

# Me and My Shadow

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## Chapter One

“Off with her head!”

I looked over my laptop screen at the man who stood in the center of the sitting room, pointing with a fine dramatic flair at a woman in the doorway.

“I demand that you punish that...that...dragon for insubordination!”

“Oh, yeah, like *that’s* gonna happen,” a voice muttered from the floor.

Magoth narrowed his eyes on the dog laying in a patch of sunlight, reading through a stack of near-pornographic graphic novels. “I have not given you permission to speak in my presence, demon.”

“Here’s a news flash for you—you’re not a prince any more, so I can say what I like. Right, May?”

I was about to nod, but thought better of giving the demon in doggy form *carte blanche* to do as it willed. My experience with Jim might not have been great, but it had been sufficient to give me pause. “No, you can say what Aisling told you was allowable to say when she sent you to stay with us. And if I recall, the words, ‘Don’t lip off to anyone, for any reason, any time, ever,’ were included in her instructions.”

Jim, whose full demon name of Effrijim was deemed too girly by its owner to be used in anything but formal ceremonies, grinned, not an easy task considering it bore the form of a large, shaggy black Newfoundland dog. “Actually, I think she said if I pissed you off, she’d banish me to the Akasha until the baby was old enough to vote, but everyone knows doppelgangers don’t get pissy easily, so it’s all copacetic.”

“Were we in Abaddon at this moment,” Magoth told the demon, the words coming out as a growl, “you would be on your belly begging for my mercy. A quality that I don’t possess, so it would be a useless gesture, nonetheless I would allow you to continue begging, while writhing in torment so great you would plead for destruction, until such time as I grew tired of your screams of absolute, utter, endless agony.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jim said, turning back to its graphic novel. “Been there, done that, have the ‘My demon lord torments me for fun’ t-shirt.”

Magoth puffed himself up until I thought he was going to explode. I considered whether the cleaning bill would be worth the entertainment value to be found therein, but decided against it. “What’s the problem, Maata?” I asked instead, shifting my gaze to the woman who stood at the door, watching us with noticeable amusement in her silver eyes.

She held onto a placid expression. “Magoth—”

“Prince of Abaddon Magoth, to you, dragon,” the man in question said. “Or Lord Magoth. Or even, His Unholy Highness Magoth.”

“Magoth,” Maata repeated, “Tried to get into the basement. *Again.*”

I raised one eyebrow at the exiled demon lord, former silent film star, and the bearer of a (literally) cursed penis as he stormed around the room in impotent rage. Being born an incredibly handsome man in possession of sultry looks that had women throwing away their better judgments (and sometimes souls) over the centuries, Magoth had no reason to adopt a form other than his natural one. Not, I noted silently to myself, that he could now if he wanted.

“You see how I am treated? This is intolerable, wife! I insist that you lesson this minion! I will not be told by a mere slave what I may or may not do! She threatened me with violence! *Me!* She deserves a lengthy and inventive punishment for daring to treat me in such an insupportable manner!”

“It was my fault. He used my bathroom break to get past me to the entrance of the lair,” Maata said, apology rich in her voice. “He won’t do so again.”

“It was the merest of coincidences that I was in the basement at the exact moment the slave was out of the room,” Magoth sniffed, adopting a self-righteous expression that I didn’t for one moment buy.

“You sneaked past me when I was in the bathroom,” Maata accused.

“I am a demon lord! I do not sneak!” he said, outraged.

“One,” I said, ticking it off on a finger, “You’re no longer a demon lord. At least not technically. Two, Maata is one of Gabriel’s elite guards, not a slave, and you will treat her with the respect due her. And three, I’m not your wife, so stop calling me that.”

“You’re my consort,” he insisted, his eyes narrowing on me.

“You de-consorted me when you found out you’d been kicked out of Abaddon, remember?”

“I spoke in the heat of the moment. You know full well that I have not conducted divorce proceedings. Until it pleases me to remove you from that position…” he smiled, and I thanked my stars that we weren’t in Abaddon, or I might have lost a few bits of my soul to that smile. “...or until you die, you will remain my consort.”

