whimper.

Then his tongue parted her folds, and her thoughts scattered. The world narrowed to this moment and this man. His mouth moved against her, his tongue stroking. She arched into his torrid kiss, needing the gentle swirl against her clit, but wanting the penetration of his tongue.

He moved his hand between her thighs and pushed two fingers into her core. She gasped, canting her hips, taking him deeper. His tongue settled over her clit as he filled her with his fingers. The first ripple of pleasure caught her by surprise. She cried out, her fingers tightening in his hair. He flicked his tongue against her clit, until the last spasm passed.

Kane eased her leg from his shoulder and swept her into his arms. He tried not to compare her to Lyra, but it was impossible. Lyra had been meek and docile. Dora's spirit fascinated him.

He sat, arranging her astride his lap, stroking her back, holding her close. She kissed him passionately before he could decide how to proceed. Never would Lyra have dared to take the lead. Desire coiled, tight and demanding. Thrilled by her passion, he accepted the bold thrust of her tongue and let her play.

"Do you want me to return the favor?" Her lips moved against his as she spoke.

"I don't want to wait any longer. I need to be inside you."

She pushed to her knees and guided his cock to her entrance. Her slick folds encircled him, and he groaned. She'd seemed concerned when she first saw him. Her boldness strained his determination to the breaking point. He grasped her hips, steadying her, while allowing her to control her descent. She was hot and so damn tight he could hardly breathe.

"Am I hurting you?" he gritted out between clenched teeth.

"Not really," she panted.

"Not really" would never do. He cupped one breast and eased his other hand between their bodies. "Kiss me, while I touch you. We're not doing this until you come again."

She traced his bottom lip with her tongue, nibbling and teasing before she settled her mouth over his. He squeezed her breast, enjoying the weighty feel of her soft flesh. His middle finger found her clit and circled gently. Using the contractions of her inner muscles as a guide, he aroused her again.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders as she took him deeper and deeper. She lifted her hips, dragging herself up along his shaft. "Wait," he moaned.

"I can't."

She slid more easily now, tormenting him with her eagerness. He moved both hands to her breasts. With a wicked chuckle, she pushed him over and braced herself against his shoulders.

“Oh gods, that feels good,” he whispered.

Rocking her hips in a demanding rhythm, she took him deep over and over. Her neck arched, her breasts pressing into his palms, and her knees gripped his sides. She was so beautiful in her abandon. He wanted to prolong the pleasure so he could watch her come.

The insistent squeeze of her core sabotaged his determination to make it last. This was only the beginning. They could go slowly next time. His shaft throbbed, and his balls drew up tight against his body. He didn’t want it to end. Not now, not ever! Groaning, he moved his hands to her hips and thrust fast and hard. She cried out, her inner muscles rippling with release. He shuddered, arching off the mat as he emptied his seed deep inside her.

As they clung to each other, savoring the languid aftermath, the mirror transformed, revealing a scene beyond the dojo. Lyra stood naked at the foot of an ornate bed, a man directly behind her. His large hands fondled her breasts, tugging firmly on her nipples.

Kane stiffened, ready to lift Dora off him, when she whispered, “Can Chaos change his shape?”

“No. He sent my image into Lyra’s mind.”

“But that man isn’t even as tall as you. There’s no way that’s Chaos.”

Lyra gasped as her lover slipped his hand between her thighs. “My lord, I did not expect you so soon.” Her voice sounded breathless and anxious. The man touched her, stimulated her, without speaking a word. “How is it that you...” Her sentence trailed away into a moan.

Kane sat. Dora wrapped her legs around his waist. He clutched her to his chest, unable to tear his gaze from the scene. It wasn’t possible. Why would Chaos admit to something he hadn’t done? Tension banded Kane’s chest, and his pulse thundered through his veins.

The man bent Lyra forward, entering her with one forceful lunge. Kane's image appeared, faded to shadow, then appeared again as the imposter thrust into Lyra.

"What the hell?" Dora whispered.

"My thoughts exactly."

The light faded and the mirror returned. Stunned, Kane shook his head, silently denying the implication. "Is this the clue? Have I falsely accused my brother all these years?"

Chapter Eight

They dressed in silence and returned through the portal. Chaos waited in the gallery, his features tense and drawn.

“Are you all right?” Dora moved closer to the demigod.

He inclined his head. “Were you able to locate the clue?”

