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# THE CHERISHED ONE

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## Chapter 1

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**I**t was pre-early morning, well before dawn, where he needed it to be, in the magnificent stillness of the night. The room was pitch-black, but it might as well have been lit like a stadium, as far as he was concerned. His eyes knew no deficit; he eagerly drank in every detail of the lusciously curved woman who was curled in the middle of their bed, even all these years as if she'd been seeking his non-existent heat and scent, as he sought hers every second he was conscious.

She was sound asleep; as well she should be, considering the activities of last evening. She slept in her favorite position, on her right side, right leg extended, left drawn up, pillow scrunched to within an inch of its life beneath her head, those long red curls – what had attracted him to her immediately, on sight so long ago, flowing out behind her as if she were flying through the air instead of safe in Morpheus' arms.

As always unable to resist, Dag reached out from where he stood, fully dressed, leaning over the bed that still radiated that special essence that was hers and hers alone, breathing deeply of it once last time and let one of those eager burnished curls claim

his finger, tightening around it with the same soft strength as she would, had she known what he was planning.

He let the errant lock fall, following its descent along the curve of her creamy, flawless backside until it became slightly less flawless where wondrous cheeks betrayed the loving discipline he had applied there hours before. They still wore the rosy red blush of his avid attentions – signs of his handprint as well as the shape of the hairbrush he'd used - and the tip of his index finger naturally sought their increased warmth.

Fawna stirred at his touch, as he should have known she would, and Dag stilled, unnaturally so, until she settled again, and his eyes settled where they had spent most of their time while she had been sleeping: those two seemingly innocuous dots on her neck, until he forced himself away from them. Fixating there wasn't going to change what had happened.

Or what had to happen.

One last sweep of their room, long ago reserved only for romance that only last night had been blazingly so, all the lavender scented candles - her favorite - had long since been extinguished, the beautiful antique oil lamps extinguished, the fresh roses he had bought well away from any flames and nearer to her, where they would naturally thrive and fill the air with that unmistakable scent.

Dag took a deep, entirely unnecessary breath. He'd made many exits in his life, said goodbye to his heart in very many different ways, but none as painful as this. He almost couldn't make himself do it, but he knew he had to. He'd allowed her to be hurt in a way that she had every right to expect to be protected from, and there was precious little he could have done about it. What use was he to her if he couldn't keep his enemies from threatening her like that? She could have been killed right in front of his eyes, exactly as he had killed another innocent soul. And what if he ended up destroying – yet again – that which he only sought to cherish?

## The Cherished One

He would not – could not – exist if that happened again.

He would eagerly embrace the sun rather than endanger a sliver of this – his – woman’s essence.

As if departing a great ruler, Daggar backed away from her, bowing somewhat, feeling he was able to give her only the slightest part of the true honor she was due, as a lady, as his woman, as he faded away from her.

For good.

For *her* good.

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FAWNA ROLLED AND STRETCHED, claiming much more of the bed than she knew was hers, but knowing he wasn’t going to be there by the sun she could feel was peeping through the lacy bedroom curtains. She had to give it to Dag. He wouldn’t let his handicap effect her decorating tastes in the least. She was all for blackout measures, so he would be more comfortable during the day, but he’d merely smiled that sometimes quite annoyingly beatific smile of his and assured her that he didn’t much miss the daytime any more, and that she was free to decorate any which way she liked.

Fawna had figured he might have come to regret that statement, considering that he spent a reasonable amount of his time in an extremely feminine environment, but he’d never said a word against her choices, so she’d let it be. She’d gone a bit crazy, even for herself, she had to admit, and the bedroom was a frilly girl’s romp. It had tickled her, at first, to see her monstrously male, testosterone oozing man lying in a room that reeked of pastel pinks and purples and delicate laces and flowers, but somehow nothing – but nothing – managed to dent his masculinity in the least. And she found that their room became a wonderful, sensual refuge – even when she was being spanked, which, particularly in the beginning of their relationship, had

been alarmingly frequent, and even later in their time together hadn't become nearly as occasional as she would say she would have preferred.

