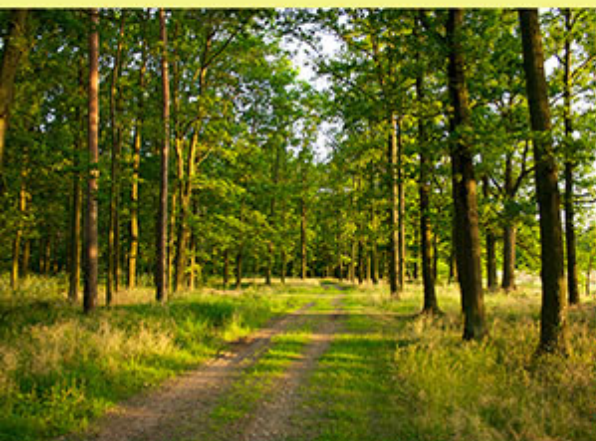


# LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

## OBSIDIAN

# Rory Ni Coileain

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## OBSIDIAN

**By Rory Ni Coileain**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# OBSIDIAN

By Rory Ni Coileain

## Photo Description

A man in the process of changing to a snake, or a snake in the process of changing into a man.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I cry out in pain as my body changes. The muscular power of my body expands and my scales slide off my torso, revealing flesh. What's happening to me? I don't know who I am, or why I can smell the heat coming from the man carrying my limp body over his shoulders. He's strong for such a small being. He cares for me, washing sweat off my brow while the rest of my body changes. Now, I am part of the human world and I need to find out why. But this man, this beautiful man who rescued me from the forest floor touches me sweetly, and I know he is mine.*

*Sincerely,*

*M.E. Sanford*

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy

**Tags:** mythical creatures, first time, fated mates, shifter non wolf/cat, flight/escape

**Content Warnings:** None (well, snakes...)

**Word Count:** 8,444

# OBSIDIAN

**By Rory Ni Coileain**

Naqxo eased himself out of the tangle of the female's coils, his bronze and gold and emerald gliding along her lapis and amethyst and coral. He moved carefully, as he had no wish to disturb the sated female; and slowly, for it was cool even in the shelter of the female's *mlji*, and as restless as he was, he was yet sluggish.

He emerged from the *mlji* into the dappled light of early morning. This female was young, as Lamiae reckoned age, and made her den near the outskirts of the ruined city, where only the magic of the Eldresses kept the forest at bay. The air was cool, and Naqxo's flickering tongue caught the taste of mist rising from the river to the west.

He wound his way slowly among fallen stones, through what remained of the foundations of ancient human habitations, toward the high place at the center of the city. In these early morning hours, the plaza was his, its warmth his privilege alone. As the sole male of his generation, and the only father of the next, he was indulged in this way. Cherished, even revered.

For now.

Naqxo had dreamed, as he lay entwined with the female. Even human children knew that Lamiae were the Serpents Who Blinked... but they were also the Serpents Who Dreamed, and perhaps not even the Mated among the humans knew that secret.

Waking, Naqxo's dreams clung to him like spider-silk, making his skin twitch and ripple as he poured like water over the ancient stones. Warmth, Sunlight, basking, these would restore him, banish the dreams.

At last the terraced steps of the plaza rose before him, pushing up out of earth and broken stone almost as the builders had crafted them millennia ago. Sinuously, he wound his way up the crumbled stairs, relishing the roughness of the tumbled stone against his skin; he could already taste the warmth of the high plaza, its promise of mindless peace.

At last he eased himself onto the plaza. Sun and stone, each offered their heat to his restless body; he rippled over the weathered stone, seeking every bit

of its stored Sunlight, before coiling at last on his favorite ledge to face the climbing Sun. Here, at last, he could release his dreams, and the fears of the night, into the forgiving warmth of the Sun.

*The forest floor is alive with the brilliant scales of Lamiae. An escort, a guard of honor, and at their center one who is about to shed her skin for the first time. I watch them go, from this very place. I have no place at this ritual, they tell me, as kindly as they may; it is for females only. Females and their Mated human males. And the existence of Lamia males is a secret kept close by our kind; my size would give me away, they say. My size and my color.*

*But I know where they are going. I have had this dream before. Swiftly they will escort the female, already in the throes of her first Change, to a place special-built by the humans of the city on the river. Lamiae pouring like a scaled river through the forest. A Lamia is only vulnerable in human form. If the Change overtakes this one before she reaches safety, and without aid to help her remember herself, she will surely die.*

*A human male will await her. Perhaps he will know fear, as hundreds of my kin spill into the Changing arena to surround him. But perhaps not. There is a Mated caste among the humans, males with eyes obsidian like ours; they know from birth that one day they will feel the call to the arena, to join with a Lamia. And, perhaps, to be marked as her chosen, to share her immortality.*

*The females will surround the one who Changes. This I cannot see in my dream, cannot imagine the sight of the snake's skin falling away, slowly revealing a human female. Almost human. Human enough to the eye, and human enough for the male who waits.*