“Thank you for that reiteration of demon lord protocol.” Inside me, deep inside my chest, the shard of the dragon heart that I bore stirred, triggered as always by any threat or strong emotion. I clamped down hard on it, practicing the control I’d been working so hard to wield. I smiled at Gabriel’s bodyguard. “Thanks, Maata, I’ll take care of this.”

“Better you than me,” she answered with a wry smile as she left.

“You want me to rough him up a little?” Jim asked, rising and walking slowly toward Magoth. “I’d go straight for his noogies, but that curse gives me the willies. Ha! Willies! Get it?”

“Go ahead and try,” Magoth said, his eyes glittering with an unholy light.

Jim paused, shooting me a worried look. “You said he doesn’t have any powers here, right?”

“He’s without about ninety-five percent of his power, yes,” I answered.

Jim froze. “Oh, man! I thought you said *all* of his power was gone!”

“It is. Well, all but about five percent, as best as we can figure.”

“Five percent? Geez, May! We’ve got to have a little talk about the difference of a demon lord without any power, and one with enough to squash flat a sixth class demon!”

Magoth smiled again. A little black tendril of power snapped at Jim.

The demon yelped and backed toward the door. “Fires of Abaddon, can’t you take a joke? I was just funning, your imperial dark and twisted majesty. Er...I think Hart to Hart is on that retro TV show channel. You know how I love me some Stephanie Powers. Catch ya later, your eminence of unholy darkness.”

I gave Magoth my full consideration as the door shut behind Jim. It was true that Gabriel and I, over the last six weeks that Magoth had lived with us, determined that he had retained only a tiny fraction of his powers, but he hadn’t spent a couple of millennia being a prince of Abaddon without learning a few tricks.

“You know the basement and areas below are off limits until the workmen are done, Magoth. We explained that to you when they started building the lair.”

His expression shifted from outrage to sullen discontent. “As the mortals say, you are not the boss of me.”

“Perhaps not, but you are here on sufferance, a fact I am obliged to point out yet again. Irritating Gabriel by attempting to force your way into his lair is going to do nothing but give him due cause to boot your butt out into the street.”

He oiled his way around the desk at which I sat, trailing a finger up my arm as he moved behind me. I fought the urge to shiver, his touch so cold it leached all the heat from the air around me. “Ah, but you wouldn’t allow your scaly boyfriend to do that, would you, my sweet, sweet May?” He brushed a quick, frigid kiss on the back of my neck. Beneath the desk, my hands tightened into fists, pain pricking my palms. I knew without looking that my fingers had changed into long, scarlet talons. The dragon shard urged me to shift, tempting me with mental visions of Magoth lying dead on the floor at my feet.

I was sorely tempted to give in to the shard, but I reminded myself that once I gave myself up to it, there would be no going back. Much as I loved Gabriel, as happy as I was being the mate to a powerful—not to mention witty, urbane, and incredibly sexy—wyvern, I did not want to spend the rest of eternity as a dragon.

“You’ve been warned about touching me,” I managed to stay in a neutral voice. The dragon shard fought hard to dominate me, but I hadn’t survived as Magoth’s slave for almost a hundred years without learning how to control my emotions.

His cold breath touched my neck for a moment longer before wisdom evidently got the better of him. He pushed aside my laptop and lay on top of the desk in a seductive pose, one hand languidly gesturing toward his body. “You want me.”

“I want Gabriel,” I said, struggling inwardly as the dragon shard once again threatened to overwhelm me.

He smiled again, but this was a smile of seduction, not promised retribution. “Your dragon may satisfy your doppelganger needs, but the animal within you wants me, sweet May. I can feel it.”

“I am not an animal,” I said, my voice taking on a rough tone. I cleared my throat, determined to keep my usual placid demeanor with him, no matter how much he might provoke me.

He leaned forward slightly, his eyes half-lidded. The analytical side of my mind recognized the signs—heaven knew I’d been the recipient of his seduction attempts often enough. If I just let him work himself through the worst of it, eventually I’d be able to distract him with some other interesting mental tidbit. Magoth was always attracted by shiny things, be it tangible or intangible.

“Tell me you don’t feel it, as well,” he said, his gaze attempting to draw me in to the seduction. He didn’t have enough power to put a thrall on me—a full fledged sexual enchantment of sorts—so it was simply a matter of distracting him with a suitably interesting conversational offering.