Kane faced him squarely, shoulders back, eyes narrowed. “Answer me honestly, did you father Lyra’s bastard?”

Chaos laughed and raked his hair with both hands. “After two thousand years of accusations, you dare to ask me now?”

Tension pulsed between them. Dora caught her bottom lip between her teeth and turned to Kane. “What made you think Chaos was Lyra’s lover?”

“*He* did.” Kane snarled out the words. “My introduction to the afterlife was only slightly less shocking than yours. I knew I was dead, but I had no idea who my true father was. Persephone despised me, and Chaos provoked me at every turn. Hades had no choice but to separate us.”

“That’s when you became a Dream Warrior.” He nodded, and she looked at Chaos. “Why would you want him to think you seduced his wife if you didn’t?”

“Who says I didn’t seduce her?”

“I do,” Kane said emphatically. “Phantasos showed us Lyra’s lover, and it wasn’t you.”

“Then who was it?” Chaos sneered.

“Her lover literally took on Kane’s shape,” Dora explained. “Or at least a close enough facsimile to fool Lyra in the dark.” Kane balled his hands into fists. Dora squeezed his arm. “This has something to do with the succubus. Why else would Phantasos show us the truth?”

“Why have you accepted the blame for a crime you didn’t commit?” Kane’s question was part demand, part plea.

“I was guilty in my heart!” Chaos threw his hands up and glanced away. “Part of me wanted it to be true. I heard Father arguing with Persephone. He wanted to bring you to the Underworld and Persephone wouldn’t allow it. She’d relented with me, and this time she was determined to have her way.”

Dora looked around, concerned they’d draw a crowd. Both men were practically shouting. She gave a mental shrug. Let the manager call security. They had to figure this out. “This was while Kane was still alive.” Chaos nodded. “So you searched for your brother?”

He glared at her. “I was curious.”

She fought back a smile. He was jealous as hell, but he’d never admit it.

“When I found Kane, I also found Lyra.” His voice grew distant and hushed. “She was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. I was captivated by her grace, entranced by her innocence.”

She glanced at Kane. Anger emanated off him in waves, but he miraculously held his tongue.

“I watched her, longed for her,” Chaos went on. “I intended to seduce her as soon as Kane departed.”

“But she already had a lover?”

He made another helpless gesture with his hands. "I was there the night -- whoever he was appeared to Lyra. I knew it wasn't Kane, but how could I warn her?"

"By the gods, this is worse than I imagined! Did the whole world covet my wife?"

Chaos looked at Dora and shook his head. "She was uncommonly fair."

Kane punched him in the jaw. Chaos staggered back, slamming into the wall mere inches from the display.

"What if he'd broken the window?" Dora snapped. "This quest isn't finished yet."

A woman with a plastic name badge paused in the entrance to the gallery. "Is everything all right in here?"

"Everything is fine," Kane replied, not taking his gaze off Chaos.

"We close in fifteen minutes." She looked Chaos up and down, then smiled flirtatiously. "Fabulous costume."

"Thank you. We'll be along directly." He turned back to the window, dismissing her.

"If we've only got fifteen minutes, we better step through one of the portals while we figure this out." Dora motioned toward the third brother. "What is his expertise?"

"Icelus constructs dreams that reflect reality."

Dora looked into the disk and found Icelus staring back at her. "Yep. That's the next stop on this adventure." She shot Chaos a meaningful look. "We go through together this time."

They passed through the third portal and emerged into gray nothingness. Dora screamed, flailing her arms and legs. Nothing happened. She stopped struggling. The plummeting sensation never came. "Where are we?" She gasped, blood rushing through her ears.

"We're in the Dream Realm, but apparently Icelus isn't in the mood to play." Kane took her hand and pulled her toward him. She could only make out his silhouette in the dense fog.

"I gave my solemn vow never to speak of these things, but the succubus is out of control," a disembodied voice said. "You may each ask one question, and I will answer."

"That makes thing easy," Chaos muttered from somewhere on her left. "What is Delilah's real name?"

"Lyra."

Dora's heart missed a beat. She'd wondered if that's where this was leading, but how was it possible?

"How is that possible?" Kane echoed her thought, his voice harsh with disbelief. "Lyra was mortal."