*She will be frightened. With the shedding of her skin, she will shed all memory of what she is. Only her sisters around her will remind her of her true self. Until the male fills her, takes her. The pleasure he gives her will restore her memories, and his seed within her will be her food, the only food a Lamia requires. Enough to sustain her until her next Change.*

*My dream-vision darkens; a shadow falls between me and the Sun. I shiver. The shadow, too, I know.*

*"This is not for you, Naqxo."*

*The soft dream-voice is Aqissa, an Eldress. In the waking world, she carries my young within her. And she is kind to me, in her way. There, and here in dream.*



*“Your longings will only bring you pain. Males have no place in the arena when they Change, no Mated to restore them to themselves. No way to feed. No path back to the Qaa.” The way of things, the flow of life.*

*“I know,” I whisper.*

*“But you have pleased me well.”*

*This is new. This was not part of the first dream. “Thank you, Eldress.”*

*I feel a caress, scales against scales. “I will not let you linger, or suffer, when it is your time.”*

Naqxo shifted as he slept, coils tumbling, scaled skin whispering softly against scaled skin. Waiting for the Sun to work Her bright magic and grant him the gift of forgetfulness.

\*\*\*\*

“I should have known I would find you in here.”

Startled, Damis looked up from the scroll unrolled on the table in front of him. Anander leaned on the table opposite him, looking from Damis, to the illuminated manuscript, to the pile of its fellows at his elbow, and back at Damis again, laughter in his black-on-black eyes.

“Should I be somewhere else?” Somehow, a lock of long dark hair had fallen in Damis’ eyes. Again. He tucked it back behind an ear. Again. “Did I miss something?”

Anander perched on the edge of the heavy *ndirr*-wood table; his fine muslin *shendyt* fell aside, baring a distracting amount of flesh. His finger stabbed down at the open scroll. “Only you would try to learn the art of Restoring a Lamia in the library instead of the harem.”

Damis could feel himself turning red. He opened his mouth to reply—though, truly, he had no idea what he might say—but before he could try, Anander leaned forward and rested a hand on his shoulder, forestalling him. This close, the Mated-mark on his friend’s forearm was unmistakable; his Lamia’s bite, two droplets of black that seemed to watch Damis.

“I understand your reluctance.” Anander lowered his voice, even though no one was nearby to overhear. Damis and Anander had been friends from the Mated crèche to which they had both been brought by their mothers when barely old enough to toddle. Anander understood him and did not judge. “But you have no more choice than any of us.”

“I know.” Damis swallowed hard, wishing the lump in his throat would go away. “When I am called, I will go.” The Mated were responsible for upholding the humans’ end of the bargain allowing Lamiae and humans alike to survive. The sorceresses of the Lamiae kept their dwellings and the great human city of Tesh’qqa safe from the massive crocodilians which sometimes made their way upriver from the Sea where they spawned, and in exchange the Mated gave the Lamiae the only food they required, male seed. There were legends of a time when Lamiae had been predators on humankind, stealing human children and taking human males. But the coming of the G’sharr had changed all that. Human and Lamia needed one another now.

No matter what one Mated-caste male might wish for himself.

“You might not be chosen.”

Damis was sure Anander thought he was being kind, offering him hope. Not all Mated were chosen by the first Lamia they fed, marked to share eternity with an immortal inhuman female. And an unchosen Mated-caste male past his first feeding was free to take other lovers, so long as he remained open to his next calling. Damis might find men to share his bed, some part of his life. Until the next call.

But he wanted more. Men who returned from the arena marked were changed. They, too, spent the time between their Lamia’s Changes as they chose, with whom they chose. But most chose to wait upon their mates’ return in human form. And there was something about those men... Joy. Peace. Centeredness. They knew their others, and were known, intimately, in a way no other humans ever experienced. Marking was an act of total trust, making the human a repository of the Lamia’s memory of self. Each Change was a homecoming for a mated Lamia. And her Mated carried his Lamia within his heart from one Change to the next; a Mated was never truly alone.

The life Damis longed for was in the mark on Anander’s forearm, and in Anander’s obsidian eyes.

But it was not in a Lamia’s body.

“Thank you, my friend.” Sighing, Damis pushed the scroll away. “You are right, as always. I need to go to the harem.” The words stuck in his throat. “But not today. Tomorrow will be soon enough.”

A soft rustling noise drew Naqxo from his Sun-warmed torpor. He blinked, not yet truly awake; he raised his head, tasting the air and peering down from his ledge to survey the plaza below.

The Sun was high in the sky, and other Lamiae had emerged from their *mljii* to their favorite places on the ancient stone as he basked. The only sounds were the calls of birds, the gentle whisper of the wind in the tops of the trees and among the stones.

Musing, he shifted to let the Sun's kiss reach shade-cooled skin. The rustling came again, and with it a taste of dryness unpleasant on his tongue. Discomfort prickled the surface of his skin; irked, he twisted to relieve the itch.