Something small exploded in a sneeze under the duvet, then rooted its way towards the warmth of the curve of her waist. Cookie, her somewhat asthmatic Chihuahua, who was not to be outdone by Teo, her pure white, bulimic, gay male cat, who promptly demanded to occupy – none too reticently – the other side. Cookie didn't like Dag at all, which Dag found somewhat surprising, since he had always been able to call all manner of canids. Apparently, no one had told Cookie that. Teo, however, adored him, an affection that Dag did his best to discourage, but his firm but gentle attempts at disaffection only seemed to make Teo love him just that that much more. Teo's unrequited love was a source of constant amusement to Fawna, and a thorn in Dag's side that he bore with his usual stoicism.

Fawna stretched again, a full body indulgence complete with a long, throaty moan that, if it had been a lesser quality apartment, might have awakened their neighbors - disturbing the animals and ignoring their protests. She was extremely careful not to rub her bottom against the silk sheets, having learned long ago that overnight was definitely not long enough to recover from one of Dag's spankings.

That man was going to be the death of her yet. She could see the headlines – “Death by Spanking”. Fawna wasn't at all sure whether it was the spanking that was going to kill her or the sex. Because last night he had broken one of his cardinal rules.

And rules – order – was extremely important to Dag, along with obedience, especially as pertained to Fawna. He'd always felt, since they'd met, that she didn't have nearly enough rules in her life, and she had long since learned to obey first and ask questions later. Although she'd certainly never admit it to him, she thought he was right. She was the doted upon only girl, and the youngest, and her family, much to her older brother's disgust,



had pretty much let her get away with murder. Her parents hadn't expected much from her in the way of behavior, beyond the basics of not being hauled home by the police or getting hooked on drugs.

She'd managed to avoid those pitfalls, along with unwanted pregnancy, and had basically been a good girl, but she'd definitely been a spoiled princess, and she wasn't much into changing that status. After all, it had certainly worked for her!

Then last night the spanking had been different somehow, and followed by something it had never been followed by before, due to his own rule: pleasure. He had long since decreed that, if she were going to be punished, then he wasn't going to reward her by making love to her ; not that he ever denied his own desire for her. Indeed, spanking her made him absolutely rock hard, although she knew there was a definite dichotomy at work there, because she knew that he detested hurting her. But if she was over his lap when he punished her, which was a favorite position for the both of them for the physical closeness, his arousal was undeniable as it poked uncomfortably into her stomach the entire time.

So, she often found herself being made love to after a spanking, lying on her recently singed bottom, feeling everything that she always felt when he loved her – his strong, sure hands on the parts of her that only he had access to - rubbing and squeezing, pinching just slightly, rasping her open every time as if it were her first, making her gasp at his size, her body never quite learning to accommodate him easily as he stroked himself up against her over and over again - only he made very sure that it never came to a culmination for her. And she knew that wasn't easy, since she was so connected to him that his mere voice – in or out of her head – could set her off, and being spanked – as awful as it was, and it definitely was, especially at the time – made her terribly buttery, as he called it, in and of itself.

He would tweak and suckle at her nipples, deep kiss her for

long moments, even taste of the very heart of her before possessing her, but would very carefully steer away from the exact movements that he knew would afford her the release she would sometimes literally beg for, while availing himself of his own explosive culmination. Then he would tuck her against him, spoon fashion, her seared rear pressed back against his now flagging manhood, still throbbing with need of him, only to remain sorely unsatisfied until he deemed she might find release.

Last night was different, though, in more ways than she could put into words. He had taken her out to her favorite little restaurant – a hole in the wall place that you didn't have to dress up for but she did, purely to see the look of possession in his eyes when she finally made it out of the smallish dressing room slash punishment room just off their master bedroom in a clingy silk and lace sheath that loved every curve she owned. Small gold, diamond and pink sapphire droplets hung from her ears, matching the droplet that nestled at the top of her cleavage, where she knew his tongue watered to be.

She'd been surprised when he'd offered to take her out. He was supposed to be furious with her. Why wasn't he lining up implements and telling her she'd better hope she had enough pillows to last her, because she wasn't going to be sitting comfortably for quite some time? That was what she'd come to expect from Dag. He almost never yelled at her. Well, he had last night, but that had been the extenuating circumstances that she would have sworn would have earned her a doozy of a punishment. He rarely needed to yell, and considered it to be a considerable loss of control, especially in front of a woman. She could count on one hand the number of times she'd heard him raise his voice. He didn't need to, dammit. All he needed to do was reach for the hairbrush he kept on the nightstand.