"When a mortal's life is ended prematurely, they are offered a last request. Lyra's last request was to be brought to the sons of Hypnos. We struck a bargain with her, but she has abandoned the original parameters. We transformed her into a creature, part nightmare and part fantasy, with the ability to create illusions so realistic no mortal can tell the difference. Then we unleashed her in the Dream Realm and watched her torment Morpheus."

"You did this to spite Morpheus? He's your brother." Kane's hand tightened around hers.

"And he was set above us! Dream Master, he calls himself. The Dream Realm was never meant to have a *master*."

"What is Lyra's fixation with the Dream Realm?" Chaos asked.

"I already answered your question."

"Why have you allowed her destruction to continue when you know she is out of control?"

"I answered your question as well, Dream Warrior."

The man who accused Lyra of being a whore now resided in the Dream Realm. Dora didn't need clarification on that point. Kane's question, however, bothered her. "Why wasn't Lyra destroyed as soon as she violated your agreement?"

“She must be destroyed by her creator,” Icelus told her.

“You said you and your brothers created her.”

“We facilitated her transformation, but the succubus was created by forces far stronger than us. You must unravel those forces or Lyra’s reign will never end.”

They were thrown back through the portal, ending their interaction with Icelus.

Kane picked himself up off the floor and dusted off the seat of his pants. He helped Dora to her feet and ignored Chaos.

“Is he always so cryptic?” Dora rolled her shoulders and adjusted the overlapping halves of her uniform top. If Chaos hadn’t been present, Kane would have been happy to help her.

“That’s the funny thing about reality,” Chaos began. “It can be twisted by perception and bias. Icelus was uncomfortable with his own involvement, so he manipulated the facts to shift the focus of blame.”

“You think he could have destroyed Lyra all along?” Dora asked.

“Perhaps not, but he certainly could have been more forthcoming.”

The overhead lights flipped off, and Kane looked at the clock.

“Time passed while we were in there.” Dora turned back to the window.

“Icelus deals in realism.”

“Or he was just being a bastard,” Chaos suggested.

“Where will the last one take us?” Dora touched the outer edge of Morpheus’s image.

“Hopefully, home.” Kane interlaced his fingers through hers and activated the portal. They emerged in the Great Hall of Morpheus, and Kane smiled.

“Wow.” Dora released his hand and turned around in a slow circle. “This is even more impressive than your villa.”

Chaos scowled. "You took her to your villa?"

"No. Phobator found it amusing for me to revisit the past."

"You said Phantasos showed you Lyra's lover."

Dora returned to his side. "When and how aren't important, but *who* has to be part of this mystery."

"What are you talking about?" Kane rubbed the bridge of his nose, exhausted by the turmoil.

"If Chaos didn't appear to Lyra, who did? I don't know how accurate the image was, but her lover reminded me of Zared."

Kane shook his head. "Zared was only able to take on form because of your command. Besides, the imposter appeared before Lyra's transformation. Zared didn't exist."

"Who else could have assumed your form?"

"Zeus." Kane shuddered. "He's taken on a number of different forms in his pursuit of females, but I don't think he's ever impersonated the lady's husband."

"Not dramatic enough," Chaos agreed.

Kane crossed to the reflection pool. Passing his hand over the surface, he said, "Show me the true face of Lyra's lover."

The waters rippled and churned. How odd. Either the pool had access to the information, or it didn't. He'd never seen it struggle against the answer. Gradually the waters stilled and an image formed in the depths. A long black robe, features lost in shadow, and a familiar gold nimbus illuminating obsidian eyes.

"Is that --"

"How dare you use my pool to spy on me!"

Kane spun, facing the Dream Master, his mentor, his friend. "Why?" His voice hitched. "Why would you betray me like this?"

Morpheus glided toward him, his eyes gleaming in his featureless face. “How did I betray you?”

“You took on my appearance to bed my wife!”

After a long, tense pause, Morpheus asked, “Why is this an issue now?”

Kane advanced. Morpheus held his ground, his nimbus intensifying. “You don’t deny it?”

“I didn’t know you then. I’m not proud of my weakness, but I knew Lyra long before --”

“Lyra is the succubus,” Chaos informed him.

“*What?*”

The fury drained out of Kane, leaving him shaken and torn. “You didn’t know?”

“Of course not. How was... My brothers. I had no idea their resentment ran so deep. They turned Lyra into Delilah to punish me. Explain how you discovered all this.”

“No, you explain how you justify screwing another man’s wife.”