Naqxo stiffened as a silent shock ran through him, stealing his breath. It was not quite pain, more a sensation as if the skin down the length of his supple spine had been torn. Surely not... he raised his head and turned to regard his coiled body.

He barely suppressed a frightened hiss; his heart raced at the sight of the dull brittleness of the surface of his skin. Each movement, however slight, sent a shower of dry scales to scatter on the stone; where the dead scales flaked away, supple skin gleamed in the Sunlight, new and raw. But as he watched, that hope, too, clouded over and roughened.

He was Changing.

*"I will not let you linger, or suffer, when it is your time."*

The Sun had not taken away all memory of his dream. The Eldress' voice murmured to him once again, the deadly consolation of a sorceress' affection.

Uncoiling, he spilled down the side of the terrace, leaving rainbow clouds of powdered scale hanging in the air behind him to fall to the stone or be scattered by the wind. The rough stone felt wonderful against his skin. Every instinct he possessed told him to stop, to roll, to writhe. To split his uncomfortable bindings. To allow the imprisoned creature within him to emerge.

Naqxo was not a slave to his instincts. He raced down the slope, away from the terrace, toward the shelter of the trees, faster than he had ever moved before. Leaving behind everything he had ever known. It was not in him to wait quietly, trustingly, for death. The trees swallowed him without a sound.

He raced through the undergrowth, one ruined building after another left behind him. Soon he would no longer know who or what he was. And

sometime after that, he would starve. But better that than the sorceress' cold magic.

Before he died, he would live. He would know life beyond the Qaa.

He would see the world through human eyes.

\*\*\*\*

Damis stumbled over a tree root, a long brown tendril across the remains of a road not used in tens of generations. The encroaching forest had left barely a footpath, following the winding course of the river but just out of sight of the water.

He heard little but the sound of his heart hammering in his ears, scarcely felt the sting of branches against his skin when he had to force his way through some narrow space where the forest had nearly reclaimed the ancient way. The sense of urgency he felt was like a live thing, trying to escape from within his flesh. And when it could not escape, it dragged him along with it, down the faint track ever disappearing before him and swallowed up by the forest.

He was being Summoned.

But where? And to what?

The way was obscure, yet his feet remembered the path. In his adolescence, when he had first come to understand that in his case, the privileged future of a Lamia's Mated was not so much a golden promise as a curse, he had almost lost himself along this track. The first time he followed it, he had half-hoped the creatures who called the forest home would end his troubles for him, but they had let him be. The old way led upriver from the city, piercing the protective ward the Lamiae wove around Tesh'qqa and their own *mljii*. If he kept on as he was, in another hour or so he would come to an ancient stone ruin, between forest and river. He had no idea what use past generations had had for it; for him it had been his refuge. A place of his own, where he could dream of the life he would have wished for himself, had he been free to wish.

The urgency, the Summoning, had no patience for his memories and whipped him onward. Sweat trickled down his forehead, into his eyes, burning; his breathing was harsh with exhaustion. And with fear. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong. Why would a Summoning call him away from the arena? How would a Lamia, and all her sisters, find him here?

Sunlight slanted down in pollen-dusted columns ahead of him, piercing the canopy of trees. He burst out into the light; dazzled, he tripped over a root and

fell headlong, scraping the heels of his hands against stone and unforgiving earth.

The root over which he had tripped writhed. Thrashed.

Damis scrambled up onto his elbows, backing away from the movement, staring wide-eyed. No root... a snake, massive, bronze and emerald and gold, its skin dry and brittle, falling away from it in huge flakes as it thrashed in obvious distress.

Not it. Her.

Lamia.

The relentless compulsion was gone; his Summoning had led him here, to her. But how had she come to be here, unguarded and helpless, without her sisters? And no one had ever seen, or heard of, a Lamia so huge. Even an immortal Eldress would be dwarfed by this frightened beauty.

The Lamia coiled, thrashed, cast her head about blindly, hissing in what could only be pain. Then, before Damis could move, she reared up and smashed her head into the ground. There was a soft ripping sound, like worn fabric. The skin split, and a head emerged. Shining black hair. The Lamia gasped for breath, her first breath with human lungs, and expelled it with a low groan.

Low?

The Lamia twisted, and shoulders followed the head. Broad shoulders, well-muscled.

Damis stared in shock as the Lamia rolled to face him. He stared into wide dark eyes, set in an inhumanly handsome face pale with terror. The snake's skin strained where arms should be; trapped, the Lamia craned his neck, trying to see in all directions at once, off into the shrouded forest, up into the brassy brilliance of the sky.

Always, his pleading gaze returned to Damis.

*His gaze.*

Damis stepped forward, dropping to his knees beside the Lamia an instant before his knees would have left him no choice in the matter. The male looked up at him, trembling, white showing all around the flat obsidian of his irises.