Or, hell, all he needed to do was *look* like he was going to reach for that blasted hairbrush. Or the paddle. Or the tawse. Or the cane. Or the crop. Sometimes she felt like the cat with the

spray bottle of water they kept so that he wouldn't claw the curtains! But she couldn't help it – his spankings hurt, even if he chose to use no implement at all but his formidable hand!

But there he was, looking practically illegally gorgeous in a pair of worn jeans that clung to all the right parts of him; he had a phenomenal butt that most men lacked any part of, she'd noticed, so that his jeans in the back didn't just drop from the waistband to his legs, they molded to those wonderful curves, making her palms itch to grab and squeeze them as she did when she was beneath him in their bed. He favored black T-shirts and jackets, and that was exactly what he was wearing. Fawna didn't give a damn. He could have been wearing the proverbial potato sack, for all she cared. She washed his clothes for him, and deliberately ran his all cotton t shirts through a hot wash and then the dryer on high heat, which shrank them, so that they strained nicely over all of those hard won chest and arm muscles.

Fawna was all for eye candy, and Dag was the very definition of the word. She even forgave him for being a blonde. She'd always thought that blondes weren't her type, but here he was to prove her very, very wrong.

The Roma was a family run place that knew them well enough to bring her a menu and Dag a glass of good red wine, knowing he wasn't going to be ordering anything. He could eat – and would eat, if she wanted him to – but she'd banned that idea as soon as she found out that it caused him to have to void the food later. She wasn't about to be the cause of someone having to throw up; it just went against her grain to support bulimia, even for his kind, when she knew it did him absolutely no harm whatsoever.

He was being so secretive, so... mysterious that it was in the back of her mind that he might propose, although she knew that they had already decided that marriage really wasn't for them. And she was fine with that. Besides the fact women supposedly were no longer pressured by human society to grow up and get

married, their own particular social backgrounds forbid what would still be considered a mixed marriage, and one that could possibly end in her death.

Nothing like being dead to put a damper on a marriage, Fawna thought to herself as she watched the suburbs flow by outside the window of his Jag.

She'd had her usual – a baby antipasto salad with their just right oil and vinegar dressing, cheesy garlic bread, and a meaty braciola with homemade angel hair pasta on the side.

Dag loved watching her eat. She wasn't like a lot of the women he'd dated, in more ways than one. She enjoyed eating, and didn't hide that fact. How she managed to stay so slim, he'd never know, but she did. It had been a very long time since he'd enjoyed a meal, but he enjoyed eating vicariously through her. She was a sensual woman, and her taste buds were definitely a part of that package. Her moans when she was indulging that side of herself were nearly as rhapsodic as those when he was pressing her home to ecstasy within the confines of their bed.

She was just tucking into the tender layers of stuffed beef when she stopped and looked him straight in the eye. "So why haven't you taken me to task for last night?"

In some ways, she had grown to hate that half smile of his. She knew she amused him on a lot of levels, and that fact annoyed her on a lot of her own levels.

He took a swallow of his wine, taking his time answering as always. He would not be budged, and sometimes that drove her crazy. "I shall, in my own time."

Fawna sighed. Of course. His tone said she should have known better than to ask, and that she was probably going to regret having done so later. But dinner – and his presence across from her – was enough of a distraction, for the moment. Dear God, how had she managed to rate even a moment of his attention? Despite the fact he was slightly paler than he probably

should have been, he was drop dead gorgeous, and she still wondered at her luck that he'd deigned to be with her.

After all, she really wasn't anything special.

"I should spank you right here and now for even thinking that, *petite*."

She knew he'd read her mind, but spoken those words out loud in response in a voice he hadn't bothered to tone down in the least. Dag wasn't the slightest concerned with modern conventions about not correcting one's woman. To him, that was the most natural thing in the world to do. But Fawna frowned and sat forward uneasily in her chair, looking around them as if he'd shouted his intentions from a bullhorn. She could feel the blush creeping up to her hairline, knowing that, an hour or so from now, the color of her bottom was more than going to match that of her face. "Stop that."

He managed to look both slightly embarrassed and yet completely unashamed at the same time, much unhappier at having been caught delving into her mind – which he'd grudgingly promised her he would only do in emergency situations – than at having noticed that she was running herself down, which he flatly refused to permit. To her, he looked much more like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar than a dangerously lethal man known to kill first and ask questions later. Of course, she knew she was the only person alive who was privileged to know the other, less lethal side of him.