“Lyra was one of Persephone’s handmaidens. I visited her in dreams for many years while she remained in Olympus.”

“Was she mortal?” Dora asked.

“Her mother was a nymph. I’m not sure about her father.”

Dora looked at Kane, confusion clear in her expression. “Did you know Lyra wasn’t human?”

“There was a lot about Lyra I didn’t know.”

Chaos attempted to conceal his laugh with a cough, but Kane wasn’t fooled.

“Persephone took Lyra with her to the Underworld, and everything changed.” Morpheus resumed his tale. “Lyra became cold and distant. I thought she was horribly unhappy in that dismal place, but I soon realized the cause.”

"I often wondered when her obsession began," Chaos said.

"Lyra was obsessed with Hades?" Kane heaved a ragged sigh. Just when he thought it couldn't get any worse, the facts continued their downward spiral.

Morpheus passed through Chaos and hovered before the reflection pool, his fingers absently stirring the water. "She rejected me, told me to stay out of her dreams, that she wanted a real lover. I had to know why."

"Did my father sleep with her?" Chaos wanted to know.

Morpheus shook his head. "I planted the suspicion in Persephone's subconscious, and she acted immediately. She had Lyra banished to the Realm of Mortals, but apparently Lyra's obsession had already taken root. If she couldn't have Hades, she would have his son."

Nausea rolled through Kane. He'd believed Lyra a wealthy widow when he'd met her. He'd felt sorry for her loss and tried to comfort her. Had she dreamt of *his father* as she lay sleeping in his arms?

"She knew the power of the Dream Realm. I'd revealed it to her. But how was she able to contact my brothers?"

"You gave her that opportunity as well." Morpheus may not have known him personally when he seduced Lyra, but he'd known she was another man's wife. "The bastard you planted in her belly prematurely claimed both their lives, so Lyra was allowed a final request."

"And she requested an audience with my brothers." He sounded speculative now, and Kane wanted to shake him. How could he accept it all so easily?

"Let's digress for a moment. Why did you take on my form?"

"Solidifying in the Waking Realm is extremely hard for me." Morpheus paused. Pulling his fingers from the pool, he turned and faced Kane. "She wanted a real lover, but I was unwilling to risk rejection again. So I came to her in your likeness. I'd never mated with a woman in human form. I had no idea I could beget children. I didn't learn about the child

until after Lyra's death." He dimmed for a moment as if the story drained his energy. "I scanned her mind while our bodies were joined and realized my suit was hopeless. She loved Hades with every fiber of her being."

Kane crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for jealousy and rage to erupt within him. Was he so jaded he no longer felt emotion? He looked at Dora, and tenderness gripped his heart. There was nothing wrong with his emotions. Nearly two thousand years had passed since the convoluted events. His only regret was blaming Chaos.

"Then you created the succubus," Chaos concluded.

Dora shook her head. "Icelus said forces, not force. Morpheus is only part of the equation. I thought she wanted access to the Dream Realm to punish Kane, but -- don't take this the wrong way -- Kane was never that important to Lyra."

Kane laughed. "How could I possibly take that the wrong way?"

She smiled and continued her supposition. "This has always felt personal to me. She's out to punish Morpheus for separating her from Hades."

"Then what are the forces?" Morpheus asked.

"Love and hate. What could be more powerful than that? Her love for Hades and her hatred of you."

Morpheus gathered his robe about him, his nimbus intensified. "Hades and I must act together." He looked at Chaos. "Go get your father. We'll do it right this time."

Chapter Nine

Dora held her hand over her nose and mouth, fighting her gag reflex. She'd seen very little of the Underworld, but it was nothing compared to the vile cavern that was Tartarus. Slime oozed from the walls like pus from an infected wound. The cavern floor squished beneath her feet. One glance down had convinced her some things were better left unseen.

"Stay here until I signal you," Hades said in as soft a voice as he could manage before he walked into the adjacent room with Morpheus.

"Hello, Delilah." Dora could hear him clearly now.

"My love, have you... What is *he* doing here?" The frail female voice suddenly increased in volume and strength.

"I brought you several presents. I hope you'll enjoy them."

"Let's go." Chaos led the small procession into the room in which the succubus was caged.

Dora stared in morbid fascination at the creature who had once been Kane's wife. Tartarus had not been kind to Lyra. Her stooped, emaciated body hardly seemed a threat to anyone. The fact that she was solid outside the Dream Realm hinted at the power concealed within her wasted form.