*His eyes are like mine.*

“I will help you,” he whispered, resting a hand on the male’s shoulder. He could feel skin and muscle twitch under his touch, but the Lamia’s restless thrashing slowed.

*Now what do I do? A female Lamia lost all memory of herself when she shed her skin. But a female had the safety of the arena in which to change, and her sisters around her to remind her of who and what she was.*

*I must get him to some place safer than this.*

But then what? A female in the arena would be pleased by her Mated, and then immediately fed, the ravenous unnatural hunger following a first Change sated. Damis was sure he could give the handsome male pleasure, though he could feel his face flush at the thought... but could he feed a male? Or was he about to rescue his destined mate from the dangers of the forest, only to doom him to death from starvation?

The Lamia groaned softly, a restless wave running down the length of his beautiful body as he sought to cast his skin. His gaze never left Damis’ face, even as his body jerked.

“I will not let you die, beloved.”

\*\*\*\*

*I cry out in pain as my body changes. Hurling myself from side to side, trying to free myself from the strange trap that is my own body.*

“You must calm yourself, my beloved, or I cannot carry you.”

*The words have no meaning to me, but the tone is gentle. I would answer if I could, but when I open my mouth to reply, nothing emerges but a groan as my body ripples, convulses. Expands. Scales slide off my torso, revealing smooth flesh. Arms, falling free, stirring the forest loam under me. There is a scent, a taste. Earth, growing things, living things, decaying things.*

*The taste of the Qaa, the way of things.*

*Where has that thought come from?*

*Hands stroking me, somehow easing my terrible itch. The hands of a human male. Like me, and yet unlike. He kneels beside me, caressing me, his long dark hair falling forward around his face. His eyes. Black as obsidian. Beautiful.*

*More scales fall free. What is this, what is happening to me?*

*Who am I? Only my eyes ask the question. I expect no answer.*

“Belovéd.”

*This touch is not on my scales. Fingers hesitantly caress my cheek, then withdraw. I long to speak, but I cannot.*

“Relax. Trust me. I know a place where you will be safe.”

*Somehow he lifts me, carrying me across his shoulders. I know I must be still; if I thrash, I will knock him to the ground, and I will fall with him. I can smell and taste the heat rising from his body, feel the strength of him where I am draped around him.*

*I crane my neck to look around as he carries me, though the movement makes me dizzy. He has taken me out of the Sunlight, into the deep shadow of the forest canopy. Birds fly at our approach, calling to one another. There is other life here as well; though it is out of sight, I can taste it, smell it. Large. Hungry. If it finds us...*

*It does not find us. The human carries me to another place where the trees fall back and the Sun beats down on crumbled stones. I feel the silken whisper of an ancient ward against my skin. This place was once guarded—by whom?—and protection lingers in the stone.*

*The male sets me down on Sun-warmed stone, then turns away. The ease his touch gave me is gone in an instant, and I am once again desperate to be rid of my entanglement. I hurl myself against the stones, again and again, crying out in wordless relief and pain as more scales fall away.*

*The male hurries back to me, kneels beside my head. He has removed his single garment, and soaked it in water. I can taste the coolness of it, and he bathes my face. This time, though, there is no soothing touch; it is as if he knows that easing me will only prolong this incomprehensible change.*

*He knows more of me than I know of myself.*

*He looks down at me, compassion in his eyes. My gaze does not leave his, though my body writhes and I struggle not to cry out. My back arches, there is a sound of something tearing; dead dry skin falls away like paper, and I am bare to the Sunlight. Newly made.*

*And the first touch my new skin knows is his. Gentle, reverent. Sweet. Stroking down my side, my flank. Sometimes cool with water, sometimes not. It is as if the Sun grew hands and reached down to pleasure me.*

*Once I lived for the touch of the Sun. I dimly remember this. Now, though, I am part of the human world. I need to know why, I need to know what has*

*happened to me. But this male, this beautiful gentle male who rescued me from the forest floor and touches me so sweetly... he is mine.*

*This, I need no one to tell me.*

*This I know.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Damis was glad of his long hours in the library, instead of the harem. No human female's body could ever have spoken to him of a Lamia's needs the way the scrolls did. He knew that Lamiae in their first Changes reveled in touch. The old wisdom of the scrolls also called this a part of the pleasuring, instructing that touch was a purely sexual experience for a newly-emerged Lamia.

*Not true. Not entirely.* Yes, his Lamia took pleasure from his touch, arched into his stroking hand like a cat, made soft pleasure-sounds low in his throat. But there was something about the deep black eyes that spoke of more than pleasure. Wonder. Delight.

*Am I really giving him such joy?*

Damis did not want to stop touching. Would not stop touching. But he needed to reach the truth behind those eyes.

The pleasure a Mated gave his Lamia restored the Lamia's memory of self and power of speech, both torn away by the trauma of the first Change. For this reason, a Mated always saw to his Lamia's pleasure immediately before feeding her.