To my surprise, shock, and utter horror, instead of passing along a benign bit of Abaddon gossip, I found myself leaning forward until my lips brushed his.

The dragon shard swamped me with emotions, hot and foreign, foremost of which was a burning desire to mate with him.

“No,” I gasped, shoving myself away from the desk, away from Magoth. Horror crept up my flesh. Never once since I’d met Gabriel had I considered Magoth with anything but loathing and irritation. What was going on that I was now responding to him?

I pulled up a mental picture of the man I loved with all my heart, remembered the warm latte-colored brown skin, the dimples that made my knees go weak, the flash of mercurial silver eyes, the fires he alone stirred in me, making me burn for him. *Only* for him.

I stamped out the tiny little flame that appeared on the floor.

“You see? The beast you bear says yes, sweet one. Give in to it. Let me show you what exquisite pleasure I can bring you.”

I had to force my legs to back up. The need was great in me to do just what he offered, so great it almost had me casting common sense to the wind. “It’s not a beast. It’s one fifth of the dragon heart, and it does not rule me. You can stop trying to seduce me because it simply won’t work. And must I remind you what Gabriel said he’d do to you the last time he caught you trying to make love to me?”

“I don’t make love. I make ecstasy,” he answered, but his hands twitched protectively toward his groin before he stopped them. “No matter how much you protest, my adorable one, the fact remains that we both know the honeymoon with your dragon is over, and it’s me you truly want.” He slid off the desk and stalked toward me.

“Stop trying to get a look at Gabriel’s lair, stop getting in Maata’s way, and stop trying to seduce me,” I said, backing toward the door. I jerked it open and was through it before he could answer, although the sound of his mocking laughter followed me as I raced down the hall to the stairs that led down to the basement.

Maata was sitting on a chair at the bottom of the stairs, reading a book. She glanced up as I leaped down the last couple of stairs, her eyebrows going up at the sight of my flushed face. Since I was normally a calm, possessed person, I knew she recognized signs that the shard was driving me to distraction.

“Where is he?” I asked.

She knew exactly who I was talking about. “Examining the lock. They got the door up.”

“Thanks.” I didn’t wait to chat, just bolted for the hole that was cut into the cement floor, clattering down the metal ladder set into the wall until I reached the rocky bottom. Lights hung drunkenly from the ceiling, a dank, earthy smell heavy in the air. It wasn’t surprising, given that the workman had just excavated this subterranean lair over the last month, digging deep into the earth to create a series of tomb-like passages that ended in a large room where Gabriel would keep his most precious items.

Two guards appeared as I jumped the last few feet to the earth and stone floor. They smiled as I fled past, scattering greetings behind me as I dodged another three silver dragons who were lounging around on various packing crates.

My unseemly haste was cause for amusement, I knew, but none of that mattered at the moment. Gabriel’s people—now mine—might be amused by the fact that I couldn’t control the dragon shard, but they understood well what drove me.

Another metal ladder down to a lower, almost oppressively deep level, and the entrance of the lair rose before me. The door was metal, such as those found on large bank vaults, ponderously heavy, impervious to explosives and other devices intended on breaching its thickness. Three high-tech locks and a retina scanner kept even the most proficient of safecrackers at bay. The spells that would be woven into the door would come later, I knew, ensuring safety from those beings who possessed skills beyond those of the mortal world.

I skidded to a stop at the door, only seeing one dragon present.

“Gabriel?” I asked Tipene, the second of Gabriel’s elite guard.

He tipped his head toward the door. “They’re testing the security system.”

I considered whether or not I would be able to last the ten minutes or so it would take before Gabriel and the security experts would emerge. I knew the answer even as I leaned in to allow the retina scanner to examine my eyes before moving directly in front of the door, my eyes on the lock.

Tipene watched me with interest as I shook out my hands, trying desperately to clear mind enough so I could “talk” to the lock.

“I’ve never understood why doppelgangers can do that,” he commented as I laid my hands on the lock, closing my eyes to concentrate.

“I have no idea, either, I’m just grateful I can do it.”