“Do you remember the pleasure I brought you, my love, or did that vile goddess wash it from your memory?” She tilted her head to one side and tendrils of stringy black hair fell across her face.

“I had forgotten most everything, but it’s returning to me now,” Hades snapped. “I took pity on you once, *Lyra*. It will not happen again.”

“Pity?” she hissed. “Sealing me in that pit was merciful?”

“More merciful than the fate awaiting you now.”

“Why is loving you wrong?” she cried. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted. Take me to the Dream Realm so I can regain my strength. I can be anyone you want, take you anywhere you can imagine. I can --”

“Lyra!” Hades spoke her name loud and clear. “I command you to scatter to the four winds and never reassemble in any form.”

“Lyra, you are banished for all eternity from the Dream Realm,” Morpheus added.

“Please, my love. Don’t do this to me.”

“Go, now!” Hades roared.

Fury ignited within the succubus’s gaze. She shimmered, dimmed, then light erupted around her. Her skeletal features contorted as she absorbed the energy pulses. One corner of her mouth quirked in a cruel smile.

“She’s not dispersing.” Dora stepped forward, trepidation speeding her pulse. “She’s trying to escape.”

“She must obey. We know her name,” Morpheus argued.

“Put me in the cage.” Dora looked at Morpheus expectantly.

“No!” Kane moved between her and the succubus.

She has no power over me. Dora silently mouthed the words in case the thought failed to reach his mind. The protectiveness never left his gaze, but he stepped aside.

A subtle shift of Morpheus's eyes sent Dora into the cage. She wrapped her arms around Lyra's throat and trapped her arms against her bony sides. Lyra shrieked. The piercing sound stabbed into Dora's head. Her hold didn't waver.

"Together," Dora shouted over Lyra's shrill cry. "You must strike together."

Hades and Morpheus aligned their bodies and sent a continual stream of energy into the center of Lyra's chest. She bucked and writhed, pounding her head against Dora's chest. Dora ignored the painful impact and tightened her grip. Searing heat shot up her arms and sank into her chest. She couldn't let go. She must --

Lyra burst into a million bits of ash. Dora coughed and waved her hand in front of her face. Iron scraped, and Kane was at her side, hugging her to his chest and peppering kisses across her face.

"Are you all right?"

She smiled at the worry in his tone. "I think so."

He eased her away and examined her arms, the exposed skin on her chest, and the underside of her throat. Then he kissed her mouth.

Chuckling at Kane's effusion, Hades turned to face the others. "Let us away from this wretched place."

Dora never thought she would be relieved to see the Underworld. Taking a deep breath, she purged the stench of Tartarus from her lungs.

"What are your intentions for Dora?" Morpheus asked as Hades settled himself behind his desk.

"Why do you ask?"

Dora's pulse leapt, and her gaze darted to Kane. He'd asked for a few moments alone with Morpheus before they headed down to Tartarus. Had he made arrangements for them to be together? She really didn't want to stay in the Underworld. He smiled and slipped his arm around her shoulders.

“I would like to recruit her, if you will allow it.”

“You want me to be a Dream Warrior?” Dora couldn’t believe her ears.

“Why does this surprise you? You proved your worth as a warrior when you insisted I put you in that cage. If not for your courage and quick thinking, the succubus might well have escaped. I suspect Kane will be more than happy to teach you how to manipulate the Dream Realm.”

“You’ve never recruited a woman before,” Hades said.

“Then isn’t it time I did?”

Hades gazed at Dora for a long moment. “Mortals who are forced into the afterlife are granted one last request.”

She smiled into Kane’s eyes, tenderness making her heart flutter. “May I please be a Dream Warrior?”

Epilogue

Dora gazed across the white-capped waves at the spectacular sunset Kane had just created with the wave of his hand. He sat on a blanket he'd manifested on the sandy beach. The cool ocean breeze rippled his hair out behind him. He looked good enough to eat.

Turning back to the ocean, Dora hid her wicked smile. "I'll be able to do this some day."

He chuckled. "I've had a few *thousand* years to practice, but yes. The Dream Realm can be shaped into anything you like."

"I'd like to see Sheri again." She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Is that possible?"

"Sheri and Ryder are linked telepathically. It allows her to accompany him into the Dream Realm."

"I'm starting to understand what all that means."