*Can a male be fed?* The unwanted thought pushed its way back into his awareness, sweeping through him with a deadly chill despite the sunlight slanting through the canopy of the trees. Was this why no one had ever seen a male Lamia? Because males starved after their Changes?

*I know so little. I must ask him.*

And in order to ask him—in order to know the truth behind the Lamia's enraptured obsidian gaze—Damis had to give him back his voice.

The male startled when Damis kissed him. But only a little. Damis started to tease the Lamia's lips apart with his tongue, but was quickly met by a flickering tongue-tip, questing, seeking. Perhaps it should have felt wrong. Snakelike.

Instead, it sent a thrill racing through Damis' body, all the way to the root of his suddenly aching shaft. He let the male's tongue in and slid one hand slowly



down the hard, lithe body; he drank in the soft moans, and made more moans happen. The Lamia's and his own. *So good...*

An arm slipped around Damis' waist, drew him closer; the male rolled, letting most of his weight settle on Damis. Damis closed his eyes and shuddered with pleasure at the touch of the male's hard cock gliding along his own, dripping heat onto his stomach. And then the male kissed him, tentatively, sweetly. Again and again, as thorough and gentle as cool water pouring over and between lips he had never realized were parched.

"More," Damis whispered. The male, he knew, could not understand. But Damis needed to speak. To reassure, to plead, to find words for sensations he had feared he would never know. "Gods, please..."

Perhaps the male did understand. Or perhaps his need was as great as Damis' own. The pour of kisses never slowing, he slid between Damis' thighs, his body undulating, rubbing insistently against Damis' to the accompaniment of soft, wordless, ecstatic sounds.

Damis could barely breathe.

But he was a Mated; it was his place to give pleasure, before receiving it. His heart pounding, he urged the male onto his back; breaking off the perfect kisses, he mouthed his way down the column of the male's throat, over smooth hard muscles. Pausing to tease one nipple and then the other to hard, sharp peaks.

*No one has ever touched this flesh before.* The realization stopped Damis' breath in his throat, made his heart race. *He will be my first lover... but I am the first to touch him in his human form.*

Trembling with need, still breathless with awe, and alive with instinct, he trailed kisses down over the male's abdomen, licked away the streaks of his own seed and the male's that glistened on tanned skin. Kneeling between spread legs, he teased the thick dark curls nesting the male's cock with the tip of his tongue, and smiled as the male's hips came up off the stone with an abrupt urgency.

The male's sac was heavy, the skin dark and soft, the hair wiry against his stroking tongue. Slowly, he licked his way up the purpling shaft, lapping at the clear trickle rolling down the side. The male's hands fisted in his hair, but he allowed Damis to stay where he was, to tease and play and taste.

The moist, plum-colored head of the male's cock wept drop after drop of crystal fluid. Damis licked, again and again, until he could no longer deny the hunger the male's faint keening woke in him and settled his mouth over the flared head. Still he teased, as long as he could bear to, his tongue flickering over the gaping slit and the sweet knot of nerves just under the blunt head.

The teasing tormented them both in equal measure. And tasting was not enough. With a groan, Damis sank down on the hot, rigid bar of the male's erection, swirling his tongue over the vein-ridged length. He cupped the male's perfect round buttocks in his hands and urged him to raise himself, suckling as best he could around the male's girth until he felt a smooth hard nudge at the back of his throat. He swallowed.

Fists tightened in his hair.

He swallowed again, groaning at the hint of a sweet-salt taste at the back of his throat.

The male's body quivered, like the plucked string of a *qanbus*, hard and taut.

A third time he swallowed, one finger finding its way to stroke the male's tight puckered entrance. Teasing, almost entering.

A choked cry was the only warning Damis was given; the cock in his mouth curved, went hard as ivory and hot as sun-kissed steel, and pulsed between his lips, shooting one jet after another down his open throat. His mouth was flooded with the salty sweetness only hinted at before; his ears were filled with hoarse cries as intoxicating as wine. The male's buttocks clenched tight, trapping Damis' finger; he would have laughed with delight, had he been able.

The flood went on and on, longer than Damis would ever have thought possible. He swirled and sucked and stroked, his own erection throbbing in sweetest agony as he clung to the male's twisting form.

Finally, though, the male relaxed into Damis' hands, slipped from his mouth. The fists in his hair unclenched; hands slid down the sides of his neck, stroked his shoulders, gripped his arms, urged him up the male's body.

Suddenly almost shy despite his arousal, Damis stretched himself to lie beside the male, avoiding his gaze as long as possible. Looking instead at the thin trail of soft dark hair arrowing up from the male's spent shaft, the hard tiled muscles of the male's abdomen rising and falling with each gasp for

breath. The chest glistening with sweat, the broad shoulders, the strong neck, the head tipped back. Perfection.

“I am Damis,” he whispered. *And I am yours.*

Dark eyes, as dark as his own and infinitely beautiful, caught his gaze, held him mazed. “I am Naqxo. I am Lamia.” The male took a deep, unsteady breath. Sweat beaded on his forehead, rolled down his face. His body twitched, and Damis felt the movement all along the length of his own body. “And if I must die, I am glad to die with you. My Mated.”