“I don’t think you’re going to have much luck. This is a MacGyver 512 titanium carbon magnetic electron lock, calibrated on the atomic level. It’s absolutely top of the line, not even released to the public yet. I know you can open most locks, but I doubt if even you will be able to get through it, May.”

“We’ll see.” I persuaded the lock to open a few of its secrets up to me, probing its depths, noting with interest just how intricate and well-made it was. Most locks allowed me to open them with nothing but a token resistance, but this one was different. It didn’t respond at all to the usual persuasions, making me resort to brute strength. As I worked my way through the many levels of the lock, I made a mental note to tell Gabriel that there were some cases where over-design was not to the good.

The last of the tumblers finally gave way under the force of my will, allowing the steel rods to withdraw smoothly into the body of the lock. I flung a quick smile at Tipene goggling when I jerked the door open.

“How—” he started to say, but I didn’t wait around to gloat.

At the sound of the door opening, the three men who stood in the vault consulting a clipboard turned to look at me.

I ignored two of them, flinging myself on the third.

“Little bird!” Gabriel’s voice, arms, and presence wrapped themselves around me, making me feel as if I’d come home after a long journey.

With blatant disregard for both dragon etiquette and mortal manners, I kissed him, needing the reassurance that only he could provide me.

“I don’t believe it,” one of the two men said as I dug my fingers into Gabriel’s soft dreadlocks, tugging on them to make him give me what I wanted. “She didn’t just open that lock. It’s impossible. It’s just impossible. No one can open that lock. Maybe we didn’t close it properly...”

“Fire,” I whispered into Gabriel’s mouth.

His dragon fire spun through me, setting me ablaze with his molten heat.

“It was closed,” the second man said, censure in his voice. “And as you can see by the fact that the silver mate is right here, I think it’s all too clear that the lock is not as impossible to defeat as your company has claimed. If I’ve told one dragon, I’ve told a hundred—the best security system in the world won’t do any good so long as the door is easily breached.”

“My locks are not easily breached,” the first man snarled. “This has to be an anomaly.”

“What’s wrong?” Gabriel asked, finally disengaging his tongue from mine.

“We have got to get rid of Magoth.” I didn’t want to say more in front of the other men. Gabriel trusted them to construct his lair, but neither one of them were dragons, and I wasn’t sure how far his trust went.

“Hey, May, just thought you’d like to know that Magoth found your wallet again, and is on the phone with your MasterCard in his hand. Hey, Gabe, how they hangin’? Oooh. Nice lair. Is that a MacGyver 512 you got there? Drake has one on order.” Jim stepped around the two security experts and cast an interested eye around at the work in progress.

“István dropped him off a couple of days early,” I explained to Gabriel’s surprised expression. “Evidently Drake feels that since Aisling’s due date has come and passed, everyone would be more comfortable without Jim making references to her exploding like an overripe peach.”

“The word was actually pimple, but yeah, Drake threatened to chop me up into demon chow if I didn’t get out of the way,” Jim said with absolute nonchalance. “But it’s all good, because Ash made May my temporary boss while she’s busy popping out that baby, and May loves me. Right, May?”

Gabriel’s quicksilver eyes flashed from the two men, now arguing over the relative merits of wards versus banes (the latter being a weakish sort of curse that was nonetheless extremely powerful, and very difficult to break). “What has Magoth done now?”

“We just have to get rid of him,” I said in a low voice, hoping he could read the message in my eyes. “Immediately.”

“Right May?” Jim repeated, a little more forcefully. “Ya love me, right? I’m da man?”

Gabriel examined my face. “Has he touched you—”

I sighed, holding up my hand. Rather than normal slightly freckled fingers, it was made up of long, elegant silver digits tipped with scarlet claws. “The dragon shard isn’t working correctly. It seems to be confused. And the sooner Magoth is gone, the sooner I can straighten it out.”

“Who’s your daddy? That’s right, incredibly handsome, and manly in a furry sort of way Jim is! I’m all yours, sweet cheeks, duly authorized by Ash to submit to your every whim and desire, especially the ones that involve giving me food and belly scratches.”

“You don’t mean…” Gabriel’s eyes opened wide.

I nodded.

“I’ll kill him.”