He smiled and pulled her down to the blanket beside him. "It means you can spend as long as you like with your friend tomorrow or the next day or the next."

"Why the delay?"

"Because I'm not certain how soon I'll be willing to let you up for air." He eased her back, his arm supporting her neck. "We've only begun to explore the possibilities."

His mouth covered hers, and Dora parted her lips. She loved the way he kissed, bold, demanding, wild. Pushing her fingers into his hair, she angled her head so their mouths fit more naturally. His tongue surged and swirled.

Cool air touched her nipples and stirred the damp curls at the apex of her thighs. She tore her mouth away from his to confirm her suspicion. They were both naked.

“That’s a handy trick.”

He grinned. “You have a spectacular body. Do you mind my saying so?”

She laughed. “Not so long as you allow me to return the compliment. In fact, I believe I owe you more than a compliment.”

Pushing him over onto his back, she took his face between her hands and kissed his mouth. He cupped her breasts and returned her kiss with bold thrusts of his tongue. Their breaths mingled. Their heartbeats aligned. He was her match, the male half of her soul, and they had eternity to enjoy each other.

She nibbled her way along his jaw and explored his neck with her lips and her tongue. He tried to draw her back up to his mouth, but she continued her descent. If she could shape the Dream Realm into whatever she wanted...

Closing her eyes, she formed a detailed image within her mind. She pictured Kane with his hands bound above his head. He chuckled, and she opened her eyes. “I did it!” She beamed.

“Your first accomplishment as a Dream Warrior was to tie me up. I’ll make sure Morpheus records it in the chronicle.”

She knelt between his legs and splayed her hands over the distinct curves of his chest. “I should have bound you standing up, so I could enjoy both sides of you.”

“Let me know when you’ve had enough of this side, and I’ll be happy to turn over.”

“If you don’t resist at least a little, I won’t feel like I’ve accomplished anything.”

He laughed again. "You staked me to sand, sweetheart. If I resist they're going to pull right out."

"Fine. But you can't pull them loose until I give you permission."

"Yes, ma'am."

She bent his knees, moving his legs farther apart. Her hair fell forward as she bent over him. His abdominal muscles clenched. Closing her fingers around his shaft, she tested his control with teasing strokes and feathery kisses. She circled his flared tip with her tongue, while her hand pumped his entire length.

"Gods, woman, are you trying to kill me?"

"You're immortal."

His eyes narrowed, then squeezed shut as she took him deeply into her mouth. She cupped his balls with one hand while her lips formed a snug circle around his shaft. She swirled her tongue around his tip at the apex of each stroke. His thickness barely fit between her lips. How had she taken him into her body? She shivered at the thought, sucking firmly.

He pushed his fingers into her hair, and her gaze flew to his. The ropes were gone! He hadn't pulled the stakes free, he'd simply commanded them to disintegrate.

"My turn." He hooked his hands under her arms and pulled her up along his body.

His strength astonished her. He maneuvered her as if she weighed nothing. Settling her directly above his face, he cupped her bottom with both hands and pressed his mouth against her folds. His tongue traced her slit, rimmed her core, then flicked over her clit. Over and over he repeated the pattern. She squirmed against him, reveling in the sensations, but needing more than his teasing kiss.

She cupped her breasts, abandoned to the pleasure. His lips moved against her, and his tongue stabbed into her. Again and again he returned to her clit. He circled and she trembled, tension building with alarming speed. She didn't want to come until he was inside her, sharing the release.

“Wait,” she cried. “I want you...” He closed his lips around her clit and sucked until she cried out helplessly. Scalding pleasure erupted in her core, radiating out through her body.

He moved his hands to her waist and lifted her, sitting up as he laid her down across the blanket. “You do that so well.” His eyes gleamed with passion and tenderness. “Can you do it again?” Hooking his arms under her knees, he spread her thighs wide and found her opening.

“I’m certainly willing to try.”

Her body opened to his, welcoming him with moisture and heat. He filled her completely. She stroked his chest and his arms as he pulled back and drove deep. Her heart pounded in time to his strong thrusts. Without breaking rhythm with his hips, he leaned down and kissed her. She filled her lungs with his breath, then returned it to him, laden with her scent and her taste.

He raised his head and cupped her bottom, lifting her into each downward thrust. She cried out, overwhelmed by the sensations building within her. Hard, deep, he filled her again and again.