\*\*\*\*

Naqxo held his human, his Mated, unsure where to put his new arms but craving the warmth they encircled. Greedily he tasted the scents of sweat and sex on the air; he longed to devour Damis in any way he could, with kisses, with his tongue. Perhaps his strange new blunt teeth could be used to give pleasure in some way.

But if he gave in to these lesser hungers, he would hasten his starvation. Female Lamiae spoke in lazy, laughing tones of the various appetites a Change evoked, but they rarely spoke of this ravenous hunger, the one following a first Change.

A female Lamia who survived her frantic dash to the arena had nothing left to fear. Her Mated fed her as he pleased her, his seed in her almost-human womb nourishing her.

Naqxo had no womb to fill.

Damis kissed him gently. His own scent and taste on the human’s lips were strange to him. Everything about this body was new. And as fleeting as the life of a day-midge, if not as fragile. He shivered in the grip of his hunger, and drew back from his Mated’s soft kisses.

The human frowned. “Do I displease you?”

“No!” Naqxo recognized pain when he heard it; a pang struck his heart, deeper than the hunger, and he gathered Damis close again. “The more I have of you, the more I want. And the wanting goads my hunger.” His words were muffled in the human’s luxurious dark cloud of hair. “If I could stop desiring you, I might slow my hunger and prolong my life. But I cannot.”

A hand stroked Naqxo’s back, caresses speaking awe and wonder, touching his skin to life. “I promised I would not let you die.” Kisses fell on Naqxo’s

shoulder, each one perfect, placed where it had always been meant to fall. “I will not be an oathbreaker.”

Naqxo waited out the inner grip of another hunger pang in silence. “There is only one way for my kind to feed,” he whispered when it had passed.

The caresses stopped. The wind stilled. Even the birds in the lush canopy over their heads ceased calling.

“Then that is how I will feed you.”

Naqxo’s heart hammered like thunder in his ears. He allowed Damis to roll him onto his stomach, to urge him up onto his knees and settle him on his elbows. In front of him was the forest, and what he thought was the great river barely visible through the thick undergrowth.

A brilliant teal and violet bird landed on a branch, just past the edge of the stones, cocked its head, and stared down at him with eyes of liquid gold. Naqxo stared back, entranced, delighted. Birds avoided snakes, and avoided Lamiae even more carefully. No bird had ever allowed him to watch so long before.

Behind him, Damis laughed, a sound that made Naqxo think of cool water. Needing to see the source of the sound, he turned his head as best he could.

Turned his head, and lost his heart forever.

Damis was watching him, with the same fascinated joy the bird had quickened in him. His smile was as warm as sunlight, his hands on the globes of Naqxo’s buttocks as gentle as falling silk-leaves. And his eyes... black pools, infinitely deep, alive with delight and desire.

He wanted to speak. To tell the human what was in his heart. But words, the sort spoken aloud, were as new as everything else about this nearly human flesh he wore, and they deserted him.

The human’s lips shaped a kiss, and then a smile.

*I cannot die. I will not.*

Damis put two fingers into his own mouth, played his tongue over them, withdrew them. “I will try not to hurt you,” he murmured. “I would ready you properly, if we had more time.” Strangely, the tanned skin of the human’s cheeks flushed a dusky red. “It’s as well for you that I am... not large.”

“You are perfect.” Naqxo bit back a groan, struggled to remain propped on his elbows as a spasm gripped him. He would not look away from his human.

Not for anything. “You were made for me.” Smile, eyes, hands... surely the erection resting hot in the cleft between Naqxo’s buttocks could be no less perfect than the rest of the male.

The human’s brilliant smile flared again, even as water that smelled and tasted of salt welled up in his obsidian eyes and trickled down his cheeks. Lamiae could not weep, but they told tales of their humans’ tears.

Naqxo would have spoken, but Damis’ wet fingers slipped into him, and all his breath left him in a rush. *Later. I will dry his tears later.*

*There will be a later. I so swear.*

Damis’ fingers stretched him, worked him, hooked and raked over a spot inside him that made his toes curl and his breath catch and stars fall and dance at the edges of his vision, again and again. He stared at the stone between his hands, everything in him focused on the human’s touch. “Please...” He rocked back against the sweetly merciless hand, seeking more. Though surely there could be no greater bliss than this.

He was wrong. He cried out, startling the beautiful bird into flight, as Damis’ hot tongue joined his fingers, playing where they penetrated and teasing Naqxo’s entrance. He was hard again, as hard as he had been when his human had swallowed his length. It was all new, it was all bliss, and he never wanted it to end.

Until the hunger wrenched at him again, and his arms lost their strength and gave way, spilling him face-first onto the stone.