And he was the only person alive to know all sides of her. Not even her mother – with whom she was extremely close – or her close group of female friends knew her quite as well as Dag did, and she was glad and proud of that fact.

As always, she stopped eating when there was more than enough for lunch and dinner tomorrow; The Roma's portions were notoriously enormous, and she was the only one who was going to be noshing on them, which was quite all right with her.

It meant she wasn't going to have to cook for another couple of days.

He had been watching her delicate precision as she made her way through the meal, as if he was going to devour her himself. Seeing she was done, he threw several large bills onto the table, literally growling, "Let's go," as his hand clamped down on her wrist and she fell into place behind him. Well, no proposal in the restaurant. She'd been dead wrong about that.

They'd been together long enough, though, that he automatically shortened his stride so that she could easily keep up with him without danger of breaking an ankle on the stiletto heels she preferred. Although he adored what they did for those gorgeous stems of hers, he'd told her long ago she didn't have to wear them for him. Fawna had shot back that she didn't give a damn whether or not he liked them – she wore them because she loved how they looked, too hell with him. She hadn't said that she also liked that they gave her a six inch height advantage that she desperately needed with him. He towered over her, and she hated that. If she could, she'd wear them all the time. One of the things he'd learned during their time together was one of the worst punishments he could give her that wasn't in the least physical was to ban her from wearing anything but flats. She detested having to look up at him all the time, and once, in the middle of an argument during which, of course, she had become much more heated than he, she had actually gone and gotten a chair to stand on, so that she could look down on him for a change.

It hadn't had quite the effect she'd hoped for – making him dissolve into laughter and effectively end the argument just when she'd been lining up all her arguments – so she hadn't tried to again. Instead, she made him sit down, where at least their height difference was a little less exaggerated.

Despite their hurried departure, he made an impromptu stop at a florist and bought her a dozen of her favorite lavender roses, furthering her thoughts that she might be proposed to this

evening, perhaps after she was spanked. Fawna wrinkled her nose. That wouldn't be right. If he spanked her, he wouldn't make love to her, by his own damned rule. If he proposed, she damned well wanted him to claim her right afterwards. She'd have to see what she could do about getting him to change his mind, if what she thought was going to happen happened.

And, if it didn't, she was fine, too. They'd been together for a while, and she knew the impediments to what she was thinking as well as he did. But he was acting strangely tonight, and, considering what had happened last night between himself, her big brother Dain, and Maximilian, who was at least as dangerous and powerful a vampire as Dag was, if not more so, she supposed it could be nearly anything.

He and Max had been enemies for centuries, all over a woman.

But what she'd thought was going to happen once they got home, didn't. At least, not the more pleasant thought. Instead, once he'd very carefully put everything in its place, and she had grown complacent and was updating her Facebook page with tales of their wonderful meal and pictures of her gorgeous flowers, she found herself being led into their bedroom by the unforgiving circle of his thumb linked with his third finger, encircled, as it was, around her slender wrist.

She found herself standing in front of him as he sat on the end of their bed. Calling it their bed was somewhat of a misnomer, though. It was her bed. He occupied it with her, held her while she slumbered, but he usually slept alone... elsewhere. She'd seen where his coffin was, although it had taken him nearly five years to trust her with that information. Five years during which she did her best not to feel insulted that it had taken him so long, because it was a blink of an eye, as far as he was concerned, and she could understand his reticence at revealing that kind of information, especially considering her family background.

Dag took both of her hands in his, in a way he hadn't before, kissing each of them. "I thought – I thought I was going to lose you last night, you know." He caught her eyes just before they darted away and he watched that gorgeous pink stain her first set of cheeks.

She heard – and felt – the unfamiliar hesitation in his voice, and in his heart, reaching out to tilt his chin up, forcing him, when no being in existence could have, to look up at her with his eyes blood red with unshed tears.

Shocked down to the soles of her feet, she wasn't given the time to consider what she'd seen. Instead, he had the sheath of a dress in an uncharacteristic heap on the floor, and her bottom arched over his lap in record time, the barely there scraps of lace she called panties serving as decoration atop of the expensive pile of dress material.