Tingling heat gathered low in her belly. She clutched his shoulders hard. Her inner muscles gripped him as the sensations unwound. He shuddered violently, a satisfied groan escaping his throat. The hot splash of his release sent her over the edge. She trembled and moaned as pleasure crashed over her.

He eased her legs to his hips and settled between her thighs, their bodies still fully joined. She brushed the hair away from his damp face. He chuckled and did the same.

Content and sleepy, she glanced at the colorful horizon. “Wasn’t the sun setting when we began?”

“It’s on a sort of loop.” He paused for a lingering kiss “As soon as it sinks below the waterline, it starts coming up again”

She laughed and wrapped her legs around his waist. “That seems to apply to all sorts of things.”

 THE END 

Cyndi Friberg

Cyndi has been a member of Romance Writers of America since 1999 and also belongs to two local chapters of RWA. She is the winner of multiple national contests, including The Molly and The Merritt. In 2003, she was chosen as a finalist in the prestigious Golden Heart, as well as winning the Jasmine with *Rebel Angels 1: Born of the Shadows*. After dabbling in freelance journalism and songwriting, she returned to her true passion: paranormal romance. Visit Cyndi on the Web at www.cyndifriberg.com, or email her at cyndi@cyndifriberg.com.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Desert Moon: Cael

by Alicia Sparks

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Desert Moon: Cael

“Do you come to me willingly?”

“Yes.”

“Do you understand that I own you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what that entails? That I shall not harm you, but that I do control you. You are mine: your body is mine, your soul is mine. Do you agree to this?”

“Yes.”

She had not yet looked at him. He needed to see her eyes, needed to see the honesty there. If she did not come to him freely, he would not have her. He had no room for a woman who did not wish to bend to his will.

“Look at me.” He tipped her chin, bringing her eyes to meet his. They glowed golden. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.” She licked her bottom lip as she spoke.

“Then tell me what it is you understand.”

“I am yours. You have brought me here to be your slave, to be yours. I shall obey you and honor you.”

“Do you sincerely mean that? If you don't, you shall be set free. I want a woman who is willing...”

“I am willing.”

“Then do not interrupt me again.” He let a slight smile curl his lips as he spoke. “Once more. Do you come to me willingly?”

“Yes. What is it you wish?”

“I wish for you to undress and serve me dinner. I wish to eat it from your naked body. Will you do that for me?”

“Yes.”

“What else will you do for me? What have they taught you? What skills do you possess?” He still had not released her chin and knew she wouldn't move until he did so.

“Whatever you want. I am yours.”

“Do you have no desires of your own? Tell me what you wish.”

“I wish to serve you, to please you, to bring you pleasure. That is my only purpose.”

“And what do you get in return?”

Her plump bottom lip refused to stay dry as her tongue darted out once more. “I get pleasure beyond any you could imagine.”

“For being my slave?”

“Yes.”

He moved his hand from her chin. “Then please me. Undress.”

He took a step back and watched as she moved. Her hands went to her blouse, which she slowly, torturously began to unbutton. One...two...three. Creamy flesh emerged from beneath the blue silk. As if undressing for a stranger were the most natural thing in the world, she tossed the blouse aside and stood there in her see-through undershirt, her nipples, pink and puckered, standing at attention.

He let out an audible moan before he could stop himself. Her hands went to the fabric, to lift it over her head, when he stopped her. “No. Leave it on.”

Obedying, she moved her fingers down to her long, willowy skirt. Bending forward, causing her breasts to spill forward, she pushed the skirt to her ankles, leaving a wisp of lace behind. The V-shaped outline of her pubic hair practically glowed beneath the white fabric. His cock grew hard as he imagined how it would feel to nestle in that foliage and sink into her depths.

"Take those off," he said, his voice catching in his throat.

When her fingers hooked into the sides of the lace and began sliding it down her legs, his throat went dry. Clearing it, trying to shake the cobwebs from his head and remember that he was the one in charge, he took another step backward, as if in retreat.

"Let me look at you."

She stood there, her hands at her sides, and as if she felt his desire, her eyes locked to his, the golden glow deepening.

"No. I want to see all of you."

She reached for her undershirt.

"Leave that on. I want you to turn around and bend over. Spread your legs for me so I can look at you."

* * * * *

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I haven't read sex scenes as erotic as these in a long time. Ms. Sparks has created a fascinating universe in her Desert Moon series, one that I hope to revisit very, very soon.

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