He heard a hiss behind him, one so like a Lamia’s that for an instant he was confused. Damis’ fingers withdrew; hands gripped Naqxo’s hips and pulled them up. Heat pressed against his entrance, like a smoldering ember in the heart of a tree after a lightning strike. “Tell me if I hurt you, my own.”

The heat breached Naqxo’s tight virgin ring. He sucked in a breath through clenched teeth, let it out in a long, low groan as Damis penetrated deeper. The invasion felt like fire, yet he shivered. He craved more, and tried to push back; Damis, though, kept to a slow pace, burying himself in Naqxo inch by broad inch.

“Please,” Naqxo whispered again. “I hunger. For you.”

Damis cried out softly, a sound almost lost in the wind, the rustling of leaves, the call of birds, the rasp of Naqxo’s breath. Then he fell forward, covering Naqxo’s body with his own. A strong arm went around Naqxo’s chest, wrapping him tightly.

The human's hips jerked, slammed, circled. Again. And again.

Pain, yes, and heat, but both wrapped in pleasure and buried deep in his new body. Buried over and over, gliding over the star-falling spot until Naqxo could barely see for the pleasure. Damis held him up, murmured wordlessly against his neck, kissed, bit. Each thrust harder than the one before, less controlled, deeper.

And then Damis froze, trembling. Moaning. Holding Naqxo tightly, like a second skin. One that would never be cast, no matter the Changes.

Instinctively Naqxo tightened his tender ring around his Mated's shaft, and the anticipation of his human's pleasure triggered his own. He groaned loudly, his seed splashing on the stones. And Damis' cry joined his, an instant before he felt the first spray of heat in his hold.

Heat. And life. Roaring through him, like a wind powerful enough to make the most ancient tree bow down. Life. His body was greedy; his inner muscles seized Damis' shaft, worked it, massaged it. Damis resumed thrusting, short fierce jerks of his hips, a splendid storm.

Yet even over the roar of the gale, he heard the low, unsteady moans of his Mated's pleasure; stronger than the spasms of pleasure was Damis' arm around him. The pleasure was not in the joining alone, but in every touch of sweat-slick skin on skin, each hot breath ghosting over flesh, each hoarse grunt and shuddering cry.

Even the silence and the stillness were precious, when at last they followed the storm.

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“Are you fed, my own?”

Damis lay sprawled across Naqxo's broad back. As if the male were a feather bed stuffed with the finest swansdown, instead of flat planes and hard curves of muscle, and as if he himself would never need to move again. Or even open his eyes.

Yet he had to know. If he had failed his Mated, better his eyes never opened.

Soft rich laughter told him everything, even before Naqxo spoke. “I am sated, beloved.” The words were almost more purr than voice; ancient legends held snakes and cats to be close cousins, and in this boneless moment, Damis

could almost believe the legends true. “Or nearly so. Can you move? My arms have not yet had their fill of you.”

There was more laughter, and sweet awkwardness, as they separated and fell back into one another’s arms. And if the stone was uncomfortable, Damis never noticed, his head pillowed on Naqxo’s shoulder and one leg slanted across Naqxo’s thighs.

It was only then, nuzzling into his Mated’s shoulder, that Damis realized that he had no idea what was supposed to happen next. A female Lamia’s first Change and first mating were public, with a host of other Lamiae present to guide her and her Mated. He and Naqxo... would simply have to make do. “How long do you have before you Change again?”

Naqxo’s hand played lazily down his side; when Damis raised his head, he could see the Lamia watching its progress in fascination, as if he had never seen the like of either hand or side. Which he probably had not. “Not long, I suppose. The females say the first Change is brief, and that they cannot retain human form for long.”

Damis nodded. Anander had hinted at this, upon his return from his mating. He had been disappointed, he said, and Damis could well understand the reason. Most Lamiae Changed in accordance with the slow rhythms of their serpentine life, needing to feed only once in a hand of years. Yet Anander was at peace, with his Lamia’s Mated-mark in his flesh prolonging their contact and promising reunion.

Naqxo touched Damis’ chin, turned his head gently. “I taste fear.” A thumb brushed where Damis’ tears had fallen. “And sorrow.” The male’s soft lips were parted, and Damis caught a glimpse of his tongue, no doubt tasting the air. “What frightens you?”

Useless to lie, to one who could read him so perfectly. “The thought of sharing this with you only once, and then losing you.” Damis felt his cheeks redden, and tried to look away.

This Naqxo would not permit; he held Damis’ chin firmly, leaned in, and kissed him, with a gentle thoroughness that took Damis’ breath. “Having known you, I have no wish to be alone.” Another kiss, a brush of lips. “I would mark you, if you will allow me.”

*If...?* Once again, everything seemed to stop. Wind, bird-song, Damis’ heart, time itself. “I offer myself gladly, to honor the human debt to the

Lamiae.” But the ritual words were empty and cold and without meaning. “I can think of no greater joy than to be bound to you.”