The words were spoken softly, and in Gabriel’s normal velvety tones, but the underlying threat was so great it made my blood grow cold.

“Whoa, now! No offense intended,” Jim said, backing away. “If you don’t want May giving me belly scratches, I can get them elsewhere. Word of advice, though, Gabe—you may wanna think about switching to decaf.”

“You can’t,” I said sadly, the dragon shard, content at having stirred things up, subsiding into silence as reason returned to me. “He’s still immortal, and there’s a chance we can unload him back into Abaddon.”

A thin little curl of smoke escaped his nose. For some reason, that always charmed me. I leaned in to give him a little lip nibble and kiss.

“Oh, yeah, now that’s what I’m talkin’ about,” Jim said from the foot of the metal ladder.

I shot the demon a glare, and pointed. “Leave!”

“I was just—”

“Leave!” I ordered again. “Go tell Magoth if he orders just one more item from that high end sex shop, I’ll stick his twelve inch glow in the dark spiked dildo where the sun don’t shine.”

Jim gave me a wounded look before it obeyed my command. “And I thought you were going to be fun. You’ve been hanging around Aisling too much, you really have.”

“Come in here,” Gabriel said, pulling me deeper into the coolness of the semi-finished lair. Steel and iron-lined to minimize the effectiveness of any magical attacks against it, the lair resembled a small wine vault, with long, gleaming shelves waiting for the placement of treasure he held in England. “Are you sure, little bird? You were not thinking of me, and the shard reacted to that?”

I smiled and kissed the tip of his nose. “I like the fact that you don’t for one moment think I really was attracted to Magoth.”

“Tch.” He made a dismissive gesture. “You love only me. I know that you could never be attracted to him.”

I didn’t enlighten him to the fact that Magoth had, previous to my meeting Gabriel, come very close to seducing me. “Much as thinking about you does stir the dragon inside me, in this case, it wasn’t due to that. And yet, I don’t think it was really reacting to him, either. It was if…” I paused, trying to sort through the unfamiliar emotions to form them into some semblance of sense. “It was as if the shard was reacting to what he represented—a dark, dangerous power. I’ve never felt like that around Magoth before, so I can only assume that for some reason, the shard is suddenly wanting power.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Gabriel said, shaking his head so his shoulder-length dreadlocks trembled. “The shards of the dragon heart hold power themselves. They would not seek more.”

“It doesn’t make sense to me, either. I’m just telling you what it felt like, and that I’d really like to see the last of Magoth. Maybe I should send Bael another e-mail—”

“No.” Gabriel leaned forward and kissed me swiftly, his lips demanding and aggressive. “I would prefer you not becoming involved with Abaddon.”

“I’m consort to an ex-prince of Abaddon,” I pointed out gently, touching the frown between his brows. “I don’t see how much more involved I can become. When he kicked Magoth out of Abaddon, Bael said he’d finalize Magoth’s expulsion in two months, and that deadline is almost upon us. Perhaps I could prompt Bael into reinstating Magoth. I can live with being his servant, Gabriel, but I can’t live with myself if the shard makes me do something we’ll all regret.”

“We cannot remove the shard from you without bringing them together to reform the dragon heart,” he said, his voice rich with distress. He touched my cheek, gently pushing tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “And you cannot do that without having a proper lair in which to do so. The shards are the most valuable relics of dragonkin, little bird.”

“I know.” I leaned into his palm for a moment, trying to remember what it felt like to just love him without the distraction of the shard trying to force me into a dragon state.

“Once the lair is functional, then we can go about locating the last shard, and the ceremony can commence to withdraw the one you bear—”

“Hey, May? There’s someone at the door for you.”

Jim’s voice interrupted Gabriel, causing us both to turn and glare at the furry demon.

“Jim, I realize that Aisling allows you great freedom, but you are interrupting a private conversation. Frankly, I don’t care who—”

“I think you’re going to want to see this guy,” Jim said with a knowing look.

I frowned. “See who?”

“That thief taker who nailed your ass and dragged you to the committee.”

“Savian?” I asked, the sudden memory of the charming, if more than a little roguish, Englishman coming immediately to mind. “What’s he doing here?”

“Dying,” Jim said succinctly.