Naqxo’s smile was as warm as sunlight, his hands on Damis’ body warmer still. “Then I can bear being parted from you for a while.” He rolled into Damis and slid a hand down his thigh, urged Damis’ leg upward to wrap more tightly around him. “I will find you again whenever my Change is on me.”

Damis thought he heard a tremor in Naqxo’s voice. Gently he stroked his tongue over his Mated’s full lower lip. “What do *you* fear, my own?”

Naqxo sighed; the sound was a soft hiss. “I dare not return to the other Lamiae. They think me dead; one would have killed me as I Changed, as an act of kindness. And now... there will be no place for me with them once a new male is born.”

Damis heard what Naqxo did not say. *They will kill him.* “Then stay with me. Come back to the city, to Tesh’qqa.”

Dark eyes widened; the grip on Damis’ leg tightened. “To live among humans?”

“To live with me.” Life with the beautiful creature he had seen on the forest floor would be strange. But life without the male he held in his arms would be unthinkable.

“I will—”

Naqxo’s eyes unfocused; his body jerked. The movement drew Damis’ gaze down the length of his Mated’s body; Naqxo’s legs were fused together, his toes and feet already scaled and beginning to point.

“Turn away, beloved.” Naqxo’s beautiful, rich voice was choked, as if it already issued from a throat too narrow for speech.

Damis obeyed, but not before bending to share one final kiss. “We will share again soon, my own.”

“Sssssoon.”

Damis rolled away and knelt, sitting back on his heels. The forest was dark, and cool, and silent save for a rustling of leaves in a fitful wind. The birds were gone, he realized, every one. *Did they flee the serpent?* He blinked back a burning in his eyes, remembering Naqxo’s delight at the presence of the *tsatri* bird at their mating.



Something cool and smooth slid along the sole of Damis' bare foot. Then a flash of brilliant green, gold, bronze at his side, as the enormous snake he remembered from the forest floor poured out to surround him where he knelt. Scales which before were dry, rough, flaking, now gleamed in the sunlight like gems and precious metal, surrounding Damis in a shifting pool of beauty, skin whispering softly to skin. The Lamia's head swayed gently before him, cool, hypnotic, inhuman, forked black tongue as thick as a finger flickering out to taste the air.

But it was Naqxo who watched Damis, the heart of a Mated in his deep obsidian eyes.

Damis held out his arm, wishing it would stop trembling. "I offer myself," he whispered, waiting for the bite.

Instead, Naqxo ducked his head, bumping against Damis' upturned palm, exactly like a cat insistently seeking human touch. The very tip of the Lamia's great tail twitched back and forth impatiently.

Startled into laughter, Damis stroked the smooth head that more than filled his palm. Naqxo rolled his head, luxuriating in the touch, showing off the iridescent scales at his throat. Then, before Damis could flinch, he struck, burying his fangs deep in Damis' forearm.

There was no pain, only a moment of ice-cold shock, and a drop of blood welling up beside each liquid black mark in Damis' skin. And Naqxo withdrawing, watching, apprehensive.

*Is this all?*

Damis turned his arm, examining the marks. They gleamed, shone. Like his Mated's eyes.

Once again, a smooth cool head butted against his palm; tentatively this time, hesitant.

*~together?~*

There was no voice, no word, no thought. Only a presence within him, a sense of sun-warmed stone. And peace. And an offer of love.

Damis ran a gentle finger along the offered throat.

*~together~*

*Epilogue: One Week Later*

Damis braced himself against the low wall of polished stone, looking out over the twilight city, torches lit one by one scattering flecks of warm light across the deepening night. In the distance, the great river edged the sparks with silvered darkness; the breeze toying with his unbound hair was cool and water-scented.

*~together~*

Behind Damis, the torchlight in the library beckoned. He ignored it. Naqxo was asleep in their chambers. Yet Damis shared with his Mated the beauty of the view, in quiet companionship.

*~together~*

Yes, together. He missed holding and being held, kissing and being kissed. He missed the sounds and the scents of pleasure. He missed the sensation of being buried deep in his lover's straining body. But he would have those again, over and over. Forever. This moment, this night, was full, full measure and running over.

A hand moved Damis' hair away from his neck. Soft lips brushed the side of his throat and curved into a smile against the sudden racing of his pulse.

"I hunger, my beloved."

**The End**

## Author Bio

*Rory Ni Coileain majored in creative writing, back when Respectable Colleges didn't offer such a major, so she had to design it herself, at a university which boasted one professor willing to teach creative writing, he being a British surrealist who went nuts over students writing dancing bananas in the snow but did not take well to high fantasy. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa at the age of nineteen, sent off her first short story to an anthology being assembled by an author she idolized, received the kind of rejection letter that puts therapists' kids through college, and found other things to do, such as going to law school, ballet dancing (at more or less the same time), and nightclub singing, for the next thirty years or so, until her stories started whispering to her. Now she's a legal editor, a soprano/alto/tenor in her church choir, and the proud mother of a proud Brony and budding filmmaker, and is busily wedding her love of myth and legend to her passion for m/m romance.*

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